

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA: SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines public and people-to-people diplomacy as an emerging social infrastructure of regionalism in Central Asia, with a comparative focus on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It distinguishes public diplomacy from soft power, cultural diplomacy, citizen diplomacy, Track II diplomacy, and digital diplomacy, and uses “societal diplomacy” as an analytical umbrella for sustained cross-border interaction among state-enabled and non-state actors. Methodologically, the study combines institutional analysis, structured comparison, and qualitative content analysis of legislation, presidential and governmental documents, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation materials, United Nations documents, and peer-reviewed scholarship. The empirical period extends from Uzbekistan’s regional opening after 2017 to 25 September 2026, with earlier developments included where necessary to explain institutional trajectories. The findings identify two complementary models. Uzbekistan has developed a relatively specialized, outward-facing model centred on the SCO Centre for Public Diplomacy. Kazakhstan has historically relied on a distributed ecosystem of interethnic, interfaith, cultural, and multilateral platforms; in 2026, this architecture was reconfigured through the establishment of Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi and its inaugural session. The article argues that these trajectories can be connected through a light, networked Central Asian Public Diplomacy Network aligned with Central Asia–2040. Such an architecture could institutionalize reciprocal exchanges, youth and academic mobility, interfaith dialogue, digital cooperation, and Track II problem-solving while supporting relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, People-To-People Diplomacy, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Regional Integration, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

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Орталық Азиядағы халық дипломатиясы: Қазақстан мен Өзбекстанның әлеуметтік және институционалдық өлшемдері

Аңдатпа. Мақалада қоғамдық және халықтық дипломатия Орталық Азиядағы өңіршілдіктің қалыптасып келе жатқан әлеуметтік инфрақұрылымы ретінде қарастырылып, Қазақстан мен Өзбекстан тәжірибесіне салыстырмалы талдау жасалады. Қоғамдық дипломатия «жұмсақ күштен», мәдени дипломатиядан, азаматтық дипломатиядан, Track II дипломатиясынан және цифрлық дипломатиядан ажыратылады; ал «societal diplomacy» ұғымы мемлекет қолдайтын және мемлекеттік емес акторлардың тұрақты трансшекаралық өзара іс-қимылын қамтитын талдамалық ұғым ретінде пайдаланылады. Әдіснамалық тұрғыдан зерттеу институционалдық талдауды, құрылымдалған салыстыруды және заңнамаға, президенттік және үкіметтік құжаттарға, Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымының материалдарына, БҰҰ құжаттарына және рецензияланатын ғылыми әдебиетке сапалық контент-талдауды біріктіреді. Эмпирикалық кезең Өзбекстанның 2017 жылдан кейінгі өңірлік ашықтық саясатының жандануынан 2026 жылғы 25 қыркүйекке дейінгі аралықты қамтиды; институционалдық траекторияларды түсіндіру үшін қажет болған жағдайда ертеректегі оқиғалар да қарастырылады. Нәтижелер өзара толықтырушы екі модельді айқындайды. Өзбекстанда ШЫҰ Халықтық дипломатия орталығына негізделген салыстырмалы түрде маманданған және сыртқы байланыстарға бағдарланған модель қалыптасты. Қазақстан тарихи тұрғыдан этносаралық, конфессияаралық, мәдени және көпжақты платформалардың бөлінген экожүйесіне сүйенді; 2026 жылы бұл архитектура Қазақстан Халық Кеңесінің құрылуы және оның алғашқы сессиясының өтуі арқылы қайта құрылды. Мақала осы траекторияларды «Орталық Азия–2040» тұжырымдамасымен үйлестірілген ікемді, желілік Орталық Азиялық қоғамдық дипломатия желісі арқылы байланыстыруға болатынын негіздейді. Мұндай архитектура өзара алмасуларды, жастар мен академиялық ұтқырлықты, конфессияаралық диалогты, цифрлық ынтымақтастықты және Track II форматындағы проблемаларды бірлесіп шешуді институционалдандырып, тиісті Тұрақты даму мақсаттарына үлес қоса алады.

Түйін сөздер: қоғамдық дипломатия, халықтық дипломатия, Орталық Азия, Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, өңірлік интеграция, ШЫҰ.

