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RESEARCH FOCUS
INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL

Vol. 5, Issue 10, 2026
ISSN 2181-3833 | Uzbekistan
https://refocus.uz/

RESEARCH ARTICLE • PEER-REVIEWED • OPEN ACCESS • SERIES D • 23.00.00 — POLITICAL SCIENCES

Bilateral partnership as an instrument of political stabilization in Central Asia: evidence from Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan relations

Markaziy Osiyoda siyosiy barqarorlashuv vositasi sifatida ikki tomonlama hamkorlik: O‘zbekiston-Qirg‘iziston munosabatlari misolida

Двустороннее партнёрство как инструмент политической стабилизации в Центральной Азии: на примере узбекско-кыргызских отношений

ADYLBEKOVA Bekzada[1,*]

[1] *Osh State University, Osh, Kyrgyzstan*
***** Corresponding author: beka_adylbekova@mail.ru

ARTICLE INFO

ARTICLE TYPE
Research Article

LANGUAGE OF FULL TEXT
English (EN)

SCIENTIFIC FIELD / OAK
☑ 23.00.00 – Political Sciences
Siyosiy fanlar
Series D

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 2026-10-09
Revised: 2026-10-18
Accepted: 2026-10-24
Published: 2026-10-31

DOI
https://doi.org/10.66073/researchfocus.v5i10.1021

CONTACT
ReFocusJournal@gmail.com

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AUTHOR, TITLE AND ABSTRACT METADATA (EN / UZ / RU)

ENGLISH

ADYLBEKOVA Bekzada[1,*]
[1] *Osh State University, Osh, Kyrgyzstan*

Abstract. Existing scholarship on Central Asian regionalism documents in detail the structural barriers to cooperation among the five Central Asian states, including sovereignty concerns, uneven resource distribution, and unresolved border and water disputes. It does not fully explain how a single bilateral pair can convert these risk factors into functioning stabilization mechanisms. This article examines how bilateral political stabilization was achieved in Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan relations between 1999 and 2026, and whether the mechanisms involved are transferable to other bilateral pairs. The study uses a single-case design with an embedded comparison to Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan relations (most-similar-systems logic). Evidence consists of treaty texts, official statements, trade statistics, and reports by monitoring organizations. Four stabilization dimensions (border delimitation, water-energy management, security cooperation, and economic stabilization) are operationalized through observable indicators.

Keywords: political stabilization; Central Asia; Uzbekistan; Kyrgyzstan; border delimitation; water-energy cooperation; regional security

O‘ZBEKCHA

ADYLBEKOVA Bekzada[1,*]
[1] *O‘sh davlat universiteti, O‘sh, Qirg‘iziston*

Annotatsiya. Markaziy Osiyo regionalizmi bo‘yicha mavjud ilmiy adabiyotlar beshta Markaziy Osiyo davlati o‘rtasidagi hamkorlikka to‘sqinlik qiluvchi strukturaviy to‘siqlarni, jumladan suverenitetga oid xavotirlarni, resurslarning notekis taqsimlanishini hamda hal etilmagan chegara va suv nizolarini batafsil yoritadi. Biroq bu adabiyotlar bitta ikki tomonlama juftlik ushbu xavf omillarini qanday qilib amaldagi barqarorlashtirish mexanizmlariga aylantira olishini to‘liq tushuntirib bermaydi. Maqolada 1999-2026-yillarda O‘zbekiston va Qirg‘iziston munosabatlarida ikki tomonlama siyosiy barqarorlashuvga qanday erishilgani va qo‘llanilgan mexanizmlarni boshqa ikki tomonlama juftliklarga tatbiq etish mumkinligi tadqiq etiladi. Tadqiqot Qirg‘iziston-Tojikiston munosabatlari bilan qiyosiy tahlilni o‘z ichiga olgan yagona holat tadqiqoti (eng o‘xshash tizimlar mantiqi) sifatida qurilgan. Empirik baza shartnoma matnlari, rasmiy bayonotlar, savdo statistikasi va monitoring tashkilotlari hisobotlaridan iborat. Barqarorlashuvning to‘rtta o‘lchovi (chegara delimitatsiyasi, suv-energetika resurslarini boshqarish, xavfsizlik sohasidagi hamkorlik va iqtisodiy barqarorlashuv) kuzatish mumkin bo‘lgan ko‘rsatkichlar orqali operatsionallashtirilgan.

