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## CENTRAL ASIAN REGIONAL INTERACTIONS IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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This report is published as part of the “Kazakhstan Futures Program” (January-September 2023) with financial support from the U.S. Embassy in Kazakhstan.

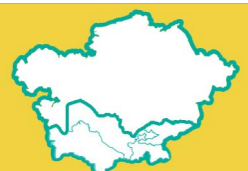
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## INTRODUCTION <sup>1,2</sup>

The five Central Asian states are now confronting a new geopolitical landscape in the wake of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Many experts have remarked on the noticeable increase in diplomatic engagement of Central Asian countries by outside powers in the past two years, tying this development to a potential waning of Russian influence in the region as a result of the war.<sup>3</sup> Notably for intra-regional relations, much of this diplomatic activity is centered on trade and connectivity as the United States, the European Union, China, and other countries seek to bolster supply chains that avoid Russia. At the same time, Russia has continued to engage Central Asian countries at the highest levels, with Russian President Vladimir Putin making multiple visits to the region since February 2022.

Experts have long described Central Asia as one of the world's "least integrated" regions.<sup>4</sup> Initial efforts at regional cooperation in the 1990s and early 2000s were followed by over a decade of stagnation. Outside observers have noted the low level of trust among Central Asian governments as a significant factor hampering regional cooperation.<sup>5</sup> But regional relations received a new impetus following Uzbekistan's leadership transition in 2016. Since assuming power,

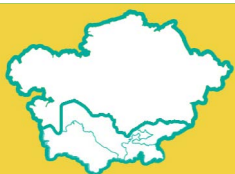
<sup>1</sup> Maria Blackwood contributed to the framing of this research project and to the introduction to this report. The findings, recommendations, or policy developments that result from the discussions or work products of the Oxus Society, or that are contained in publications or work products of the Oxus Society, were not formulated or endorsed by Maria Blackwood or the Congressional Research Service.

<sup>2</sup> The authors would like to thank Temirlan Umirbekov and Meruyert Adylgazina for their assistance during the data collection and coding process.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Mark Temnycky, "The West Is Eyeing Closer Relations With Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2023; Ken Moriyasu, "U.S. has golden opportunity to engage Central Asia's Turkic states: analysts," *Nikkei Asia*, December 31, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Asian Development Bank, *Evaluation of ADB Support for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program, 2011–2022*, May 2023, pp. vii, 1; Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, "A Steady Hand: The EU 2019 Strategy and Policy Toward Central Asia," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, 2019, pp. 15, 49; U.S. Department of State, "The New Silk Road Post-2014: Challenges and Opportunities," Remarks Delivered by Nisha Desai Biswal, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, January 22, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> European Parliament, *Resolution of 13 April 2016 on Implementation and Review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy*, A8-0051/2016.



President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has promulgated a policy of “good neighborliness” that identifies Central Asia as “the main priority of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy.”<sup>6</sup> This shift in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy brought an intensification of high-level regional cooperation, and Central Asian countries made progress on resolving certain long-standing issues, including the demarcation of some national borders. When the four Central Asian heads of state met in Astana, Kazakhstan, in March 2018,<sup>7</sup> it marked the first such gathering in almost a decade and inaugurated an annual consultative meeting that has been held five times. The fifth consultative meeting held in September 2023 illustrated that the Central Asian states had achieved some tangible results in deepening regional dialogue and cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Although the Covid-19 pandemic and related border closures presented challenges for regional integration efforts, high-level contacts continued.

These developments raise the question of whether and how intra-regional relations have shifted in the context of both regional developments and external geopolitical changes. Our project aims to examine and quantify the intensity of high-level inter-regional interactions. How has the intra-regional high-level cooperation in Central Asia changed over the recent years? This is the main research question that drives this project.

In order to examine this and related questions, we compiled a dataset of bilateral and multilateral intra-regional events among (a) presidents (P), (b) prime-ministers (PM), and (c) foreign ministers (FM) of Central Asian states. By ‘events’ we refer to any kind of interaction between these officials of the five states, including visits, meetings, phone calls, video calls, and telegram letters. Our dataset covers interactions for four years: 2015 – before Uzbekistan’s presidential transition; 2019 – after the presidential transition in Uzbekistan and before the Covid-19 pandemic; 2022, and 2023 – after the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Foreign Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan,” available at <https://www.mfa.uz/en/pages/vneshnaya-politika>.

<sup>7</sup> President of Turkmenistan at the time Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov did not attend the first meeting. Instead, Turkmenistan was represented by the Chairman of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan Akja Nurberdyeva.

