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EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF REGIONAL STABILITY IN CENTRAL ASIA: FROM GEOPOLITICAL BALANCING TO ADAPTIVE DIPLOMACY

This article refines the content and dynamics of the concept of “regional stability” as applied to Central Asia in 2001–2025. It shows that, within regional discourse and foreign-policy practice, there has been a shift from interpretations of stability as the outcome of geopolitical balancing and external security guarantees toward an understanding of stability as a managed process sustained by institutions of cooperation and “adaptive diplomacy.” Adaptive diplomacy is defined here as a set of instruments and procedures of foreign-policy governance that enables the early adjustment of priorities, coalitions, and international regimes to a changing configuration of threats and opportunities. Methodologically, the study relies on comparative-historical analysis and document analysis, as well as the author’s operationalization of adaptive diplomacy through eight indicators: institutional connectivity, multi-vector policy, proactiveness, cross-border interaction, strategic communications, cultural diplomacy, and anti-crisis adaptability. A periodization of 2001–2025 is proposed, and the dominant stabilization mechanisms at each stage are compared. The practical conclusion is that the resilience of regional stability is determined less by “hard” balances than by the quality of institutional coordination, the feasibility of project implementation, and states’ capacity to manage change in advance.

Keywords: Central Asia, regional stability, adaptive diplomacy, institutional connectivity, multi-vector policy, cross-border interaction, strategic communications, cultural diplomacy, anti-crisis adaptability, external actors.

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Орталық Азиядағы өңірлік тұрақтылық тұжырымдамасының эволюциясы: геосаяси теңгерімдеуден бейімделмелі дипломатияға дейін

Бұл мақала 2001–2025 жылдар аралығында Орталық Азияға қатысты «өңірлік тұрақтылық» ұғымының мазмұны мен динамикасын нақтылайды. Өңірлік дискурс пен сыртқы саясат тәжірибесінде тұрақтылықты геосаяси теңгерім мен сыртқы қауіпсіздік кепілдіктерінің нәтижесі ретінде түсіндіруден, тұрақтылықты ынтымақтастық институттары мен «бейімделмелі дипломатия» қолдайтын басқарылатын үдеріс ретінде ұғынуға қарай бетбұрыс болғаны көрсетіледі. Бейімделмелі дипломатия бұл жерде қауіп-қатерлер мен мүмкіндіктер конфигурациясы өзгерген жағдайда басымдықтарды, коалицияларды және халықаралық режимдерді алдын ала қайта баптауға мүмкіндік беретін сыртқы саяси басқарудың құралдары мен рәсімдерінің жиынтығы ретінде анықталады. Әдіснамалық тұрғыдан зерттеу салыстырмалы-тарихи талдау мен құжаттарды талдауға, сондай-ақ автордың бейімделмелі дипломатияны сегіз индикатор арқылы операциялауына сүйенеді: институционалдық байланыстылық, көпвекторлы саясат, бастамашылдық, шекарааралық өзара іс-қимыл, стратегиялық коммуникациялар, мәдени дипломатия және дағдарысқа қарсы бейімделгіштік. 2001–2025 жылдарға кезеңдеу ұсынылып, әр кезеңдегі тұрақтандырудың басым тетіктері салыстырылады. Практикалық қорытынды: өңірлік тұрақтылықтың орнықтылығы «қатаң» теңгерімдерден гөрі институционалдық үйлестіру сапасына, жобаларды іске асырудың жүзеге асырмалылығына және мемлекеттердің өзгерістерді алдын ала басқару қабілетіне көбірек тәуелді.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, өңірлік тұрақтылық, бейімделмелі дипломатия, институционалдық байланыстылық, көпвекторлы саясат, шекарааралық өзара іс-қимыл, стратегиялық коммуникациялар, мәдени дипломатия, дағдарысқа қарсы бейімделгіштік, сыртқы акторлар.

