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Security issues in the region of Central Asia: challenges and prospects

The purpose of this article is to analyze the security challenges and prospects facing the states of Central Asia after the collapse of the USSR. Three stages of formation and development of regional security systems of the countries of the Central Asian region are presented. The authors characterize the steps taken by the independent states of Central Asia to maintain security in the face of new challenges and trends. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a major transformation in the political, economic, social and cultural fields in all the former Soviet republics. For many decades, the Central Asian region as part of the USSR was the ideological and political enemy of the West in the framework of the Cold War. Despite the previous historical experience of confrontation between the USSR and NATO, the geopolitical importance of the Central Asian region has always remained high. Significant changes were required in the creation and approaches to the issues of the security system. New relations with the border states of the Central Asian region that have received independent status, as well as foreign policy partners in the person of China, Western players (US and EU) and the Russian Federation, have created a platform for both geopolitical challenges and prospects for creating regional security. However, this process is not unambiguous and for more than thirty years of sovereignty of the countries of the region has been going on within three historical periods. This article not only traces and characterizes these three stages, but also assesses the current state of security systems in the region, offering pragmatic solutions and recommendations for improvement.

Keywords: Central Asia, sovereignty, USA, China, NATO, security structures, CSTO, border states.

Introduction

Mid 1980s led not only to the end of the existence of the Warsaw Pact, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also to the natural interest in Central Asia on the part of the big powers of the NATO bloc. The 1990s for the states of Central Asia were clearly marked by two important events: the collapse of the USSR with the further gaining of independence and sovereignty by the former subjects, and, as a result, the emergence of new geopolitical forces in the region. At this stage, the newly appeared states began to receive numerous investments from Western countries for gradual integration into the global economic community in order to switch to a market economy model [1].

At the same time, new security measures were created around the Central Asian countries based on the Western strategic vision of the region and domestic security initiatives, which could potentially be called a "collective security" system. Therefore, in order to move into a new orbit of political development and security, the countries of the region went through a transition period, which could be symbolically divided into three main stages.

The first stage was characterized by great interest and the presence of American (and in some regions European) influence in the political sphere and in security matters. The second stage faced a very dramatic reorientation of the states of Central Asia due to significant geopolitical changes in the international arena, including mutual rethinking of the strategies and priorities of Central Asia and the West. The third stage, marked, as many experts believe, by a change in the world order and world structures, is currently taking place, confronting world participants with the pandemic and its consequences, internal political crises, as well as Russia's military actions in Ukraine. The latter directly affects the aspects and structures of the security of the Central Asian countries, confronting them with a difficult choice of foreign policy strategy both towards the Russian Federation and Western powers, and putting Central Asia in the most difficult geopolitical position since their independence.

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Justification of the choice of articles and goals and objectives

This article is aimed at tracking and analyzing the current challenges of the prospects for the security system of the countries of Central Asia. The presence of foreign powers in the region during the entire period of independence has played both a positive and a negative role in the creation and transformation of structures and strategies for the security of Central Asia. In the 1990s the influence of Western countries in the region on the structures and concept of security was much higher (Partnership for Peace-NATO program, military bases in the region, presence in Afghanistan), but in the last decade it began to noticeably decline, yielding to Russia and China (CSTO, SCO). The latter substantiates the relevance of the chosen topic, as well as the goals and objectives of the study:

- definition of three stages in the development of the security system of the Central Asian region;
- assessment of the role of the West (USA) in the security sphere of the CAR in the first period of independence;
- analysis of new security platforms in Central Asia in the 2000s;
- assessment of modern challenges and new security strategies in the region in the context of the complex geopolitical configuration of relations between the United States, China and Russia in the region.

Research methodology and literature review

This paper presents a qualitative study aimed at understanding and analyzing the nature of the region's security problems, as well as assessing the complex factors that influence it. As a methodological basis, this work uses content analysis of primary and secondary sources, historical retrospective, interviews with experts, SWAT analysis.