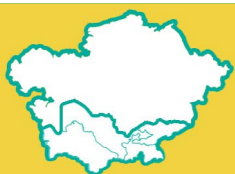
<sup>8</sup> Filippo Costa Buranelli, “Central Asian Regionalism after the 5th Leaders’ Meeting”, *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2023.

The dataset reveals a marked shift in the dynamics of regional relations, with a significant increase in the number of high-level interactions and a move toward more substantive forms of engagement. At the same time, most recorded intra-regional interactions occurred on a bilateral basis, rather than involving more than two Central Asian states. Our findings demonstrate that Central Asia's intra-regional contacts remain driven by the presidents and show that Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan are the most active players in high-level engagement among regional countries.

## METHODOLOGY

Our dataset aims to track the extent to which the intra-regional high-level engagements at the levels of the heads of states, prime ministers and foreign ministers vary in different years: 2015, 2019, 2022, and 2023. To collect instances of interactions, we relied *only* on data provided on the official websites of presidents (*akorda.kz*; *president.kg*; *president.tj*; *president.uz*), prime-ministers (*primeminister.kz*; *gov.kg*; *gov.uz*), and foreign ministers (*gov.kz/mfa*; *mfa.gov.kg*; *mfa.tj*; *mfa.gov.tm*; *mfa.uz*) of Central Asian states. For Turkmenistan, we also consulted the 'Golden Age' electronic newspaper (*turkmenistan.gov.tm*) as many interactions of Turkmenistan's highest officials are reported on that platform. The dataset includes all multilateral and bilateral visits, in-person meetings, phone calls, video calls, and telegrams reported on these websites involving relevant officials.

The data obtained was then manually coded into five categories: (1) political figures involved in the interactions (P-to-P, PM-to-PM, FM-to-FM, and 'Mixed' (e.g. P-to-PM, P-to-FM, or PM-to-FM)); (2) means of interaction (in-person meetings, phone calls, video calls, and telegrams); (3) format of interaction (multilateral or



bilateral); (4) countries involved in interactions; and finally (5) topics discussed during interactions. The last category was the most challenging one in terms of coding because many instances of interactions covered various topics and it was difficult to classify them into one category. Additionally, when the websites above report such interactions, they do not provide many details regarding topics discussed, and rather provide general notes. Yet, we decided to categorize interactions into (a) political issues (instances when only political issues were discussed, e.g. during the January events in Kazakhstan or Karakalpakstan protests in Uzbekistan); (b) economic issues (instances when only economic issues were discussed); (c) security issues (instances when only security issues were discussed including border and Afghan issues); (d) technical interactions (instances when foreign ministers met, usually ahead of presidential meetings, to discuss the details of a summit or outline agenda/calendar for future meetings); (e) ceremonial interactions (congratulations and condolences); and (f) interactions with comprehensive agenda (interactions with two and more general items for discussion).

The dataset has some limitations. First, this dataset does not fully represent the full extent of the regional interactions in Central Asia as it solely focuses on high-level official engagements, which are just one layer of regional cooperation. Second, the dataset deliberately avoids Central Asian interactions in multilateral regional institutions. The dataset concentrates on the engagements of exclusively Central Asian character, i.e. how Central Asian officials interact among themselves bilaterally and multilaterally without participation of any external actors. Finally, as we collected data from the official websites only, we assume that those websites may not contain the full list of interactions for chosen years.

## FINDINGS

In general, the collected data indicates that the number of interactions between Central Asian presidents (P), prime ministers (PM), and foreign ministers (FM) has visibly increased since 2015. Our dataset includes 60 interactions for 2015, in 2019, the number of recorded interactions constituted 87, further growing to 147 in 2022. We observe that this rising trend continued in 2023, reaching 158 recorded interactions among top government officials. Not only did the number of annual interactions more than double during this period, but the substance of those interactions appears to have grown considerably.

As mentioned above, we code the dataset in terms of (1) the political figures most involved in interactions; (2) means of interaction; (3) the format of interactions, i.e. bilateral or multilateral; (4) countries most involved in interactions, and (5) most discussed topics.

### *Political Figures Involved*

The compiled dataset suggests that the Central Asian cooperation is largely driven by heads of state. On average, about two-thirds of interactions occurred at the president-to-president level between the Central Asian republics. We see that this indicator stays relatively stable throughout 2015, 2019, 2022, and 2023.