Народная дипломатия в Центральной Азии: социальные и институциональные измерения Казахстана и Узбекистана

Аннотация. В статье публичная и народная дипломатия рассматриваются как формирующаяся социальная инфраструктура регионализма в Центральной Азии с акцентом на сравнительный анализ Казахстана и Узбекистана. Публичная дипломатия разграничивается с «мягкой силой», культурной дипломатией, гражданской дипломатией, дипломатией «второго трека» (Track II) и цифровой дипломатией; понятие «societal diplomacy» используется как аналитическое обозначение устойчивого трансграничного взаимодействия государственных, поддерживаемых государством и негосударственных акторов. Методологически исследование сочетает институциональный анализ, структурированное сравнение и качественный контент-анализ законодательства, президентских и правительственных документов, материалов Шанхайской организации сотрудничества, документов ООН и рецензируемой научной литературы. Эмпирический период охватывает время от активизации региональной открытости Узбекистана после 2017 года до 25 сентября 2026 года; более ранние события учитываются там, где это необходимо для объяснения институциональных траекторий. Выявлены две взаимодополняющие модели. В Узбекистане сформировалась относительно специализированная и внешне ориентированная модель, центром которой выступает Центр народной дипломатии ШОС. Казахстан исторически опирался на распределенную экосистему межэтнических, межрелигиозных, культурных и многосторонних платформ; в 2026 году эта архитектура была перестроена через создание и проведение первой сессии Қазақстан Халық Кеңесі. Обосновывается возможность соединения этих траекторий посредством гибкой сетевой Центральноазиатской сети публичной дипломатии, согласованной с концепцией «Центральная Азия-2040». Такая архитектура способна институционализировать взаимные обмены, молодежную и академическую мобильность, межрелигиозный диалог, цифровое сотрудничество и решение проблем в формате Track II, одновременно содействуя достижению соответствующих Целей устойчивого развития.

Ключевые слова: публичная дипломатия, народная дипломатия, Центральная Азия, Казахстан, Узбекистан, региональная интеграция, ШОС.

Introduction

International politics is increasingly shaped by a paradox. Interstate rivalry, geopolitical fragmentation, information disorder and transnational security risks have increased the demand for resilient diplomatic channels, yet the legitimacy and practical reach of purely official communication are often insufficient to sustain trust across societies. Public diplomacy therefore matters not because it replaces conventional diplomacy, but because it operates in the social space in which foreign-policy decisions are interpreted, accepted, contested and translated into long-term perceptions [1]. Nye's concept of soft power clarifies why attraction, credibility and the perceived legitimacy of policy can affect international outcomes, while the public-diplomacy literature demonstrates that the mechanisms through which such attraction is cultivated are institutionally diverse and increasingly relational. Nye, Cull, Melissen and Gilboa provide complementary rather than interchangeable foundations for that argument.

Central Asia offers a particularly important setting for studying this transformation. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan possess dense historical, cultural, linguistic, economic and human interconnections, while post-Soviet state-building produced strong sovereign institutions and uneven formal regionalization. Earlier analyses

often assessed Central Asian regionalism in terms of its failure to reproduce highly institutionalized integration models [2]. More recent scholarship has instead emphasized regional practices, endogenous ordering, consultation and forms of cooperation that do not necessarily require supranational authority.

This conceptual shift has acquired growing empirical relevance. The Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State have contributed to a more explicitly Central Asian framework for regional coordination, and in 2024, the five states approved the Concept for the Development of Regional Cooperation "Central Asia-2040", prepared at Kazakhstan's initiative. Official Kazakhstani materials frame the concept as a long-term guide for five-sided cooperation across security, connectivity, innovation, environmental challenges and common regional development [3].

The social dimension of this regionalism, however, remains less systematically institutionalized than presidential, diplomatic and economic cooperation. The present study builds on an original Uzbek-language manuscript that identified culture, education, science, youth, sport, tourism, information technologies, heritage preservation and civil-society contacts as major fields of people-to-people diplomacy. The present article develops that argument at the conceptual and comparative levels. Existing studies of cultural and public diplomacy in Central Asia also demonstrate the relevance of

cultural instruments, external public-diplomacy models and national adaptation, but they do not by themselves provide a comparative institutional account of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as complementary regional trajectories [4]. Rather than treating xalq diplomatiyasi (people-to-people diplomacy) as a generic designation for all benevolent international contacts, this article asks how distinct varieties of societal interaction can become durable mechanisms of regional cooperation.

