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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**“CONSTRUCTIVISM IN CHINA-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS: AN
ANALYSIS OF IDEAS, VALUES, AND DISCOURSE”**

Chen Wei¹ and Dilfuza Turaeva²

1. Researcher, Research Center for Central Asian Education and Humanities Exchange, School of Foreign Languages, Shihezi University, Shihezi, Xinjiang, China. Research fields: Area studies.
2. PhD candidate, School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China; Lecturer at the at the Ng Teng Fong Sino Group Belt and Road Research Institute, Hongkong Chuhai College Research fields: China’s policy in Central Asia and Eurasia region; Geopolitics of Central Asia and Afghanistan; One Belt, One Road; Shanghai Cooperation Organization; China and the world.

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Abstract

This study examines relations between China and the Central Asian countries from a constructivist perspective in international relations theory. It focuses on the analysis of ideas, values, norms, and discursive practices that shape the nature of regional interactions, including historical narratives and humanitarian forms of cooperation. The study aims to identify how political rhetoric, official documents, and public communications contribute to the social construction of strategic partnerships and mutual trust. The methodological basis of the study is a discourse and content analysis of official statements, policy documents, and media materials. It is shown that concepts such as "peaceful development," "mutually beneficial cooperation," "community of common destiny," and the principle of non-interference play a key role in shaping the dominant framework of regional interactions. The article argues that China's relations with the Central Asian countries are shaped not only by material factors but are also largely determined by socially constructed perceptions, norms, and value orientations. The findings expand the understanding of the mechanisms of regional cooperation and contribute to the development of constructivist research in the Central Asian context.

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Introduction:-

In recent decades, relations between China and the Central Asian states have become a key area of transformation in the Eurasian regional order. Their development is accompanied not only by growing economic interdependence and the institutionalization of multilateral cooperation formats, but also by the active formation of a distinct discursive and normative space within which the goals, forms, and limits of interaction are understood. Therefore, analyzing these relations solely through the prism of material factors - trade, investment, or the balance of power - seems methodologically limited and insufficient for understanding the sustainability and specificity of the emerging

Corresponding Author:-Chen Wei

Address:-Researcher, Research Center for Central Asian Education and Humanities Exchange, School of Foreign Languages, Shihezi University, Shihezi, Xinjiang, China. Research fields: Area studies.

partnership. Constructivism in international relations theory offers an analytical toolkit that enables to move beyond reductionist interpretations and focus on the role of ideas, norms, identities, and discursive practices in shaping foreign policy. According to constructivist logic, the interests of states are not a priori given, but are shaped through social interaction; the international environment is understood as a socially constructed reality, and the stability of regional orders is linked to the intersubjective recognition of norms and legitimate models of behavior. Applying this approach to analyzing China-Central Asia relations allows to identify the hidden mechanisms of their reproduction and explain how cooperation remains resilient even in the face of resource asymmetries and diverse national strategies.

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive constructivist analysis of relations between China and the Central Asian states, focusing on the ideas, values, and discourses that form the normative and symbolic foundation of interaction. The focus is on the processes of identity construction, the institutionalization of partnership norms, the use of historical narratives, and the development of cultural and communicative practices. Particular attention is given to analyzing how historical memory (in particular, the image of the Silk Road), concepts of mutual respect and joint development, as well as humanitarian and media practices, are transformed into tools for the formation of regional community. The paper is structured around several interconnected analytical blocks. The first section examines constructivism as a theoretical framework for analyzing the foreign policies of China and the Central Asian states, incorporating both classical theoretical propositions and relational-processual interpretations developed within the Chinese academic tradition. The second analyzes ideas and values in the diplomatic relations between the two sides, focusing on the formation of the normative architecture of the partnership and the role of historical discourse in constructing the region's collective identity. The third examines the symbolic and communicative practices - cultural, educational, and media diplomacy - through which norms and identities are publicly represented and reproduced at the societal level. Thus, the article offers an interpretation of China-Central Asian relations as a dynamic social process in which material interests intertwine with ideas, values, and discourses. A constructivist approach shows that the emerging regional order in Central Asia is based not only on economic calculations or security considerations, but also on a socially constructed system of meanings, norms, and identities that ensure long-term legitimacy and sustainability of cooperation.

Constructivism as a theoretical foundation of China and Central Asia foreign policy:-

The role of constructivism in shaping China's foreign policy:-

Constructivism, as a theory of international relations, offers an analytical lens within which foreign policy is viewed not as a mechanical response to the distribution of material resources, but as the result of the social construction of identities, norms, and interpretations of international reality. Unlike realism and liberalism, which treat the interests of states as relatively given and derived from the material structure of the system, constructivism assumes that interests themselves are formed through social interaction and depend on the intersubjective perceptions of actors. In this sense, the international system is not an objective and immutable environment, but a socially constructed reality (Wendt, 1999).

A key tenet of constructivism is the assertion that the anarchy of the international system has no fixed content: "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1999). This thesis implies that the nature of international politics is determined not only by the absence of a central authority, but also by the norms, expectations, and identities formed through the interactions of states. Identity, in turn, precedes interests and determines their content (Wendt, 1999). Therefore, an analysis of Chinese foreign policy requires examining the processes through which China constructs its own identity and interprets its role in the international system, particularly in Central Asia. From this perspective, Chinese foreign policy can be viewed as the result of the strategic use of historical narratives, cultural codes, and institutional practices. One of the central elements of this discursive construction is the appeal to the legacy of the Silk Road. The historical image of the Silk Road serves as a symbolic resource, helping to reinforce the notion of China as a civilization traditionally oriented toward trade, cultural exchange, and peaceful interaction (Liu, 2022). Thus, the historical narrative is used not simply as a retrospective reference, but as a tool for shaping contemporary identity and normatively legitimizing foreign policy strategy.

