

# THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES: THE RESULTS OF 30 YEARS OF DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

**A**fter gaining independence in 1991, the Central Asian states, which had no experience in conducting independent foreign policy activities, began to build their own foreign policy coordinate system and develop its conceptual framework. Given their unique geopolitical position and diverse resource potential, the regional states preferred to pursue an open and multi-vector foreign policy, which allowed them to realize their national interests. With regard to

the transformational processes in global politics and economy, as well as the geopolitical characteristics of their states, the political elites of the regional states have developed their own approaches to foreign policy.

The article analyzes the doctrinal foundations of the Central Asian countries' foreign policy, and the influence of global factors on the foreign policy formation of the regional states and intraregional cooperation.

**KEYWORDS:** *Central Asia, foreign policy, multi-vector, the U.S., Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, geo-economic projects, integration, regionalism.*

## *Introduction*

Following the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) were forced to start building their sovereign foreign policy from scratch, with no experience and a shortage of qualified diplomats. Gradually, under the influence of internal and external factors, the conceptual basis of foreign policy and a system of foreign policy priorities was formed in the Central Asian countries.

Factors such as geographical location and the rich resource potential predetermined the choice of the Central Asian countries in favor of pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy. Orientation to various foreign policy centers of power was seen as a path that allowed,

- first of all, to declare themselves full-fledged entities of international relations,
- secondly, to strengthen their sovereignty,
- thirdly, to create favorable external conditions for the development of national statehood.

In addition to the development of bilateral ties and in the globalization context, the Central Asian countries preferred to integrate themselves into multilateral cooperation formats and profitable geo-economic projects actively promoted in the region by the leading political players. Relying on the principle of foreign policy balancing, the Central Asian states attempted to avoid dependence on geopolitical players that have a significant impact on the political and economic development of the region.

At the same time, the political leaders of the Central Asian countries made attempts to establish a regional integration association. Its creation was considered a mechanism for settling interstate contradictions and solving the internal socio-economic problems that these countries faced after the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

## Doctrinal Foundations of the Central Asian Countries' Foreign Policy

Since gaining independence in 1991, the ruling elite of the Central Asian countries has begun to develop foreign policy principles and identify priority areas in foreign policy cooperation. Gradually, a doctrinal base was formed, which implied that the regional countries would pursue their foreign policy course, including the constitution, the foreign policy and national security concepts, and the development strategy.

Over three decades of Kazakhstan's independence, three foreign policy concepts have been adopted in the republic: the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2001,<sup>1</sup> the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2014—2020,<sup>2</sup> and the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020—2030.<sup>3</sup> All these documents testify to Kazakhstan's commitment to pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy aimed at balancing between the leading global and regional centers of power. A fundamental point in the Concept of Kazakhstan's foreign policy for 2020-2030 is the course towards strengthening the republic's leading position in the region.<sup>4</sup>

Due to underlying socio-economic problems, Kazakhstan's leadership sought to subordinate foreign policy to the internal tasks of the country's development. To achieve this goal, Kazakhstan's ruling elite focused on attracting foreign investments through an active foreign policy and improving national legislation. Strategy Kazakhstan-2030<sup>5</sup> and Strategy Kazakhstan-2050<sup>6</sup> designate the main priority areas of the republic's socio-economic policy that are aimed at strengthening and developing the national economy. Thus, Strategy Kazakhstan-2050 proclaimed that the implementation of national tasks would be facilitated by a consistent and predictable foreign policy course.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: M.Sh. Gubaydullina, "Printsipy i vybor vneshnepoliticheskikh prioritetov Respubliki Kazakhstan v kontseptualno znachimykh dokumentakh (vystupleniye)," available at [<https://articlekz.com/article/7001>], 17 июля 2021.

<sup>2</sup> See: "Utverzhdena Kontseptsia vneshney politiki Respubliki Kazakhstan na 2014-2020 gody," available at [<https://www.zakon.kz/4599704-utverzhdena-koncepcija-vneshnejj.html>], 21 July, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> See: "Kontseptsia vneshney politiki Respubliki Kazakhstan na 2020-2030 gody," available at [[https://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal\\_acts/decrees/o-koncepcii-vneshnei-politiki-respubliki-kazahstan-na-2020-2030-gody](https://www.akorda.kz/ru/legal_acts/decrees/o-koncepcii-vneshnei-politiki-respubliki-kazahstan-na-2020-2030-gody)], 21 July, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> See: Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> See: "Strategiia 'Kazakhstan-2030' i ee ekonomicheskii prioritet," available at [<https://www.zakon.kz/60241-strategiia-kazakhstan-2030-i-ee.html>], 21 July, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> See: "Strategiia 'Kazakhstan-2050'," available at [[https://www.akorda.kz/ru/official\\_documents/strategies\\_and\\_programs](https://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/strategies_and_programs)], 26 July, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> See: Ibidem.