Three questions guide the analysis. First, how should public diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, citizen diplomacy, Track II diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and digital diplomacy be distinguished in a Central Asian context? Second, what do the institutional trajectories of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan reveal about specialized and distributed approaches to societal diplomacy? Third, what institutional architecture could connect the existing national and multilateral mechanisms without creating a costly or politically unrealistic supranational organization?

The central argument is that public and people-to-people diplomacy in Central Asia can be conceptualized as an emerging social infrastructure of regionalism. Uzbekistan represents a relatively specialized, outward-facing, and SCO-anchored trajectory, most visibly through the SCO People's Diplomacy Centre in Uzbekistan [5]. Kazakhstan has historically followed a more distributed trajectory involving consultative, interethnic, interfaith, cultural and multilateral institutions. The Kazakhstani model entered a major period of institutional reconfiguration in 2026 with the establishment of Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi. Accordingly, the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan is treated here as an institutional predecessor and a source of accumulated experience rather than as an unchanged present-day institution.

The article contributes to the literature in three respects. Conceptually, it advances the notion of people-to-people regionalism, defined as relational capacity generated through repeated cross-border interactions among institutions and social groups. Empirically, it brings the comparison of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan up to 25 September 2026, including the inaugural session of Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi on 23-24 September 2026. Practically, it proposes a Central Asian Public Diplomacy Network (CAPDN) aligned with Central Asia-2040 and selected UN Sustainable Develop-

ment Goals. The network is conceived not as another supranational body but as a coordination architecture connecting institutions that already exist [6].

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative comparative research design focused on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Case selection follows a most-similar systems logic: the two states share geographic proximity, extensive bilateral ties, historical and cultural interconnections, and a growing commitment to Central Asian regional cooperation, while differing in the institutional organization of public and people-to-people diplomacy. Three complementary methods are used. First, institutional analysis identifies the legal mandates, organizational locations, and policy functions of relevant bodies and initiatives. Second, structured comparison evaluates both cases against common dimensions: institutional specialization, state-society interface, target publics, multilateral anchoring, thematic reach, continuity, digital capacity, and links to regional policy. Third, qualitative content analysis is applied to legislation, presidential and governmental documents, SCO and United Nations materials, and peer-reviewed scholarship. The documentary corpus is purposively selected for relevance and authority rather than statistical representativeness, and official documents are treated as evidence of formal mandates and declared policy objectives, not as proof that intended outcomes were achieved. The empirical period runs from the acceleration of Uzbekistan's regional opening after 2017 through 25 September 2026; earlier material is included where necessary to explain institutional trajectories. Source triangulation is used to compare official records with academic literature. The study evaluates institutional capacity and plausible mechanisms – repeated interaction, continuity of communication, cross-border networking, and opportunities for regional identity formation – without claiming that public diplomacy independently causes regional integration, conflict prevention, or measurable changes in mass attitudes.

Main part

Comparative Analysis

Uzbekistan's contemporary trajectory in societal diplomacy is closely connected with

its broader reorientation toward Central Asian cooperation after 2017. Greater emphasis on good-neighbourliness, political dialogue, cross-border connectivity and interaction with neighbouring societies created a more enabling environment for people-to-people relations. One particularly distinctive institutional manifestation is the SCO People's Diplomacy Centre in Uzbekistan.

Official SCO material surrounding the Centre's development defined its mission broadly: strengthening mutual trust and good-neighbourliness, supporting interethnic and intercivilizational dialogue, developing cultural and humanitarian links, expanding interaction among civil-society organizations, youth and women, and facilitating media and information contacts [7]. The Centre therefore represents more than cultural programming narrowly understood. Its formal logic combines elements of public diplomacy, people-to-people exchange and multilateral civil-society networking.

This institutional role became increasingly visible in the SCO's wider cultural-humanitarian agenda. The second SCO Public Diplomacy Forum was held in Tashkent in May 2022 under a theme linking people's diplomacy and mutual understanding with development; official SCO reporting connected such interaction to cooperation in science, education, culture, sport, tourism and city-to-city relations [8]. The 2022 Samarkand summit documentation also recognized the role of public-diplomacy institutions and people-to-people contacts within the organization's broader cooperation.

Institutional continuity remained visible after Uzbekistan's SCO chairmanship. In March 2025, SCO Secretary-General Nurlan Yermekbayev visited the Centre and discussed cooperation with Kabuljon Sabirov in fields including culture, science, technology, education, information and journalism [5]. During 2026, the SCO's cultural-humanitarian agenda included multiple formats relevant to people-to-people diplomacy, including women's leadership, science, education, innovation and humanitarian cooperation.

