

New Political Dynamism in Central Asia: Security Issues and Prospects for Regional Cooperation



Abstract: The article examines the issues of regional security and prospects of cooperation between the countries of Central Asia in the context of a new world order. As factors of sustainable development and security, the author considers the following issues: preservation of the geopolitical balance in Central Asia; development of a multivariate system of transportation and communication corridors; cardinal increase in the efficiency of counterterrorism and religious extremism; a solution to the Afghan problem; and resolution to the problems of fair water use and ecology in the region.

Keywords: Central Asia, Uzbekistan, regional security, cooperation

Structural changes are undergoing in the contemporary system of international relations under the influence of globalization. Political and economic interdependence is increasing among states in an unprecedented level. In these conditions, the development of the international political situation is acquiring intensive, less manageable and unpredictable nature. The geopolitical confrontation among the great powers for the spheres of influence and resources are growing, militarization, the confrontation in the information and cyberspace are intensifying.

The range of threats to regional security and stability, such as terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, transnational crime is expanding. The problems of food, energy and environmental security are exacerbating. The growing gap between wealthy and poor countries is leading to aggravation of interethnic and confessional tensions.

In these conditions, being located in the very heart of Eurasia, with a total population of more than 70 million people Central Asia is an important link connecting Europe and the Middle East, South and East Asia. Moreover, Central Asia is one of the “youngest” regions in terms of the age composition of the population: young people make up about 60% while in the world this figure does not exceed 20%.

The rapid changes taking place in the modern world, the growing number of challenges and threats, and the escalation of tensions in various parts of the world require from the states of Central Asia to pay close attention to ensuring security at the regional and national levels.

According to experts, the situation in neighboring and distant regions where armed confrontation continues, the growing scale of challenges and threats of terrorism and religious extremism, drug trafficking and organized crime will systemically impact on the stability and security of Central Asia. In this vein, the security of Central Asia is an integral part of global security.

As Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated, "Central Asia is a single organism that has had a common culture for centuries. Historical community, linguistic similarity, common traditions and customs give us enormous opportunities to be together and to build our common future together, to turn Central Asia into a stable, economically developed and prosperous region." Meanwhile, the ability of the Central Asian countries to work together toward a view of ensuring peace, stability and prosperity in the region will largely determine the dynamics of the most important processes in Eurasia. The states of this region, aware of the indivisible nature of security and the common historical destinies of the peoples living in Central Asia, are making concerted efforts at both bilateral and multilateral levels to ensure peace and stability in Central Asia.

Today, the situation in Central Asia can be characterized by the presence of favorable conditions for the development of multifaceted and mutually beneficial interstate cooperation between the countries of the region. The political dialogue at the highest level has noticeably intensified, the interdepartmental and interregional relations of neighboring countries have intensified. As a result, we may observe the increase in trade and economic relations and, most importantly, a new impetus given to the process of solving long-standing region-wide problems.

Scholars in the field of politics argue that the past two years (2017-2018) will be marked in history as a year of beginning of a new era in interstate relations of regional countries.

Due to the political will and active strategic actions taken by the political elites of these neighboring states, the region began to show new signs of political life. Assessing the dynamics of the latest developments in the region experts argue that the level of political confidence has significantly increased among the countries of Central Asia.

Moreover, in a very short period of time an absolutely "new political atmosphere" was created in the region, which contributes to strengthening contacts in all areas and reducing the conflict potential in the region. Simple interdependence and not very friendly relations among the states of the region, which lasted more than 25 years in the region, are becoming complex interdependence, binding the economic ties and hence the political interests of states ever more tightly together.

Dwelling on the essence and the content of active regional dialogue in Central Asia, Ilan Berman, the Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council argued that the main driving forces of the current changes taking place in the region are "the peaceful transition of power in Uzbekistan in 2016 and new large-scale economic reforms initiated in the country by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. He also announced to recalibration of Tashkent's foreign policy towards neighboring countries".

In his inaugural speech, President Mirziyoyev gave a strong signal of his readiness to take a new approach to regional issues, stating his commitment to "an open, friendly, and pragmatic stance" towards the Central Asian states. Uzbekistan, having a common border with all the countries of the region, is interested in turning the space into a zone of stability, sustainable development and good-neighborliness.

Having a shared border with all the Central Asian states, including Afghanistan, Uzbekistan is objectively interested in turning the region into a zone of stability, sustainable development and good neighborly

relations. An economically prosperous and safe Central Asia is an absolute imperative for Tashkent.

In his UN's General Assembly Address in September 2017 Shavkat Mirziyoyev, describing the core directions of Uzbekistan's modern foreign policy, once again confirmed that the Central Asian region is a main priority and named it to be "a conscious choice".