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Эволюция концепта региональной стабильности в Центральной Азии: от геополитического баланса к дипломатии адаптации

Статья уточняет содержание и динамику понятия «региональная стабильность» применительно к Центральной Азии в 2001–2025 гг. Показано, что в региональном дискурсе и практиках внешней политики происходит сдвиг от трактовки стабильности как результата геополитического баланса и внешних гарантий безопасности к пониманию стабильности как управляемого процесса, поддерживаемого институтами сотрудничества и «дипломатией адаптации». Под «дипломатией адаптации» понимается совокупность инструментов и процедур внешнеполитического управления, обеспечивающих раннюю настройку приоритетов, коалиций и международных режимов под меняющуюся конфигурацию угроз и возможностей. Методологически исследование опирается на сравнительно-исторический анализ и анализ документов, а также на авторскую операционализацию дипломатии адаптации через 8 индикаторов: институциональная связанность, многовекторность, инициативность, приграничное взаимодействие, стратегические коммуникации, культурная дипломатия, антикризисная адаптивность. Предложена периодизация 2001–2025 гг. и сопоставлены доминирующие механизмы стабилизации на каждом этапе. Практический вывод состоит в том, что устойчивость региональной стабильности определяется не столько «жесткими» балансами, сколько качеством координации институтов, проектной реализуемостью и способностью государств управлять изменениями заранее.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, региональная стабильность, дипломатия адаптации, институциональная связанность, многовекторность, приграничное взаимодействие, стратегические коммуникации, культурная дипломатия, антикризисная адаптивность, внешние акторы.

Introduction

The issue of regional stability in Central Asia over the past two decades has become a sustained subject of scholarly and applied discussions. The region simultaneously demonstrates the accumulation of institutions of interstate interaction and the persistence of “long-term” sources of instability: border disputes, water and energy imbalances, threats of radicalization, asymmetries in socio-economic development, and competition among external actors. Under these conditions, the term “stability” gradually ceases to signify merely the absence of conflict; it is increasingly employed as a governance category, implying procedures of prevention, coordination, and adaptation.

The scientific problem lies in the fact that a significant portion of research describes stability either as the result of the balance of power and external security guarantees, or as a derivative of national security policies. At the same time, the evolution of the very concept of stability and the connection of this evolution with changes in the diplomatic practices of the states of the region remain insufficiently elucidated. Particularly evident is the deficit of operationalized categories that would allow for comparisons across periods and the identification of reproducible mechanisms for maintaining stability.

The aim of the article is to trace the evolution of the concept of regional stability in Central Asia in 2001-2025 and to demonstrate how “adaptation diplomacy” is formed and consolidated in regional practice as an instrument for maintaining stability under conditions of polycentricity.

The objectives are:

- to clarify the conceptual framework and theoretical foundations;
- to propose an operationalization of adaptation diplomacy and a set of indicators;
- to identify and substantiate the stages of the period 2001-2025;
- to compare stabilization instruments across periods and across groups of external actors;
- to outline limitations and practical implications for foreign policy planning.

Research questions:

- which semantic components dominated interpretations of regional stability at different stages of 2001-2025;
- which diplomatic mechanisms ensured the reproducibility of stability in each period;
- whether “adaptation diplomacy” can be operationalized as a comparable set of practices and how it differs from traditional models of balancing and alliance policy.

Theoretical, Methodological and Operationalization of «Adaptation Diplomacy»

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, stability in the article is interpreted not as a “set of spheres,” but as a dynamic equilibrium sustained by governance decisions and diplomatic practices under conditions of high uncertainty. Therefore, the analytical emphasis shifts from enumerating areas to the mechanisms of the reproduction of stability – coordination and harmonization of rules, reduction of transaction costs, management of perceptions (legitimation/trust), and the institutional consolidation of norms in multilateral formats.