Kalit so‘zlar: siyosiy barqarorlashuv; Markaziy Osiyo; O‘zbekiston; Qirg‘iziston; chegara delimitatsiyasi; suv-energetika hamkorligi; mintaqaviy xavfsizlik

How to cite / Iqtibos keltirish / Как цитировать: ADYLBEKOVA, B. (2026). Bilateral partnership as an instrument of political stabilization in Central Asia: evidence from Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan relations. Research Focus International Scientific Journal, 5(10), 107–112. https://doi.org/10.66073/researchfocus.v5i10.1021

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HAC / OAK: On the HAC list of national scientific publications (Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan) for 06.00.00 Agricultural Sciences and 16.00.00 Veterinary Sciences.
O‘zbekiston Respublikasi FA huzuridagi OAK ro‘yxatida: 06.00.00 – Qishloq xo‘jaligi fanlari; 16.00.00 – Veterinariya fanlari.

РУССКИЙ
АДЫЛБЕКОВА Бекзада[1,*]
[1] *Ошский государственный университет, Ош, Кыргызстан*

Аннотация. Существующая литература по центральноазиатскому регионализму подробно описывает структурные барьеры сотрудничества между пятью государствами Центральной Азии, включая опасения за суверенитет, неравномерное распределение ресурсов, нерешённые пограничные и водные споры. Однако она не в полной мере объясняет, каким образом одна двусторонняя пара способна превратить эти факторы риска в работающие механизмы стабилизации. В статье рассматривается, как была достигнута двусторонняя политическая стабилизация в узбекско-кыргызских отношениях в 1999-2026 годах и можно ли перенести задействованные механизмы на другие двусторонние пары. Исследование построено как кейс-стади со встроенным сопоставлением с кыргызско-таджикскими отношениями (логика наиболее сходных систем). Эмпирическая база включает тексты договоров, официальные заявления, торговую статистику и доклады мониторинговых организаций. Четыре измерения стабилизации (делимитация границы, управление водно-энергетическими ресурсами, сотрудничество в сфере безопасности и экономическая стабилизация) операционализированы через наблюдаемые индикаторы.

Ключевые слова: политическая стабилизация; Центральная Азия; Узбекистан; Кыргызстан; делимитация границы; водно-энергетическое сотрудничество; региональная безопасность

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and research problem

The stabilization of bilateral relations between neighboring post-Soviet states remains a comparatively underexamined phenomenon, despite its evident significance for regional order in Central Asia. While a substantial literature documents the structural obstacles to multilateral regional integration across the five Central Asian republics, far less attention has been paid to the conditions under which a single bilateral pair, embedded within the same unfavorable regional structure, nonetheless achieves durable stabilization. This gap is consequential: if bilateral stabilization is achievable under broadly unfavorable regional conditions, as the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan case suggests, then understanding its mechanisms has implications for regional policy as well as for academic debates. Central Asia has long been described in the comparative regionalism literature as a region where structural obstacles, rather than a lack of shared interests, account for the persistent underperformance of multilateral cooperation (Atid & Ozel Ozdjan, 2023). Reports by the International Crisis Group identified unresolved border disputes in the Fergana Valley as a central source of conflict potential as early as 2002 (International Crisis Group, 2002); the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, for example, was settled by treaty only in March 2025, after decades of deadlock and an armed conflict in September 2022 (Eurasian Research Institute, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025). Against this backdrop, the political stabilization achieved in Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan relations since 2016, culminating in the Treaty on Allied Relations signed on 30 July 2026 (Kyrgyzstan i Uzbekistan podpisali Dogovor o soyuznicheskikh otnosheniyakh, 2026), presents an empirical puzzle: two bilateral pairs facing a structurally similar set of risks reached border settlement at different times and through different institutional routes.

1.2. Literature and theoretical framework

The dominant strand of the Central Asian regionalism literature, exemplified by Atid and Ozel Ozdjan (2023), explains the weakness of multilateral cooperation through a set of recurring structural factors: concerns over sovereignty erosion, the conflation of regional identity with regionalism as a loss of autonomy, and an uneven distribution of natural resources among the five states. Cooley's account of multi-vector diplomacy (Cooley, 2012) adds an external dimension, showing how simultaneous engagement with several great powers shapes the room for maneuver available to Central Asian governments. Both literatures, however, are primarily concerned with explaining the persistence of regional-level obstacles rather than with identifying the conditions under which a specific bilateral pair manages to overcome them.