In constructivist logic, historical memory and collective representations are part of the social structure that influences the behavior of states. Through the discourse of "reviving the Silk Road," China creates an intersubjective basis for cooperation with Central Asian states, emphasizing continuity, mutual benefit, and cultural connectivity. This helps solidify China's image as a peaceful and responsible partner, influencing perceptions of its role in the region and, consequently, the structure of interaction. The formation of China's national interests in Central Asia can

also be explained through a constructivist lens. National interests are not solely a reflection of material needs, but are constructed in international society through norms and social expectations (Finnemore, 1996). Moreover, states shape their interests based on perceptions of legitimate behavior and status (Finnemore, 1996). In this context, China's interests in energy, infrastructure, and security acquire a normative dimension: they fit into the discourse of "peaceful development," mutual respect for sovereignty, and the principle of non-interference. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in this case functions as an institutionalized form of regional order construction. It represents not only an economic project but also a process of creating new norms and practices of interaction. Through regular forums, agreements, and joint infrastructure projects, a network of recurring interactions is formed that facilitates the development of shared expectations. According to constructivist logic, it is precisely such repetitive practices that form the basis for the formation of collective identity (Wendt, 1999).

Regional identity within the framework of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries emerges through social interaction and joint participation in institutions. The region, therefore, is not a geographical given but a socially constructed community, in line with constructivist approaches to regionalism (Acharya, 2014). The BRI fosters the concept of Eurasia as a space of interconnectedness, where economic development is accompanied by cultural exchange and normative coordination. The issue of security occupies a prominent place in constructivist analysis. National security is understood not only as a response to objective threats but also as a product of cultural and normative beliefs (Katzenstein, 1996). Moreover, norms and identities influence the definition of threats and acceptable responses (Katzenstein, 1996). In China's cooperation with Central Asian countries, the emphasis on combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism is shaped by collective threat definitions. Thus, security becomes an intersubjective category, enshrined in institutional documents and diplomatic discourse.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) represents an important mechanism for institutionalizing these norms. International institutions not only coordinate the behavior of states but also create sustainable models of legitimate interaction (Ruggie, 1998). Through its participation in the SCO, China promotes the principles of consensus, equality, and collective responsibility as the normative foundation of regional architecture. The institution becomes a space where shared interpretations of threats are formed, rules of cooperation are reinforced, and collective expectations are reproduced. An additional dimension of analysis is related to the development of Chinese theoretical thought, focused on the formation of an autonomous international political paradigm (Ren, 2025). The assertion that international theory is not reducible to Western international relations theory opens the possibility of rethinking international reality through a relational ontology. In this context, the emphasis shifts from autonomous actors to relations as the primary category of analysis. Procedural constructivism, developed in the Chinese academic tradition, proceeds from the premise that relations precede actors and shape their identity. The state is viewed as an "actor-in-relations," whose interests and behavior are determined by the configuration of social ties (Qin, 2009). Within the framework of processual constructivism, relations are not secondary to states, but precede them and shape their identity. Consequently, China's foreign policy can be understood as maintaining and developing relations as an independent value, and not solely as a tool for achieving predetermined material goals (Qin, 2009). The process of interaction acquires normative significance, and its maintenance is seen as a goal comparable in importance to the achievement of specific results, since it is in the process that identities and norms are reproduced (Wendt, 1999).

Within the framework of relational logic, power is also interpreted differently than in classical theories of international relations. Within a constructivist perspective, power is understood not only as the ability to impose one's will but also as a socially constructed category emerging within the structure of relations (Wendt, 1999). The relational approach emphasizes that power is formed and realized within a network of social interactions, rather than existing solely as an attribute of an actor (Qin, 2009). Relationships can both enhance and limit a state's influence, as they determine the legitimacy of its actions and the intersubjective expectations of its partners (Ruggie, 1998). Consequently, China's influence in Central Asia is determined not only by its economic potential but also by the degree of institutionalized trust and entrenched norms of cooperation. Collective identity in the region is formed not solely through a rational understanding of interdependence, but also through the gradual accumulation of interaction practices. Constructivism emphasizes that collective identity emerges through repeated social practices, in which actors begin to perceive each other as "us" rather than "them" (Wendt, 1999). Norms and identities are reinforced through institutional interaction and the shared definition of threats and goals (Katzenstein, 1996). Repeated summits, cultural exchanges, and joint projects create an intersubjective environment in which a sense of shared destiny and mutual trust is formed (Acharya, 2014). Taken together, the constructivist perspective - in its classical and relational-processual dimensions - allows to interpret China's foreign policy as the result of a complex process

of social construction. Identities shape interests (Wendt, 1999), national interests are shaped in international society through norms (Finnemore, 1996), and institutions reinforce and reproduce normative structures of interaction (Ruggie, 1998). Historical narratives, normative discourses, and institutional mechanisms form the social environment within which China defines its strategies of behavior. China's foreign policy in Central Asia thus functions not only as a tool for achieving material goals but also as a mechanism for shaping a regional order based on interconnectedness, institutionalized cooperation, and the reproduction of stable relations.

Constructivist analysis of Central Asia foreign policy in the context of China:-

A constructivist approach provides the framework to examine the foreign policy of Central Asian states in the context of their interactions with China as the result of the social construction of interests, identities, and norms, rather than as a purely rational response to the distribution of material power. According to constructivist logic, the international system is not fixed and immutable; its structure is shaped by the stable practices of interaction between actors. The key proposition that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1999) provides a theoretical basis for analyzing the transformation of relations between China and the Central Asian countries toward partnership, institutionalization, and normative consolidation of cooperation. In the post-Soviet period, the Central Asian states found themselves in a situation where they had to construct a new international subjectivity. Having gained independence in 1991, they were forced to simultaneously build mechanisms for internal consolidation and formulate foreign policy priorities. The rapid establishment of diplomatic relations with China in January 1992 was an important step in the process of institutional recognition and consolidation of their status as independent actors in the international system (Usupova, 2022). In this context, China acted not only as an economic partner but also as a source of normative confirmation of their sovereignty.

A constructivist perspective offers a lens through which to see that the interests of Central Asian countries vis-à-vis China were not predetermined. They were formed through a process of interaction, during which expectations of mutual benefit, principles of non-interference, and respect for sovereignty were reinforced. Feng (2019) emphasizes that China's strategy in Central Asia is based on the principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and the rejection of spheres of influence. These principles contribute to the formation of a stable normative environment within which cooperation is perceived as legitimate and predictable. Historical memory plays an important role in the formation of regional identity. Research on China's relations with the peoples of Central Asia demonstrates that stable trade and cultural ties have been established since the era of the Great Silk Road (Barinova, 2016). Archaeological finds of Chinese imports in Central Asian sites confirm the intensity of ethnocultural contacts and the long-standing presence of China in the region's historical interaction networks (Barinova, 2016). In contemporary discourse, this historical layer is used as a symbolic basis for legitimizing cooperation.