The empirical basis of the study includes scholarly publications and analytical materials from 2001–2025 devoted to regional stability in Central Asia, the foreign policy and diplomatic practices of the states of the region, as well as mechanisms of multilateral cooperation. The methods employed include comparative-historical analysis, document analysis, and qualitative comparison across periods. As an auxiliary procedure, an element of content analysis is utilized: the identification of recurring semantic markers (threat/challenge; stability/security; integration/cooperation; multi-vectorism/balance; adaptation/renewal of instruments).

“Adaptation diplomacy” is understood as an institutionally consolidated and reproducible set of foreign policy practices aimed at the early adjustment of national diplomacy to a changing environment. Its key feature is the transition from reactive behavior to the management of change: the state proactively restructures coalitions, agendas, and instruments in order to minimize risks and capitalize on opportunities. This logic is manifested in the Tajik discourse of sustainable development and security, where foreign policy is viewed as a resource for strengthening regional stability through initiatives, multilateral formats, and project-based solutions (Salimov, 2025).

To impart a measurable character to the category, an operationalization is proposed through eight indicators identified on the basis of documentary evidence and recurring semantic markers (see Table 1 below): institutional connectivity; multi-vectorism; proactiveness; project orientation; cross-border interaction; information support (strategic communications); cultural diplomacy; anti-crisis adaptability. The indicators do not claim to provide an exhaustive “quantification” of diplomacy, but they establish a comparable analytical framework across specific periods.

Table 1
Operationalization of Adaptation Diplomacy: Components and Indicators

Component of Adaptation Diplomacy	Operational Indicator (example of identification)	Significance for Regional Stability
Institutional connectivity	participation/activity in formats; initiation of decisions	reduction of uncertainty; channels of coordination
Multi-vectorism	diversification of partnerships without abandoning core obligations	containment of dependency; maneuvering
Proactiveness	proposal of initiatives (water, development, security)	agenda-setting; norm creation
Project orientation	implementation of programs (infrastructure, humanitarian projects, education)	translation of discourse into practice
Cross-border interaction	de-escalation and cooperation at borders; infrastructure	conflict prevention; trust
Information support	strategic communications; support of initiatives and crises; engagement with media and digital platforms	legitimacy and sustainability of policy; countering disinformation
Cultural diplomacy	humanitarian ties; image; promotion of heritage	“long-term” foundations of trust
Anti-crisis adaptability	reconfiguration of priorities in response to new threats	reduction of decision-making lag

Note: the indicators are used as qualitative benchmarks for comparing the periods 2001-2025; if necessary, they can be supplemented with quantitative metrics (frequency of markers in the corpus of documents, indicators of project implementation, network analysis of coalitions, etc.)

The comparison procedure includes three steps: (a) identification of “nodal” events and documents for each stage; (b) coding the intensity of indicators on a 0–2 scale (0 – absent; 1 – episodic; 2 – systemic), which makes it possible to distinguish one-time manifestations from sustainable mechanisms of stabilization; (c) verification of interpretations through regional control based on materials from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan in order to avoid narrowly tying conclusions to a single national case.

Literature review

The literature review on the given topic encompasses a sufficiently broad body of scholarship; however, the present study focuses on a specific and narrower aspect necessary for achieving its objectives. Theoretically, the analysis of regional stability draws upon complementary traditions. The first is associated with the theory of regional security complexes, in which security is understood as the result of the interdependence of threats and practices within a region; external actors influence the region through “penetration” and the formation of interaction regimes. This perspective makes it possible to distinguish between internal and external sources of stability and to register the density of interstate ties as a condition for the manageability of risks (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 62-67).

The second tradition is represented by the Russian school of international relations, in which stability is interpreted as dynamic controllability: a system is considered stable when it is able to maintain the basic rules of interaction and correct deviations without destroying the whole. It is essential that maintaining the status quo by itself does not guarantee sustainability if the mechanisms of self-correction and feedback are not developed (Bogaturov, 1997).

