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PROBLEMS OF INTEGRATION AND COOPERATION OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES IN TIME OF GEOPOLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

The authors highlight the features and differences in the development of the countries of the region, their common economic and political interests, emerging on the basis of modern geopolitical uncertainty and tension. The need for government reforms and the development of current areas of foreign policy cooperation between Kazakhstan and Central Asian countries is substantiated. The main provisions of the study are necessary for building a region-wide joint policy for the life support of the countries of the Central Asian space and maintaining stability and sustainability in the format of dynamic changes in world development. Today, Central Asia (the center of the Asian macroregion, economically, politically and resource-rich) represents a geographical place of intersection of interests and special attention of the leading actors of the world community and international structures. At the same time, the uniqueness of Kazakhstan's position lies in the fact that the country is located at the crossroads of many transport links and is of great strategic importance in identifying key tracks of economic development and ensuring the security of Central Asian states. There is a significant potential for cooperation to expand the trade potential between the Central Asian countries.

Key words: challenges, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, systemic problems, cooperation, Central Asian region.

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Геосаяси белгісіздік кезеңіндегі Орталық Азия елдерінің интеграциясы мен кооперациясының мәселелері

Авторлар аймақ елдерінің дамуындағы ерекшеліктер мен айырмашылықтарды, олардың қазіргі геосаяси белгісіздік пен шиеленіске негізделген ортақ экономикалық және саяси мүдделерін атап өтті. Мемлекеттік реформалардың қажеттілігі, Қазақстан мен ОА елдерінің сыртқы саяси ынтымақтастығының өзекті бағыттарын әзірлеу негізделді. Зерттеу жұмысының негізгі ережелері Орталық Азия кеңістігі елдерінің тіршілігін қамтамасыз етудің жалпы өңірлік бірлескен саясатын құру және әлемдік дамудың серпінді өзгерістері форматында тұрақтылық пен беріктікті сақтау үшін қажет. Бүгінгі таңда Орталық Азия (Азия макроөңірінің орталығы, экономикалық, саяси және ресурстарға бай) әлемдік қоғамдастық пен халықаралық құрылымдардың жетекші ойыншыларының мүдделері мен ерекше назарының қиылысатын географиялық орны болып табылады. Сонымен бірге Қазақстан жағдайының бірегейлігі елдің көптеген көлік байланыстарының қиылысында орналасуында жатыр, сондай-ақ экономикалық дамудың негізгі бағыттарын анықтауда және Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің қауіпсіздігін қамтамасыз етуде үлкен стратегиялық маңызға ие. Орталық Азия елдері арасындағы сауда әлеуетін кеңейту мақсатында ынтымақтастық үшін айтарлықтай әлеует бар. Сонымен қатар ұжымдық қауіпсіздікке қол жеткізу және Орталық Азияның экономикалық орнықты дамуын қамтамасыз ету міндеттері өзара тәуелді және өзара байланысты болып табылады.

Түйін сөздер: сын-қатерлер, Орталық Азия, Қазақстан, жүйелік проблемалар, ынтымақтастық, Орталық Азия өңірі.

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Проблемы интеграции и кооперации стран Центральной Азии в период геополитической неопределенности

Авторами выделены особенности и различия в развитии стран региона, их общие экономико-политические интересы, складывающиеся исходя из современной геополитической неопределенности и напряженности. Обоснована необходимость государственных реформ, разработки актуальных направлений внешнеполитического сотрудничества Казахстана и стран ЦА. Основные положения работы исследования необходимы для выстраивания общерегиональной совместной политики жизнеобеспечения стран центрально-азиатского пространства и сохранения стабильности и устойчивости в формате динамичных изменений мироразвития. Сегодня Центральная Азия (центр азиатского макрорегиона, экономически, политически и ресурсно богатый) представляет собой географическое место пересечения интересов и особого внимания ведущих игроков мирового сообщества и международных структур. В то же время уникальность положения Казахстана заключается в том, что страна расположена на перекрестке многих транспортных связей и имеет большое стратегическое значение для определения ключевых направлений экономического развития и обеспечения безопасности государств Центральной Азии. Существует значительный потенциал для сотрудничества в целях расширения торгового потенциала между странами Центральной Азии. Более того, задачи достижения коллективной безопасности и обеспечения экономически устойчивого развития Центральной Азии являются взаимосвязанными и взаимозависимыми.

Ключевые слова: вызовы, Центральная Азия, Казахстан, системные проблемы, сотрудничество, центрально-азиатский регион.

