

SECURITY AND INTEGRATION OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS: TRANSFORMATION OF APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the analysis of the transformation of approaches to security and integration processes in Central Asian countries in the context of modern geopolitical instability. The authors explore the impact of global challenges on the regional security architecture and economic development of Central Asian states. The paper examines the key factors determining the need to review the existing strategies for the development of the region, including economic, social and environmental aspects. Special attention is paid to the analysis of the possibilities of forming a new agenda for regional cooperation, considering the specifics of the internal challenges of each Central Asian state. The authors substantiate the directions of transformation of political and economic approaches in the context of a changing world order, focusing on solving cross-border issues, strengthening multilateral cooperation and developing intraregional ties. The article presents recommendations on the formation of a sustainable model of security and integration that can ensure the stable development of the countries of the region in the face of global uncertainty. The study contributes to the understanding of modern processes of regional transformation and offers a conceptual framework for developing effective strategies for the development of the Central Asian region.

Key words: Central Asia, Foreign Policy, Security, Integration, Structured Approach, Strategies, Challenges and Risks.

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Заманауи геосаяси шиеленіс жағдайындағы Орталық Азия елдерінің қауіпсіздігі мен интеграциясы: тәсілдер трансформациясы

Аңдатпа. Мақала қазіргі геосаяси тұрақсыздық жағдайында Орталық Азия елдеріндегі қауіпсіздік пен интеграциялық процестерді қамтамасыз ету тәсілдерінің трансформациясын талдауға арналған. Авторлар жаһандық сын-қатерлердің Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің аймақтық қауіпсіздік архитектурасына және экономикалық дамуына әсерін зерттейді. Жұмыста экономикалық, әлеуметтік және экологиялық аспектілерді қоса алғанда, өңірдің қолданыстағы даму стратегияларын қайта қарау қажеттілігін айқындайтын негізгі факторлар қарастырылады. Орталық Азияның әрбір мемлекетінің ішкі сын-қатерлерінің ерекшелігін ескеретін өңірлік ынтымақтастықтың жаңа күн тәртібін қалыптастыру мүмкіндіктерін талдауға ерекше назар аударылады. Авторлар өзгермелі әлемдік тәртіп жағдайында саяси және экономикалық тәсілдерді трансформациялау бағыттарын негіздейді, шекара маңындағы мәселелерді шешуге, көпжақты ынтымақтастықты нығайтуға және өңірішілік байланыстарды дамытуға баса назар аударады. Мақалада жаһандық белгісіздік жағдайында аймақ елдерінің тұрақты дамуын қамтамасыз етуге қабілетті қауіпсіздік пен интеграцияның тұрақты моделін қалыптастыру бойынша ұсыныстар берілген. Зерттеу аймақтық трансформацияның заманауи процестерін түсінуге ықпал етеді және Орталық Азия аймағының тиімді даму стратегияларын әзірлеудің тұжырымдамалық негіздерін ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, сыртқы саясат, қауіпсіздік, интеграция, құрылымдамалық көзқарас, стратегиялар, сын-қатерлер мен тәуекелдер.

Безопасность и интеграция стран Центральной Азии в условиях современной геополитической напряженности: трансформация подходов

Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу трансформации подходов к обеспечению безопасности и интеграционным процессам в странах Центральной Азии в условиях современной геополитической нестабильности. Авторы исследуют влияние глобальных вызовов на региональную архитектуру безопасности и экономическое развитие центрально-азиатских государств. В работе рассматриваются ключевые факторы, определяющие необходимость пересмотра существующих стратегий развития региона, включая экономические, социальные и экологические аспекты. Особое внимание уделяется анализу возможностей формирования новой повестки регионального сотрудничества, учитывающей специфику внутренних вызовов каждого государства Центральной Азии. Авторы обосновывают направления трансформации политических и экономических подходов в условиях изменяющегося мирового порядка, делая акцент на решении приграничных вопросов, укреплении многостороннего сотрудничества и развитии внутрирегиональных связей.

В статье представлены рекомендации по формированию устойчивой модели безопасности и интеграции, способной обеспечить стабильное развитие стран региона в условиях глобальной неопределенности. Исследование вносит вклад в понимание современных процессов региональной трансформации и предлагает концептуальные основы для выработки эффективных стратегий развития центрально-азиатского региона.

Ключевые слова. Центральная Азия, внешняя политика, безопасность, интеграция, структурированный подход, стратегии, вызовы и риски.

Introduction

Currently, Kazakhstan's foreign policy priorities are predominantly directed toward fostering regional and multilateral cooperation [1]. Within the framework of bilateral relations, particular significance is attached to neighboring states, as well as to strategic partnerships with the United States and the European Union. On the Asian continent, Kazakhstan places emphasis on active engagement within such platforms as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Furthermore, considerable attention is devoted to expanding dialogue with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the League of Arab States, and other international organizations, even in cases where Kazakhstan is not a member state [2].

Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategy is underpinned by the principles of multi-hectorism and pragmatism. These principles entail maintaining a balanced distance and neutrality in relation to global and regional conflicts and contradictions, while simultaneously prioritizing the promotion of equal and constructive relations. Such an approach is pursued primarily with immediate neighbors, but also extends to other states and international institutions, always with due regard for Kazakhstan's national interests.

Methodology

The research is primarily grounded in a systemic approach, drawing upon the principle of constructivism in international, regional, and national relations. This framework necessitated the assessment of external actors' influence on Central Asia. The core methodological toolkit combines synthesis of the following:

a) Qualitative methods such as comparative analysis, discourse analysis, examination of official documents, and case studies (e.g., the assessment by Central Asian states and their elites of Russia's war in Ukraine);

b) Quantitative methods including statistical analysis and media content analysis.

The sources of data encompass: expert interviews (with Central Asian political scientists and diplomats), official documents (Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, policy initiatives, and cooperation strategies), as well as databases of the UN and the World Bank, IMF reports, and others; in addition, scholarly articles, reports, dissertations, monographs, and related literature were utilized.

Based on the above, the issues were examined in the following sequence:

- the impact of the external environment on the attitudes of Central Asian states and their elites toward Russia's military actions in Ukraine;
- the application of a structured approach to ensuring the security and integration of Central Asian countries;
- conclusions and policy recommendations.

Main part

As noted by independent analyst on energy policy and geopolitical risks, D. Simeonidis (The Hague, the Netherlands), Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to unprecedented shifts in the global geopolitical order [3]. The war in Ukraine has fundamentally altered the security landscape across the entire post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia [4]. Moreover, Central Asia has suffered disproportionately compared to other regions of the world from the Russian Federation's aggression and occupation of Ukrainian territories [5]. The Central Asian states have experienced the repercussions of sanctions imposed on Russia, including economic decline, depreciation of national currencies, shortages of goods and food supplies, price inflation, reduction in remittances, and related effects.

The protracted war waged by the Russian Federation in Ukraine has resulted in profound transformations of the geopolitical landscape in Central Asia. At the same time, amid intensifying isolation policies, Russia has sought to preserve its influence in the region and even strengthen economic relations.

In recent years, Central Asia has faced the consequences of significant challenges: the collapse of Afghanistan, the January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the impacts of sanctions, and other military conflicts worldwide [6]. The region is simultaneously subject to pressures arising from these developments, including an energy crisis, the influx of tens of thousands of Russian citizens fleeing conscription, and attempts by Moscow to coerce Central Asian states into adopting its position on the war. In addition, the closure of Russia's European trade routes has redirected Russian business activity toward Central Asia, which is reflected in the growing number of Russian-registered foreign enterprises in Kazakhstan [7].

The responses of Central Asian states to Russia's military actions against Ukraine, as well as to their broader implications, are outlined below*:

*Note: At this stage of the research, the authors consider it necessary to acknowledge certain methodological limitations related to the subjectivity inherent in discourse analysis, interviews, and similar methods, which are largely dependent on the interpretations of experts, analysts, and practitioners in the fields of political science, international relations, and related disciplines.

Table 1 - Kazakhstan: Neutrality, Actions, and International Partnerships
Kazakhstan

<div>1. In political terms:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- adheres to a position of neutrality;- advocates for peaceful negotiations and dialogue.</div> <div>2. Measures and concrete actions (specific stance):<ul style="list-style-type: none">- does not support sanctions against the Russian Federation;- observes restrictions related to secondary sanctions;- has increased the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine;- President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has publicly declared that Kazakhstan will not recognize pseudo-state entities that is, it rejects the annexation of Ukrainian territories;- diversifies oil exports by seeking routes that bypass the Russian Federation.</div> <div>Kazakhstan is subject to heightened pressure from Russia. President Tokayev has unequivocally stated that Astana will not recognize the quasi-state structures established by the Russian Federation in occupied Ukrainian territories. Several months after the outbreak of Russia's war in Ukraine, Tokayev paid an official visit to Turkey following his inauguration, which elevated bilateral relations to the level of strategic partnership. During this visit, Tokayev and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed not only to launch the production of Turkish drones in Kazakhstan but also to enhance cooperation in military intelligence exchange with Turkey, a key NATO member. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has revised its military strategy in response to Russia's aggression.</div>

