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FROM PERIPHERY TO PARTNERSHIP: MONGOLIA'S INTENSIFYING FOREIGN POLICY TRENDS TOWARD CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT. *Mongolia's foreign policy has traditionally emphasized balance among its neighbors and "third neighbors", yet its relations with Central Asian states remained limited for decades after diplomatic ties were first established in the early 1990s. In recent years, however, Mongolia has intensified engagement with Central Asian states, reflected in new embassies, high-level visits, and the elevation of ties to strategic partnerships. This study analyzes the drivers and implications of this shift. Using a constructivist perspective complemented by liberal international relations theory, the research combines historical review, document and speech analysis, and comparative case studies of Mongolia's ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. Findings show that Mongolia's reinvigorated approach is motivated not only by strategic and economic considerations but also by cultural proximity and shared regional identity. The study argues that Mongolia is moving from a peripheral observer to an active partner in Central Asia, positioning itself as a like-minded actor in regional cooperation. By identifying the factors enabling this transformation, the paper contributes to broader debates on small-state diplomacy and regionalization in Eurasia.*

KEYWORDS: *Mongolia, intensifying foreign policy, Mongolia-Central Asia relations.*

INTRODUCTION

The growing complexity of international relations and the escalation of disputes and confrontations among states are spreading everywhere. During this period of intensified conflict, Mongolia needs to pursue a multilateral foreign policy in cooperation with neighboring states that face similar social, economic, and diplomatic challenges. In this context, Mongolia is faced with the growing necessity to take a more careful and deliberate approach to its foreign policy planning in relation to the countries of the region. This study aims to explore the political, social, and economic factors related to the growing activity of Mongolia's policy toward Central Asia.

The Central Asian states (formerly Soviet republics), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, became independent and began participating in international relations after declaring their independence in 1990. Researchers describe Central Asia from a geographical perspective as a region through which the Silk Road passed, a home to numerous ethnic groups, and a meeting point of various

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civilizations encompassing a vast area *"stretching from the Caspian Sea to the steppes of Eastern Mongolia"* (Kolya, 2022).

Mongolia is in close geographical proximity to the Central Asian states and shares a deep historical connection stemming from their nomadic culture. During Soviet times, the Mongolian People's Republic maintained extensive economic, scientific, technical, and humanitarian exchanges with these Soviet republics. Furthermore, these Central Asian states are culturally, demographically, socially, and economically similar to Mongolia, with agricultural and pastoral traditions, which further brings them closer. Although Mongolia does not directly share borders with these states, historical ties, a tradition of warm relationships, and their analogous social and economic transformation foster growing and deepening cooperation.

Today, Central Asia is considered a key region in world politics, economics, and geopolitics. The region's significant geographical location, rich in natural resources, makes it a major area of competition for influence by world powers. According to analysts, *"the way the Central Asian states develop will profoundly affect the balance of power in the world"* (Luguusharav, 2022). The rich energy resources, natural gas and oil, extracted from the Caspian Sea further raise its strategic significance. Thus, major powers pursue their geopolitical interests in the region, disregarding its ongoing political instabilities stemming from terrorism, separatism, and religious radicalism.

It is important to assess the political, social, economic, demographic, cultural, and humanitarian development of the Central Asian states, their role and significance in the region's progression, their trade, economic, political, cultural, and humanitarian relations with Mongolia, and to identify opportunities to revive traditional forms of cooperation.

Mongolia shares geographical, historical, and cultural ties with the Central Asian states. Thus, understanding the political, social, and economic factors that contribute to the growing activity of Mongolia's policy toward Central Asia is a significant aspect of this study.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding a country's foreign policy requires more than counting visits, treaties, or policy statements. It requires asking why a state chooses to engage in certain ways, how it perceives its partners, and what kind of regional order it imagines itself belonging to. This study, therefore, approaches Mongolia's evolving policy toward the countries of Central Asia through a constructivism-inspired view of regionalization, while also drawing on key insights from liberalism in international relations.

This framework departs from realism, which views international politics as a zero-sum arena where states are primarily concerned with maximizing power and ensuring survival. Realism can explain why major powers compete for influence in Central Asia, but it cannot adequately capture why a smaller state like Mongolia invests in sustained cooperation rooted in trust, cultural familiarity, and mutual gain. In practice, Mongolia's diplomacy in Central Asia is driven less by efforts to deter threats or balance power, and more by the pursuit of enduring partnerships, a shared sense of regional

belonging, and mutually beneficial (win-win) forms of cooperation that can advance the interests of all sides.

Constructivism provides a more suitable lens because it emphasizes how state behavior is shaped not only by material interests but also by shared ideas, norms, and identities. Scholars such as Ilkhom Qoraboyev describe the history of Central Asia as a "long quest for regional identity," showing that cooperation in the region often serves to affirm belonging as much as to achieve material gains (Qoraboyev, 2009). Together with scholar Kairat Moldashev, he develops the idea of soft institutionalism, a form of regionalism rooted in informal trust-building, social interaction, and consensus rather than rigid legal structures or supranational commitments (Moldashev & Qoraboyev, 2018). This perspective helps explain why Mongolia's ties with Central Asian states are advancing mainly through diplomatic dialogue, cultural exchanges, and symbolic recognition rather than through formalized, binding institutions.

Rustam Burnashev adds a valuable nuance by showing how security perceptions are shaped by norms and shared understandings. In his studies on regional security with Irina Chernykh, they argue that even when Central Asian states face threats such as extremism or instability, they frame these challenges in terms of preserving a shared regional order, not simply through raw power calculations (Burnashev & Chernykh, 2013). This reinforces the idea that Mongolia's policy operates within an environment where stability is understood as a collective responsibility rather than a competitive race for dominance. Assylzat Karabayeva, scholar from Kazakhstan, contributes another crucial dimension, showing how political leaders' ideas and discourses shape which international norms are accepted or resisted in Central Asia (Karabayeva, 2021). She argues that foreign policy decisions are often entwined with questions of national identity and worldview. This insight is especially relevant to Mongolia, whose outreach to Central Asia is motivated not only by strategic interests but also by its self-image as a culturally proximate, like-minded partner that can contribute to building a stable and cooperative regional community.

Alongside this constructivist perspective, the study draws on liberal theory to account for how growing economic interdependence, institutional linkages, and multilateral diplomacy promote cooperative behavior. Mongolia's efforts to open embassies, institutionalize intergovernmental commissions, and expand trade and cultural exchange with Central Asian countries reflect this liberal logic of "absolute gains," where states seek shared benefits rather than competitive advantage.

Methodologically, the study combines historical analysis, document analysis, and comparative approaches to examine how Mongolia's policies and practices toward Central Asia have evolved since the early 1990s. It analyzes speeches, agreements, and policy statements to trace shifting narratives and objectives, and uses comparative analysis to highlight both the commonalities and differences in Mongolia's relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. It also employs tools from foreign policy analysis, especially means-ends analysis, which examines whether the policy instruments and actions used are appropriate and sufficient to achieve the stated strategic objectives, to evaluate the coherence between Mongolia's goals and its actual engagement with Central Asia. Taken together, these approaches

allow for a more nuanced understanding of how Mongolia is gradually transforming its ties with Central Asia from sporadic bilateral contacts into a more coherent, identity-driven, and cooperation-oriented regional policy..

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although research on Central Asia has steadily expanded over the past two decades, Mongolia has rarely been included in these regional debates. Most studies of Mongolian foreign policy focus on its relations with Russia, China, and Northeast Asia, while Central Asia remains on the margins. Yet in practice, Mongolia's engagement with the region has grown markedly in recent years, and this shift has not been examined in a systematic way.

Early Mongolian scholarship emerged in the 1990s, as the region was still adjusting to post-Soviet independence. Batbayar Tsedendamba (1996), writing in the The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs, described how the collapse of the Soviet Union created both opportunities and instability for the new Central Asian republics. He highlighted Kazakhstan as Mongolia's most promising partner but noted the limited trade and infrastructure links constraining cooperation (Tsedendamba, 1996). Despite its age, the study captures the cautious optimism that marked Mongolia's first outreach to the region. A similar early effort, Central Asian Geopolitics and Mongolia by Demberel Kolya, Khurmetkhan Mukhamadi, and Shurkhuu Dorj (2005), explored the region's geography, energy security, and transport corridors (Kolya et.al, 2005), but ultimately portrayed Mongolia as an external observer rather than an active participant.

Some Mongolian analysts have examined Mongolia's limited role in regional institutions. Mendee Jargalsaikhan (2012), writing for the Voices from Central Asia series, explained why Mongolia has remained an observer rather than joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member. He argued that this stance reflects Mongolia's closer integration with Northeast Asia, its democratic political system, and its desire to maintain foreign policy independence from Russia and China (Jargalsaikhan, 2012). Jargalsaikhan noted that Ulaanbaatar views the SCO as an "authoritarian club" and fears full membership could erode its democratic image and constrain its "third neighbour" strategy.

Other studies have explored how external actors view Mongolia in this regional context. Tsermaa Lkham (2016), in her monograph Germany's Policy on Central Asia and Its Impact on Mongolian-German Relations (1990–2014), showed how Germany's policy toward Central Asia indirectly shaped its perception of Mongolia as a stabilizing partner, though her study does not explore Mongolia's own policies toward Central Asia, leaving it as a secondary actor in the regional picture.

At the institutional level, Mongolian interest in Central Asia has grown in recent years (Jargalsaikhan & Nyamjav, 2022). The Institute for Strategic Studies of Mongolia (ISS) published Central Asian Geopolitics in 2022, covering security challenges, the SCO's internal dynamics, and the policies of the United States and China, as well as the prospects for a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" (Institute for Strategic Studies of Mongolia (ISS), 2022). While this is one of Mongolia's most comprehensive regional studies, it largely treats Mongolia as an observer rather than an actor. Likewise, the

policy report Geoeconomics in Central Asia: Great Powers and Regional Countries (National Institute for Security Studies & Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2022) analyzes the geoeconomic strategies of major external powers – Russia, China, the United States, India, Turkey, Japan, and the European Union. While it was the first Mongolian study to frame the region through geoeconomics theory, Mongolia itself appears only as an outside observer, not as an active regional actor. This gap underscores the need to analyze Mongolia's emerging role in the region more directly, a task this study undertakes.

A few international scholars have touched on Mongolia–Central Asia ties from broader perspectives. Uradyn E.Bulag, a Mongolian-born scholar based at the University of Cambridge, offers a conceptually rich account of Mongolia's post-Cold War diplomacy in his 2017 chapter in The Art of Neighbouring. He frames Mongolia's "third neighbour" policy as part of a "world community of neighbours," arguing that it seeks to convert resource wealth into "fortune-sovereignty" and practise "collaborative nationalism" (Uradyn, A world community of neighbours in the making: Resource cosmopolitics and Mongolia's "third neighbour" diplomacy, 2017). Yet his analysis remains broad and global, with little attention to Mongolia's engagement with Central Asia. John Irgengioro (2022) provides one of the few direct studies of Mongolia's relations with Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, in the context of China's expanding influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. He argues that these ties remain limited despite cultural and geopolitical affinities, citing weak connectivity and entrenched Russian influence. Vaishali Krishna (2020), an Indian scholar, analyzes India's engagement with both Mongolia and Central Asia, framing Mongolia as a "spiritual" and "third" neighbor under its "Act East" policy and viewing Central Asia through its "Connect Central Asia" policy. While her study situates Mongolia–Central Asia ties within wider Indo-Asian geopolitics, it views them mainly through India's lens and gives little attention to Mongolia's own agency.

Together, these works reveal a clear gap. Mongolian scholars have acknowledged Central Asia's significance but have not systematically analyzed Mongolia's recent, more proactive diplomacy toward the region, while most international studies either overlook Mongolia or treat it as marginal. The surge in high-level exchanges over ten presidential-level bilateral visits between 2024 and 2025 shows that Mongolia is moving beyond symbolic gestures toward sustained regional cooperation. By situating these developments within the emerging body of Mongolian research on regional diplomacy, this study addresses a neglected area of scholarship and examines how Mongolia is beginning to position itself as an engaged and integrated actor within the Central Asian region.

GEOPOLITICAL FEATURES OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION

Researchers define the geographical location of Central Asia as situated in the center of the Eurasian continent, bounded by the Caspian Sea to the west, central China to the east, southern Russia to the north, and northern India to the south (Dynkin, Baranovsky, 2013). The geographic framework for this study includes the five former Soviet republics (Central Asian) — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

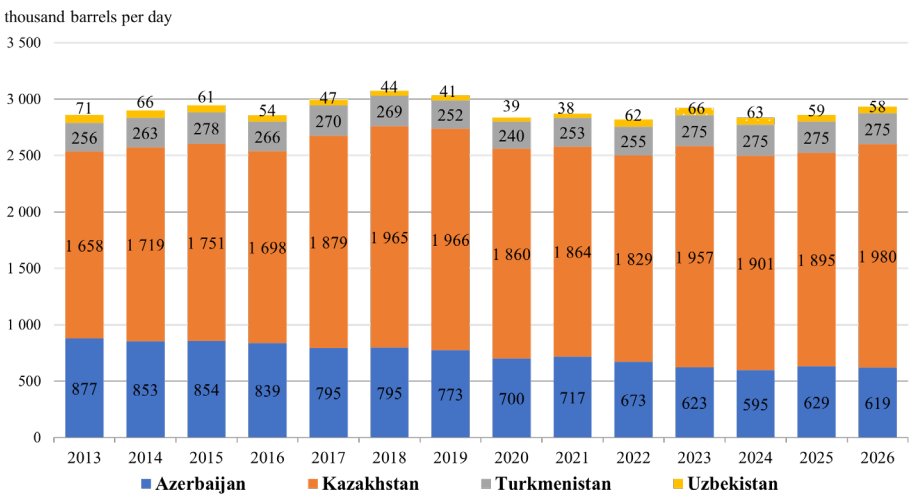
Central Asia plays a crucial role in world geopolitics and geo-economics, the power that dominates this region can significantly influence the balance of power in the world (Kolya, 2022; Nyamjav, 2022). The factors fueling geopolitical conflict in the region include its unique geographical location, historical trajectory, energy resources, and ongoing disputes.

The growing influence of major powers in Central Asia can be explained by their political, economic, security, historical, and cultural ties with the region as follows.

1. *Strategically significant geographical location:* The geographical position of Central Asia forms a key transit corridor, linking Asia and Europe. Furthermore, the region borders both Russia and China, making their influence particularly strong. The USA, the European Union, Japan, and Turkey also pursue their political and strategic interests in the region.

2. *Abundant natural resources:* The region's rich energy resources make it a major area of competition for great powers. For instance, as of 2025, the Caspian basin contains 46 billion barrels of oil and 610 trillion cubic meters of natural gas (E+E Leader, 2025), which account for nearly 12% of the world's natural gas (Tsereteli, 2020). The shores of the Caspian Sea border five countries: Kazakhstan (29% — 2340 km), Russia (16%), Azerbaijan (20%), Turkmenistan (21%), and Iran (14%) (Akhmetuly, 2018).

Figure 1. Caspian region petroleum and other liquid fuels production, 2013–2026



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, International Energy Statistics and Short-Term Energy Outlook. Note: Data for 2025 and 2026 are forecast in the Short-Term Energy Outlook. Excludes production in Iran and Russia.

In other words, competition is underway in the region for control over energy resources and their transportation routes. This primarily involves the USA, the European Union, Turkey, India, Japan, and other countries. For instance, a major reason for the USA's growing economic interest in Central Asia is its aim to control energy resources,

particularly the large deposits of natural gas, oil, and uranium in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, the Central Asian region is considered one of the world's richest in strategic raw materials, with abundant deposits of coal, gold, uranium, and aluminum, further increasing its economic significance. Kazakhstan, for example, is the world's largest uranium producer and is among the most resource-rich countries in the region.

Table 1. Kazakhstan's Global Ranking in Mineral Extraction

Uranium	2
Petroleum	12
Gold	15
Silver	2
Copper	3
Lead	3
Zinc	4
Iron	8
Chrome	1
Magnesium	3
Molybdenum	4
Natural gas production	19

Source: Absametov et al. (2019)

Moreover, under the framework of China's massive infrastructure and logistics Belt and Road initiative, which is based on substantial financial lending, there has been a growing focus on economic policy and gaining access to regional energy resources at significantly lower costs.

In recent years, the Central Asian region has become a stage for active multilateral diplomacy by major powers. For instance, in May 2023, the first China–Central Asia Summit was held in Xi'an, China, and the second summit was organized in June 2025 in Astana, Kazakhstan. While China had previously focused primarily on trade, investment, and economic cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative, a noticeable shift has occurred toward issues of security and stability. China has expressed its readiness to assist in strengthening the security and defense capacities of the region.

3. *Ensuring stability and security in the region.* Scholars note that external actors such as the United States, the European Union, and India have sought to contribute to stability in Central Asia through a mix of political, security, and economic initiatives (Luguusharav, 2022; World Bank, 2023; EU External Action Service, 2024). The United States has emphasized democratization, governance reform, and security assistance, often framed through its soft power policies. The European Union has supported institutional capacity-building, border management, and rule-of-law projects, while India has expanded cooperation in counterterrorism, training, and infrastructure development. At the same time, some findings highlight that challenges such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and transnational crime complicate these efforts and continue to shape the regional security agenda (SIPRI, 2024; UNODC, 2023). Consequently, while external powers promote stability, their policies interact with persistent local security threats, making the region a contested space for influence and cooperation.

4. *A region located at the intersection of major world civilizations.* The Central Asian region occupies a unique geographical position at the intersection of several major world civilizations. To the east lie China and the Asia-Pacific region; to the south, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Islamic states of the Middle East; to the west and north, Europe, Russia, and the Caucasus. The region's population shares historical and cultural ties stemming from Turkic heritage, and many states aim to consolidate their influence by emphasizing these shared historical and cultural values. Turkey and Azerbaijan, for instance, are such states. Some researchers view Turkey's ambitions in Central Asia as stemming from a policy of strengthening its political and military role (Dorjpalam & Purevdorj, 2022). Turkey's largest economic market in Central Asia is Kazakhstan, a key trading partner, and Turkey is eager to further expand its economic relations with Kazakhstan. The main tool for Turkey's policy in Central Asia is the Organization of Turkic States, an association composed of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, which serves as a platform for Turkey to promote its soft power and to balance Russian and Chinese influence in the region. One of the reasons why the countries of this region are pursuing economic cooperation with wealthy Middle Eastern countries without damaging their newly established relations with Russia is their deep-rooted religious and cultural ties with the Muslim background countries.

In recent years, the Central Asian countries have been experiencing significant economic growth. According to the study (HKTDC Research, 2024), the total GDP of the Central Asian countries reached USD 468.6 billion in 2023. Among them, Kazakhstan stands out as the region's largest economy, based on its natural gas and oil resources. It led the region in GDP growth, reaching USD 263.4 billion in 2023, with its economy growing by 5.1%. As of 2023, Uzbekistan's GDP was USD 101.6 billion, Turkmenistan's was USD 77.7 billion, Kyrgyzstan's was USD 14 billion, and Tajikistan's was USD 11.9 billion (Table 2).

Table 2. Some Socio-Economic Indicators of Central Asian Countries (2023)

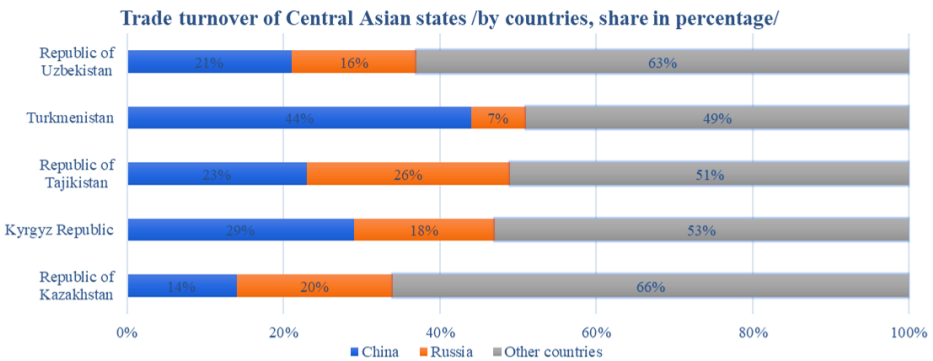
Uranium	Area (square kilometers)	Population (millions)	Nominal GDP (billion USD)	GDP per capita (thousands. USD)	GDP growth (%)	Inflation (%)
Central Asia	3,940,870	79.3	468.6	5.9*	6.3*	-
Republic of Kazakhstan	2,699,700	19.9	263.4	13.3	5.1	14.6
Republic of Uzbekistan	440,650	36	101.6	2.8	6.3	10
Republic of Turkmenistan	469,930	6.5	77.7	11.9	2	-1.6
Kyrgyz Republic	191,800	6.9	14	2	6.2	10.8
Republic of Tajikistan	138,790	10	11.9	1.2	8.3	3.7

Source: HKTDC Research (2024)

The main trading partners of the region include the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. As of 2023, China accounted for 23% of the region's exports and 33% of its imports, making it the largest trading partner. In terms of trade policy, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) since 2015, while Uzbekistan became an observer in 2020. The Union

maintains a policy of high tariff harmonization, protective measures for its markets, and the facilitation of free movement of goods.

Figure 2. Trade turnover of Central Asian States



Source: International Trade Center (2025)

Table 3. Main export products of Central Asian countries (2023)

HS code	Product type	Percentage
27	Fossil fuels, oil	52.4%
71	Natural gemstones, semi-precious stones, and precious metals	11.6%
26	Ore concentrate	4.9%
28	Inorganic chemicals; organic and inorganic compounds of precious metals, rare earth metals	4.0%
72	Iron and steel	4.0%
74	Copper and copper concentrate	3.8%
84	Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery, and mechanical appliances; parts thereof	2.0%
10	Grains	1.9%
31	Soil fertilizer	1.7%
85	Electrical machinery and equipment parts	1.3%
	Other	12.4%

Source: International Trade Center (2025)

Table 4. Main export products of Central Asian countries (2023)

HS code	Product type	Percentage
84	Nuclear reactors, machinery, mechanical devices, and their accessories	17.1%
87	Vehicles and car parts	15.7%
85	Electrical equipment and its parts	10.0%
27	Minerals and oil	3.7%
73	Iron and steel products	3.6%
39	Plastic products and their parts	3.2%
72	Iron alloy	3.1%
30	Pharmaceutical products	3.0%
90	Optical goods	2.3%
62	Knitted and woven clothing and related products	1.8%
	Other	36.6%

Source: International Trade Center (2025)

The process by which the newly independent Central Asian states are revitalizing their societies and economies and pursuing accelerated development is a subject of considerable interest. During the past thirty years, these countries have faced many of the same developmental challenges as Mongolia. In the years following independence, their foreign policy was predominantly aimed at avoiding domination by any major power, while pursuing an open, multilateral, and Western-oriented approach. Scholar Udo Barkmann (2014) explains the relations between the Central Asian countries in the post-independence period as follows: *"The new Central Asian states remained distant from each other, emphasizing their own unique identity, and perhaps even fearing that Turkey would have some influence on their recognition of their national identity"*(Barkmann, 2014).

Furthermore, the geographical location of the Central Asian states, being landlocked, possessing vast territories with low population densities, and uneven settlements, has posed significant constraints to their economic development. During that period, their economies fell into crisis, their GNP fell sharply, and unemployment, poverty, and social stratification grew, fueling social unrest and internal conflict, including disputes related to religion. A vivid example of this is the civil conflict in Tajikistan in 1992, which turned into a fratricidal war (Nazarbayev, 2010). Tajikistan, with a population of approximately 5 million, remained in a state of civil war for five years after gaining independence, suffering heavy human casualties and extensive material damage.

While the Central Asian states gradually began strengthening their stability, structural weaknesses remained. These states have historically maintained close political, economic, religious, and cultural ties, yet disputes over ethnic, religious, and territorial issues, as well as water resources, frequently triggered conflict. Also, the region faced significant economic hardships. Nursultan Nazarbayev, former President of Kazakhstan, described the country's difficult financial situation by stating: *"...the country was in a state of a patient in a coma", adding that "conflicts stemming from ethnic disputes, political controversies, and armed conflict turned the region into a major hotspot"* (Nazarbayev, 2010). This illustrates the depth of the political, social, and economic crises in the Central Asian states during that period.

Kazakhstan, much like Mongolia, is a landlocked developing country. Nevertheless, over the past two decades, it has successfully implemented operations related to its border dry port, yielding significant progress, a process from which Mongolia can draw valuable lessons. Foreign analysts have described the Khorgos dry port, located within Kazakhstan's territory, as a strategic hub linking China and Europe by land, emphasizing that choosing an appropriate location for a new city can enable the creation of a new intersection for economic activity. The Ministry of Road Transport and Development of Mongolia (2020) identifies the Khorgos project as a clear example of how a country can effectively manage a major Belt and Road Initiative project within its borders for its own benefit.

Among the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has experienced the most rapid economic growth since independence. International financial institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, and Asian Development Bank classify it as an upper-middle-income economy, highlighting consistent GDP growth, diversification efforts, and major inflows of

foreign direct investment (World Bank, 2023; IMF, 2024; IsDB & ADB, 2024). Analysts also note Kazakhstan's gradual structural reforms in energy, infrastructure, and services, which have helped stabilize domestic demand and attract external capital. While significant vulnerabilities remain—such as dependence on resource exports and exposure to external shocks—the country's development trajectory provides a reference point for other states in the region, including Mongolia, in terms of balancing resource management with broader economic modernization.

The geopolitical competition among major powers in Central Asia is closely tied to the utilization of its vast natural resources. In this context, the region is expected to become a significant center of international political and economic activity in the future.

Today, the Central Asian states are pursuing a policy aimed at transitioning toward innovation-oriented economies. The main goals in this process include allocating their resources toward developing key sectors with strong future potential, creating a more favorable business and investment climate, and strengthening the efficiency and productivity of their domestic industries.

The Central Asian countries are interested in deepening their relations with Mongolia, and this can be explained by several factors, such as Mongolia's policy that is oriented toward Western democratic values, its ability to consolidate political stability, the preservation of its nomadic culture and traditions, and the presence of a Muslim community within its borders.

Central Asia is a region that shares geographical proximity, historical and cultural ties, ethnic relations, and a similar level of development with Mongolia. In the future, it is essential for Mongolia to further foster cooperation and collaborate more closely with the Central Asian states as they collectively go through the process of addressing their social and economic challenges. Therefore, strengthening and deepening trade, economic, and cultural relations with Central Asia through a multilateral diplomatic policy is of great significance.

DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS AND COOPERATION BETWEEN MONGOLIA AND THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL ASIA

One of the main directions of Mongolia's foreign policy is extensive cooperation with neighboring countries in the political, economic, security, social, and humanitarian fields. In this context, Mongolia conducts its diplomatic policy through both bilateral and multilateral channels with various states across the world.

Mongolia's Increasing Political and Diplomatic Relations with Central Asian Countries

In recent years, Mongolia has expanded its foreign policy focus toward friendly cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, with both sides showing mutual efforts to strengthen and deepen their relations. Since 2015, Mongolia's foreign policy toward Central Asia has become more active, characterized by regular high-level reciprocal visits with increasing frequency. New embassies have been established to enhance Mongolia's diplomatic presence in the region. For example, Mongolia opened new

embassies in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and established its first strategic partnership in the Central Asian region with Kazakhstan. These developments have contributed significantly to strengthening the foundation of political and diplomatic relations and reflect Mongolia's tendency to pursue a balanced foreign policy oriented toward the Central Asian region.

Within the framework of bilateral cooperation, Mongolia initially established diplomatic relations with the Central Asian countries in 1992 (see Table 5).

Table 5. Mongolia's establishment of diplomatic relations with Central Asian countries

Country	Date	Capital
The Republic of Kazakhstan	January 22, 1992	Astana
The Republic of Uzbekistan	January 25, 1992	Tashkent
Turkmenistan	April 23, 1992	Ashkhabad
The Kyrgyz Republic	April 22, 1992	Bishkek
The Republic of Tajikistan	April 24, 1992	Dushanbe

Source: Central Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia (1992-1994)

Over the past approximately thirty years, the intensity and activity of relations with these countries have remained relatively weak. The Central Asian region has been characterized by its remote location in the world, susceptibility to ethnic and national conflicts, and political instability. Although Mongolia has been unable to deepen its cooperation with Central Asian countries for nearly 30 years after establishing diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan, this slow development of relations can be largely explained by geographic remoteness, underdeveloped transport and communication infrastructure, weak regional economic integration, and Mongolia's limited opportunities to participate due to Central Asia's historical reliance on the oil and gas sectors.

Foreign policy toward Central Asia has intensified, particularly in recent years, with frequent high-level reciprocal visits becoming more regular. The establishment of mutual embassies and the increasing frequency of diplomatic consultations indicate a strengthening of political trust between the parties. For instance, since 2015, the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia have made a total of ten visits to Central Asian countries.