The literature review allows us to single out three groups of studies that consider security issues in the Central Asian region, conditionally dividing the process into three periods of the formation of security strategies and structures in these countries:

- the first stage (1990s);
- the second stage (2000s);
- the third stage (2019 — present).

The works of Matveeva N. [2], Erimbetova K. [3], Brill Olcott M. [4], Akkazieva G. [5], Burnashev R. [6], Mavlanova D. [7] are devoted to the study of the first period. The young countries of Central Asia had to look for reliable partners in order to survive among strong neighbors both in the North and in the South. These partners for a number of Central Asian states were found among the big powers of the West. The US and the EU took part in the development of political and economic structures for “lobbying” Western regimes in the region and systems that support political reconstruction in a Western way [8]. Of course, the process of political transformation was not uniform throughout the Central Asian region, and, for example, the state building of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan was characterized by authoritarian features in Turkmenistan and a long-term civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s [9]. US political intentions have gone so far as to promote the landmark “Greater Central Asia” project, which saw the region as an object of long-term operations. In order to be accepted by the leading states such as the United States, Great Britain and France, the new states had to meet special conditions. For example, in the case of Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus in the 1990s, it was necessary to abandon the nuclear arsenal that was based on their territory, due to which Kazakhstan hoped to receive reliable guarantees of its own and regional security from strong world powers [10].

The second group of authors focused on the study of the period of the 2000s, and geopolitical changes that affected the foreign policy strategies of Western countries in relation to the Central Asian region, as well as the transformation of the security system in it. The works of Naumkin and Linke [11], Matveeva N. [2], Panfilova [12], Descalzi S. [13], Foust J. [14], Nichol J. [15], Cohen A. [16], Kaufman S. [17], Sadykov M. [18], Faisal J. et al [19] and others are devoted to this. The region during this period was also associated with the geographical proximity of the CA region to Afghanistan (the 2001 war). The region was considered by the US and other NATO countries as a military base and platform for military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq [16]. NATO expansion to the East was supported by the strengthening of US anti-terrorist operations under the auspices of the Partnership for Peace program. 2000s were marked by the deployment of military bases at the airfields of Karshi-Khanabad (Uzbekistan) and Manas (Kyrgyzstan), and then by active joint training of military personnel from NATO countries and local troops. Experts also noted the monitoring of security [13] in the event of such internal unrest, as in the Fergana region (Uzbekistan) or

Osh region (Kyrgyzstan), which could challenge the stability of border Kazakhstan. Researchers have also studied the highly contentious border relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan [20]. After the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Tajik-Afghan border, the United States effectively replaced Russian anti-drug and anti-terrorist guarantees by using Tajik airspace for air flights over Afghanistan.

Experts note that the second stage also formulated new approaches and strategies for the CA region [13]. It began in 2007-2008, marked by a major financial crisis, the election of a new US president, the emergence of V. Putin's foreign policy doctrine, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, and the Arab Spring. In Central Asia in the 2000s political regimes evolved with their own paradigm, Eastern paternalism, and the creation of stable political elites [15]. Also, some societies in the countries of Central Asia were characterized by signs of the so-called comprador bourgeoisie with the peculiarities of local color and a strong role of the government [21]. The Arab Spring, where the new political technologies of the West were implemented, has become the least desirable scenario for local authorities in Central Asia. Also, here one should not rule out the possibility of latent anti-American sentiments among marginal groups concerned about the US's excessive involvement in global political events. Russia, on the contrary, was considered as a partner, since it was not involved in the above events associated with a high risk in relation to the state security of the Central Asian countries. The relations of the countries of the Central Asian region with the Russian Federation during this period are presented in the works of Descalzi G. [13].

One of the most difficult periods in the context of global and regional security was 2019-2022, marking the beginning of the third period in the development of the Central Asian security system. It is marked by several geopolitical events affecting both global and regional security. These include the following events: the coming to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021, the January events in Kazakhstan in 2022, the speeches in Uzbekistan in 2022, and the military actions of Russia on the territory of Ukraine in 2022.