Over thirty years of Kyrgyzstan's sovereign development, the following have been adopted: The Foreign Policy Concept of the Kyrgyz Republic of 1999,<sup>8</sup> 2007,<sup>9</sup> and 2019.<sup>10</sup> These concepts emphasized that Kyrgyzstan is pursuing a balanced, pragmatic and multi-vector foreign policy. The new version of the 2019 Foreign Policy Concept of Kyrgyzstan notes that the country's foreign policy is aimed at creating and maintaining favorable conditions for its sustainable development.<sup>11</sup> The formation of friendly good-neighborly relations with the regional states and the strengthening and deepening of relationships with allies and strategic partners are among the central foreign policy priorities.<sup>12</sup>

Also, the key issues in Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy were reflected in the National Security Concepts of 2001, 2009, and 2012, and the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Kyrgyzstan for 2013-2017.<sup>13</sup>

In Tajikistan, the first decade of independence was difficult due to the civil war that unfolded between the country's various political forces. It impacted Tajikistan's foreign policy, slowing down the process of developing its conceptual foundations.

The principles and priorities of Tajikistan's foreign policy were initially formalized on 24 September, 2002, with the adoption of the republic's first Foreign Policy Concept.<sup>14</sup> In the context of the geopolitical transformations that occurred in Central Asia in the early 21st century, Tajikistan strove to defend its national interests, and to take an active part in the collective struggle against international terrorism.

In the same year, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmon announced the open-door doctrine, which aimed to diversify the directions of the country's foreign policy. Based on internal socio-economic needs, the Tajik leadership intended to give impetus to the development of the economic aspect of diplomacy, making the republic's foreign policy more profitable.<sup>15</sup> The second Foreign Policy Concept of the country, approved on 27 January, 2015, also contains a commitment to pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy or an open-door policy based on building friendly and mutually beneficial relations "with all near and distant countries."<sup>16</sup>

The following should be emphasized among the key political documents that consolidate the conceptual foundations of Turkmenistan's foreign policy: the Constitution of Turkmenistan of 18 May, 1992,<sup>17</sup> the Declaration on the Foreign Policy of Turkmenistan in the 21st Century (1999),<sup>18</sup> the Concept of Foreign Policy of Turkmenistan as a Neutral State of 27 December, 1995,<sup>19</sup> The Foreign

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<sup>8</sup> See: "Kontseptsia vneshney politiki Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki ot 17 maia 1999 g.," in: *Khronika vneshnepoliticheskoy deyatelnosti Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki (1991-2002)*, Bishkek, 2003, 240 pp.

<sup>9</sup> See: "Kontseptsia vneshney politiki Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki ot 10 ianvaria 2007 g.," available at [<http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/preview/ru-ru/4569/10?mode=tekst>], 21 July, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See: "Kontseptsia vneshney politiki Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki ot 11 marta, 2019 g.," available at [<http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/430044?cl=ru-ru>], 25 July, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> See: "Natsionalnaia strategiiia ustoychivogo razvitiia Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki na 2013-2017 gg.," available at [<http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/61542?cl=ru-ru>], 3 August, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> See: Z.Sh. Saidov, *Respublika Tadjikistan na mezhgosudarstvennoy arene do i posle ob'iaivleniia politiki "otkrytykh dverey"*, Dushanbe, 2015, 346 pp.

<sup>15</sup> See: *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>16</sup> "Kontseptsia vneshney politiki Respubliki Tadjikistan ot 27 ianvaria, 2015 g.," available at [<https://www.mfa.tj/ru/main/view/988/kontseptsiya-vneshnei-politiki-respubliki-tadjikistan>], 5 August, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> See: "Konstitutsiia Turkmenistana," available at [<https://worldconstitutions.ru/?p=124>], 5 August, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> See: "Deklaratsiia o vneshnepoliticheskom kurse Turkmenistana v XXI v., osnovannom na postoiannom neiralitete, printsipakh miroliubiia, dobrososedstva i demokratii," available at [[http://wiki-tm.com/index.php/Декларация\\_о\\_внешнеполитическом\\_курсе\\_Туркменистана\\_в\\_XXI\\_веке\\_от\\_27.12.1999](http://wiki-tm.com/index.php/Декларация_о_внешнеполитическом_курсе_Туркменистана_в_XXI_веке_от_27.12.1999)], 5 August, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> See: "Kontseptsia vneshney politiki Turkmenistana kak neiralnogo gosudarstva ot 27 dekabria 1995 g.," available at [[http://continent-online.com/Document/?doc\\_id=31339053](http://continent-online.com/Document/?doc_id=31339053)], 12 August, 2021.

Policy Concept of Turkmenistan for 2013-2017,<sup>20</sup> and The Foreign Policy Concept of Turkmenistan for 2017-2023.<sup>21</sup>

Since gaining independence in 1991 and up to the present time, Turkmenistan has adhered to the principle of permanent neutrality in its foreign policy. However, this does not prevent it from actively participating in global and regional processes. With regard to internal (socio-economic crisis in the country) and external (aggravation of geopolitical rivalry in the region) factors, in 2017, President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov approved a new version of the country's Foreign Policy Concept for 2017-2023.<sup>22</sup> Development of a strategic partnership with the U.N. was declared a priority vector of Turkmenistan's foreign policy. The Concept also noted that Turkmenistan attaches particular importance to further strengthening interaction with such international organizations as the OSCE, OIC, Non-Aligned Movement, etc.<sup>23</sup>

The conceptual foundations of Uzbekistan's foreign policy are enshrined in the following documents: the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated 8 December, 1992,<sup>24</sup> the Law on the Basic Principles of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated 26 December, 1996,<sup>25</sup> and the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept of Uzbekistan.<sup>26</sup> The 2012 Concept noted that,

- firstly, Uzbekistan pursues an open and pragmatic foreign policy, building interstate relations based on friendship and good neighborliness; and
- secondly, the republic does not join military or political blocs.<sup>27</sup>

However, under the first President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, the foreign policy guidelines declared in theory were not implemented in practice. At that time, Uzbekistan's foreign policy was based primarily on maneuvering between the United States and Russia. At the regional level, Uzbekistan's foreign policy was not constructive and balanced on the brink of a military conflict with the neighboring states.

Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev's victory in the elections in 2016, Uzbekistan began to pursue a more open and active foreign policy, both regionally and globally. As part of the internal economic liberalization strategy, a course was set to subordinate foreign policy to the country's internal needs.<sup>28</sup> As part of this approach, the country adopted the Action Strategy on Five Priority Directions of Uzbekistan's Development for 2017-2021.<sup>28</sup> The document noted that one of the main priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy is the creation of a belt of security, stability and good-neighborliness around the country.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the foreign policy documents of all Central Asian countries reflected the multi-vector nature of their foreign policy. They declared the desire to obtain economic benefits through an active

<sup>20</sup> [<http://turkmenbusiness.org/category/blok-novosti/soobshcheniya-i-sobytiya?page=166>], 15 August, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> See: "Prezident Turkmenistana utverdil Kontseptsiiu vneshnepoliticheskogo kursa strany na 2017—2023 gg.," available at [<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/9988>], 21 August, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> See: Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> See: Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> See: "Konstitutsiia Respubliki Uzbekistan ot 8 dekabria 1992 g.," available at [<https://constitution.uz/ru/>], 17 August, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> See: "Ob osnovnykh printsipakh vneshnepoliticheskoy deiatelnosti Respubliki Uzbekistan," available at [<https://parliament.gov.uz/ru/laws/adopted/85/3402/>], 17 August, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> See: "Senat Uzbekistana odobril riad zakonov," available at [<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2012/08/30/senate/>], 21 August, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> See: "Senat odobril Kontseptsiiu vneshnepoliticheskoy deiatelnosti Uzbekistana," available at [<https://uzdaily.uz/ru/post/12420>], 26 August, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> See: "Strategiia deystviy po piati prioritetnym napravleniiam razvitiia Respubliki Uzbekistan v 2017-2021 gg.," available at [[https://president.uz/ru/pages/view/strategy?menu\\_id=144](https://president.uz/ru/pages/view/strategy?menu_id=144)], 26 August, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> See: Ibidem.

and open foreign policy. All the conceptual policy documents of the Central Asian countries indicate a course towards strengthening regional interstate cooperation.

## **Global Aspects of Foreign Policy of the Central Asian Countries**

In the context of the new geopolitical configuration that took shape after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 in Eurasia, the former Soviet republics were able to build their foreign policy course independently. Conducting an active foreign policy has become part of the strategy to strengthen national statehood and its new sovereign status in the global arena.

After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the Central Asian countries began to pay close attention to building political and economic contacts with the West. Favoring the introduction of the liberal democratic principles in their socio-political systems, the leaders of the regional states, mainly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, sought to intensify bilateral relations with Western countries, primarily with the United States. In 1992, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev made his first official visit to the United States, laying the foundation for the subsequent development of bilateral relations. Following the meeting, the presidents of Kazakhstan and the United States agreed to foster economic and military cooperation. The following package of documents was signed: an Agreement on Trade Relations, an Agreement on the Encouragement and Mutual Protection of Investments, a Memorandum of Understanding between the Governments of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the United States, and a joint statement on the conclusion of a convention on the avoidance of double taxation.<sup>30</sup>

Faced with complex internal problems, Central Asian countries required financial and economic support from outside. Through various international financial institutions, Western countries allocated loans to the newly independent states, counting on their political loyalty. Meanwhile, by the late 1990s, the results of the political and economic reforms carried out in the regional countries were disappointing to the West. As they fostered the development of the regional states on the basis of democratic and market economy principles, Western countries expected to see a generation of Asian tigers. However, they encountered a new set of failed states.<sup>31</sup> In the course of their sovereign development, all the regional countries had to deal with corruption, increased authoritarian tendencies and a lack of progress in economic reforms.<sup>32</sup>

In the same period, relations between the Central Asian countries and Russia developed by inertia. This resulted from the absence of a clear vision of strategic regional goals and objectives on the part of the Russian leadership. Moreover, the latter was not ready to adequately respond to the problems associated with foreign compatriots.<sup>33</sup> Gaining an awareness of these problems as key for Russian foreign policy was a painful process.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan sought to develop closer economic and political relations with Russia based on economic feasibility. Back in 1994, speaking at Moscow State University, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed to

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<sup>30</sup> See: Yu. Komlyakova, "Democratization in Post-Soviet Central Asia: American Impact," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 15, Issue 1, 2014, pp. 121-122.

<sup>31</sup> See: Ye. Rumer, "SShA i Tsentralnaia Azia posle 11 sentiabria," *Rossia i musulmanskii mir*, No. 11, 2003, pp. 90-103.

<sup>32</sup> See: Ibidem.

<sup>33</sup> See: M.A. Neymark, "Russkiy mir i geopolitika," *Problemy postsovetskogo prostranstva*, No. 2 (4), 2015, pp. 78-100.

<sup>34</sup> See: Ibidem.

bring the interstate cooperation of the post-Soviet countries to a new level by creating the Eurasian Union.<sup>35</sup> The first president of Kyrgyzstan Aslan Akayev also noted that the path to the rise of the republic's industry primarily involves cooperation with Russia.<sup>36</sup> However, the attempts to create a multilateral Eurasian cooperation format have yielded no results. The agreements signed between Russia, Belarus and the regional countries<sup>37</sup> remained on paper and were never actually implemented.

In the 1990s, a mutual interest in cooperation emerged in relations between the regional countries and China. The political leaders of the Central Asian countries were impressed by the principles that China intended to use to build relations with the newly independent states. These principles, voiced by the Premier of the State Council of China in 1994 in Tashkent, included a course towards good-neighborliness, friendship and peaceful coexistence, mutually beneficial cooperation aimed to promote common prosperity, respect for the choice of the peoples of all countries, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, respect for independence and sovereignty, and promotion of regional stability.<sup>38</sup> The political and legal normative base in relations between China and the countries of the region was laid gradually. In 1993, a declaration was signed on the foundations of friendly relations between China and Kazakhstan.<sup>39</sup> In 1994, Uzbekistan and China signed a Protocol on the basic principles of relations and on the development of mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries.<sup>40</sup> In 1995, the Memorandum on the Development of Friendly Relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Government of Shanghai was signed.<sup>41</sup>

One of the key problems affecting the development of the region was the issue of territorial disputes. Their successful resolution could play a positive role in strengthening regional stability and security. The solution of issues of border disputes in bilateral and multilateral formats has thus become the priority in relations between the countries of Central Asia and China. Guided by this task, in 1996 the political leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in Shanghai and signed a "military confidence-building agreement in the border area."<sup>42</sup> This meeting laid the foundation for the development of the Shanghai cooperation format. At the turn of the 21st century, China and the countries of Central Asia managed to resolve all territorial differences, enshrining the results in special bilateral treaties. In this process, China's virtuoso level of diplomacy allowed it to achieve a solution to a range of border problems that was beneficial to it.<sup>43</sup> Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have ceded some of the disputed territories to China.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See: *25 let idei evraziyskoy integratsii N.A. Nazarbayeva (v otsenkakh ekspertov KISI pri Prezidente RK)*, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, 2019, 296 pp.

<sup>36</sup> See: G. Rudov, *Nam suzhdeno zhit vechno v družbe: dokumentalnye stranitsy rossiysko-kyrgyzskikh otnosheniy na rubezhe vekov*, ed. by Academician V. Ploskikh, Илим, Moscow, Bishkek, 2002, 352 pp.

<sup>37</sup> The Agreement on the Customs Union (1995), the Treaty on Deepening Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Spheres (1996), the Treaty on the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space (1999).

<sup>38</sup> See: Ye.G. Garbuzarova, *Tsentrlnaia Azia v sovremennykh miropoliticheskikh protsessakh*, Aspekt Press, Moscow, 2020, 192 pp.

<sup>39</sup> See: "Joint Declaration on the Foundations of Friendly Relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China dated 18 October, 1993," available in Russian at [[https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=1025860](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=1025860)], 21 August, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> See: D.K. Yusupaliyeva, "Sotrudnichestvo mezhdru Kitaem i Uzbekistanom," *Problemy nauki*, No. 1 (60), 2021, pp. 21-23.

<sup>41</sup> See: "Memorandum on the Development of Friendly Ties between the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Government of Shanghai dated 26 October, 1995," available in Russian at [[http://continent-online.com/Document/?doc\\_id=30224696](http://continent-online.com/Document/?doc_id=30224696)], 27 August, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Zh. Lian, "Kitaiskaia diplomatiia v Tsentralnoy Azii v 1990-e gg.," *Sotsialno-politicheskie nauki*, No. 1, 2017, pp. 17-21.

<sup>43</sup> See: V. Paramonov, O. Stolpovskiy, "Pogranichno-territorialnye problemy v kitaisko-tsentralnoaziatskikh otnosheniakh," available at [<https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1235032800>], 27 August, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> See: Ibidem.

With the start of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan, all the regional states declared their readiness to assist the West in the fight against international terrorism. At the beginning of the 21st century, the U.S. military-political presence in Central Asia changed the balance of power in the region and opened a new page in relations with regional states. Agreements were reached with the ruling elites of the Central Asian countries, allowing the United States to use their infrastructure facilities for military and humanitarian purposes. Turkmenistan, with its status of a neutral state, also granted the United States the right to use its airspace and the airport in the capital Ashgabad for refueling aircraft carrying humanitarian supplies to Afghanistan. Each regional state has received economic support from Western countries and international foundations for their participation in the American military operation in Afghanistan. Generous financial assistance was aimed at solving social and economic problems in these countries. For example, in 2001, the IMF allocated a \$90-million loan to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>45</sup> In 2002, the World Bank announced a strategy for assisting Uzbekistan. The strategy envisaged the issuance of loans to the republic under two scenarios over three years: 300-350 million dollars subject to a decisive reform of the economy, and 150 million dollars if the pace of reforms is accelerated without a macroeconomic decline.<sup>46</sup>

The global financial and economic crisis and internal problems have pushed the Central Asian countries to deepen economic cooperation with Russia. In 2010, the Customs Union began to function with the participation of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Two years later, the Common Economic Space of the three countries was launched. In 2014, the leaders of the three above-mentioned states signed an agreement on the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which came into force in January 2015. Soon, Kyrgyzstan joined the Union in order to give impetus to the development of its national economy. The republic's leadership considered its participation in the EAEU a means of solving economic problems and upholding geopolitical interests.<sup>47</sup> The institutionalization of Russia's relations with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was negatively assessed in the West, which saw neo-imperial ambitions in Moscow's actions. The American leadership tried to convey these concerns to the political leaders of the Central Asian countries. Thus, in July 2020, during the annual meeting with the foreign ministers of Central Asian states in the virtual C5 + 1 format, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed the intention of the United States to provide "unwavering support for independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity" to the regional countries.<sup>48</sup>

Despite skepticism in regard to the subsequent development of Eurasian integration, fueled by Western countries, this Union did succeed and strengthen its positions, becoming an important factor in global politics and economy. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are focused on expanding economic cooperation within the Union, considering Eurasian integration a prerequisite for the sustainable development of their national economies and a vital factor in strengthening their political stability.<sup>49</sup> Gradually, Eurasian integration became attractive to other regional states. Structural economic reforms carried out in Uzbekistan stimulated its leadership to join the EAEU in 2020 as an observer state. The issue of Tajikistan's entry into the EAEU is being elaborated at the state level; both positive and negative aspects of the country's possible entry into the Union are analyzed. Tajikistan's accession to the EAEU will allow to unlock the republic's trade and investment potential, and to create a

<sup>45</sup> See: S.S. Zhiltsov, I.S. Zonn, *SShA v pogone za Kaspiem*, Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, Moscow, 2009, 200 pp.

<sup>46</sup> See: Ibidem.

<sup>47</sup> See: S. Zhiltsov, "The Post-Soviet Space: Previous Development and a New Configuration," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. English Edition*, Vol. 19, Issue 3, 2018, pp. 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> "Pompeo obsudil s glavami MID stran Tsentralnoy Azii prodovolstvennuiu bezopasnost," available at [<https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/8856971>], 7 August, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> See: S.S. Zhiltsov, "Borba za Evraziu," *Problemy postsovetskogo prostranstva*, No. 8 (1), 2021, pp. 8-19.

favorable labor migration regime.<sup>50</sup> According to various estimates, the number of migrants from Tajikistan working in Russia exceeds 1 million people.

The desire of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to diversify their hydrocarbon export routes and free itself of Russia's influence coincided with the interests of China, which needed new sources of raw materials. The participation of China and the Central Asian countries in joint infrastructure projects was beneficial for all parties. The implementation of these projects has brought great geopolitical and geo-economic benefits to China, opening up access to the energy markets of the regional countries. The elites of the Central Asian countries see China as an advantageous economic partner, who is ready to provide cheap loans and incur additional costs associated with infrastructure development.<sup>51</sup> The first branch of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline was built in 2009, opening up Beijing's access to Turkmenistan's and the entire region's hydrocarbon reserves. In 2017, Kazakhstan began exporting gas to China from its western fields. In the future, the construction of the fourth branch of the gas pipeline, which will pass through the territory of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, is slated for completion.

Gradually, China became the dominant buyer in Turkmenistan's energy market. The Turkmen authorities plan to reduce economic dependence on China through the TAPI project. This project, lobbied by the United States as part of the New Silk Road initiative, includes the supply of Turkmen gas southward to India through Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the prospects for this project are still vague, since the main gas pipeline routes traverse the countries where conflicts persist, and there is a danger of their escalation. Against the backdrop of Turkmenistan's growing economic dependence on China, Russia's return to the Turkmen energy market in 2019 was a timely one. Thus, after a three-year break, Gazprom resumed imports of Turkmen gas until 2028. Also, for several years now, Turkmenistan has been discussing the supply of its gas to the European market.<sup>52</sup> A project for the construction of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline, which will open the way for Turkmen gas to Europe, is under discussion. The signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in 2018 and the Memorandum of Intent on Joint Exploration and Development of the Dostlug Hydrocarbon Field in the Caspian Sea between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan in 2021 increased the chances for the implementation of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline.

Central Asian countries, primarily Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, demonstrate great interest in the American CASA-1000 project. It was developed by the Obama administration and is aimed at exporting electricity from the regional countries to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The cost of the project is \$1.86 billion. For the United States, this project bears more geopolitical burden than economic,<sup>53</sup> since it will orient the countries of Central Asia southward, weakening their economic and political ties to Russia and China. The project was launched in 2016 in Tursunzade. The COVID-19 pandemic has made certain adjustments, slowing down its implementation. The next phase of the CASA-1000 project started on 3 April, 2021, when the President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov laid a capsule in the foundation of the first support of a high-voltage power transmission line in the village of Karabulak, Batken region.<sup>54</sup> The leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have repeatedly stressed that they are pinning great hopes on the implementation of this project, which will give impetus to the develop-

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<sup>50</sup> See: "Ekonomicheskiye efekty vstupleniya Tadjikistana v Evraziyskiy ekonomicheskiy soiuz. Analiticheskiy doklad, No. 11, 2020," available at [[https://eabr.org/upload/iblock/97a/EABR\\_Analytical\\_Report\\_RT\\_11\\_2020\\_RU\\_1.pdf](https://eabr.org/upload/iblock/97a/EABR_Analytical_Report_RT_11_2020_RU_1.pdf)], 7 August, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> See: S. Zhiltsov, I. Zonn, E. Markova, "The Geopolitical Landscape of Eurasia Under the Pressure of Caspian and Central Asian Power Projects," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. English Edition*, Vol. 22, Issue 1, 2019, pp. 25-33.

<sup>52</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> See: A. Knyazev, "V CASA-1000 bolshe geopolitiki, chem ekonomiki," available at [<https://www.postsovet.ru/blog/asia/912413.html>], 7 August, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> See: "O khode stroitelstva CASA-1000 v Kyrgyzstane i Tadjikistane," available at [<https://energy.media/2021/07/21/o-hode-stroitelstva-krupneyshego-proekta-casa-1000-v-kyrgyzstane-i-tadjikistane/>], 16 August, 2021.



ment of their national economies. On the one hand, the Central Asian countries expect to receive economic benefits from the implementation of the CASA-1000 project, on the other hand, they consider it an opportunity to diversify foreign economic and foreign policy contacts.

At the present stage, China has become the most active geopolitical player in Central Asia due to its large-scale regional economic policy. The Belt and Road (BRI) transcontinental cooperation project proposed in 2013 by the Chinese leadership seemed attractive to all Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan has defined its participation in this project in the Nurlı Zhol Kazakh state development program. Kyrgyzstan's political elite is also positively disposed towards deepening cooperation with China, which it considers an attractive investment partner for economic development purposes. Currently, Kyrgyzstan has an opportunity to implement the project for the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, which has been deliberated since the 1990s. However, China is in no rush to finance the project, which is estimated at \$4.5 billion. In the early stages of the BRI project, China has actively provided the regional states with investments and loans. However, faced with corruption schemes in Central Asian countries, Beijing chose to act more cautiously and only supports those initiatives that will be implemented on a co-financing basis.<sup>55</sup> Kyrgyzstan's economy is experiencing financial difficulties, so its authorities cannot assume such obligations. Due to this fact, Uzbekistan agreed to take part in the design and construction of individual sections of this railway. Relevant agreements were reached at a meeting of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz intergovernmental commission in March 2021.<sup>56</sup> Participation in the BRI project will allow Uzbekistan to implement the tasks related to the modernization of the national economy. "The terms of the Chinese project are most closely suited to the modern foreign policy of Uzbekistan, closely correlating with the tasks of diversifying foreign trade transport routes and attracting investments in the development of economic infrastructure."<sup>57</sup> Just as its neighbors, Tajikistan seeks to derive economic benefits from its participation in the Chinese project. A bilateral cooperation program aimed at converging the Chinese BRI project and the National Development Strategy of Tajikistan until 2030 was launched by Tajikistan and China.

## Cooperation of Central Asian Countries with Non-Regional Players

Since their first days of independence, Central Asian countries have established political and economic contacts with Muslim countries, i.e., Turkey and Iran. Cooperation with Turkey, which the Central Asian countries relied on to get closer to the West, was of particular interest. However, in reality the interests of Turkey and the regional countries immediately began to diverge. Appealing to Turkic unity, Turkey sought to establish multilateral cooperation with the regional countries, emphasizing the creation of supranational institutions. Meanwhile, the political leaders of the regional states were rather wary of such initiatives,<sup>58</sup> seeing them as a threat to their national sovereignty. Thus, the

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<sup>55</sup> See: K. Riklton, "Zheleznaia doroga Kitay-Kirgiziia-Uzbekistan: kto zaplatit?," available at [<https://inosmi.ru/economic/20210520/249754125.html>], 22 August, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> See: "Uzbekistan gotov vziat na sebia stroitelstvo chasti zheleznoy dorogi KNR-KR-RUZ," available at [<https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20210326/uzbekistan-gotov-vzyat-na-sebia-stroitelstvo-chasti-jeleznoy-dorogi-knr--kr--ruz-17984600.html>], 22 August, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> D.A. Borisov, "Vneshniaia politika Uzbekistana pri Sh. Mirziëve: strategiia i praktika," *Izvestia Uralskogo federalnogo universiteta*, Series *Obshchestvennye nauki*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (188), 2019, pp. 130-139.

<sup>58</sup> See: G. Rudov, "Rol Turtsii i Irana v Tsentralnoy Azii," *Rossia i musulmanskii mir*, No. 12, 2010, pp. 114-118.

President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev emphasized that civilized interstate relations should be built on mutual respect for state sovereignty, rather than on ethno-linguistic grounds.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, the Turkish foreign policy vector has become one of the key elements in the foreign policy of the regional countries, which were interested in deepening economic and political cooperation with Ankara. Interaction between Kazakhstan and Turkey developed especially actively. Kazakhstan became the first of the Turkic Central Asian states, with which Turkey signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2009.<sup>60</sup>

The interest of the Central Asian republics in the development and strengthening of interaction with Turkey in the Cooperation Council of Turkic States (CCTS, created in 2009) has increased. For Turkey, CCTS has become the promotion of its geopolitical interests in the region. The Central Asian countries viewed this integration mechanism as an opportunity to diversify their foreign policy. Turkmenistan joined the CCTS as an observer country. Joining the Council in 2019 as a full member was historic for Uzbekistan. The accession of Uzbekistan to the CCTS demonstrated the open nature of the republic's foreign policy and the versatility of its foreign policy strategy.<sup>61</sup>

All Central Asian countries seek to strengthen cooperation within the CCTS and increase the influence of this Turkic integration structure in the international arena. Thus, the following agreements were reached at the summit of the heads of CCTS states in April 2021:

- first, to change the name of the Union to Turkic Council, and
- secondly, to prepare Vision of the Turkic World-2040 and Strategy of the Turkic Council 2020-2025.<sup>62</sup>

While fostering cooperation with Turkey, the Central Asian countries also furthered economic and political contacts with Iran. However, they were not particularly intense. Positive dynamics were only evident in the relations between Tajikistan and Iran. Tajikistan's affiliation with the Persian-speaking world made Iran as a priority vector of Dushanbe's foreign policy. Since Tajikistan gained independence, the factor of cultural, historical and civilizational proximity has become a decisive one in Tajik-Iranian relations.<sup>63</sup> In 2006, ethnocultural closeness led to the emergence of the Union of Persian-speaking States, with the participation of Tajikistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Tajikistan demonstrated a special interest in the development of this union, hoping for joint implementation of large-scale economic projects with the brotherly countries. The active promotion of integrative cooperation based on ideology and values was the result of Tajikistan's foreign policy aimed at diversifying foreign policy and foreign economic relations.

Infrastructural projects have become one of the priority areas of cooperation between Iran and the Central Asian countries. Back in the 1990s, cooperation with Iran provided the Central Asian countries with access to the Persian Gulf through the implementation of such projects as the construction of the Bafq-Bandar-Abbas (1995) and Mashhad-Seraks-Tejen (1996) railways. Iran was implementing its strategy of modernizing transport and communication routes, which corresponded to the interests of the regional countries that sought to find ways to enter world markets. The commissioning of the Bafq-Mashhad railway in 2005 reduced the distance to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas for

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<sup>59</sup> See: *G. Rudov*, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> See: "Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Turkey dated 22 October, 2009;" available in Russian at [[https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=30501274](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30501274)], 25 August, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> See: "Mezhdunarodnye eksperty obsuzhdayut vstupleniye Uzbekistana v Sovet sotrudnichestva tiurkoiazychnykh gosudarstv," available at [<https://nuz.uz/politika/44217-mezhdunarodnye-eksperty-obsuzhdayut-vstupleniye-uzbekistana-v-sovet-sotrudnichestva-tyurkoyazychnyh-gosudarstv.html>], 25 August, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> See: K. Bozdogan, "Tiurkskiy sovet: Turkestan ob'iavlennyy odnoy iz dukhovnykh stolits tiurkskogo mira," available at [<https://inosmi.ru/politic/20210401/249469750.html>], 29 August, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> See: V.I. Mesamed, "Irano-tadzhikskie otnosheniia: problemy i dostizheniia," available at [<http://www.iimes.ru/?p=34967>], 29 August, 2021.

the Central Asian states by about 900 km. In 2007, a joint declaration was signed between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran on the construction of the Gorgan-Bereket-Uzen railway. In 2014, this 934.5-km railway line was officially put into operation, which allowed to intensify regional economic ties. Speaking at the commissioning ceremony, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev emphasized that this new transport and communication route in the Central Asian states “will increase the importance of the regional market and the production focused on Asian markets.”<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, relying on its transit potential, Iran also tried to overcome international isolation through more active participation in geo-economic projects in Central Asia. Thus in 2018, together with China, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan put into operation a railway along the Changsha (China)-Altynkol (Kazakhstan)-Bolashak-Serhetyaka (Turkmenistan)-Akyayla- Incheburun (Iran)-Tehran route within the BRI framework. This event opened up new trade and economic opportunities for the Central Asian states. The flow of cheap goods from China, Iran and Turkey rushed into the region, providing people with basic requirements and alleviating the internal economic crisis in the regional countries.<sup>65</sup> In April 2019, Uzbekistan joined this transport corridor, strengthening the transit potential of this Eurasian transport route.

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## Intra-Regional Level of Interstate Cooperation

After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the countries of Central Asia faced regional problems: ethnic conflicts, territorial disputes and water energy conflicts. They sought to find mechanisms for interstate interaction. Their political leaders attempted to create multilateral cooperation formats: the Central Asian Union (1994), the Central Asian Economic Community (1998), the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CAC). However, in the end, in 2005, the member countries of the CAC, which Russia had joined in 2004, decided to join the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). The political elites of the Central Asian countries were aware of the need to pool resources and efforts in order to solve common socio-economic problems.<sup>66</sup>

A new stage of interstate regional cooperation began in 2016, when Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected president of Uzbekistan. This phase was distinguished by an increased level of activity of international contacts between the regional countries. Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy allowed to initiate the bilateral format of regional cooperation, as well as to create a collective interaction mechanism. Shavkat Mirziyoyev made his first official visits to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. In 2017, a Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the foundation was laid for the development of comprehensive cooperation. With Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan signed a Joint Declaration on furthering strategic partnership and strengthening good-neighborliness.<sup>68</sup> Relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been hampered by border disputes. In

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<sup>64</sup> “Zapushchena zheleznodorozhnaia magistral Uzen-Bereket-Gorgan,” available at [<https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20141204/1013471452.html>], 29 August, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> See: Ch. Guo., D.A Degtarev., Zh Jielin, “Implications of ‘One Belt, One Road’ Strategy for China and Eurasia,” *Vestnik RUDN. Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2019, pp. 77-88.

<sup>66</sup> See: Z.A. Dadabayeva, Ye.M. Kuzmina, *Protsessy regionalizatsii v Tsentralnoy Azii: problemy i protivorechiia*, Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2014, 55 pp.

<sup>67</sup> See: “Strategic Partnership Agreement between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan of 6 March, 2017,” available at [<https://lex.uz/ru/docs/4647214>], 30 August, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> See: “Joint Declaration on Further Deepening Strategic Partnership and Strengthening Good-Neighborliness between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Kazakhstan,” available in Russian at [<https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/346>], 30 August, 2021.

March 2016, another tense situation arose on the border between the two states. The conflict was resolved with the help of the CSTO, to which the ex-president of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev turned for help. The conflicting parties were reconciled in the framework of an emergency meeting of the CSTO Permanent Council in Moscow.<sup>69</sup> In September 2017, during the first state visit of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Kyrgyzstan, the leaders of the two countries signed an Agreement on the Demarcation and Delimitation of the State Border.<sup>70</sup> However, the 200 kilometers of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border have not yet been agreed upon. The first visit of the head of Uzbekistan to Tajikistan in a long time took place in 2018. Following the meeting, the parties agreed,

- first, to abolish the visa regime and restore transport links between the two countries;
- secondly, they reached an agreement on the last disputed section of the interstate border;
- thirdly, contracts worth about \$140 million were signed.<sup>71</sup>

The unresolved tension that arose in Kyrgyz-Tajik relations in 2021 due to border disputes, leading to armed clashes on the borders of both states, negatively affected the spirit of regional cooperation.

Uzbekistan's new policy has created conditions for the implementation of a multilateral regional interaction format. Thus, since 2018, heads of the regional countries have been meeting annually in a Consultative Meeting format. In August 2021, the third Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia was held in the city of Turkmenbashi. Following the meeting, the participating states made a Joint Statement. The document noted that the countries of the region are willing to continue active cooperation in the implementation of the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone.<sup>72</sup> It was also emphasized that the regional states are ready to provide all possible assistance for the earliest possible attainment of civil peace and harmony in Afghanistan.<sup>73</sup> The participants of the Consultative Meeting proposed to resolve the issue "of establishing a dialogue on security and cooperation in Central Asia as a permanent consultative platform for discussing topical issues of regional development on a systematic and regular basis."<sup>74</sup> Active intra-regional interaction demonstrated the desire of the political leaders of the Central Asian countries to take on the responsibility for solving ~~pressing regional problems and to protect their national interests in the context of the growing geopolitical rivalry between the United States, China and Russia in the region.~~ However, the increasing economic influence of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia opens up an opportunity for them to claim the status of a regional leader, which may negatively affect regional cooperation.

## *Conclusion*

After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Central Asian countries were forced to start shaping their foreign policy in the context of a new geopolitical reality. The countries have made a choice in favor

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<sup>69</sup> See: "Postoianny Sovet ODKB na vneocherednom zasedanii obsudil situatsiiu na neuregulirovannom uchastke kyrgyzsko-uzbekskoy granitsy," available at [[https://odkb-csto.org/authorized\\_organs/permanent\\_council/postoyanny\\_sovet\\_odkb\\_na\\_vneocherednom\\_zasedanii\\_obsudil\\_situatsiyu\\_na\\_neuregulirovannom\\_uchastke\\_k/](https://odkb-csto.org/authorized_organs/permanent_council/postoyanny_sovet_odkb_na_vneocherednom_zasedanii_obsudil_situatsiyu_na_neuregulirovannom_uchastke_k/)], 31 August, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> See: "Uzbekistan i Kyrgyzstan demarkirovali 1 170 kilometrov granitsy za god," available at [<https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20170904/uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-demarkirovali-granitsy-1023244628.html>], 31 August, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> See: "Pervy za 18 let vizit prezidenta Uzbekistana v Tadjikistan," available at [<https://centralasia.media/news/1435996>], 31 August, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> See: "Joint Statement Following the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia," available at [<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/38734/sovместное-заявление-по-итогам-консультативной-встречи-глав-государств-центральной-азии>], 31 August, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*.

of pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy, considering it a condition for maintaining sovereignty. In addition, the regional countries have structured their foreign policy by relying on the principle of balancing between global and regional actors. As a result, the external factor began to play a decisive role in regional political and economic processes, setting the trajectory for the development of the Central Asian countries.

The multi-vector policy has allowed the Central Asian countries to maneuver between the United States, Russia and China. Under conditions of economic weakness and underdevelopment of political institutions, it allowed to defend their national interests. At the same time, the regional states have demonstrated interest in geo-economic projects that were proposed by the leading centers of global politics. Central Asian countries have exhibited interest in the New Silk Road and the Eurasian Economic Union, combining them with their national development strategies.

In the future, the direction of foreign policy of the Central Asian countries will be determined by a number of factors.

- On the one hand, these are the success of interaction within the region and the willingness to compromise on controversial issues and other long-standing regional conflicts.
- On the other hand, the extra-regional factor, or the desire of external players to use Central Asia in their own interests, will have a great influence.

In these conditions, much will depend on the political ambitions of the leaders of the regional countries and their ability to build interstate cooperation within the region in bilateral and multilateral formats.