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RECONCEPTUALIZING REGIONALISM: GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS AND STRATEGIC REALIGNMENTS IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract: *In recent decades, the international order has undergone profound transformation driven by the diffusion of power, the erosion of Western dominance, and the resurgence of regional and subregional cooperation frameworks. The concept of regionalism, once primarily associated with economic integration and institutional cooperation, is now being redefined as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing political, security, cultural, and civilizational dimensions.*

This article explores the reconceptualization of regionalism within the context of shifting geopolitical realities in Central Asia and the Global South. It examines how emerging powers such as China, India, Turkey, and the Gulf states, as well as regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), BRICS, and ASEAN, are reshaping the strategic landscape of the developing world. The study argues that the post-liberal order has ushered in a "new regionalism" characterized by overlapping networks of economic corridors, security partnerships, and identity-based cooperation. Drawing on a qualitative review of scholarly literature and policy documents, the article highlights the implications of this transformation for global governance, multipolarity, and the reconfiguration of international hierarchies.

Key words: *regionalism, Central Asia, Global South, multipolarity, geopolitics, Belt and Road Initiative, BRICS, SCO.*

The twenty-first century has witnessed a decisive shift in the global distribution of power. The unipolar moment that followed the end of the Cold War has gradually given way to a more complex, polycentric world order, where regional powers and non-Western coalitions play increasingly prominent roles. This transition has prompted scholars and policymakers to revisit traditional notions of regionalism and integration, exploring how they evolve amid global uncertainty and systemic change.

In its classical understanding, regionalism referred to the institutionalized cooperation among neighboring states, typically centered on

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trade liberalization, economic integration, and collective security. Yet, the "new regionalism" of the post-Cold War era transcends these functionalist objectives. It incorporates transnational linkages, soft power instruments, and non-Western epistemologies that redefine how regions interact with global structures. As regions emerge not only as economic blocs but also as geopolitical and cultural entities, regionalism becomes a key arena of contestation in world politics.

Central Asia and the Global South offer compelling case studies for analyzing this transformation. Both regions occupy pivotal positions in the reconfiguration of global power. Central Asia—situated at the crossroads of Eurasia—has re-emerged as a strategic heartland due to its natural resources, connectivity potential, and proximity to major powers such as Russia, China, and India. The Global South, encompassing Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia, meanwhile, has become the epicenter of economic dynamism and political experimentation. Collectively, these regions illustrate how the global order is being reshaped from the peripheries, not just the centers of power.

Moreover, the rise of initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's Connect Central Asia Policy, and Turkey's Middle Corridor Strategy underscore a growing emphasis on regional connectivity as a geopolitical instrument. Such projects illustrate a new mode of "infrastructural geopolitics," where roads, pipelines, and digital corridors become tools for influence and integration. At the same time, organizations such as the SCO, EAEU, and BRICS provide institutional frameworks for non-Western cooperation that challenge the normative hegemony of Western-led institutions like NATO and the EU.

The need to reconceptualize regionalism thus stems from the inadequacy of existing theories to explain the plural, overlapping, and often hybrid forms of cooperation emerging across the Global South. Traditional realist and liberal paradigms—rooted in Western experiences—fail to capture the complexity of regional dynamics in Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America. In response, scholars have begun to develop post-Western and decolonial approaches to regionalism, emphasizing diversity, autonomy, and mutual recognition as foundations for cooperation.

This article aims to contribute to that growing body of scholarship by examining how geopolitical shifts and strategic realignments in Central Asia and the Global South necessitate a reconceptualization of regionalism. The following sections discuss the theoretical evolution of regionalism, analyze its manifestations in Central Asia and the Global South, and assess its implications for the emerging multipolar world order.

The concept of regionalism has long occupied a central place in international relations theory, reflecting the recurring tension between global integration and regional autonomy. Early discussions of

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regionalism emerged in the aftermath of World War II, when regional cooperation was promoted as a mechanism for peacebuilding and economic recovery. Institutions such as the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Organization of American States (OAS) embodied what scholars later termed classical or old regionalism.