Within constructivist logic, invoking the legacy of the Silk Road represents an act of symbolic reconstruction of the past with the goal of forging a new collective identity. In his speech at the China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized that over the past decade, the parties "worked closely together to fully revive the Silk Road" (Xi J., 2023). Thus, the historical narrative becomes a tool for shaping a shared vision of the future based on interconnectedness and cooperation. The multi-vector foreign policy of Central Asian states can also be interpreted through the prism of identity. It reflects a desire for autonomy and balancing various areas of interaction. In this system, China acts as an important, but not the only, partner. Zhang (2022) notes that countries in the region use various regional mechanisms to diversify their foreign relations, demonstrating a desire to maintain independence and avoid unilateral dependence. From a constructivist perspective, such policies are an expression of an emerging regional identity based on the principles of sovereign equality and pragmatic cooperation. Economic cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries has become extensive. China has become the largest trading partner and investor for most countries in the region (Usupova, 2022). However, constructivist analysis emphasizes that the significance of these processes extends beyond material interdependence. Infrastructure projects such as the China-Central Asia gas pipeline and the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline create sustainable institutional ties that reinforce regular interactions and contribute to the formation of long-term expectations of cooperation (Feng, 2019). The regularity of these practices contributes to the entrenchment of partnership norms.

The Belt and Road Initiative, proposed in 2013, marked a new stage in the institutionalization of cooperation. A speech by Chinese leader in Xi'an emphasized that relations between China and Central Asia had entered a "new era" (Xi J., 2023). From a constructivist perspective, the initiative serves as an institutional framework for norms of mutual benefit and common development. It enshrines the principles of cooperation through agreements, investment mechanisms and infrastructure projects. The China-Central Asia (C+C5) format is strengthening the institutional

dimension of interaction. According to the China Studies Center (2025), this format is gradually transforming into a sustainable regional platform capable of influencing economic, political, and humanitarian processes. Its institutionalization - the creation of regular summits, coordination mechanisms, and specialized structures - reflects the process of solidifying norms of cooperation at the regional level. Energy cooperation plays a significant role. Feng (2019) notes that energy cooperation between China and the countries of the region is based on the principle of mutual benefit. China receives stable resource supplies, while Central Asian states receive investment, technology, and access to a large market. However, from a constructivist perspective, long-term energy projects reinforce stable expectations and contribute to the gradual development of trust through sustained interaction.

The humanitarian dimension of cooperation also contributes to the formation of a collective identity. Zhang (2022) notes the growing interest in studying the Chinese language and the expansion of educational programs. Educational diplomacy, implemented within the SCO and through bilateral agreements, fosters generations of specialists focused on intercultural interaction. These processes strengthen the social foundation of partnership. In the area of security, cooperation is developing within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Feng (2019) emphasizes that the joint fight against terrorism, extremism, and transnational crime has become a key area of interaction. The institutionalization of these mechanisms contributes to the formation of a collective perception of threats and the strengthening of trust. Within constructivist logic, security is understood not only as a military category but also as the result of jointly constructed norms. The concept of a "community of shared destiny," proposed by the Chinese side, lends a normative dimension to cooperation.

The 2023 speech of the Chinese President emphasized the importance of the principles of mutual support, common development, and universal security (Xi, 2023). These ideas resonate with the Central Asian countries' aspirations for stability and economic growth. The formation of a common discourse contributes to the strengthening of the region's collective identity. At the same time, public perceptions of China in the region demonstrate complex dynamics. China's expanding economic presence is influencing the transformation of public opinion, including growing interest in language and culture (Zhang, 2022). From a constructivist perspective, such processes are part of the formation of new social perceptions and norms of interaction. Thus, the foreign policy of Central Asian states toward China is the result of a complex process of social construction. Historical narratives, institutional mechanisms of cooperation, the development of the BRI, the formation of the C+C5 format, and the expansion of humanitarian ties form an interconnected system of practices and norms. A constructivist analysis suggests that the states of the region are not passive objects of external influence, but actively participate in the formation of a regional order based on principles of mutual benefit, the institutionalization of cooperation, and the maintenance of sustainable relational dynamics of interaction.

Ideas and values in diplomatic relations between China and Central Asia:-

Normative architecture of partnership: forming intersubjective rules of interaction:-

From a constructivist perspective, diplomatic relations between China and the Central Asian states represent not simply a set of institutional mechanisms or pragmatic agreements, but a process of gradual formation of an intersubjective normative architecture within which shared understandings of acceptable behavior, legitimate forms of cooperation, and mutual expectations of the parties are enshrined (Nuriddinova et al., 2022). Unlike approaches that interpret foreign policy primarily through the prism of material interests or formal institutions, constructivism provides the framework to examine the interests themselves as socially constructed, and norms as the result of long-term discursive interaction. In this context, an analysis of ideas and values in relations between China and Central Asia enables to identify mechanisms for the sustainability and reproduction of partnerships that extend beyond short-term political conjuncture (Leksiutina, 2025). The central element of the emerging normative architecture is the discourse of partnership, formed around stable formulas of "mutual respect," "mutual trust," "mutual benefit," and "joint development," which are regularly reproduced in official statements and joint declarations.¹ Rather than merely rhetorical devices, these formulas can be interpreted from a constructivist perspective as normative markers

¹Xi, J. (2025, June 17). Championing the China–Central Asia Spirit for High-Quality Cooperation in the Region. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>;
Mirziyoyev, Sh. (2025, June 17). Speech at the Second Central Asia–China Summit. President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/8231> (in Russian);
Tokayev, K. Zh. (2025, June 17). Speech at the Second Central Asia–China Summit. President of Kazakhstan. <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/prezident-kazahstana-prinyal-uchastie-vo-vtorom-sammite-centralnaya-aziya-kitay-175559>. (in Russian).

that structure expectations of interaction and frame bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Thus, "mutual respect" is consistently linked to the recognition of the sovereign equality of states and their right to independently choose their development model, which creates a persistent expectation of a non-hierarchical nature of interaction even in the face of objective resource asymmetry (Cheng, 2011). The principle of "mutual trust" in the discourse of Chinese-Central Asian relations is institutionalized through a consistent emphasis on supporting the "core interests" of partners and refraining from interference in their internal affairs (Liu, 2022). In this case, trust functions not as a subjective feeling, but as an intersubjective rule regulating the expectations of the parties' behavior. Constructivist analysis allows to interpret such formulations as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty and legitimizing long-term interaction, particularly in sensitive areas of security and sovereignty.