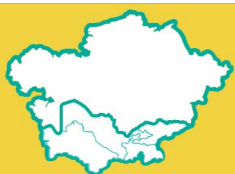
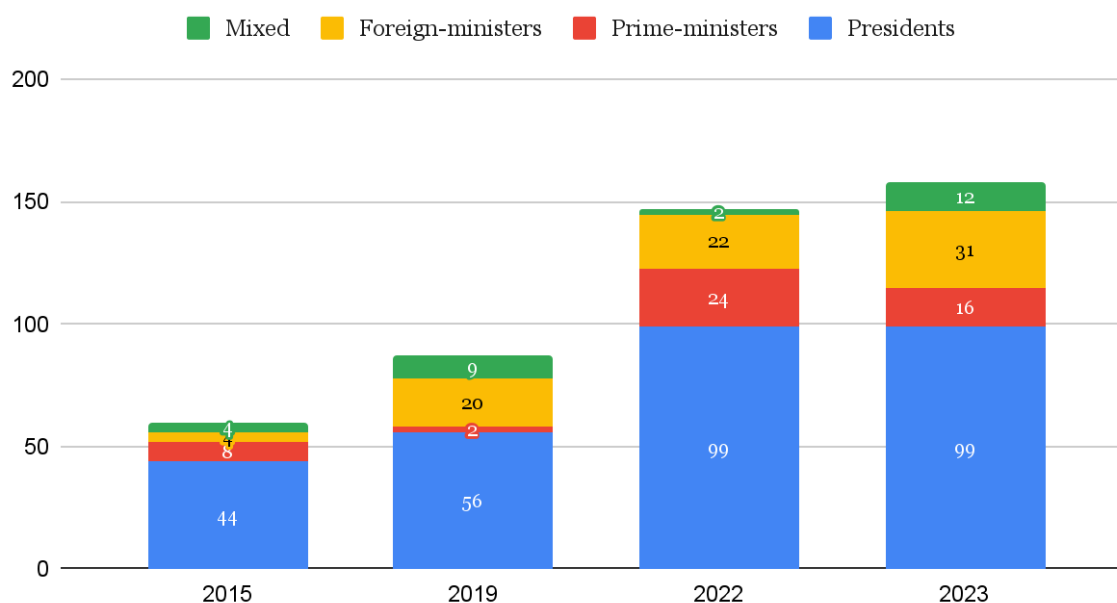


Figure 1. Most involved political figures



Moreover, many instances of interactions that we coded in the ‘mixed’<sup>9</sup> category also include regional presidents interacting with lower-level officials in neighboring states. As a result, the overall involvement of presidents has risen. By contrast, Central Asian prime ministers’ (PM) and foreign ministers’ (FM) engagement with each other remains modest compared with the presidents’ level of activity.

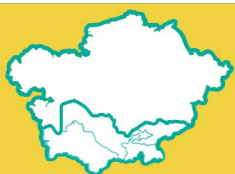
However, we observed a stark increase in interactions involving prime ministers, from 8 in 2015 and 2 in 2019 to 24 in 2022, with a slight decline to 16 in 2023. We assume that this increase might have been caused by two factors. On one hand, some of these ceremonial interactions (e.g. congratulatory phone calls or telegrams on occasions such as Victory Day, New Year, Ramadan, etc.) reported by official websites in 2022 and 2023 were sometimes absent in 2015 or 2019. In other words, in 2022 and 2023, prime ministers either began interacting ceremonially more frequently or their offices started reporting on such interactions more

<sup>9</sup> We coded to the ‘mixed’ category those interactions that occurred between officials of different levels, i.e. president-to-prime-minister, president-to-foreign minister, and prime-minister-to-foreign minister.



routinely. Secondly, a large number of interactions between prime ministers in 2022 and 2023 can be attributed to the then Kazakh Prime Minister, Alikhan Smailov, who assumed office following the January events in Kazakhstan in 2022. Specifically, 17 events (71%) out of 24 in 2022 and seven interactions (44%) out of 16 in 2023 involved the Kazakh Prime Minister, who mainly interacted with his Kyrgyz and Uzbek counterparts. Some of these interactions belong to ceremonial engagements mentioned previously, and some belong to meetings on the sidelines of regional organizations such as the CIS and EAEU. Again, we propose two possible explanations for the Kazakh Prime Minister being relatively more active: (1) his office possibly might have more actively reported on his interactions; and (2) such a proactive approach might have been forced by domestic pressures too, i.e., after the January events, the political leadership declared the idea of 'New Kazakhstan,' promising a set of political and socio-economic reforms. In this context, some political figures in Kazakhstan, including Prime Minister Smailov, might have pursued a more proactive policy.