In recent years, Mongolia has placed significant emphasis on strengthening its relations with Central Asian countries as part of its broader foreign policy strategy (Jargalsaikhan & Nyamjav, 2022). Since 2023, the presidents of four Central Asian nations have visited Mongolia, while the President of Mongolia has reciprocated with visits to the same number of countries in the region. The frequency of these mutual visits has increased notably, during which heads of states have conducted bilateral meetings and formal negotiations. These engagements have focused on expanding mutually beneficial cooperation, enhancing regional and international collaboration, and establishing substantive and effective partnerships. This trend underscores Mongolia's growing

interest in deepening its ties with the Central Asian region, as illustrated by the following developments:

- In 2015, Mongolia opened a Consulate General in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.
- In 2015, the Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan visited Mongolia and organized the first Mongolia-Turkmenistan Foreign Ministries consultation meeting in Ulaanbaatar.
- In 2019, the second Mongolia-Turkmenistan Foreign Ministries consultation meeting took place in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.
- In 2019, the Prime Minister of Mongolia made an official visit to Kazakhstan, marking the first visit at the Prime Ministerial level in 25 years.
- In 2019, Mongolian President Khaltmaagiin Battulga made an official visit to Kyrgyzstan.
- In 2019, Mongolia opened its Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.
- In 2021, Mongolian Foreign Minister Battsetseg Battsengel visited Kazakhstan, the first official visit at the Foreign Ministerial level in 29 years.
- In 2023, the President of Kyrgyzstan made a state visit to Mongolia, the first presidential visit since the establishment of diplomatic relations 21 years prior.
- In 2023, Foreign Minister Battsetseg Battsengel made an official visit to Uzbekistan, the first Foreign Minister-level visit since diplomatic relations were established in 1992.
- The 4th meeting of the Mongolia–Kyrgyzstan Intergovernmental Commission was held in Ulaanbaatar on March 28–29, 2022.
- In 2024, Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh made an official state visit to the Republic of Uzbekistan, marking the first presidential-level visit since diplomatic relations were established in 1992, a highly significant event opening a new chapter in bilateral relations.
- In 2024, Mongolia opened its Embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.
- In 2024, President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh made an official visit to Turkmenistan, the first high-level visit since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992.
- In 2024, the Speaker of the Kyrgyz Parliament made an official visit to Mongolia, the first such visit at the parliamentary speaker level since diplomatic relations were established.
- In 2024, Mongolia elevated its relations with Kazakhstan to the level of "Strategic Partnership," becoming Mongolia's first major "Strategic Partner" in the Central Asian region. On October 29–30, 2024, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, conducted a state visit to Mongolia. During this visit, Mongolia and Kazakhstan formally established a Strategic Partnership. This marked a significant and historic milestone, as it represented Mongolia's first Strategic Partnership with a country in the Central Asian region
- On June 1–2, 2025, President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedow paid an official state visit to Mongolia, marking the first presidential-level visit since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. This historic visit opened a new chapter in bilateral relations. This marked the first official visit by a Turkmen head of state since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Mongolia and Turkmenistan in 1992.

- On June 24–25, 2025, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev paid an official state visit to Mongolia, also marking the first presidential-level visit since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. This marked the first state visit by an Uzbek head of state since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992. During the visit, Mongolia and Uzbekistan elevated their bilateral relationship to a "Comprehensive Partnership" and signed a "Joint Statement," signifying a deepening of strategic cooperation.
- Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan paid an official visit to Mongolia on June 26–27, 2025. This was the first-ever visit at the level of Deputy Prime Minister and the first official visit by a Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan in 19 years since 2006. During the visit, the two sides agreed to regularize high-level dialogues and reciprocal visits, as well as inter-ministerial consultations and consular meetings. They also agreed to hold the next session of the Mongolia-Kazakhstan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technical, and Cultural Cooperation within 2025 to further advance bilateral cooperation.
- On June 26–27, 2025, the 5th meeting of the Mongolia-Kyrgyzstan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technical, and Cultural Cooperation was held in Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic.
- On July 20-23, 2025, the President of Mongolia, U.Khurelsukh, paid a state visit to the Kyrgyz Republic. During the visit, the President of Kyrgyzstan personally welcomed the President of Mongolia at the airport. It was a unique visit that elevated traditional friendly relations to a "Comprehensive Partnership" relationship.
- On July 23-26, 2025, the President of Mongolia, U.Khurelsukh, paid a state visit to the Republic of Tajikistan. This visit is notable for being the first state visit by a Mongolian head of state since Mongolia established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Tajikistan in 1992.
- The Speaker of the State Great Khural of Mongolia, D. Amarbayasgalan, paid an official visit to Kazakhstan from September 4–7, 2025, with the aim of strengthening inter-parliamentary relations between Mongolia and the Republic of Kazakhstan. This marked a significant visit from the Mongolian side at the level of the Speaker of Parliament, 22 years after the last such visit in 2003.

The increasing frequency and regularity of such high-level visits demonstrate Mongolia's commitment to elevating its cooperation with Central Asian countries to a new stage. This trend is further evidenced by the growing number of intergovernmental commission meetings, ministerial consultations, and consular discussions being held actively and on a regular basis in recent years. These developments express Mongolia's aspiration to elevate its relations and cooperation with the Central Asian countries to a new level.

The content of agreements and treaties with Central Asian states has become richer, aiming for more innovative and broader cooperation, with an increasing focus on developing collaboration in an efficient, sustainable, and balanced manner. For example, the agreements between Mongolia and Kazakhstan, based on their "Strategic Partnership," cover a wide range of areas, including political affairs, security, defense, nuclear energy, information technology, e-governance, space technology, border

infrastructure, environment, green development, and mutual support for international initiatives. This indicates that priority is being given to fostering stable and well-rounded cooperation in the future.

Mongolia's Trade and Economic Relations with Central Asian Countries

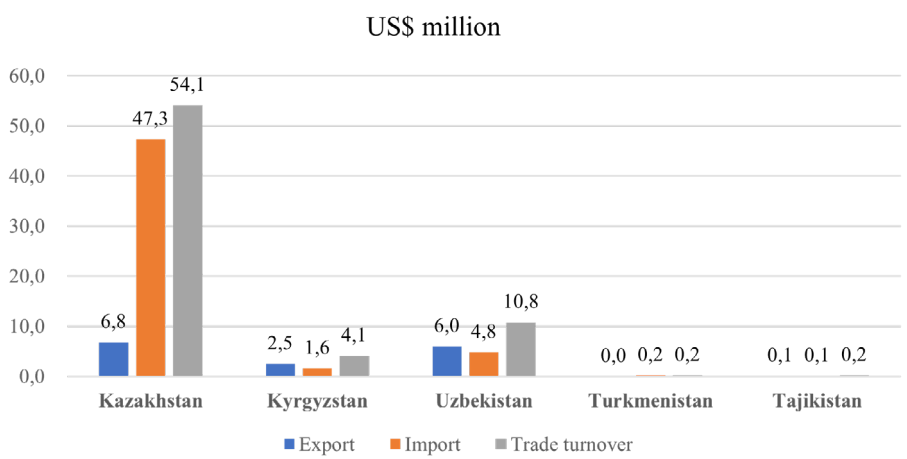
The Central Asian region is becoming a politically and economically active area attracting global attention, which is important for Mongolia in many respects. Mongolia exports animal-derived products such as meat, leather, knitted goods, wool, and cashmere products, clothing, and footwear to Central Asian countries. Conversely, Mongolia mainly imports foodstuffs and consumer goods from Central Asia, including flour, fruits and berries, hand-woven carpets, automotive equipment oils, hygiene products, detergents, tea, vegetable oils, cotton fabrics, wheat, and blue corn flour.

Common challenges facing Mongolia's economic relations with Central Asian countries include the paradox of geographical proximity but a lack of shared borders and direct road or railway connections. Transport routes passing through Russia or China entail high taxes and tariffs, which hinder the expansion of trade and economic ties. Therefore, to enhance trade relations with Central Asian countries, Mongolia needs to develop trilateral partnership mechanisms involving its two neighboring powers and negotiate agreements aligned with its national interests.

In the future, the agricultural and mining sectors present opportunities for joint cooperation to expand economic collaboration. Moreover, intensifying cooperation requires increasing investment from the region and raising the frequency of air transport connections.

Trade and economic cooperation play a vital role in deepening Mongolia's relations with Central Asian countries, and an attempt has been made to explain trade turnover by each country individually.

Figure 3. Trade between Mongolia and Central Asian countries (2024)



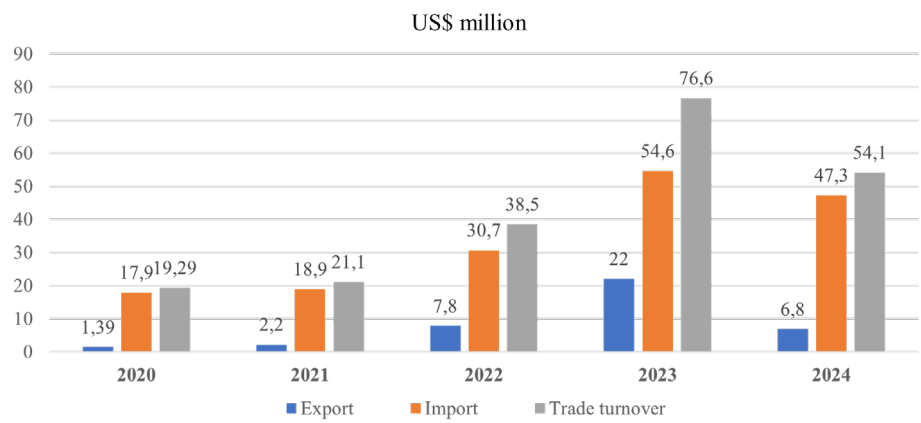
Source: International Trade Center (2025)

As shown in the above diagram, Kazakhstan stands out as Mongolia's largest trading partner among Central Asian countries (Figure 3). Although Mongolia is geographically close to Kazakhstan, with a distance of only 40 km to its west, the two countries do not share a direct border. This, in turn, constitutes a weakness for the expansion of their trade and economic relations, as all exchanges must pass through the territory of the Russian Federation. Mongolia does not have a direct border with Kazakhstan in the Central Asian region, but it is geographically very close. Mongolia and Kazakhstan are separated by about 40 kilometers of Russian territory. This lack of a direct border poses a significant challenge to Mongolia's relations with Central Asian countries. If the transport and logistics issue is resolved, Mongolia will have the opportunity to further develop trade and economic relations with Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries. This will increase the flow of goods and services from Central Asian countries, which will be of great importance for the bilateral cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, and others. Furthermore, direct investment and business relations with Central Asian countries can improve. Therefore, in order for Mongolia to improve its relations with Central Asian countries in the future, it is important to resolve the transit transport and logistics issues through Russia and China.

Mongolia–Kazakhstan Trade

Trade between Mongolia and Kazakhstan has been growing steadily over the last five years. As of 2024, total trade turnover stands at US$54.1 million, with US$6.8 million in exports and US$47.3 million in imports (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Mongolia-Kazakhstan trade turnover (2020-2024)



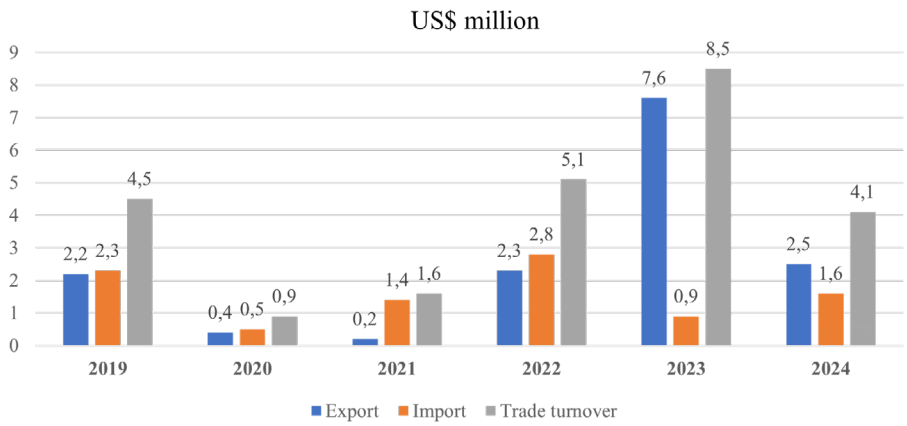
Source: International Trade Center (2025)

Mongolia's exports to Kazakhstan primarily include animal-derived products such as meat, leather, knitted goods, wool, cashmere products, clothing, and footwear. From Kazakhstan, Mongolia predominantly imports processed tobacco, sanitary products, laundry detergents, tea, vegetable oil, cotton fabrics, wheat, rye flour, and food products.

Mongolia–Kyrgyzstan Trade

The Consulate General of Mongolia in the Kyrgyz Republic opened in 2014. However, it was limited in its ability to perform all diplomatic functions typically carried out by an embassy, such as negotiating with the host government. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia subsequently raised the proposal to establish an embassy, and in June 2019, Mongolia opened its Embassy in Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic. This move contributed significantly to strengthening and deepening the two countries' bilateral relations, with high-level meetings, reciprocal visits, and the exchange of embassies becoming more frequent.

Figure 5. Mongolia-Kyrgyzstan trade turnover (2019-2024)



Source: International Trade Center (2025)

The total trade turnover between the two countries in 2024 stands at US$4.1 million, with US$2.5 million in exports and US$1.6 million in imports (Figure 5). Mongolia's exports predominantly include mutton, goat meat, by-products, ready-made clothing, and knitted products, while its imports from Kyrgyzstan mainly comprise fruits, seed grains, and carpets.

Mongolia–Uzbekistan Trade

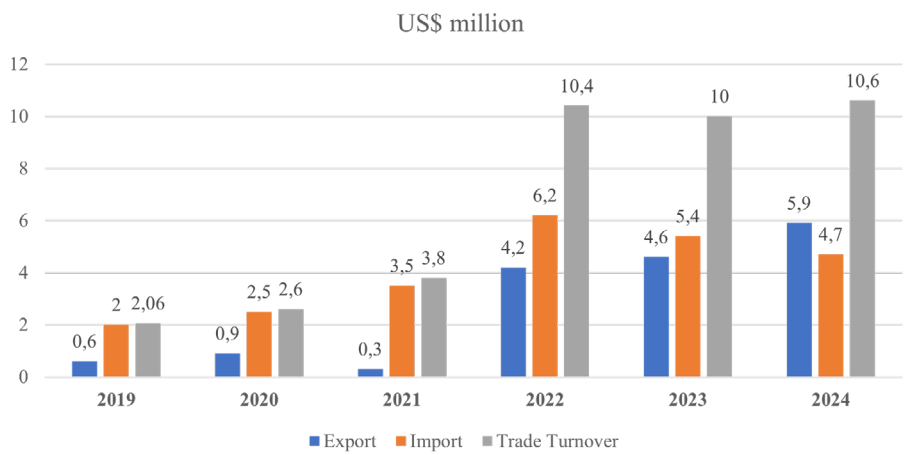
Uzbekistan, with a population of over 35 million, stands out in Central Asia due to its strong agricultural and light industrial base. In contrast to its neighbors, Uzbekistan shares no borders with Russia or China, is not a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Eurasian Economic Union, and maintains an independent foreign policy. Determining that there was a clear need for a diplomatic presence in a country of growing political and economic significance, Mongolia opened its Embassy in Tashkent on June 25, 2024. The two governments held their first Intergovernmental Commission meeting in Tashkent in February 2025, following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. President of Mongolia, U.Khurelsukh, made a state visit to the Republic of Uzbekistan in June 2025. In 2023, Minister of Foreign Affairs B.Battsetseg also paid an official visit to Uzbekistan. An agreement was signed to

establish a Mongolia–Uzbekistan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technical, and Cultural Cooperation.

On June 24–25, 2025, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev paid a state visit to Mongolia, the first visit at the presidential level since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992.

During the visit, the Presidents of Mongolia and Uzbekistan signed a Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Partnership between Mongolia and the Republic of Uzbekistan, thereby elevating bilateral relations to the level of a Comprehensive Partnership. A series of events was held in conjunction with the visit, including the Mongolia-Uzbekistan Tourism Forum, the Mongolia-Uzbekistan Business Forum, a cultural performance by Uzbek artists, a photo exhibition, and a traditional Uzbek cuisine day. This historic visit, the first-ever state visit to Mongolia by the President of Uzbekistan in 33 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations, opened a new chapter in the history of bilateral relations and marked a highly significant milestone in deepening cooperation between the two countries.

Figure 6. Mongolia-Uzbekistan trade turnover (2019-2024)



Source: International Trade Center (2025)

The total trade turnover between the two countries in 2024 reached US$10.6 million. Mongolia exported processed sheep and lamb skins, casings, mutton, chevon, frozen beef, polyacetals, and polycarbonate, valued at US$5.9 million, while it imported grapes, fruits, food products, refrigeration equipment, freezing equipment, and trucks from Uzbekistan, totaling US$4.7 million (Figure 6).

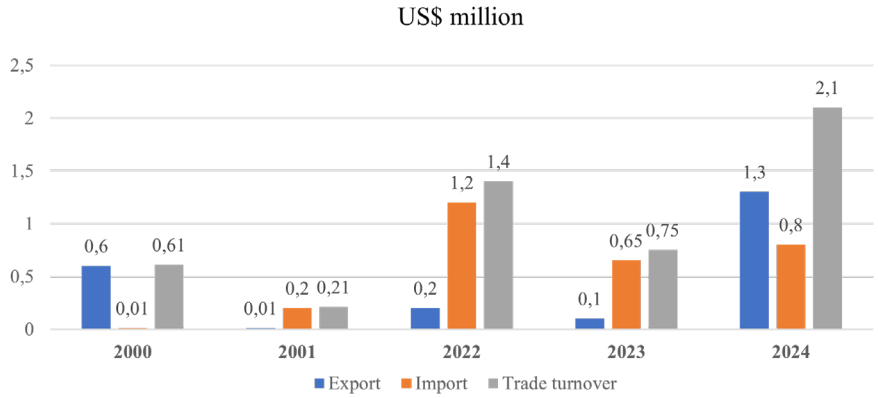
As of 2024, 240 Mongolian nationals reside in Uzbekistan, while 1,020 Uzbek nationals reside in Mongolia. Currently, 25 Mongolian nationals live in Uzbekistan, and 40 Uzbek nationals reside in Mongolia. In 2022, the two countries abolished their respective tourist visas for stays of up to 30 days.

Mongolia and Uzbekistan have significant potential for cooperation in strengthening food security and increasing the supply of healthy food products.

Mongolia–Tajikistan Trade

Mongolia's relations with Tajikistan are the weakest and slowest to develop in comparison with its relationships with other Central Asian states.

Figure 7. Mongolia-Tajikistan trade turnover (2019-2024)



Source: International Trade Center (2025)

The total trade turnover between the two countries in 2024 stands at US$2.1 million, with US$1.3 million in exports and US$0.8 million in imports (Figure 7).

Mongolia–Turkmenistan Trade

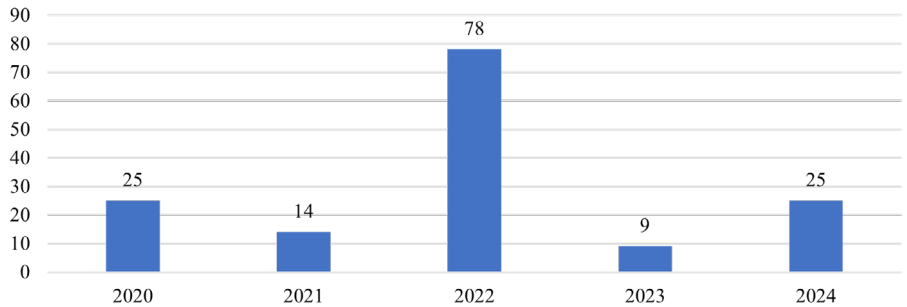
In 2015, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan visited Mongolia, and the first consultation meeting between the two Foreign Ministries was held in Ulaanbaatar. Subsequently, in 2019, the second consultation meeting was held in Ashgabat.

President of Mongolia, U.Khurelsukh, made his first state visit to Turkmenistan in October 2024, which represented a significant step forward in strengthening and developing bilateral relations.

There has been no high-level presidential visit between the two countries in more than 30 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations. In June 2025, President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov made his first state official visit to Mongolia. This visit was a significant visit that strengthened mutual trust between the two countries and sought to enrich relations with new content.

Turkmenistan stands as the country with the lowest trade turnover with Mongolia in Central Asia. As of 2024, there were no exports from Mongolia to Turkmenistan, while US$25,000 worth of products were imported from Turkmenistan (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Volume of Imports to Mongolia from Turkmenistan (US$ thousands)



Source: International Trade Center (2025)

Although the exchange of presidential-level visits has taken place within a relatively short span of time, both sides have demonstrated strong mutual commitment to implementing the agreements reached during the visits and producing tangible results in various areas of cooperation. This practical and results-oriented approach was evident during this state visit.

For instance, following the official visit of President U.Khurelsukh to Turkmenistan in 2024, several agreements were successfully implemented. These include the establishment of the Mongolia-Turkmenistan Parliamentary Friendship Group, the creation of an Intergovernmental Joint Commission between the Governments of Mongolia and Turkmenistan, as well as the formation of the Joint Committee on Road Transport, the Joint Committee on Agriculture, and the Joint Committee on Veterinary and Livestock Husbandry. These achievements reflect the successful outcomes of last year's state visit and the dynamic progress in bilateral cooperation.

Overall, in the future, establishing free economic and trade zones in border areas with the participation of Russia, China, and Kazakhstan could be a key way to foster international trade and investment and to further promote Mongolia's relations with Central Asian countries.

FEATURES OF MONGOLIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

Mongolia maintains traditional friendly relations with Central Asian countries, shares deep historical and cultural ties, and has a similar level of economic and social development. Therefore, it is important to deepen relations with Central Asian countries based on shared interests.

Mongolia's geographical and geopolitical location falls within both Northeast Asia and Central Asia. Mongolia emphasizes a policy of "balanced" relationships in its regional interactions. Mongolia's Central Asia–directed foreign policy aims to guarantee the country's security, maintain ecological balance, develop its western region through expanded cooperation with its neighbors, and further deepen collaboration based on historical and cultural traditions.

Point 14.3 of Mongolia's Foreign Policy Concept states: *"To develop bilateral friendly relations and cooperation with Asian countries, and to contribute to strengthening strategic stability and security cooperation in East Asia, Northeast Asia, and Central Asia"* (State Great Khural, 2011). Therefore, it is important for Mongolia to work closely with Central Asian countries to promote common regional interests and establish clear mechanisms to jointly combat the challenges and threats they face, in order to strengthen regional security and stability. The absence of any territorial disputes between Mongolia and the countries of the Central Asian region is a significant achievement in its foreign policy

While Mongolia established diplomatic relations with Central Asian countries in the early 1990s, their interaction remained weak and slow due to regional instability, weak economic integration, and limited opportunity for Mongolia's participation in that process. At the same time, Mongolia has been eager to foster extensive relations with its Northeast Asian neighbors, such as Japan and South Korea. In this context, in order to balance power in the region, Mongolia's policy toward Central Asia in recent years shows a growing tendency toward deepening its engagement. There are significant opportunities for strengthening Mongolia's cooperation with Central Asia in the field of trade. Scholar Alicia Campi (2002) in her paper *Mongolia's Integration into Central Asia: Defining its Future by Rediscovering its Past*, stressed that, *"... today Mongolia should not be turning away from Central Asia, but instead looking for a third neighbor there. Mongolia's reintegration into Central Asia might seem a step backward toward its past, but in reality, it is a path toward a better future."* Thus, Mongolia's policy toward Central Asia should aim to make use of cooperation mechanisms to promote regional stability, protect the environment, foster the development of its western region, and further deepen traditional relations based on historical and cultural ties. Mongolia has established embassies in the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and is showing a tendency to promote large-scale business activities with the business entities of these countries. This trend was clearly visible during the business forums held as part of high-level visits.

Mongolia's foreign policy toward Central Asia can be explained by the following factors:

First: Trade and Economic Cooperation Based on Traditional Friendly Relations. Mongolia's geographical location, landlocked and situated between two neighbors, constitutes a geopolitical vulnerability. Therefore, it is crucial for Mongolia to seek access to European markets by strengthening its transport links through Central Asia. It is especially important to foster relations with Central Asian countries that pursue a Western-oriented economic policy.

Second: Cooperation to Strengthen Regional Peace, Security, and Stability. Mongolia can connect its interests with those of Central Asia by promoting political stability, strengthening democracy, and securing peace and stability in the region. The country should collaborate closely with its neighbors on topical global and regional issues. This includes:

- Mutual support for initiatives put forward by the UN, WTO, Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO);
- Support for Mongolia's "Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security" initiative;
- Mutual support in international organization elections;
- Combating climate change, desertification, and conserving the environment;
- Support for cooperation in the energy sector.

Third: Cooperation Based on Historical and Cultural Ties. Mongolia is connected to Central Asia through its shared nomadic culture and history. The Central Asian countries lie at the intersection of multiple cultures and blend Islam with modern social progress (Chuluumbaatar, 2020). Mongolia itself stands at a crossroads of many cultures, with Christian-Orthodox culture to the north (Russian Federation) and Confucian- and Buddhist-dominant culture to the south (China). Also, about 5% of Mongolia's total population is Muslim. The western region of Mongolia is geographically close to the countries of Central Asia, where the population is culturally or traditionally Muslim. Thus, these historical and cultural ties enable strengthening relations with Central Asia. There are further opportunities to develop cooperation based on these shared historical and cultural connections.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, due to the complex issues arising in international relations, it has become important for Mongolia to deepen its relations with neighboring countries in the region. In this context, it is crucial for Mongolia to pursue a diplomatic policy with innovative initiatives that align with its own interests and to increase its number of partners.

Mongolia's relations with Central Asian countries have been weak and inactive over the last nearly 30 years. In recent years, Mongolia has intensified its policy toward Central Asia, putting significant effort into strengthening its political and diplomatic foundations and focusing more on developing these relations.

The Central Asian countries, where the majority is of Muslim background, share with Mongolia a nomadic lifestyle and deep historical and cultural ties. These commonalities provide a strong foundation for fostering closer political, economic, and cultural cooperation.

To expand its international partnerships, Mongolia must pursue a more active, innovative, and purposeful foreign policy. Therefore, deepening relations with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is particularly important, as these two countries share common interests with Mongolia and follow a Western-oriented development trajectory.

Looking ahead, it will be essential for Mongolia to carry out a detailed study of the specific features of each Central Asian state to formulate a well-grounded regional policy. Within the framework of its "New Revival" in foreign relations, Mongolia's active and balanced diplomacy is already gaining broad international support, which strengthens its prospects for successful engagement with the Central Asian region.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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ASh: writing – original draft, conceptualization, formal analysis, data curation, investigation, methodology, planning, and execution of the research; KB: methodology, writing – theoretical and methodological framework, literature review, investigation, resources, software, translation of the article.

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CLIMATE GOVERNANCE: COMPARING CENTRALIZED AND DECENTRALIZED APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT. *Climate governance is entering a period of turbulence, with policy reversals in some democracies and rapid expansions elsewhere. This paper compares how centralized, decentralized (federal), and polycentric/hybrid governance designs shape mitigation and adaptation outcomes. Using a qualitative comparative approach across China, the United States, Canada, Türkiye, Norway, and Saudi Arabia, assessing policy ambition, legal instruments, implementation capacity, subnational authority, stakeholder participation, finance mobilization, and equity considerations. A qualitative comparative approach is applied across six country cases - China, the United States, Canada, Türkiye, Norway, and Saudi Arabia - evaluating policy ambition, legal instruments, implementation capacity, subnational authority, stakeholder participation, finance mobilization, and equity considerations. Insights are then extended to the Central Asian context, where climate governance remains predominantly centralized, shaped by Soviet-era institutional legacies, uneven local capacity, and constrained civic participation. The analysis demonstrates that no model is universally superior; the most effective arrangements combine top-down coherence with bottom-up experimentation and social legitimacy. Norway's polycentric governance model and Türkiye's hybrid approach illustrate how localized climate planning can be integrated within broader national frameworks. For Central Asia, pragmatic hybrid pathways are recommended that align national targets and financing with empowered regional pilots, transparent monitoring, and inclusive engagement. These context-sensitive combinations offer the best prospects for durable emissions reductions, climate resilience, and just transition outcomes in the region.*

KEYWORDS: *climate governance, climate policy, China, the USA, Türkiye, Canada, Central Asia.*

INTRODUCTION

Climate change has become a defining test of governance in the twenty-first century. As impacts intensify and transition timelines compress, institutional design - who decides, how coordination occurs across levels, and how society participates - has become as consequential as technology costs or resource endowments. Effective climate action, therefore, depends not only on what policies are adopted but on how authority, capacity, and accountability are structured. As of 2023, China, the United States, India, the European Union, Russia, and Brazil account for over 62% of global greenhouse gas

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emissions (World Bank, 2023; European Commission, 2024). On a per-capita basis, the United States (14.2 tCO_2), Canada (13.1 tCO_2), and Russia (11.5 tCO_2) remain among the highest emitters, compared with 8.9 tCO_2 for China and 1.9 tCO_2 for India. To address these challenges and accelerate energy transition, countries are substantially increasing investments in clean energy (World Bank, 2023). In 2024, clean-energy investment was led by China (~USD 680B), the European Union (~USD 370B), and the United States (~USD 315B), with strategies reflecting divergent governance models and institutional capacities (International Energy Agency, 2024). These differences shape policy credibility, investor expectations, and the pace of decarbonization.

Meanwhile, countries face differing structural and contextual challenges and exhibit distinct climate action trajectories. It is therefore critical to identify the core enablers and constraints that shape the effectiveness of their climate governance, which can include political will, administrative capacity, regulatory coherence, stakeholder engagement, and alignment between national and sub-national levels. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing context-sensitive and adaptive climate pathways.

The Central Asian region - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and neighbors - faces acute vulnerabilities (desertification, water stress, extreme events) while operating within highly centralized governance structures marked by limited fiscal decentralization and uneven local capacity (Sabyrbekov, Overland, & Vakulchuk, 2023). Understanding which elements of centralized, decentralized, and hybrid systems travel well to Central Asia is, therefore, a practical and scholarly priority.

This paper contributes by providing a comparative evaluation of centralized, decentralized, and polycentric/hybrid arrangements across representative cases; identifying criteria that link governance design to climate outcomes; and translating these insights into actionable implications for Central Asia, where administrative legacies and capacity asymmetries constrain implementation. Authors argue that the most credible pathways for the region are hybrid: clear national targets and funding frameworks combined with empowered subnational experimentation, inclusive participation, and robust monitoring.

Moreover, climate risks vary widely across geographic, ecological, and socio-economic contexts, reinforcing the urgency of localized or bioregional approaches to both mitigation and adaptation. Such approaches are particularly important in geographically expansive and ecologically diverse countries (Aberley, 1999). In this context, Central Asia presents a compelling case. The region faces acute climate vulnerabilities, including desertification, water scarcity, and extreme weather events, while contending with governance challenges rooted in Soviet-era institutional legacies and centralized state systems.

