

NEW ASPECTS OF CENTRAL ASIAN POLITICS

Introduction

In today's world, many countries, given the devaluation of the stabilizing mechanisms of the international system, tend to pursue pragmatic policies based primarily on their interests. Relevant today are the issues of realistic and objective perception of such interests, correlating them to history, geography, economic feasibility, and reality.

The first prerequisite for a successful foreign and domestic policy is a constructive understanding of one's place in the world and in the region, which enables pragmatic formulation and implementation of national development goals. This was true was the nations of Central Asia too. Strengthening cooperation and increasing political trust among the regional actors of enables them to become a more independent, predictable, and sustainable region in world politics.

The rapidly changing situation in the region and the world as a whole adjusts the regional and national development agenda. The main objective of the regional actors' efforts in foreign policy was to strengthen their role in international arena, to create the atmosphere stability, and good neighborhood in Central Asia.

E Pluribus Unum

For all states of Central Asia, the basic and historically established principles of their state identity are based on a balance between secularism and spirituality. In its secular form, the state has been balanced by spirituality and remains resistant to its content. It shows a certain consistency, continuity in the principles of nation-building in the region, which is very important for maintaining a constructive balance between statist, secular and traditional values. It should be understood that the Central Asian countries have been able to mobilize internal resources to counter various manifestations of extremism and separatism, despite the prevailing view in the expert community that the region is located on a so-called "geopolitically fragile line" of the world¹.

January 2022 tragic events in Kazakhstan, caused direct losses in GDP growth of the country, but still the slowdown in economic activity in this country may be leveled soon and as damage is compensated and the situation in the country stabilizes,

¹ Ibidem

the economy will return to steady growth by the end of the first quarter of this year.² *And the support of regional neighbours in restoring the situation in this country was considerable.*

In Uzbekistan, systematic steps to turn the country into a logistical hub in the heart of Central Asia with a population of over 70 million people (106 million with Afghanistan being included) have a tangible effect.³ This country has a diversified economy with a rapidly developing new infrastructure combined with political, macroeconomic stability as well as steady growth. In addition, the European Union has recognized the Republic of Uzbekistan as the 9th beneficiary country of a special system for stimulating sustainable development and good governance within the framework of the unilateral General Scheme of Preferences (GSP+). From April 10, 2021, the EU began to apply preferential tariffs on goods imported from Uzbekistan in accordance with these rules. As a beneficiary of GSP+, Uzbekistan has received additional economic benefits compared to the current standard GSP scheme.⁴ The abolition of tariffs on two-thirds of the products of the lines covered by the GSP creates opportunities for export growth from our country to the markets of 27 European countries and will attract additional investments into the country. In addition, the acceptance of Uzbekistan as a beneficiary of GSP+ reflects recognition of the reforms undertaken by the government, supports the country in its economic development and building a more sustainable future, as well as promoting the benefits provided after joining GSP+. Uzbekistan, receiving the main benefits from this scheme and increasing its status, will now be able to increase the number of goods exported to the EU without import duties, to increase them from the previous 3,000 to 6,200 different categories and varieties. Uzbekistan is also working on joining the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The Korean model of innovative economy is undoubtedly recognized by almost every regional nation as an example of successful modernization. The states of Central Asia share the common challenges of transition in reforming political and economic structures. The Central Asian region can be characterized by the fact that despite the crisis of nation-states in other parts of the world, the region is experiencing state-building and the consolidation of sovereignty. According to leading foreign experts⁵, state and society building in Central Asia has specific features which should be considered more thoroughly.

The formation of a new system of relations in Central Asia essentially leads to a transformation of national interests of the states of the region to new realities, and their practical adaptation and possible consolidation of approaches can only be achieved through collective actions of two or more states with joint coordination of actions. Thanks to the new quality of Uzbekistan's bilateral relations with

² <https://kursiv.kz/news/ekonomika/2022-01/kak-yanvarskie-sobytiya-v-kazakhstane-povliyayut-na-rost-vvp-v-2022-godu>

³ Ibidem

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uzbekistan-is-the-first-beneficiary-of-the-uk-enhanced-gsp-scheme--2>

⁵ Abdullaev Sh. Transformatsiya mejdunarodnoy sistemi i geopoliticheskaya identichnost' Uzbekistana / Mejdunarodnie otnosheniya / 2017, N4. <https://www.uwed.uz/ru/e-journal/12>

Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, close regional cooperation is beginning to take its shape in the region.

The principles of mutual respect and mutual benefit between the states of Central Asia, close adherence to national interests can tackle universal problems. Moral and ethical components of good relations in the region are much higher than the so-called “trust-building”⁶ prevalent in Greater Europe and the West, and this term historically reflects the level of relations between these countries and peoples more deeply.

Ex Aèquo et Bòno

As basic components of growth, fundamentally new trends of regional development are intensifying in Central Asia and the level of political trust has increased markedly. The new environment has significantly boosted trade and economic ties among Central Asian countries. Thus, in 2017, Uzbekistan’s trade turnover with the countries of the region exceeded \$3 billion and increased by 20 percent. As the President of Uzbekistan noted at the summit of heads of states of Central Asia in Astana, the volume of mutual trade is expected to reach \$5 billion in the coming years⁷.