This period is being actively studied by scientists, since the multi-level security threats that have emerged today not only cause concern, but also require the development of new strategies and tactics for all participants in the world and regional politics. Experts are actively studying the causes, nature and consequences of the latter, and here we can note the works of such researchers as: Giyosov M. and Rizoen S. [22], Abdurasulov A. [23], Ryskulova N. [24], Kari K. [25], Kaspe S. [26], Amueva U. [27], Mankoff J. [28], Masters J.[29], Kavanagh J. [30], Kudaibergenova D., Laruelle M.I. [31] et al.

The presented work is also aimed at studying the present period and based on recent research, provides an assessment analysis of the factors and challenges to the regional security system for the period 2019-2022.

Results and discussion

Western efforts in the 1990s yet failed to establish full-scale democratization in Central Asia. Already at the second stage, there was some withdrawal of the United States from the region into the shadow and a parallel establishment of cooperation between the Central Asian states with Russia and China. The year 2009 began with a gradual withdrawal of American troops from the region in the context of a new global and regional geopolitical situation, when Russia and China competed to push the interests of the Western powers out of Central Asia. Failing to do so in the 1990s, the re-emergence of Russia and China in the 2000s coincided with the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. Some experts believe that the closure of the military base in Manas occurred under some pressure from Beijing, which justifies the impossibility of deploying military bases for states that are not SCO member states [12]. A new geopolitical situation has emerged in Central Asia, where Russia and China are not interested in the implementation of Western political values and can guarantee the preservation of political regimes in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, it can be said that for several years a fairly effective security structure was created around the region, which was not financially expensive for the Central Asian region and led to the forced existence of a regional security regime formalized by collective security agreements with neighboring Russia (CSTO) and China (SCO). This dual alliance could effectively serve as a “security arch” for the entire region [17].

However, the events of the last two years have radically changed the security situation in Central Asia, affecting both internal regional aspects and issues of the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries with external players. The latter, in turn, have noticeably transformed in terms of their own ambitions of influence and presence in the CA region. Let's dwell on these events in more detail.

Afghan Events 2021

The events in Afghanistan in August 2021 with the seizure of power by the Taliban shocked the world community. In addition to numerous internal restrictions, the new government also affected foreign policy

cooperation, which does not bypass the Central Asian countries. The latter are mainly concerned and wary of what is happening in Afghanistan, but Uzbekistan has not turned away from cooperation with the Taliban, and even sees Afghanistan as part of Central Asia. Although the government points to zero tolerance for the creation of an Islamic caliphate, Uzbekistan sees no point in continuing military action to resolve the Afghan crisis. Turkmenistan officially maintains relations with the Taliban.

Some CA countries fear the infiltration of Afghan refugees, such as Tajikistan. However, some experts believe that refugees do not seek to settle in Central Asia, but see their future in Western countries [32]. Other dangers that may threaten the Central Asian region include drug trafficking, terrorism, extremism and others.

Events in Kazakhstan in January 2022

Due to a sharp increase in prices for liquefied gas, protests began in Zhanaozen (Mangistau region) on January 2 from (SUG), and a day later the protests spread to other cities of the country, in particular, to Almaty. At the first stage, there was a certain mixture of different interests, demands for a change of power, the resignation of the first president, the seizure of strategic objects, arson and destruction of public and private objects. Communication facilities were turned off for a week, an emergency situation was introduced in connection with terrorist groups and the need to eliminate them. The CSTO defined the situation in Kazakhstan as an invasion by foreign-trained terrorists (Ryskulova, 2022), but CSTO military units were in Kazakhstan from 6 to 15 January. Kazakhstan is a member of this organization, and some experts noted that the participation of the CSTO in the January events in Kazakhstan was minimal. By the way, the CSTO, with the participation of the Kazakh military, provided assistance to Tajikistan during the civil war of 1992-1993. Some activists, on the contrary, believed that Kazakhstan needed to cope with the situation with internal resources. For comparison, the political conflicts in Karakalpakstan in 2022 were resolved without the participation of the CSTO, indicating that the CSTO is functioning but not used consistently [23].