Regional studies of Central Asia generally shift the focus to institutional and diplomatic stabilization mechanisms. It is emphasized that stability is supported by a combination of external and internal tools, and increased polycentricity increases the value of flexible multi-vector approach (Cooley, 2012).

An important empirical layer is formed by studies analyzing Tajikistan’s policy of maintaining regional stability under conditions of the formation of a polycentric world, emphasizing the necessity of combining national security interests with participation in multilateral formats and with the maintenance of sustainable lines of regional interaction (Maitdinova, 2022).

Regional studies of Kazakhstan reinforce the institutional and socio-economic perspective: stability is described as a function of the manageability of threats and the quality of rules of cooperation, including the role of multilateral organizations as a “framework” of coordination, as well as the linkage of security with socio-economic drivers (resource, infrastructural, and governance imbalances) (Delovarova et al., 2023; Usserova et al., 2025; Akkozina & Darkenov, 2024; Gubaidullina, 2011; Chukubaev & Kydyrbekova, 2012). Uzbek literature emphasizes the “production of stability” through the pragmatization of foreign policy, good neighborliness, and initiative-based formats of cooperation, linking security with development and project-based interdependence (Khaidaraliev, 2023). Kyrgyz researchers, in turn, associate the sustainability of the regional order with the quality of regional cooperation (political, economic, and cultural-humanitarian), where the reproduction of trust and predictability of interactions becomes key (Samadova & Chynykeeva, 2022).

Discussion and results

Periodization of the evolution of regional stability in Central Asia (2001-2025)

The periodization of 2001-2025 is based on a combination of three factors: (a) the change in the external configuration of security after 2001 and the institutionalization of new formats of cooperation; (b) the transformation of the role of external actors and the growing competitiveness of their strategies; (c) the evolution of the internal agendas of the countries of the region from restoration and basic security to project models of development and risk management.

To reinforce the substantiation of stage boundaries, threshold markers indicating shifts in the dominant stabilization mechanism are additionally employed:

- the 2005/2006 boundary: transition from the predominance of externally guaranteed security to the expansion of agendas and the legal framework of multilateral cooperation;

- the 2010/2011 boundary: increased emphasis on risk governance and conflict prevention (growth of social turbulence and transboundary threats, the need for sustainable coordination procedures);

- the 2016/2017 boundary: expansion of project-based logic and proactive diplomacy, institutionalization of regional consultations, and orientation toward early adjustment of the agenda to a changing external environment.

Table 2
Periodization of the evolution of regional stability in Central Asia (2001-2025)

Period	Dominant Interpretation of Stability	Key Stabilization Mechanisms	Prevailing Diplomatic Practices
2001–2005	Stability as externally guaranteed security and threat control	Coalition counterterrorism; formation of institutions	Allied and institutional integration; restorative diplomacy
2006–2010	Stability as institutionalized cooperation	Strengthening of multilateral regimes; alignment of agendas	Multilateral project-based engagement; expansion of coordination channels
2011–2016	Stability as risk and conflict governance	De-escalation; border and resource mechanisms; prevention of radicalization	Constraining multi-vectorism; preventive diplomacy
2017-2025	Stability as managed change (“diplomacy of adaptation”)	Diversification of partnerships; “soft” instruments; strategic communications	Early agenda and coalition alignment; proactive diplomacy

Note. Summarized text of the above section. The table compiled by author

Stabilization mechanisms by stages

The 2001-2005 period is characterized by the predominance of “hard” security instruments and the expectation that stabilization would be achieved through external guarantees and threat control. The region came into the focus of the global counterterrorism agenda, which intensified the presence of external actors and increased the significance of coercive mechanisms. In parallel, regional institutions were formalized, primarily the SCO, established in June 2001 by six states, including the Republic of Tajikistan (Salimov & Nabieva, 2024).

Regional review indicates that already at this early stage, the Kazakhstani research tradition identified the linkage between security and socio-economic threats and governance deficits, thereby broadening the understanding of stability beyond external guarantees (Gubaidullina, 2011).