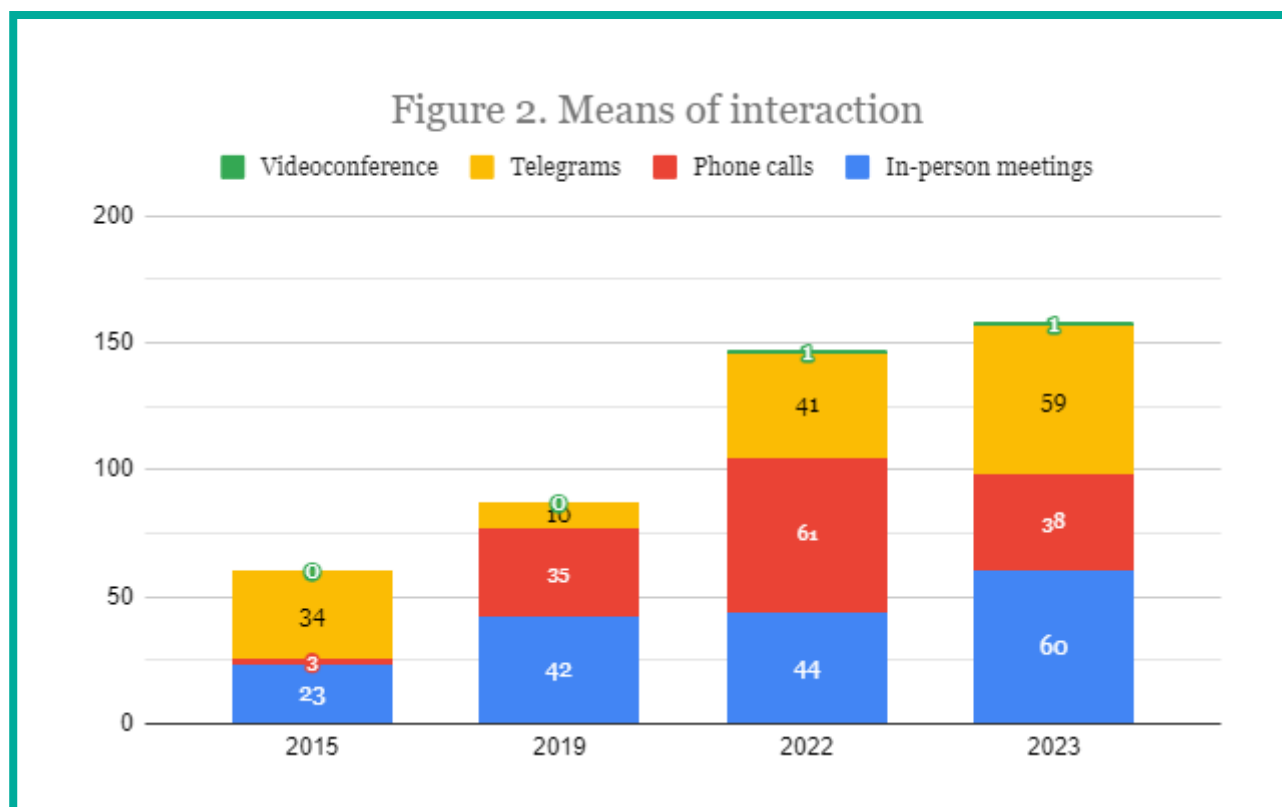
Despite such an increase in both prime minister and foreign minister interactions in 2022 and 2023, we still observe a huge discrepancy between presidents and other political figures. This discrepancy can arguably be explained by the overlap of several factors. First, in the Central Asian political context, foreign policy is traditionally in the hands of presidents, whereas foreign ministers mainly play the role of policy implementers rather than formulators. Second, prime ministers' role in Central Asia is inward-looking; they mostly deal with domestic rather than external issues. Third, the informational coverage of presidents might be much higher in Central Asia. Consequently, a better reporting of presidents' external dealings compared to other officials' interactions might have influenced our dataset as well. Fourth, the dataset also gets distorted in favor of presidents as it includes a large number of formal telegrams or phone calls that presidents send to each other, whereas prime-ministers and foreign ministers less frequently practice these interactions. Finally, Central Asian foreign ministers frequently



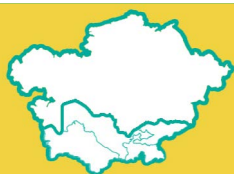
meet multilaterally with representatives of extra-regional players in the 'C5+1' format, but the dataset excludes those interactions. Nevertheless, we still see that the frequency and substance of presidential meetings in Central Asia remain visibly higher than those of prime-ministers and foreign ministers.