He stated that, "a peaceful and economically prosperous Central Asia is our most important goal and key task". Moreover, emphasizing the intensification of the interstate contacts, he initiated organizing the summit of heads of Central Asian states. As he mentioned, "holding regular consultation meetings" of the presidents would promote the consolidation of the tendency towards rapprochement with the neighbors. In response to this, the leaders of other countries of the region have demonstrated their readiness and sincere desire for cooperation, as well as their responsibility for a common future.

In this vein, international analysts argue that, achieving the long-term stability and sustainable development in Central Asia depends on the strengthening of mutual trust among the states of the region, the development of international transport corridors, economic diversification, rational approaches to the use of transboundary water recourses and completing the delimitation and demarcation of state borders.

In this regard, and most importantly, the process of resolving long-standing region-wide problems received a new impetus. Positive progress was made on the issue of delimitation and demarcation of state borders between the countries of the region. In this issue, Uzbekistan signed agreements on state borders with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Tashkent and Bishkek agreed on the demarcation and delimitation of 85 percent of their borders. Yaroslav Trofimov, an analyst at the Wall Street Journal, concluded that this was a huge milestone because just a few years ago there were clashes between Uzbek and Kyrgyz border guards.

Bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan started with a new page after the state visit of President Mirziyoyev to Dushanbe in March 2018. Edward Lemon, an expert on Central Asian affairs, argued that the resumption of air transport and visa facilitation would undoubtedly improve the life of border communities and benefit the Tajikistan's economy, in particular.

Zachary Witlin, an analyst for the Eurasia Group in Washington said that "few could have expected so quickly revive Uzbekistan's foreign relations with the rest of Central Asia and beyond and to do it so quickly raises hopes for political reforms".

Moreover, according to foreign experts, "these developments and others also suggest a certain degree of political consolidation and innovation, which was unthinkable even ten years ago". The head of the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia Petko Draganov in his speech at the conference which was held in August 2017, in Tashkent titled "Central Asia - the main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy" underlined that all the initiatives of Uzbek leadership aimed at bringing all the countries of Central Asia for common development and progress are fully conformable to the fundamental purposes and goals of the UN.

Catherine Putz, analyst on Central Asian issues at "The Diplomat", wrote that repairing bilateral relationships is just one piece of this puzzle, a second is Tashkent's emerging embrace of multilateral cooperation.

Confirming this in November 2017, ancient city of Uzbekistan, Samarkand hosted international conference on Security and Sustainable Development in Central Asia under the auspices of the United Nations. Agenda of the forum was named "Central Asia: Shared Past and a Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity". During the conference, experts discussed the issues of strengthening peace and stability in Central Asia, developing regional cooperation, as well as the contribution of international structures, primarily the UN, to the implementation of sustainable development projects. At the end of the conference, a joint communiqué was issued calling for the UN

General Assembly to adopt a resolution on ensuring peace, security and sustainable development in Central Asia.

The conference was attended by ministers of foreign affairs of the states of the region, heads of such authoritative organizations as the United Nations, the European Union, the OSCE, the SCO, the CIS, the EBRD, representatives of diplomatic corps, famous experts, mass media workers - more than 500 participants.

At the conference, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev stressed that the first achieved results are not a reason for complacency. We are still "in the beginning of the road". He underlined that Uzbekistan firmly believes that the main goal for the coming years should be to harmonize approaches to turn Central Asia into a territory of peace, good neighborliness and prosperity. According to him, the region faces the most important tasks - jointly eliminate the conditions and causes that inflame and provoke the conflict potential, ensure the alignment of the prospects for national development with the region-wide priorities.

As a result, of these efforts, in 2017-2018, the trade turnover of Uzbekistan with the Central Asian countries increased by 20 percent and with individual states by 70 percent. The improvement of trade and economic relations between the countries of Central Asia has contributed to the increase of foreign investments not only for the one country, but also for the region as a whole.

In addition, after 20 years of negotiations, significant progress has been made in the construction of a railway connecting China and Central Asia through Kyrgyzstan. With the implementation of this project, the delivery time of goods will be reduced by seven to eight days, and the length of the route from East Asia to the Middle East and to southern Europe will be reduced by 900 kilometers.

Important agreements were reached on the formation of the trans-Afghan transportation corridor along the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat route during the visit of President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Uzbekistan in December 2017. The strategic importance of the above projects lies in the fact that they can be integrated into an extensive network of transportation corridors involved in the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as provide access to promising markets in almost all directions, including in the Indian Ocean.

On June 22, 2018 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on "Strengthening regional and international cooperation for ensuring peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian region". According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, the document, draft of which was developed by Uzbekistan jointly with the neighboring states of Central Asia was unanimously supported by all UN member states.