Classical regionalism was largely state-centric, designed to foster intergovernmental cooperation within bounded geographical spaces. It was underpinned by liberal functionalism, which held that economic interdependence would lead to political stability and peace (Haas, 1958). The assumption was that regional economic integration, achieved through trade liberalization and common markets, would gradually spill over into political unity. The European model thus became the paradigmatic example of regionalism for much of the twentieth century.

However, this Eurocentric conceptualization proved insufficient to explain the diversity of regional processes outside Europe. In Latin America, Africa, and Asia, regional initiatives were often shaped by postcolonial conditions, developmental goals, and security imperatives rather than by market integration alone. These distinct trajectories gave rise to what scholars began to call new regionalism in the 1990s—a phenomenon associated with globalization, transnational networks, and non-state actors. The New Regionalism Approach (NRA), articulated by scholars such as Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, marked a conceptual turning point. It shifted attention from formal institutions to processes and actors that shape regional cooperation in a globalized world. Unlike the earlier functionalist and neoliberal institutionalist models, the NRA viewed regionalism as a multidimensional and open-ended process, influenced by both internal dynamics and global transformations.

Hettne defined a region as a "spatially coherent unit" whose boundaries are socially constructed through political, economic, and cultural interaction. Thus, regionalism is not only about geography but also about identity formation and political agency. New regionalism embraces the idea of "regionness" — the degree to which a region becomes an actor with collective goals and institutions. This approach also recognizes the interplay between global and regional forces, suggesting that regionalization can occur within globalization, not in opposition to it.

The NRA framework provides several analytical advantages:

–It incorporates non-state actors, including businesses, NGOs, and epistemic communities.

–It acknowledges asymmetric power relations within regions.

–It situates regions within a multi-level governance structure that connects local, regional, and global arenas.

This multidimensionality makes the NRA particularly relevant for

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understanding contemporary transformations in the Global South, where regionalism often emerges as a hybrid of state-led and society-driven initiatives.

Despite its inclusivity, the New Regionalism Approach still reflected certain Eurocentric assumptions about modernization and integration. In response, scholars from the Global South have advanced post-Western and critical regionalism perspectives, emphasizing pluralism, decoloniality, and normative diversity.

Amitav Acharya's concept of "comparative regionalism" challenges the dominance of the European experience as the model for all regions. He argues that regionalism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America must be understood through local contexts, historical legacies, and indigenous knowledge systems (Acharya, 2016). Similarly, critical regionalism draws on constructivist and postcolonial theories to highlight how regions are not just physical spaces but also discursive constructs shaped by narratives of belonging and exclusion (Börzel & Risse, 2016).

These approaches reframe regionalism as a site of contestation where global hierarchies are negotiated. Rather than passive recipients of globalization, regions become producers of order and agents of transformation. This insight is crucial for understanding the re-emergence of Central Asia and the Global South as dynamic arenas of geopolitical experimentation.

The twenty-first century has seen the consolidation of a multipolar world, in which multiple centers of power—such as China, Russia, India, and the European Union—coexist and compete. Within this environment, regionalism serves as both a strategy and a shield: a means to project influence and a mechanism to safeguard sovereignty.

In this context, strategic regionalism—a variant of new regionalism—emphasizes the geopolitical function of regional cooperation. It entails forming alliances, security pacts, and economic corridors that enhance a region's bargaining power in global affairs. For instance, the formation of BRICS and the expansion of the SCO illustrate how non-Western powers use regional frameworks to balance Western dominance and promote alternative norms of governance.

Moreover, the current phase of regionalism is deeply intertwined with infrastructure-led connectivity. Initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Trans-African Highway Network symbolize a shift from institutional regionalism to spatial and infrastructural forms of integration. These projects extend beyond borders, linking continents through trade routes, energy corridors, and digital infrastructure, thus blurring the line between regional and global geopolitics (Summers, 2016). In summary, the evolution of regionalism from its classical to contemporary forms reflects a profound transformation in global political economy. While classical

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regionalism was hierarchical, state-centric, and economically functional, contemporary regionalism is heterarchical, multi-actor, and normatively pluralistic. It accommodates diverse pathways of cooperation and resists universalist models imposed by global powers.