Russian military operation in Ukraine in 2022

Although there is no direct threat of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 for the region, the Central Asian countries have to pursue a cautious policy in relations with the Russian Federation. For example, Kazakhstan's non-recognition of the so-called Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics expresses some distancing from the Russian Federation. The issue of food security is quite significant, especially in the current realities of an aggravated geopolitical background, layered as a result of the conflict. In this regard, the main logistics routes for the Central Asian region, which runs through the territory of the Russian Federation, seem difficult.

Both domestic political instability and limited economic security pose additional challenges for the region. The position of the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on the non-recognition of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) was positively assessed in the countries of the region. However, the Central Asian countries that receive Russian relocators as a result of the mobilization announced by Vladimir Putin do not want to fall under sanctions and be identified with this conflict [33]. For current security institutions see the Table 1.

Table 1

Current security structures in the CA region

Name of the organization	Mission of the organization	Participating countries
CSTO (1992 - present)	Ensuring the collective security of the participating countries, including territorial integrity	Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan
SCO (2001 - present)	Strengthening the security and territorial integrity of the participating countries, combating terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, developing comprehensive cooperation	India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan
Centrazbat (1997 - 2000)	Training of the armed forces of the participating countries, joint military exercises, peacekeeping, protection of territorial integrity	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan
Kazbat (2000 - present)	Training of own armed forces, protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity	Kazakhstan

Source: compiled by authors.

The position of the United States in Central Asia in the context of modern geopolitical changes

For now, the US cannot afford to step up its influence in Central Asia. Unlike the Trump administrations, the financial obligations of the Biden administration make it much more difficult to secure the region. The countries of Central Asia have somewhat frozen cooperation within the framework of NATO PfP programs. And also in Central Asia they do not want the US military to have access to local bases. At the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Central Asian countries were especially cautious in matters of military cooperation between the US and NATO, maneuvering between China and Russia. Last year, the US State Department, in meetings with Kazakh and Uzbek officials, requested access to the bases there, but to no avail. Currently, the United States does not have a clear national security policy or doctrine that would have a significant impact on Central Asia. Moreover, the US is more concerned about affairs in Europe, including countries such as Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, etc., which are requesting US and NATO military forces to provide a contingent of soldiers to be based in their countries.

In addition, the US is concerned about the Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which has seized large territory in the South China Sea, as happened with the islands off the Philippines. In the Pacific, there is a big cold war or influence going on between the US and China. China is now beginning to pose a threat to world security, having seriously advanced technologically and in the military sphere. Just last year, China became the largest fleet with the largest number of ships in the world. Shortly before that was the US Navy.

The United States also pays great attention to attempts to contain Iranian influence and their actions. Iran is also a growing power every day and has good contacts with Russia. They have just sold a lot of their military drones to Russia, drones that can make impressive swarm attacks [34].

The United States failed to implement Western value standards in the countries of the Middle East, including Afghanistan and Iraq, from which they wythdrew their military contingent. For example, by leaving Afghanistan, the United States provided China and Russia with a field for vigorous activity and cooperation with the new regime of the emirate declared by the Taliban. Moreover, during the Arab Spring, with the active participation of NATO countries, local authoritarian regimes fell, which were replaced by authorities hostile to the US and the EU.

The US military also has internal problems. The pandemic has led to a drop in military recruitment where the U.S. military has fallen short of recruiting targets. Since President Biden became president, the US has been rapidly fading economically and militarily. All this is happening against the backdrop of growing confrontation between the West (USA, EU) and the East (Russia, China). Putin's recent speech, in which he attempted to connect himself with Peter the Great, shows that he and Russia have clear irredentist goals [35]. China has the Belt and Road Initiative, all of which are policies that have a clear vision for Central Asia. At the same time, Russia and China are pursuing a policy of crowding out US influence in the field of security as both countries try to become superpowers. They are driving big economic changes that affect the global economy. In addition, without China's large-scale cooperation, Russia would not have been able to survive all Western sanctions and military losses.