This article departs from that literature by treating stabilization not as a regional outcome to be explained in the aggregate, but as a bilateral achievement that can be disaggregated into discrete functional dimensions, border delimitation, water-energy management, security cooperation, and economic stabilization, each with its own institutional history. This disaggregated approach follows Wolf's observation that, contrary to widespread expectations of water wars, states overwhelmingly prefer negotiated agreements over armed conflict in trans-boundary water disputes (Wolf, 1998), a pattern this article tests directly against the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan case.

The theoretical framework draws additionally on North's institutional theory, which conceptualizes institutions as humanly devised constraints that structure interaction and reduce uncertainty between actors (North, 1990), and on the argument of Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff (2002) that domestic political conditions, notably regime type and electoral accountability, shape the extent to which states enter into cooperative agreements, rather than the preferences of unitary state actors alone. Keohane and Nye's concept of complex interdependence further suggests that contemporary interstate relations increasingly rely on multiple channels of connection, economic, cultural, and institutional, rather than on military capability alone (Keohane & Nye, 1977), a pattern consistent with the multidimensional stabilization process examined in this article. Czechowska and colleagues' edited volume on strategic partnerships provides a useful conceptual bridge between the classification-oriented literature and the process-oriented approach adopted here, by showing that strategic partnerships constitute a flexible, non-binding middle-range category situated between ad hoc cooperation and formal alliance (Czechowska et al., 2019).

1.3. Research questions and objectives

This article asks how bilateral political stabilization was achieved in this particular case, and whether the mechanisms involved are specific to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan or potentially transferable to other bilateral pairs in the region.

The article pursues three sequential objectives. First, it disaggregates stabilization into discrete functional dimensions rather than treating it as a single undifferentiated outcome. Second, it tests whether geographic and historical similarity is sufficient to explain stabilization by comparing the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan case

against the less stabilized Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan pair. Third, it examines the domestic political costs that accompanied stabilization at the interstate level, since an account that focuses exclusively on interstate outcomes risks overstating the completeness of the stabilization process.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research design and case selection

The article employs a single case study design with an embedded comparison to Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan relations as a contrast case with a structurally similar risk profile but a different timing of border settlement.

The case selection follows a most-similar-systems logic: Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan share comparable starting conditions, a Soviet-drawn border running through densely populated agricultural valleys, overlapping ethnic enclaves, and trans-boundary water infrastructure inherited from a unified Soviet irrigation system, yet diverge on the dependent variable, the timing and institutional route of political stabilization. This design allows the analysis to hold several potentially confounding structural variables approximately constant while isolating the sequence of political and institutional choices that differentiate the two pairs.

2.2. Data sources

The empirical material consists of treaty texts and official statements on border delimitation and institution-building, as reported in the sources cited in this article, supplemented by reports from independent monitoring organizations on contested episodes and by published trade and growth statistics. Rather than relying primarily on political leaders' public statements as the main evidentiary basis, which is methodologically insufficient for institutional-level claims, the analysis privileges documentary and institutional evidence wherever available.

2.3. Operationalization of stabilization dimensions

Four stabilization dimensions are operationalized through the following indicators: for border delimitation, the completion status of demarcation and the frequency of recorded border incidents; for water-energy management, the existence and meeting frequency of joint water management bodies; for security cooperation, the density of coordinated counter-terrorism and border security arrangements; and for economic stabilization, the growth trajectory and structural composition of bilateral trade. Official statements are used only to corroborate, not to establish, the empirical claims derived from these indicators.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Border delimitation

The Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, running through the densely populated Fergana Valley, was identified as early as 1999-2000 as a site where local elite competition over nationalist discourse, rather than purely territorial disputes, drove periodic escalation (Megoran, 2004). The completion of delimitation by 2023 and the subsequent signing of the alliance treaty in 2026 represent the practical resolution of what had been, for over two decades, the most visible source of bilateral friction.