Between September 2016 and July 2021, negotiations on delimitation and demarcation of common borders in the region have become intensive and continuous, compromises in defining borderlines, including complex and rather contentious areas, have been reached as a result of agreements between the heads of neighboring countries during bilateral working meetings and talks held within the framework of international organizations⁸.

The resilient future and sustainable development of Central Asian countries largely depend on a full-fledged inclusion of neighboring Afghanistan into regional economic processes. Defining a common regional agenda is impossible without taking the Afghan factor into account. Integration of current Afghanistan into regional economic processes has been recognized as one of the priority tasks.

The country’s main approaches to this issue were outlined at the 76nd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2021, as well as at a subsequent number of international forums and conferences. The Central Asian perspective on sustainable development takes into account that the regional agenda has long been linked to programmatic measures to promote social and economic reconstruction as well as the development of neighboring Afghanistan, which remains an integral part of Central Asia. The states of Central Asia and Afghanistan do not only share a

⁶ Mavlanov I. Transformasiya ekonomicheskoy diplomatii Uzbekistana dlya realizatsii vneshneekonomicheskix prioritetov Strategii deystviy Respubliki Uzbekistan na 2017-2021 gg./ Mejdunarodnie otnosheniya/2018, N 1. <https://www.uwed.uz/ru/e-journal/13>

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ne'matov I. Uskorenie zaversheniya pravovogo oformleniya Gosudarstvennoy granisi so stranami Sentral'noy Azii kak vajniy prioritet vneshney politiki Uzbekistana/ Mejdunarodnie otnosheniya/2018/N1. <https://www.uwed.uz/ru/e-journal/13>

common history, religion, culture, and traditions, but also mutual interests in security and trade. At the same time, a stable Afghanistan can link Central Asian states to markets in Europe and China by providing the shortest route to ports in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf⁹.

Pro Bona Pacem

The time has come to turn the standard clichéd perceptions of Afghanistan from a source of regional threats and dangers into a strategic opportunity that could give a whole new impetus to the development of broad trans-regional connectivity across the Eurasian space.

Under the new conditions in the region, many regional actors understand the need for direct dialogue with the Government of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan led by the leaders of the Taliban movement to promote a peace process in Afghanistan. This approach aims to achieve the consensus in Afghan national reconciliation and development. Moreover, located in the Heartland of Central Asia and having close relations with its immediate neighbors. This assures regional nations and big powers including the United States, Europe, Russia, China, and others on the necessity to engage in economic aid to war-torn Afghanistan. Tashkent has a direct interest in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan as part of its strategy for sustainable development and capacity building in Central Asia. For example, in 2017 alone, the trade turnover had grown by 15% amounting to about USD 600 million. At the same time, implementation of the adopted “Road Map for Development of Cooperation” will make it possible to considerably increase trade turnover and bring its volume up to 1.5 billion US dollars in the coming years. The sides also reached an agreement to organize long-term supplies of 300 thousand tons of mineral fertilizers from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan, 2 thousand units of agricultural machinery, up to 250 thousand tons¹⁰ of the supply of various cereals and other foodstuffs that are in high demand in the Afghan market.

It should be noted that the development of regional relations has always been an important aspect of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. On the 15th and 16th of July 2021, Tashkent hosted a high-level international conference on “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities” during which the Uzbek Leader put forward several regional connectivity initiatives. They were aimed primarily at further deepening the integration of Central Asia and its closest partners in South Asia that are linked to it in economic, social, and cultural-civilizational terms. In addition, the initiative facilitated the establishment of an expert and analytical platform for multi-format search and discussion on optimal models of inter-regional cooperation of “Central Asia and South Asia” in transport and logistics, energy, trade, manufacturing, investment, technological and cultural as

⁹ Aripov E. Uzbeksko-afganskije otnosheniya: noviy etap dinamichnogo razvitiya/Mejdunarodnie otnosheniya/2018, N 1. <https://www.uwed.uz/ru/e-journal/13>

¹⁰ Ibidem

well as humanitarian spheres¹¹. The conference concluded with the adoption of the Tashkent Declaration on ensuring peace and security in the region, strengthening cooperation, and further extending good neighborhood ties. In other words, the forums of this format laid the groundwork for consultative meetings, which were initiated in 2017, as an effective platform for constructive dialogue and consistent resolution of common problems relating to Central Asian countries.