Table 2 - Uzbekistan's Policy Responses and External Partnerships
Uzbekistan

<div>1. In political terms:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- maintains neutrality;- supports Ukraine's territorial integrity.</div> <div>2. Measures and concrete actions (specific stance):<ul style="list-style-type: none">- voted in favor of the UN resolution demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops;- does not openly condemn the Russian Federation, yet refuses to recognize the annexation of its occupied territories;- strengthens economic ties with the European Union and Turkey;- seeks to reduce dependence on the Russian Federation.</div> <div>President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has neither openly nor directly condemned Russia's war against Ukraine, nor did Uzbekistan vote on the UN resolution. However, both the expert community and broader public opinion hold a critical view of the war.</div>

Table 3 - Tajikistan's Political Position and Dependence in the Context of the Russia-Ukraine War
Tajikistan

<div>1. In political terms:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- provides de facto support for the Russian Federation.</div> <div>2. Measures and concrete actions (specific stance):<ul style="list-style-type: none">- does not condemn Russia's actions;- remains dependent on Russian military and economic assistance;- the national economy is heavily reliant on remittances from labor migrants working in Russia.</div> <div>During the newly established Central Asia + Russia format, President Emomali Rahmon directly addressed Vladimir Putin, emphasizing that Tajikistan and other Central Asian states should not be treated as outsiders. He further underlined that these countries, once governed within the same framework, deserve greater investment from Russia rather than being perceived through the prism of a protracted colonial legacy.</div>

Table 4 - Kyrgyzstan's Political Stance and Actions in the Context of the Russia-Ukraine War
Kyrgyzstan

<div>1. In political terms:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- maintains a form of neutrality that tends to lean toward the Russian Federation.</div> <div>2. Measures and concrete actions (specific stance):<ul style="list-style-type: none">- does not join sanctions;- in 2022, voted at the United Nations in favor of the resolution against Russia's war;- the leadership refrains from issuing strong statements;- overall, the country holds a generally pro-Russian position.</div> <div>The absence of President Sadyr Japarov from the CIS event organized by the Russian leadership on Vladimir Putin's 70th birthday, as well as the subsequent cancellation of CSTO exercises in Kyrgyzstan, clearly reflected Bishkek's dissatisfaction with Moscow's stance. This was particularly evident following the bloody clashes on the Kyrgyz Tajik border, after which Putin awarded President Emomali Rahmon the Medal "For Merit to the Fatherland." According to experts, Kyrgyzstan perceived this gesture as a clear sign of Moscow's favoritism toward Tajikistan. Nevertheless, tensions stemming from these confrontations have since somewhat subsided.</div>

Table 5 - Turkmenistan: Complete Neutrality and Diversification of Foreign Policy
Turkmenistan

<p>1. In political terms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- maintains a position of complete neutrality. <p>2. Measures and concrete actions (specific stance):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- issues no official statements regarding the war;- abstained from voting on UN resolutions against the Russian Federation;- strengthens ties with China and Turkey;- seeks to distance itself from dependence on Russia. <p>Although the Russian Federation has been losing significance as a major player in the European energy market, Ashgabat has continued to diversify its foreign policy, seeking opportunities to sell gas to the European Union while simultaneously strengthening its relations with the United States. On the issue of the war, the regime has traditionally maintained its neutral stance.</p>

Thus, the Central Asian states have expressed their positions albeit cautiously regarding the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine[8]. Based on this analysis, the following observations can be made:

Table 6 - Comparative Overview of Central Asian States' Positions on the Russia-Ukraine War and Their Strategic Priorities

<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Overall, the Central Asian states align with Western sanctions and are not interested in jeopardizing their relations with the West one of their key sources of investment nor in facing secondary sanctions for assisting the Russian regime;- During voting at the UN General Assembly, three Central Asian states abstained, while two others refrained from voting altogether, which in effect signaled their unwillingness to support the annexation of Ukrainian territories;- For the Central Asian countries, maintaining stability to ensure state survival and regional security remains a key priority;- The region avoids openly supporting Russia's war against Ukraine;- Due to significant political and economic dependence on Russia, the Central Asian states refrain from joining actions directed against it;- The region faces a set of challenges conditioned by Russia's war:- as landlocked states, Central Asian countries must seek new vectors of engagement with the outside world, particularly through coordinated interaction with China, Turkey, the EU, the OIC, the Organization of Turkic States, and others;- the implementation of principles of Turkic unity is viewed as significant for fostering trade development and enabling Central Asian access to new markets, which is of growing importance for the region.