However, even during this period, the limitations of a stabilization model built predominantly on external guarantees became apparent. The policies of external centers of power were heterogeneous, while the interests of the regional states required the preservation of autonomy and consideration of socio-economic factors. Competing approaches of Russia and the United States toward engagement with the countries of Central Asia, including differences in objectives and instruments, generated an additional layer of uncertainty (Usenov, 2023).

The 2006-2010 stage is associated with the strengthening of institutionalized cooperation. There is a growing understanding in regional discourse that stability cannot be reduced to threat control; the agenda of cooperation within multilateral organizations is expanding, and the importance of

humanitarian and socio-economic components is increasing. Research on the SCO’s activities highlights its versatility and the existence of a regulatory framework, which makes it possible to consider the organization as a mechanism for maintaining peace and stability.

Against the backdrop of the institutionalization of multilateralism, Kazakhstani scholarship interprets regionalization as a practical mechanism of predictability: stability is associated with the reproducibility of rules and procedures of cooperation, as well as with the formation of sustainable regimes of interaction (Chukubaev & Kydyrbekova, 2012), (Delovarova et al., 2023), (Usserova et al., 2025).

The deepening of multilateralism was accompanied by the growth of project-based logic. Stability is increasingly associated with the reproducibility of institutional procedures and the presence of concrete cooperation programs. As regional reviews of multilateral organizations demonstrate, the institutional environment becomes one of the “frameworks” of stability, as it establishes the distribution of responsibility and channels of coordination.

The 2011-2016 stage is characterized by increasing attention to risk management and conflict management. Threats of radicalization, the complication of the situation around Afghanistan, as well as the aggravation of certain border and resource issues increase the demand for conflict prevention mechanisms. In this logic, cross-border cooperation acts as a combination of security measures and economic interconnectedness: stability at borders requires both institutional channels, infrastructure, and coordinated interaction practices (Salimov & Gulbekova, 2024).

In Kyrgyz scholarship, risk governance is interpreted through the quality of regional cooperation: without sustainable channels of coordination, political and economic contradictions rapidly acquire a destabilizing character, which increases the value of confidence-building measures and predictability of interactions (Samadova & Chynykeeva, 2022).

The foreign policy logic of the regional states during this period shifted toward cautious multivectorism. Maintaining stability required avoiding rigid alignment with a single center of power while simultaneously observing basic commitments and preserving predictability. Such a balance of interests is regarded as a necessary condition for behavior under conditions of instability in the external environment.

The 2017–2025 period reflects a transition to a framework of managed change, in which stability is sustained through a “diplomacy of adaptation.” Since the late 2010s, competition among the strategies of external actors in Central Asia has intensified, increasing the cost of managing regional processes. Research identifies competition among the strategies of Russia, China, the United States, and the EU, as well as differences in their instrumental toolkits, alongside a shared aspiration to consolidate presence through institutions and projects (Salimov, 2025).

In Uzbek scholarship of the late 2010s and early 2020s, stability is linked to the formation of a “belt of good-neighborliness” and proactive diplomacy, in which security is maintained through economic interdependence and project-based formats of cooperation (Khaydaraliyev, 2023).

Intra-regional diplomacy during this period acquires a more pronounced adaptive character. The

normalization and expansion of intergovernmental contacts, including the Tajik–Uzbek direction, functions as a mechanism for reducing conflict and strengthening trust, and thus as an element of regional stability.

In a polycentric world, according to researchers’ assessments, stability increasingly depends on the combination of participation in multilateral formats and the promotion of sustainable development initiatives, which shape the region’s “positive” agenda (Maitdinova, 2022). The transition to a diplomacy of adaptation is also manifested in the expansion of the set of “soft” instruments. The informational support of foreign policy is considered part of strategic planning, enabling the promotion of initiatives, the protection of national interests, and the countering of disinformation in the digital sphere.