These developments support the characterization of Uzbekistan's model as relatively specialized and externally oriented. A dedicated centre gives people's diplomacy a recognizable institutional address, allows expertise and institutional memory to accumulate and makes it easier to convene heterogeneous actors under a common framework. Association

with the SCO also gives the institution access to a much wider multinational network.

Specialization nonetheless has limitations. A designated centre may overlap with the functions of ministries, universities, friendship societies, cultural institutions, youth bodies, NGOs, and other organizations. It may also become excessively dependent on a single institutional agenda or funding stream. The appropriate policy response is therefore not further concentration, but network governance: a specialist institution can act as a hub without becoming a monopoly over societal diplomacy.

Kazakhstan offers a contrasting institutional trajectory. Historically, the country relied less on a single specialized public-diplomacy centre and more on a distributed ecosystem of institutions concerned with interethnic interaction, social cohesion, interfaith dialogue, international humanitarian initiatives and consultative participation.

For approximately three decades, the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan represented an important component of this ecosystem. Its primary mandate was domestic, but its institutional experience in ethnocultural representation, dialogue, mediation and societal consultation generated resources with international relevance. Kazakhstani scholarly literature has associated people's diplomacy and cultural diplomacy with interethnic dialogue, cultural exchange and broader international relations [9].

However, a publishable article updated to September 2026 must reflect a major institutional change. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's address to the fifth National Kurultai proposed Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi as a high-level consultative mechanism preserving strategic continuity with earlier consultative institutions. The new framework was subsequently formalized in constitutional legislation [10].

The Constitutional Law "Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi" was adopted on 5 June 2026 and entered into force on 1 July 2026, simultaneously invalidating the 2008 Law on the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. The new framework defines Halyq Kenesi as the highest constitutional consultative body representing the interests of the people, with powers that include national dialogue, public harmony and interaction with civil society and international organizations [6]. The institutional transition moved from legal establishment to operational launch in September: the President convened the first

session for 23–24 September 2026, and the inaugural session formally began the work of the new body. This development allows the article to treat the Assembly as an institutional predecessor and accumulated repertoire of societal diplomacy while analysing Halyq Kenesi as an operating, though still new, constitutional framework.

A second major Kazakhstani component is the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Its importance to public diplomacy lies in its ability to transform Kazakhstan’s domestic and international identity as a site of interfaith dialogue into a recurrent transnational platform. The eighth Congress, held in Astana on 17–18 September 2025, adopted the Astana Peace Declaration 2025. The declaration linked interreligious and intercultural dialogue with peace, social stability, participation of young people and women, education, environmental responsibility, responsible approaches to artificial intelligence and implementation of the SDGs [11].

This evolution is analytically revealing. Interfaith diplomacy in Kazakhstan is no longer confined to theological dialogue. It increasingly intersects with peacebuilding, youth engagement, digital ethics, environmental responsibility and the governance of societal diversity. The Congress therefore illustrates how a platform originally defined around religion can perform wider functions of societal and intercivilizational diplomacy.

Kazakhstan’s role in Central Asian regional architecture is further reflected in Central Asia–2040. Prepared at Kazakhstan’s initiative and approved at the 2024 summit in Astana, the concept sets out a long-term perspective for five-sided regional cooperation and is linked in official materials to historical-cultural commonality, stability, connectivity, innovation, environmental questions and a shared development horizon [3]. It offers a suitable political umbrella for institutionalizing a stronger people-to-people component because it is Central Asian in ownership while remaining compatible with sovereign, intergovernmental regionalism.

The Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan bilateral relationship constitutes an especially important laboratory for this argument. Their Treaty on Allied Relations was signed on 22 December 2022 and entered into force on 30 May 2024 [12]. The alliance framework is increasingly accompanied by mechanisms below the presidential level.

In August 2024, the two presidents supported transformation of the regional forum into a Council of Regional Leaders. The first meeting of the Council of Regional Leaders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan took place in Aktau on 24 July 2026, providing governors, ministries, agencies and other actors with a more direct subnational channel [13]. Such a mechanism is significant for people-to-people regionalism because border and regional authorities operate close to practical issues – mobility, trade, tourism, cultural exchange, transport and local economic cooperation – that shape everyday perceptions of bilateral relations.

