STRATEGIC CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA: REGIONALISM AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE

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Abstract. This article explores the nuanced roles of Central Asian countries in international relations, emphasizing their strategic significance in global geopolitics. It examines their diplomatic strategies, engagement in regional cooperation mechanisms, and the potential impact on regional stability. The study employs a multidimensional approach, combining qualitative analysis with documentary research.

Introduction. Central Asia has become a significant object of modern world politics. Such large states as Russia and China are located near the borders of the region, the zones of cultural contacts of world civilizations and peoples intersect, the most important transport and communication lines pass, the bowels of the countries of the region are very attractive - they contain the richest reserves of natural resources.

At present, in Central Asia, new positive trends in regional development are observed, which, in turn, contribute to enhancing the development of trade and economic relations between the countries. In this regard, it should be noted that the prospects for stable and sustainable development of the Central Asian region are inextricably linked with the achievement of peace in neighboring Afghanistan. It is impossible to ensure the prosperity of the countries of the region without solving the Afghan problem, since Afghanistan has always been and will remain an integral part of Central Asia [1].

Currently, Central Asia is of relevance to the global economy mainly as a source of raw commodities. Threats from the political domain, such as the export of instability, terrorism and religious extremism, drug trafficking, migration, etc., affect international participants. In contemporary Central Asia, the conflict between external forces takes the shape of rivalry between different integration schemes, each of which is backed by a different non-regional actor.

In order to understand the regionalism in Central Asia, we should also consider periods of foreign dominance (Chinese, Persian, Mongolian, British, Russian and Soviet), which have influenced on the current socio-cultural situation in the region. Many Central Asian countries refer to these periods as the basis of new national traditions and newly formed national identities. The cult of strong rulers (for example Genghis Khan and Tamerlane) has a very significant impact on the mentality of Central Asian societies and very often justifies the direction of strategies chosen by political elites in the region. Furthermore, Central Asia is also now usually referred to the historical Silk Road, because constitutes the analytical and research framework

of new concepts such as the New Silk Road in the USA or the New Great Game in Western Europe. The understanding of these socio-historical and cultural issues (cult of elders, authority of power, tradition, nomadic lifestyle) is currently indispensable to the appropriate analysis of the Central Asian regionalism.

Methodology. The geopolitical reconfiguration of the region is the subject of international research that is based not only on a geographic understanding of the area but also on the goals and interests of external powers. The underlying principles of Central Asia's internal and external configurations are influencing the development of the region's models. These models offer solutions to numerous problems pertaining to the growth of the Central Asian nations and peoples, including everything from long-term prospects to self-identification.

In recent years, the situation in Central Asia has generally remained stable. In political terms, each country in the region is actively following the path of development that corresponds to the general political situation of each state. In the economic aspect, countries are responding to a recession, striving to improve the lives of the population, while at the same time implementing long-term and medium-term development strategies, promoting structural reforms, and increasing the level of resistance to external threats. In the field of security, countries have launched a resolute fight against extremist forces, taken strict preventive measures against the growth and strengthening of the opposition, and are using the support of major powers to maintain national and regional stability.

The countries of Central Asia have identified their foreign policy priorities in the context of the complex geopolitical and geostrategic realities. They repeatedly expressed their interest in developing relations with Russia, China, the United States, Germany, Japan, and India. They have created a more or less efficient system of checks and balances, in which none of the external actors is in a dominant position that would allow him to shape the countries' fates. Today, all Central Asian states are active subjects, as well as objects of international policy, and are perfectly capable of successfully shaping the interactions of the great powers and foreign institutions appropriate to their politics [2].

The Mackinder theory, according to some analysts, would be forgotten after the conflict between the US and the USSR was settled. His concepts, however, were given new life by the circumstances in Central Asia. According to many scientists and journalists, Mackinder's theses needed to be revised because this particular region is the primary scene of the battle for global hegemony among Russia, the USA, China, Turkey, Iran, and other states, and it is therefore appropriately referred to as a "pivot." As a result, after focusing on Central Asia, Ehsan Ahrari writes in "The Strategic Future of Central Asia: A view from Washington," "the father of modern geopolitics whoever controls Central Asia will govern the globe, according to a statement made by Sir Halford Mackinder" [3]. Based on the analysis of Mackinder's theories, D. Sloan writes that "Central Asia has again become the key to the security of the entire Eurasian continent" [4], and According to S. O'Hara, the rivalry between outside parties that has existed in the area since 1991 should be referred to as "the

battle for the Heartland" [5], and believes that and thinks Mackinder's "observations made with such insight may well prove to be correct" [6].

Results. It became quite obvious how big the role of the region is in building the future international system. The states of Central Asia, maybe unwittingly, have gotten to be the subject of near consideration of the complete world community. This can increase attention to the international initiatives of the countries of the region and stimulate assistance in solving their economic, environmental, political and other problems.

