

GLOBAL ACTORS IN CENTRAL ASIA: GREAT GAME OR GREAT GAIN?

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Abstract. From the first days of their independence, the Central Asian states were constantly searching for the most optimal and beneficial ways to interact between each other and with other partners, both located in close proximity to their borders and relatively remote, but no less significant.

The main goal and scientific novelty of this research is to analyze current approaches, taking into account the foreign policy doctrines of global actors (Russia, China, the USA and the EU) in relations with the countries of Central Asia. Particular attention is paid to the assessment and conclusions on the prospects for their development, including through the prism of the interests of the states of the region.

Key words: Central Asia, Russia, China, USA, European Union, Connectivity, “Belt and Road” Initiative.

JEL codes: F42, F50, F68

Аңдатпа. Өз тәуелсіздігінің алғашқы күндерінен бастап Орталық Азия мемлекеттері бір-бірімен және шекараларына тікелей жақын орналасқан, сондай-ақ салыстырмалы түрде алыс, бірақ маңызды емес басқа серіктестермен өзара іс-қимылдың оңтайлы және тиімді тәсілдерін тұрақты негізде іздеді.

Осы зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты мен ғылыми жаңалығы Орталық Азия елдерімен қарым-қатынастардағы жаһандық ойыншылардың (Ресей, Қытай, АҚШ және ЕО) сыртқы саяси доктриналарын ескере отырып, қазіргі заманғы тәсілдерді талдау болып табылады. Оларды дамыту перспективалары бойынша, оның ішінде өңір мемлекеттерінің мүдделері призмасы арқылы бағалау мен қорытындыларға ерекше назар аударылды.

Түйінді сөздер: Орталық Азия, Ресей, Қытай, АҚШ, Еуропалық Одақ, өзара байланыстылық, «Белдеу және жол бастамасы».

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Аннотация. С первых дней своей независимости государства Центральной Азии на постоянной основе искали наиболее оптимальные и выгодные способы взаимодействия друг с другом и с другими партнерами, как находящимися в непосредственной близости от их границ, так и относительно удаленными, но не менее значительными.

Основной целью и научной новизной данного исследования является анализ современных подходов, с учетом внешнеполитических доктрин глобальных игроков (России, Китая, США и ЕС) в отношениях со странами Центральной Азии. Особое внимание уделено оценке и выводам по перспективам их развития через призму интересов государств региона.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Россия, Китай, США, Европейский Союз, взаимосвязанность, Инициатива «Пояс и Путь».

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The collapse of the Union opened Central Asia to the world community, making it a new point of attraction for the interests of global and regional actors. Just like centuries ago, the region again acquires the role of a kind of bridge between East and West, through which

the most important strategic resources are redistributed between them.

Central Asian countries possess the richest reserves of minerals such as oil, gas, gold, uranium, zinc, aluminum, rare and rare earth metals, etc., and their location in the heart of the Eurasian continent between Russia, China, India and Iran adds not only a transport and logistics, but also a geostrategic component.

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military and military-technical cooperation. At the same time, it considers its interests in the region primarily through the prism of security.

According to the authoritative American researcher Francis Fukuyama, Central Asia will soon become the centre of the global economy. And China will make to this process its huge contribution, since it is increasingly focused on Eurasia (Fukuyama, 2016).

The new US Strategy for Central Asia, adopted in early 2020 (*United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025, 2020*), will appear in connection with Washington's diplomatic rapprochement with the states of the region, and it will focus on Afghanistan, as well as deterring a growing China and revanchist Russia in Central Asia, because Washington considers these two countries their main opponents on the world stage.

Due to geopolitical factors, the European Union has not claimed, and now does not claim to be a key player in Central Asia. Nevertheless, the EU has always sought to maintain its presence in the region and promote its interests, adapting to the ongoing local changes.

In 2019 the European Union presented "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" document, which has become de facto new EU Strategy for Central Asia, in which the main ideas remain unchanged - interconnectedness, sustainable, comprehensive and rule-based initiatives, which is definitely beneficial.

The methodological basis of this research includes a complex of historical and sociological methods. The historical-descriptive method allowed the author to conduct a holistic analysis of the primary factual information. The comparative-historical method and systematic analysis made it possible to identify the stages of the formation of the policy of global actors in Central Asia, as well as to determine cause-and-effect links, emerging trends and specifics of the development of interaction with subsequent conclusions. This method was also used to compare the points of view of various researchers and politicians on the issue under consideration.

Russia's role in Central Asia. The Russian Federation certainly considers the Central Asian region to be the sphere of its historical influence. Nevertheless, the sequential strengthening of China, which is becoming the dominant economic force, is gradually changing regional processes, introducing new dynamics into them and forcing a review of existing approaches. These are not the only needles in the region. The United States, the European Union, and such regional powers as India, Turkey and Iran are also ready to defend their interests here.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had to develop new approaches to its own foreign policy, which would be most consistent with the modern realities of international life and its new status as the successor state of the rights and obligations of the USSR.

However, the Russian leadership of that period did not have a clear vision of the country's foreign policy priorities, and the process of forming the conceptual foundations of the new foreign policy doctrine of Russia looked rather contradictory and uncertain.

This was caused by exaggerated expectations that a sharp turn of Russia towards rapprochement with the West would entail a sharp improvement in bilateral relations with former rivals and, as a result, the attitude of Western countries to "new" Russia will change, and political and economic support will increase.

On the other hand, amid the expansion of contacts between Russia and Western states, its traditional ties with Asian countries and post-Soviet states were weakening. On the very periphery of Russia's interests among the CIS countries were the republics of Central Asia.

Thus, for almost fifteen years, Moscow has paid undeservedly little attention to Central Asia. And only in the mid-2000s the official state bodies and non-governmental institutions of Russia began to revive their interest to the countries of the region.