The significant strengthening of the normative dimension of partnership is associated with the discourse of a "new era." This phrase functions not as a neutral temporary designation, but as a framework category that offers a lens to rethink previous experience and present China-Central Asia relations as a qualitatively new stage. By contrasting the early period with the "new era," a narrative is formed of a transition from situational good-neighborliness to a sustainable strategic partnership based on a high level of mutual trust and institutionalized expectations (Liu, 2022). The formulas "strategic partners that trust and count on each other" and "never attaches any political strings" in this context act as normative statements that reinforce the idea of the legitimacy of China's presence in the region and the separation of economic cooperation from political pressure. The categories of "mutual benefit" and "common development" also acquire a distinctly normative character. In the analyzed texts, they are used not so much to describe the quantitative parameters of cooperation as to define a notion of what "correct" and legitimate interaction should be (Xi J., 2025; Liu, 2022). From a constructivist reading of these texts, emphasis is placed on the long-term nature of benefits, their regional distribution, and their connection to modernization goals. According to constructivist logic, this fosters intersubjective expectations of the fairness of cooperation and reduces the risk of conflicting interpretations of the results of interaction.

The institutionalization of discourse becomes a key stage in the consolidation of the normative architecture. The launch and development of the C+C5 format reflects the transition from cautious and fragmented interaction to a more active and institutionalized Chinese diplomatic strategy in Central Asia. From a constructivist perspective, it is particularly significant that this format creates a stable space for the reproduction of norms through regular meetings, joint statements, and specialized coordination mechanisms. The repetition of these practices contributes to the internalization of norms and their transition into routine diplomatic behavior as theorized in constructivist analyses of China–Central Asia cooperation (Nuriddanova et al., 2022). The discourse of a "community of common destiny," captured in joint declarations and speeches, represents an attempt to construct a collective identity within which the security and development of Central Asian states are viewed as interconnected with Chinese participation (Xi J., 2025). Rather than focusing exclusively on bilateral benefit, official rhetoric increasingly emphasizes shared challenges and collective responsibility, indicating a gradual process of normative socialization in which the region is framed as a space of mutual dependence rather than merely a set of individual partnerships. (Nuriddanova et al., 2022).

The historical depth of this normative transformation can be revealed by analyzing the institutional development of the SCO. Even at the early stage of Chinese policy in Central Asia, principles of respect for sovereignty, non-interference, the rejection of exclusive spheres of influence, and a focus on voluntary cooperation were enshrined. These norms, initially formulated in the context of resolving border issues and ensuring regional security, eventually became the foundation of a broader normative framework for interaction (Cheng, 2011). From a constructivist perspective, this indicates the continuity of discursive practices, which in the "new era" are acquiring a more universal and value-laden form. An additional dimension of the normative architecture is revealed through an analysis of the multi-layered system of China's partnerships with the countries of Central Asia. The hierarchization of partnerships in Chinese diplomacy serves not only an instrumental but also a normative function, shaping perceptions of status, trust, and the degree of institutionalized closeness. The modifiers used - "strategic", "comprehensive", "all-weather", "in a new era" - act as discursive markers signaling the depth of mutual obligations and the level of recognition of the partner (Leksiutina, 2025). From a constructivist perspective, this system of partnerships fosters stable behavioral expectations and encourages states to deepen interactions not only for material but also for symbolic reasons. Central Asia occupies a unique position in this context as a region where all states have achieved a high level of partnership with China, which enhances the effect of normative consolidation and contributes to the formation of a regional identity aligned with Chinese development and security discourse (Leksiutina, 2025). The institutionalization of norms is also manifested in the expansion of multilateral interaction

mechanisms, including the C+CA format at the level of heads of state. The regularity of summits, the establishment of a secretariat, and the expansion of the thematic agenda contribute to the transformation of discursive formulas into elements of managed practice. From a constructivist perspective, it is the repetition of institutional interactions that ensures the transition of norms from the declarative sphere to the sphere of stable expectations and routine behavior, as demonstrated in earlier cases of China's regional institution-building (Cheng, 2011).

The normative architecture is also strengthened through the symbolic dimension of cooperation. Appeals to historical ties and the Silk Road create a shared semantic space in which partnership is presented not as a temporary political project, but as a logical continuation of the historical interconnectedness of the region and China (Liu, 2022). These narratives contribute to the formation of a collective identity, albeit primarily elite and institutional, but with the potential for further internalization (Leksiutina, 2025). Taken together, discursive practices, institutionalization, and symbolic narratives form a stable normative architecture for the China-Central Asian partnership. Analysis of these formulations demonstrates that their repetition, semantic coherence, and embeddedness in institutional mechanisms contribute to the entrenchment of norms of mutual respect, trust, and joint development as intersubjective rules. Within the constructivist theoretical framework, this process let us speak of the formation of a specific regional order based not on coercion or rigid hierarchy, but on socially constructed norms and a reproducible partnership identity.

Historical discourse and the construction of the region's collective identity

Within a constructivist theoretical framework, collective identity is viewed as a primary element of social order, preceding the formation of interests and defining the framework for interpreting permissible forms of interaction. In this context, historical discourse takes on particular significance, as it is through the interpretation of the past that stable notions of "us," "others," and the nature of their interconnections are formed (Wendt, 1999). In relations between China and Central Asia, historical narratives and cultural memory act not as passive reflections of the past, but as an active mechanism for constructing regional identities, within which contemporary cooperation is understood as a continuation of historically established interactions. One of the key elements of this discourse is the Silk Road, which in contemporary academic and political rhetoric functions as a symbolic resource linking China and Central Asia within a single historical space. The image of "the Silk Road" itself represents less a concrete historical reality than a discursive construct, formed retroactively and uniting diverse forms of trade, cultural, and political contacts under a single concept (Kozhin, 2011). Despite the conventionality and research-based nature of this image, it possesses a high symbolic capacity and offers the construction of a narrative of "traditional cooperation" rooted in deep history.