### ***Means of Interaction***

We also looked at *how* Central Asian high-ranking officials interacted with each other. In this respect, one can observe a visible change too. For instance, in 2015, half of recorded interactions were telegram exchanges between presidents (34 out of 66) on the occasion of presidential elections in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, presidential birthdays, independence days, and on other similar occasions. These telegram exchanges were mere formal practices and did not offer much in terms of the real substance of Central Asian cooperation. In 2019, the share of telegram exchanges dropped to 10 (out of 87), but subsequently increased again to 41 (out of 147) and 59 (out of 158) in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Such growth in recent years can partly be explained by the increase in the number of registered congratulatory telegrams between presidents of Central Asian countries. Currently, presidents, prime-ministers and foreign ministers alike, exchange telegrams on national holidays, religious festivals, birthday occasions, as well as regularly express condolences on some tragic events. For instance, 13 telegrams (22% of the total number) were sent in just 10 days between August 31 and September 9, 2023, in connection with the independence days of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.



Compared to 2015, we also observe that there were more phone calls between Central Asian officials in 2019, 2022, and 2023. We argue that phone calls, and more so personal meetings, are more important when it comes to deepening regional cooperation. In other words, the value of phone calls and personal meetings is notably higher than that of telegram exchanges if one is to assess the real substance of interactions. As a result, the increase in their frequency in 2019 and 2022 might be considered as a sign of deepening Central Asian cooperation. For instance, the number of registered phone calls between Central Asian officials has significantly grown since 2015. Especially in 2022 the number of phone calls constituted more than 40% of all interactions. This might be due to the January events in Kazakhstan, protests in Karakalpakstan, as well as presidential elections in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. For example, in January 2022, Kazakh officials had twelve phone calls with their other Central Asian counterparts.



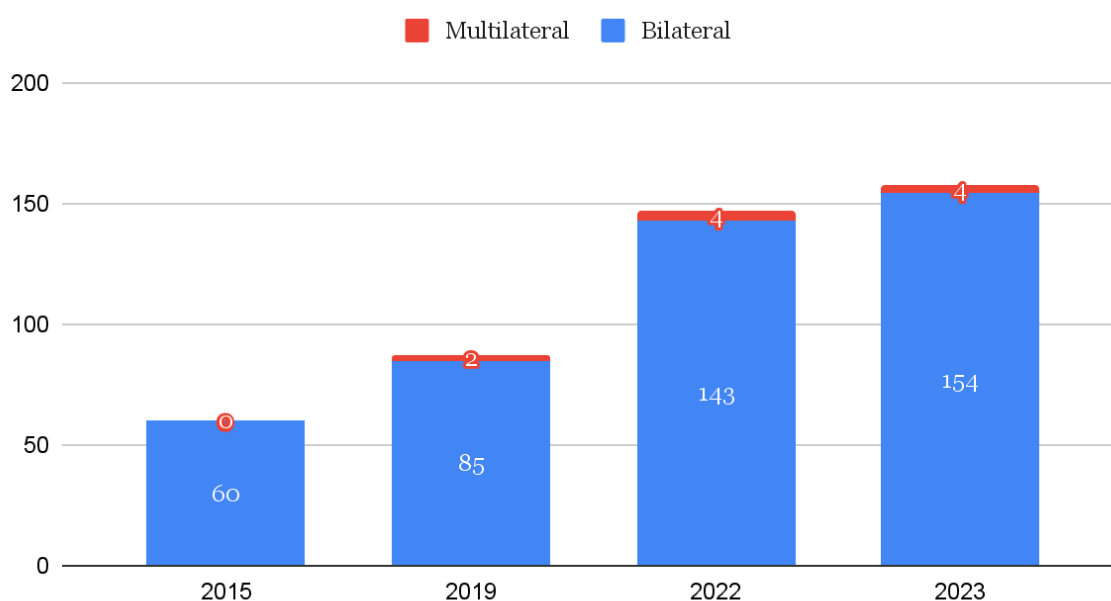
We observe a substantial, and, arguably, more important increase in the number of in-person interactions among Central Asian officials. If registered in-person interactions in 2015 constituted only 23 instances, that figure almost tripled by 2023. As argued above, we hypothesize that in-person meetings are also richer in terms of the substance of interactions. As a result, it can be argued that not only the quantity, but also the quality of Central Asian intra-regional interactions significantly increased since 2015.