The actions and influence of Russia and China have also created barriers to the US presence in the region. Russia has created a lot of tension over its refusal to diplomacy with NATO, which has created limiting factors for the OSCE, as well as for some UN agencies and missions. Russian diplomacy is so tense with the West that even the space sector has been affected.

But if India wanted a greater military presence in Central Asia, Russia would not see this as a threat, especially since it recently held joint military exercises with India.

There are two possible scenarios for the presence of the US and NATO in Central Asia today. The first includes economic partnership; the second is aimed at the technological development of Central Asia. For CA security monitoring there was made a SWOT analysis shown in Table 2.

Table 2

SWOT analysis of CA regional security

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
participation in collective security organizations and programs, military exercises, peacekeeping operations (for example, the CSTO and NATO)	dependence on strong powers, maneuvering between strong powers in moments of political, military and trade crises
Opportunities	**Threats**
possibility to choose between several alternative trajectories West (USA and EU), China, Russia, Turkey	the risk of falling under sanctions in case of a careless reaction to the positions of large countries

Source: compiled by authors.

Conclusion

Central Asia continues to be isolated and most impacted by security and economic policies of its two most powerful neighbors of Russia and China. Its geographic position lends to its unique situation. Perhaps, if it was closer to Western European influences and political possibilities it would have suffered territorial losses like Ukraine and Georgia and experienced more exerted security intrusions from Russia.

The OSCE founded from the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in 1975 between the Western Block (NATO) and Eastern Block (Warsaw Pact) nations, have found itself more Western with many of the Eastern Block nations becoming members of the European Union and NATO. It still operates small missions in Central Asia and has a minor role in security. However, it should be noted that Russia's influence in the OSCE and the UN are still significant to the autonomy and strength of influence that these international government organizations have, which was made apparent by Russia's diplomatic actions and veto's that caused both the peacekeeping missions of the UN and OSCE to end in Georgia in 2009.

Geography also has great value to Central Asia's location as according to Mackinder's [36]. World Island and Heartland theory that places half the world's control of who controls this heartland. This was true in the era of the Silk Road and may again make a resurgence in the future and are integral parts of Russia and China's foreign policies.

Central Asia is an important part of China's global economic trade and transportation plan its Belt and Road Initiative. In September of 2013 in Kazakhstan Chinese President Xi Jinping [37] called this economic strategy the "Silk Road Economic Belt". China further exemplifies Central Asia's importance with the Chinese partnered and Central Asia focused Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is still a maturing organization that officially included India and Pakistan in 2017. The Chinese diplomatic and economic soft security power over Central Asia may also be noted with the Central Asian states complying with the China's request not to recognize Eastern Turkestan in Xinjiang [38].

Overall, the security situation in Central Asia for the present is predominantly influenced by Russia and China. However ongoing political trends could still determine other outcomes. Security and economics are inseparable and the economic blows from Western sanction on Russia, as well as the U.S. entering a recession under the Biden Administration, along with the economic setbacks of China will also affect the influence these major players can exert on Central Asia security. Russia and China have contributed positive effects such as economic commerce and development in Central Asia which is important to the region's stability, and the CSTO involvement in Kazakhstan earlier in 2022 displayed a quick and successful intervention in Kazakhstan's political stability.

Other Central Asian border regions may have smaller effects on Central Asia such as Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Iran. The trends of competition between the West against Russia and China are present there. Brian Carlson [39] stated: "Both China and Russia view the US withdrawal and the Taliban takeover as an opportunity to weaken US prestige around the world, remove any possibility of a long-term US military presence in the heart of Eurasia, and bolster their own regional influence."

