

**“REGIONAL LEADERSHIP” DYNAMICS IN UZBEK-KAZAKH RELATIONS  
(1991–2016)**

**Musurman Khurramov**

Senior lecturer, PhD, International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

**ABSTRACT.** This article presents a scientific and theoretical analysis of the phenomenon of the “struggle for regional leadership” within the context of Uzbek-Kazakh relations. It offers a comparative examination of key political, economic, and social indicators of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan through the lens of political leadership. The study also explores how the personal relationship between the two countries' leaders at various times has influenced the dynamics of bilateral relations. Importantly, the article provides scholarly evidence that the notion of a struggle for regional leadership is not a defining factor in Uzbek-Kazakh relations.

**KEY WORDS:** regional leadership, bilateral relations, economic superiority, demographic potential, personal rivalry, ethnic Uzbeks, ethnic Kazakhs.

## **INTRODUCTION**

We know that when it comes to Uzbek-Kazakh relations, the issue of “competition for regional leadership” between the two countries is also mentioned. The issue has even sparked controversy among Uzbek and Kazakh scholars. In addition, this topic was interpreted by many foreign media in a very exaggerated way. This begs the question, was there really any competition between the two neighboring countries during the period under study, or was it just a myth fabricated by the media? Similar questions encourage any researcher studying Uzbek-Kazakh relations to think profoundly. We will try to study this issue from a scientific point of view with an objective approach to the subject.

If we look at recent history, a difficult economic situation has arisen since the independence of the Central Asian states. The state-run economy, formed during the former USSR, has given way to a market economy based on capitalist relations. In the first decade of independence, Uzbekistan had a clear economic advantage over other countries in the region. Tashkent has become the financial and economic center of Central Asia. It is no coincidence that many international organizations have opened their offices in Tashkent. We are witnessing that the economic crises in the domestic life of the country have been milder than in the CIS countries.

In the first decade of independence (1991-2000), the GDP growth rates of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were -2.0% and -30.6%[22], respectively. As a result, Uzbekistan's GDP growth in the first decade of independence was much higher than in neighboring Kazakhstan. In addition, Uzbekistan in the 90s of the last century, as a country that creates ideas in the Central Asian region, has done a lot. In particular, in 1993, Uzbekistan actively promoted the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone initiative. In 1995, I.Karimov announced another slogan “Turkistan is our common home”. The Collective Security Treaty was signed in 1992 in Tashkent. In addition, in 1999, Uzbekistan put forward the idea of establishing a “6 + 2” group for the peaceful settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan[13].

On the other hand, the attitude of the outside world to Uzbekistan was very warm. For Western countries, Uzbekistan is seen as a country with relatively large demographic and economic potential that can resist Russia's restoration of its position in Central Asia. For the Muslim world, Uzbekistan is a continuation of the region's millennial traditions related to the Islamic past, the homeland of Muslim shrines such as Bukhara and Samarkand. Turkic-speaking countries saw the example of Uzbekistan as the second largest Turkic state in the world. In the eyes of East Asian

countries, Uzbekistan was a densely populated Central Asian country, similar to the East Asian tigers (newly industrialized countries), with preserved cultural traditions, hard work and methodical work ethic. It was assumed that Uzbekistan would follow the path of the Asia-Pacific region and Southeast Asia by creating a favorable investment climate and importing relevant technologies[30].

However, many of these predictions did not materialize. It has become clear that Uzbekistan remains a post-Soviet state where market relations are not widely introduced. Much attention was also paid to the formation of a model of state capitalism in the economy.

As a result, by the early 2000s, economic leadership in Central Asia was slowly shifting toward Kazakhstan. As a result of the choice of a radical and dynamic approach to the implementation of socio-economic reforms in Kazakhstan, in 2003 Kazakhstan's GDP exceeded the GDP of all other countries in the region[30]. In 2004, the United States and European countries recognized Kazakhstan as a market economy. It was from this period that the elite of Kazakhstan began to use the concept of regional leader more often. The statement that "*Kazakhstan is a leading country in Central Asia*" was initially used informally, but later began to be reflected in official documents. As an example, the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, published on March 9, 2020, identifies strategic tasks to "*strengthen Kazakhstan's leadership in the Central Asian region*" [18].