The attitude of the Central Asian elites toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine (which also varies) [9]:
Table 7 - Comparative Analysis of Central Asian States' Positions on the Russia-Ukraine War

Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan
<p>Kazakhstan has sought to remain active when certain Russian media outlets attempted to draw it into the debate, yet the country has managed to maintain a degree of distance. Public protests, of which the authorities were aware, reflected a certain level of silent support for Ukraine. The government has provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Some consequences of sanctions have also manifested, such as the suspension of Air Astana flights to certain Russian cities. At the same time, Kazakhstan continues to interact with the Russian from voting in the UN General Assembly. Overall, Kazakhstan seeks to strike a balance by a) maintaining relations with Russia and b) demonstrating efforts to engage with both sides.</p>	<p>Uzbekistan, while preparing to act in a measured manner, proceeds with caution. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly delineated the country's boundaries by refusing to support Russia on the issue of recognizing the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk regions. (similar to Kazakhstan's position)</p>	<p>Kyrgyzstan has traditionally maintained close ties with the Russian Federation. The President has openly expressed his inclination toward fostering relations with Moscow. The government, under external pressures, has demonstrated an even stronger orientation toward engagement with Russia, although this has been complicated by certain public discontent.</p>		<p>Maintains a position of neutrality. The elites have spoken relatively cautiously about the conflict in Ukraine, avoiding direct criticism of either side.</p>

Conclusion: Kazakhstan's policy appears to be the most favorable (considering the events of early 2022), with Uzbekistan largely following Kazakhstan's lead. Both states adhere to the principles of multi-vector foreign policy. According to experts, multi-vector diplomacy functions as a form of maneuvering between China and Russia, as the latter tend to seek accommodations with each other rather than forcing the countries situated between them to choose sides [10].

- Central Asian leaders, albeit implicitly, have criticized the war and allowed demonstrations in their countries;
- Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan remain only marginally distanced, while Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan the region's leaders have moved further away;
- The governments of Central Asia, along with civil society and nearly half of the citizenry, are opposed to the war. At the same time, another segment of society is heavily influenced by Russian propaganda and by Moscow's promises to grant citizenship to Central Asian labor migrants in exchange for military service. This complicates the relationship, as all Central Asian leaders have explicitly prohibited their citizens from participating in any form of the conflict.

The direct impact of Russia's war, the consequences of sanctions, and the resulting political, economic, and social conditions are expected to further deteriorate. According to the forecasts of experts and analysts, the future economic outlook is likely to take the following shape:

Table 8 - Economic Implications of the Russia-Ukraine War for Central Asia

- Economic decline is unlikely to significantly strengthen anti-Russian sentiment in Central Asia, since the majority tend to blame sanctions rather than Russia's actions; however, negative perceptions of Russia are growing among certain segments of society due to concerns over Moscow's potential actions in other regions [11];
- Under such conditions, Central Asian states are expected to seek greater inflows of Chinese investment. Nevertheless, Chinese companies are exercising caution in the region considering sanctions, which implies that Central Asia may become even more dependent than before;
- Russia will emerge from the sanctions regime with a weakened economy, shaped by multiple repercussions beyond its borders, particularly in Central Asia. The longer the war continues, the greater the damage inflicted on Russia, and the more compressed its economic capacity becomes.

In recent years, Central Asia has experienced the consequences of major challenges, including the collapse of Afghanistan, domestic unrest in Kazakhstan, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the impact of international sanctions. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has sent shockwaves throughout the entire post-Soviet space [12]. Central Asia has likewise been affected by these repercussions, such as the energy crisis, the influx of tens of thousands of Russians fleeing conscription, and Moscow's attempts to pressure regional states into adopting its stance on the war.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative and extensive trade and economic relations, China emphasizes not political but rather economic and security interests in Central Asia. At the same time, we are referring to strategic long-term objectives.

Table 9 - China's Expanding Engagement with Central Asia: Key Country-Specific Initiatives

- At the SCO summit held in Samarkand this autumn, Kazakhstan and China discussed the launch of a new transport corridor and the expansion of cross-border cooperation;
- In Kyrgyzstan, China seeks to strengthen its "soft power" by promoting vocational education projects;
- Turkmenistan and China, in turn, continue to traditionally reinforce their cooperation in the energy sector.

Taking into account global challenges and risks, the United States' relations with China through the framework of Central Asian structural dialogues (such as the "China-Central Asia" Secretariat and the "B5+1" business forums) acquire significant importance for the region [13].

Within the practice of the structural approach (SA), it is legitimate to highlight China's stated Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the "Green Deal" policy advanced by the European Union, which entails a systemic transformation of its relations with the Central Asian states.

Accordingly, the SA (structural approach) represents an organized form of interaction among actors (states), organizations/groups, and other institutions, characterized by clearly defined rules, procedures, and institutional formats.

Table 10 - The key principles of the Structural Approach (SA):

formalization	Permanent platforms (councils, commissions, secretariats, etc.), such as the "China-Central Asia" Secretariat and others.
orderliness	Meetings and discussions held according to previously agreed and coordinated schedules (annual summits, quarterly negotiations)
objectivity	The emphasis shifts to specific areas: security, trade, investment, environment, and others.
multilevelness	It encompasses various levels, ranging from meetings of ministers and heads of state to sessions of expert working groups and seminars.