According to constructivist logic, the significance of the Silk Road is determined not so much by its actual role in the past as by its ability to shape intersubjective perceptions of the region's interconnectedness. Through appeals to ancient trade routes, Central Asia and China are presented as naturally connected spaces, historically embedded in a unified process of exchange, mobility, and cultural interaction. This narrative contributes to the formation of an image of the region not as a collection of disparate states, but as a coherent Eurasian space with a shared historical destiny. Historical memory in this context serves as a legitimizing force for contemporary cooperation. Turning to the past allows contemporary initiatives to be interpreted not as the result of ad hoc political calculations, but as a restoration of a "natural" historical order. In this sense, history is used as a normative resource, lending moral and cultural justification to contemporary forms of interaction. This logic is evident in official narratives, where contemporary partnerships are described through the prism of millennia-old ties and historical continuity, and where appeals to the ancient Silk Road frame cooperation as a natural restoration of long-standing connections (Xinhua, June 2025).

The formation of this narrative is based on broader understandings of China's traditional world order and its place in Eurasia. Historiographical interpretations of China's foreign relations, including the concepts of Sinocentrism and the tributary system, have laid the foundation for perceiving China as a civilizational center engaged in long-term interaction with surrounding regions (Fairbank, 1968). It is important to emphasize that these perceptions shaped not only foreign policy practice but also stable identification patterns within which Central Asia was perceived as a space of special significance. At the same time, the development of historiography has revealed the complexity and variability of Chinese understandings of the external world. An analysis of sources shows that the perception of neighboring regions was not reduced to a rigid "center-periphery" dichotomy, but included elements of recognition of the relative equality and autonomy of other political entities (Wang G., 1968; Kryukov, 1980). This facilitates to view historical discourse as a dynamic field in which various interpretations coexisted and competed. From a

constructivist perspective, it is precisely this variability that enables the contemporary reinterpretation of historical narratives in accordance with current normative expectations.

China's historical experience of interaction with Central Asia, a space traditionally designated in Chinese sources as the Western Frontier, occupies a special place in the formation of regional identity. A long history of contacts, including trade, military conflicts, diplomatic missions, and cultural exchanges, has shaped a persistent notion of the region as a zone of strategic involvement (Anufriev, 2009). Even periods of loss of control and the rise of external forces were interpreted in historical memory as temporary aberrations, demonstrating the deep rootedness of Central Asia in the Chinese historical imagination. From a constructivist perspective, such notions are directly relevant to the formation of the region's collective identity. Central Asia is presented not as an external and arbitrary territory, but as a historically significant space of interaction embedded in a broader Eurasian context. This image is actively reproduced in contemporary narratives, where the region is described as the "heart of Eurasia" and a key link between East and West (Xinhua, June 2025). Such formulas foster a notion of structural interconnectedness, within which cooperation is perceived as necessary and natural.

Cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges serve as important tools for reproducing this collective identity. Joint archaeological projects, cultural heritage preservation programs, educational initiatives, and humanitarian contacts create institutional conditions for entrenching historical narratives in everyday practices of interaction. According to constructivist logic, it is the repetition of such practices that facilitates the internalization of identity representations, transferring them from the realm of symbolic discourse to the realm of social reality. Modern forms of cultural interaction, including the restoration of historical monuments, joint research, and the expansion of academic exchanges, enhance the effect of historical continuity, linking the past and present in a single narrative. These practices not only convey a particular understanding of history but also form social networks within which the image of a "common Eurasian space" is reproduced. As a result, collective identity begins to take shape not only at the level of elite discourse, but also through institutionalized forms of interaction between societies (Nuriddenova et al. 2022).

The process of regional community formation is distinctly processual. Collective identity does not emerge suddenly, but rather is formed through the consistent accumulation of shared experience, repeated forms of interaction, and the gradual normalization of notions of interconnectedness. Historical discourse in this context functions as a semantic framework within which individual practices acquire a holistic meaning (Acharya, 2014). Through the constant reproduction of images of the Silk Road, historical cooperation, and cultural affinity, a stable framework for interpreting the regional order is formed. Contemporary narratives of the Silk Road's revival reinforce this process by linking historical memory with prospects for future development. Ancient trade routes are reimagined as symbols of a lost but recoverable Eurasian unity, within which Central Asia once again occupies a central transit and cultural position (Xie, 2024). A key element of this narrative is a reduced emphasis on rigid hierarchical interpretations of the past, alongside a growing focus on mutually beneficial cooperation, reflecting the adaptation of historical images to contemporary normative conditions. Thus, historical discourse in China-Central Asia relations serves as an active tool for constructing the region's collective identity. Through the symbolism of the Silk Road, appeals to cultural memory, and the institutionalization of humanitarian practices, an intersubjective understanding of traditional cooperation, interconnectedness, and strategic involvement is formed. From a constructivist perspective, it is precisely this process that examines the contemporary regional order not as the result of purely material interests, but as a socially constructed reality, rooted in a reinterpreted historical experience and aimed at shaping a common future.

Symbolic and communicative practices in shaping relations between China and Central Asia:-

China's cultural and educational diplomacy as a mechanism for institutionalizing norms and identities in Central Asia:-

Constructivist international relations theory focuses on how social practices, norms, and ideas shape stable patterns of interaction between states. From this perspective, cultural and educational diplomacy is not a secondary supplement to "hard" foreign policy instruments, but an independent mechanism for constructing an intersubjective order. Through regular forms of humanitarian interaction, stable expectations are formed, norms of acceptable behavior are reinforced, and collective understandings of the nature of partnership are created (Adler, 1997). In the context of relations between China and the countries of Central Asia, cultural and educational practices play a key role in institutionalizing long-term cooperation that extends beyond situational political or economic interests. The theoretical starting point for this analysis is the concept of "soft power," which views culture, education, and

humanitarian exchanges as tools for building attractiveness and trust. According to Nye, soft power allows a state to achieve its foreign policy goals not through coercion, but through its ability to shape the preferences of other actors by influencing their values and perceptions (Nye, 2008). In the constructivist perspective, the key factor is not so much the resource of attractiveness per se, but its ability to transform the structure of social expectations and norms, embedding cooperation as "natural" and self-evident.