Identifying transferable governance practices is therefore crucial. For example, China offers valuable insights into rapid and coordinated top-down policy execution. Meanwhile, the United States and Canada demonstrate the strengths and limits of decentralized, sub-national innovation. Türkiye's hybrid governance model illustrates how national coordination can be balanced with regional flexibility, an especially

relevant consideration for Central Asian states given their similar geographic and developmental profiles.

Despite emerging climate initiatives, governance in Central Asia continues to be constrained by limited civic participation, fragmented policy implementation, and insufficient resource allocation to local authorities. This research seeks to identify applicable governance models and institutional practices that can strengthen climate adaptation and mitigation in the region, drawing on lessons from diverse international cases.

In parallel, recent decades have seen the rise of climate governance and environmental governance as key concepts in international policy discourse. While sometimes used interchangeably, current research highlights essential distinctions between them, particularly in terms of institutional design, policy tools, stakeholder participation, and mechanisms for global coordination. Clarifying these differences is essential for shaping effective, inclusive, and accountable climate governance systems, especially in transitional and emerging economies.

METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design to analyze climate governance across countries that represent three distinct institutional models: centralized (e.g., China, Saudi Arabia), decentralized (e.g., Canada, the United States), and hybrid or polycentric (e.g., Türkiye, Norway). The primary aim is to evaluate how varying policy architectures, including legal instruments, incentive schemes, multi-level coordination mechanisms, and energy transition progress, shape the effectiveness of national climate action. Particular attention is paid to climate mitigation and adaptation outcomes, as well as the degree to which equity, justice, and stakeholder participation are integrated across governance levels.

The empirical basis of this research is broad and triangulated. Data is drawn from peer-reviewed academic studies, official policy documents (including Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans, and climate legislation), and international clean energy investment trends from institutions such as the International Energy Agency, the International Renewable Energy Agency, the Climate Policy Initiative, and the World Bank. This is further complemented by information from global climate action tracking platforms, including the Climate Action Tracker, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and official national climate and energy portals. Together, these sources enable a multi-dimensional assessment of governance dynamics across institutional and geographic contexts. The comparative approach allows the synthesis of cross-country insights and supports the development of policy recommendations tailored to the Central Asian states. These recommendations aim to foster climate governance systems that are context-sensitive, adaptive, and inclusive, particularly relevant for regions struggling with bureaucratic inertia, capacity asymmetries, and heightened climate vulnerability.

Climate governance theory emphasizes distributed authority, multi-level coordination, and learning across scales (Cole, 2011; Bauer et al., 2007; Bennett & Satterfield, 2018; Hey, 2006; Lemos & Agrawal, 2006; van der Molen, 2018; Bulkeley et al., 2012;

Hoffmann, 2011; Blue & Dusyk, 2022b; Smoke & Cook, 2022). This scholarship highlights the shift from centralized environmental regimes to more polycentric, hybrid arrangements involving states, markets, and civil society actors. Research on power, equity, and justice explores how resource allocation, institutional veto points, and the inclusion (or exclusion) of marginalized groups shape outcomes (Paavola, 2005; Blue & Dusyk, 2022b). This perspective underscores the need to integrate climate justice and procedural fairness into governance frameworks. Comparative governance performance studies produce mixed empirical findings. While decentralization and democracy are often assumed to deliver more effective outcomes through innovation and accountability, recent research questions whether regime type alone determines emissions reductions or policy coherence (Escher & Walter-Rogg, 2023; Lindvall & Karlsson, 2023). Evidence suggests that factors such as economic structure and developmental stage may weigh more heavily than political system design. National-level research provides case-specific insights into how countries design and implement climate strategies. Studies of the United States and Canada highlight the role of federalism and subnational leadership (Rabe, 2011; Harrison, 2023; Winter, 2024). Research on China illustrates centralized policy coherence but also entrenched coal dependence (Qi et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022, 2023; Cui et al., 2021). Türkiye and Norway exemplify hybrid or polycentric approaches that balance national coordination with local innovation and stakeholder inclusion (Boasson & Jevnaker, 2019; Fauchald & Gulbrandsen, 2023; Demirci & Karabulut Uçar, 2024). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia shows the limitations of highly centralized, resource-dependent systems with low civic engagement (Rahman et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2023).

This research also foregrounds the importance of social engagement, local authority empowerment, and community co-production of climate solutions, dimensions often overlooked in state-centric policy models. By synthesizing governance theories with region-specific insights, the study contributes to both academic discourse and applied policy development on equitable and effective climate governance in transitional contexts.

Finally, the study addresses notable gaps in the comparative literature by explicitly linking governance model effectiveness to the institutional and political realities of Central Asia. Previous scholarship rarely applies participatory governance frameworks, decentralized policy experimentation, or capacity-building approaches to this region. This research, therefore, makes a novel contribution by situating comparative lessons within Kazakhstan and neighboring states, where centralized traditions persist but demand for inclusive and adaptive climate action is rising.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Climate Governance

To clearly navigate the complexity of contemporary climate challenges, it is critical to first establish conceptual clarity by differentiating between three interconnected yet distinct terms frequently encountered in environmental studies: environmental power, environmental governance, and climate governance. Understanding these distinct yet overlapping definitions provides a foundational lens through which this paper evaluates

diverse governance models, institutional effectiveness, and their implications for policy implementation across varying national contexts.

Environmental power, as a concept, derives from a state's capacity to manage, protect, or exploit critical ecological systems such as forests, watersheds, and fossil fuel reserves or, conversely, from its potential to cause transboundary environmental harm (Buzan & Falkner, 2022). Environmental power manifests support for global cooperation and problem-solving, reinforcing notions of environmental leadership (Skodvin & Andresen, 2006; Eckersley, 2020), while the latter enables obstruction or strategic delay, often for economic or geopolitical gain. Despite the emergence of environmental stewardship as a key institution in global society, it has yet to reach systemic importance in maintaining international stability, unlike traditional security threats. Thus, environmental issues like biodiversity loss, ozone depletion, and climate change, although critical to planetary survival, still lack full integration into global power structures (Bernstein, 2020; Buzan & Falkner, 2022, p. 43).

Environmental governance encompasses the institutions, policies, regulatory mechanisms, and stakeholder interactions explicitly designed to manage environmental resources sustainably, addressing issues such as pollution control, biodiversity conservation, and natural resource management through legal instruments, international agreements, and domestic regulations (Bauer et al., 2007; Bennett & Satterfield, 2018) Environmental governance has largely relied on command-and-control regulation and binding legal instruments focused on discrete issues like air pollution or endangered species protection (Hey, 2006; Bauer et al., 2007).

Climate governance, as a core dimension of environmental governance, encompasses a wide range of methods and institutional arrangements aimed at mitigating and adapting to the adverse effects of climate change. It involves not only formal decision-making by states and international institutions, but also corporate strategies, legal frameworks, and the engagement of civil society actors (IPCC, 2022, p. 45; UNDP, 2022). Climate governance includes collaborative approaches to decision-making, the mobilization of scientific knowledge, institutional capacity-building, and actions that support conservation and sustainable management of ecosystems (Lemos & Agrawal, 2006; van der Molen, 2018).

Within this broader framework, climate governance specifically targets two interrelated goals: climate mitigation, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and climate adaptation, efforts to cope with the ongoing and projected impacts of climate change (Hölscher & Frantzeskaki, 2020). The success of these objectives depends on the inclusion and active participation of a wide array of stakeholders, including civil society, political institutions, youth, Indigenous Peoples, businesses, media, and local communities (IPCC, 2022).

Effective climate governance must also address issues of equity and justice, particularly in ensuring that historically marginalized and vulnerable populations, who are often the most affected by climate impacts, are adequately represented in policy-making processes (Blue & Dusyk, 2022b). The distribution of power in multi-level governance frameworks plays a decisive role in shaping how policies are formulated and

implemented. Unequal access to institutional power and resources across governance levels may empower veto players, hinder consensus-building, and stall climate action. While multi-level governance scholarship has focused on the role of the nation-state (Bache & Flinders, 2004), scholars in environmental governance are increasingly incorporating theories of power and agency to better understand how these dynamics unfold (Nastar & Ramasar, 2012).

The complexity of climate change, with its long-term temporal scale, cross-sectoral implications, and global scope, has demanded more adaptive and experimental governance models. These include voluntary and market-based instruments such as carbon pricing, climate finance, and multi-stakeholder networks (Browne, 2022; Cole, 2011). As climate challenges increasingly intersect with trade, finance, and social justice, climate governance frameworks have come to foreground issues of power asymmetries, North-South equity, and procedural justice, dimensions less pronounced in conventional environmental regimes (Paavola, 2005; Murombedzi & Chikozho, 2023; Gough, 2013).

Climate governance initially has evolved into a polycentric, fragmented, and hybrid system, marked by the involvement of multiple levels of authority and a wide array of non-state actors such as cities, private firms, and civil society organizations (Asselt & Zelli, 2013; Bulkeley et al., 2012; Hoffmann, 2011). In contrast, traditional environmental governance remains more centralized, treaty-based, and state-centric, with compliance mechanisms embedded in formal legal regimes such as the Montreal Protocol and the Convention on Biological Diversity (Hey, 2006; Bauer et al., 2007).

At the national level, climate governance involves aligning domestic strategies and regulations with global commitments, often guided by scientific evidence and emission reduction targets (Blue & Dusyk, 2022a). One of the critical factors shaping climate governance effectiveness is the choice of governance model - centralized or decentralized - which determines how authority, resources, and responsibility are distributed across different levels of government and society (Lulham et al., 2023; Lulham & Natural Resources Canada, n.d.; Poberezhskaya & Bychkova, 2022; Upadhyaya et al., 2018).

Decentralized climate governance has emerged as an alternative to traditional top-down approaches, involving multiple actors at various levels. This polycentric model allows for greater experimentation and learning across governmental units (Cole, 2011). Examples include local climate initiatives and grassroots organizations, which form part of networked climate governance (Tosun & Schoenefeld, 2017). Administrative decentralization for climate action involves subnational governments and intergovernmental collaboration, with the appropriate mix varying based on country-specific climate needs and existing governmental structures (Smoke & Cook, 2022). While decentralized approaches offer opportunities for innovative climate policies, they also face obstacles in implementation, highlighting the need for careful design and adaptation to local contexts. Moreover, decentralized systems may encourage flexibility but often result in vague compromises at the federal level to accommodate diverse regional interests (Rabe, 2004). Thus, the choice between centralized and decentralized governance models carries profound implications for climate policy effectiveness, especially in large and diverse countries.

Overall, climate governance has evolved from a centralized approach to a more complex, fragmented, and decentralized models (Ren, 2022; Cole, 2011). Then the polycentric governance structure involves multiple centers of authority at various levels, including public and private actors (Abbott, 2017). While some scholars argue that institutional fragmentation can enhance climate governance effectiveness in the short term (Ren, 2022), others propose that a polycentric approach allows for greater experimentation, learning, and cross-influence among different governance levels (Cole, 2011). Balancing a soft and indirect mode of governance has played a significant role in shaping the polycentric climate governance system, challenging some assumptions of polycentric governance theory regarding spontaneous emergence and decentralized coordination (Abbott, 2017). To maximize benefits and minimize costs of institutional complexity, nonhierarchical orchestration of climate governance has been suggested as a potential solution (Abbott, 2012).

Centralized climate governance refers to systems where the national government holds primary authority over climate policy formulation and enforcement. This model allows for uniform policy implementation, coordinated resource allocation, and streamlined administrative processes. However, it may struggle to reflect regional diversity, address local needs, or involve stakeholders in meaningful ways, often leading to slower decision-making and reduced public engagement. In contrast, decentralized climate governance distributes authority across national, regional, and local levels, granting sub-national actors greater autonomy to tailor policies to local conditions. This fosters innovation, encourages stakeholder participation, and can yield context-sensitive solutions.

Public Involvement, Democracy and Climate Action Effectiveness

Initially, it is expected that democracy and decentralized approaches inherently leads to better climate governance and outcomes as these governance settings allow for localized policy innovation, increased accountability, and better alignment with community needs, thereby supporting emission reductions (Escher & Walter-Rogg, 2023; Povitkina, 2018), but also decentralization can also lead to fragmented efforts or regulatory capture at the subnational level if institutional oversight is weak (Allen, 2015; Steurer et al., 2019).

In contrast, autocratic regimes generally face systemic barriers to effective climate governance regardless of centralization strategy. Top-down approaches are frequently undermined by conflicting local interests, lack of incentives, and limited public participation, resulting in poor implementation and reduced accountability (Luo et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Goedeking, 2023).

Meanwhile, while democracies tend to produce better climate policy outputs than autocracies, there is weak evidence linking democratic development to CO2 emission reductions (Lindvall & Karlsson, 2023, Chesler et al. (2023). However, more evidence that there is no statistically significant relationship between regime type and greenhouse gas emissions, suggesting that democracies are no more effective than autocracies in mitigating climate change (Chesler et al., 2023). Although democracies are often assumed to promote better environmental outcomes due to political freedoms and civic

engagement, empirical evidence remains inconclusive, and recent quasi-experimental research fails to confirm a consistent link between democratization and emission reductions (Chesler et al., 2023).

Another opinion is that factors affecting the effectiveness of climate actions, associated with economic growth, income distribution, a country's developmental stage, and corruption, influence climate policy performance more significantly than regime type (Lindvall & Karlsson, 2023, Shen, 2024). In democracies, civil society participation and social equality contribute to long-term CO2 emission reductions, while in autocracies, local democracy and social equality play a role (Escher & Walter-Rogg, 2023). Bernauer et al. (2025), using cross-national data from 161 countries (1990-2015), demonstrate that more democratic countries offshore significantly higher amounts of pollution and, in turn, experience statistically lower domestic emissions. Democracies tend to achieve lower domestic greenhouse gas emissions not solely due to superior environmental governance, but also by outsourcing pollution-intensive production to less democratic or lower-income countries, explained by "pollution offshoring", the transfer of environmental harms through international trade (Bernauer et al., 2025).

COUNTRY CASE STUDY

Climate Action and Policy in Practice

The climate governance of core cases structures of the United States and China reflect fundamentally different institutional logics, where the U.S. employs a decentralized, "bottom-up" model driven by local governments and market mechanisms, and China implements a centralized, "top-down" approach guided by national planning and mandatory targets (Wu et al., 2022). These cases, along with the other country examples in this study, were selected not only for their governance diversity but also for their economic structures, resource dependencies, and institutional practices that offer potential parallels with Central Asian states, thereby making the political implications of their experiences especially relevant. Despite aiming for carbon neutrality, China faces a significantly shorter transition period than the United States, making its decarbonization challenge more intense due to a larger population and higher dependence on coal (Wu et al., 2022). Although China and the U.S. follow divergent policy paths, both approaches offer valuable lessons: China's centralized policy coherence accelerates mobilization, while U.S. local innovation and stakeholder involvement promote flexibility and market integration (Wu et al., 2022).

Centralized Climate Governance: China, Saudi Arabia

China's climate governance has evolved through a distinctive and state-led trajectory, marked by increasingly ambitious policy frameworks and global leadership aspirations. Initially focused on economic growth and sovereignty, China resisted binding climate obligations between 1988 and 2006, adopting a development-first posture (Xue & Poon, 2024). A shift occurred between 2007 and 2015 with the introduction of the National Climate Change Programme and the piloting of regional carbon markets, setting the groundwork for institutional and policy innovation (Gallagher et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2020). Since 2016, China has positioned itself as a leader in global climate diplomacy, formalizing commitments to peak carbon emissions by 2030 and achieve

carbon neutrality by 2060, often referred to as the "30-60" goal. These objectives are coordinated through a highly centralized governance model involving the Communist Party's Central Committee, the National People's Congress, and the National Leading Group for Climate Change, with provincial governments tasked with implementation via the Target Decomposition and Assessment System (Wu, 2023).

China's climate policy toolkit blends command-and-control regulations, emerging market-based instruments such as the national Carbon Emissions Trading Scheme, and a limited role for voluntary initiatives. Key policies include coal and carbon taxes, increased environmental spending, and emissions trading systems, which have shown measurable impact on curbing pollutants and promoting energy efficiency (Parry et al., 2016; Cui et al., 2021). Despite these advancements, structural challenges persist. These include the absence of a national climate law, limited civic participation, regional disparities in policy enforcement, and knowledge gaps in estimating emissions and carbon sinks (Feng et al., 2023; Wu, 2023). Although target decomposition and emissions trading have supported carbon reductions and stimulated innovation, scholars note that more ambitious and enforceable targets are needed to address systemic inertia and administrative fragmentation (Greider et al., 2017).

China's achievements in renewable energy are particularly notable. By mid-2024, the country had already met its 2030 renewable energy goals, signaling accelerated progress in solar, wind, and hydro deployment (Xue & Poon, 2024). However, coal still accounted for nearly 60% of electricity generation, revealing the challenge of balancing rapid decarbonization with economic and grid stability (Meidan, 2020). Globally, China's energy investments have diversified both technologically and geographically. The China Global Energy Investment portfolio, once concentrated in fossil fuel projects, has shifted toward renewables, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Solar and wind investments, though more geographically concentrated due to technology-specific market factors, have supported clean energy access and global decarbonization goals (Xue & Poon, 2024). While private enterprise involvement expanded after 2008, denationalization stagnated post-2014. Central state-owned enterprises still control nearly 90% of energy investment, particularly in fossil, hydro, and grid infrastructure, reflecting limited market liberalization. Overall, China's climate governance showcases the strengths of centralized, long-term planning and massive state-led investment, but also highlights challenges around institutional rigidity, energy dependency, and constrained civic engagement. While centralized control facilitates policy coherence, the absence of institutionalized civic participation limits public oversight, transparency, and grassroots innovation. Scholars argue that despite growing experimentation with market tools, public participation in China's climate governance remains minimal, largely due to the dominance of central state-owned enterprises and the restricted civic space (Feng et al., 2023; Wu, 2023).

Saudi Arabia's approach to energy transition and emissions reduction has shown incremental improvements, particularly in energy efficiency, though significant structural challenges remain. Between 1981 and 2019, emissions intensity in the energy sector declined from 113 to 54 gCO_2 per million joules, reflecting some success in cleaner production practices (Rahman et al., 2022). However, absolute greenhouse gas

emissions continued to rise over the same period, revealing limited overall effectiveness in achieving decarbonization goals (Rahman et al., 2022). Similarly, while energy intensity fell from 38 to 14 million joules per USD of GDP from 1988 to 2019, recent fluctuations and a slowdown in the rate of improvement suggest that efficiency gains are plateauing and call for broader systemic integration and sector-specific interventions (IEA, 2023; Rahman et al., 2022). Despite public awareness campaigns and the introduction of building efficiency standards, per capita energy consumption increased from 207 GJ in 1981 to 313 GJ in 2019, indicating that behavioral change and demand-side management remain insufficient (World Bank, 2023; Rahman et al., 2022).

Econometric analyses using a vector error correction model further emphasize the structural roots of Saudi Arabia's emissions trajectory. Total energy consumption and foreign direct investment are identified as long-term drivers of emissions, while short-term causality between population growth and emissions underscores the need for urban planning and demographic policy integration (Rahman et al., 2022). Although the Kingdom has initiated several notable programs, such as the National Renewable Energy Program, combined-cycle gas turbine efficiency upgrades, and smart grid development, most of these efforts remain in the pilot or early implementation stages, and their current scale is inadequate to meet the targets set for 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2023; Rahman et al., 2022).

To accelerate progress, scholars recommend a more aggressive and comprehensive strategy combining the scale-up of renewable energy deployment, the implementation of carbon capture and storage, the introduction of carbon pricing mechanisms, and stronger regulatory enforcement (SGI, 2023; Rahman et al., 2022). Voluntary programs and campaigns, while beneficial, must be reinforced with mandatory policy tools to influence consumption behavior and ensure long-term sustainability. In sum, while Saudi Arabia has laid a foundation for transition, the path forward requires a decisive shift from pilot programs to full-scale policy enforcement and institutional integration (IEA, 2023; Carnegie Endowment, 2023).

Saudi Arabia’s climate strategy also suffers from low transparency and limited civic or civil society participation. There is minimal data availability on the implementation status of national targets or stakeholder inclusion. Climate planning remains a top-down process lacking participatory governance, which hinders public accountability and behavioral change (Carnegie Endowment, 2023; Rahman et al., 2022).

Decentralized Climate Governance: Canada, the USA

Canada's climate governance reflects a complex and evolving system shaped by its decentralized federal structure and competing regional interests, where federalism historically hindered ambitious climate action due to provincial veto power, resource ownership, and remaining potent constraints on coherent and equitable national climate action (Harrison, 2023). Initially characterized by voluntary measures and subsidies (Rivers & Jaccard, 2005), Canadian climate policy has gradually shifted toward more compulsory mechanisms such as carbon pricing and regulatory frameworks (Potvin & Jodoin, 2015). This transition has been influenced by both international commitments and domestic political shifts. Canada’s early engagement with global

climate governance was marked by its ratification of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, committing to reduce GHG emissions by 6% below 1990 levels by 2012. However, under the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, Canada withdrew from Kyoto, weakening its international climate leadership and inviting criticism (Boyd & Rabe, 2019). A renewed commitment emerged with the Liberal government under Justin Trudeau, which ratified the Paris Agreement in 2016 and introduced the Pan-Canadian Framework for Clean Growth and Climate Change. Despite this progress, aligning federal ambitions with domestic implementation remains challenging, particularly due to the economy's dependence on fossil fuel extraction (Winter, 2024).

The structure of Canadian federalism allows provinces considerable autonomy, resulting in diverse and sometimes conflicting approaches to climate and energy policy. This dynamic is often termed "contested federalism," wherein provinces such as British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec exhibit varied policy pathways and energy mixes (Scott et al., 2023; Harrison, 2023). Quebec, for example, generates over 90% of its electricity from hydroelectric sources and has enacted a ban on new oil, gas exploration, and nuclear energy, as well as a commitment to eliminate fossil fuel heating in buildings by 2040 (Canada Energy Regulator, 2023a, 2023b). Ontario is heavily reliant on nuclear energy, which accounts for over 50% of its electricity generation; it is currently investing in small modular reactors to meet rising electricity demands (Canada Energy Regulator, 2023a, 2023b). Alberta remains the most fossil fuel-dependent province, though it leads Canada in wind and solar capacity growth, while British Columbia benefits from a predominantly hydro-based electricity system and is expanding its renewable capacity through Indigenous-led wind projects (Canada Energy Regulator, 2023a, 2023b; World Nuclear News, 2024; BC Hydro, 2023).

These regional distinctions in energy policy and resource dependency underscore both the innovation potential and coordination challenges within Canada's decentralized governance model. While provinces have tailored climate strategies that reflect local resource endowments and political cultures, achieving coherence and accountability at the national level remains difficult. Recent developments, such as the repeal of the federal consumer carbon tax in April 2025, have further intensified debates over the limits of decentralization (Government of Canada, 2025). Critics argue that the removal of this nationwide pricing mechanism weakens Canada's climate ambition and highlights the vulnerability of decentralized systems to political fluctuation.

Notably, Indigenous participation in clean energy projects has been substantial; as of 2022, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit entities were partners or beneficiaries in nearly 20% of Canada's existing electricity-generating infrastructure, most of which produces renewable energy (Canada Energy Regulator, 2023). Furthermore, Indigenous communities have significant equity in renewable energy projects operating within their communities and, to a lesser extent, on traditional Indigenous territory. Of the projects on traditional territory, 39% are wholly or partially Indigenous-owned, while within Indigenous communities, 42% are wholly Indigenous-owned, and 92% of projects have at least some Indigenous ownership (Canada Energy Regulator, 2023). Indigenous communities across Canada are not only stewards of vast carbon sinks but also active agents in climate governance, especially in British Columbia and the

Yukon. However, they often face institutional exclusion from national climate planning structures (Zurba et al., 2021).

Although Canada has committed to reducing emissions by 40-45% below 2005 levels by 2030, reaching these targets remains politically and economically contested. Scholars argue that Canada's climate strategy would benefit from stronger intergovernmental coordination, market-based incentives for clean technology, and tighter alignment between international climate commitments and domestic enforcement mechanisms (Duff et al., 2007; Winter, 2024). In sum, Canada represents a rich but fragmented case of decentralized climate governance, balancing national objectives with provincial variation and revealing both the tensions and adaptive capacity inherent in federal environmental policymaking.

The United States exemplifies an evolving federalist model of climate governance, shaped by shifting political leadership and the interplay between national and sub-national authorities. According to Rabe (2011), U.S. climate policy has progressed through three major phases: an initial stage of symbolic federal action from 1975 to 1997, followed by a state-driven innovation phase from 1998 to 2007, and more recently, a phase of "contested federalism" in which both state and federal governments simultaneously compete and collaborate on climate policy. This model has enabled pioneering states such as California and New York to serve as incubators for ambitious climate initiatives, including vehicle emissions standards, renewable energy mandates, and cap-and-trade systems, that have subsequently influenced federal policymaking through diffusion and intergovernmental learning (Rabe, 2011; Carlson, 2009; Bednar, 2008). At this period, the dynamic intergovernmental system reflects what North (1990) and Carlson (2009) describe as adaptive efficiency, the capacity of institutions to evolve under complex conditions through experimentation and policy learning. The United States' decentralized structure enables policy innovation and regional leadership but also creates fragmentation and political polarization that complicate cohesive national climate strategies.

Then, the most significant federal development in recent years has been the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022 under the Biden administration. The IRA allocates approximately $400 billion in investments toward clean energy infrastructure, electric vehicle deployment, and emissions mitigation technologies, representing the most substantial federal commitment to climate action to date (U.S. Department of Energy, 2022). The United States has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50-52% below 2005 levels by 2030 and to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. However, according to the Climate Action Tracker, current policies are rated as "Insufficient," indicating that additional efforts are necessary to meet the nation's climate goals (Climate Action Tracker, 2023).

Despite this federal progress, states continue to play a pivotal role in shaping U.S. climate governance. California has led with its Zero-Emission Vehicle mandates, low-carbon fuel standards, and regional emissions trading, while New York has adopted legally binding climate targets under its Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act. Yet, recent developments highlight tensions within the federal system. In 2025, the U.S. Senate voted to revoke California's waiver to set its own vehicle emissions standards,

illustrating a potential rollback of state autonomy in climate regulation (Vox, 2025). Additionally, proposed legislation threatens to eliminate critical clean energy subsidies introduced under the IRA, posing risks to the policy continuity needed for long-term decarbonization (Washington Post, 2025).

The United States' climate governance in 2025 reflects an increasingly polarized and fragmented policy landscape. Although it benefits from a federal system that allows for subnational innovation, it also suffers from political interference, inconsistent leadership, and legal volatility. A stark example was the U.S. Senate's revocation of California's Clean Air Act waiver in May 2025, effectively nullifying the state's Advanced Clean Cars II regulations mandating zero-emission vehicle sales by 2035 (The Verge, 2025). The rollback not only undermines California's autonomy but also disrupts coordinated climate efforts across 17 aligned states and Washington, D.C., illustrating the fragility of state-led transitions under contentious federal oversight (Rabe, 2011).

In parallel, the proliferation of misinformation campaigns often funded by fossil fuel interests has eroded public trust in climate science and delayed effective policy implementation. Such disinformation has been identified as a deliberate strategy to politicize environmental discourse and obstruct regulatory progress (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; UNDP, 2025). This dynamic has deepened partisan divides and complicated local-level action, particularly in conservative states where climate skepticism remains entrenched.

However, the United States also demonstrates significant regional divergence in climate performance. Leading states like California, New York, and Massachusetts have implemented aggressive climate targets, economy-wide carbon pricing, and clean energy mandates. California continues to lead in EV adoption, despite federal pushback, and New York has invested over $30 billion in offshore wind, building retrofits, and green job creation under its Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (NYSERDA, 2024). Massachusetts, meanwhile, has committed to net-zero by 2050 and launched programs for municipal decarbonization and social equity in transition efforts (Massachusetts Clean Energy Center, 2024).

In contrast, states like Wyoming, West Virginia, and Mississippi remain laggards in the transition. These states continue to rely heavily on coal and natural gas for electricity generation, lack enforceable climate targets, and have limited participation in national or regional carbon markets (EPA, 2024). For example, Wyoming derives over 85% of its electricity from coal and has actively challenged federal climate regulations through litigation (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). Political resistance, economic dependency on fossil industries, and underinvestment in renewables further constrain their climate progress.

Polycentric (hybrid) climate governance: Norway, Türkiye.

Norway's climate governance presents a compelling case of polycentric responsibility, where local authorities play a crucial role in implementing climate policies, with municipalities acting as both policy implementers and independent actors (Aall et al., 2007; Hanssen et al., 2013). The country has adopted a wide range of climate measures

across sectors, despite its already decarbonized power production (Boasson & Jevnaker, 2019). Norway's total energy supply in 2023 consisted of approximately 43% renewable energy, primarily hydropower, while oil and natural gas together accounted for about 49%, mainly due to their roles in transport and industry (IEA, 2024). In contrast, over 90% of Norway's electricity generation comes from hydropower, making its domestic power sector one of the cleanest globally (IEA, 2024; Climate Action Tracker, 2024). However, Norway remains a major exporter of fossil fuels, especially crude oil and natural gas, which comprised 61% of total goods export value in 2023, amounting to NOK 1,100 billion, or a dominant share of national income (Norwegian Petroleum Directorate, 2024). This export dependence creates a structural contradiction: while Norway's domestic energy system supports climate goals, its economic reliance on fossil fuel exports challenges its global climate leadership and long-term sustainability transition (OECD, 2022, Sydnes, 2019). Norway's petroleum-dependent economy poses a dilemma, as carbon risk challenges existing governance structures (Bang & Lahn, 2020). Norway's commitment to climate action is codified in its Climate Change Act, which mandates a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50-55% by 2030 and 90-95% by 2050, relative to 1990 levels (IEA, 2024). The government's Climate Action Plan outlines a multifaceted approach, incorporating taxation, regulation, public procurement, and investment in innovation to achieve these targets (Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment, 2021).