Introduction

Today, Central Asia (the center of the Asian macroregion, economically, politically and resource-rich) represents a geographical place of intersection of interests and special attention of the leading actors of the world community and international structures. At the same time, the uniqueness of Kazakhstan's position lies in the fact that the country is located at the crossroads of many transport links and is of great strategic importance in identifying key tracks of economic development and ensuring the security of Central Asian states.

Central Asia (CA) is becoming one of the important centers of economic growth (the GDP of the countries of the region has grown by 25% over the past 4 years, exceeding \$300 billion (Satpayev 2019); in 2023, the GDP of the Central Asian countries exceeded \$395 billion (Duisen 2021, 63). Intraregional trade has doubled in the last 5 years alone. The trade of Central Asian countries with the outside world is growing dynamically: in 5 years, trade has increased by 54%, amounting today to \$167 billion dollars (USAID holds the 12th Annual Central Asian Trade Forum in Kazakhstan, 2022).

There is a significant potential for cooperation to expand the trade potential between the Central Asian countries. In addition, there are huge opportunities in various sectors of the economy, includ-

ing agriculture, as well as information technology, culture, fashion industry, mining, logistics, construction, and energy. Despite all the peculiarities and differences, the countries that make up the region have common economic and political interests based on economic development mechanisms and protected by the foundations of collective security, which is especially important in an unstable multipolar and rapidly changing world. Moreover, the tasks of achieving collective security and ensuring economically sustainable development for Central Asia are mutually dependent and related.

Materials and methods

The methodological basis of this work is based on conceptual scientific provisions based on the synthesis of principles and scientific approaches to the study of economic and political interests, emerging from modern geopolitical uncertainty and tension.

The methodological tools include the following methods of analysis: chronological, value-functional, statistical, comparative, expert assessments, generalizations, etc., based on the principles of historicism and objectivism in the context of the development of a region-wide joint policy of life support for the countries of the Central Asian space and the preservation of stability and sustainability. The use of the above methods contributed to the cor-

rect assessment of possible trends in multifaceted, mutually beneficial cooperation and mutual trust in the interests of all states and peoples of the Central Asian region. The foreign policy vector included a reassessment of the foreign and domestic policies of the regional and country order and, based on this, the formation of a new vision of the role, place, and significance of the Central Asian region in the overall dynamically changing system of international coordinates. Issues of socio-economic order relate to cooperation between the countries of the region, ensuring the competitiveness of national economies, integration of Central Asian countries into interregional economic systems, improving the standard of living of the population of the countries, developing cultural and humanitarian ties, etc. According to the environmental direction, issues of solving regional environmental problems, water use, quality of life, etc. were considered.

The approach developed by the authors allows us to consider different sides of interaction through the search for new formats of cooperation in all spheres of the economies of Central Asian countries in changing international conditions.

Results and discussion

In order to ensure the security and stabilization of the national economies of the Central Asian

countries, it is necessary to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation and interaction, especially in terms of industrial and agricultural cooperation and integration, expand ties in the fields of trade, science, transport and logistics, education, science and culture. In accordance with this, the need to assess systemic problems of a domestic and regional nature in coordinating the efforts of all countries of the Central Asian region is justified.

Based on the new reality in the format of the modern world order, the need to search, develop and implement state reforms, priority areas of foreign policy cooperation between Kazakhstan and Central Asian countries in real time, the inclusion of the principles of smart diplomacy (political, economic, environmental), scientific and expert, people's diplomacy, paradiplomacy is dictated (Simeonidis, 2023).

Today, Central Asia is experiencing a new stage of development and formation as a single megaregion and the revival of its historical purpose for trade and economic contacts in the Eurasian space. The unity of the civilizational community appears to be a platform for intraregional integration.

The policy of strengthening cooperation in the "C5" format aims at deepening regional cooperation, as well as using the full potential of the Central Asian countries. Socio-economic indicators for Central Asian countries are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Socio-economic characteristics of Central Asian countries

Country	Population, million people. (2023)	Place in the world by population	Population density, per person/km ² (2023)	Literacy rate, %	The area of the country, thousand km ² (2023- early 2024)	The country's place in the world by area	The country's GDP, (2023), million \$
Kazakhstan	19,828165	65	7,197	99,80	2724,902	9	228,869
Uzbekistan	35,673804	42	78,59	100,0	447,400	56	79288
Tadjikistan	10,331553	94	71,72	99,80	141,376	93	9309
Kyrgyzstan	6,598071	111	33,71	99,60%	199,949	86	10207
Turkmenistan	6,839606	116	13,36	99,90%	488,100	53	67246
In the whole Central Asian region	79,271199		53,20	99,70%	4001,730		395098