Liang (2017) defines China's cultural diplomacy as an interactive activity led by the state and aimed at fostering cultural ties with other countries based on principles of equality and cooperation. A key element of this definition is the emphasis on the institutional nature of cultural diplomacy, which is implemented through sustainable forms of educational and cultural exchanges, rather than isolated symbolic actions. The normative content of Chinese cultural diplomacy is largely rooted in the Confucian philosophical tradition. The concepts of harmony, moral responsibility, and "agreement in difference" form the value foundation that informs China's foreign policy and humanitarian practices (Wang, 2010). From a constructivist perspective, these ideas appear not as abstract philosophical categories but as norms that, through repeated socialization practices, are entrenched in international interactions and come to be perceived as a legitimate basis for cooperation. Central Asia occupies a special place in the implementation of this normative framework. The historical legacy of the Silk Road, long-standing forms of transregional interaction, and geographic proximity contribute to the perception of the region as a space of natural cultural and civilizational dialogue. In modern times, this image was updated and institutionalized following Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at Nazarbayev University in 2013, where the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative was first proposed (Baishan et al., 2024). Since then, cultural and educational exchanges have been integrated into the broader framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, acquiring strategic and symbolic significance.

The Belt and Road Initiative was initially positioned not only as an economic project but also as a comprehensive social development platform, encompassing humanitarian and educational dimensions. The scale of the agreements concluded and the involvement of a large number of countries indicate that China views humanitarian cooperation as an integral element in the formation of sustainable partnerships (Baishan et al., 2024). Within constructivist logic, this implies a desire to institutionalize not only economic ties but also the social foundations of interaction. Educational diplomacy is particularly important in this process. The growing number of students from Central Asian countries studying in China indicates the formation of sustainable channels of academic mobility through which future elites and professional personnel are socialized (Baishan et al., 2024). Education in this context serves as a space for the formation of cognitive frameworks and value systems, within which China is perceived as a source of knowledge, technology, and opportunities for social advancement. Confucius Institutes remain the most institutionalized form of China's cultural and educational diplomacy in the region. Their activities focus on teaching the Chinese language, disseminating cultural knowledge, and organizing cultural events, creating a routine space for everyday interaction with Chinese culture (Indeo, 2012). From a constructivist perspective, the routine nature of such practices plays a key role, as it helps normalize collaboration and reduce the perception of cultural influence as external pressure. Research shows that Confucius Institutes create sustainable educational trajectories, through which graduates continue their studies or professional activities related to China (Zhiqun, 2012). This process can be interpreted as a form of deep socialization, in which participants in the interaction become bearers and retransmitters of certain norms and ideas, thereby reinforcing an intersubjective order of collaboration.

An important element of this strategy is the gradual and unobtrusive nature of cultural influence. China deliberately avoids abrupt and overt forms of cultural presence in Central Asia, preferring a long-term, gradual approach through education, language, and humanitarian exchanges (Dadparvar & Azizi, 2019). This approach reduces the risk of developing anti-Chinese sentiment while simultaneously fostering social capital and trust. Alongside humanitarian and cultural formats, the pragmatic dimension of China's educational diplomacy has been strengthening in recent years. The most illustrative example of this process is the development of Lu Ban Workshops, which represent a new format for international cooperation in vocational education. These projects focus on training applied specialists and are closely linked to the socioeconomic development needs of host countries (Yang, 2025). Unlike traditional forms of cultural diplomacy, Lu Ban Workshops integrate educational practices with industrial and technological demands. A key feature of Lu Ban Workshops is their adaptation to local conditions and focus on the real needs of national economies. This approach promotes the perception of these projects as mutually beneficial and equitable, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of China's presence in the region (Yang, 2025). Within constructivist logic, this contributes to the institutionalization of the norm of mutual benefit and joint development, which is consistently articulated in official Chinese discourse. Empirical data on the functioning of Lu Ban workshops in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan demonstrate that these projects are reported as being perceived positively by local elites and students as

a practical resource for social mobility and professional advancement (Xinhua, July 2024). Individual experiences in such programs contribute to the formation of positive associations with China, which enhances the effect of "embedded" legitimization of cooperation at the micro-level. It is important to emphasize that China's cultural and educational diplomacy in Central Asia is developing in close conjunction with the economic and political aspects of interaction. Research on "soft power" emphasizes that the cultural dimension often serves as the foundation upon which economic and political ties are built (Feizi, 2011). In this sense, humanitarian practices do not replace other forms of cooperation, but rather create a social environment conducive to their expansion and deepening. In a broader context, these processes fit into China's strategy of expanding its comprehensive influence in Central Asia. Cultural influence is viewed as the deepest and most long-lasting level of impact, as it affects social attitudes and value orientations (Dadparvar & Azizi, 2019). Hence, China's cultural and educational diplomacy in Central Asia represents a multi-layered process of institutionalizing norms and identities. Confucius Institutes, educational mobility, and Lu Ban workshops function as complementary socialization mechanisms through which stable expectations of cooperation and mutual respect are formed. As a result, political initiatives and economic projects acquire a social foundation, transforming from mere declarations into reproducible practices of regional relations. According to constructivist logic, these practices create the "social fabric" of interactions between China and the countries of Central Asia, ensuring the long-term stability and legitimacy of the emerging regional order.

Media and communication practices as mechanisms for the reproduction of regional community:-

Media and communication practices in relations between China and Central Asian countries perform a constitutive rather than an auxiliary function: they translate diplomatic initiatives and cooperation projects into stable public meanings, through which the reproduction of the notion of a "regional community" becomes possible (Kabar.kg). In constructivist logic, "region" is not automatically determined by geography, but is formed through intersubjective expectations, norms, and identities that are reinforced in repeated acts of communication (Ju & My, 2022). Therefore, media should be viewed not only as a "channel for transmitting information" but also as a space for the production of social knowledge: news narratives, frames, and linguistic choices construct the boundaries of what is permissible, the figures of "us" and "them," and scenarios for future interaction. It is significant that in the contemporary media agenda of the "Central Asia – China" format, communication interaction is institutionalized as a separate area of humanitarian cooperation. (Golden Age Newspaper). At forums and accompanying events surrounding summits, the emphasis shifts to the need for "joint coverage," content exchange, technological innovation, and personnel training, as well as the creation of a collaborative alliance in the media sphere (Kabar.kg). These formulations are important not in themselves, but as elements of norm-setting: they set the expectation that a "correct" information environment should be built on reliability, objectivity, and mutual respect, thereby forming a normative framework for public interpretations of cooperation (Stan Radar).