Recent research suggests that both politicians and the public attribute responsibility for climate action similarly, countering the notion of a "governance trap" (Falck, 2023). Oslo exemplifies polycentric urban climate governance, combining integrative and interactive approaches. This dichotomy raises questions about the efficacy and equity of Norway's climate policies, particularly in the context of global emissions accounting and responsibility (Fauchald & Gulbrandsen, 2023).

However, a critical weakness in Norway's governance model is the diffusion of responsibility, which can lead to collective inaction. By attributing high responsibility to diffuse actors like the international community and industry entities less directly accountable to citizens, there is a risk of over-dependence on external solutions and underperformance at home (Fauchald & Gulbrandsen, 2023).

Norway faces a "governance trap" where diffuse responsibility across actors reduces decisive action. While polycentric governance supports shared responsibility, surveys reveal that both the public and politicians attribute primary responsibility to external actors - especially the international community and industry - thus weakening domestic accountability and timely climate action (Falck, 2023; OECD, 2022).

Since ratifying the Paris Agreement in 2021, Türkiye has undertaken substantial reforms in its climate governance structure. Critically, Türkiye is transitioning from a traditionally centralized, top-down climate governance model toward a hybrid system that combines soft and hard law instruments while introducing limited participatory mechanisms alongside continued state leadership. This evolving structure reflects Türkiye's strategy to integrate climate objectives with ongoing economic development goals (Demirci & Karabulut Uçar, 2024).

It has elevated the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change as the lead institution, established the Directorate of Climate Change, and initiated the Climate Council to incorporate input from a broad range of stakeholders (Demirci & Karabulut Uçar, 2024).

Türkiye has set a national target to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2053, a goal first announced following its ratification of the Paris Agreement in 2021 (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, 2021a). In 2022, Türkiye submitted its updated Nationally Determined Contributions, committing to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 41% by 2030 compared to a business-as-usual scenario based on 2012 levels, and to peak emissions by no later than 2038 (MEUCC, 2022). Furthermore, the government launched the Green Deal Action Plan in July 2021, led by the Ministry of Trade, to align with the European Green Deal and prepare for related external trade measures such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Trade, 2021). These developments reflect Türkiye's intention to harmonize climate action with economic competitiveness and international trade obligations. Notably, both Istanbul and Izmir have made significant strides in advancing local climate action. In 2023, Istanbul was selected as one of the EU's 100 Mission Cities, committing to achieve climate neutrality by 2030. The city has developed a comprehensive Climate Action Plan, focusing on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and sustainable transportation initiatives (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2023). Additionally, Istanbul has implemented waste-to-energy projects, such as the Istanbul Waste Power Plant, which contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by converting waste into electricity (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2023). Similarly, Izmir has demonstrated leadership through its Climate City Contract Action Plan, aiming for climate neutrality by 2030. The plan outlines strategies for greenhouse gas reduction, climate adaptation, and the promotion of a circular economy. Izmir's initiatives include expanding public transportation, enhancing energy efficiency in buildings, and increasing the use of renewable energy sources (Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, 2023).

Although Türkiye has introduced hybrid governance structures, the role of metropolitan municipalities remains underutilized in national climate planning. Urban areas such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir have shown initiative through local climate plans, yet they lack legal mandates, stable funding, and integration into national climate strategies (Demirci & Karabulut Uçar, 2024).

Central Asia

Central Asia illustrates a fragmented and evolving model of climate governance, shaped by resource dependence, weak regional integration, and the interplay between donor influence and national development priorities. Despite contributing relatively little to global greenhouse gas emissions, the region is warming faster than the global average, amplifying water scarcity, agricultural stress, and energy insecurity (IPCC, 2022; Sabyrbekov, Overland, & Vakulchuk, 2023).

All five states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, have submitted NDCs under the Paris Agreement. Yet these pledges are generally

modest, heavily conditional on donor support, and often misaligned with national development strategies. Kazakhstan is the regional frontrunner, pioneering carbon pricing through its emissions trading scheme and committing to carbon neutrality by 2060 (World Bank, 2022). Uzbekistan has begun attracting foreign investment in renewables, while Turkmenistan remains reliant on natural gas exports, with no operationalized decarbonization plan (Abdi, Zhakiyev, & Toilybayeva, 2023). Coal dependence continues in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, constraining near-term transition prospects.

At the governance level, implementation capacity is constrained by bureaucratic inertia, overlapping institutional responsibilities, and uneven technical expertise (World Bank, 2022, 2023a). Coordination between central and local authorities is weak, with climate strategies often subordinated to energy and industrial priorities (World Bank, 2023a). Subnational authority is limited: municipalities and provinces lack stable funding and clear legal mandates to pursue independent climate initiatives (World Bank, 2022). Participation and equity mechanisms are narrow, with environmental NGOs, eco-activists, and youth groups contributing primarily through advocacy and grassroots initiatives, rather than through institutionalized policymaking (Skalamera, 2025; Tskhay, 2023; Bossuyt, 2023). Climate finance is dominated by external partners (World Bank, EBRD, ADB), with donor-funded projects accounting for much of the renewable and adaptation investment. Domestic private-sector engagement remains modest, and carbon market mechanisms are underdeveloped (World Bank, 2023a). Outcomes are uneven: renewable capacity has expanded, particularly wind and solar in Kazakhstan, but fossil-fuel dependence, methane emissions, and transboundary water conflicts continue to dominate the regional climate profile (World Bank, 2022, 2023a). Public opinion trends further complicate governance: willingness to pay for climate action in Europe and Central Asia has declined since 2016, underscoring the risks of politicization if just-transition policies are absent (World Bank, 2023b). The region's strengths lie in the ability of central governments to adopt headline commitments and mobilize donor resources rapidly. Yet weaknesses include limited subnational authority, fragmented regional cooperation, weak civic participation, and heavy reliance on external financing. This trajectory demonstrates the contradictions of fossil-fuel dependence under accelerating climate risk. A hybrid pathway anchored in national guardrails and donor finance, but broadened through subnational pilot programs, participatory forums, and transparent MRV systems, offers the most credible route for Central Asian states to achieve durable mitigation and adaptation outcomes (World Bank, 2022, 2023a).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of climate governance across selected country cases reveals that the effectiveness of climate action depends on more than institutional form or regime type (Table 1-3). Instead, it is shaped by context-specific combinations of centralized coordination, decentralized innovation, and hybrid governance models that accommodate national ambition and local responsiveness. Broadly, no singular governance model universally outperforms others; rather, context-specific combinations of centralized coordination, decentralized innovation, and hybrid institutional design produce different climate outcomes.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Climate and Energy Governance in Selected Countries

	ENERGY MIX (ELECTRICITY, 2024)	ENERGY MIX (PRIMARY, 2024)	CLIMATE GOVERNANCE	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESES	NET-ZERO COMMITMENT	NATIONAL INSTRUMENTS	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	CARBON TAX / PRICING
UNITED STATES	Fossil fuels: ~60% (Nat. gas: 37%, Coal: 17%), Renewables: 21%, Nuclear: 19%	Oil: 36%, Nat. gas: 33%, Renewables: 12%, Coal: 10%, Nuclear: 9%	Federal, with strong state-level roles; EPA and DOE	Subnational innovation; civic engagement; strong legal precedents	Policy inconsistency; partisan conflict; limited federal coherence	2050 (official commitment)	IRA, EPA standards, clean energy tax credits	Strong state/local variation; grassroots campaigns	No federal carbon tax; some state-level programs (e.g., California cap-and-trade)
CANADA	Renewables: 70% (Hydro: 62%), Non-GHG: 82% (incl. nuclear)	Oil: 39%, Nat. gas: 39%, Coal: 2%, Renewables: 10%, Nuclear: 10%	Federal-provincial, with Environment and Climate Change Canada	Provincial leadership (e.g., Quebec, BC); Indigenous participation; carbon pricing	Jurisdictional overlaps; risk of rollback under new leadership	2050 (legally binding)	Carbon pricing, Clean Electricity Regs, Net-Zero Act	Municipal action, Indigenous ownership in energy	Yes; federal carbon tax (currently CAD $80/tonne CO_2 in 2024), upheld by Supreme Court
TURKEY	Fossil fuels: ~54% (Coal: 35%, Gas: 19%), Renewables: ~46%	Oil: 28%, Coal: 27%, Nat. gas: 23%, Renewables: 19%, Nuclear: 3%	Emerging hybrid model; central government coordination	Growing multilevel coordination; local urban innovation; alignment with EU	Limited enforcement; institutional fragmentation	2053 (announced target)	Renewable Energy Roadmap, draft Climate Law	Growing local initiatives, Climate Council	No carbon tax; early-stage discussions on carbon pricing and market design
SAUDI ARABIA	Fossil fuels: ~99%, Renewables: <1%	Oil: ~60%, Nat. gas: ~38%, Renewables: <2%	Centralized under Vision 2030 and SGI	Top-down coordination; massive investment in clean energy	Low public engagement; lack of transparency; fossil dependency	2060 (net-zero goal)	Energy efficiency and hydrogen strategy	Government-led; limited civic participation	No carbon tax; alternative mechanisms like Circular Carbon Economy promoted
CHINA	Coal: ~53%, Renewables: ~44% (Hydro: 13%, Wind: 10%, Solar: 8%, Nuclear: 4%)	Coal: 57%, Oil: 19%, Renewables: 14%, Nat. gas: 8%, Nuclear: 2%	Centralized; led by Ministry of Ecology and Environment	Rapid mobilization; target achievement; global industrial leadership	Coal dependence; limited civic participation; policy rigidity	Carbon neutrality by 2060, peak by 2030	CETS, Five-Year Plans, '1+N' Framework	Top-down with growing public awareness	No carbon tax; operates national ETS covering power sector
NORWAY	~90% Hydropower, ~7% Wind, ~3% Other (bio/gas)	Oil: 40%, Gas: 27%, Renewables: 31% (mostly hydro + bioenergy)	Unitary system; cross-level coordination; Climate Change Act (2018); Climate Action Plan (2021); strong municipal role	High policy coherence; citizen trust; climate tech innovation	Export reliance on oil/gas; diffusion of responsibility	2050 (legally binding); 50–55% GHG reduction by 2030 vs. 1990	Carbon tax; participation in EU ETS; municipal climate budgeting; Enova programs; CCS strategy	High municipal capacity; participatory budgeting in Oslo; Sámi protest over wind projects highlights need for just transition	Yes; CO_2 tax ~€80/t (2024); covers oil, gas, transport; integrated with EU ETS
KAZAKHSTAN	Coal: ~66%, Gas: ~20%, Renewables: ~10%, Hydro: 4%	Coal: 50%, Oil: 26%, Nat. gas: 19%, Renewables: ~5%	Centralized; Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources coordinates NDC	Strategic planning; international alignment via NDCs; growing awareness	Weak implementation; limited civic input; outdated bureaucracy	2060 (strategic objective, not legally binding)	National ETS, Green Economy Concept 2050, updated NDCs	Limited but growing; pilot projects for energy efficiency and renewables in schools and public buildings	No carbon tax; national ETS in place since 2013

Source: EIA (2024); Climate Action Tracker (2024); Government of Canada (2025); LowCarbonPower (2024); Ember (2025); IEA (2023, 2024); Saudi Green Initiative (2023); CarbonBrief (2024); Gallagher et al. (2019); Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment (2021); Falck (2023); OECD (2022); UNFCCC (2023); Ministry of Ecology Kazakhstan (2024); EBRD (2023); World Bank (2022, 2023a, 2023b).

To move beyond country-by-country description, we evaluate each case against seven explicit criteria derived from this study's design: (C1) policy ambition & legal form; (C2) implementation capacity; (C3) multi-level coordination; (C4) subnational authority; (C5) participation & equity/justice; (C6) climate-finance mobilization & instruments; (C7) indicative outcomes (mitigation, adaptation, clean-energy deployment). Ratings below are qualitative (1-5) and are interpreted from evidence summarized in this manuscript and its cited sources; they serve as a comparative heuristic rather than a normative index.

Rating scale (for all tables/figures)

1 = very low; 2 = low; 3 = moderate; 4 = high; 5 = very high.

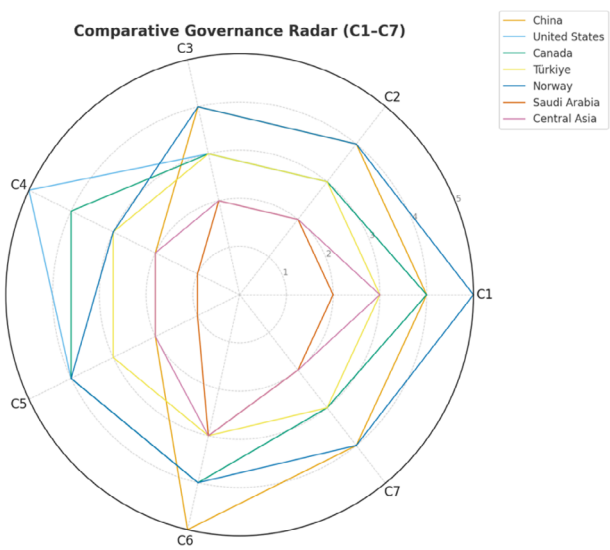
Table 2. Governance performance by criteria (qualitative ratings)

Country	C1 Policy ambition & legal form	C2 Implementation capacity	C3 Multi-level coordination	C4 Subnational authority	C5 Participation & equity	C6 Finance & instruments
China	4	4	4	2	2	5
United States	4	3	3	5	4	4
Canada	4	3	3	4	4	4
Türkiye	3	3	3	3	3	3
Norway	5	4	4	3	4	4
Saudi Arabia	2	2	2	1	1	3
Central Asian States	3	2	2	2	2	3

Based on sources: EIA (2024); Climate Action Tracker (2024); Government of Canada (2025); LowCarbonPower (2024); Ember (2025); IEA (2023, 2024); Saudi Green Initiative (2023); CarbonBrief (2024); Gallagher et al. (2019); Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment (2021); Falck (2023); OECD (2022); UNFCCC (2023); Ministry of Ecology Kazakhstan (2024); EBRD (2023); World Bank (2022, 2023a, 2023b).

Notes: China's strong plan-led ambition, national ETS and state investment (C1,C6) co-exist with limited civic participation and weak local discretion (C4,C5); U.S./Canada exhibit high subnational authority and participation (C4,C5) but coordination frictions and policy volatility (C2,C3); Türkiye transitions toward a hybrid model (balanced 3s); Norway shows high ambition and municipal roles yet faces responsibility diffusion and export contradictions; Saudi Arabia remains top-down with incremental efficiency and early-stage instruments.

Figure 1. Comparative governance radar (C1-C7). Ratings are qualitative (1-5) across seven criteria for six country cases and Central Asia.



Based on sources: EIA (2024); Climate Action Tracker (2024); Government of Canada (2025); LowCarbonPower (2024); Ember (2025); IEA (2023, 2024); Saudi Green Initiative (2023); CarbonBrief (2024); Gallagher et al. (2019); Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment (2021); Falck (2023); OECD (2022); UNFCCC (2023); Ministry of Ecology Kazakhstan (2024); EBRD (2023); World Bank (2022, 2023a, 2023b).

Centralized models (China; Saudi Arabia)

Centralized systems like China demonstrate the capacity for rapid policy mobilization and large-scale investment in clean energy. China's early achievement of its 2030 renewable targets and continued leadership in solar and wind capacity highlight the advantages of top-down coordination (Xue & Poon, 2024). However, the absence of national climate legislation, ongoing coal reliance, and limited civic participation undermine the legitimacy and inclusiveness of its transition (Feng et al., 2023).

China's centralized model enables coherent targets ("30-60"), rapid scaling of renewables, and a national ETS, reflected in high C1/C6 scores. Coordination is vertically enforced through target decomposition (high C3) and strong administrative capacity (high C2). However, limited civic participation and restricted local discretion (low C4/C5) constrain transparency and policy learning, while coal dependence complicates outcomes despite clean-energy surges (C7 = 4).

Saudi Arabia's central steering delivers defined strategies and efficiency programs, but implementation remains pilot-heavy, with low transparency and minimal civil society engagement (C2, C5 = low). Finance mobilization is rising yet narrowly focused (C6 = 3), and outcomes lag (C7 = 2).

Synthesis - centralized strengths & risks. Strengths: uniform rules, capital mobilization at scale, fast execution (C1/C2/C6). Risks: information bottlenecks, lock-in, and weak accountability where civic participation is limited (C4/C5).

Decentralized models (United States; Canada)

In systems such as Canada and the United States, subnational leadership, civil society mobilization, and public accountability are pivotal drivers of progress. Provinces like British Columbia and Quebec, and states like California and New York, have pioneered ambitious climate initiatives from carbon pricing to renewable mandates, often exceeding national ambitions. However, these gains are frequently offset by federal inconsistencies, jurisdictional fragmentation, and partisan divides, which challenge long-term coherence. For example, the recent revocation of California's emissions waiver by the U.S. Senate in 2025 (San Francisco Chronicle, 2025) demonstrates the fragility of subnational climate autonomy under shifting federal leadership.

In the ***United States***, strong subnational authority creates policy laboratories (California/New York), high participation and innovation (C4/C5 = high). Yet federal-state contestation and policy volatility depress implementation coherence (C2/C3 = 3). IRA-era finance is significant (C6 = 4) but subject to political risk; outcomes are uneven across states (C7 = 3).

Provincial autonomy in ***Canada*** fosters tailored policy mixes and Indigenous energy leadership (C4/C5 = 4), but intergovernmental frictions and sectoral dependence complicate coordination and implementation (C2/C3 = 3). Finance and instruments (pricing, standards, credits) are substantial (C6 = 4), while outcomes vary by province (C7 = 3).

Synthesis - decentralized strengths & risks. Strengths: contextual innovation, legitimacy, diffusion of best practice. Risks: fragmentation, inconsistent national trajectories, and exposure to partisan cycles.

Polycentric/hybrid models (Türkiye; Norway)

Türkiye has gradually introduced climate legislation, multistakeholder institutions, and net-zero targets by 2053. Its urban innovation hubs, notably Istanbul and Izmir, demonstrate subnational leadership in transport decarbonization, energy efficiency, and climate neutrality planning (Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, 2023). While coordination and legal mandates remain partial, Türkiye's trajectory illustrates how transitional regimes can incrementally embed climate governance within national development frameworks. Institutional reforms (MEUCC elevation, Climate Council, 2053 net-zero) and urban pilots (Istanbul, Izmir) signal hybridization; yet mandates, funding certainty, and legal integration remain partial (balanced 3s across criteria). This trajectory illustrates sequenced decentralization under national guardrails.

Norway's high ambition and strong municipal roles yield solid implementation and coordination (C2/C3/C7 = 4-5). However, responsibility diffusion and export-led fossil dependence complicate global alignment. This underscores that polycentric strength can be tempered by structural contradictions.

Synthesis - polycentric strengths & risks. Strengths: structured discretion, deliberate coordination forums, learning networks, and equity mechanisms. Risks: coordination costs and diluted accountability if responsibility is spread too widely.

Cross-cutting patterns show that no single model dominates: effective systems blend national coherence (C1/C2/C3) with empowered local experimentation and participation (C4/C5). Finance is necessary but not sufficient: high C6 improves deployment, but C4/C5 shapes legitimacy and persistence. Trade-offs are model-specific: centralized coherence vs. innovation; decentralized innovation vs. fragmentation; polycentric learning vs. diffusion of responsibility.

Implications for Central Asia

Across cases, findings reinforce that centralized models can offer regulatory uniformity, efficient capital deployment, and administrative clarity, especially where institutional capacity is high. However, such models are also vulnerable to bureaucratic rigidity, elite capture, and limited feedback mechanisms. Conversely, fragmented or decentralized systems foster contextual innovation and greater public legitimacy, but often struggle with coordination, scale, and inconsistency (Cole, 2011; Rabe, 2011).

For Central Asia, where governance is highly centralized, capacities are uneven, and civic space is limited, the most credible near-term pathway is a hybrid configuration:

- National guardrails: statutory targets; unified MRV; ring-fenced transition funds (C1/C2/C6).
- Structured subnational pilots: legally authorized municipal/provincial programs with devolved budgets (C4).
- Institutionalized participation: standing forums with civil society, youth, Indigenous/traditional communities; just-transition compacts (C5).
- Meta-coordination: an intergovernmental platform to scale successful pilots and prevent fragmentation (C3).

  This aligns global commitments with place-based implementation and builds legitimacy critical for durable outcomes

Table 3. Model-level strengths, risks, and design responses

Model	Core strengths	Core risks	Design responses for the CA region
Centralized	Coherence; speed; capital scale	Rigidity; weak feedback; lock-in	Add formal participation; publish MRV; pilot windows under national plans
Decentralized	Innovation; legitimacy	Fragmentation; uneven capacity	National floor standards; equalization funds; interprovincial learning
Polycentric/Hybrid	Learning; resilience; equity instruments	Coordination cost; diffuse accountability	Meta-governance body; time-bound mandates; clear escalation rules

Based on sources: EIA (2024); Climate Action Tracker (2024); Government of Canada (2025); LowCarbonPower (2024); Ember (2025); IEA (2023, 2024); Saudi Green Initiative (2023); CarbonBrief (2024); Gallagher et al. (2019); Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment (2021); Falck (2023); OECD (2022); UNFCCC (2023); Ministry of Ecology Kazakhstan (2024); EBRD (2023); World Bank (2022, 2023a, 2023b).

CONCLUSION

This study compared centralized, decentralized, and polycentric governance models across six countries and drew lessons for Central Asia, a region where climate governance remains highly centralized but increasingly subject to external and internal pressures. The comparative analysis shows that no single model is universally superior; rather, each offers distinct strengths and risks that can inform the design of more adaptive and legitimate systems in transitional contexts.

Centralized models, as in China and Saudi Arabia, demonstrate how uniform national targets and strong state financing can mobilize large-scale transformation. For Central Asia, such coherence is valuable, but without mechanisms for transparency and feedback, it risks locking in fossil-fuel dependence and suppressing innovation. Decentralized models, exemplified by Canada and the United States, highlight the power of subnational experimentation and stakeholder engagement, yet also reveal the dangers of fragmentation and political volatility, findings that align with multi-level governance theory, which emphasizes both the potential and pitfalls of devolved authority. Polycentric or hybrid models, visible in Türkiye and Norway, show that structured discretion, multi-level learning, and civic participation can balance national coordination with local initiative, consistent with polycentric governance theory that highlights experimentation and cross-level feedback. Legitimacy and justice are decisive, supporting scholarship that emphasizes procedural and social justice as conditions for policy durability. Importantly, the concept of climate governance itself is founded on broad community and societal participation, where state action is complemented by the engagement of citizens, NGOs, and local institutions. For Central Asia, this underscores that climate strategies cannot succeed through state mandates alone. Building participatory mechanisms such as structured consultations, just-transition compacts, and stakeholder forums should be seen not as optional add-ons but as core requirements of effective governance.

Across all models, three cross-cutting findings are particularly relevant for Central Asia. First, finance is necessary but not sufficient: Kazakhstan's ETS and donor-funded renewable projects demonstrate that investment must be paired with accountability and inclusion, echoing theories of distributive justice in climate governance. Second, regional cooperation is indispensable, reinforcing insights from multi-level and

transnational governance scholarship that coordination across borders is essential for effectiveness. Legitimacy and justice are decisive, supporting scholarship that emphasizes procedural and social justice as conditions for policy durability.

Taken together, these insights suggest that the most credible future for Central Asian states lies in a hybrid pathway: firm national guardrails and financing mechanisms; structured subnational pilots with devolved budgets; institutionalized stakeholder forums; transparent monitoring, reporting, and verification; and coordinated regional platforms for water and energy governance. Such an approach blends the coherence of centralized systems, the innovation of decentralized experiments, and the resilience of polycentric networks.

By situating Central Asia within global debates on climate governance design, this study both enriches comparative scholarship and highlights the urgency of context-sensitive pathways. Climate risks in the region, ranging from water scarcity to energy insecurity, are intensifying faster than global averages. Whether Central Asia can move from fragmented, donor-dependent governance toward inclusive, adaptive, and resilient systems will be a defining question for both regional sustainability and global climate cooperation.

For policymakers in Central Asia, the authors suggest that effective climate governance requires embedding polycentric features, stakeholder forums, subnational pilots, and just-transition strategies within existing centralized systems. International donors should support these efforts not only with finance but also with capacity-building for participation and monitoring.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed to the design, writing of the manuscript, reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript. SI: methodology, writing–review and editing, funding acquisition. RF: conceptualization, investigation, data curation, writing–original draft, visualization, formal analysis.

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CLIMATE DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA: CONTEXT, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT. *Central Asia is a region that is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, which adversely affects the lives of its inhabitants. Since 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has expressed concerns about the need to promote regional cooperation and enhance climate resilience to address current challenges and adapt to future climate risks.*

The governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are developing national legislation and strategies focused on climate issues. They engage in both regional and international cooperation through summits, ministerial meetings, and participation in projects funded by third parties. This article provides a content analysis of these efforts.

Using SWOT analysis, the research findings highlight the current state of regional climate diplomacy, the measures being taken, and the challenges posed by the region's reliance on fossil fuels. It also points out the lack of sufficient research within the regional academic community. However, there are opportunities for improvement, as well as potential negative consequences if necessary measures are not implemented promptly.

The ability of the region's states to turn their plans into actionable steps, in consultation with the expert community, is essential for creating a more prosperous and secure future. Consequently, the article emphasizes the need for a more coordinated approach among the Central Asian Republics and further development of regional climate diplomacy.

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, climate change, regional cooperation, international institutions.*

INTRODUCTION

The negative effects of climate change are accelerating with each passing year. OSCE's member-states have already acknowledged the connection between environmental cooperation, peaceful inter-state relations, water pollution control, and rational use of natural resources as a crucial aspect of comprehensive security since the ratification of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 (Krasnai, 2021). Thirty years after the First Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was published in 1990, remarkable advances in interdisciplinary research have increasingly shown that the climate is changing, with the complex effects of what is felt by both natural and human systems (von Uexkull & Buhaug, 2021). World Economic Forum Global Risks in their 2024 report provide top 10 short-term (2 years) and long-term (10 years) expected

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risks, where the negative impact of environmental risks is expected to grow within given time framework: if in 2 years, there are only two climate-related risks (2nd – extreme weather events and 10th – pollution), in 10 years, there are already 5 of them (1st – extreme weather events, 2nd – critical change to Earth systems, 3rd – biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, 4th – natural resource shortages, 10th – pollution) (The Global Risks Report, 2024). As a result, climate change began to be presented as a security threat already in 70s, and according to recent data, future projections of global risks represent climate risks as a major one.

Turning to Central Asia, since republics gained independence in the early 1990s, three major issues have characterized interstate relations there: energy, water, and land management. In the Soviet era, a large transboundary water infrastructure was constructed, and water resources in the Aral Sea basin were centrally regulated. However, after the collapse of the USSR, previously existing frameworks covering technical, legal, and economic aspects for sharing energy and water resources needed to be updated. This has led to both regional agreements on transboundary water resource management, but at the same time, tensions among the countries over water resources.

In modern times, regulation of regional resources is becoming more relevant with each passing year, due to the rise of regions' vulnerability and climate change negative impacts, including water scarcity, desertification, and glacial melting. As these risks are shared across the region, they also provide entry points for co-operation and indicate the necessity of the development of regional climate diplomacy. Today, there are already a number of completed and ongoing regional climate projects. However, this work provides an analysis of their effectiveness and the existing drawbacks of regional climate diplomacy, highlighting the importance of cooperation to achieve better results in this field.

This article aims to examine climate change vulnerabilities in Central Asia, to evaluate existing mechanisms of climate change cooperation in the region, and the role of foreign actors in the' implementation. It will also allow assessing the challenges and prospects for enhancing climate diplomacy in Central Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on climate change and cooperation among Central Asian states on this issue have been widely examined in recent years, as reflected in reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the World Bank, the Eurasian Development Bank, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Mitigation and adaptation measures of the Central Asian (CA) Republics are incorporated into national legislations, National Determined Contributions, long-term development strategies, and action plans of the CAREC Institute and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit.

In addition, in the course of writing the work, an extensive scientific literature of various researchers and scientists, including Adylbekova, K., Akunova, G., Asakawa, M., Krasnai, M., Mosello, B., Sabyrbekov, R., was studied. This literature contains information on the perspectives of regional cooperation on water issues, especially taking into account the

transboundary nature of water resources, on existing climate change initiatives, focuses on opportunities for regional cooperation in this field, and covers regional climate change policies and states' commitments.

Works of Idrisov, T., Aben, D., and Blumstein, S. highlight regional climate change challenges and possible negative consequences if necessary measures are not taken. It is important to note that only in recent years has the issue of climate change become the subject of more extensive research and consequently resulted in rising interest of the academic community and international institutions, which illustrates the relevance of conducting studies in this field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of regional climate efforts, it is essential to identify key theoretical frameworks on which the cooperation of Central Asian states is based. To begin with, the definition of climate diplomacy is "encompasses the use of diplomatic tools to support the ambition and functioning of the international climate change regime and to attenuate the negative impacts climate change risks pose for peace, stability and prosperity" (Climate Diplomacy Platform, n.d.). There are also several characteristics and features of climate diplomacy, making it possible to outline a definition on which this work is based. According to Tshering and Craft (2016), there are the following major factors related to climate diplomacy: environmental sustainability as a pillar of development; carbon neutrality and moral authority; multilateralism; and coordination of diplomatic engagement (Zhang et al., 2023). At its core, in the context of global environmental and climate policymaking, climate diplomacy encompasses different policy areas in order to make it more effective, including international,

pluri- and bilateral interaction among parties builds mutual interaction between the large emitters and developing countries (Bremberg et al., 2024).

However, peculiarities related to the differences between developing and developed countries must be clarified. The developed nations and their negotiation blocs practiced climate diplomacy in an effort to shape international negotiations based on their priorities, and in contrast, developing nations, such as least developed countries (LDCs), have often lacked active engagement in climate diplomacy, which results in limited influence in shaping negotiations (Zhang et al., 2023).