The sequencing of border delimitation is analytically significant: rather than being resolved in a single comprehensive settlement, the border was delimited incrementally, with the change in Uzbekistan's political leadership in 2016 identified by Saud as a turning point (critical juncture) for the country's broader regional economic engagement, serving as the catalyst that converted two decades of episodic negotiation into a sustained, institutionally supported process (Saud, 2018).

3.2. Water and energy management

The 2022 agreement on the Kempir-Abad reservoir illustrates both the stabilizing potential and the domestic political cost of trans-boundary water cooperation: while the agreement itself resolved a long-standing bilateral dispute, its implementation generated protests and the detention of several public figures in Kyrgyzstan (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

A Joint Water Management Commission, established in 2022 to administer the Kempir-Abad arrangement, had convened four sessions by 2024, the most recent in Andijan, indicating that the institutional mechanism survived the initial domestic political turbulence surrounding its creation. This resilience is itself an empirical finding of some significance: institutions created under politically contentious circumstances are not automatically rendered unstable by that contentiousness, provided they acquire a regular meeting cadence independent of the controversy that attended their founding.

3.3. Security cooperation

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are both members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, whose Council of Heads of State convened in Bishkek on 31 August-1 September 2026 to mark the organization's 25th anniversary (V Bishkeke nachalsya glavnyy den' sammita, 2026), about a month after the signing of the bilateral alliance treaty. Kyrgyzstan, but not Uzbekistan, also participates in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, whose Council of Foreign Ministers met in Cholpon-Ata on 30 June 2025 (Sadyr Zhaparov prinyal ministrov inostrannykh del, 2025). The security indicator used here is therefore limited to the documented ministerial and summit-level contacts cited above; no systematic data on operational bilateral counter-terrorism or border-security arrangements were available for this study.

3.4. Economic stabilization

Bilateral trade turnover exceeded 1.2 billion US dollars in 2025, growing 36.4 percent year on year (Tovarooborot mezhdu Kyrgyzstanom i Uzbekistanom, 2026), against the background of a 2024 growth forecast for Kyrgyzstan of approximately 9 percent (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development [EBRD], 2024). The composition of bilateral trade also shifted: the share of simple commodity exchange has declined in favor of joint production arrangements, exemplified by the Tulpar Motors automobile assembly plant established through cooperation between Kyrgyz and Uzbek companies.

3.5. Institutional architecture

The four stabilization dimensions examined above are not pursued through a single comprehensive institution but through a layered architecture of bilateral bodies, each with its own mandate and meeting cadence. The Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation, operating since 1996, provides the oldest institutional channel and meets annually, alternating between Tashkent and Bishkek. The Council of Heads of Border Regions brings together the governors of Uzbekistan's Andijan, Fergana, and Namangan provinces with their Kyrgyz counterparts in Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken. The Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Development Fund, established in 2021 with an initial capital of 50 million US dollars and a stated ambition to reach 200 million, constitutes the first permanent bilateral financing mechanism not subject to annual budgetary renegotiation.

Critically, none of these second-stage institutions were discontinued or replaced when the alliance treaty was signed in 2026; rather, the treaty consolidated them within a single overarching framework.

3.6. Domestic political costs

Across the four dimensions, interstate stabilization and domestic political stability did not necessarily move in tandem. In the Kempir-Abad case, the bilateral agreement, which exchanged a reservoir territory for a larger area of mountainous, water-poor land, resolved a long-standing interstate dispute, yet its domestic implementation generated sustained protest activity and the detention of several public figures in Kyrgyzstan (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

3.7. Comparison with Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan relations

Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan relations began from the same structural position as the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan pair: unresolved Soviet-era border delimitation, contested water infrastructure, and densely populated border districts (International Crisis Group, 2002). An armed conflict took place in September 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Negotiations resumed in December 2022, delimitation was completed in December 2024, and the presidents signed a state border treaty on 13 March 2025; on 31 March 2025 the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan signed an agreement on the junction point of the three state borders (Eurasian Research Institute, 2025). The Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan delimitation had been completed by 2023, so the two pairs settled their borders at different times.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Principal findings

The results indicate that stabilization of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan pair operated on four dimensions at once rather than through a single settlement, and that it rested on a layered set of bilateral bodies, each with its own mandate and meeting cadence. The consolidation of these bodies by the 2026 treaty rather than their replacement is consistent with North's (1990) account of institutional development as predominantly cumulative rather than substitutive, and distinguishes this case from relationships in which successive agreements replace their predecessors.