The social layer is reinforced by educational and cultural-humanitarian cooperation. In 2026, the bilateral agenda continued to emphasize cultural and educational links, while the two culture ministries agreed on a 2026–2027 cultural-humanitarian cooperation plan [14]. The implication is that allied relations increasingly rest not only on presidential and intergovernmental agreements but on a denser set of subnational, educational and cultural contacts.

A broader regional development strengthens the argument. In July 2026, Uzbekistan’s president described deeper Central Asian cooperation as gradually contributing to a common regional identity while preserving national identities, and called for stronger institutions, direct regional interaction, digital services and integrated infrastructure for education, science and innovation [15]. This formulation closely corresponds to the mechanism proposed in the present article: regional identity does not require the weakening of national identity; it can develop through repeated cooperation layered above sovereign states.

The Uzbek and Kazakhstani cases can therefore be summarized as follows.

Table 1 - Comparative Institutional Models of Societal Diplomacy

Dimension	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	Comparative Implication
Core trajectory	Specialized, outward-facing and strongly SCO-linked	Historically distributed; undergoing institutional consolidation/re-configuration in 2026	The models are complementary rather than mutually exclusive

Dimension	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	Comparative Implication
Key institutional anchor	SCO Centre for Public Diplomacy in Uzbekistan	Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan as institutional predecessor; Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi from 2026; Congress infrastructure	A regional network can connect specialized hubs with broader institutional ecosystems
Primary strengths	Clear mandate, recognizable convening platform, strong SCO interface	Dense experience in state–society, interethnic, interfaith, and multilateral dialogue	Specialization and institutional diversity can reinforce one another
Main risks	Functional duplication; over-concentration; dependence on a particular organizational agenda	Loss of accumulated networks during institutional restructuring; diffusion of responsibility	Regional architecture should preserve plural nodes and transparent coordination
Regional channels	SCO forums, youth, media, education, culture, think tanks	Central Asia–2040, interfaith Congress, UN SDG infrastructure, regional and bilateral councils	Connecting these channels can deepen people-to-people regionalism

The comparison should not be interpreted as a ranking. Uzbekistan’s relative advantage lies in institutional clarity and the existence of a recognizable centre dedicated to people’s diplomacy. Kazakhstan’s comparative strength lies in the breadth of an ecosystem that connects domestic societal management with interfaith, multilateral, and regional initiatives. The Uzbek model risks excessive institutional concentration; whereas the Kazakhstani model risks fragmentation or loss of continuity during restructuring. Their combination is therefore more promising than the replication of either model throughout the region.

Table 2 - Timeline of Selected Institutional and Policy Developments

Period	Initiative or development	Regional significance
1995-2025	Development of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan as a major state–society platform	Accumulation of institutional experience in inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue
2018-2019	Institutional development of the SCO People’s Diplomacy Centre in Uzbekistan	Specialized institutionalization of people’s diplomacy
2022	Second SCO People’s Diplomacy Forum in Tashkent and Samarkand SCO summit	Greater normalization of people-to-people and cultural-humanitarian cooperation within the SCO
2022-2024	Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan Treaty on Allied Relations signed and enters into force	Stronger political framework for bilateral societal and interregional cooperation
2024	Central Asia-2040 approved at the Astana Consultative Meeting	Long-term framework for endogenous five-state regional cooperation
2025	Eighth Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions; UN regional SDG architecture in Almaty	Connects interfaith dialogue, peace, youth, digital ethics, and sustainable development
2026	Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi established in law and preceding Assembly regulatory structure reorganized	Major transition in Kazakhstan’s consultative and harmony architecture
2026	First Council of Regional Leaders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and new cultural-humanitarian program	Adds subnational and cultural dimensions to allied relations
2026	Expansion of SCO people-to-people, youth, think-tank, women’s, and intercultural formats	Indicates denser multilevel societal interaction within the wider SCO space

The bilateral case illustrates why people-to-people diplomacy should not be treated as ceremonial friendship alone. Regions sharing borders confront practical questions of movement, transport, trade, environmental management, tourism, educational access, and cultural exchange. Repeated cooperation among universities, professional communities, regional leaders, and civil-society institutions can lower the social transaction costs involved in implementing interstate agreements. Such connections cannot eliminate political disputes, but they can multiply the number of channels through which relations are maintained.