At this point, given the economic superiority achieved by Kazakhstan at the beginning of the 21st century, a legitimate question arises as to how appropriate it is to consider Kazakhstan as a regional leader. In our opinion, such an approach to the issue would be the basis for a wrong conclusion. If we take into account that in the first decade of independence Uzbekistan was ahead not only of Kazakhstan, but also of other Central Asian countries in many respects, then we have to call Uzbekistan the leader of the region at that time. In addition, in order for Kazakhstan to become a leader in Central Asia, it must have a clear advantage not only economically, but also militarily, politically, regionally, demographically, historically and culturally. Most importantly, it must be recognized by the countries of the region as a leading state. However, there are not enough grounds to say that these aspects are fully integrated in Kazakhstan.

#### **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOME INDICATORS OF UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN**

From this point of view, an objective comparison of some parameters of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan shows that the situation is completely different. In particular, in the Global Firepower Index of Military Power, published in 2016, Uzbekistan ranked 48th out of 126 countries, while Kazakhstan ranked 53rd [28]. The Uzbek Armed Forces are recognized by military experts as the most militant in the region[7]. According to military analysts, after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the Uzbek government immediately began to reform the army and achieved great success among all Central Asian states[8].

According to military experts, the effectiveness of the Uzbek army was demonstrated in August 1999 when religious extremists invaded the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan from the territory of Tajikistan and in the summer of 2000 in the south of Kyrgyzstan[10].

Unlike Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan has test, space and nuclear test sites (Baikonur Cosmodrome, Semipalatinsk test site, Emba and Sari-Shagan test sites) and powerful arsenals of conventional weapons[14]. Also, although Kazakhstan inherited huge strategic and nuclear weapons from the former USSR, the country renounced them as a result of joining the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. At the same time, the Kazakh military has gained combat experience in peacekeeping and other international military operations. In particular, in 1992-2001, a Kazakh battalion guarded the Tajik-Afghan border in Gorno-Badakhshan; The

engineering team of the Kazakh army served in the International Coalition Forces in Iraq for five years (2003-2008)[6]. This means that the military power of Uzbekistan is much higher than in Kazakhstan.

If we compare the demographic potential of the two countries, in 2016 the population of Uzbekistan was 31 million 575.3 thousand people[20], and accordingly, the population of Kazakhstan is 17 million 670 thousand people[19]. It should be noted that Uzbekistan is the leading country in Central Asia in terms of population, ranking third in the CIS after Russia and Ukraine. This, in turn, allowed Uzbekistan to take 42nd place in the world ranking of countries in terms of population. The Republic of Kazakhstan ranks fourth among the CIS countries in terms of population and 63rd in the world. According to experts, by the middle of the XXI century, Uzbekistan will surpass Ukraine, which is experiencing a natural decline in population, and its population will reach 40 million[5].

It should be noted that a large number of ethnic Uzbeks live in Kazakhstan. In 2021, the number of Uzbeks living in Kazakhstan was 620,324 people (3.29% of the total population)[25]. The number of ethnic Uzbeks in Kazakhstan is the third largest, after Kazakhs and Russians. It should be noted that a large number of ethnic Kazakhs live in Uzbekistan. According to 2021, the population of Uzbekistan is 821.2 thousand Kazakhs. This figure is 4.1% of the total population. In terms of the number of ethnic Kazakhs living in Uzbekistan, it ranks fourth after Uzbeks, Russians and Tajiks[24]. According to experts, Uzbekistan has never used ethnic Uzbeks living in neighboring countries as a means to achieve foreign policy goals[11]. This is a characteristic feature of Uzbekistan's diplomacy and good neighborly policy. If we summarize the indicators of the two countries in terms of demographic potential, we can see that a clear advantage is on the side of Uzbekistan.

Now let's compare the territory parameters of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The territorial area of Uzbekistan is 448.9 thousand km. sq[23]. The territory of Kazakhstan is 2 mln. 724.9 thousand km. sq[21]. In this regard, it can be seen that Kazakhstan's capabilities are far ahead of those of Uzbekistan.

If we compare the economic indicators of the two countries, in 2016 the gross domestic product (GDP) of Uzbekistan amounted to 85 billion 658 million USD[27]. Kazakhstan's GDP is estimated at 137 billion 289 million USD[16]. From an economic point of view, Kazakhstan is a clear dominant country in Central Asia. It is known that strong economic growth in the neighboring country began in the 2000s, one of the main reasons for which was the rapid transfer of state property to the private sector, ie sold to investors. While capitalist relations have been advanced in the economy of Kazakhstan, the process of privatization of state property in Uzbekistan has been gradual. The preservation of the role of the state in the economy has led to the underdevelopment of market relations in Uzbekistan. In the ten years since independence, Uzbekistan, which is far ahead in Central Asia not only economically but also in other respects, has handed over its economic leadership to Kazakhstan.