Generally, based on existing international practices, different approaches of climate diplomacy can be identified, namely: legal approach that includes initiating and updating of international agreements on climate change, such as the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement; institutional approach, focusing on the role of international institutions in development of climate agenda; economic approach, focusing on transition on reducing dependence on raw materials, increasing green investments, and others. Therefore, in the case of Central Asia, climate diplomacy encompasses the diplomatic engagement in all existing forms mentioned previously, proceeding from the region's characteristics.

This article will focus on legal approach, mainly on the initial legal basis on water sources allocation of Central Asian states and newly adopted and signed concepts and agreements, following recent events, such as COPs or Consultative Meetings of the Heads of Central

Asian States; institutional approach, illustrating the importance of regional interaction in terms of existing mechanisms on the ministerial and heads of state levels and also the role of external aid and financing in terms of newly emerging projects with the participation of third parties; economic approach, underlining the necessity of adopting green practices, reducing dependence on natural resources, developing renewable energy sources and attracting green investments.

The second approach is connected to liberal institutionalism, developed by Robert Keohane, who points out that by exchanging information, establishing joint points of cooperation between states, confidence rises, which contributes to more effective interaction within institutions (1995). Another applicable theory is liberal intergovernmentalism, developed by Andrew Moravcsik and Franks Schimmelfennig, according to which, by passing through initial stages forming national preferences and reaching a substantive bargain for mutual benefit of states, they reach the third stage – design of international institutions to achieve better outcomes (Diez & Wiener, 2019).

In addition, this scientific article uses a problem-chronological approach to examine the security threats posed by current climate change conditions in the region, focusing on water stress, glacier melting, frequent floods, and severe droughts that have severe impacts on the livelihoods of the population and exacerbate resource scarcity in the region.

The study relies on a variety of secondary data sources, including global risks assessments and water stress projections, energy generation indicators provided by international institutions such as the World Bank, OSCE, and research centers. By incorporating these data, the article provides a comprehensive evaluation of current environmental risks, illustrating the necessity of the development of climate diplomacy in order to mitigate negative impacts.

An analytical review of climate projects and situation analysis of regional summits and negotiations was used in order to identify interactions on the ministerial and heads of state level, as well as to provide an overview of action plans and projects funded by third parties. This analysis helps identify the relevance of the climate agenda in negotiations across the region and the efforts of CA Republics in climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

SWOT analysis was made in order to identify strengths, drawbacks, opportunities, and threats associated with regional climate diplomacy. It helped to cover such aspects as historical environmental legislation, the roots of currently existing problems and ongoing regional dilemmas, launched initiatives and projects that open new perspectives for Central Asia, and the role of further development of scientific activity and innovation in shaping climate policies.

These methods allowed the authors of the article to conduct a comprehensive analysis of regional climate diplomacy and highlight the need for coordinated policies, sustainable resource management strategies, and increased scientific engagement to address the pressing environmental issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to IPCC, the region is extremely vulnerable to climate change, and the five nations that comprise this region are seeing faster temperature increases than the world as a whole (IPCC, 2018).

Firstly, excessive water diversion from the rivers Amu Darya and Syr Darya has caused the Aral Sea to lose more than three-quarters of its surface area between 1960 and 1990. From 2030 to 2050, population growth and economic development are likely to increase demand for water and land resources in Central Asia (Climate Diplomacy Platform, n.d.).

Second, over the past 50-60 years, there was already a 30% decrease in the surface area of glaciers in Central Asia (Aziatskii Bank Razvitiya, 2022). Glacial melting in the mountain ranges of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which feed the Aral Sea, ultimately increases the occurrence of flooding and contributes to overall soil degradation and long-term water scarcity.

Third, the threat of agricultural water stress is increasing as well. In Central Asia, a major part of the population lives in rural areas and is dependent on agriculture and irrigation. According to the statistics of 2022, the share of agriculture in Central Asian states' GDPs varied from 5% to 27% (Halyk Research, 2023).

Furthermore, greater temperatures, extreme weather events like heatwaves, floods, and droughts can have disastrous effects on crop yields, which clearly have an impact on food security. In Kazakhstan, droughts are already a serious issue, which affects 66% of the state's territory. Up to half of the Kyrgyz Republic's territory could be affected by desertification by the turn of the century, compared with the 2000s, when it was 15%. According to the IPCC 2022 report, small-scale farms in arid zones of Tajikistan will experience a negative impact, with likely effects on farm income security. Impacts on farmers' income in western Uzbekistan will also significantly vary and could be as much as 25% depending on the extent of temperature increase and water-use efficiency (IPCC, 2022).

Fourth, security threats could also emerge from the impacts of climate change on the energy sector. The hydropower sector is quite vulnerable to floods, and most of the hydraulic structures in the region require maintenance to continue operating safely. Projections indicate that the potential of small hydropower plants is likely to decrease by 13% in Turkmenistan and 19% in Kyrgyzstan by 2050 under a 2°C warming. Already today, out of Tajikistan's 300 small hydropower plants, less than 20% remain operational (Mosello et al., 2023).

Fifth, a sizable portion of the population lives in the areas exposed to heightened water stress because of climate change. Natural disasters in the region cause both temporary and long-term relocation. By 2050, up to 2.4 million internal migrants may arrive in Central Asia due to climate change, according to data from the World Bank (Idrisov, 2023).

National level commitments

On the national level, all of the Central Asian states are parties to the Paris Agreement and set their goals in terms of National Determined Contributions, with unconditional and conditional contributions, depending on the international funding and technology

transfer. In addition, national legislation also includes laws related to climate change and long-term strategies. A general overview is provided in the following table:

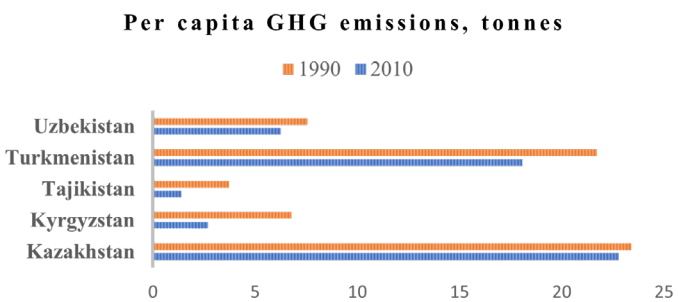
Table 1. NDCs of Central Asian states and the legal framework on climate change

State	Emission reduction target (NDC)	National legislation and strategies that include aspects related to climate security
Kazakhstan	By 15% - unconditionally, by 25% - conditionally from 1990 level by 2030	• "Kazakhstan-2050" Strategy • Ecological Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan • The Strategy for Achieving Carbon Neutrality by 2060
Kyrgyzstan	By 16% - unconditionally, by 44% - conditionally by 2030	• National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040
Tajikistan	Unconditionally - not to exceed 60-70%, conditionally - not to exceed 50-60% of GHG emissions as of 1990 by 2030.	• A National Strategy of Turkmenistan on Climate Change
Turkmenistan	By 20% from 2010 level by 2030	Higher education modernization, digital learning, and teacher preparation
Uzbekistan	By 35% from 2010 level by 2030	• Program and a Plan of Action for Transitioning to a Green Economy and Ensuring Green Growth until 2030 • Concept of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030 • The Development Strategy for the New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026

Compiled by the authors based on sources Adilet (2021); Adilet (2023), Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023); Government of the Republic of Tajikistan (2016); Government of Turkmenistan (2022); UNFCCC (2021a), UNFCCC (2021b), World Bank Group (2023)

Nevertheless, several disadvantages of national climate policies can be noted. Firstly, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan refer to 1990 as the base year of emissions reduction, while the other two countries, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, refer to 2010, and Kyrgyzstan focuses on the business-as-usual scenario. As a result, due to the higher GHG emissions in 1990, it is easier to achieve emissions reduction goals for those states that have chosen it as a reference year.

Figure 1. Comparative governance radar (C1-C7). Ratings are qualitative (1-5) across seven criteria for six country cases and Central Asia.



Source: Our World in Data (2024);

Secondly, submitting NDCs is already a significant step in taking climate responsibility, but it is also important to create working mechanisms for the evaluation of national policies, adaptation to recent changes of ongoing strategies and programmes, and to provide reports with the results of taken measures.

Regional and international cooperation on climate change

Assessment of the effectiveness of climate diplomacy of Central Asia on regional and international levels will be conducted by the SWOT analysis, which will help to provide a framework for the internal and external elements influencing the intensity of regional cooperation. Effectiveness will thus be evaluated by analyzing which opportunities can become the region's strengths and contribute to the elaboration of cooperative mechanisms leading to tangible results. Therefore, SWOT analysis serves not only as a diagnostic tool but also acts as a guide for determining which aspects of Central Asian climate diplomacy need to be strengthened, especially when shifting from declarative promises to results-oriented cooperation.

Here is the SWOT analysis on climate diplomacy that includes diplomatic efforts made by Central Asian states, with the orientation towards deepening regional cooperation and increased international support:

Among the main advantages are:

1. *Constantly elaborated and updated regional cooperation frameworks.*

- In 2023, UNFCCC COP-28 began with the presentation of the most important document, the Regional Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change in Central Asia, which contains a mechanism for cooperation to overcome the negative effects of climate change and implement adaptation measures in the region until 2030 (The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia, 2023).
- During the COP29, a Declaration on Cooperation between Central and West Asia in the field of climate change among Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan was signed, focusing on cross-border climate cooperation (Ministry of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2024).
- The Climate and Sustainability Project Preparatory Fund was formed, and the CAREC Climate Change Action Plan (2025–2027) was endorsed by participants at the CAREC Ministerial Conference in Astana in November 2024 (Asakawa, 2024). The Action Plan aims to prioritize regional climate adaptation and mitigation projects and initiatives across CAREC sectors, coordinate regional climate actions in the CAREC clusters and working groups, and improve coordination among development partners to maximize and increase resources supporting regional climate actions. Finding gaps in regional climate action and securing funding to create and carry out regional investment projects are the goals of the CCAP (CAREC, 2024).

2. *High-level political engagement.* States meet regularly in terms of Consultative Meetings of Central Asian states, with Kazakhstan in 2018, Uzbekistan in 2019, Turkmenistan in 2021, Kyrgyzstan in 2022, Tajikistan in 2023, and Kazakhstan in 2024, which illustrates their constant engagement (Tolipov, 2024).

- The 6th Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States took place in Astana on 9 August 2024, during which the concept of development of regional

cooperation "Central Asia – 2040" was signed, and it aims to improve economic logistic potential, to elaborate common policies on water, energy, and food security. During the meeting, heads of states highlighted the necessity of regulation of natural resources´ use, elaborating a water-regulating strategy with mutual obligations, and Bishkek proposed to create a regional hub focusing on the creation of technologies that save water and energy resources (Muratbekova, 2024).

- Through the C5+1 diplomatic forum, the five Central Asian nations have also been working with the US administration to address shared problems related to energy, environment, and security. During the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly, the presidents of the United States and the CA Republics met at the C5+1 Presidential Summit. In their joint statement, such important aspects as the development of sustainable hydropower, efficient energy use, increasing energy production, and identifying new energy export routes were mentioned (U.S. Mission in Kazakhstan, 2023).

3. *Opening of the UN Regional Centre for Sustainable Development Goals for Central Asia and Afghanistan.* Adoption of the resolution on the Centre's establishment at the UN General Assembly became an important milestone for Central Asia and Afghanistan. This initiative fully reflects the growing role of middle powers in the climate agenda, showing the ambitions towards a more secure and prosperous future of the region (MFA Kazakhstan, 2025).

4. *Access to international support and climate finance.* Together with international partners, governments in Central Asia are also implementing several regional-level projects and initiatives that seek to address various challenges related to climate change, as well as foster regional experience-sharing and co-operation in addressing these challenges:

- Central Asian Capacity Building for Methane Emission Reduction (CA CBMER), funded by Global Methane Hub, 2025-2027;
- The Regional Task Force on Education for Inclusive Energy Transition in Central Asia (RTEET), a joint initiative of the CAREC and OSCE, 2025-2026;
- "Land management, Environment & SoLId-WastE: inside education and business in Central Asia (LESLIE)", funded by European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and ERASMUS, 2024-2027 (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program, 2025);
- The flagship Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate Change, funded by the EU (European Union External Action, 2025);
- Green Central Asia II: Transboundary dialogue on Climate, Environment and Security in Central Asia - Bridging borders to enhance regional adaptation and mitigation, commissioned by German Federal Foreign Office, 2024-2028 (GIZ, 2024).

5. *Support of international organizations and institutions.* MDBs play a crucial role in providing financial assistance in carrying out development projects initiated by states. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts to minimize its adverse impact, MDBs continued financing the water and energy complex of Central Asia: a total of $1.8 billion in financing for 24 water and energy projects in the region

was allocated in 2020 (EDB, 2022). Asian Development Bank's Energy Transition Mechanism (ETM), launched in 2021, focuses on the transition from fossil fuel power plants to renewable energy sources. Currently, from Central Asian countries, only Kazakhstan has become a pilot country of this project, after receiving $225,000 grant for studying the current state of coal-fired and heat-power plants, the regulatory framework, and possible options for the realization of this energy transition (ADB, 2023c). Another example is a $200 million loan that was provided to Uzbekistan for the improvement of energy efficiency and with the aim of realizing long-term energy transition in terms of ADB's Distribution Network Digital Transformation and Resiliency Project (ADB, 2023a). Hence, if such climate-related projects funded by banks or organizations are extended for a whole region, it would be another climate diplomacy opportunity for a gradual climate transition in Central Asia.

6. *Significant bilateral cooperation on water facilities.* The countries co-finance the maintenance and operation of water facilities of interstate importance on a bilateral basis. Such bilateral arrangements include water facilities on the Chu and Talas rivers between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and in the AmuDarya lower reaches between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as Orto-Tokoiskoye/Kasansai reservoir between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Andizhan/Kempirabad reservoir between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and Farkhad dam between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. These workable arrangements could be further strengthened by elaborations of technical and financial guidelines and calculations on cost-sharing (Ziganshina et al., 2023).

Among the weaknesses:

1. Prioritizing national interests over regional interests. Some countries want to use water in an irrigation regime, others in an energy regime. In the irrigation regime, water must be used in summer, and in the energy regime, in winter. For instance, agriculture is one of the main sectors of the economy of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and most of the population of these countries directly or indirectly depends on irrigated agriculture. Hydropower is important for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; energy production meets more than 90 percent of the total demand in the upper countries and is also an export commodity. Competing sectors of agriculture in the downstream countries and hydropower in the upstream countries are fueling serious disputes in the region, where each republic, first of all, takes into account its national interests (Global Water Partnership, 2014).

2. The governments of the Central Asian states are unable to implement the necessary adjustments to adequately adapt to the changing climate and minimize its effects. The financial support provided by foreign donors may provide an impetus for taking actions, but they also have to develop the potential that is necessary for the effective implementation of these measures.

3. The declared national development plans are soiled by sectors and often ignore the findings of climate change impact research. The best example is plans to invest significantly in hydro energy despite the mounting research on looming water stress in the region. Despite the increasing climate change-induced water-related

risks, the two upstream countries — Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan — in their national development plans are still heavily focused on the development of new hydropower plants, including both large national dams and small hydro stations. National energy strategies repeatedly mention the underutilized hydro energy potential and neglect the latest climate change science warnings on water disruptions (Sabyrbekov et al., 2023). If the region aims to use its full energy potential and position itself as a regional energy hub, it is crucial to follow the recommendations applicable to the region. Here, the climate diplomacy can help to improve interregional interactions and to take actions aiming at profitable usage of energy sources.

4. Reliance on fossil fuels. Gas accounts for over half of the region's total power generation, with Turkmenistan (99%) and Uzbekistan (94%) generating most of their electricity from gas. Coal, on the other hand, plays a major role primarily in Kazakhstan, where it meets 57% of electricity demand, while gas contributes 29%. Hydropower is the only significant renewable source in the region, supplying between 76% and 88% of electricity in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia. As a result, the power sector in Central Asia and the South Caucasus produces 239 million tonnes of CO2 per year, that are 62% higher than Türkiye's, a coal-dependent G20 country, even though Türkiye has 8% higher electricity demand (Alparslan, 2024). In this case, climate diplomacy is mostly constrained by the fear of economic losses from decarbonisation. Consequently, regional climate commitments are less ambitious than they could be, therefore, leading to not full realization of the region's potential in climate mitigation and adaptation measures.

5. Lack of research on the assessment of climate adaptation measures in the region. According to the IPCC 2022 report, there is no evidence on the assessment of behavioral aspects of adaptation, which illustrates the existing knowledge gaps. Furthermore, despite Central Asia's vulnerability to the effects of climate change, the IPCC has raised worries since the 2010s about the region's lack of research on the subject. 51 of the 54 theme areas that are crucial to understanding the effects of climate change have not been thoroughly studied in Central Asia, with either very little or no data available (IPCC, 2022). For more effective climate diplomacy, it is essential to improve academic engagement and research based not only on national peculiarities, but also on the region's capacity, which joint measures can be implemented, what projects can be elaborated, and how to make plans realizable.

Among the opportunities:

1. More benefits that regional cooperation can bring. Regional cooperation can be useful for reducing costs and improving resource efficiency, replicating and scaling up best practices, knowledge, technology, and capacity building, attracting innovative financing and private sector participation. By strengthening collective action to mitigate climate change risks, it can also unlock the potential of the region for accelerated integration into achieving sustainable economic growth. Planning for these efforts, however, requires a full understanding of the potential challenges and prospects in all countries of the region and a continued commitment to regional and intersectoral cooperation. To support the implementation of NDCs, national green economies, and sustainable development strategies, governments in Central Asia

should mobilize political will among themselves for the introduction of cutting-edge climate policy tools and develop technological regulations for the GHG emission inventory.

2. Central Asia possesses significant capabilities for producing electricity through wind, solar, and hydropower. Kazakhstan, with its expansive territory, has the highest potential for onshore wind energy in the region, capable of generating around 929 TWh each year—equivalent to three times the region's power consumption. Regarding solar energy, the southern areas of the region show particularly great promise. Turkmenistan's solar capacity is estimated at 655 GW, which is eight times greater than the current total installed capacity of the region. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan depend largely on hydropower but still have a wealth of untapped resources. Additionally, Kazakhstan offers 62 TWh of technical potential for hydropower. Although hydropower development may take longer than solar and wind, the region could benefit from increasing hydro resources concurrently while reducing possible social and environmental challenges (Alparslan, 2024).

   Integrating various energy sources into unified power generation systems across nations may result in increased efficiency, grid stability, and RE penetration. The strengths and seasonal dynamics of electricity generation vary among the Central Asian countries. For example, Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan have significant thermal electricity potential in the winter, whereas Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have strong hydropower potential in the summer. Optimizing power transmission between states will maximize the utilization of water resources, especially in the summer, while cross-border electricity exchanges in the region could lessen the demand for peak and backup capacity reserves within the different national systems (Sabyrbekov et al., 2023). It is also essential to take into account the necessity of balancing the renewable energy sources, due to the fact that, for instance, renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind energy, are not always available, depending on weather conditions.

   In Soviet times, there was a unified energy system, and now there is the Central Asia Transmission Cooperation Association, formed in 2022 by CAREC with the aim of developing regional energy projects with shared standards and investing in common transmission lines. CASA-1000 project between Central and South Asia, TUTAP project, which includes Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, are examples of such energy-related initiatives, and there are still prospects for the development of new transmission and distribution networks, cooperating with other countries (ADB, 2023b).

3. Close communication between professional, academic, expert, and business communities, as well as non-governmental organizations, should be pursued in addition to official interstate interactions. During the implementation of the projects, it should be planned to collect scientific and methodological approaches, principles, and practices of assessment, the existing regulatory framework for assessing the environmental flow of transboundary water bodies, and the sustainable distribution of water resources of the region, with the active participation of experts from Central Asian countries. These activities will provide an opportunity to assess the situation

in the region on this issue and jointly explore the relevance and potential value of international best practices. The results of the work can be used in the development of diverse strategically important documents (Akhmetkal, 2019).

4. For the effective implementation of climate initiatives in Central Asia, experts recommend strengthening climate business processes. This includes building a management, monitoring, and reporting system in accordance with international standards, as well as active interaction with the private sector. For instance, understanding the factors that make it difficult to attract investment to address climate change issues will help governments find solutions to improve the investment climate.

5. Promoting the Debt-for-Nature Swap theme. It is a financial arrangement in which a portion of a developing country's foreign debt is forgiven or restructured in exchange for the country committing to invest in conservation and environmental protection efforts. Experts emphasize the importance of promoting this theme by providing an inspiring example of successful implementation in Belize. This experience, which reduced the country's external debt by 10% of GDP and contributed to the preservation of the coral reef, can become a model for the countries of Central Asia (Adylbekova, 2023).

6. Necessity of improving the already existing institutions that aim to manage and coordinate the water and energy sectors. It would be worth considering improving and combining the functions of the existing institutions on water and energy in Central Asia, including IFAS bodies, with new mechanisms to better represent such varying interests, rather than creating another new institution (Ziganshina et al., 2023). Because generally, these institutions have demonstrated their effectiveness in operational management and coordination, while also showing certain needs for adopting new elements, their interlinkages and mechanisms for further coordination, harmonization, and provision of services.

7. Development of regional hydromet services, namely focused on gathering data on weather and climate, to forecast on the basis of this data, which can help to avoid urgent situations in the region and improve water management and agricultural productivity. Also, it is necessary to develop common early warning systems, because usually climate disasters spread across the region. There are already several such initiatives, for instance:

- Strengthening Financial Resilience and Accelerating Risk Reduction in Central Asia program funded by Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) and the World Bank, which works on risk analysis and management;
- The Central Asia Flood Early Warning System (CAFEWS), supported by the World Bank and the WMO, addresses flood risks in Afghanistan and the five Central Asian republics;
- The Center for Emergency Situations and Disaster Risk Reduction (CESDRR) was established by Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic for disaster preparedness and response.

Taking into account the unpredictability of adverse weather events, it is essential to improve risk management on a regional level in order to avoid unfavorable consequences, the economic costs of which are much higher than investing in the prevention of such disasters (ADB, 2023b).

Among the threats:

1. The future development of Central Asia is highly vulnerable to adverse ecological and socioeconomic implications if there is no greater regional collaboration in resolving or mitigating these environmental issues. Natural or man-made disasters or other events could have a severe impact on the environment, economy, and public health of the entire region (Aben, 2019).

2. Dependence on external financing. Although there are many sub-regional platforms and information portals on climate-related issues, they are created within the framework of regional projects, are completely dependent on project financing, and cannot continue working after the completion of projects.

3. Higher costs of inaction. Even though it would be challenging to quantify the advantages of cooperation at this point, the cost of non-cooperation at this point, the cost of non-cooperation is simpler to measure. According to Adelphi's Climate diplomacy project, the insufficient cooperation costs of agricultural losses, inefficient electricity trade, and lack of access to finance can reach 4.5 billion US$ annually. According to a 2016 World Bank global level study, by 2050, sufficient water governance could account for almost 20% of Central Asia's GDP, or more than 60 billion US dollars annually (Blumstein & Pohl, 2018).

4. The Presidents of the Central Asian republics have been unable to reach a consensus on the water issue in the region throughout the period after gaining independence. It should be noted that an increasing population, an expanding economy, increasing environmental pressure, and the practice of irrational consumption will continue to put pressure on the common resources of Central Asia (Akunova, 2021).

5. Periodic demarches in relations between the countries of the region remain an alarming phenomenon, indicating a continuing high degree of conflict and lack of trust between the Central Asian states. Ferghana Valley is a source of tensions between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (Adelphi, n.d.). Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflicts in April 2021 and September 2022 have signaled an escalation in scale, with the use of heavy weapons on both sides resulting in mass casualties (Gabdulhakov et al., 2023). The roots of the unclear border definitions and disputes over natural resources, mostly water and land resources, are linked to the collapse of the USSR, as a result of which violent clashes and ethnic tensions continue to arise.

   As a result, it can be concluded that there is an active cooperation of CA Republics through regional platforms that are financed by diverse international organizations and other governments that help to progress in the climate change dimension and to mitigate the negative impacts of it. They facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building, and joint projects in such areas as water management, renewable energy, and disaster risk reduction; support countries in developing robust systems for

monitoring, reporting, and verifying their GHG emissions and climate actions. Through collaboration and targeted action, Central Asia countries are striving to build resilience, adapt to changing climate conditions, and secure a sustainable future for the region. Nevertheless, some challenges related to prioritization of national interests over the regional, fear of economic losses of decarbonisation that consequently results in not full realization of the region's energy capacity, impede climate diplomacy. Based on the conducted SWOT analysis, the following recommendations for improvement of regional climate diplomacy can be highlighted:

- Ensuring that during the high-level political interaction between the Central Asian leaders, especially through such platforms as C5+1, states position themselves and act as a region, pursuing the common interests and goals. The region's representation as a responsible actor with a single voice and position aimed at joint efforts and practical results is essential for the effective implementation of adaptation and mitigation measures that can be supported by third parties.

- Ensuring that the controlling mechanisms of existing and future agreements or declarations function appropriately. It is a great advantage that CA states update not only national strategic documents, but also adopt new regional climate legal frameworks, where provisions on climate change and actions needed to be implemented are highlighted. Expanding climate monitoring networks are essential components for the implementation of strategic documents, ensuring transparency and inclusiveness in regional development. For instance, the monitoring mechanism mentioned in the Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategy for Central Asia is the evaluation through Climate Resilience, Vulnerability, and Readiness Indexes ND-GAIN, based on the independent assessment, which will be useful for measuring the progress, if reliable data is provided on a constant basis.

- In addition, it is crucial to enhance the responsibility of intergovernmental and interministerial commissions and working groups for steps taken towards climate resilience, making their reports transparent and available for experts and academics. Open dialogue can contribute to higher accountability of bodies responsible for this question.

- Strengthening transparency and accountability is an essential prerequisite to increasing donor confidence. Due to the fact that it is challenging for the region to cover climate spending on its own, attracting international donors and investors is essential. There are already existing financial mechanisms, grants provided by foreign banks and partners; however, the development of robust monitoring, reporting, and verification systems, publishing of climate finance reports with spending made, and involvement of independent auditors will raise the confidence of third parties, improving and increasing external financing, and making it more accessible.

- Strengthening research and data-sharing. On the basis of the mentioned UN Regional Center on Sustainable Development, sharing best practices, conducting regular consultative meetings on the topics of climate change and food security grounded in shared priorities and solutions will serve as an important catalyst for joint research

and expertise. Establishment of data centers for monitoring regional water flows, glaciers, and emissions, in collaboration with leading universities, think-tanks, and NGOs, will improve coordination among states.

- Preparing specialists in the field of climate security and green technologies. Taking into account growing climate vulnerabilities, exchange programs, for instance, with European countries, which position themselves as leaders in the environmental field and show good planning and adaptation readiness, elaborating strong climate policies will be useful for regional specialists, who can study best practices, evaluate their applicability in the region, and consequently improve knowledge-sharing.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, climate change has become a pressing issue in the modern world, and the Central Asian region is no exception. As the region continues to experience rapid economic growth, the impact on its fragile ecosystems becomes increasingly apparent. With melting glaciers, deteriorating water quality, and extreme weather events becoming more frequent, it is clear that urgent action is needed.

Through the SWOT analysis, it is seen that states are not implementing their full potential to combat climate change problems. The future rise in water and energy stress, as population and economies grow and resource availability and access shift, will make cooperation around resource management between the upstream water-rich and downstream fossil fuel-rich states necessary. More research is needed across the disciplines on, for example, extreme events and their multiple societal and sectoral impacts. Progressive policy frameworks and the strong political will of regional leaders are also essential. Additionally, without proper management of shared resources, conflicts may arise between neighboring countries. Therefore, diplomacy must be utilized not only for environmental protection but also for promoting peace and stability in the region.

States are implementing national projects and strategies in order to fulfill their objectives under the Paris Agreement; international institutions and foreign states play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and promoting cooperative agreements between these nations; regular meetings of the leaders from Central Asian countries promote collaboration and encourage the adoption of sustainable practices. Despite these positive facts, financial resources and third parties' investments are limited, and it is necessary to boost interregional cooperation.

Great potential for the development of alternative energy sources, wind and solar power, improving the consistency in climate diplomacy through better coordination among the relevant ministries responsible for foreign relations, environment, energy, development, economy and finance; investing in the experts, engineers, and other specialists who can carry out the large-scale climate initiatives being considered now and in the future is equally crucial. Engaging in a broad, multi-stakeholder dialogue is essential for developing policy-level recommendations on how to effectively mobilize resources and invest them in a systemic and strategic manner. Strengthened confidence and the capacity to manage future installations cooperatively, in the best interests of all parties,

are essential prerequisites for the realization of cooperative climate projects, which will ensure timely water releases and the delivery of energy.

As a result, it can be concluded that the strengthening of climate diplomacy coordination between countries could help drive more ambitious action, especially in order to reduce exacerbating risks to human security, livelihoods, and economic development in Central Asia. It is a shared responsibility to work together in order to empower the countries of the region to effectively address mounting challenges.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AA: conceptualization, methodology, data curation, visualization, writing – original draft preparation; DA: supervision, formal analysis, project administration, writing – review and editing.

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DOI: 10.52536/3006-807X.2025-3.004 PP 74-89 ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"UZBEKISTAN-2030": A DUAL PURSUIT OF ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT. *"Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy represents a pivotal national development blueprint aimed at transforming the nation into a competitive and sustainably developed state. This article examines the dual pursuit of economic diplomacy and regional integration as foundational pillars of this strategy. Through a comprehensive analysis of the strategy's core objectives, key performance indicators, and recent implementation efforts, this paper elucidates how Uzbekistan leverages proactive international engagement and intensified intra-regional cooperation to foster sustainable economic growth, enhance social welfare, and ensure environmental protection. The article details the country's initiatives in attracting foreign direct investment, expanding trade partnerships, and spearheading critical infrastructure projects in transport, energy, and water management across Central Asia. By analyzing empirical data and assessments from international organizations, this study highlights the progress, challenges, and future prospects of Uzbekistan's strategic trajectory, emphasizing its commitment to becoming a linchpin of stability and prosperity in the broader Central Asian region.*

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, economic diplomacy, foreign direct investment, green economy, infrastructure, regional integration, sustainable development, trade.*

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan, a landlocked nation at the heart of Central Asia, has embarked on an ambitious journey of profound transformation under its "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy. This comprehensive national development program, formally adopted following the Presidential Decree "On the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy" (Presidential Decree No. PF-158, 2023), serves as a strategic roadmap for the country's transition towards a more prosperous, equitable, and sustainable future.