In this respect, reciprocity is critical. Public diplomacy ceases to build trust if neighbouring societies perceive it merely as a vehicle for uni-

lateral national branding or political messaging. The social infrastructure of regionalism requires opportunities for Central Asian partners to co-design programmes, rotate leadership, and retain identifiable institutional ownership.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

The comparison supports the central proposition that the next stage of Central Asian public diplomacy should focus on network-building rather than event accumulation. Counting conferences, festivals, visits, or media products risks confusing diplomatic activity with institutionalization. A more meaningful test is whether relationships become reciprocal, durable, cross-sectoral, and capable of continuing through political and bureaucratic change.

This perspective also clarifies the connection between public diplomacy and regional integration. The relevant mechanism is not persuasion alone. Repeated interaction creates familiarity; familiarity can reduce uncertainty; professional networks can preserve communication; and shared projects can produce constituencies with an interest in continuing cooperation. These processes do not mechanically create trust, but they generate conditions in which trust and practical cooperation are more likely to be sustained.

University consortia, for example, can maintain research collaboration and mobility. Local governments can address tourism, urban development and border-region connectivity. Think tanks can test policy options in settings that are less politically restrictive than formal negotiation. Interfaith and cultural figures can preserve channels of dialogue when governmental rhetoric becomes tense. Youth programs can create long-term professional relationships among future academic, administrative and business elites. Digital platforms can extend access to educational and cultural resources beyond participants who can physically travel.

These mechanisms suggest a move from event-based people's diplomacy to networked people-to-people regionalism.

The proposed institutional response is a Central Asian Public Diplomacy Network (CAPDN). It should be established not as a treaty-based supranational organization but as a light coordination architecture associated politically with the Consultative Meetings of

the Heads of State and the Central Asia-2040 agenda. Such a design would be more consistent with Central Asia's current preference for sovereign, intergovernmental regional cooperation [16].

A rotating coordination function or small secretariat could work with national focal points nominated by all five Central Asian states. Those focal points should not monopolize national public diplomacy. Their role should be coordinative: mapping institutions, maintaining a common project registry and calendar, issuing transparent calls for joint projects, facilitating cross-border institutional matchmaking, monitoring reciprocity, and supporting evaluation.

For Kazakhstan, participation could draw on Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi's consultative architecture, institutions responsible for interfaith dialogue and the Congress, foreign-policy and cultural bodies, universities, think tanks and other societal organizations. The first session of Halyq Kenesi in September 2026 moved the institution beyond the purely transitional stage, although its long-term practices and inter-institutional routines remain in formation. Preservation of accumulated expertise from the preceding Assembly ecosystem should therefore remain an explicit objective [17].

The network should develop around thematic clusters rather than one undifferentiated program. A youth and education cluster could facilitate student and researcher mobility, joint summer schools, co-taught modules, multilingual academic resources, networks of young researchers and regional innovation competitions. A culture and heritage cluster could link museums, libraries, archives, archaeological and conservation specialists, writers and translators. Shared digitization and preservation projects would be particularly valuable because Central Asian cultural heritage often transcends contemporary state borders.

A Track II and mediation cluster should connect think tanks, universities, former officials, and conflict-resolution specialists for problem-solving discussions concerning issues that are difficult to explore in formal settings. This would conform more closely to the established Track II and multi-track diplomacy literature than the common practice of applying the term to any unofficial cultural event [18].

An interfaith and intercultural dialogue cluster could draw on Kazakhstan's accumulated Congress experience without reducing the

network to religious dialogue. The 2025 Astana Peace Declaration connects interreligious engagement with education, youth, peace, digital responsibility and sustainable development, demonstrating the potential for such an expanded agenda [11].

A digital-resilience cluster should focus on digital literacy, responsible AI, synthetic media, online hate, cross-border fact-checking research and the institutional capacity to maintain interaction during crises. Digital diplomacy should not become a centralized information campaign. Scholarship on relational and digital-diplomacy shows that technology changes the communicative environment and that credibility depends on interaction and networks rather than one-way broadcasting [19].

A climate, water and public-health cluster would expand people-to-people diplomacy beyond the traditional cultural-humanitarian field. Scientists, universities, local communities, professional associations and NGOs can support official negotiations by providing joint knowledge, professional continuity and public communication.