For analytical purposes, this study adopts a hybrid framework that combines insights from the New Regionalism Approach, critical regionalism, and strategic geopolitics. This synthesis allows for a nuanced understanding of how regionalism operates in non-Western contexts such as Central Asia and the Global South—where economic integration, political identity, and geopolitical competition intersect. The concept of regionalism has evolved profoundly over the past seven decades, reflecting the transformation of global political and economic structures. Initially conceptualized in the aftermath of World War II, regionalism emerged as a mechanism for maintaining peace, fostering economic cooperation, and creating shared institutional frameworks among geographically proximate states. However, the trajectory of regionalism has never been linear. It has oscillated between periods of enthusiasm and skepticism, expansion and decline, depending on the broader international environment and the shifting nature of global power relations. Classical regionalism, rooted in the post–World War II order, was largely shaped by Western experiences of integration — particularly the European project. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC, 1951) and later the European Economic Community provided a model for other regions, representing regionalism as a functional, economic, and institutional process that could mitigate conflict and enhance prosperity (Haas, 1958; Deutsch, 1957). Under this paradigm, regional integration was viewed as a stepping stone toward global governance, a means to transcend nationalism through interdependence.

The classical approach was underpinned by liberal institutionalism and functionalism, emphasizing the role of institutions and economic interdependence in reducing conflict. Theorists such as Ernst Haas and Karl Deutsch posited that states could gradually transfer sovereignty to supranational bodies, generating a "spillover effect" in which cooperation in one sector would lead to integration in others. Yet this model was deeply Eurocentric, grounded in the political and economic context of postwar Western Europe — stable democracies, shared norms, and high levels of industrialization — conditions rarely mirrored elsewhere in the world.

In parallel, realist scholars such as Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz (1979) remained skeptical of regionalism's transformative potential, viewing it as an extension of power politics. For realists, regions were arenas of competition where dominant powers sought to maintain influence rather than create egalitarian

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partnerships. This realist critique laid the foundation for understanding regionalism as a geopolitical instrument rather than merely an economic project.

The end of the Cold War ushered in what scholars termed new regionalism — a multidimensional process that differed fundamentally from its classical counterpart (Hettne, 1994; Söderbaum, 2004). Unlike the state-centric and institution-heavy models of classical regionalism, new regionalism was shaped by the forces of globalization, transnational networks, and non-state actors. It emphasized flexibility, informality, and hybridity, blurring the boundaries between domestic and international politics.

The "new" aspect of regionalism was not simply temporal but conceptual. It reflected a shift from top-down institutional integration toward bottom-up, multidimensional cooperation. In this view, regions were not pre-given entities but socially constructed spaces, defined by shared identities, historical ties, and overlapping interests. The analytical focus thus moved from formal organizations to broader patterns of interaction that included trade networks, migration flows, cultural exchanges, and security partnerships.

Globalization played an ambivalent role in this evolution. On the one hand, it created unprecedented opportunities for interconnectivity; on the other, it provoked new insecurities and dependencies that spurred regional responses. As global governance structures proved increasingly incapable of managing economic crises, pandemics, and environmental challenges, regional frameworks emerged as more adaptable and context-specific mechanisms of collective action (Acharya, 2014). This flexibility allowed regions such as Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa to develop indigenous approaches to cooperation, independent of Western blueprints.

Despite its pluralism, the literature on regionalism remained long dominated by Western epistemologies. Theories derived from the European experience were often applied uncritically to the Global South, overlooking historical asymmetries, colonial legacies, and power imbalances. Postcolonial and decolonial scholars have since challenged this bias, arguing that regionalism in the Global South cannot be understood through the same analytical lenses used for the European Union .