Two further patterns deserve interpretation. First, the bilateral alliance treaty was followed within about a month by an SCO summit in Bishkek, which may indicate that bilateral outcomes are subsequently presented at wider regional platforms rather than pursued in isolation from them; with a single case, this timing is suggestive rather than demonstrative, and Uzbekistan's non-membership in the CSTO limits the weight of CSTO-level contacts for the bilateral security relationship. Second, the shift in trade from commodity exchange toward joint production can be read as an indicator of economic stabilization that is analytically distinct from, though temporally correlated with, the political processes examined above.

4.2. Domestic political costs and institutional durability

The Kempir-Abad episode is consistent with the argument that domestic political conditions shape the depth of interstate cooperation (Mansfield et al., 2002), and it suggests that stabilization at the interstate level does not automatically translate into the absence of domestic political costs. The Joint Water Management Commission's survival after these protests indicates that institutions created under contentious circumstances need not be destabilized by that contentiousness once they acquire a regular meeting cadence.

One plausible reading, which this study cannot test directly, is that differences in decision-making structures produce asymmetric implementation friction: Uzbekistan's more centralized apparatus may afford greater predictability in implementing agreed commitments, while Kyrgyzstan's comparatively more competitive political environment may generate additional friction. This finding has a direct bearing on how stabilization outcomes should be interpreted. An analysis confined to the interstate level alone would record the Kempir-Abad agreement as an unambiguous stabilization success; incorporating the domestic political dimension reveals a more qualified picture, in which interstate stabilization was purchased, in part, at the cost of domestic political contestation in one of the two states. Future stabilization agreements that fail to anticipate this asymmetry risk generating comparable domestic friction.

4.3. Interpreting the comparison with Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan

Because the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border was settled by treaty in 2025, the comparison cannot support a claim of lasting divergence between the two pairs. What it supports is a claim about timing and sequencing: with structurally similar starting conditions, one pair completed border settlement and built a layered set of bilateral institutions earlier than the other. The Eurasian Research Institute (2025) notes that the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan settlement in turn enabled progress on the agreement on the junction point of the three countries' borders, which suggests that the two settlements were interdependent rather than independent. Whether the earlier Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan settlement and its institutional follow-through facilitated the later Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan one is a plausible hypothesis that this study does not test.

4.4. Implications for the study of post-Soviet regionalism

The findings carry implications that extend beyond the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan case to the broader study of post-Soviet regionalism. Much of the existing literature explains variation in regional integration outcomes through either structural factors, economic size, shared borders, resource complementarity, or external factors, the influence of great powers. The disaggregated, process-oriented analysis offered here suggests that these factors, while necessary, are insufficient without attention to the endogenous sequencing of institution-building itself: an identical set of structural preconditions can produce either alliance-level cooperation or persistent episodic engagement, depending on whether a specific sequence of institutional decisions was undertaken and sustained.

The Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan pairs function, in this respect, as something close to a comparative test: because the structural preconditions, shared border, shared water infrastructure, comparable demographic density along the frontier, were broadly similar in both pairs, the difference in the timing of settlement cannot be attributed primarily to structural variables. This strengthens the case for process-oriented, rather than purely structural, explanations of regional (de)institutionalization in the post-Soviet space.

4.5. Relation to earlier research

The stabilization function examined in this article complements Ernazarov's (2020) analysis of Uzbekistan's engagement with international non-governmental organizations, which similarly found that formal institutional engagement, rather than ad hoc diplomatic gestures, best predicts the durability of Uzbekistan's external relationships. It also resonates with Ernazarov's (2025) research on the 2024 mixed electoral system reform, which demonstrated that domestic institutional design choices in Uzbekistan have downstream consequences for the country's external relationships, a pattern consistent with the broader claim that domestic political conditions shape the depth of interstate cooperation (Mansfield et al., 2002).

4.6. Implications for policy and practice

Beyond its contribution to the academic literature, the four-dimension stabilization framework developed in this article has

practical relevance for regional policy coordination bodies operating in Central Asia. Regional organizations seeking to promote stabilization across multiple bilateral pairs simultaneously, rather than relying on organic replication of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan sequence, could draw on the dimension-specific indicators identified here, border delimitation completion rates, joint water body meeting frequency, security consultation density, and trade structure diversification, to monitor and benchmark stabilization progress across the region's various bilateral relationships in a comparable, standardized manner.