Sports, tourism and city diplomacy should likewise be incorporated. Sports competitions, traditional games, festivals, joint tourism routes, gastronomic initiatives and sister-city programs can reach audiences that academic and diplomatic institutions rarely engage. Their value, however, should be assessed according to the durability of the partnerships they create, not attendance numbers alone.

The digital component deserves particular safeguards. A regional platform seeking to build trust should operate with transparent institutional authorship, multilingual access, appropriate protection of personal information, identifiable distinctions between dialogue and political advertising, and real opportunities for participants to respond. A highly centralized propaganda-oriented mechanism would undermine the very relational credibility the network is intended to cultivate. Evaluation should therefore move beyond output indicators. The number of conferences, posts, participants or signed memoranda is useful administratively but insufficient analytically. CAPDN could monitor:

- The proportion of genuinely reciprocal projects.
- Institutional and geographic diversity.
- Participation of women and young people.

- Continuity of partnerships over several years.

- Jointly authored research and cultural products.

- Creation of new cross-border organizational ties.

- Involvement of non-state partners in project design.

- Where reliable survey data are available, changes in knowledge, attitudes, or trust.

For Track II initiatives, evaluation should consider whether relationships or ideas feed into policy processes while protecting the confidentiality necessary for problem-solving dialogue.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a useful normative and policy framework, though societal diplomacy should not be reduced to SDG implementation alone. The 2030 Agenda explicitly places partnership and integrated action at the centre of sustainable development [20].

The strongest links are with SDG 16, through dialogue, conflict prevention, and inclusive institutions; SDG 17, through multi-stakeholder partnerships; SDG 4, through educational and scientific cooperation; SDG 10, through inclusion and intercultural engagement; and SDG 11.4, through cultural heritage preservation. Water and environmental cooperation can also support SDGs 6 and 13 [20].

Kazakhstan provides an important institutional interface in this area. In August 2025, Kazakhstan and the United Nations formalized the establishment in Almaty of the UN Regional Centre for the Sustainable Development Goals for Central Asia and Afghanistan, designed to facilitate coordinated regional action, knowledge and collaboration among governments and other stakeholders [21]. CAPDN should therefore cooperate with the UN regional infrastructure instead of duplicating it.

Three strategic risks must be addressed. The first is politicization. When universities, cultural institutions or civic organizations are treated only as instruments for promoting government narratives, their independent credibility can deteriorate. The second is asymmetry. Central Asian states and institutions possess different financial, demographic, and administrative capacities. Better-funded countries should not automatically control agendas. Rotation, co-design and shared ownership should therefore be built into governance. The third is institutional proliferation. Central Asian states already participate in the SCO, CICA, the Or-

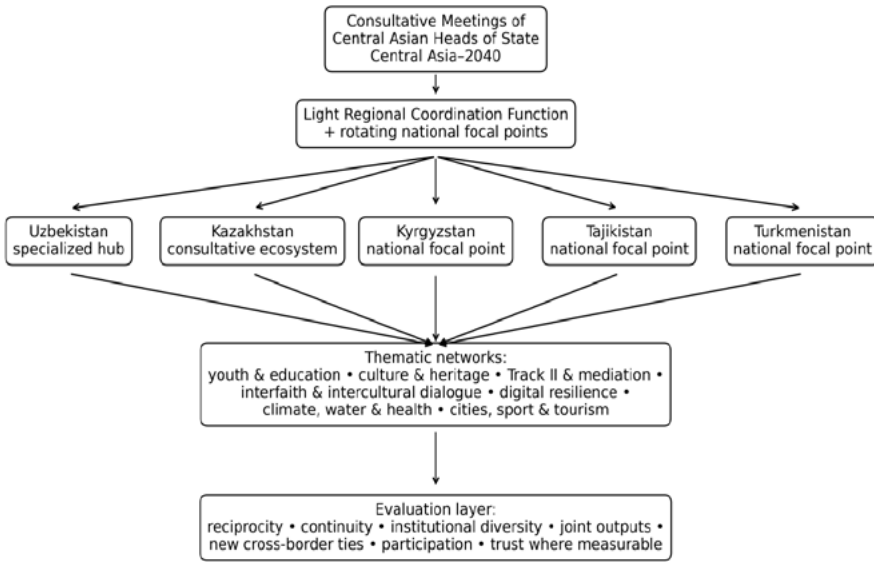
ganization of Turkic States, CIS structures, UN programs and numerous “Central Asia Plus” mechanisms. CAPDN would add value only if it connects existing institutions and addresses a genuine coordination gap, rather than creating another cycle of high-level meetings.

Implementation should consequently be incremental.

The first stage should map existing people-to-people and public-diplomacy institutions across the five states. The second should establish national focal points and a multilingual digital registry. The third should create a

small competitive funding mechanism for projects that involve organizations from at least two Central Asian states, with preference for three or more. The fourth should establish thematic networks with rotating coordinators. The fifth should publish a biennial Central Asian Societal Connectivity Report measuring cross-border institutional relations and, where methodologically possible, incorporating comparative public-opinion data.

Such a sequence would make public diplomacy increasingly evidence-based without requiring a large new organization.



CAPDN is conceived as a networked coordination architecture, not a supranational organization.

Figure 1 - Proposed Central Asian Public Diplomacy Network

Table 3 - Proposed CAPDN Policy Modules and Sustainable Development Goal Linkages

Policy module	Illustrative instruments	Principal SDG link
Youth and education	Mobility, joint modules, summer schools, and young-researcher networks	SDG 4; SDG 17
Culture and heritage	Museum and archival digitization, translation, restoration, and shared heritage projects	SDG 11.4; SDG 17
Track II and mediation	Expert dialogues, border-region problem-solving, and mediation training	SDG 16; SDG 17
Interfaith and intercultural dialogue	Youth networks, educational dialogue, and anti-hate initiatives	SDG 10; SDG 16
Digital resilience	Media literacy, verification networks, AI, and synthetic-media dialogue	SDG 9; SDG 16
Climate, water and health	Professional networks, citizen science, and cross-border public communication	SDGs 3, 6, 13 and 17
Cities, sport and tourism	Sister-city networks, routes, festivals, sports, and destination cooperation	SDGs 8, 11 and 17

Conclusion

Public diplomacy in Central Asia is entering a qualitatively different stage. The region does not lack declarations supporting friendship, good-neighbourliness, and cultural exchange. The more significant question is whether such commitments can be embedded in institutions and networks that persist across political cycles and connect citizens, professionals and communities to regional cooperation.

The comparison between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan demonstrates that relevant foundations already exist, but they have developed through different institutional logics. Uzbekistan has established a relatively specialized model in which the SCO People's Diplomacy Centre serves as a visible organizational hub and connects national initiatives to the SCO's expanding cultural-humanitarian agenda. Official SCO materials confirm the Centre's orientation toward trust, cultural-humanitarian ties and civil-society interaction, while later SCO initiatives show continued expansion of people-to-people formats.

Kazakhstan has historically relied on a more distributed institutional model, combining interethnic consultation, interfaith diplomacy, cultural initiatives and multilateral platforms. The 2026 establishment of Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi represents not a reason to disregard the earlier Assembly experience but a reason to analyze institutional continuity and change more carefully. By 23-24 September 2026, the new body had held its inaugural session, marking the transition from legal establishment to operational activity [6]. The Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, Central Asia-2040 and the UN regional sustainable-development platform in Almaty provide additional outward-facing components whose significance extends beyond national boundaries.

The Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan relationship illustrates how the two trajectories can converge. The formal architecture of allied relations now operates alongside direct interregional cooperation and structured cultural-humanitarian engagement [12]. These mechanisms cannot replace negotiations over trade, transport, water, security or borders, but they can make co-operation more socially resilient by multiplying channels of communication and developing groups with a practical interest in continuity.

The principal conclusion is therefore that Central Asia should move from event-based

people's diplomacy toward networked people-to-people regionalism. A Central Asian Public Diplomacy Network aligned with Central Asia-2040 could connect national focal points, universities, think tanks, cultural institutions, interfaith platforms, young people, media organizations, municipalities and professional communities. Its objective should not be to manufacture a single homogeneous Central Asian identity or subordinate civil society to governmental communication. It should provide an institutional environment in which distinct national societies can interact repeatedly while gradually developing a practical sense of regional belonging.

Trust, from this perspective, is not a rhetorical resource that can be activated only during crises. It is an institutional asset accumulated through repeated interaction. Official diplomacy remains indispensable, but it becomes more resilient when societies have parallel channels of knowledge, dialogue and cooperation. In Central Asia, where common history and geographic proximity create both opportunities and sensitivities, public diplomacy can help transform cultural affinity into sustained regional capacity.

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Author Contributions

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