Note. Table 1 is compiled according to the sources: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru>; <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2024/04/09/nase-teniye-tsentralnoy-azii-sostavlyayet-pochti-81-million-chelovek-k-2050-godu-ono-dostignet-100-millionov-chelovek/09/04/2024>; www.youtube.com/watch; <https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/central-asia-population>; Interstate Statistical Committee of the CIS [Electr. resource]. Access mode: <http://www.cisstat.com> (date of application – 03/23/2024); <https://data.worldbank.org>; <https://economy.kz/ru>; https://www.inform.kz/ru/na-3-9-vyros-ob-em-proizvodstva-v-obrabatyvayuschey-promyshlennosti-rk-v-2020-godu_a3757979; <http://www.stat.kg/ru/opendata/category/361/>.

The total area of the Central Asian region is more than 4 million km² (slightly larger than India, but smaller than Australia). According to Table 1, the population of Central Asia has reached almost 80 million people, with an average population growth of about 1 million people over the past 10 years (Dzhursunbek, 2024). According to forecasts, by 2050 the population of Central Asia will exceed 100 million people. The literacy rate of the population is almost 100%. The share of young people exceeds 70% of the collective population of the region, i.e., the population of the region has become younger. If in 1990 the average age in Central Asia was 34 years, today it is 28.7 years (Vinokurov 2022, 17). According to analytical studies, digital literacy in the region is within the range of almost 100%. Therefore, one of the triggers for the successful development of a country/region (in this case, according to the human factor) is the younger generation, receptive to knowledge and innovation in the field of digital systems and computer technologies. Young citizens are distinguished by their national identity and at the same time by their openness to everything new, including new knowledge. Because of this, the Central Asian region seems to be an ideal space for investment, outsourcing, industrial clustering, as well as clustering of e-commerce, transportation and logistics centers, solving problems of sustainable development and collective security (state, national, economic, information, biological, etc.).

According to IMF estimates, the positive growth of the economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, despite the growth of global instability and the slowdown in the global economy (sanctions confrontation, transformation of international logistics chains, regional conflicts, inflationary pressure, etc.) amounted to 4.9% (Leader in Central Asia, 2023). In 2023 the country also topped the ranking for attracting foreign direct investment among post-Soviet countries. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are next in terms of economic growth in the region; Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan show fairly positive development parameters.

In our opinion, in the context of radically and dynamically changing international conditions, strengthening interregional and intercountry cooperation and developing an operational joint response to challenges and risks are of particular importance. In this case, it is important for Central Asia to have a widely diversified set of allies and partners on a global and interregional scale, which implies the coexistence and interaction of many countries not only in the Central Asian region, but also in all

regions on the principles of good neighborliness and conflict-free.

According to many analysts, the interest in the Central Asian region is due to: a) a change in the structure of relations between the United States and China; b) the war of the Russian Federation in Ukraine; c) intraregional and country processes. For Central Asia, 2023 was probably the busiest year in terms of the number of meetings with neighboring countries in the region (Umarov, 2024); (Mager, 2024) and summits within the framework of “C5 + 1” (China, the USA, and European countries (Central Asia is in the spotlight, 2023):

- The Presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan have met personally 12 times since 2019. In early March, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku to strengthen and expand trade and transport agreements;

- today, the mechanism of consultative meetings of the heads of state of the region is regularly operating;

- The presidents of the Central Asian countries regularly visit Beijing. Chinese President Xi Jinping has personally visited Astana, Tashkent, Bishkek, Ashgabat and Dushanbe on several occasions to promote trade and investment initiatives.

All of the above indicates that the near and far environment of Central Asia focuses its economy and foreign policy on deepening established ties (China, Russia) and expanding trade and economic cooperation (European countries, USA, Turkey, Iran, etc.). The geographical location of Central Asia, the neighborhood with the Russian Federation and the PRC explains their established ties. If in the days of the USSR the Central Asian republics were economically connected with the Russian Federation by supply chains, then recently Central Asia has been reducing dependence on the Russian Federation by creating new infrastructure, entering new markets and carriers and pursuing a multi-vector policy (“Distancing from Russia will increase”, 2023). As you know, for a long period integration was carried out under the supervision of the Russian Federation, today for the real integration of the Central Asian countries, a new vision is needed within the Central Asian countries, which should: expand the framework of mutual cooperation, change their priorities in foreign policy, focus on internal problems. At the same time, the key issues are interaction within the region, the growth of trade turnover, mutual investments, the development of new and expansion of existing platforms for interaction, in-

creasing each other’s presence within the region, etc. (Bisenbayev 2020, 8).