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Орталық Азия аймағындағы қауіпсіздік мәселелері: келешегіндегі сын-қатерлер

Мақаланың мақсаты — КСРО ыдырағаннан кейін Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің алдында тұрған қауіпсіздік саласындағы сын-қатерлер мен перспективаларға талдау жүргізу. Орталық Азия аймағы елдерінің аймақтық қауіпсіздік жүйелерінің қалыптасуы мен дамуының үш кезеңі ұсынылған. Авторлар Орталық Азияның тәуелсіз мемлекеттерінің жаңа сын-қатерлер мен тенденциялар жағдайында қауіпсіздікті сақтау үшін жасаған қадамдарын сипаттайды. Кеңес Одағының ыдырауы барлық бұрынғы одақтас республикалардағы саяси, экономикалық, әлеуметтік және мәдени салалардағы елеулі өзгерістермен ерекшеленді. Көптеген онжылдықтар бойы КСРО құрамындағы Орталық Азия аймағы «қырғи қабақ соғыс» аясында Батыстың идеялық және саяси қарсыласы болды. КСРО мен НАТО-ның қарсыласуының бұрынғы тарихи тәжірибесіне қарамастан, Орталық Азия аймағының геосаяси маңызы әрқашан жоғары болып қала берді. Қауіпсіздік жүйесін құру мен оған деген көзқарастарда айтарлықтай өзгерістер қажет болды. Тәуелсіз мәртебеге ие болған Орталық Азия аймағының шекаралас мемлекеттерімен, сондай-ақ Қытай тұлғасындағы сыртқы саяси серіктестермен, батыстық ойыншылар (АҚШ және ЕО) және Ресей Федерациясымен жаңа қарым-қатынастар геосаяси сын-қатерлер үшін де, аймақтық қауіпсіздікті құру перспективалары үшін платформа құрды. Дегенмен, бұл процесс біржақты емес және аймақ елдерінің егемендігінің отыз жылдан астам уақытында үш тарихи кезең ішінде жалғасып келеді. Мақалада осы үш кезеңді қадағалап, сипаттап қана қоймай, сонымен қатар прагматикалық шешімдер мен жетілдіру бойынша ұсыныстар ұсына отырып, аймақтағы қауіпсіздік жүйелерінің қазіргі жағдайын бағалайды.

Кілт сөздер: Орталық Азия, егемендік, АҚШ, Қытай, НАТО, қауіпсіздік құрылымдары, ҰҚШҰ.

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Проблемы безопасности в регионе Центральной Азии: вызовы в перспективе

Цель данной статьи заключается в проведении анализа вызовов и перспектив в сфере безопасности, стоящих перед государствами Центральной Азии после распада СССР. Представлены три этапа формирования и развития систем региональной безопасности стран Центрально-Азиатского региона. Авторы характеризуют предпринятые независимыми государствами Центральной Азии шаги в рамках поддержания безопасности в условиях новых вызовов и тенденций. Распад Советского Союза ознаменовался серьезными трансформациями в политической, экономической, социальной и культурной областях во всех бывших союзных республиках. На протяжении многих десятилетий регион Центральной Азии в составе СССР представлял собой идейно-политического противника Запада в рамках «холодной войны». Несмотря на предыдущий исторический опыт конфронтации СССР и НАТО, геополитическое значение Центрально-Азиатского региона оставалось всегда высоким. Потребовались существенные изменения в создании и подходах к вопросам системы безопасности. Новые отношения с приграничными государствами региона Центральной Азии, получившими независимый статус, а также внешнеполитическими партнерами в лице Китая, западных игроков (США и ЕС) и Российской Федерации создали платформу как для геополитических вызовов, так и для перспектив создания региональной безопасности. Однако данный процесс не является однозначным и более чем за тридцать лет суверенитета стран региона проходит в рамках трех исторических периодов. Данная статья не только прослеживает и характеризует эти три этапа, но и оценивает текущее состояние систем безопасности в регионе, предлагая прагматичные решения и рекомендации по совершенствованию.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, суверенитет, США, КНР, НАТО, структура безопасности, ОДКБ, приграничные государства.