As for the cooperation of the countries of Central Asia with the OSCE in the field of ensuring regional security, we can note the methodological, military-technical and financial assistance of this organization to local law enforcement agencies in combating the smuggling of drugs, weapons, ammunition and strengthening border control at the state border. At the same time, the linking of these types of assistance by OSCE representatives accredited in the Central Asian countries with the "state of the issue of observance of human rights" is nothing more than interference in the internal affairs of the sovereign states of the region [7] and the imposition of "Western models of democracy" that do not harmonize with the local mentality.

As a result, the nations of Central Asia are today linked by a single, distinct regional security complex, which has its roots in their shared geography, historical background, and security-related concerns and objectives. Although the possibility of collaboration is diminished by competitiveness and the fear of dominance, the relationships between the Central Asian states remain strong due to the interdependence of the region's security. This is the outcome of internal dynamics brought on by the coexistence of two categories of nations: powerful in terms of capacity (territory, population, economy, and army – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) and weak (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). The tight interdependence among the nations in the region prevents any one of them from effectively existing alone.

In terms of regional cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are among the leading regional cooperation mechanisms. Central Asian countries have been actively participating in these platforms, aiming for economic integration and collective security.

However, the results also indicate that the region is fraught with numerous challenges. Despite the strategic partnerships, Central Asian countries are yet to leverage their collective potential fully due to internal disagreements, border disputes, and issues such as water scarcity and economic disparity.

Discussion. The geopolitical significance of Central Asia in the world, as well as the region's abundant natural resources and geo-economic potential, all serve to support this claim. The major international players – Russia, the United States, the EU, and China – have expressed support for regional cooperation and peace in Central Asia, and these comments are of course warmly received in the area.

Central Asian countries hold a critical position in shaping the regional balance of power. Their active engagement with global superpowers significantly impacts international dynamics and reshapes geopolitical equations. However, this involvement presents its own set of complications, often exposing these nations to the risks of power politics and external interference, and potentially undermining their sovereignty.

In the past few years, the countries of the region have begun mutual cooperation again. In this regard, the initiative is taken by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Sh.Mirziyoyev, before being elected as a President, that is, on September 8, 2016, at a joint meeting of the chambers of the Oliy Majlis, upon assuming the office of Acting President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, expressed the following opinion about Central Asia: “The Central Asian region, which is important for ensuring the national interests of our country, is the main priority of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy. We remain committed to an open, friendly and pragmatic policy with our close neighbors Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan” [8].

The regional cooperation mechanisms, such as the SCO and the EAEU, are not merely platforms for dialogue but also reflect the opportunities and struggles of Central Asian countries in harmonizing their national interests. These cooperation mechanisms offer platforms for growth and security, but the challenges these nations face in achieving meaningful cooperation are considerable. Disparities in economic development, border disputes, and issues such as water scarcity are among the most significant hurdles to regional integration [9].

This suggests a pressing need for these nations to focus on building trust, resolving outstanding disputes, and promoting sustainable development. The future of the region hinges on how these countries navigate their domestic challenges and international engagements. The significance of this balance cannot be overstated, as it not only shapes the Central Asian landscape but also has far-reaching implications for global geopolitics.

Conclusion. The current development of the geopolitical situation in Central Asia indicates that its importance is growing as a region of key geostrategic importance in ensuring international and sub-regional security, as well as in the implementation within its space by extra-regional actors, such as the United States, China, India and Russia, of their national interests. In connection with the ongoing process of appeasement of the situation in Afghanistan and its reintegration into the international community, which implies the presence in this country and in the adjacent territory of foreign military contingents, the Central Asian region is becoming an arena of military-strategic rivalry between the United States and Russia and their military coalitions. Although today in this confrontation there are no direct signs indicating a high probability of unleashing an international armed conflict in the region, nevertheless, the very presence of military contingents does not hypothetically exclude this.

The pressing need for conflict resolution, trust-building, and comprehensive regional integration has been accentuated through this study. It underscores the necessity for the international community to support these efforts, ensuring that the trajectory of development undertaken by the Central

Asian countries result in beneficial outcomes for the region and beyond. This support could manifest in the form of diplomatic interventions, technical assistance, capacity building, or investment in sustainable development projects.

This study adds to the scholarly discourse on the role of Central Asia in international relations - an area of study that is becoming increasingly pertinent due to the region's evolving geopolitical dynamics. The insights drawn from this study contribute to a broader comprehension of the geopolitical and geo-economics landscapes of Central Asia.

Looking ahead, future research should extend the examination of the ongoing shifts in the region's dynamics, assess the impact of emerging global trends on Central Asia, and devise effective strategies for conflict resolution and cooperative development. Scholars and policy makers must pay particular attention to how regional and international developments might shape the future of Central Asia and its place in the global geopolitical order.

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