Such benchmarking would also help regional and international partners identify which bilateral pairs are approaching a potential critical juncture, of the kind identified in the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan case in 2016, and thus where external diplomatic or financial support might most productively be directed to help convert favorable but fragile openings into durable institutional commitments, rather than allowing them to dissipate as the earlier, pre-2016 Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan episodes repeatedly did.

The findings carry several practical implications for policymakers in both countries. First, institutionalizing an annual joint review of alliance treaty implementation at the level of foreign ministries would allow early detection of any drift from the stabilization trajectory documented here. Second, incorporating a structured public communication component into the practice of bilateral commissions, particularly for decisions affecting border populations, could reduce the recurrence of domestic political costs similar to those generated by the Kempir-Abad agreement. Third, formalizing institutional succession procedures within existing bilateral bodies, so that their functioning does not depend on the tenure of specific officials, would further reduce the risk of regression toward the less institutionalized patterns characteristic of the pre-2016 period.

4.7. Limitations

This study has several limitations that bear on the generalizability of its conclusions. First, the four-dimension stabilization framework is derived from and tested against a single case with an embedded comparison, and its applicability to other bilateral pairs beyond Central Asia remains to be established through further comparative work. Second, verifiable quantitative data on the internal distribution of benefits from large infrastructure projects remain limited, requiring partial reliance on official estimates provided by the parties themselves. Third, the stabilization achieved by 2026 should not be read as permanent or irreversible; the analysis captures a particular historical trajectory rather than a steady-state equilibrium, and future domestic political change in either country could, in principle, alter the trajectory described here. Fourth, several institutional and economic details (for example, the Development Fund's capital, the meeting cadence of bilateral commissions, and the Tulpar Motors plant) rely on official statements and press reports rather than on independent verification. Fifth, the contrast case had completed its border settlement by the time of writing, so the study cannot assess whether differences between the two pairs persist.

4.8. Directions for future research

Several avenues for future research follow directly from the limitations identified above. A systematic comparison extending the four-dimension framework to the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan bilateral pairs would help establish whether the stabilization sequence identified here constitutes a regional pattern or a case-specific outcome. Quantitative operationalization of the stabilization indicators proposed in this article, border incident frequency, joint commission meeting density, trade structure, and documented institutional survival, could support the construction of a bilateral stabilization index applicable beyond single case studies. Finally, further research might examine whether the domestic political costs documented in the Kempir-Abad episode generalize to other instances of water infrastructure renegotiation in the region, or whether they reflect contingencies specific to Kyrgyzstan's more competitive domestic political environment. A further question is whether the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan settlement and its institutional follow-through facilitated the later Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan settlement (Eurasian Research Institute, 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

This article set out to explain how bilateral political stabilization was achieved in Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan relations, and whether the underlying mechanisms are case-specific or potentially transferable. The analysis confirms that stabilization operated through four distinct but mutually reinforcing dimensions, border delimitation, water-energy management, security cooperation, and economic stabilization, rather than through a single comprehensive settlement. The comparison with the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan pair, which settled its border later, suggests that this outcome was not automatic given shared structural conditions, but followed a specific, datable sequence of political and institutional choices initiated in 2016 and consolidated through 2026.

The institutional architecture underpinning this stabilization, the Intergovernmental Commission, the Council of Border Regions, the Development Fund, and the Joint Water Commission, was not discarded when the alliance treaty was signed but consolidated within it, indicating a cumulative rather than substitutive pattern of institutional development. At the same time, the Kempir-Abad episode demonstrates that interstate stabilization can coexist with, and in part generate, domestic political contestation, a qualification that a purely interstate-level analysis would overlook.

Future research should examine whether the sequencing identified in this case, border resolution preceding deeper economic and security cooperation, holds as a general pattern across other bilateral pairs in Central Asia, and whether the domestic political cost asymmetry documented here generalizes beyond the specific institutional configurations of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

DECLARATIONS

Author contributions *CRediT*

Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethics approval

Not applicable. This study did not involve humans, animals or other regulated materials.

Informed consent

Not applicable.

Data availability statement

All data supporting the findings of this study are included in the article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Generative AI disclosure

Not used.

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