External crises have led to the recognition by world leaders and the international community of the importance of the region as a whole, represented by independent countries in the “C5” format. In the new world order, each Central Asian country is building its balanced and diversified foreign policy, taking into account new economic and political realities. The multi-vector nature of the foreign policies of the Central Asian country is the basis for ensuring their collective security and the development of each country in the region.

External factors affecting Central Asia depend on the development of the situation in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Iran; according to World Bank and IMF analysts, the distancing of Central Asian countries from the Russian Federation will increase in 2024. Internal factors include the authoritarianism of the government, corruption, potential natural disasters/shocks and their negative consequences, the financial burden of which will weigh down the development of the national economies of the region.

Summarizing the above, the main factors influencing the development of Central Asian countries, in general, include the following (Table 2):

Table 2 – The main factors of the development of Central Asian countries

External	Internal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - geopolitical (external challenges and risks); - Collective and national security; - the existing infrastructure of the world; - climate change; - environmental background; - biological; - epidemiological; - cyber attacks; - emergencies, disasters; - interregional; - interstate; - international relations; - external extremism, terrorism, radicalism, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - economic; - social; - border conflicts; - environmental (elimination of the consequences of violations of the ecological balance); - emergencies, disasters; - demographic; - migration; - consequences of unemployment; - cultural and humanitarian; - scientific and educational; - separatism, radicalism; - strengthening the country’s defense capability, etc.

Developed by the authors

In assessing the strategic partnership and allied cooperation of the Central Asian countries, a special place is given to the use of a wide range of political matrices in the analysis, formation of foreign economic relations and forecasting of interaction and

cooperation of agent countries. This is due to the hypothesis that the matrices of political activity are quite stable, which is why the political processes, factors, and phenomena determined by them also gain stability. The matrix method of analysis, in our opinion, is the most acceptable and legitimate for assessing the current situation and in long-term forecasting of interaction and cooperation between countries, since the matrix includes the widest range of indicators and parameters of both quantitative and qualitative nature, namely: political system; political regime; legal system, legislative and legal framework within the state and in foreign policy activities; the socio-economic situation in the country; political culture, ideological and information processes in society, etc. This approach will make it possible to develop mechanisms of balance in the face of global threats and challenges and to define clear contours of regional security in real time and in the medium and long term.

Central Asian countries face common challenges to collective and national security in a changing global context, so it is important to develop and strengthen regular contacts at all levels, including analytical and scientific expert ones. To ensure sustainable stability and collective security in the Central Asian region, constant systemic dialogues and coordinated actions of the participating countries are necessary, contributing to the intensification of integration and cooperation processes of the Central Asian countries in conditions of geopolitical tension and uncertainty:

- deepening multifaceted, mutually beneficial cooperation and mutual trust in the interests of all states and peoples of the Central Asian region;
- growth of trade between countries, improvement of its structure, expansion of the range of goods-products-services. Kazakhstan can increase exports to Central Asian countries to \$1 billion, and other countries in the region have reserves.;
- creation of infrastructure in the format of a single commodity distribution network integrated into the transport corridors of Central Asia and including wholesale distribution and agro-logistics centers for coordinating the supply of goods and products to foreign markets, as well as providing domestic markets with domestic agricultural products;
- attracting investments in strategically important sectors of the regional economy, primarily in anchor investment projects in hydropower, industry, mining, agriculture, transport and communications;
- expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation in the development of transport communications in Central Asia (according to World Bank estimates,

the development of transport communications in Central Asia can ensure GDP growth of countries by 15%);

- development of roadmaps and improvement of interaction to facilitate trade operations;

- search for new formats of cooperation in all spheres of the economies of the Central Asian countries in the changing international conditions;

- building a new format of partnership with the countries of the region within the framework of the interaction of peoples belonging to the same civilization, a single civilizational community (science, education, culture, religion).

Conclusion

We note that the current transformations of the world, taking into account their dynamics and possible negative consequences, determine the onset of cardinal profound changes in the political and economic landscapes in the overall picture of the modern world order. Based on this, the need for a reassessment of the external and internal policies of the regional and country order is actualized and, based on this, the formation of a new vision of the role, place, and significance of the Central Asian region

in the overall dynamically changing system of international coordinates in general, of each Central Asian state in particular.

In these harsh conditions of world development, every region, every subject of the world community is trying and must preserve its regional and state stability, national identity. At the same time, the Central Asian region is no exception, and the multifaceted foreign economic strategy of the countries of the Central Asian space seems to be a logical vector of world politics as a whole. Moreover, the President of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev has repeatedly noted on international platforms that the main trends of global economic development are directed to the East, to the Asian continent, and the future of the international community depends on Asia.

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