In this context, media forums and joint initiatives act as mechanisms of "socialization"—a process through which participants learn to speak a common symbolic language, reinforcing collective notions of partnership (Hu, 2025). For example, the motive of "good neighborliness and friendship" is presented as a value framework within which journalists position their professional mission: breaking down stereotypes, fostering trust, and "building bridges of friendship" (Kabar.kg). This approach shifts media activity from a purely professional sphere to the production of regional identity: audiences begin to perceive information partnerships as a sign of "spiritual affinity" and shared values. Also symbolically significant is the fact that key media cooperation initiatives are described through the historical and cultural marker of the Silk Road, which functions as a "memorial resource" and a unifying myth. References to centuries-old ties and the "Silk Road civilization" establish a framework of continuity, where modern cooperation is presented not as a situational calculation, but as a "return" to the natural logic of interaction in the Eurasian space (Stan Radar). In a constructivist analysis, this means that the historical narrative functions as a legitimizing discourse: it lowers the threshold of mistrust and transforms collaborative projects into a morally acceptable and familiar form of interaction (Golden Age Newspaper).

At the same time, institutional media practices strive to create a common "information space" through material and organizational tools: press tours, photo exhibitions, co-production, journalist exchanges, and training (Stan Radar). Not only symbolism is important, but also the communication infrastructure: joint studios, partnership programs, and permanent platforms transform interactions into a repeatable routine, and routine is one of the main mechanisms for the sustainable reproduction of norms (Inbusiness.kz). In this regard, the example of the Silk Way creative studio is indicative as a "common environment" for joint media projects and the exchange of news content, where the emphasis is on the accessibility of information about China for a Kazakhstani audience and the expansion of multilingual formats (Inbusiness.kz). The practice of cultural broadcasting and media "packaging" of the

humanitarian agenda deserves special attention, where cultural diplomacy becomes a series of recognizable media products (Kabar.kg). The launch of the international project "Cultural Ties 2025," which involves the broadcasting of television programs and films in Central Asian countries, is an example of how cultural meanings are disseminated through seriality, repetition, and recognizable genres. (Kabar.kg). From a constructivist perspective, this creates a "common repertoire" of images -modernization, heritage, technological progress - and facilitates the formation of intersubjective expectations: audiences receive similar stories, which form the basis for a predictable perception of their partner.

However, the reproduction of community through media is never linear and unambiguous: it always involves competing narratives, asymmetric interests, and conflicting interpretations. (Burkhanov, 2018) Empirical observations show that Russian-language media in Kazakhstan often describe cooperation with China in neutral or positive terms, while some Kazakh-language platforms are capable of articulating alarming narratives related to land, migration, and suspicions that these initiatives are a cover for expansionism. (Burkhanov, 2018) Within a constructivist framework, this is not simply "information noise" but a manifestation of competing identity projects: some narratives reinforce the image of partnership and mutual benefit, while others reproduce the "us/them" boundary and shift relations into a state of caution. This is precisely why official and semi-official communication practices so persistently emphasize the principles of truthfulness, objectivity, and social responsibility, attempting to establish a norm for the "correct narrative" about cooperation (Stan Radar). In the logic of forum rhetoric, the media's task is to "tell sincere, vivid stories" and avoid the impression of "dry propaganda" - that is, to maintain the legitimacy of discourse through audience trust. This reveals the key constructivist distinction between coercion and persuasion: the stability of community depends not on imposition, but on the recognition of a narrative as plausible and morally acceptable (Ju & My, 2022).

The very category of "media image" helps to explain why communication practices are becoming a field of political significance. A country's image is interpreted as the result of the recipient's cognitive and emotional reactions and can be considered an image formed in the flow of media messages. (Ju & My, 2022) This suggests that the media do not simply reflect relations between China and Central Asia, but actively participate in their "production" through the choice of topics, the frequency of messages, evaluative markers, and the methods of explaining the causes of events. Even when news texts are brief and focus on the fact of an event without in-depth analysis, the very density of repeated messages can reinforce a sense of permanence and "normality" of interaction (Ju & My, 2022). An important clarification is the distinction between traditional and social media, as well as between local and international news sources: these differences create a heterogeneous communicative field where perceptual effects can diverge. Research findings indicate that media consumption overall correlates with greater favorability toward China in Central Asian countries, but social platforms can exacerbate polarization of assessments, simultaneously increasing overall favorability and decreasing support for certain aspects of the Chinese presence, such as those related to employees or specific projects. This is fundamental to constructivist analysis: "public opinion" is not unified; it is segmented across communication channels, meaning "regional community" is reproduced through multiple, sometimes contradictory, information trajectories. (Neafie & et al., 2024)

Equally significant is the phenomenon of media convergence, where traditional media outlets actively participate in social media and messaging apps, blurring the line between "official" and "user-generated" content. As a result, news stories about state visits, infrastructure, or humanitarian initiatives become intertextual events: they circulate simultaneously across television news, social media feeds, and community discussions, acquiring additional shades of meaning. (Neafie et al., 2024) This creates a communication environment where "community" can be strengthened through the repetition of positive stories, but can also be eroded by micro-stories about local conflicts, mistrust, and anxiety (Burkhanov, 2018). In the public rhetoric of contemporary media forums, there is a noticeable attempt to "sew" this heterogeneous field together through the metanarrative of a "community of shared destiny," which defines the value grammar of interaction and claims universality. (Stan Radar) Within the framework of forum discussions, this metanarrative is identified as the foundation of foreign policy and simultaneously as the semantic framework for journalistic cooperation, transforming the media into a "connecting thread" between societies (Stan Radar). From a constructivist interpretation, this means that the media are involved in the production of identity not through direct political decisions, but through the normalization of the language used to describe relationships: if the audience becomes accustomed to the vocabulary of "neighborhood," "mutual benefit," and "common future," these categories begin to structure expectations and assessments of events. (Hu, 2025) Meanwhile, media participants themselves emphasize that building trust is linked to professional contacts and "networks of reliable sources," not just declarations. The logic of "face-to-face" interactions (forums, tours, exchanges) here

serves as a technique for producing trust: it reduces distance, expands empathy, and allows for the formation of an image of a partner through direct impressions, which are then transformed into publications and reports. As a result, the reproduction of regional community takes on a more every day, rather than abstract, character -through stories about people, educational trajectories, professional collaboration, and local change (The Astana Times, June 2025).