At its core, the "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy embodies a dual pursuit: the vigorous advancement of economic diplomacy and the deepening of regional integration. These twin engines are seen as indispensable for unlocking Uzbekistan's full potential, enhancing its global competitiveness, and ensuring sustainable development across all facets of society and the economy (Ministry of Investment, Industry and Trade, 2023).

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For decades, Central Asia faced challenges related to fragmented economic spaces, limited connectivity, and uncoordinated resource management. However, a new era of regional cooperation has emerged, with Uzbekistan playing a pivotal role in fostering a more interconnected and interdependent Central Asia. This article argues that Uzbekistan's proactive engagement in economic diplomacy—aimed at attracting foreign investment, diversifying trade, and forging strategic partnerships—is inextricably linked with its commitment to regional integration. By strengthening ties with neighboring countries and beyond, Uzbekistan seeks to create a synergistic environment where economic growth is shared, security is bolstered, and collective sustainable development goals are realized.

This paper will delve into the intricacies of the "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy, exploring its five key pillars and the ambitious targets set for the coming decade. It will then critically examine the instruments and outcomes of Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy, showcasing its efforts to position itself as an attractive destination for foreign capital and a reliable global trade partner. Subsequently, the article will analyze the country's multifaceted approach to regional integration, highlighting significant advancements in transport connectivity, energy collaboration, and crucial water resource management initiatives. Leveraging recent and precise data, as well as assessments from reputable international organizations, this analysis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Uzbekistan's progress, the challenges it faces, and the promising outlook for sustainable development in Central Asia driven by this dual strategic imperative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

National development strategies, such as Uzbekistan-2030, are widely conceptualized as blueprints for long-term socio-economic transformation (Stiglitz, 1998). These strategies articulate a nation’s vision, set strategic priorities, and establish measurable targets for progress. Increasingly, they are framed in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reflecting a global trend toward integrating economic growth with social equity and environmental protection (United Nations, 2015). Uzbekistan’s current approach is emblematic of this shift: it aims to reach high-income status while simultaneously addressing poverty reduction, improving public services, and mitigating the effects of climate change (UNSDG, 2025). Development economics scholarship underscores that achieving such goals requires more than ambitious planning. Institutional reforms, human capital investment, and private sector engagement are frequently cited as critical enablers of successful long-term transformation (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Within this broader framework, economic diplomacy has emerged as a particularly relevant dimension of national development strategies. Defined as the use of diplomatic tools to advance economic interests, it encompasses trade promotion, foreign direct investment (FDI) attraction, economic agreement negotiations, and engagement in international financial institutions (Saner & Yiu, 2005; Lee & Hocking, 2011). The literature emphasizes economic diplomacy’s role in expanding market access, enabling technology transfer, and strengthening a country’s position in global economic networks (Bayne & Woolcock, 2017). For developing economies such as Uzbekistan, these functions are especially important in diversifying exports, reducing reliance on a

narrow set of commodities, and deepening integration into global value chains (World Bank, 2024). Scholars also note that sustained success in these areas depends on a stable regulatory environment and transparent governance, both of which are essential for attracting and retaining foreign investment (IMF, 2024).

Regional integration theory provides another lens for understanding Uzbekistan's development trajectory. The theory posits that closer economic, political, and social ties among neighboring states can deliver mutual benefits, ranging from expanded trade and improved infrastructure to enhanced security and collective responses to shared challenges (Mattli, 1999; Hurrell, 2007). While earlier scholarship on Central Asia often highlighted barriers to integration—including geopolitical rivalries, water disputes, and diverging economic priorities (Linn, 2004; Zabel, 2017)—more recent work points to a renewed impetus for cooperation. Under Uzbekistan's regional leadership, new opportunities for transport corridors, energy grids, and coordinated water management have come to the fore (ADB, 2024). A key theme in this literature is "connectivity," particularly infrastructure-driven connectivity, which can reduce trade costs and strengthen regional competitiveness (World Bank, 2023).

The relationship between economic diplomacy and regional integration is increasingly recognized as mutually reinforcing. A country's capacity to attract investment and expand trade is often strengthened by participation in regional blocs and by commitments to improve cross-border connectivity (Frankel, 1997). For Central Asia, this synergy carries particular weight given the region's landlocked geography and shared development challenges. Uzbekistan's transition from a historically insular policy stance to one of open engagement and proactive regional leadership represents a notable turning point (International Crisis Group, 2020). Earlier studies focused largely on the internal challenges of Uzbekistan's economic reforms, but more recent scholarship has begun to examine their external dimensions, highlighting how national development strategies intersect with regional dynamics (Pomfret, 2023). Building on this emerging body of work, the present article seeks to provide an updated, empirical analysis of Uzbekistan's dual pursuit of domestic transformation and regional integration within the framework of the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis of official documents and academic literature with quantitative data synthesis from government and international reports. It uses comparative and case study analyses to critically assess Uzbekistan's "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy, focusing on economic diplomacy and regional integration for sustainable development.

"UZBEKISTAN-2030" STRATEGY: A TRANSFORMATIVE BLUEPRINT

The "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy is not merely a collection of targets but a holistic vision for national resurgence, building upon the foundational reforms initiated since 2017. It envisions Uzbekistan achieving upper-middle-income status and becoming a fully democratic, rule-of-law based state by the end of the decade. The strategy is structured around five key pillars, each with distinct strategic goals and measurable

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) designed to guide implementation and track progress (Presidential Decree No. PF-158, 2023; MIIT, 2023).

Pillar 1: Creating Decent Conditions for Realizing the Potential of Every Person

This pillar focuses on human capital development and social welfare, recognizing that a skilled, healthy, and empowered populace is the bedrock of sustainable development.

Goals: Enhancing the quality of education, improving healthcare services, strengthening social protection, fostering youth development, and promoting culture and sports.

KPIs:
Education: Increase higher education enrollment from 39% in 2023 to 50% by 2030. Expand opportunities for quality preschool, general secondary, and vocational education. University enrollment has already increased fivefold since 2015, reaching 1.43 million students in 2024/2025 (UNICEF, 2024). However, challenges remain in education quality, with 80% of children not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and math (UNICEF, 2024).

Healthcare: Increase average life expectancy to 78 years. Reduce early mortality rates from major non-communicable diseases (oncological, cardiovascular, diabetes, respiratory) by 2.5 times. Uzbekistan's healthcare system was ranked 64th globally in the 2024 Healthcare Index, the best in Central Asia (CEOWORLD magazine, 2024). Newborn survival rates for low-birthweight infants have improved (e.g., 70% to 75% for 500-1500g; 80% to 82% for 1500-2000g) (UNICEF, 2024). Immunization coverage remains high at 96% (UNICEF, 2024).

Poverty Reduction: Reduce the poverty rate to below 8% by 2030. Significant progress has been made, with the poverty rate declining from 11% to 8.9% in 2024, lifting 719,000 people out of poverty through employment, entrepreneurship support, and social benefits (World Bank, 2024).

Pillar 2: Ensuring Population Welfare through Sustainable Economic Growth

This pillar outlines the macroeconomic and sectoral objectives to drive robust and inclusive economic expansion.

Goals: Achieving high and sustainable economic growth, ensuring macroeconomic stability, transforming the industrial sector, attracting significant investments, modernizing infrastructure, developing tourism, and promoting regional economic development.

KPIs:
GDP Growth: Achieve GDP of $160 billion by 2030, with per capita GDP reaching $4,000. Economic forecasts are robust: ADB projects 6.6% GDP growth for 2025 and 6.7% for 2026 (ADB, 2024). World Bank forecasts 6.5% for 2024, 5.9% for 2025, and 5.9% for 2026 (World Bank, 2024).

Inflation: Maintain inflation at 5-6%.

Investment: Attract $250 billion in investments, including $110 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) by 2030. FDI inflows showed remarkable growth in 2024, increasing over 60% to $34.9 billion, and are projected to reach $42 billion in 2025 (Gazeta.uz, 2024a; World Bank, 2024b). Key investing countries include China and Russia, with significant investments in manufacturing, electricity, gas, and mining (Gazeta.uz, 2024a).

Private Sector Share: Increase the private sector's share in GDP to 80%.

Exports: Boost exports to $45 billion.

Digitalization: Increase the share of the digital economy in GDP to 8%. The digital transformation has seen successes like “Uzum”, a local tech giant in e-commerce and fintech, demonstrating significant FDI and growth potential in the digital sector (Forbes, 2025).

Pillar 3: Water Resources Conservation and Environmental Protection

Recognizing the urgency of climate change and water scarcity in Central Asia, this pillar prioritizes environmental sustainability.

Goals: Ensuring water security, increasing green spaces, improving air quality, and promoting a circular economy.

KPIs:
Renewable Energy: Increase the share of renewable energy sources in electricity generation to 40% by 2030 (from 18% by end of 2024). Uzbekistan had an installed capacity of 2000 MW of solar and 600 MW of wind power by the end of 2024 (Power Uzbekistan, 2024; IEA, 2023).

Water Efficiency: Reduce water losses in agriculture by 25% and increase agricultural land covered by water-saving technologies to 1.3 million hectares. A $200 million World Bank loan aims to modernize irrigation infrastructure, projected to reduce water losses by 540 million cubic meters annually and save 165 million kWh of electricity (World Bank, 2025b).

Afforestation: Increase green spaces to 30% by 2030. The "Yashil Makon" (Green Space) national project saw 138 million trees planted in spring 2024, and 257 green parks created nationwide (Ministry of Ecology, 2024).

Air Quality: Reduce atmospheric pollutant emissions. Uzbekistan is working with UNECE to develop an air pollutant emission inventory and intends to accede to the Air Convention (UNECE, 2024). A World Bank report identified heating, transport, and industry as main sources of air pollution, alongside windblown dust (World Bank, 2024f).

Pillar 4: Ensuring Rule of Law, Organizing Public Administration Focused on Serving the People

This pillar emphasizes governance reforms, aiming for transparent, accountable, and citizen-centric public administration.

Goals: Strengthening the rule of law, protecting human rights, enhancing public service delivery, fighting corruption, and modernizing public administration.

KPIs: Improve Uzbekistan's ranking in international indices related to governance, rule of law, and anti-corruption. Key reforms include optimizing state functions, reducing the state's footprint in the economy, and strengthening the independence of the judiciary (IMF, 2024).

Pillar 5: Consistent Continuation of the Policy Based on the Principle "Safe and Peaceful State"

This pillar outlines the foreign policy and national security objectives, emphasizing open, pragmatic, and proactive engagement with the international community, particularly within Central Asia.

Goals: Strengthening good-neighborly relations, promoting regional stability, and enhancing defense capabilities.

KPIs: Increase Uzbekistan's participation and influence in regional and international organizations. Foster a peaceful and predictable regional environment conducive to trade and investment.

ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY: A PROACTIVE GLOBAL OUTREACH

Uzbekistan's "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy places significant emphasis on economic diplomacy as a primary driver for achieving its ambitious economic targets. This involves a multi-pronged approach aimed at attracting foreign investment, diversifying export markets, and forging strategic economic partnerships globally.

Attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

FDI is central to Uzbekistan's economic transformation, bringing not only capital but also technology, expertise, and access to new markets. The government has implemented a series of reforms to improve the investment climate:

Liberalization and Incentives: Tax reforms, simplification of business registration, and the establishment of free economic zones with preferential regimes (World Bank, 2024e). The Uzbekistan Direct Investment Fund (UzDIF), wholly owned by the sovereign wealth fund, plays a crucial role in co-investing in projects and assisting foreign investors, effectively de-risking investments and signaling government support (UzDIF, 2024).

FDI Growth: The results are evident in the significant surge in FDI. In 2024, foreign investment increased by over 60% to $34.9 billion, with projections to reach $42 billion in 2025 (Gazeta.uz, 2024a). China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia are among the leading investors.

Key Sectors for FDI: Investments are diversified across manufacturing (especially automotive and textiles), electricity and gas production, mining, and the rapidly growing digital economy (Gazeta.uz, 2024a).

Case Study: A notable success story is "Uzum", a local tech ecosystem encompassing e-commerce, fintech, and banking. Its rapid growth and substantial foreign investment demonstrate Uzbekistan's potential in the digital economy and its appeal to tech investors (Forbes, 2025). The IT Park Tashkent is another initiative that has successfully attracted international IT companies and fostered a vibrant startup ecosystem (IT Park Uzbekistan, 2024).

EBRD Engagement: The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has been a significant partner, investing €4.8 billion in 150 projects across Uzbekistan since 1992, with €1.3 billion in 2023 alone (EBRD, 2024a). Recent EBRD-backed projects include the construction of a modern glass fiber plant, investments in the pharmaceutical sector, and critical irrigation upgrades, all contributing to private sector development and green economy initiatives (EBRD, 2024a).

Expanding Trade Partnerships and Market Access

Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy extends to actively expanding its global trade footprint and securing better market access.

WTO Accession: A strategic priority is the accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) by 2026 (UNCTAD, 2024). This will liberalize trade, integrate Uzbekistan more deeply into the global trading system, and enhance investor confidence.

Bilateral Trade Agreements:

- Azerbaijan: A strong partnership with Azerbaijan aims to boost bilateral trade to $1 billion by 2030 (Daryo.uz, 2025a). Recent agreements encompass diverse sectors including environmental protection, science, higher education, industrial cooperation, agriculture, social protection, shipping, and shipbuilding. Discussions also include a joint project to export "green" energy to Europe (Daryo.uz, 2025a).
- European Union (EU): Uzbekistan is deepening ties with EU countries, including recent high-level visits to Hungary, Slovenia, and Italy. Agreements have been signed on climate change adaptation, science, innovation, peaceful use of nuclear energy, and various economic sectors such as transport, agriculture, textiles, and pharmaceuticals (Gov.uz, 2024a). The EU has also granted Uzbekistan GSP+ status, allowing duty-free access for over 6,200 Uzbek products to the EU market, significantly boosting exports (European Commission, 2023).

Multilateral Engagement: Uzbekistan actively participates in multilateral forums to promote economic cooperation. Discussions with China focus on expanding trade, investment, technology, and infrastructure, with proposals for an "Electronic Silk Road" and an "Industrial and Infrastructure Belt 'Central Asia – China'" (China Daily, 2024).

REGIONAL INTEGRATION: FOSTERING CENTRAL ASIAN SYNERGY

Uzbekistan's "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy firmly positions the country as a driver of regional integration in Central Asia. Recognizing that shared challenges and opportunities necessitate collective action, Uzbekistan champions initiatives aimed

at enhancing connectivity, coordinating resource management, and fostering greater economic interdependence among its neighbors.

Connectivity and Transport Corridor

As a double-landlocked nation, enhancing regional transport connectivity is paramount for Uzbekistan to access global markets and boost trade. One of the central initiatives in this regard is the development of the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route). Uzbekistan actively promotes the development of the Middle Corridor, which connects Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. Uzbek cargo transit through this route has significantly increased, reducing reliance on traditional northern routes (Daryo.uz, 2025a). The route is crucial for diversifying logistics chains and shortening delivery times.

Another major undertaking is the Trans-Afghan Railway (Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan - UAP). This ambitious project, aiming for completion by 2027, seeks to connect Uzbekistan to Pakistani seaports (Gwadar and Karachi) through Afghanistan. The railway is projected to significantly reduce cargo delivery times between Central Asia and South Asia (Gulf News, 2024; The Diplomat, 2025a). Recent high-level discussions have focused on accelerating its implementation, despite security and funding challenges in Afghanistan (The Diplomat, 2025a).

In parallel, Uzbekistan has also advanced cooperation on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) Railway. After decades of discussions, the commencement ceremony for the construction of the CKU railway was held in June 2024, with construction on the Kyrgyz section set to begin in July 2025 (Gov.cn, 2024; Eurasianet, 2024). The estimated cost of the project is around $8 billion, and it aims to shorten the route for goods from China to Europe and the Middle East by 900 kilometers, significantly cutting transit times and costs. This project holds immense geostrategic and economic importance, although concerns regarding Kyrgyzstan's potential debt burden have been noted (CA&CC Press, 2024).

Beyond physical infrastructure, Uzbekistan has prioritized trade facilitation as a means of enhancing competitiveness and connectivity. The government launched a National Trade Facilitation Roadmap 2025–2030 in collaboration with international partners. The country has achieved an 85% implementation rate of trade facilitation measures, the highest in Central Asia (UNECE, 2023). Initiatives like the "Central Asia Gateway," an online information hub for cross-border trade formalities, further streamline procedures (UNECE, 2023).

Energy Cooperation and Green Transition

Uzbekistan is a key player in Central Asian energy dynamics, focusing on both traditional and renewable energy cooperation. A notable initiative in this regard is the trilateral collaboration with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan on a groundbreaking project to export "green" energy to Europe, potentially involving the laying of a subsea cable across the Black Sea. This initiative highlights a shift towards regional energy diversification and clean energy export capabilities (Daryo.uz, 2025a).

In parallel, Uzbekistan has been working to strengthen its domestic renewable energy infrastructure. With the support of a $100 million loan from the World Bank, the country is integrating renewable energy into its electricity distribution networks, strengthening grid stability, which is crucial for regional energy trade (World Bank, 2024d).

Uzbekistan is also pioneering nuclear power in Central Asia, with plans for a large-scale nuclear power plant in cooperation with Russia's Rosatom, and exploring Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). This diversification is critical for meeting growing energy demands and enhancing regional energy security (World Nuclear News, 2024).

Water Management and Environmental Collaboration

Water scarcity represents a critical transboundary issue in Central Asia, a region where water insecurity affects an estimated 82 million people (The Jerusalem Post, 2025; Scissa, 2025). This profound challenge is exacerbated by rapid urbanization, population growth, economic development, and the inherent inefficiencies within irrigated agriculture.

The current water crisis is deeply rooted in the Soviet era's large-scale irrigation projects, primarily driven by cotton monoculture, which led to the severe overexploitation of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2017; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2015). This historical mismanagement resulted in catastrophic water losses, widespread desertification, soil salinization, and the dramatic desiccation of the Aral Sea. Since 1960, the Aral Sea has shrunk dramatically, with its volume decreasing by 73% to 90% and its surface area by over 50% (Micklin, 1993; The Aral Sea Crisis, n.d.), with some data indicating a 74.3% reduction in surface area by 2008 (ResearchGate, n.d.). The institutional frameworks established during this period were notably inefficient and lacked coordination (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2015).

As a downstream nation heavily reliant on these shared water resources, Uzbekistan actively participates in regional efforts to address water scarcity and promote sustainable management. The Aral Sea's desiccation serves as a potent historical warning, illustrating the profound environmental and socio-economic catastrophes that can arise from large-scale, centrally planned, and largely unilateral water management decisions that disregard ecological and downstream impacts (World Bank, n.d.). This historical context provides a crucial lens through which to analyze contemporary projects, highlighting the high stakes involved in transboundary water management.

Regional and Bilateral Cooperation: Progress and Persistent Challenges

Regional cooperation on water management in Central Asia operates through various mechanisms, with varying degrees of effectiveness. The Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), established in 1992 following the Almaty Agreement, comprises five water ministers or their deputies tasked with managing water resources and ensuring sustainability (International Crisis Group, 2014). It includes basin water organizations for the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, fostering regional dialogue (IWMI, 2024).

However, despite its formal mandate, cooperation under the ICWC has been described as "insufficient" and its ability to effectively coordinate water management "limited" (International Crisis Group, 2014; Scissa, 2025). Many regional initiatives lack legal force, contributing to persistent conflicting national interests among member states (International Crisis Group, 2014). While international bodies like the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) engage with the ICWC, its functional limitations remain a significant hurdle (IWMI, 2024). The complexity of aligning five diverse national interests, particularly the upstream-downstream dynamics, proves more challenging than fostering agreement between closely aligned nations.

In contrast to the multilateral challenges, bilateral cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan demonstrates more tangible progress. These nations have made significant strides, agreeing to establish an automated water accounting system on the Amu Darya river and restore hydro-posts (Uzbekistan.org, 2024). This initiative aims to ensure transparent water sharing, a critical step in building confidence and mitigating disputes. Discussions between their water ministries also focus on infrastructure maintenance, flood prevention, riverbank reinforcement, and efficient water use (Uzbekistan.org, 2024). Both countries plan joint research, exchange expertise on water-saving technologies, and enhance training programs, committing to utilize international financial institution grant funds for these projects (Uzbekistan.org, 2024). The effectiveness of this bilateral cooperation, especially on transparent data-sharing mechanisms, could serve as a model for broader regional collaboration, indicating that trust-building and practical solutions may be more achievable in targeted partnerships before scaling up to full regional consensus. Transparency through digital systems is key to overcoming historical mistrust and data opacity.

UZBEKISTAN'S INTERNAL MODERNIZATION AND EFFICIENCY DRIVE

Uzbekistan is proactively investing in domestic water efficiency, which yields direct benefits for its economy and indirectly contributes to regional water security. The World Bank has approved a $200 million concessional credit to support Uzbekistan in modernizing its irrigation and drainage infrastructure (World Bank, 2025b). This project marks the first phase of a broader World Bank-supported regional program designed to improve water efficiency and conservation across Central Asia (World Bank, 2025b). Uzbekistan co-finances this initiative with $23.2 million (World Bank, 2025b).

The country's irrigation infrastructure is largely outdated, a legacy of the Soviet era, leading to significant water losses and uneven distribution. Across Central Asia, obsolete water infrastructure can result in up to 40% water losses during irrigation (World Bank, 2025b). To address this, modernization projects in Uzbekistan focus on replacing earthen canals with concrete lining (259 km), rehabilitating pumping stations, and introducing water-saving technologies like drip irrigation (World Bank, 2025b). Key upgrades include re-sectioning and elevating canal beds for gravity-fed supply and installing hydraulic structures equipped with Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems and flowmeters for improved water control (World Bank, 2025b).

These efforts are anticipated to deliver substantial benefits:

- **Water Savings:** Annual water losses are expected to be reduced by approximately 540 million cubic meters (World Bank, 2025b).
- **Energy Efficiency:** Over 165 million kWh of electricity are projected to be saved annually, a critical outcome given that irrigation pumping stations consume 16% of Uzbekistan's national electricity use (World Bank, 2025b).
- **Agricultural Productivity:** The quality of irrigation service delivery is expected to be enhanced across 232,000 hectares of agricultural land, improving productivity and resilience (World Bank, 2025b).
- **Socio-Economic Benefits:** Approximately 180,000 water users, including 80,000 women, will directly benefit from improved access to reliable irrigation services, incentivizing private investments and supporting job creation in the irrigation and agrifood sectors (World Bank, 2025b).

Uzbekistan's internal modernization efforts are not merely about conserving water but represent a strategic investment in national energy security and economic diversification. By setting a precedent for efficient water use, these efforts indirectly contribute to regional water security by reducing overall demand on shared resources, potentially easing transboundary tensions over allocation. This demonstrates a proactive approach to sustainable development that addresses multiple systemic challenges simultaneously, highlighting the critical interconnectedness of the Water-Food-Energy-Climate Nexus.

The Qosh Tepa Canal: A New Geopolitical Fault Line

The construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal in northern Afghanistan by the Taliban regime represents a significant and potentially destabilizing new factor in Central Asian water dynamics. The canal's purpose is to divert water from the Amu Darya to convert 550,000 hectares of desert into farmland (German Economic Team, 2024; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023). The main canal is expected to be 285 km long, with construction commencing in early 2022. The first phase was completed in October 2023, and the second phase was reported to be 90% complete by December 2024 (German Economic Team, 2024).

This unilateral development poses critical implications for downstream countries, particularly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which are heavily reliant on the Amu Darya's flow. Projections indicate a significant reduction in surface water levels in the Amu Darya basin (German Economic Team, 2024). The canal's construction highlights several critical challenges and issues. Afghanistan is not a party to any regional or international treaty on transboundary river waters, and the project commenced without consultation or formal agreements with downstream neighbors (German Economic Team, 2024; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023). This unilateral approach significantly increases the risk of diplomatic or economic retaliations. Furthermore, independent experts express skepticism regarding Afghanistan's technical expertise, noting "rudimentary" construction methods and a lack of oversight (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023). This raises substantial concerns about significant water loss through seepage, potentially leading to widespread soil salinization in the region (German Economic Team, 2024). A major breach in the canal was, in fact, reported in December 2023 (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023).

The Qosh Tepa Canal will further exacerbate the already dire Aral Sea situation and contribute to increased soil salinization in downstream agricultural areas (German Economic Team, 2024). It compounds existing problems such as land degradation and rapid glacier melt in the region (UN Climate Change, 2023). The socio-economic impacts are equally concerning: decreased crop yields could drive up prices of staple goods and negatively affect textile exports (German Economic Team, 2024). Rural populations, heavily dependent on agriculture, will be disproportionately affected by water shortages, potentially leading to increased migration, drinking water shortages, and the spread of diseases (German Economic Team, 2024). Such severe impacts could also trigger internal displacement and socio-political unrest within Afghanistan itself. Afghanistan's pursuit of its own water and food security through this project, without engaging in formal agreements, risks a "zero-sum" outcome where its development paradoxically endangers the water security and agricultural stability of its neighbors. This situation elevates the Kushtepa Canal from merely an environmental or agricultural issue to a profound geopolitical challenge that threatens regional stability, underscoring the urgent need for international mediation and a shift from isolationism to collaboration.

However, the region faces an escalating crisis, primarily driven by climate change (UN Climate Change, 2023) and the profound implications of unilateral actions such as the Kushtepa Canal. The canal's construction without comprehensive regional agreements poses substantial environmental, economic, and socio-political risks to downstream nations, echoing the historical catastrophe of the Aral Sea (German Economic Team, 2024). This situation underscores that while national development imperatives are legitimate, the transboundary nature of Central Asia's water resources necessitates a fundamental shift towards a more integrated, cooperative, and legally binding regional water governance framework. The deep awareness of the importance of water issues across Central Asian states offers a basis for optimism, but decisive, collective action remains paramount to avert further environmental degradation and ensure regional stability.

CHALLENGES AND OUTLOOK

Despite tremendous progress and ambitious objectives, Uzbekistan's "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy confronts inherent obstacles that need ongoing monitoring and adaptive policy responses.

Internal challenges

The IMF and World Bank advocate for reducing the state's economic dominance, privatizing state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and increasing competition to promote a more dynamic private sector (IMF, 2024; World Bank, 2024c).

Human Capital Quality: While access to education and healthcare has improved, the quality of these services remains a challenge. For instance, UNICEF (2024) points to significant gaps in education quality, requiring sustained investment in curriculum reform, teacher training, and digital learning infrastructure.

Environmental pressures: Uzbekistan faces significant environmental challenges, including water shortages, air pollution from industrial emissions, transportation, and heating, and land degradation. The effective implementation of environmental legislation and the broad use of green technology are critical (UNECE, 2024; World Bank, 2024f).

Inclusive Growth: Although poverty has decreased, it is still important to ensure that the benefits of growth reach all sectors of society, particularly disadvantaged groups and rural communities. Regional gaps in development must also be addressed (World Bank, 2024c).

Regional and Geopolitical Challenges

Trans-Afghan Corridor Security: The long-term success of the UAP railway depends on the stability and security of Afghanistan (The Diplomat, 2025a).

CKU Railway Funding and Geopolitics: While promising, the CKU railway project's significant cost and probable debt consequences for Kyrgyzstan, along with regional geopolitical complications, necessitate cautious management and transparent finance procedures (CA&CC Press, 2024).

Transboundary Water Resources: Effective and fair sharing of transboundary water resources in Central Asia is a complicated task that requires strong legal frameworks and political will from riparian governments (IWMI, 2024). Climate change exacerbates the situation, emphasizing the need for collaborative action.

External economic shocks, fluctuations in commodity prices, and global geopolitical concerns may affect Uzbekistan's trade, investment, and economic stability.

Outlook and Opportunities

Despite these hurdles, the outlook for Uzbekistan's "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy remains mostly favorable, supported by several enabling factors.

The present leadership's persistent commitment to reforms and open regionalism creates a great basis for future success. By maintaining investments in education, skills development, and job creation, the country may realize a significant demographic dividend from its youthful and growing population.

Uzbekistan's strategic location in Eurasia makes it a natural transportation and commerce center, especially with the development of new trade corridors.

Increased political cooperation among Central Asian republics presents opportunities for collaborative infrastructure projects, economic liberalization, and joint problem-solving, particularly in sectors such as energy and water.

Finally, the emphasis on digital transformation, a green economy, and value-added manufacturing presents pathways for economic diversification beyond traditional industries.

CONCLUSION

Uzbekistan's "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy represents a profound commitment to national transformation, with economic diplomacy and regional integration serving as its fundamental pillars. The country's proactive global outreach has resulted in a significant surge in foreign direct investment, diversified trade partnerships, and strengthened bilateral ties with key economic actors like the EU and Azerbaijan. The success of initiatives such as the Uzum digital ecosystem and substantial investments facilitated by the UzDIF and EBRD underscore the efficacy of this outward-looking economic strategy.

Concurrently, Uzbekistan's determined pursuit of regional integration is reshaping the Central Asian landscape. Ambitious infrastructure projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway promise to fundamentally alter regional connectivity, positioning Central Asia as a vital Eurasian transit corridor. Furthermore, collaborative efforts in energy, particularly in green energy export, and crucial advancements in water resource management, demonstrate a growing commitment to shared prosperity and environmental sustainability across the region.

While formidable challenges remain, including the need for further market liberalization, continued improvements in human capital quality, and addressing persistent environmental pressures, the momentum generated by the "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy is undeniable. The strong political will, combined with a youthful demographic and strategic geographic location, provides a robust foundation for continued progress. By skillfully balancing its pursuit of global economic integration with deepening intra-regional cooperation, Uzbekistan is not only steering its own course towards sustainable development but also solidifying its role as a linchpin of stability, connectivity, and shared prosperity in Central Asia. The successful realization of this dual pursuit will be a testament to Uzbekistan's transformative vision and its potential to unlock a new era of development for the entire region.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no competing interests to disclose.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

JM: formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, visualization; UK: conceptualization, methodology, validation, writing – review & editing, supervision, project administration.