The cooperation of the Central Asian states with the United States and China is of considerable importance in establishing stable institutional formats of interaction. Successful examples of

the structural approach in addressing diverse issues ranging across politics, economics, security, ecology, management, and the social sphere may be illustrated as follows:

Table 11 - Structured Approaches to Global Challenges: Comparative Analysis Across Key Sectors

Sector	Problems	Structured Approach	Strategy	Instruments and Mechanisms	Outcomes
International Relations	Nuclear proliferation threat	The United States and its allies/partners	Multilevel deterrence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Treaties (e.g., the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with Iran, JCPOA); - Sanctions against violator states (e.g., DPRK); - Diplomatic pressure; - Negotiations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduction of military escalation; - Cessation of hostilities (e.g., Russia's aggression against Ukraine, conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere); - Slowing down of nuclear program development in Iran and the DPRK.
Economy and Trade	Dependence on Chinese goods	The EU's structural approach	"De-risking" (risk reduction)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diversification of suppliers (India, Vietnam) - Subsidies for local production (EU Chips Act) - Anti-dumping investigations 	Reduction of China's share in the EU's critical imports from 24% to 19% (2020–2023)
Cybersecurity	State-sponsored hacking attacks	Structural approach (NATO)	Collective cyber defense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unified response center (CYBERCOM) - "Red lines" for Russia/China (e.g., sanctions for attacks on hospitals) - Locked Shields exercises (large-scale cyber drills) 	Reduction of successful attacks on Alliance infrastructure by 37% (2022–2024)
Social Policy	Population aging	Structural approach (Japan)	"100-Year Life Society"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Robotization of care (30% of nursing homes) - Flexible retirement age (up to 70) - Tax incentives for working pensioners 	Increase in employment among the 65+ population from 23% to 29% (2015–2023)
Ecology and Environmental Protection	Carbon emissions	Structural approach (Scandinavia)	Transition to a green economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Carbon tax (\$137/t in Sweden) - Public investments in hydrogen (€20 billion in Norway) - Ban on internal combustion engines starting in 2025 	32% reduction in emissions during GDP growth (2005–2023)
Crisis Management (Governance)	COVID-19 pandemic	Structural approach (South Korea)	«3T» (Test-Trace-Treat)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drive-thru testing (20,000 tests per day) - QR-based contact tracing (without nationwide lockdowns) - Regionally targeted restrictions 	Mortality rate per million eight times lower compared to the EU

Prepared by the authors

In the current context, the Central Asian states must employ the Structural Approach (SA) to fully utilize the available opportunities for strengthening intra-regional cooperation across all spheres of regional development. To this end, it is necessary to:

a) address regional challenges ranging from security to economic policy;

b) reinforce the unity and commonality of goals in order to navigate the present geopolitical chaos;

c) coordinate joint actions both from within the region and in relation to external actors. In this regard, the SA envisages covering and incorporating the following areas:

Table 12 - Strategic Directions for Central Asian Regional Cooperation

Direction	Tasks to be Addressed
Institutionalization of Central Asian cooperation in the "C5+" format (with the United States, China)	Holding regular summits and meetings with the leaders of the Central Asian states; establishing regional platforms for cooperation
Strategic Cooperation	Developing and supporting priority initiatives through long-term regulatory mechanisms, including major joint programs and projects of importance for Central Asia
Strengthening scientific, educational, and socio-cultural ties	Deepening integration and advancing vectors aimed at enhancing mutual understanding, respect, and trust among the peoples of the Central Asian states

Prepared by the authors

The process of institutionalizing intra-Central Asian cooperation with external actors is linked to their involvement in the region's politics and economy, which in turn reflects Central Asia's openness compared to other regional unions. As a result, external powers acting as primary players shape the regional agenda in formats such as B5+1 and the China–Central Asia Secretariat, much as they did at the inception of these mechanisms. The delegation of regional cooperation institutionalization processes to external actors is explained by the relatively low level of intra-regional integration [12]. Professor R. Burnashev of the German-Kazakh University has advanced the thesis that Central Asian states tend to unite in response to crisis situations, whereas in more stable periods they prefer to maintain bilateral relations [13].

For China, cooperation at the elite level with Central Asian states is particularly important. The U.S. strategy, by contrast, is more oriented toward supporting business, since business communities, while strengthening interregional ties, demand that the governments of Central Asian states reduce trade barriers an agenda that may

influence other domains of cooperation as well.

However, in our view, the institutionalization of Central Asian cooperation should not be entrusted solely to external actors but ought to be addressed independently. On the one hand, importing successful experiences of institutionalization from abroad is a feasible and beneficial option; on the other hand, Central Asian states must retain autonomy in constructing their territorial institutional space, planning and forecasting economic development, and ensuring collective security. Within the framework of consultative meetings and other formats of interaction among Central Asian states, cooperation opportunities should be defined with the aim of focusing more directly on regional issues and strengthening the independence of Central Asian countries.