The adoption of the resolution was a practical implementation of the initiative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev put forward during the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2017 in New York. The resolution recognizes the important role of the Central Asian countries in ensuring peace, stability and sustainable development in the region, as well as in promoting regional and international cooperation. Introducing the draft text, the representative of Uzbekistan said that its main purpose was to gain the support of the international community in the efforts of the Central Asian States to foster closer collaborations in order to ensure peace and stability in the region. He also emphasized their shared spiritual and cultural heritage.

In this resolution, it was also noted the importance of developing and strengthening bilateral and regional cooperation in the sphere of the rational and integrated use of water and energy resources in Central Asia, and called upon the member states to support the Central Asian nations in their efforts to mitigate the effects of the drying up of the Aral Sea. In this case, a new level of political confidence in the region gave a powerful impetus to the development of institutions of public diplomacy, cultural ties, expanding contacts between bordering provinces, parliamentarians, public organizations and citizens. In this sense, experts argue that Central Asia's ills (its economic ills, at least) could be cured by greater regional cooperation.

Experts argue that today a new complex of regional security is being formed in Central Asia. For example, Uzbek expert I. Bobokulov notes that regional security is “the awareness of regional states of the unity of their destinies, the commonality of existing threats, problems and interests.”

At the same time, with the formation of a new world order, on the one hand, favorable opportunities for regional cooperation are opening up; and on the other hand, direct and potential challenges and threats to its implementation are increasing. Under these circumstances, the following factors are the primary motivators for sustainable development and security in Central Asia.

First, the further development of trade and economic ties and the creation of favorable conditions for the growth of mutual trade in the region. Over the past 2 years, the trade turnover between Uzbekistan and the countries of the region has increased by an average of 20 percent, and with individual states by almost 70 percent.

According to the United Nations calculations, the effective cooperation of the Central Asian countries in the next 10 years may increase regional GDP at least 2 times. A practical contribution to this task could be the creation of a Regional Economic Forum and the establishment of the Association of Heads of Regions of the Central Asian States. This will allow a direct dialogue between the business communities and strengthen inter-regional ties.

Secondly, to use the transit and logistics potential of the region more efficiently and ensure the faster development of the transport and communications infrastructure. Today, the states of the region are trying to use their advantageous geographical position not only to enter the world markets, but also to act as one of the links of the transcontinental transport communication. In particular, since early 2017, a high-speed railway between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan was launched.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan opened new railway and automobile bridges of Turkmenabad-Farab through the Amudarya, which is an important part of the transport-transit route “Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman”. In addition, an agreement was reached to start constructing the “Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China” railway, as well as to hold a pilot rally along this corridor.

Thirdly, further strengthening and intensifying cooperation among the Central Asian countries to identify and prevent terrorist cross-border activities, defeat the recruitment channels for militants, fight against financing terrorism, arms smuggling, illegal migration and drug trafficking. Countering such challenges and threats will be effective through of bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms. President Mirziyoyev emphasized that it is necessary to abandon the division of threats “ours and others” and continue to adhere to the principle of “indivisibility of security”.

Fourthly, to continue the regional efforts in the integration of Afghanistan to the regional trade-economic, transport-communications and energy links. The early achievement of peace in Afghanistan is crucial for ensuring security and stability in the region, which is in the fundamental interest of the Central Asian countries. This will open a new strategic opportunity for the full realization of the potential of trade and economic cooperation, the implementation of projects in the field of transport communications. A significant contribution to the overall efforts aimed at stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan will undoubtedly contribute to the Kabul’s active involvement in the processes of regional cooperation in Central Asia.

Fifth, to complete the process of delimitation and demarcation of state borders, strengthen the confidence measures in them by taking into account mutual interests, on the basis of reasonable compromises and equivalent exchange.

Sixth, the important direction of interstate relations in the region is the strengthening of cultural and humanitarian contacts, ties of friendship and good-neighborliness between our states and peoples.

In this regard, the solution of all the vital issues of regional development from border security to a

developed system of transport routes is connected with the further sustainable development of the region. Moreover, states of the region came to conclusion that only by strengthening bilateral and multilateral ties within the region they can achieve economic and political goals. So far, they tested the colorful contacts with different actors, without paying enough attention to regional cooperation but today economically prosperous, secure Central Asia is an absolute imperative for all countries of the region. Any major regional projects in the spheres of transport, communications and energy cannot be realized without active interaction of the regional states, without ensuring a high level of cooperation and political confidence.

Rustam Khuramov

Head of department

At the Institute for strategic and

regional studies under the

President of the Republic of Uzbekistan

(This article was published in 2019 March/April edition of the Contemporary International Relations Journal, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations)