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## **GEOPOLITICAL FEATURES OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION**

**Abstract:** *The article focuses on the aspects that define the geopolitical significance of Central Asia and the changes that have occurred since the collapse of the USSR. It describes the economic and transit potential and overviews the interests of other states. It highlights the main factors of instability and threats that may arise and spread from the region. The authors conclude that the main cause of distress are the Afghan problem, issues of water use and energy and illicit drug trafficking.*

**Keywords:** *Central Asia, Afghanistan, Great Game, geostrategic value, geopolitics, security*

In the second decade of the 21st century, Central Asia remains one of the main regions of world politics, and one of the main factors influencing this is the geopolitical potential of the countries of this region and the problem of peace in Afghanistan. The role of Central Asia in the geopolitical dynamics of the modern world has grown [16].

There is hardly a region in the world today that does not face international threats and insecurity. The current geopolitical significance of Central Asia is determined not only by the region's capabilities and its creative potential. Central Asia is at the center of the global community because of the dangers and threats that may arise and spread from here. The factors determining the current geopolitical significance of the region are in fact threats to the development of the region.

In the 1990s, serious changes and important events took place on the geopolitical map of the world. New sovereign states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan appeared in Central Asia.

The emergence of a new geopolitical space in Central Asia should be seen as the result of significant changes that have occurred since the end of the Cold War. It is expected that this change, which is characterized by a series of events, will become the object of the struggle for leadership positions between Russia and the trans-regional and regional forces of Central Asia which compete for their own interests and goals.

The Central Asian region has long been a crossroad of civilizations and an important transit area for international trade. It is important to note that, according to the theory of the famous British geographer H. Mackinder about the Heartland, Central Asia is the most important and integral part of Heartland. According to Mackinder, "the one who rules the Heartland rules the World Island (Eurasia and Africa); the one who rules the World Island rules the whole world" [18, p. 87].

In general, the term "Central Asia" was first used by the famous German geographer Alexander von Humboldt in his three-volume "Studying Central Asian mountain ranges and climate comparisons", published in Paris in 1843. In this paper, Central Asia stands out as a unique region [4, p. 11]. It should be noted that although the countries of Central Asia do not have access to seaports, economic

and cultural ties can be established not only with neighboring countries, but also with the rest of the world through the development of land transport. This requires, first of all, the achievement of internal stability in the countries of the region and the joint creation of transport corridors to enter the world market.

The geopolitical region of Central Asia covers a large territory located in the central part of Eurasia and does not have direct access to the world's oceans. Although it does not have clear boundaries geopolitically, the region currently includes Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Historically, Central Asia was known as the region connecting Europe, the Middle East, South and East Asia through the Great Silk Road.

Today, Central Asia remains one of the most important centers of concentration of the geostrategic interests of the leading world. Its geopolitical regionalization is determined by the territories of five independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Officially, this name was adopted in January 1993 at a general meeting of heads of state and government in Tashkent, when it was proposed to further name Middle Asia and Kazakhstan as Central Asia [12].

The geopolitics and geostrategic value of Central Asia are based on its huge oil and gas resources, transit and communication routes, the strategic and geo-economic importance of the Caspian Sea, its ability to extract and transport resources, its ability to withstand internal crises, and also has common cultural, historical and economic interests with the states of Central Asia and neighboring states. These factors lead to increased competition between regional and trans-regional forces seeking to play a decisive role in Central Asia.

Currently, Central Asia is transforming from a peripheral region (where geopolitical trends did not appear at all) into a region in which the interests of several major powers and other sectors of international life are increasingly

intersecting. Located in the "heart" of the continent, Central Asia is a kind of "gateway" to the strategically important regions of Eurasia. In the east are China and the countries of the Asia-Pacific region; in the south - Afghanistan, the Middle East and a number of other Islamic states; in the west and in the north - the Caucasus, Turkey, Europe, Russia.

Central Asia is an important geostrategic region on the world map, covering an area of 3,994,400 square kilometers, which is about 10% of the entire Asian region [17]. Geographically, Central Asia has common borders with Europe in the west, with Asian countries in the east, with the Russian Federation in the north and with Muslim countries in the south [17]. Therefore, Central Asian states can gain access to the world's oceans through transit routes. The region takes the second place in the world in fuel and energy resources (oil and gas), and also has large reserves of rare earth minerals such as gold, copper, uranium and heavy metals. In general, a characteristic feature of Central Asia is its location at the crossroads of eastern and western cultures.

It can be predicted that the balance of forces in the world will largely depend on the direction in which the situation in the Central Asian states will develop. Any events taking place in the countries of Central Asia will make a difference at not only the regional level, but also can also cause changes in the geopolitical balance of forces on the entire Eurasian continent, which is recognized as the axis of world development.

Today Central Asia is a very risky and unstable region with a consumer market of more than 60 million people [14], a diverse population and a large number of territorial disputes.

As for the 16.5 million population of Kazakhstan, about 35% of the population are Russians (the number of Russians in the country is decreasing year by year), and 20% are not Kazakhs. Therefore, it will be more difficult for the new

Kazakh government to pursue a policy of state building on the base of ethnicity and language. Although this factor is more prone to nationalism, the Kazakhs make up only half the country's population [6, p. 1].

The Republic of Uzbekistan is the main candidate for the role of regional leader in Central Asia. Despite the fact that Uzbekistan is not as large as Kazakhstan in terms of territory and less rich in natural resources, it has a much larger population (more than 33 million) and, most importantly, it is closer to a nation state than Kazakhstan. Given the high birth rate of Uzbeks and the gradual exodus of formerly privileged Russians, 85% of the country's population is now ethnic Uzbek. Russians make up 7% of the total population (mainly in the capital Tashkent) [7, p. 1].

Turkmenistan is relatively a nation-state. Out of 4.8 million, about 75% of the population are Turkmen, and Uzbeks and Russians make up 10% of the total population [5, p. 1]. Turkmenistan is geographically protected: it is relatively far from Russia. Uzbekistan and Iran play an important geopolitical role for the future of this country. If an oil pipeline passes through Turkmenistan, the country's large natural gas reserves will ensure the prosperity of its people [1].

The population of Kyrgyzstan (about 5 million) is characterized by great ethnic diversity. Kyrgyz people make up about 55 percent of the country's population, and Uzbeks - 13 percent, and the number of Russians has recently dropped from 20 to 15 percent. [8, p. 2]. Kyrgyzstan is a country rich in natural resources and has a beautiful nature called Switzerland in Central Asia (in this regard, it is possible to create a new tourist center). However, it is located between China and Kazakhstan, and in view of its geopolitical position, it increasingly depends on the successes of Kazakhstan to maintain its independence.

Tajikistan is ethnically considered a nation state. Of the 6.5 million people, less than two-thirds are Tajiks, more than 25 percent are Uzbeks, and about 3

percent are Russians [9, p. 1]. Nationalism is widespread in Tajikistan, with violent acts committed by urban political elites. As a result, the cities not only caused a crisis, but also created a good opportunity for Russia to maintain its army on the territory of the country. The ethnic situation is further compounded by the fact that the majority of Tajiks live outside the country, mainly in northeastern Afghanistan. The Tajik population in Tajikistan is about the same as the Tajik population in Afghanistan, another factor that undermines regional stability.

Today, the main threats to stability in the Central Asian region are:

- international terrorism,
- religious extremism,
- environmental issues,
- proliferation of illegal weapons,
- domestic geopolitical competition,
- illicit drug trafficking,
- competition of external forces in the region,
- interethnic conflicts, instability of the domestic political situation in the countries of the region,
- issues of water use and energy,
- The Afghan problem and others [20].

Illicit drug trafficking is one of the main obstacles that pose a threat to the security of the region.

It should be noted that Afghanistan is the world leader in the production of drugs, and the main markets for the drugs grown in Afghanistan are European countries and Russia. It goes without saying that Central Asia serves as a transit point for transporting drugs from Afghanistan to Europe. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are the main transit points for Afghan drugs in the region. About 90% of the drugs consumed today in Europe are produced in Afghanistan [25, p. 24].

Besides, the situation in Tajikistan was a major threat to the stability in Central Asia in the 1990s. Because of the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992, many civilians were killed and many were forced to flee to neighboring Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. President Askar Akayev fleeing the country in March 2005 as a result of riots in Bishkek, the Andijan events in May 2005 and ethnic clashes in the Osh and Jalal-Abad regions of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 had a significant negative impact on overall stability in the region [20].

Another important problem in the region is the problem of the Aral Sea, which is a concern not only in the Central Asian region, but also on a global scale. The issue of the Aral Sea is considered as one of the greatest environmental tragedies of the twentieth century. According to experts, due to the irrational use of water, the sea, which was once the fourth-largest lake in the world, remains only 25 percent of its original size and holds just 10 percent of its original volume of water [10].

However, the disaster of the Aral Sea is not the only environmental problem in Central Asia. Particular attention should be paid to the rational use of water resources, which are vital in the region. In recent years, there has been disintegration of a unified water management system in Central Asia. Conflicts of interest between countries over the use of river water for irrigation or energy purposes have intensified. The most publicized case was the construction of the Rogun hydroelectric station in Tajikistan. This is one of the largest projects in Central Asia, which has caused tremendous dissatisfaction of the government of Uzbekistan. In the context of increasing volumes of water use, limited water resources have also begun to have influence. According to the World Resources Institute Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were placed in the category “High Baseline Water Stress”, meaning 40-80% of available supply of water is withdrawn annually by irrigated agriculture, industries and municipalities, and Turkmenistan

was identified as having “Extremely High Baseline Water Stress”, where more than 80% of available supply is withdrawn [15].

Each of the neighboring states has its own method of political governance and approaches its place in the region from its geopolitical interests. There is a subtle competition between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for regional leadership. Kazakhstan does not consider it important to confine itself to five neighboring countries in the region and is trying to achieve its hegemony by actively participating in multilateral platforms, such as OSCE and CICA. Kazakhstan was also a non-permanent member in the UN Security Council in 2017-2018. It is also rich in natural resources and has a more developed economy than other countries of Central Asia and higher standard of living. According to The World Bank, GDP per capita of Kazakhstan is \$9,731, compared to \$1,724 in Uzbekistan [12]. However, Uzbekistan is most likely fit for this position. This is mainly due to its convenient geopolitical position at the center of the region, its strong political will and its prevailing human resources, which makes up more than half of the total population in the region. Uzbekistan does not have a common border with Russia and has successfully withstood pressure from its southern neighbor in the last decades, whereas Kazakhstan, which shares the longest border with Russia, has maintained a pro-Russian vector of foreign policy.

Central Asia is a unique geopolitical and civilizational space, and the conflict at any point in the region does not develop separately, but as an interconnected chain and affects the entire region. In this regard, it is appropriate to quote the following words of the first president of Uzbekistan President I. A. Karimov: “Any conflict in a separate state cannot remain within national borders for a long time” [21, p. 24].



One of the key features that increases the geopolitical importance of Central Asia for other countries is the richness of energy resources like oil and gas, uranium resources in the region.

According to various estimates, the total proven oil reserves are from 15 to 31 billion barrels, which is about 7.2% of world reserves. This is, of course, much less than the potential of hydrocarbons in the Middle East. The proven oil reserves here account for 55% of the world's resources. [25, p. 27]. In comparison, Saudi Arabia's proven oil reserves amount to 269 billion barrels. Central Asia's proven natural gas reserves are estimated at 230-360 trillion cubic pounds, which is about 7% of the world's reserves [13, p. 29].

However, it is obvious that the fast-growing economies of China, India and Pakistan must find new sources of energy to sustain this pace of their economy. Such sources can only be found in practice in Central Asia. Given that these three countries play a strategic role in the global economy and international life, the management of oil and gas reserves by Central Asian countries is of paramount importance.

The policies pursued by the leading countries of the world and the region regarding Central Asia today are largely determined by the aforementioned situation.

Central Asia is regaining its historical significance as a crossroad of trade routes. Traditional marine transport undoubtedly plays a key role in traditional trade. Due to the increasing efficiency of rail and road transport in Central Asia and the development of aviation communications, the competitiveness of the region in the system of transport routes is increasing. The development of cooperation with Afghanistan in the field of transport and construction of new railways within the "Trans-Afghan" corridor in the future will provide Central Asia with the shortest

access to the ports of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, and will connect South and South-East Asia with the markets of Europe and China.

Central Asia's potential to transform into an important transport corridor is increasing. In the recent years, a number of projects, such as the railway corridor "China-Central Asia-Europe," Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway, Tashkent-Andijan-Osh-Irkeshtam-Kashgar automobile highway, "Hayraton-Mazari-Sharif" railway in Afghanistan, "Eurasia" transport corridor, "Lapis lazuli" transport corridor and others have been developed [3].