Moreover, the transfer of institutionalization processes to external actors is disadvantageous for the states of the region, since external powers, while playing an active role, promote their own visions and objectives, propose and implement cooperation formats, and determine the themes of interaction, such as:

Table 13 - Central Asia Between U.S. Strategic Autonomy and China's Connectivity Agenda

<p>- In his speech following the "Central Asia–United States" summit, U.S. President Biden emphasized strategic autonomy and the strengthening of regional potential in terms of security and economic independence [14]. His perspective focuses on enhancing capacity and interconnectivity, with particular attention to the resilience of global supply chains and cooperation in the field of security.</p> <p>- At the "Central Asia–China" summit, CCP Chairman Xi Jinping highlighted the broader implications of long-term integration and cooperation for "global stability and prosperity." He emphasized large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which are designed to tie Central Asia more closely to China.</p> <p>Conclusion: 1) For Biden, the emphasis lies on independence, while for China it is on connectivity; in other words, Central Asia is confronted with the necessity of accounting for the potential clash of interests between the U.S. and China. 2) This must also be considered against the backdrop of the West's intensifying confrontation with both Russia and China [15].</p>

The war in Ukraine, now lasting more than three years, has only reinforced this trend [16]. Central Asia has found itself in a complex situation [17], as sanctions have had adverse effects on the region due to its close ties with Russia.

China, while expanding its spheres of influence in Central Asia, does not renounce joint actions with Russia in the region. The Samarkand Declaration of September, which reflected the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's consolidated stance on key issues of regional security, economy, transportation, and culture, was another important indication of China's growing influence. However, China's presence in Central Asia also generates negative per-

ceptions; hence, while safeguarding its core economic interests under the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing simultaneously seeks to strengthen its "soft power" strategy. The war has intensified political competition among major powers and alliances, but at the same time contradictory tendencies have emerged: a) Russia strives to retain Central Asia within its political orbit, as evidenced by the unprecedented number of high-level Russian official visits to the region in recent years, as well as by the increase in both the circulation and volume of remittances. In other words, sanctions have contributed to the intensification of economic relations between Central Asia and Russia; b) however, the

Central Asian states are distancing themselves from Russia's war against Ukraine, with none of the "Central Asian Five" supporting the war [4].

Foreign and Central Asian experts describe Russia's major integration projects as failures. In

our view, these projects may nevertheless receive a more positive assessment if revised in light of geopolitical uncertainties, as well as external challenges and risks.

T

able 14 - Russia's Declining Political Influence and Shifting Dynamics in Central Asia

- CSTO – Following the relatively successful January intervention in Kazakhstan (in a hypothetical scenario), a decline has occurred, as noted by Ambassador Thomas Greminger, PhD, Director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). In this regard, the October military exercises in Kyrgyzstan were cancelled. At present, there is a certain distancing of the Central Asian member states from the CSTO.

- EAEU – Uzbekistan could potentially join, however, this is not currently on its policy agenda.

Thus, politically, the Russian Federation is losing its leverage over Central Asia, and its soft power is weakening. At the same time: 1) Economic relations between Russia and the Central Asian states are being revitalized; 2) The Russian Federation must take into account the long-term economic consequences of its policies affecting Central Asia.

The institutionalization of cooperation between Central Asia and the United States and China is carried out through structured dialogues (e.g., the "China-CA" Secretariat) and economic platforms (e.g., "C5+1"), which serve to strengthen regional cooperation.

In our view, it is legitimate here to refer to reference information: China and the United States were the first to establish a permanent institutional mechanism of cooperation with the Central Asian states.

Table 15 - Institutionalization of Central Asia's External Partnerships: C5+1 and China-Central Asia Secretariat

- Prior to the establishment of the China-Central Asia Secretariat in 2015, the C5+1 platform had already been launched between the United States and the Central Asian states with the aim of fostering an independent, prosperous, and secure Central Asia.

- Since 2015, C5+1 has promoted dialogue and cooperation in the fields of economics, energy, environment, and security through ministerial-level meetings, expert sessions, and thematic working groups.

- Beginning in 2021, the platform has intensified the frequency of ministerial meetings.

- In 2022, a secretariat was established to better coordinate and plan activities. C5+1 also underscores the importance of addressing global challenges through regional solutions to enhance the security and prosperity of Central Asia.

- On 13–15 March 2024, the first B5+1 Business Forum (Central Asia–United States) was convened. This public-private dialogue platform is aimed at implementing the commitments of the New York C5+1 Declaration on regional economic integration and on expanding U.S. trade and investment in the region. The final communiqué proposed that the forum be held on an annual basis.