Simultaneously, attention is increasing to the transformation of borders as an institution of interaction under conditions of post-globalization. This is important for understanding stability, since borders are increasingly transforming from a “line of division” into “regimes” of cooperation or conflict, depending on political and economic instruments of governance (Megoran, 2017).

Comparative Framework of External Actors and the “Reciprocal Adaptation” of the Region’s States

A comparative analysis is appropriately conducted through distinguishing between “external” models of stabilization (proposed by external actors) and the “reciprocal adaptation” of the region’s states, which combine external proposals in accordance with their own priorities and constraints. Below is an analytical matrix of the typical goals and instruments of the key external actors.

External Actor	Objectives in the Region (generalized)	Preferred Instruments	Risks / Constraints for Stability
Russia	Preservation of security and allied infrastructure; prevention of destabilization	Military-political mechanisms; integration formats; mediation	Risk of “security without development”; competition with alternative projects
China	Security of western borders; economic connectivity; infrastructure corridors	Investments; infrastructure projects; economic diplomacy	Asymmetries of dependence; social sensitivity to projects
United States	Counterterrorism agenda; transit; partnerships outside Eurasian blocs Assistance programs;	political-military formats; values-based diplomacy	Instability of engagement; politicization of the agenda
European Union	Normative cooperation; sustainable development; “soft” security	Technical assistance; educational and humanitarian projects	Limited resources and influence; weak project coherence

Note. Synthesized by the authors based on materials on the competition of external strategies (Salimov, 2025) and a comparative analysis of Russian-American dynamics (Usenov, 2023)

Prospects and Research Agenda for 2026–2035

Over the 5–10-year horizon, research on regional stability in Central Asia is advisable to shift from descriptive frameworks toward testable risk management models and comparable indicators. The following priority directions are proposed:

- Development of comparable indicators of regional stability that integrate security, development, and institutional connectivity;
- Measurement of the effectiveness of adaptation diplomacy through the dynamics of initiatives, projects, and coordination formats across sectors;
- Analysis of border transformations as interaction institutions in the context of post-globalization;
- Study of information threats and strategic communications as factors in the legitimacy of foreign policy;
- comparative analysis of the competition of external actors, taking into account project portfolios and their impact on the connectivity of the region;
- assessment of the role of cultural diplomacy as a mechanism of trust and conflict prevention;
- detailed analysis of multilateral organizations as an infrastructure of stability

Conclusion

In 2001-2025, the concept of regional stability in Central Asia underwent a noticeable evolution: from the concept of stability as a result of external guarantees and threat control to the understanding of stability as a manageable process depending on institutions of cooperation, project discipline and the

quality of diplomatic instruments. The shift reflects the increasing complexity of the regional environment, the growing competitiveness of external actors, and the increasing importance of internal manageability factors.

The category of “diplomacy of adaptation,” introduced and operationalized in the article, makes it possible to describe a new logic of stabilization: the state seeks not merely to respond to crises, but to recalibrate foreign policy priorities and instruments in advance. This enhances the reproducibility of regional stability, as it reduces the effect of delayed decision-making and increases institutional interconnectedness.

The scientific contribution of the study consists of: (1) proposing a periodization of 2001-2025 that links changes in the concept of stability with transformations in diplomatic practices; (2) introducing and operationalizing the category of diplomacy of adaptation as an instrument for maintaining stability; (3) constructing a comparative matrix of external actors and demonstrating the role of the region’s states’ “reciprocal adaptation.”

The practical conclusion is that the resilience of regional stability is determined not only by balances of power, but primarily by the capacity of institutions and diplomacy to “manage change in advance” through project-based solutions, the coherence of formats, and strategic communications. For the states of Central Asia, the coming decade will become a period in which the cost of delayed reactions will increase, and the value of early risk governance will become a key criterion of successful foreign policy.

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