In addition, new forms of economic relations associated with the development of telecommunications and information technologies go along the shortest, most direct routes without the need for sea routes. This means that they pass through Central Asia, uniting important economic centers - Europe and the Asia-Pacific region [2, p. 65].

Presumably, the most important geopolitical feature of Central Asia is that after the events of September 11, 2001, it became a battleground on a regional and trans-regional scale. Thus, the Central Asian states — Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan — are a struggle for strategic territory and natural resources between the five regional (Russia, Iran, Turkey, India, and Pakistan) and three trans-regional (USA, EU, and PRC) powers fighting for their interests in the region [23].

The political transformation of the Central Asian states and the creation of a security system to a certain extent depend on both external factors and internal factors. The strategic goals of the leading countries of the world and the mechanisms for their implementation have a significant impact on the geopolitical situation in the region. Russia, the USA, China, the EU, India, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan can be called centers of geopolitical influence in the Central Asian region. In the second decade of the XXI century, competition between the leading states of

Central Asia, which was so called “Great Game”, intensified [22]. In general, if we look at the concept of the "Great Game", this term was first used in the XIX century to refer to the struggle between Tsarist Russia and Great Britain for Central Asia. The second stage of this "Great Game" took place in the 1920s, when the battlefield was moved to Afghanistan, since Central Asia was completely occupied by Tsarist Russia.

At the beginning of the XXI century, the geopolitical trend of the "Great Game" became relevant again. However, this “Great game” was completely different from its predecessors - the independent states of Central Asia began to participate as a subject, not an object. In addition, China, gaining geopolitical positions, began to play a decisive role. The United States was also involved as a leader. This poses a risk of geopolitical conflict in the region. The biggest danger is that among those factors which are trying to establish their influence in Central Asia, a new terrible and very aggressive force has appeared - Islamism, religious extremism [19].

In the early stages of the counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan, the leading world powers in Central Asia seemed to have the principle of mutually beneficial cooperation, not based on a zero-sum game, but later their interests became incompatible, sometimes even conflicting.

Central Asia is a unique case – it is the only region in the world where the core 4 superpowers are connected - Russia, China, India and Pakistan. It is possible that their number will increase. Currently, the region is the main source of nuclear material -uranium. The process of economic development in Asia, which began in the 60–70s, is leading to a sharp increase in the military power of some countries [11].

Events in the region and neighboring countries show that policies to limit the transfer of nuclear technology and even strengthen international control are not

enough to limit the growing potential for the production of nuclear weapons in the medium and long term. The experience of countries approaching the development of nuclear weapons shows that the development of nuclear energy, the development of the experience of the "old" states with nuclear weapons in the use of traditional nuclear fuel cycles, will allow nuclear power plants to extract pure plutonium and enriched uranium to produce their own nuclear fuel. This leads to the legitimate diffusion of technologies important for the creation of materials for nuclear weapons from an international legal point of view [21, pp. 67-68].

Thus, there is a risk of serious problems in the field of nuclear weapons, the proliferation of missile technologies and their control in the region. At the same time, the problem of overproduction of conventional and strategic weapons remains. The issue of ensuring strict international control over these processes, which pose a threat to regional and global security, remains relevant. In this regard, it is necessary to logically complete the initiative of the countries of the region to declare Central Asia a nuclear-free zone, put forward by the Republic of Uzbekistan at the 48th session of the UN General Assembly and fully supported by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. This step indicates that the countries of the region are actively participating in the general process of non-proliferation and disarmament. Ultimately, this could be an important contribution to global strategic security [22].

The liquidation of the international terrorist network and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is one of the top items on the agenda of Central Asia. The sustainable development of the region directly depends on the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan. As the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev repeatedly emphasized, "it is impossible to talk about a peaceful and prosperous Central Asia without solving the Afghan problem."

However, it is obvious that there is still a long way to go before the final solution to this problem. We noted above that Afghanistan remains the main source of drugs for the whole world, which is supplied to markets through Central Asia. It should not be overlooked that, under certain conditions, the presence of a foreign military contingent in this country can become a source of both internal and regional tensions.

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