### *Format of Interactions*

The bilateral format of interactions among Central Asian high-ranking officials remains dominant. For instance, all recorded interactions in 2015 were held bilaterally, whereas only two events took place in a multilateral setting in 2019. In 2022 and 2023 there were four multilateral engagements out of 110 and 160, respectively. As mentioned earlier, the dataset does not include multilateral meetings of Central Asian officials under the auspices of regional/international organizations and 'C5+1' formats. In other words, intra-regional cooperation is heavily dominated by the bilateral approach excluding consultative meetings of heads of states and preparation meetings ahead of them.

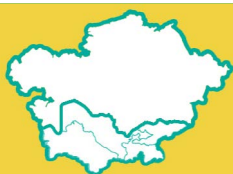
Such a tendency looks surprising given the high official rhetoric in the region, which states that the challenges that the countries are currently facing require multilateral cooperation from all countries in the region. However, we can see that such rhetoric is hardly implemented in practice. This is also illustrative of the lack of institutionalization of the Central Asian regional cooperation.

Figure 3. Format of interactions



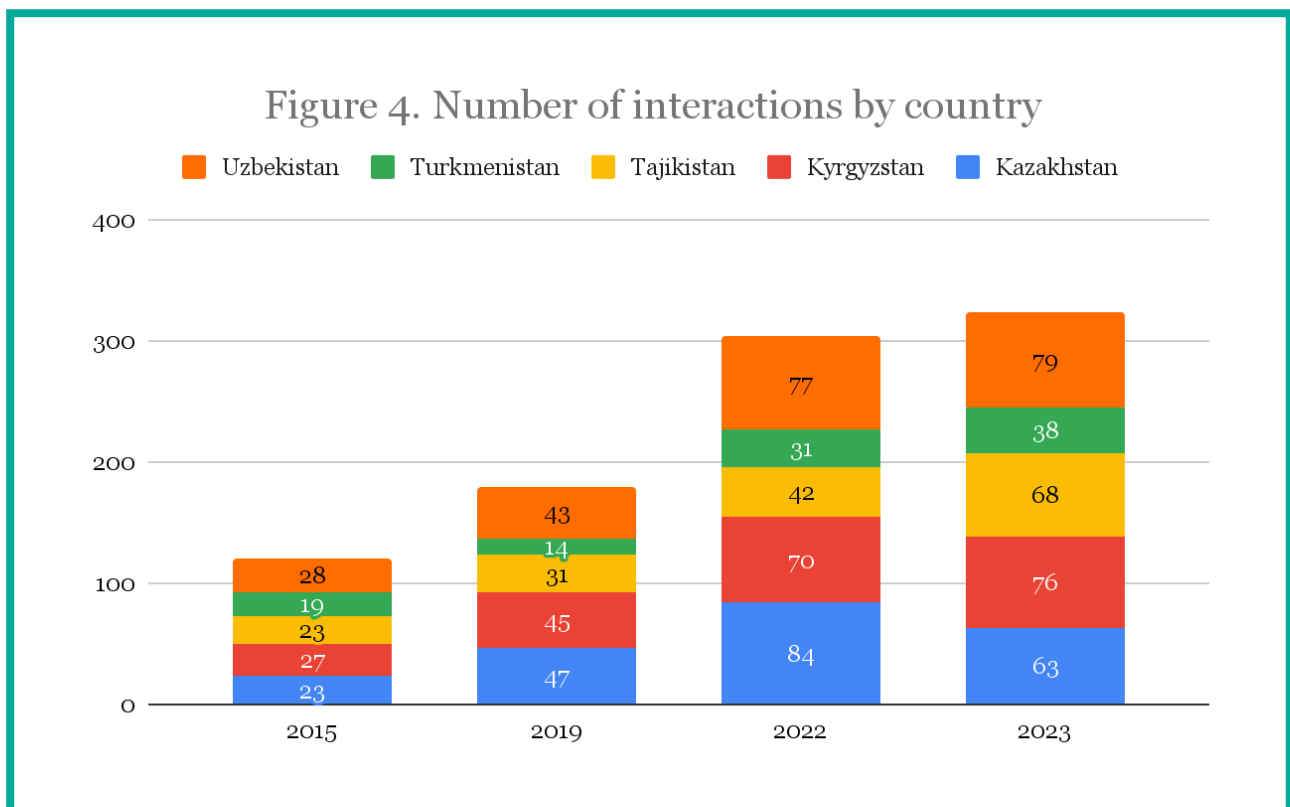
### *Countries Most Involved in Interactions*