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A VALUE-ORIENTED ANALYSIS OF EXPERT POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN KAZAKHSTAN: A SPIRAL DYNAMICS APPROACH TO PUBLIC SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT. *This article aims to provide a systematic analysis of the public discourse of leading Kazakh political experts from the perspective of the theory of spiral dynamics (C. Graves, D. Beck, C. Cowan). In the context of political reforms, growing public mistrust, and institutional transformations, expert discourse serves as a channel for articulating values. The aim of the study is to identify and interpret the dominant and auxiliary value memes based on the analysis of public interviews, articles, speeches, and publications in social networks. Methodologically, it is based on qualitative and quantitative content analysis of more than 670,000 words of direct speech, Kazakh experts Dosym Satpayev, Sanzhar Bokayev, Andrei Chebotarev, and Karlygash Yezhenova. In the course of the study, the data were encoded according to the developed matrix, and the consistency index for Cohen's Kappa was 0.84, which demonstrates a high level of reliability. In the process of coding, an eight-level model of spiral dynamics was applied, namely beige, purple, red, blue, orange, green, yellow, and turquoise. The analysis also used MAXQDA and Python software tools. The results of the study showed the presence of stable value polyphony in public statements of experts. The most frequently encountered value levels in their discourse were blue, demonstrating institutional order and accountability; orange, showing rationality, efficiency, development, and green, which demonstrates humanism, social justice, and dialogue. Moreover, each expert's value meme structure varies, forming unique configurations that reflect their analytical styles and cognitive priorities.*

KEYWORDS: *spiral dynamics; political discourse; vMEMEs; expert thinking; Kazakhstan; content analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the study. The current political discourse in Kazakhstan is undergoing a period of profound transformations caused by internal institutional changes and external geopolitical challenges. Against the background of declared reforms, decentralization of power, devolution processes, and attempts to build a new social contract model, there is an increasing need for a critical understanding of the changes taking place in the country.

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One of the most active and reflexive forms of such understanding is public analysis broadcast by leading political experts and publicists such as Dosym Satpayev, Sanzhar Bokayev, Andrei Chebotarev, and Karlygash Yezhenova.

The experts' discourse not only reflects the state of the political field, but also forms a space of alternative interpretations, political expectations, and value frameworks, as speakers perform the function of «value mediators» between society and power, articulating critical meanings, Prognoses, and institutional deficits. Expert discourse acquires special importance as a channel for value articulation and social reflection in the context of limited political pluralism and weak party competition.

The theory of spiral dynamics (K. Graves, D. Beck, K. Cowan) allows us to reveal the deep structure of these meanings through analysis of predominant value memes (vMEMEs), which determine not only the content of analytical narratives but also the level of public demand for change. The study of dominant subjects in the rhetoric of political experts represents an important step towards understanding the value architecture of the Kazakh discourse, identifying contradictions between the institutional status quo and attempts to overcome it intellectually. It is particularly relevant in the period of unstable political identity, attempts to transition to a «Listening State», and the growth of public mistrust towards formal institutions.

The aim of the study is to identify and interpret the dominant and auxiliary value memes broadcast by Kazakh political experts in a public discourse.

The study's object is the public discourse of leading Kazakh political experts, including interviews, columns, analytical comments, speeches regarding the current political agenda, and publications on social networks. *The subject of the study* is the value memes from the statements made by these experts according to the theory of spiral dynamics (K. Graves, D. Beck, K. Cowan).

The research question is formulated as follows: *Which dominant and auxiliary value* MEMEs *are transmitted by Kazakh political experts in their public discourse, and what is the structure of these t-memes in the context of the country's political dynamics?*

The study is based on the essential position of the spiral dynamics theory, in which a person, regardless of living conditions, transmits a dominant vMEME. This allows one to interpret not only the content of the statement but also the deep levels of motivation, perception, and positioning of the subject.

The scientific novelty of this study. The scientific novelty of this study lies in the targeted application of Spiral Dynamics theory to the analysis of public rhetoric by Kazakhstani political experts, using content analysis as the core methodological tool. Based on a systematic content analysis of extensive samples of direct speech by four influential experts, their statements are interpreted in terms of the structure of vMEMEs. This approach makes it possible to:

- identify individual and typological features of value orientations in the public speech of the analyzed political experts;
- interpret political rhetoric as a reflection of deeper levels of value evolution;

- apply Spiral Dynamics as a practical analytical tool for examining expert public discourse;
- capture intra-group rhetorical and ideological diversity within the professional field;
- empirically demonstrate how different levels of value-based thinking influence interpretations of current political developments.

In contrast to traditional approaches focused on institutions or normative structures, this study offers a value-semantic analysis of expert discourse based on their actual language practices. The sample size of over 670,000 words of direct public speech ensures the validity of the analysis and sufficient interpretive depth. The study demonstrates the potential of Spiral Dynamics as a tool for analyzing political-expert discourse in the post-Soviet context, using the example of specific, carefully selected figures.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used qualitative and quantitative content analysis of public statements by Kazakhstani political experts to identify dominant and auxiliary value memes broadcast in their discourse. The theoretical and methodological basis of the study is based on the provisions of the theory of spiral dynamics (K. Graves as interpreted by D. Beck and K. Cowen), according to which the levels of values of a person or group are formed as an adaptive response to changing life conditions.

Data sample. The study used a continuous sample of all available materials containing direct speech of four Kazakhstani political experts published in the public domain from the beginning of their public activities to the start of 2025. The analysis included:

- author articles, blogs, posts on social networks;
- interviews in video and text format (YouTube, Internet media);
- podcasts, lectures, conference presentations;
- expert comments and analytical remarks in national and international media.

The sample included only texts containing meaningful, identifiable direct speech of experts. The total volume of the analyzed text was:

- Dosym Satpayev - 431,467 words;
- Sanzhar Bokayev - 53,443 words;
- Andrei Chebotarev - 100,368 words;
- Karlygash Yezhenova - 86,876 words.

This study is part of a larger research project that includes content analysis of the public discourse of 25 Kazakh speakers, divided into different categories. This article presents the category «political scientists». In each category, 4-8 speakers are selected, representing the most active and influential participants of the public field. Selection was based on the following criteria:

- systematic and sustained involvement in public discourse, regular media appearances, participation in expert discussions, publication of analytical materials and comments on the current political agenda;

- influence on the formation of public interpretations and agenda, recorded through a high level of media visibility and active participation in the production of expert judgements;
- the availability of a sufficient volume of accessible texts of direct public speech, which allows for ensuring a valid content-analytical base;
- ideological and rhetorical diversity within the group, allowing a comparative analysis of different types of thinking within the same professional field.

In order to ensure transparency and analytical justification of expert selection, we clarify that the four political experts analyzed in this article were selected through a deliberative process involving the project's core research team and external academic consultants. The selection was carried out by an expert panel based on a purposive sampling strategy. While three of the selected experts possess academic credentials and have published scholarly work, one participant, Karlygash Yezhenova, was included based on her institutional position and discursive impact as editor-in-chief of Exclusive.kz, a multimedia analytical outlet that has been operating since 2002 and is recognized as a key platform in Kazakhstan's civic media landscape. Yezhenova's editorial leadership and public commentary provide an important dimension to the country's political discourse, particularly in terms of media framing and value-driven interpretation of current affairs. Although no candidates were formally excluded during the selection process, only those who met all inclusion criteria and whose public content met the minimum analytical threshold were retained.

All four experts are mainly related to the city of Almaty, which reflects the real spatial structure of the intellectual field of Kazakhstan, where the leading analytical centres, civic initiatives, independent media, and expert communities are concentrated in Almaty. Thus, geographical concentration is not an aspect of sampling, but represents the institutional fact of the contemporary Kazakh context.

It should also be stressed that this study does not claim to be representative in a statistical or universalizing sense, nor does it claim that specific structures of value memes characterize all representatives of the political community. The work represents a separate analytical segment focused on the development and verification of methodological tools for the analysis of value structures of public expert discourse within the framework of the theory of spiral dynamics. All experts agreed to participate in the study following ethical standards. They also conducted interviews and underwent tests on spiral dynamics, the results of which will be published in the future.

Unit and procedure of analysis. The unit of analysis was a paragraph and a semantically completed text fragment having content and value load. In cases where the fragment contained internally heterogeneous blocks of meaning, the fragmentation into micro-fragments was carried out. vMEME was encoded manually, and specialized software such as MAXQDA was used to build a coding base, perform statistical processing, and perform data visualization. Python to structure text and visualize vMEME. In each fragment, the following was defined:

- the dominant vMEME (determined by the number and significance of lexical-semantic markers and logical-semantic construction);

- auxiliary vMEME, if they were clearly expressed in parallel structures of the fragment.

The coding was carried out on the eight-level spiral dynamics model: beige, purple, red, blue, orange, green, yellow, and turquoise. For each level, a categorical matrix of keywords, phrases, and intensities was developed based on the theoretical provisions of the model and adapted to the Kazakh political and cultural context. Operationalization of categories passed the pilot testing phase on a random sub-sample of 1500 words, with subsequent correction of markers.

Reliability and verification. The prominent researcher performed the coding manually with constant verification against the categorical matrix. To check internal reliability, a repeated analysis of 10% of the sample was conducted after a week, which allowed us to record the level of intra-coder consistency (Cohen's Kappa = 0.84). The project archive will store all coding files and the category structure.

Methodological limitations. In this study, we, as the authors, note that vMEMEs manifested in public statements are not always an accurate projection of the speakers' values. Public discourse can perform an instrumental-communicative function, adapting to a specific audience, the format of the speech, or the current political context. Nevertheless, the stable reproduction of certain memes and logics allows us to identify the dominant levels of thinking broadcast in the expert environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Spiral Dynamics Theory, developed by Clare Glaves (Graves, 1974) and systemized by Don Beck and Cowan (Beck & Cowan, 1996), is a theoretical foundation of this study. The model has formed the basis of numerous studies in the field of leadership by Pesut (2001), Rosado (2004), political management by Kotze (2009), cultural dynamics by Butters (2015), and the analysis of worldview shifts in national communities by Pierre (2014).

One of the key advantages of Graves' model is its ability to explain how subjects adapt to changing conditions by transforming their cognitive and normative matrices (Graves, 1974; Kotze, 2009). According to the model, the levels of value consciousness are not fixed and linear, but represent a spiral, oscillating dynamics with the possibility of progression and regression. This feature makes Spiral Dynamics applicable to the analysis of political discourse, where transitions from one normative system to another are traced.

The concept of vMEME, a stable set of behavioral, moral, and cognitive orientations, was supplemented by «value spirals» that manifest themselves in group and institutional dynamics (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Rosado, 2004).

The study by Butters (2015) emphasizes that Spiral Dynamics is not just a theoretical framework, but also an analytical tool that allows you to decode normative conflicts and ideological fluctuations in society. He also analyzes the discrepancies between the interpretations of the model and different versions, pointing out the need for a critical approach in its application.

Studying the worldviews of the educated population of China through a questionnaire based on vMEMEs, Pierre (2014) demonstrated how Spiral Dynamics can be adapted to cross-cultural analysis. Although the study did not employ classical content analysis, it set a precedent for operationalizing Graves's model in the context of national discourse, confirming the relevance of the theory in studying the structures of expert thinking, especially in societies undergoing rapid sociocultural transformation.

The methodological basis of this study is based on the qualitative and quantitative content analysis, widely presented in the classic works of Berelson (1952), Krippendorff (2004), and Neuendorf (2017). In the context of spiral dynamics, content analysis allows the identification of lexical and semantic markers and the interpretation of deep semantic structures determined by a specific level of the subject's value evolution. Thus, it becomes a tool for reconstructing the value architecture of public speech.

The study by Kotzé (2009) illustrates the possibility of using the psychometric instrument he developed (Lens questionnaire) to measure Graves' levels of consciousness in psychological and social research, where the project emphasized the potential of the model for the empirical measurement of value orientations, as well as its correlation with the phenomenological and existential traditions in philosophy.

Additional attention is paid to the integrative possibilities of spiral dynamics in the works of Wilber (2000), who proposed the theory of integral quadrants as an extension of the model of consciousness. His concept allows us to link external behavioral manifestations with internal motivational structures, which is important for analyzing public discourse, where meanings are formed through text and context, audience, and institutional positioning.

In interpreting Spiral Dynamics, it is necessary to consider the levels of individual consciousness and the collective, institutional, and cultural manifestations of value systems. Rosado (2004) emphasizes the importance of the memetic approach, within which vMEMEs are considered «cultural genes» transmitted through language, images, rituals, and social practices. This understanding opens up a methodological perspective for analyzing expert discourse as an environment for reproducing value attitudes, stable behavioral models, and ideologemes.

In political analysis, Rosado's approach is particularly productive, since it allows us to consider political leadership, communications, and expert strategies as functions of deep value structures. When applied to public statements by political experts, the vMEME model helps to deconstruct the hidden foundations of rhetoric, such as reliance on hierarchy (blue), efficiency (orange), solidarity (green), or systematicity (yellow).

Kotzé (2009) attempted to combine existential philosophy and spiral dynamics, especially regarding individual development and understanding freedom as a structural component of a mature value system. Within this approach, the spiral is viewed as a continuous interaction between the internal development of the subject and external social conditions, which directly resonates with the context of Kazakhstan's political discourse, which is in a dynamic between authoritarian governance and public calls for reform.

Donkers (2014) develops an integrative approach by combining spiral dynamics with Ken Wilber's quadrant model and introduces the concept of integral dynamics, in which value systems are related to ontological «octant» spaces of interaction between the individual and the collective, the internal and the external.

Donkers (2016) confirms the methodological and conceptual relevance of Graves' model for studying political discourse, especially in transitional societies, where public statements of experts become representations of not only rational arguments, but also deep value structures. In the context of the Kazakhstani political field, where there is a clash between the authoritarian management tradition and the growing demand for systemic modernization, using content analysis based on spiral dynamics allows us to deconstruct expert narratives as a reflection of the cognitive and motivational architecture of political consciousness.

Butters (2015) also notes that the practical application of the model largely depends on its interpretative framework, namely structural, transcendental or pragmatic-functional, which also suggests that in our study, due to the nature of the material of public texts, the use of structural interpretation is justified, focusing on the definition and comparison of vMEMEs as stable configurations of meanings.

Kotzé (2009) writes about contextual correspondence between vMEME levels and the socio-cultural environment. In the context of Kazakhstan, this means the need to adapt categorical matrices and semantic markers to local political and cultural realities. This study adapted the theoretical scales to the Kazakh discursive context and conducted pilot testing of the categories.

Pierre (2014) in the study of Chinese worldviews shows how changing socioeconomic conditions lead to the transformation of the value structure, the transition from traditionalism and collectivism to individualism and pragmatism, and such findings are important in the context of the Kazakh political field, where clashes between collectivist norms and individualized forms of political subjectivity are also observed.

The transition from theoretical foundations to methodological implications is done by appealing to works devoted to content analysis as a research strategy. Following classical definitions, content analysis is considered a systematic, objective, and reproducible method of quantitative and qualitative text interpretation. This study acts as a tool for operationalizing value levels, allowing us to establish the frequency, contextual relevance, and discursive function of vMEMEs. The idea of a semantically rich unit of analysis of a paragraph or micro fragment is of particular importance as a carrier of meaning and an ideological attitude.

Content analysis becomes a link between the empirical material and the abstract model of value levels, where the methodological framework allows us to move from superficial lexical reading to the reconstruction of the logical and semantic structure of expert discourse, as emphasized by Fairclough (2013) within the framework of critical discourse analysis.

Despite the applied nature, the conclusions about the links between dominant value levels and institutional behavior models can be transferred to analyzing public speech

as an institutional action aimed at legitimizing a specific type of consciousness and action (Trem, 2021). Existing studies form a methodological basis for a comprehensive analysis of political discourse through the prism of spiral dynamics (Rodic, 2016). This work represents a further development of this direction, offering for the first time in the Kazakhstani context a study of public expert statements to identify the structure and evolution of their value motivation.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

The public discourse of four Kazakhstani political experts, Dosym Satpayev, Sanzhar Bokayev, Andrei Chebotarev, and Karlygash Yezhenova, demonstrates high-value polyphony. However, it is generally possible to record the predominance of blue, orange, and green vMEMEs, which indicate a focus on institutional order, modernization projects, and humanistic challenges, respectively. All four experts rely to one degree or another on orange rationality, namely, the use of terms related to efficiency, reforms, development, modernization, strategy, and performance indicators is observed among all participants.

Structure of Dominant and Auxiliary vMEMEs: A Comparative Perspective

A comparative analysis showed that all four experts demonstrate a stable commitment to the values of the blue and orange levels. However, the degree of their expression and semantic function varies depending on the individual style of rhetorical priorities. Sanzhar Bokayev demonstrates a nominal dominance of the blue level in actual frequency. However, a semantic analysis revealed a shift in emphasis towards the green vMEME, reflecting social justice, collective responsibility, and dialogue (see Figure 1a). As the analysis showed, the blue vMEME in his discourse is often used in a functional connection with green, acting as a lexical marker for expressing higher humanistic attitudes.

In Dosym Satpayev's discourse, the blue and orange levels also occupy key positions, but perform a different function, as they form the framework of institutional-analytical and pragmatic thinking, within which systemic failures, authoritarian practices, and economic risks are recorded and analyzed. At the same time, there is a clear growth dynamic of the yellow vMEME, especially after 2017, which indicates an expansion of the analytical horizon and a transition to meta-systemic models of explaining political reality (see Figure 1b).

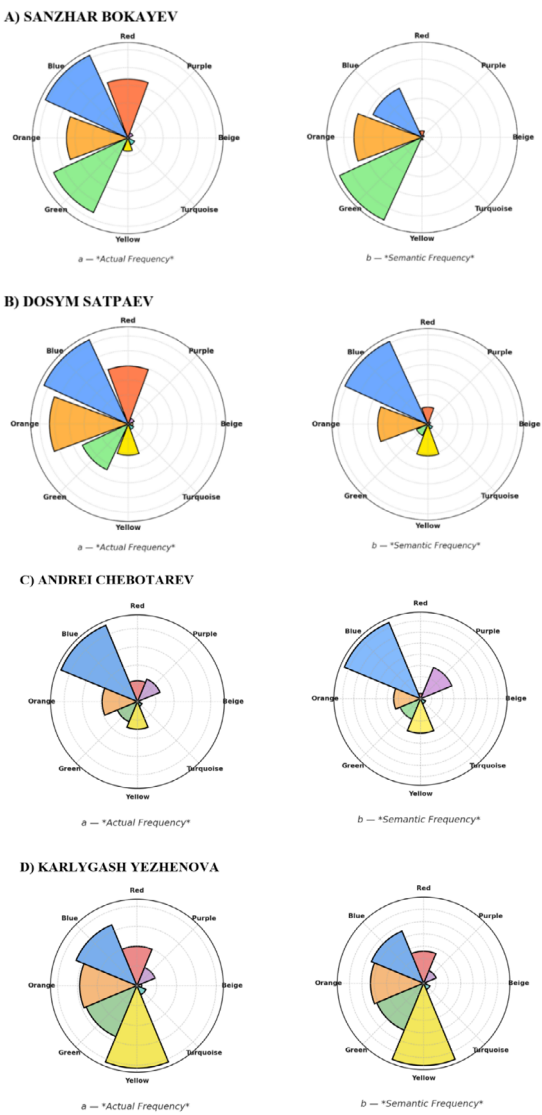
Andrei Chebotarev, unlike Bokayev and Satpayev, presents a more integrative model of thinking, where the blue level performs the function of the structural core, and orange, green, yellow, and purple act as modules of semantic complication. Particularly indicative is the purple vMEME, rare for modern Kazakhstani analysts, which Chebotarev interprets not as traditionalism, but as a cultural-anthropological structure for legitimizing power and collective identity (see Figure 1c).

Karlygash Yezhenova is the only analyzed figure whose dominant vMEME is the yellow level, which is associated with a high level of systemic thinking, reflection, and philosophical depth. Green and orange levels are also consistently represented in her

rhetoric, with a moderate role for blue, which does not determine the structure of the discourse, but is used as an additional layer of criticism of institutional degradation.

Unlike other experts, Karlygash Yezhenova demonstrates the beginnings of the turquoise level, which manifests itself in the themes of global ethics, value integrity, and the ultimate horizons of social imagination (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Comparative Structure of Dominant and Auxiliary vMEMEs in the Discourse of Kazakhstani Political Experts: Profiles of D. Satpayev, S. Bokayev, A. Chebotarev, and K. Yezhenova



Source: authors' compilation based on survey data

Differences in types of semantic load and rhetorical strategies. The analysis revealed significant differences in how v-memes structure the rhetorical strategies of experts (see Table 1). Several studies have been conducted on this topic.

Table 1. Comparative table of dominant vMEMEs

Expert	Dominant vMEMEs	Secondary vMEMEs	Characteristics
Sanzhar Bokayev	Green (Social Justice)	Blue, Orange	It demonstrates a rhetorical shift from institutional normativity (blue) to humanistic and socially oriented discourse (green). It emphasizes collective responsibility, dialogue, and civic engagement while still operating within modernizing (orange) and rule-based (blue) frameworks.
Dosym Satpayev	Blue (Institutional Analysis)	Orange, Yellow	Maintains a strong analytical focus on institutional dysfunction and authoritarian patterns (blue), framed within modernization and reformist language (orange). Increasingly, it exhibits systemic, reflective thinking and value-pluralism (yellow), especially after 2017.
Andrei Chebotarev	Blue (State Structures & Stability)	Green, Yellow, Purple	Constructs discourse with a core emphasis on governance and structural continuity (blue), while integrating social sensitivity (green), complex systemic awareness (yellow), and rare cultural-anthropological dimensions (purple) related to identity and legitimacy.
Karlygash Yezhenova	Yellow (Meta-Analysis)	Green, Orange, Blue	Operates predominantly at a meta-systemic level (yellow), characterized by high cognitive complexity, multidimensional analysis, and value-integration. Incorporates green-level ethics, social justice concerns, and critical orange-level modernization discourse. Blue elements are mainly used to deconstruct institutional limitations. Also displays early signs of turquoise-level thinking.

Source: authors' compilation based on survey data

Bokayev has a humanistic focus on legal justice, support, and trust. His discourse evolves from a normative-law-centric model to an emphasis on collective change, integrating the blue level into the green narrative, indicating a value evolution toward active participation and responsibility.

Satpayev, on the contrary, maintains an institutional distance, acting as an analyst, recording patterns of power, crisis, and transformation. His transition from blue and orange logic to a yellow meta-perspective is expressed not in emotional rhetoric but in the complication of analytical constructs. He is less interested in moral or humanistic optics, focusing on scenario forecasting and the systemic vulnerability of the Kazakh regime.

Chebotarev creates the most balanced structure of vMEMEs, where each level performs its function, where blue provides analytical discipline, green introduces civic sensitivity, yellow provides a systemic perspective, and purple records profound cultural logic. His discourse is characterized by high cognitive complexity and cultural sensitivity, while maintaining analytical precision.

Karlygash Yezhenova, unlike the others, forms a value-ironic metaposition that combines yellow systemic thinking, green moral sensitivity, and critical distance. She does not so much describe political reality as reflect its symbolic structures, revealing internal paradoxes and traumas. Thus, her rhetoric is closest to the second order of consciousness in terms of the theory of spiral dynamics.

Dynamics of transformation of rhetorical attitudes over time

Analysis of the temporal dynamics of experts' public rhetoric showed that the structure of the broadcast vMEMEs is not static but subject to significant changes, reflecting both external political and social transformations and the internal evolution of the authors' analytical positions. Below is a diachronic reconstruction of each expert's vMEME structure based on discursive and frequency analysis.

Sanzhar Bokayev: from normative to humanistic thinking

In the period before 2018, Sanzhar Bokayev's rhetoric was mainly structured around the blue vMEME, emphasizing law, order, accountability, and institutional discipline. The main statements of this stage were focused on normative criticism of governance, calls for compliance with legal norms, transparency of budget policy, and institutional accountability.

However, starting from 2019-2020, a gradual strengthening of the green vMEME has been recorded, which was expressed in a change in the rhetorical emphasis on social justice, support for vulnerable groups, collective responsibility, and trust between society and the state. It was during this period that Bokayev's speeches increasingly began to appeal to the concepts of «justice», «public trust», «humanity», and «citizen engagement».

After January 2022, Bokayev's rhetoric has attempted to synthesize the blue and green levels, where legal requirements are used to justify ethically colored social reforms. The orange level in his rhetoric remains stable, becoming more active in the economic agenda, but does not demonstrate pronounced dynamics. The yellow and turquoise levels are recorded fragmentarily, mainly as a reaction to institutional dead ends, but do not form a stable paradigm of thinking.

Dosym Satpayev: from institutional analysis to systemic reflection

In the early period (2004-2011), Dosym Satpayev's rhetoric correlated with the dominance of the blue and orange vMEMEs, which was due to his analytical focus on the institutional architecture of Kazakhstan's statehood, the role of bureaucracy, and structural limitations of modernization. Pragmatic discourse focused on efficiency and economic risks was combined with the ordering syntax characteristic of expert commentary.

From 2012 to 2016, against the backdrop of increasing authoritarian tendencies in the country, the frequency of terms associated with the red vMEME increased in Satpayev's rhetoric. However, it is important to emphasize that these constructions do not express the expert's commitment to the logic of force, but merely record the aggravation of the authoritarian trend in the political system. The blue level retains its leadership, but becomes increasingly critical, pointing to the weakness of institutions and the lack of accountability.

Since 2017, the yellow level has grown clearly, manifesting itself in the complication of analytical constructs, the expansion of scenario models, risk forecasting, and the desire for a meta-systemic view of political processes. The shift is significantly intensified in 2022-2025, when Satpayev, against the backdrop of social upheavals and repressive measures, records a decline in the blue level, as well as an increase in the beige and red levels as signs of social survival and authoritarian pressure, respectively. However, the yellow vMEME continues to grow, forming a stable meta-position of political analysis to understand the crisis as systemic.

Andrei Chebotarev: from institutional rationalism to cultural and ethical integration

From 2005 to 2015, Andrei Chebotarev's rhetoric demonstrated the dominance of blue and orange vMEMEs, which corresponded to institutional monitoring, reform analysis, and management efficiency assessment tasks. However, in this period, elements of the purple level were recorded, distinguishing Chebotarev from other experts. He began integrating political legitimacy's symbolic and ritual components into his analysis, especially concerning the first president.

Since 2016, against the aggravation of elite conflicts, the red level, recorded as a characteristic of the political landscape, has been intensifying. In parallel, there is an increase in the yellow level, which expresses the desire for a comprehensive interpretation of crises, transitions of power, and cultural and political transformations.

Since 2019, Chebotarev's rhetoric has seen a balanced formation of four vMEMEs: blue remains basic (structure), green is strengthened in themes of civic participation, yellow manifests itself in analytical superstructures, and purple stabilizes as a marker of cultural sensitivity.

Since 2022, fragments of turquoise thinking have appeared, especially in the themes of environmental sustainability, global thinking, and long-term ethical and political prospects, but the turquoise level remains peripheral.

Karlygash Yezhenova: from systemic humanism to meta-integration

Since 2012, the yellow vMEME has been present with high intensity in the rhetoric of Karlygash Yezhenova, which makes her thinking the closest to the second-order levels in terms of spiral dynamics. In the early period, her statements show signs of rejection of binary schemes, analytical multi-layering, philosophical irony, and cultural reflection.

Since 2018, the green level has been strengthening in rhetoric, which is associated with an appeal to trauma, social justice, memory, and support for vulnerable groups. The expansion of the humanistic layer occurs against the backdrop of actualizing political and ethical dilemmas associated with the transition period in power and the crisis of trust.

Since 2020, in the context of the pandemic and the growing crisis of governance, the orange level has been strengthening, expressed in criticism of the quasi-public sector, managerial incompetence, and investment dysfunction. However, it does not replace the humanistic optics, but becomes an auxiliary module in the yellow-green frame.

Since 2022-2024, the emergence of stable elements of the turquoise vMEME has been recorded, expressed in the themes of global responsibility, an ethical state, spiritual sustainability, and systemic trust. Despite the limited lexical expression, Karlygash Yezhenova's turquoise level is gradually acquiring cognitive form, forming an integrative horizon of her thinking.

CONCLUSION

The study allowed us to achieve the set goal and answer the formulated research question concerning the structure of dominant and auxiliary value memes broadcast by Kazakhstani political experts in public discourse. Based on the systemic content analysis of the statements of four key experts, Dosym Satpayev, Sanzhar Bokayev, Andrei Chebotarev, and Karlygash Yezhenova, a stable value polyphony was revealed, while there is a differentiation of rhetorical strategies, levels of thinking, and methods of value articulation depending on the individual cognitive profile of each expert. It was found that blue and orange vMEMEs (institutional order and modernization rationality) prevail in the rhetoric of all four analysts. However, they are implemented in different semantic links and rhetorical purposes.

Bokayev transforms from normative logic to humanistic logic (green vMEME), while Satpayev moves from pragmatic analysis to systemic reflection (yellow vMEME). Chebotarev demonstrates the most balanced and multi-layered structure of discourse, including a purple level, rare for the Kazakhstani context, reflecting attention to the cultural and anthropological foundations of legitimacy.

Karlygash Yezhenova stands out for the high frequency and cognitive development of the yellow vMEME, supplemented by signs of turquoise thinking, which may indicate the formation of an integrative meta-level of value consciousness in her. Of particular importance is the revealed dynamics of the transformation of vMEMEs over time. The transition from the dominance of the first orders to the levels of system integration is observed among all experts, but is realized at different speeds and intensities, which indicates that expert discourse in Kazakhstan is not a static structure, but develops in response to foreign policy challenges, crises of confidence, institutional upheavals, and changing audience demand.