- On 30 March 2024, the opening of the China-Central Asia Secretariat in Xi'an marked an important step in formalizing the mechanisms of cooperation between China and the Central Asian states.

The establishment of the Secretariat corresponds to the agreements reached at the first China-Central Asia Summit, particularly highlighting strategic cooperation in regional economic linkages. Its main functions include fostering cooperation in traditional sectors economy, trade, and energy as well as in emerging fields such as high technologies and green energy.

Against the backdrop of the political and economic uncertainty surrounding the Russian Federation, the region is diversifying its foreign policy trajectories, identifying alternative vectors of interaction, and shaping its policies in a balanced and diplomatic manner to avoid negative consequences [18]. According to the new system for forecasting international conflicts (ACLED) [19], the program highlights a decrease in tensions in Ukraine and an increase in Palestine and Lebanon, which may be associated with a preparatory phase for potential new conflicts [20].

On this basis, the following points are worth noting:

1. Central Asia has traditionally not been a focal point of global actors. The region was viewed not so much as an independent subject of the world economy, but primarily in terms of global challenges and risks.

2. The external environment has been interested in Central Asia due to several factors: its

geography; the potential prospects for cooperation considering Russia's war; its considerable quantitative and qualitative resource potential (especially energy resources); transport and logistics capabilities; proximity to Afghanistan; and the relative stability of CA states' development.

At present, Central Asia appears both relevant and promising, attracting the interest of numerous external actors. However, the situation may change with the emergence of new formats of cooperation and further shifts in the international environment [21]. Therefore, in our view, Central Asian states should use this period as effectively as possible to address their domestic challenges.

As Russia's influence weakens and China strengthens its presence, a positive trend towards intra-regional consensus and integration can be observed. Hence, it is important to define and compare the prospective vector of regional rapprochement. In our view, this represents the most favorable moment for Central Asia to focus on

resolving its internal security issues such as borders and water resources independently, without seeking external guarantors of security. As Kyrgyz political scientist Ch. Esengul has noted, the unity of Central Asian states constitutes the main guarantee of regional security.

To revitalize integration processes and coordinate policies, the region requires a national-level coordinating institution with leadership and governance functions. Similar institutions exist in the EU and ASEAN. The latter has developed more effective mechanisms for coordinating policies and integration initiatives, notably the ASEAN Secretariat (which oversees cooperation and coordination among member states) [22], as well as sectoral ministerial bodies (addressing issues of economic integration, security, and socio-cultural development). For Central Asia, adopting ASEAN's best practices would be significant in terms of: 1) developing a model of enhanced internal cooperation; 2) increasing independence and

autonomy from external powers; 3) establishing efficient coordination structures; and 4) ensuring more standardized approaches [23].

Regional cooperation in Central Asia still possesses considerable unrealized potential. There is growing interest in regional economics and even military cooperation emanating from within the region itself. The two leading states, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are deepening their partnership, which stems from their similar perceptions of risks and threats.

Kazakh experts in the field of security have pointed out that, in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the question has arisen as to which state might be the next object of aggression. Although three years ago such an assumption seemed unthinkable, the war has altered perceptions: the security context in Central Asia has fundamentally shifted, as have the positions of potential guarantors of security.

Table 16 - Multi-Vector Caution: Central Asia's Approach to Security Amid Russian Decline and Chinese Ambitions

- Considering recent events, questions have arisen as to whether Russia can continue to play a role in ensuring the security of Central Asia, and who might replace it in this role. Russia has never truly been the "guarantor of security" for the Central Asian states, particularly if one adopts a broader interpretation of security that includes economic, environmental, and social dimensions [22]. Moreover, Russia has not been a guarantor against a so-called "threat from the South," the scope of which has been largely exaggerated over the past thirty years.

- China, for its part, cannot become the principal guarantor of security in Central Asia. On the eve of the SCO Summit, during his visit to President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Xi Jinping assured Kazakhstan against "any interference by external forces in your country's internal affairs" and pledged to "resolutely support Kazakhstan in safeguarding its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity." The key driver of China's foreign policy towards Central Asia, however, remains its economic component, though Beijing has also expressed interest in other areas of regional engagement. Central Asian states, for their part, remain relatively cautious, as: 1) within the logic of multi-vector foreign policy, they view China not as a sole guarantor but as one of several potential pillars of security, thereby avoiding dependence on a single great power; 2) Russia and China maintain mutual understanding, and within their strategic partnership, a synergistic approach is possible. While China may be increasingly interested in influencing security policy in Central Asia, for now, its primary driver continues to be economic interests.