Amitav Acharya's concept of "regional worlds" (2016) is particularly instructive in this regard. It suggests that each region develops its own logic of order, rooted in distinctive cultural, political, and civilizational traditions. For example, ASEAN's "way" of consensus and non-interference differs fundamentally from the EU's supranationalism, while African regionalism prioritizes solidarity and postcolonial autonomy over market liberalization. These examples highlight the necessity of pluralizing the concept of regionalism and recognizing that it is not

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a universal, one-size-fits-all phenomenon but a diverse set of practices embedded in specific historical and social contexts.

From this perspective, regionalism in the Global South can be viewed as an act of epistemic resistance — a form of reclaiming agency in global politics. It provides a platform for states historically marginalized by Western institutions to articulate alternative visions of cooperation and development. In Central Asia, for instance, regional identity and cooperation are being reconstructed through the lens of post-Soviet independence, traditional connectivity, and shared security concerns, rather than through imitation of Western institutional models.

While the theoretical discourse on regionalism 2has expanded, recent geopolitical developments underscore its instrumental dimension. In the era of resurgent great-power competition, regionalism has re-emerged as a strategic arena where global powers project influence and contest norms. Initiatives such as China's Belt and Road, Russia's EAEU, and the U.S.-backed Indo-Pacific Strategy all employ regional frameworks to advance geopolitical objectives under the guise of connectivity and cooperation.

This fusion of regionalism and geopolitics complicates the normative distinction between cooperation and competition. As Buzan and Wæver (2003) note, regions can function simultaneously as security complexes — spaces of shared vulnerabilities — and as arenas of rivalry. Thus, regionalism is no longer a purely integrative project but a multidimensional process shaped by both internal dynamics and external interventions.

Moreover, the intersection of regionalism with issues such as climate change, digital transformation, and resource security further broadens its analytical scope. Scholars increasingly view regionalism not only as a political phenomenon but as a governance mechanism for addressing transboundary challenges that global institutions struggle to manage. This multidimensionality gives rise to what Söderbaum (2016) calls "complex regionalism" — a web of overlapping, often competing arrangements that defy neat categorization.

In light of these debates, reconceptualizing regionalism requires moving beyond the dichotomies that have long structured the field — global vs. regional, state vs. non-state, West vs. non-West. Instead, a more dynamic, relational framework is needed, one that acknowledges the plurality of regional orders and the fluidity of contemporary geopolitics. Such an approach must integrate material, ideational, and normative dimensions: material in terms of economic and infrastructural interdependence; ideational in terms of shared narratives and regional identity; and normative in terms of autonomy, sovereignty, and mutual recognition.

This theoretical repositioning is particularly pertinent to the study of Central Asia and the Global South, where

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regionalism functions as both a developmental strategy and a geopolitical buffer. These regions are not passive recipients of external influence but active agents in the construction of multipolarity. By forging new alignments and institutional innovations, they challenge the historical hierarchies that have defined international relations since the colonial era.

In conclusion, the reconceptualization of regionalism involves a shift from viewing regions as static territorial entities to understanding them as dynamic, networked spaces of interaction, competition, and negotiation. This reconceptualization lays the foundation for the subsequent sections of this article, which will explore how the theoretical insights discussed above manifest in the empirical realities of Central Asia and the Global South — regions that stand at the forefront of the world's geopolitical reordering.

Central Asia has historically been a region of convergence — a crossroads where empires, civilizations, and trade routes have intersected. In contemporary geopolitics, it has re-emerged as one of the world's most strategically contested spaces. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the five Central Asian republics — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — embarked on distinct yet interconnected paths of state-building and international engagement. Over the past three decades, the region has transformed from a peripheral Soviet hinterland into a critical node of Eurasian connectivity and great-power rivalry.

The early post-independence period was characterized by efforts to consolidate sovereignty and manage dependence on Russia, which remained the dominant external actor due to historical, economic, and security linkages. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community, precursors to the present-day Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), exemplified attempts to preserve Russian influence under a multilateral guise. At the same time, the newly independent states sought to diversify their foreign relations, adopting multi-vector policies to avoid overreliance on any single partner.