Comparing the key performance indicators of the two neighboring countries it became clear that dominant leadership is not on the side of either country. In some respects, Uzbekistan is dominant, and in other respects, Kazakhstan is dominant. In this regard, neither Uzbekistan nor Kazakhstan can claim to be a full-fledged regional leader.

#### **THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP CONCEPT**

In this regard, we will try to scientifically study the struggle for regional leadership between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. According to the theoretical interpretation, competition is a set of complex measures and actions aimed at ensuring its superiority in a particular field[26]. However, it should be noted that in the twenty-five years since independence, neither Uzbekistan nor

Kazakhstan has sought to do so, have not formed alliances and alliances against each other, and have not used economic means to put pressure on each other. It also considers the specific geographical location of both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which means that for Kazakhstan it is located between Russia and China, and for Uzbekistan it is close to Afghanistan, which is a source of instability.

In essence, the word leader is a multifaceted concept, as a hegemon, i.e., an omnipotent subject; as a leader (if others follow); as a role model (authority); as a leader success (advanced subject). The first type has physical strength; the second is legal; the third is normative; the fourth is not valid at all[12]. In this case, it would be logical to consider Kazakhstan as belonging to the fourth type. Because Kazakhstan is indeed the most advanced and economically developed country in Central Asia, but it does not have capability to force the countries of the region to follow it. Therefore, we cannot see either Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan as a regional leader.

At this point, let's analyze another concept of leadership. Leadership is a process of influence, as a result of which a team leader (in our case, a region) must be supported by other members of the team, i.e. the region, to achieve common, divisive goals[3]. In this case, the goals are developed by the leader and the other members (states) approve and recognize it. However, no Central Asian state has recognized Kazakhstan as a regional leader and has never made an official statement about it. It follows that there are not enough grounds for us to consider neighboring Kazakhstan as a regional leader.

#### **THE ISSUE OF LEADERSHIP BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN IS IN THE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FOREIGN SOURCES**

An in-depth study of the topic revealed that the issue of competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is often discussed by countries outside the region. It is no coincidence that the states themselves remain, and the competition between the two countries by scholars of the third state is mentioned. "Indeed, it seems that someone once deliberately introduced the idea of possible competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This probably happened in the early 1990s. In our view, these were indeed Western scholars who had studied Uzbekistan - Graham Fuller, Martha Olcott, Shirin Akiner, James Critchlow, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, who declared Uzbekistan a strong state that could withstand Moscow's ambitions, "Ukraine's Central Asian analogue". At the same time, Kazakhstan is seen as a pro-Russian state"[30]. It is impossible to take a one-sided approach to this issue, as the above-mentioned scholars may have come to such a conclusion, taking into account the capabilities of Uzbekistan at that time. In addition, they did not directly address the issue of competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

In addition, it should be noted that foreign scholars have tried to pay more attention to the topic of competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In particular, the following source says: "In our opinion, today the Republic of Uzbekistan is the leader of Central Asia. In only one parameter, Uzbekistan lags behind Kazakhstan. It is also the amount of income per capita and the standard of living of the population of the country. In terms of demographic potential, Uzbekistan is significantly ahead of Kazakhstan"[15]. Recognizing Uzbekistan as a regional leader, they tried to sow discord in the friendly relations between neighboring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Another source, which does not belong to Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, says: "After gaining independence, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were objectively doomed to competition as one of the largest and most developed countries in the region. It is true that Kazakhstan initially had certain advantages over its neighbors as a large regional state with enormous economic and military-strategic potential"[17]. Here, it is natural that there will be a competitive environment between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. On the contrary, in the early 1990s, the two neighboring states tried



to deepen integration ties by trying to unite their efforts on all fronts. However, the above source says that there will be mutual competition between the two countries, whether they like it or not.