As expected, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan were found to be the most involved countries in Central Asia interactions. A sharp increase in the number of interactions for Kazakhstan is observed in 2022, which could be explained by the January events given that most of the 22 occurrences in January and February involved Kazakhstan. The number returned to the regional average in 2023 when only Turkmenistan recorded lower involvement than Kazakhstan in regional affairs. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have also been similarly active across all years under the observation. As for Tajikistan, it was a rather passive regional actor in 2015, 2019, and 2022. Yet, we can notice that it managed to increase the number of its interactions with other Central Asian states to the regional average. Finally, a significant increase in the number of interactions for Turkmenistan was noted



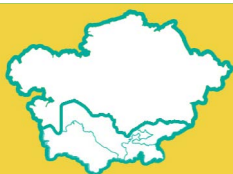
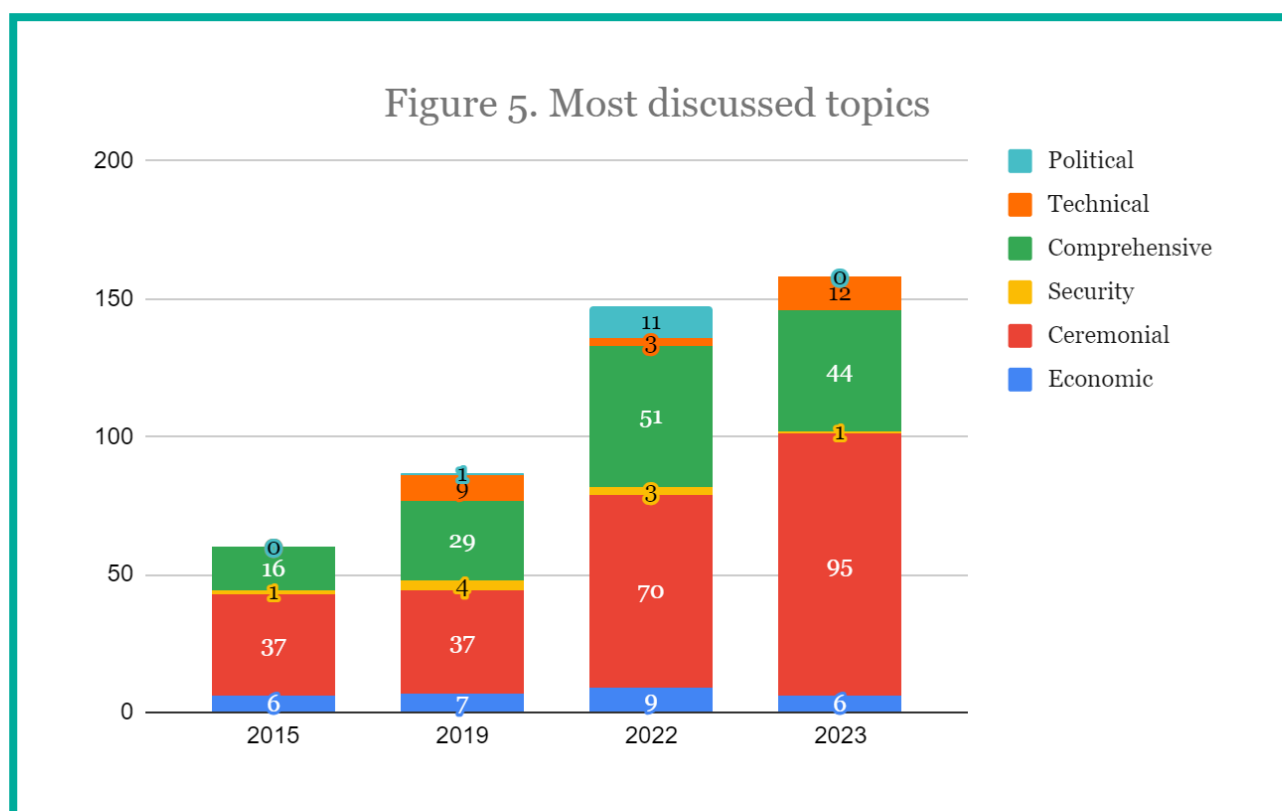
from 2019 to 2022, when the number more than doubled. One might speculate that the appointment of the new president, Serdar Berdimuhamedow, led to a more cooperative state policy. This argument can be supported by a further increase in Turkmen interactions in 2023.