Conclusion

Thus, the guarantors of security in the region must be the Central Asian states themselves. The recent developments involving Russia and Iran clearly demonstrate that in matters of national security, reliance can only be placed on one's own forces and resources.

All issues related to the development of Central Asian states are deeply interconnected. Worldwide, there is a vast body of positive practices and successful experiences of partnership and good-neighborly relations between states and peoples, grounded in the principles of mutual respect and trust, which can be imported into the region. It is important to note that Central Asia has a comparatively high proportion of youth in its overall population. Issues of effectively engaging and placing this youth within the region should be addressed through new technologies, artificial intelligence, and other innovative tools. At the same time, many unresolved issues, territorial, environmental, water and energy-related — require political revision and reassessment with the aim of

peaceful settlement and prevention of conflict.

Without agreements and negotiations, it is impossible to build long-term peace among state actors [24, 25]. Most inter-state disputes globally stem from two main sources: border delimitation and climate change, with Central Asian enclaves/exclaves often at the epicenter. Resolving border issues in Central Asia does not require external mediation: disputes over territory will cease only if the states of the region address these issues jointly. Until consensus is achieved, no third country can provide a solution. For long-term arrangements in the global order, it is essential to clearly understand the historical background and the fundamental factors of disagreement.

On the agenda of new negotiations, there must be a clear trajectory for border delimitation that is preserved by the parties and ratified by international legal institutions such as courts, arbitration bodies, and specialized commissions on enclaves/exclaves. Negotiations should be grounded in trust and the broad application of the tools and methods of public diplomacy. Moreover, they must outline concrete development projects,

particularly for exclave territories. Development programs should directly and indirectly address climate-related issues, promoting climate-friendly innovations and investment programs such as renewable energy and sustainable water management/irrigation projects with specific guidelines for water-sharing. In this regard, cooperation with the European Union deserves special emphasis.

According to many experts, the main challenge of pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy lies in the transformative direction Central Asia must take: the region must orient itself increasingly towards the West [26]. The CA-EU interaction has been institutionalized through a joint strategic roadmap (October 2023), which identified priority sectors: energy, extraction and processing of primary raw materials, development of critical resources, financing of eco-projects, security, border reinforcement, among others [25]. The rapprochement of Central Asia's transport infrastructure with the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) was also considered. The growing attention to the region is linked to the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), which cannot be implemented without sustainable development in Central Asian states.

The international community supports the sovereignty and self-determination of Central Asian countries. This is not about creating "new dependencies" or financial mechanisms against the region, but about using the fair and genuine opportunities offered by the EU, which has no hidden agenda in its policy toward Central Asia. The EU seeks to deepen its energy and trade relations with the region (as reiterated in October 2022 during German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). The European Parliament promotes a multidimensional approach to cooperation, prioritizing economic, social, environmental, water-energy issues, climate change mitigation, and broader strategic partnership [27, 28].

Considering these challenges, the regulation of domestic problems within Central Asian states constitutes the key factor for maintaining peace and stability in the region. In the context of the war in Ukraine and its negative repercussions [29], Central Asian states must consolidate their positions and strengthen stability while becoming more proactive in addressing both national and intra-regional issues. It is crucial that governments pay special attention to citizen engagement, provide social support, and pursue reforms aimed at reinforcing the foundations of internal stability.

At present, emphasis must be placed on enhancing intra-regional cooperation, raising the level of economic integration, fostering industrial cooperation, and strengthening interaction across all spheres of the economy, ecology, science, and education, while expanding socio-cultural ties. This will be possible through the harmonization of legislation in five key sectors: trade and logistics, agribusiness, e-commerce, tourism, and "green"/renewable energy [30].

However, the goals and objectives of the future regional agenda for Central Asia remain

unclear, as concrete plans for further integration and the creation of a collective security architecture have not yet been defined. Once again, it must be emphasized that the guarantors of Central Asia's security can only be the Central Asian states themselves. Regional security must be ensured primarily through policies pursued by the CA states, the building of long-term bilateral relations at the regional level, and adherence to the pragmatism and logic of multi-vector foreign policies embraced by regional leaders.

Moreover, there is a need to formulate a comprehensive plan (Strategic Roadmap) for the development of Central Asia, specifying goals, objectives, timelines, and responsible actors across the main spheres of foreign policy, economy, ecology, education, and science. This should be complemented by recommendations on evaluating the effectiveness of integration projects within the region and external initiatives (such as China's Belt and Road, U.S. programs, and EU projects). Without strengthening economic power, it is impossible to speak meaningfully of ensuring national and regional security. What is required is a systemic approach, whereby Central Asia is viewed as a complex dynamic system in which internal and external changes in any state impact the entire region. Therefore, the region requires extensive analytical, expert, and evaluative work to identify its potential and resources (strengths), detect barriers, and respond promptly to changes in both internal and external environments.

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