It should be noted that the issue of the struggle for regional leadership between the two neighboring countries began to be covered not only in foreign media, but also in Kazakh sources. As mentioned above, it was later reflected even in some official documents. However, it should be noted that although Kazakhstan has set itself the goal of becoming a regional leader, in some cases, officials do not consider Kazakhstan to be a Central Asian state and do not consider Central Asia to be a region. In a 2006 interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev used the following phrase: "Kazakhs are Europeans, not Asians. In fact, we are all Europeans. That's how we were brought up ... "[12]. If Kazakhs are European, then why are they striving for regional leadership in Central Asia. In this situation, it would be logical for Kazakhstan to set the task of fighting for leadership with European countries as a task. Another vague statement can be found in the following statement: "Kazakhstan is geographically bordered by Central Asia, but it is not a Central Asian state"[9]. Another confusing situation is emerging. Kazakhstan is not a Central Asian state, but its foreign policy concept is to be a leader in the region. Such vague statements began to emerge after the idea of "Eurasia" was developed in Kazakhstan. In order to make Kazakhstan geographically central, there was a situation of moving away from Central Asia.

Even Kazakh experts insist that Central Asia was not formed as a region. "The whole history of the use of the term Central Asia since the beginning of 1993, when this concept was introduced into the political discourse of our countries, shows that the real regionalization of the so-called Central Asia has not taken place. In order to talk about the region, it must have clear boundaries (not only administrative, but also economic, military-political, cultural-historical and environmental). In Central Asia, there is only ecological certainty in this regard - all five countries, traditionally called "regions", are included in the Aral Sea basin. But here, too, there is a "small" complication, which includes Afghanistan, which is not usually a Central Asian state. "Apart from borders, there must be structural unity in the region, but this is not the case in Central Asia"[3].

According to Kazakh experts, Central Asia has not been formed as a region. If there is no Central Asian region, in which region is Kazakhstan fighting for leadership, and in which region does Kazakhstan consider itself a country? If Kazakhstan considers itself to belong to the Eurasian region, then it can be said that Eurasia is a geographical concept, not politically widely recognized. Only certain states use this term. In view of the above, there were cases of uncertainty in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Kazakhstan has not made it clear that it belongs to a specific region.

It should be noted that during the period under review, unlike Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan's claim to struggle for regional leadership has never been mentioned in Uzbek official circles or made such statements. Because Uzbekistan has never claimed regional leadership, but has always insisted that the concept is absurd. Also, no official document of Uzbekistan reflects this opinion.

Some experts say that there was a personal rivalry between the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov and the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev. For example, political scientist A.Taksanov said: "It should be noted that the President of Uzbekistan has never liked the initiatives of the President of Kazakhstan. Therefore, the complex relations that exist between states today are based primarily on personal relations"[4]. In addition, the First President of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akayev in an interview with BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) spoke about the relationship between Karimov and Nazarbayev: "Indeed, over the past 30 years, there have been two leaders in Central Asia – Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov. Both are professional politicians with great experience. That is why there was a struggle between them for leadership in Central Asia. This is natural, because a person who comes to politics strives to be a leader first in the country, then in the region, and then

in the world. So there was struggle and competition between them. However, this struggle did not go beyond the realm of civilization. As for regional issues, whether political, geopolitical, economic, the two leaders have always been able to find common ground, reach compromises and consensus. I really appreciate these qualities in them. In general, it is true that Nazarbayev led in one and Islam Karimov in the other"[1].

The above-mentioned views were rejected by the President of Uzbekistan. Speaking about the competition between the two countries during the visit of President Nursultan Nazarbayev to Uzbekistan in 2013, Karimov said: "Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are not competing countries, because the economic conditions of the two republics are completely different and their tasks are compatible. He will not come"[29]. The Kazakh leader also never spoke of a personal rivalry with the Uzbek president. It follows that friendly relations prevailed rather than competition between the Presidents of the two neighboring states.

## **CONCLUSION**

From this it can be concluded that there has never been a factor of struggle for regional leadership between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and this is just a myth fabricated by some journalists and experts. In addition, it can be said that "healthy competition between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can benefit both countries. At the same time, we can talk not only about competition, but also about constructive cooperation"[2]. As rightly pointed out, only healthy competition will lead to the rapid development of the two countries in all respects. In this case, it is desirable that the interests of the two sides are taken into account equally, and it is expedient that the question of preventing the formation of a chemist's environment be the main focus. The two brotherly states must draw the right conclusions from the fabricated and false reports of regional competition that have no basis.

When the subject of political competition between the two countries was theoretically interpreted, it became clear that there was no phenomenon of struggle for regional leadership in Uzbek-Kazakh relations. In the twenty-five years since independence, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have not formed alliances and alliances against each other, nor have they used economic means to put pressure on each other.

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