As a result, media and communication practices act as mechanisms for the reproduction of regional community at three interconnected levels: (1) discursive - through the consolidation of norms and metanarratives of cooperation; (2) institutional - through the creation of platforms, networks, and infrastructure for joint content production; (3) perceptual - through the formation of media images and the management of frames of perception of China and the Central Asian states.

Conclusion:-

The paper enables to examine relations between China and the Central Asian states as the result of a complex and multi-layered process of social construction, in which ideas, norms, identities, and discursive practices play no less a role than material factors. The constructivist theoretical framework - in its classical and relational-processual dimensions - has demonstrated its heuristic value in explaining the sustainability and reproducibility of Chinese-Central Asian interactions amid resource asymmetries, diverse national strategies, and competition among external actors in the region. The first analytical block demonstrated that China's foreign policy toward Central Asia is shaped not as a direct consequence of economic or power calculations, but as a result of its interpretation of its own identity, historical role, and normative notions of legitimate international behavior. The concepts of "peaceful development," "mutual respect," and the rejection of hierarchical dominance are not simply declarations but elements of social knowledge through which China constructs the image of a responsible and predictable partner. At the same time, the Central Asian states are not passive objects of this process: their foreign policy interests and strategies are shaped by interaction, the institutionalization of cooperation, and the entrenchment of norms of sovereign equality and multi-vector policy.

An analysis of ideas and values in diplomatic relations has demonstrated that the partnership between China and the countries of the region is underpinned by a stable normative architecture formed through recurring discursive formulas, institutional mechanisms, and symbolic narratives. The C+C5 format, the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the hierarchical system of partnerships facilitate the transformation of value systems—mutual trust, joint development, and non-interference—into intersubjective rules of conduct. According to constructivist logic, it is precisely this institutionalized repetition of practices that ensures the long-term sustainability of cooperation and reduces the likelihood of confrontational interpretations. Historical discourse, particularly the image of the Silk Road, is particularly important in shaping regional identity. Its contemporary reinterpretation functions as a symbolic resource, legitimizing cooperation and presenting Central Asia not as a periphery, but as a historically significant space of Eurasian interconnectedness. Historical memory in this case serves not as a reflection of the past, but as a tool for constructing the present and imagined future of a regional order, where interaction between China and the Central Asian countries appears natural and normatively justified.

An analysis of symbolic and communicative practices revealed that cultural, educational, and media diplomacy play a key role in translating abstract norms and values into everyday social reality. Confucius Institutes, educational mobility, and Lu Ban workshops form the social foundation of cooperation, facilitating the socialization of new generations and the accumulation of trust at the micro level. Media, in turn, act not only as channels for information dissemination but also as a space for the production of meanings, where images of partnership, shared destiny, and mutual involvement are formed. At the same time, the media landscape remains heterogeneous and includes competing narratives, confirming the processual and unfinished nature of the formation of a regional community. Taken together, the study's results suggest that the emerging regional order in Central Asia is based not solely on economic interdependence or security considerations, but on a socially constructed system of norms, identities, and discourses. A constructivist analysis demonstrates that the stability of relations between China and the Central Asian states is ensured by these actors' ability to reproduce an intersubjective understanding of partnership as legitimate, predictable, and mutually beneficial. Thus, the article contributes to constructivist studies of regionalism and Eurasian international relations, opening up prospects for further study of the dynamics of competing narratives, the transformation of public perceptions, and the long-term evolution of regional identity.

Key findings:-**- Relations between China and Central Asia are socially constructed.**

The analysis confirms that interactions between China and the Central Asian states are shaped not only by material factors (economics, energy, security), but are also largely determined by intersubjective perceptions, norms, and identities. The interests of the parties are not predetermined, but are constructed through sustained social and institutional interaction.

- Constructivism helps explain the resilience of partnerships amid resource asymmetries.

Despite the obvious economic and political asymmetry between China and the Central Asian countries, relations are characterized by a high degree of stability. This is explained not by a balance of power, but by institutionalized norms of mutual respect, sovereign equality, and non-interference, which legitimize cooperation and reduce the perception of a threat from China.

- The normative architecture of the partnership is formed through recurring discursive practices.

Phrases such as "mutual respect," "mutual benefit," "joint development," and "a community of shared destiny" are not simply rhetorical elements; they function as normative markers. Their regular reproduction in official statements and institutions (such as the SCO and the C+C5 format) helps transform these values into stable rules of interaction and behavioral expectations.

- Historical discourse plays a key role in constructing regional identity.

The image of "the Silk Road" functions as a symbolic resource, legitimizing contemporary cooperation and shaping the perception of Central Asia as a Eurasian space "naturally" interconnected with China. Historical memory is used not as a description of the past, but as a tool for constructing collective identity and normatively justifying regional order.

- Cultural and educational diplomacy institutionalizes norms at the social level.

Confucius Institutes, educational mobility, and Lu Ban workshops serve as mechanisms for deep socialization, through which norms of cooperation are entrenched in everyday practices. These forms of humanitarian interaction create a stable social foundation for partnership and foster trust at the micro level.

- Media are a constitutive element of regional community.

Media and communication practices not only reflect relations between China and Central Asia but actively participate in their production. Through media representations of cultural, educational, and political initiatives, dominant frameworks for interpreting cooperation are formed, normalizing it as "natural" and long-term.

- Regional community is reproduced, but remains processual and heterogeneous.

Despite the dominance of a positive discourse of partnership, the Central Asian media landscape is characterized by competing narratives and segmented audiences. This indicates that the formation of regional identity is not a completed result, but an ongoing process subject to reinterpretation and discursive tensions.

- China-Central Asian relations are shaping a unique normative regional order.

The combination of discursive, institutional, and symbolic practices suggests the emergence of a regional order based not on coercion or rigid hierarchy, but on socially constructed norms of partnership, trust, and mutual participation. This order is reproduced through repeated interactions and has the potential for long-term sustainability.

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