Perhaps the most consequential development in the 21st-century geopolitics of Central Asia has been the rise of China as a major regional actor. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 marked a turning point, positioning Central Asia as a central corridor in Beijing's vision of transcontinental connectivity. The BRI's overland Silk Road Economic Belt traverses Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, linking Chinese industrial centers with Europe and the Middle East through rail, energy, and digital infrastructure.

China's growing presence has had multidimensional effects. Economically, it has provided Central Asian states with access to investment, loans, and markets — particularly in sectors such as energy,

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construction, and transportation. Politically, it has offered an alternative to Western conditionality-based aid and Russian dominance. However, this expansion has also generated concerns about debt dependency, environmental degradation, and asymmetric interdependence.

Unlike the Western model of regional integration, China's approach is pragmatic and infrastructure-driven rather than institution-based. Through bilateral agreements and flexible partnerships, it has cultivated influence while avoiding overt political interference. This has reshaped the very concept of regionalism in Central Asia — shifting it from institutional formalism to what could be termed connectivity regionalism, centered on physical and logistical integration.

While China's influence has expanded, Russia remains a pivotal power in the region, albeit in a redefined capacity. Through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), established in 2015, Moscow has sought to institutionalize its economic and political influence within a multilateral framework. The EAEU promotes a common market among its members — including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan — while reinforcing Russia's geopolitical leadership in the post-Soviet space .

However, Russia's capacity to maintain dominance has been challenged by several factors: the diversification of Central Asian economies, the growing appeal of Chinese investment, and Moscow's preoccupation with its confrontation with the West, especially after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. These dynamics have accelerated the relative decline of Russian influence, prompting Central Asian states to pursue more balanced foreign policies and deepen cooperation among themselves.

Despite these challenges, Russia retains significant cultural and security leverage. Russian remains the lingua franca of the region's elite and bureaucracy, and Moscow continues to serve as a key destination for migrant labor and remittances. Moreover, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) still provides a framework for joint security operations, particularly in counterterrorism and border control. Nonetheless, the perception of Russia as a declining yet disruptive power has led regional states to seek autonomy and multivector partnerships beyond its orbit.

The re-emergence of Turkey and Iran as influential middle powers has further diversified the strategic landscape of Central Asia. Turkey, leveraging shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties, has positioned itself as a bridge between the Turkic world and broader Eurasia. The establishment of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2009 (initially the Turkic Council) institutionalized Ankara's engagement in the region, promoting cooperation in trade, education, defense, and cultural diplomacy. Turkey's narrative of "shared Turkic identity" resonates particularly with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and complements its

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growing economic and infrastructural presence.

Iran, on the other hand, approaches Central Asia from a different angle — through the prism of connectivity, security, and energy. Its geographical position as a gateway to the Persian Gulf offers Central Asian states alternative routes for trade and transit. Tehran's engagement has been constrained by Western sanctions, but recent geopolitical shifts — including closer ties with China and Russia — have reinvigorated Iran's ambitions to integrate more deeply into Eurasian economic networks.

The growing involvement of these middle powers indicates that Central Asia is no longer a bipolar arena dominated by Russia and China but a multipolar regional subsystem, where influence is contested through overlapping spheres of connectivity, culture, and commerce.

The strategic awakening of the Global South represents a historic rebalancing of world order. It signals a departure from Western-centric globalization toward a polycentric globalism, where multiple centers of power, culture, and innovation coexist. Within this transformation, Central Asia occupies a pivotal position — not as a passive periphery, but as an active participant shaping the emerging architecture of South–South cooperation and Eurasian integration.

The ongoing evolution of the Global South highlights the convergence of diverse struggles — for autonomy, representation, and sustainability. As developing nations assert their collective agency, the contours of a new world order are taking shape — one characterized by connectivity, inclusiveness, and strategic pluralism.

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