Considering this process further, it is worth highlighting some aspects of the Third Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State in Turkmenistan in early August 2021. In continuation of the initiatives outlined during the Tashkent conference a month earlier, it was emphasized, once again, the importance of transport and communication component of cooperation between the countries of the region, and he also drew attention to the geo-economic potential and vast opportunities of the Trans-Afghan corridor “Termez - Mazar Sharif - Kabul – Peshawar”, as well as the road and railway “China - Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan” in further implementation of joint projects of regional importance¹², as well as the creation of a regional center for the development of transport and communication systems under the UN, the Regional Council on Transport Communications. The necessity of initiating joint measures to develop a common energy space and a full-scale launch of the unified energy system of Central Asia has been pointed out. It was pointed out the importance of joint Uzbek-Kyrgyz agreements on the mutual supply of 750 million kWh of electricity and on the construction of two 320 MW hydropower plants in the Zarafshan River with Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has expressed readiness to participate in the Kambarata and Rogun hydropower projects. At the same time, the countries of the region understand the need to support the transition to a “green economy” in the context of the negative impact of global climate change. Special attention is paid to the joint development of a mechanism for comprehensive measures to combat the spread of coronavirus in terms of adopting a unified information system in the field of scientific and practical cooperation in biomedicine and pharm-industry¹³.

The Central Asian leaders agreed to promote consolidated actions in the international arena on majority issues of regional and global agenda¹⁴. In particular, they embraced the initiative of the President of Tajikistan to declare 2025 the International Year of Conservation of Glaciers announcing the national program to preserve its Glaciers, called for joint promotion of the initiative of the President of Turkmenistan to develop a UN strategy aimed at implementing measures to develop low-carbon energy, as well as implementing, under UN auspices, an international “road map” to develop hydrogen energy as a priority. In line of these measures, it is worth noting the fact that full membership status at the Global Green Growth

¹¹ Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Shavkata Mirzieeva na Mejdunarodnoy konferensii visokogo urovnya «Sentral'naya i Yujnaya Aziya: regional'naya vzaimosvyazannost'. Vizovi i vozmojnosti»/16.07.2021 (<https://president.uz/uz/lists/view/4484>)

¹² Prezident Uzbekistana vystupil ya konsultativnoy vstreche glav gosudarstv Centralnoy Azii. 06.08.2021 <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/4530>

¹³ Ibidem

¹⁴ Ibidem

Institute (GGGI) headquartered in Seoul has opened new opportunities for Uzbekistan to engage into close cooperation with different programs of this institution mitigating the negative impact of the climate change. Both parties focus their approach on issues of the environmental, socio-economic, and demographic situation in the Aral Sea region within the framework of the project between KOICA and GGGI attracting comprehensive "green economy" technologies, the further transformation of the national and regional carbon energy system to the renewable and hydrogen energy.¹⁵ Korean technological experience in restoring the water resources of the four large rivers of the nation – the Hangan, Geumgang, Naktongan and Yongsan over the past decade, creating a network of solar power plants and significantly reducing carbon emissions into the atmosphere deserve the introduction into the economy of the entire Central Asian region and it corresponds to the priorities of the Glasgow COP26 Global Conference.

Conclusion and Future Expectations

Generally speaking, coordinated activities of the Central Asian countries in the international arena will not only significantly strengthen the international subjectivity of the region but also make it possible to effectively support and protect the interests of the region. During the meeting, the sides agreed to prepare a “road map” for regional cooperation between 2022-2024. This document takes over all the initiatives brought forward at the meetings and defines the mechanisms and deadlines for their implementation. To establish regional cooperation on a systematic basis, Central Asian leaders intend to sign an agreement on “Friendship, Good Neighborhood and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st century” at the next consultative meeting¹⁶.

The regularity of such processes is confirmed by the views of many respected experts and scholars about positive trends prevailing in our region. In particular, as First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Chairman of the Tashkent International Discussion Club Sodiq Safoev underlined: “This is a huge common asset, a contribution of all countries. We can look into the future with optimism. This is the main as well as a hugely positive result of the foreign policy of all our states in recent years. Our common task is to give irreversible character to the emerging trends of confidence-building between the countries of the region.”¹⁷ Sodiq Safoev noted that “...the need arises to create a legal and, in the future, and institutional basis for interaction, which will also include research structures. The main factor behind creating the irreversible environment in Central Asia is the strengthening of confidence-building measures. This is not related to declarations or general appeals, but it is important to formulate principles,

¹⁵ Камиллов встретился с главой Ассамблеи Глобального института зеленого роста
17:28 01.08.2021 (обновлено: 21:04 01.08.2021) <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20210801/kamilov-vstretilsya-s-glavoy-assamblei-globalnogo-instituta-zelenogo-rosta-19906211.html>

¹⁶ Ibidem

¹⁷ Sentral'naya Aziya: ot regional'nogo vzaimodeystviya k sovmestnomu ustoychivomu rostu / Sessiya Tashkentskogo mejdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba / 2021-04-08 https://yumh.uz/ru/news_detail/315

conceptual frameworks to give depth to confidence-building measures, which include not only state and non-state, but also business structures”¹⁸.

In short, the creation of a new political climate in the region and the adoption of a joint statement demonstrates that the process of regional cooperation is of strategic importance, under which the rapprochement has become an objective reality. The current trend for regionalism creates a healthy and friendly atmosphere, as well as favorable conditions for mutually beneficial cooperation, have been created in Central Asia, deserves high praise, and is fully supported throughout the world.

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¹⁸ Ibidem