From a theoretical point of view, the study confirms the heuristic potential of the spiral dynamics theory in the analysis of political discourse, allowing us to describe not only the substantive aspects of analytical statements but also the deep structure of thinking, as well as the mechanisms of adaptation of expert consciousness to transforming conditions. Methodologically, the work demonstrates the applicability of the eight-level model within the framework of the content analysis of expert statements in the context of a hybrid political regime, where the symbolic and value diversity of the expert scene compensates institutional limitations.

Analytics in Kazakhstan acts not only as a producer of interpretations, but also as a value system in the process of evolution, reflecting not only institutional realities, but also cultural matrices, intellectual trajectories, and public expectations. Spiral dynamics in this context becomes not just an analytical tool, but also a way of mapping

the future in the logic of the transition from normative to integral forms of political consciousness.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the journal's requirement to disclose any potential conflicts of interest, we would like to formally state that no such conflicts exist in relation to our submitted manuscript. The empirical data used in our research were independently and originally collected by the authors. We do not share this dataset with any third parties, and there is no institutional or financial involvement that could influence the objectivity or integrity of our analysis. All analytical work and interpretations presented in the paper are entirely our own and were developed without external influence.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

GI: supervision, conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, validation, writing – review & editing, project administration, and funding acquisition; MA: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, validation, software, writing – original draft, visualization.

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A COMPETENCY MODEL OF INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE: A HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACH TO CIVIL SERVICE IN KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT. *In the context of the transformation of public administration systems, inclusive and human-centered approaches that focus on addressing the needs of citizens and increasing the participation of various social groups in decision-making are becoming increasingly important. The purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual model of civil service competencies that support the implementation of inclusive and human-centered governance within the framework of the "Listening State" concept. The methodology of the study includes an analysis of strategic and regulatory documents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as a comparative review of international practices from the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand. The practical implementation of the model involves the development of behavioral indicators that take into account regional and cultural specificities, the introduction of mandatory training programs on inclusive leadership, intercultural communication, and digital literacy, as well as the establishment of regular competency assessments using adapted 360-degree feedback methods. Additional important steps include strengthening interagency coordination and developing digital citizen feedback tools to enhance openness and engagement. At the same time, potential risks such as resistance to change, limited funding, and institutional inertia may arise, requiring strong leadership support and a phased implementation plan with continuous monitoring. The results can be used to revise approaches to the selection, training, and evaluation of civil servants and to guide the development of a new civil service model that is focused on citizens' needs and the promotion of human-centered governance.*

KEYWORDS: *inclusive governance, civil service, competency model, human-centered, public administration.*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of increasing complexity in social processes and growing demands for the quality of public administration, approaches that are centered on people and

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their needs are becoming increasingly relevant (Rosenbloom, 2017; Nguyen, 2024). These approaches aim to enhance the openness, accessibility, and fairness of public governance, while also promoting citizen participation in decision-making processes, especially among vulnerable and underrepresented population groups.

The shift toward inclusive and human-centered governance entails not only institutional and regulatory reforms but also a transformation of the role of civil servants themselves. In particular, increasing attention is being paid to the competencies required to implement these approaches in practice, ranging from communication and empathy skills to ethical awareness and the ability to engage in cross-sectoral collaboration (Gupta et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2014).

Despite ongoing civil service reforms in Kazakhstan, including the implementation of the "Listening State" concept, the focus on competencies that reflect the values of inclusion and human-centeredness remains fragmented. Existing competency models for civil servants continue to emphasize traditional administrative and regulatory dimensions, while behavioral, value-based, and social components are still underrepresented. This situation is closely linked to broader challenges in the development of human capital, an issue that affects both the public and private sectors in Kazakhstan (Shevyakova & Petrenko, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual competency model for civil servants that aligns with the requirements of inclusive and human-centered public administration in Kazakhstan. This study is based on the analysis of secondary data, including international approaches from three foreign countries (the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada) and strategic and regulatory documents of Kazakhstan. A comparative analysis method is applied, with particular emphasis on those elements of competency models that reflect the principles of inclusiveness, openness, ethics, and citizen orientation.

The relevance of the topic is defined by the need to adapt the civil service to contemporary challenges, such as expanding civic participation, strengthening public trust, and advancing sustainable development. The principles of inclusive and human-centered governance are directly linked to the implementation of Goal 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda, which calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and the establishment of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations, n.d). The practical significance of this research lies in the fact that the proposed competency model can be used to inform approaches to the recruitment, training, and development of civil servants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive governance

A precise definition of inclusive governance is absent from existing theories and policies (Hickey, 2015). Broadly speaking, it refers to the ability of people to express their views and influence the processes that affect them (OECD, 2020). Inclusive governance requires the active participation of all citizens, especially marginalized groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities. This ensures that governance is not only representative but also collective, enabling citizens to engage in decision-

making processes (Kashyap, 2018; Skae & Pearse, 2021; Annahar et al., 2023). Effective inclusive governance depends on collaboration among various stakeholders, including government institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector. This collaborative approach helps align diverse interests and create more holistic and effective governance solutions (McAllister & Taylor, 2015). One of the main challenges of inclusive governance lies in balancing the competing interests of different stakeholder groups. In some cases, this may lead to tensions and conflicts, as seen in the Norwegian model of e-health governance, where differing perspectives on top-down authority and stakeholder autonomy created implementation challenges (Linstad et al., 2024).

Inclusive governance is a multidimensional concept that calls for the integration of various stakeholders into governance processes to ensure that decision-making is collaborative, transparent, and fair. Although balancing competing interests and building trust remains challenging, the principles of participation, accountability, equity, decentralization, and cooperation are central to achieving effective inclusive governance.

Human-centered governance

Human-centered governance is an approach that places the individual and their needs at the core of all administrative processes and decisions. This approach differs from traditional paradigms such as Traditional Public Administration, New Public Management, and New Public Administration, which tend to focus on bureaucratic procedures, market mechanisms, and state authority (Schnell & Gerard, 2023; Kim, 2021). Human-centered governance requires the active engagement of all stakeholders, including citizens, government bodies, businesses, and civil society organizations. Such engagement contributes to the development of more inclusive and equitable policies (Šlaus, 2017). Contemporary challenges demand that public institutions become more flexible and capable of innovation. Human-centered governance promotes the use of creative and adaptive approaches to meet the evolving needs of society (Robby & Hariyadi, 2024). One such approach is digital transformation. This includes the design and application of digital solutions that improve the interaction between citizens and public services (Chamberlain et al., 2022).

Another relevant approach is social innovation, which addresses issues such as poverty and social isolation through active community engagement and the utilization of local resources (Robby & Hariyadi, 2024). Human-centered governance contributes to improving the quality of life by promoting more effective and equitable distribution of public resources and services. It also helps reduce bureaucratic complexity and enhances the transparency of governmental processes (Langham et al., 2017; Ryan, 2024).

As a new paradigm of public governance, human-centeredness requires substantial changes in how public institutions operate. This includes active citizen participation, institutional flexibility, innovation, digital transformation, and the adoption of socially innovative practices. The application of a human-centered approach can lead to improved quality of life, greater citizen satisfaction, and a reduction in bureaucratic burdens.

The Competency-Based Approach in Civil Service

The competency-based approach in civil service is a strategic method aimed at enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of public servants by focusing on the skills,

attitudes, and behaviors required for their roles. This approach is increasingly applied across various countries and sectors, including public administration, healthcare, and education. In Europe, competency management has transformed public sector careers by shifting the focus from qualifications and tenure to individual skills and behaviors, viewing employees as assets to be developed and motivated (Hondeghem et al., 2005). The digital transformation of public services necessitates the revision of civil servants' competency profiles to include digital skills, ensuring their preparedness to address emerging challenges and seize new opportunities (Çubuk, 2025). India's competency framework for e-governance is designed to bridge the gap between the human resource capacity of the civil service and global industry standards, thereby promoting more effective governance and improving the delivery of public services (Shubha, 2017).

Training, retraining, and professional development represent the cornerstone in the formation of civil service competencies. Competency-based training in Taiwan's public sector is designed to enhance employees' knowledge, capabilities, and organizational effectiveness by offering practitioner-oriented learning methods (Wu, 2013). A blended learning model, combining in-person and distance learning, is recommended for developing managerial competencies in public administration and for addressing emerging challenges such as diversity, ethics, and digitalization (Castaño Pérez & García Izquierdo, 2019). The digital transformation of public services calls for the revision of civil servant competency profiles to include digital skills, ensuring their readiness to respond to new demands and seize new opportunities (Çubuk, 2025). A pilot experiment applying a competency model in the Office of the Prime Minister of Lithuania highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of the approach, emphasizing the need for ongoing development and implementation of competency frameworks across public sector institutions (Sudnickas & Kratavičiūtė-Ališauskienė, 2011).

The competency-based approach in civil service is a transformative strategy that aligns the skills of public servants with organizational objectives, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of public governance. Despite its advantages, challenges related to implementation and monitoring persist. These require continuous improvement and adaptation to evolving demands, especially in the context of the digital age.

Although existing literature does not yet offer studies that explicitly focus on the competencies of civil servants within the frameworks of inclusive and human-centered governance, it does examine competencies that are directly or indirectly aligned with these concepts. Inclusive leaders are characterized by their ability to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in their decision-making processes. In this context, key qualities include self-awareness (understanding one's own behaviors and biases), empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of others), adaptability (flexibility in responding to unexpected challenges and changes) (Volpe et al., 2023), as well as soft skills such as communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving (Tsirkas, 2025).

Human-centered governance focuses on the well-being of employees as a means to achieve optimal organizational effectiveness. Core competencies in this area include trust (building interpersonal trust to improve organizational performance) (Gaeta et al., 2011), ethics (Aránguiz-Bravo & Arteaga-Ortiz, 2024), and cultural competence

(Motschnig & Ryback, 2016). Additionally, an understanding of the business context and knowledge of sector-specific characteristics, along with the ability to define and manage the competencies required for different organizational roles (competency mapping), are essential for implementing these governance approaches in the public sector (Madhavi & Mehrotra, 2019).

Thus, the concepts of inclusive governance, the human-centered approach, and the competency-based civil service form an interconnected theoretical foundation that reflects the ongoing transformation of public administration. Inclusive governance emphasizes the participation and consideration of the interests of all population groups, including marginalized communities. The human-centered approach complements this by focusing on citizens' perceptions, experiences, and needs as key reference points in the design and implementation of public services and policies. The competency-based approach, in turn, provides a practical framework for the systematic training and development of civil servants who are capable of effectively putting these principles into practice. The integration of these approaches enables the development of a governance model that promotes both effectiveness and equity in the face of growing complexity and diversity in societal demands.

Despite the extensive literature on competencies in civil service, there is currently no comprehensive model that defines the specific competencies needed by civil servants to implement the principles of inclusive and human-centered governance. Existing studies tend to focus either on individual aspects of competencies, such as digital or behavioral skills, or on generalized frameworks that do not fully reflect the value-based transformations taking place in public service. As a result, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis that brings together inclusiveness, human-centered approaches, and the development of civil service competencies. This article seeks to address that gap by proposing a conceptual competency model tailored to the demands of contemporary public administration in the context of a shift toward an open, responsive, and citizen-centered government system.

METHODOLOGY

This study is theoretical and analytical in nature and is aimed at developing a competency model necessary for the implementation of inclusive and human-centered public administration in Kazakhstan. The methodological strategy consists of two sequential and interrelated stages of analysis.

The first stage involves a content analysis of the legal, strategic, and policy documents of Kazakhstan that define the goals, objectives, and priorities in the field of public administration. Particular attention is paid to provisions that articulate the principles of human-centeredness, inclusiveness, citizen participation, accountability, and the social orientation of the civil service. The analysis includes, in particular, the provisions of the "Listening State" Development Concept, the Civil Service Development Strategy, national programs for digitalization and sustainable development, as well as documents related to ethics and competencies of civil servants.

The second stage examines the experiences of three countries: the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada. The selection is based on the following considerations: (1) the

United Kingdom represents a historically established civil service system characterized by a high degree of formalization and structure; (2) New Zealand is known for its strong emphasis on human-centered and intercultural approaches, effectively adapting public services to the needs of diverse communities; (3) Canada, as a federal, multilingual, and multicultural state, offers a balanced model that integrates digitalization, inclusiveness, and open leadership. These models provide a valuable foundation for adapting best international practices in human resource management within Kazakhstan's institutional, sociocultural, and administrative context.

At the third stage, based on the identified strategic orientations and value priorities of Kazakhstan's model of public administration, as well as the analysis of international experience, a draft competency model for civil servants is developed, grounded in the principles of human-centeredness and inclusiveness. The model includes key behavioral indicators structured across several domains: leadership, citizen engagement, ethics, creativity, digital skills, and the ability to work in diverse environments. Particular emphasis is placed on the integration of competencies that promote service-oriented thinking, empathy, and cross-sectoral collaboration, which are considered essential foundations for building an effective, open, and accountable civil service.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

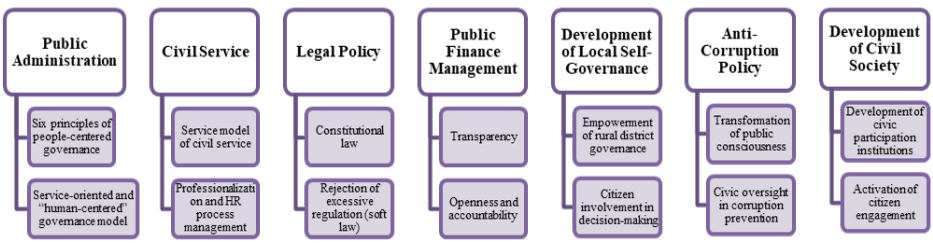
In recent years, Kazakhstan has demonstrated a steady trend toward the institutionalization of human-centered and inclusive principles in the field of public administration. The conceptual foundation for the implementation of this policy was established by the "Listening State" initiative, launched in 2019 by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev:

"Our common task is to bring the concept of the 'Listening State' to life – one that responds promptly and effectively to all constructive requests from citizens. Only through constant dialogue between the authorities and society can we build a harmonious state that fits into the context of modern geopolitics" (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019).

This presidential initiative was later formalized and institutionalized through various legal acts and programmatic documents. The core principles of the "Listening State" concept served as the foundation for the Concept for the Development of Public Administration in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030 (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021a). At the heart of this concept is the construction of a human-centered model based on the principle of "People First." Moreover, the provisions of the Public Administration Development Concept (Section 2) are closely aligned with other national policy frameworks adopted in Kazakhstan. These include the Legal Policy Concept, strategies promoting the rule of law and public order, public finance management, local self-governance development, anti-corruption policy, and the development of civil

society. The structure and key areas of reform undertaken in the implementation of the "Listening State" concept are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Key Areas of Implementation of the "Listening State" Principles in Kazakhstan's Public Policy



Compiled by the authors based on sources: President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022a, 2022b, 2024)

Thus, the development of the "Listening State" initiative has identified seven key areas, each supported by an approved national concept and incorporating elements of human-centeredness and inclusiveness.

The principle of the "Listening State" is central to the public administration system. It implies openness of the state apparatus, citizen participation in decision-making, and the obligation of public authorities to respond promptly and substantively to public requests. A key objective of this approach is to establish a sustainable dialogue between the state and society, including various social groups and civil sector institutions. This is essential for solving problems more effectively and for considering public opinion. The model of the "Listening State" emphasizes not one-way communication, but active collection of feedback and public engagement in policymaking through consultations, surveys, public discussions, and digital platforms (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021a).

Human-centeredness is reflected in the transition toward a service-oriented model, where the focus is placed on the quality of service delivery and the professional orientation of civil servants toward the needs of citizens. The adoption of human resource (HR) approaches enables personalized management of careers, performance evaluations, and training. Inclusiveness is expressed through ensuring equal access to public service and promoting principles of gender and social balance in recruitment processes (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024).

A human-centered approach is realized through the prioritization of constitutional human rights, the strengthening of the state's role in protecting these rights, and the introduction of legal norms aimed at safeguarding vulnerable population groups. Inclusiveness is promoted by developing mechanisms for public participation in lawmaking, conducting public consultations on draft legislation, and implementing soft regulation that accounts for the diversity of social contexts (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021b).

Human-centeredness in this domain is implemented by orienting budget policy toward meeting the needs of the population, including socially vulnerable groups. Enhancing transparency and accountability in the distribution of public resources helps build trust in public institutions. Inclusiveness is ensured through public involvement in budget planning, such as participatory budgeting initiatives ("people's budget") and digital platforms for monitoring budget execution (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022a).

A people-oriented approach is reflected in the push for decentralization and the empowerment of rural districts to address local issues that are closely aligned with citizens' needs. Inclusiveness is promoted by engaging the population in local decision-making, supporting rural public councils, and creating conditions for representing the interests of diverse social groups within local administrations (akimats) (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021c).

The core theme of reform in this area is the shift from punitive to preventive anti-corruption measures and the cultivation of public intolerance toward corruption as a violation of citizens' rights. Preventive strategies include the development of mechanisms for civic oversight, the involvement of civil society organizations and the media in monitoring government activities, and the promotion of anti-corruption education (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022b).

A human-centered approach recognizes citizens and civil society organizations as full participants in decision-making processes, rather than merely passive recipients of state policy. Inclusiveness is achieved through the institutional strengthening of civic participation mechanisms (such as public councils), support for NGOs, grassroots initiatives, and activists, including women, youth, and people with limited mobility (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020).

Thus, the implementation of the "Listening State" Concept encompasses eight key areas, each of which outlines specific mechanisms of human-centeredness and inclusiveness in the corresponding field of public policy. On this basis, it becomes possible to identify a set of functional, value-based, and behavioral components that may serve as the foundation for a competency model of the modern civil servant (see Table 1).

Table 1. Components of a Civil Servant Competency Model Based on the Principles of the "Listening State"

Area	Competencies
Public Administration	Communication skills, strategic planning, proactive service delivery, digital literacy, commitment to legality
Civil Service	Client orientation, HR management, ethics
Legal Policy	Legal literacy, human rights orientation, ability to conduct public hearings, language competencies
Public Finance	Financial literacy, legal literacy, digital competencies, forecasting skills, risk management
Local Self-Governance	Leadership, stakeholder engagement, knowledge of local context
Anti-Corruption	Commitment to anti-corruption, ethics, civil society engagement skills
Civil Society Development	Partnership collaboration skills, institutional thinking, adaptability in interaction

Compiled by the authors based on sources: President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022a, 2022b, 2024)

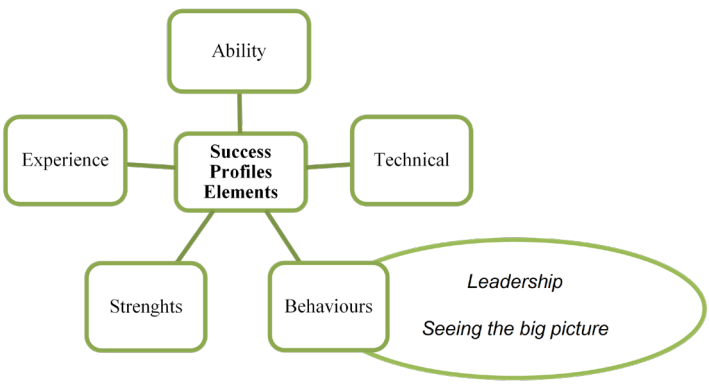
Taken together, these elements reflect the competencies of a civil servant as a mediator between the state and society – focused on service delivery, trust, and engagement.

Comparative Analytical Review of International Models

In modern civil service systems, human-centered and inclusive principles are gaining increasing importance and are reflected in the competencies of public servants. Competency models in a number of countries emphasize not only efficiency and effectiveness but also ethical public service, responsiveness to citizens' needs, fairness, respect for diversity, and the ability to operate in socially diverse environments.

In the United Kingdom, the civil service recruits staff using Success Profiles (UK Government, n.d.). These profiles, composed of five competency elements, are designed to increase the likelihood of hiring the most suitable candidate.

Figure 2. Success Profiles of the UK Civil Service



Compiled by the authors based on the UK Government (n.d.)

From the perspective of inclusiveness and human-centeredness, the "Behaviours" criterion in the UK Success Profiles framework identifies the following characteristics under Leadership:

(1) ability of civil servants to engage others in pursuing a shared vision;
(2) ability to value difference and diversity;
(3) commitment to fairness and creating opportunities for all;
(4) enthusiasm for public service.

In evaluating the Seeing the Big Picture behavior, key considerations include: (1) how well a civil servant understands their role and how it aligns with the organization's objectives; (2) how they take into account broader public service priorities and national interests (see Figure 2).

New Zealand actively promotes a human-centered approach through the principles of Te Kawa Mataaho (Public Service Commission), which include inclusive leadership, cultural competence, and community orientation (New Zealand Public Service

Commission, n.d). The Public Service Act 2020 is aimed at fostering a unified culture grounded in the "spirit of service to the community" and at promoting collaboration among public sector leaders to build a cohesive public sector identity and shared values (Scott et al., 2020).

The integration of Kaupapa Māori principles into public engagement and service delivery processes is essential. These principles offer culturally meaningful alternatives to traditional mechanistic approaches, ensuring that public services meet the specific needs of Māori communities (Boulton et al., 2020). More broadly, New Zealand's public service reforms emphasize the importance of community engagement. For example, the development of elder-friendly and culturally appropriate housing for Māori kaumātua (elders) involves co-design with local groups to meet their cultural, social, health, and economic needs (Simpson et al., 2022).

Summarizing the key competencies of civil servants under the New Zealand model, the following can be highlighted:

1. Inclusive leadership – the ability to lead processes that ensure equal participation of all population groups, especially cultural minorities and vulnerable categories.
2. Cultural competence – the knowledge, respect, and practical application of cultural norms, values, and traditions, especially those of Māori, in everyday administrative and managerial practice.
3. Community engagement – the ability to establish lasting relationships with local groups and engage them in co-design and service delivery.
4. Cross-sector collaboration – the ability to coordinate efforts with other agencies and organizations to achieve shared goals.
5. Flexibility and responsiveness to diverse needs – readiness to adapt policies and services to the cultural, age-related, health, and economic characteristics of different social groups.

Thus, the New Zealand civil service model demonstrates a shift away from bureaucratic administration toward a more human-centered, culturally grounded, and socially just form of governance.

The Public Service of Canada employs a Values and Ethics Code that defines the expected behavior of public servants committed to the traditional Canadian model of parliamentary democracy. In addition to demonstrating respect for democracy and its institutions, civil servants are expected to uphold the following behavioral standards:

- Respect for People – valuing workforce diversity, preventing discrimination and harassment, working collaboratively in a spirit of openness, honesty, and transparency, and fostering respectful communication and engagement.
- Integrity – acting diligently and in the public interest, and avoiding any manifestation of corruption.
- Excellence – continuously improving service delivery and showing respect for both official languages (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2011).

For public sector executives, Canada has developed a set of Key Leadership Competencies. They emphasize both classical leadership competencies – such as

strategic vision, integrity and respect, and results orientation – and the promotion of innovation, change leadership, and stakeholder engagement (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2016). The latter is particularly significant in the context of inclusiveness and human-centeredness. The leadership competency profile includes both effective and ineffective behavioral examples of public service executives. An effective leader is goal-oriented, actively seeks a wide range of perspectives, and remains open to improving outcomes.

Thus, the Canadian approach places a strong emphasis on behavioral and leadership orientations aimed at strengthening a culture of trust, encouraging inclusiveness and openness, and integrating ethical values into everyday management practices.

The comparative analysis of competency models in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada reveals a number of structural and value-based elements aligned with the principles of human-centeredness and inclusiveness. Despite institutional differences and variations in administrative systems, these countries exhibit a consistent trend toward strengthening the behavioral dimension of competencies, integrating cultural and ethical standards, and promoting leadership based on engagement, trust, and transparency.

The principles embedded in Kazakhstan's "Listening State" concept and the Concept for the Development of Public Administration until 2030 offer a window of opportunity to adapt and localize these international practices. However, successful implementation depends not on the direct replication of foreign models, but on their careful adaptation to Kazakhstan's specific sociocultural, legal, and administrative context (Nalau et al., 2019).

The UK civil service is characterized by political neutrality, a generalist staffing model, and career-long public service (Page, 2010). These elements are also present in Kazakhstan to some extent; however, the Kazakhstani system requires greater flexibility, as well as heightened sensitivity to territorial and ethnic diversity.

The experience of New Zealand is particularly valuable in addressing cultural diversity and working with vulnerable groups. As a multiethnic state, Kazakhstan can benefit from the transfer of principles related to cultural competence exemplified by the Te Kawa Mataaho framework, which promotes respect for diversity and improves the quality of engagement with local communities. These ideas are well aligned with the country's national strategy for civil society development and the goals of social inclusion for vulnerable populations.

Competencies such as inclusive leadership, cultural sensitivity, digital literacy, and proactive citizen engagement are particularly relevant in the context of decentralization and the expansion of powers at the local level. These characteristics align closely with the objectives outlined in Kazakhstan's strategic documents, including the development of local self-governance, the promotion of transparent budget planning, and the strengthening of civic oversight in anti-corruption efforts. The use of participatory budgeting tools, the expansion of public hearings, and the implementation of digital feedback platforms require civil servants to possess new, interdisciplinary skills such as communication, stakeholder management, and strategic thinking.

The Canadian model, in turn, places emphasis on change leadership, the institutionalization of ethical standards, and the promotion of inter-agency collaboration. These elements are highly relevant in the Kazakhstani context, where there remains a need to reform managerial culture, which continues to be dominated by hierarchical command structures. Canada's approach, featuring both positive and negative behavioral patterns as part of its competency framework, can be particularly useful in developing national competency profiles and in assessing civil servants through behavioral indicators.

Thus, the discussion highlights several key areas for adapting international best practices within a Kazakhstan-specific competency model (see Table 2).

Table 2. Adapted Competency Model for Kazakhstan: Based on the Analysis of the UK, New Zealand, and Canadian Models

Area/Component	International Experience	Adaptation Options in Kazakhstan
Behavioral Competencies	UK: emphasis on behavioral approach	Development of behavioral indicators for assessment and training
Cultural Sensitivity	NZ: working with cultural diversity, Te Kawa Mataaho	Strengthening competencies for engagement with ethnic groups and vulnerable populations
Ethical and Value Orientations	CA: implementation of ethical standards	Institutionalization of ethical norms and transparency practices
Interagency Cooperation	CA: promotion of collaboration	Fostering a culture of interagency cooperation
Fostering a culture of interagency cooperation	Universal: focus on digital skills and feedback mechanisms	Development of digital platforms, communication skills, and stakeholder management capabilities
Behavior-Based Assessment System	CA: evaluation through positive/negative behavioral patterns, 360-degree feedback	Implementation of behavior-based evaluation and 360-degree feedback system
Change Leadership	CA: orientation toward transformational change	Support for reforms, strengthening adaptability and strategic thinking
Consideration of Territorial Specificity	UK: generalist approach with contextual awareness	Enhancing sensitivity to regional and ethnocultural distinctions

Compiled by the authors based on sources: UK Government (n.d.), New Zealand Public Service Commission (n.d), Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2016)

CONCLUSION

The proposed competency model for Kazakhstan's civil service enables the integration of best international practices while maintaining a strong emphasis on national specificity. This adaptation reflects the need to balance the unification of competencies with differentiation that takes into account Kazakhstan's cultural and ethnic diversity. The development of behavioral competencies, ethical standards, and interagency cooperation is aimed at enhancing transparency, accountability, and public trust in government institutions. At the same time, it is important to identify and respect the boundary between public goods, individual interests, and state priorities.

The practical implementation of this model may involve the following steps:

- Development of detailed behavioral indicators adapted to various levels of public administration, with consideration of regional specificities and the cultural characteristics of ethnic groups;
- Creation of specialized educational programs and training in inclusive leadership, intercultural communication, and digital literacy, mandatory for all categories of civil servants;
- Introduction of a system for regular competency assessment of civil servants using behavioral indicators, including 360-degree feedback methods, adapted to Kazakhstan's legal and administrative context;
- Strengthening interagency coordination through the establishment of working groups and platforms that facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration, and joint problem-solving;
- Development of digital infrastructure and citizen feedback tools that ensure continuous monitoring of public opinion and active citizen engagement in decision-making processes.
- Certain risks and limitations may arise in the implementation of the model, including resistance to change among civil servants, insufficient reform funding, institutional inertia, and uneven readiness of regions to adopt new competencies. To mitigate these risks, it is essential to ensure strong support from senior leadership and to develop a phased implementation plan with mechanisms for monitoring and rapid response to emerging challenges.

The proposed adapted model not only contributes to achieving the goals set forth in Kazakhstan's Public Administration Development Concept to 2030, but also provides a foundation for sustainable and inclusive national development, strengthening citizen trust and enhancing the effectiveness of government-society interaction.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no competing interests to disclose.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

ZD: conceptualization, methodology, qualitative analysis, investigation, resources, writing – original draft; UB: investigation, data curation, writing – original draft; AZ: methodology; investigation, writing – original draft; AK: conceptualization, formal analysis; writing – review and editing.

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These deadlines ensure that your work can be considered for the issue that best fits your submission timing and allows for ample time for the peer review and publication process. We encourage authors to submit their manuscripts well in advance of these deadlines to facilitate a smooth review process.

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Empirical or **Theoretical Study Paper** (ETS) based on research by one or more authors.
Abstract (maximum of 300 words). This should provide a brief summary of the context, rationale, aims, methods, results (if applicable), and contribution and implications of your research.
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We should expect to find:
Introduction that should provide a context for the research,

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Conclusion that focuses on the potential implications of the research.
Font and size: Times New Roman, 12 point [Double spaced]
In-text citations and Reference. APA 7th edition format.
Your paper will be considered based on the following criteria where applicable: appropriateness of topic, justification and significance, purpose and aim, depth of understanding, critical evaluation, coherent discussion of ideas, methods of data collection and analysis, ethics, presentation of findings and logical inference, relationship between concepts and practice, relationship to previous research, overall claims and argument, potential impact, and coherence, cohesion and language.
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