The continuous growth of interactions for Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan could also be explained by the geographical context. These countries are still involved in the process of delimiting and demarcating their borders, which requires additional consultations among them. Moreover, recent developments in Afghanistan forced these states to conduct a series of meetings, forming a unified response to rising challenges.



## Most Discussed Topics

Many of the interactions registered in the dataset, especially in-person meetings and phone calls, often cover a range of various topics, which make them difficult to code into a single item (i.e. economic, political, security, and etc.). Moreover, information provided on official websites does not always contain the details of what topics the parties discussed during the interactions. Instead, they may merely report that the parties discussed ‘the state of bilateral ties’ or ‘further deepening of bilateral ties.’ Therefore, some of the interaction instances that contained more than one topic or lacked detailed information regarding discussed topics were coded to the ‘comprehensive agenda’ sub-category.



The results of our coding suggest that the most prevalent interaction type by far is ‘ceremonial interaction,’ which constituted more than 50% of interactions in all years under the study. ‘Ceremonial interactions’ include telegrams and phone calls of congratulations and condolences. We can also observe that instances of ‘ceremonial interactions’ have been proportionally and consistently increasing since 2015. While they may further regional cooperation and contribute to the good-spirited nature of regional cooperation, they do not offer much in terms of the substance of interactions.

Nevertheless, we also observe that interactions with ‘comprehensive agendas’ have also increased from 16 in 2015 to 51 in 2022 before slightly decreasing to 44 in 2023. ‘Comprehensive agenda’ included instances, when two or more topics are discussed during an interaction. Very often information on the websites do not include specific details on these topics, but rather list those sectors by name only. These types of interactions are the richest in terms of substance, and normally a set of several questions are discussed during such engagements. If one looks closer (where data allows), it can also be noticed that economy-related topics such as trade, investments, joint ventures, or infrastructural projects are a constant component of such interactions. On top of that, there is a separate category, which includes instances, where only economy-related topics are discussed. It can be seen that the number of such instances have been stable over the years.

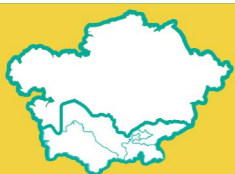
All in all, it can be concluded that the content of Central Asian high-level interactions are dominated by economy-related topics. By contrast, political topics (with the exception of 2022, when the January events in Kazakhstan and protests in Uzbekistan occurred), as well as security-related topics rarely become a separate topic for discussion among Central Asian top officials.



## CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current project was to examine and quantify the intensity of high-level regional interactions in Central Asia in 2015, 2019, 2022, and 2023. The analysis of the compiled dataset allows us to make some preliminary concluding points. First, the dataset shows that the intra-regional official high-level engagements in Central Asia have significantly reinvigorated since 2015. Second, not only has the amount of official interactions grown since 2015, the quality and substance of those engagements have become more profound as the number of personal phone calls and in-person meetings has gone up. Third, it is difficult to name one particular proactive player that serves as a driving force behind regional cooperation since Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan alternate over the years as the most active states in intra-regional engagements. It is worth mentioning that Tajikistan seems to be slowly catching up with these three countries, whereas Turkmenistan is still lagging behind. Finally, despite the substantial increase in quantity and quality of intra-regional interactions, official cooperation in Central Asia still remains largely bilateral and president-driven.

The dataset has not identified any activities that are conducive towards the institutionalization of intra-regional cooperation in Central Asia. Although the format of consultative meetings of presidents is being semi-institutionalized with the establishment of the Council of National Coordinators, the bulk of interactions in high-level regional engagements appear to be conducted on a bilateral basis. This may serve as another indicator of the real state of *regional* cooperation in Central Asia.



This dataset offers a starting point for further exploring the changing nature of the Central Asian regional engagements. Its findings suggest several avenues for future research and analysis. First, there is a need to explore how and why bilateral interactions are increasing within Central Asia's high-level government representatives, whereas the multilateral engagements in the region still involve an international presence (e.g. frameworks such as C5+1, the CIS, the SCO). It is especially necessary in light of the converging rhetoric by the Central Asian officials – usually expressed at the annual consultative meetings of leaders – about resolving the pressing issues of the region through mutual cooperation and coordination. Second, it requires further investigation on how these official engagements are being reflected practically on the ground by looking at the cross-border interactions, the number of intra-regional flights and travels, intra-regional trade and investment dynamics, people-to-people interactions, and etc. Third, how the main regional actors – Russia, China, and Turkey – view these developments and whether their actions have restraining or encouraging effects on the Central Asian cohesion warrant an in-depth analysis of its own.