An important factor that influenced the activation of Russian foreign policy in the Central Asian region was the strengthening of the position of Western states and investors in the Caspian Sea

and, in general, the increased interest of Western countries in Central Asia.

Moreover, while deepening cooperation with the countries of the region within the framework of various regional security systems, as well as in promoting the development of democratic institutions in the countries of the region, the West at the same time purposefully adhered to the policy of squeezing Russia out of Central Asia.

All this subsequently led to the expansion of the sphere of economic and political cooperation between Russia and the Central Asian countries, the intensification of bilateral high-level meetings, and increased understanding among the expert community of the Central Asian countries of the common interests between the states of the region and Russia on many issues of regional security.

It should be noted that from the point of view of national security, stability in Central Asia is more important for Russia than for any other state adjacent to this region, not to mention non-regional countries for which problems in the region are not a potential challenge to their own security, but simply a field for a diplomatic game.

With the growing geopolitical confrontation with the West, Central Asia is becoming the most important area of Russian foreign policy. Moscow traditionally makes a bet on economic, military and military-technical cooperation. At the same time, it considers its interests in the region primarily through the prism of security.

Moscow is concerned about the high risks of destabilizing the region and the activation of the United States, China and other external players in Central Asia.

In addition, amid growing protest movements in Russia, the importance of Central Asia is increasing as the front line for the protection of “traditional values” in the post-Soviet space.

At the same time, the geopolitical success of Putin’s project of the “Greater Eurasian Space” is impossible without the expansion of the military-political union, which would ensure the security of the new “civilizational association” from Kaliningrad to the Pacific Ocean. The

viability of this project largely depends on the political loyalty of the Central Asian states.

Recently, the Kremlin has also revised its ideas about Central Asia as a collective construction.

The strategic plan focuses on strengthening comprehensive cooperation with Uzbekistan. In the context of the aggravation of relations with the USA and the EU, it is fundamentally important for the Russian Federation to prevent the strengthening of the pro-Western or pro-Chinese vectors of Uzbekistan. In this context, the Russian Federation seeks to maintain the technological dependence of Uzbekistan in the mining, fuel and energy sectors, as well as in the petrochemical and nuclear industries.

Kyrgyzstan is important for Moscow in the light of its strategy to expand and deepen Eurasian integration. At the same time, Bishkek is very critical of the preliminary results of its membership in the EAEU. Despite the imminent completion of the grace period of stay in the organization, issues regarding the access of Kyrgyz goods to the Union market have not been resolved yet.

Kyrgyzstan is an important ally of Russia in multilateral formats. Practice shows that Bishkek almost completely supports international and regional initiatives of Moscow.

Russia seeks to maintain its influence in Tajikistan, which occupies a special place in the regional security system, playing the role of an outpost on the southern frontier of the CIS/CSTO.

At present, Russia seeks to maintain its military-political dominance in Tajikistan (201st military base, RT membership in the CSTO, ensuring the security of the Tajik-Afghan border, etc.).

Russian-Turkmen relations have been significantly intensified, which, following the results of Vladimir Putin’s visit to Ashgabat (in 2017), have been brought to the level of strategic partnership. Russia’s interest in Turkmenistan is determined by several factors such as the necessity of cooperation in the field of regional security in the context of preventing threats from Afghanistan and the need to maintain leverage when laying pipeline projects for

the export of hydrocarbons from Central Asia to Europe, bypassing Russia. The East-West gas pipeline constructed in Turkmenistan in 2015 allows exporting gas in the northern, western, and eastern directions.

Russia limits the supply of Turkmen gas to Europe via alternative routes. In particular, it blocks attempts to reorient energy flows from the Caspian region bypassing its territory.

As we can see, Russia shows the desire and ability to adapt its foreign policy and discussion to new conditions inside and out. This adaptation should go without significant disruptions, although there is someone to provoke them. Thus, optimal result is the gradual construction of a new space of international cooperation in Eurasia, not of the various “games” that remained in the 19th and 20th centuries.

China’s interests in Central Asia.

Over the years, the leaders of the countries of the Central Asian region have taken control of the economic and political potential that they are striving to develop, discovering new external relations and partnerships. They began to show openness towards influential representatives of their closest circle or, more precisely, to the dominant subjects who began to discover this region.

China, being no exception, today has become a commercial partner of five states, and at the same time, an important, albeit vaguely worded, participant in the regional security agenda.

The development of relations between the Central Asian countries and China with good reason can be called multi-speed. If we group all types of interaction into three spheres - military-political, trade-investment and humanitarian, it is noticeable that, for example, Tajikistan has advanced far in the first two, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan mainly in the second, and Kazakhstan is striving for a balance with the priority of investment cooperation.

Although Central Asia has been the focus of its foreign policy for a relatively short time, China has already shown significant progress. Having mainly economic interests in the region, today it is one of the most active partners in Central Asia, whose presence is fully reflected in

the “Belt and Road” initiative (BRI) or within its broader format – “Silk Road”. Beijing’s desire to secure a share of the region’s rich natural resources and create new markets for Chinese goods, especially for such industries as steel and cement that are struggling with overcapacity as the domestic Chinese economy has slowed (*Standish, 2019*).

The Central Asian countries are trying to benefit from the Chinese project. Although cooperation between China and Central Asia began to develop even before 2013, the official launch of the OBOR initiative gave a certain focus to previously unitary commercial activities and indirectly gave it a political connotation.

Despite the fact that the BRI is primarily recognized as a commercial project, its various aspects may be identified upon closer examination. The implementation of China’s foreign policy strategy, despite its official statements, can be described as the behavior of a world power, described as the goal of becoming a neighbor in every corner of the world.

Central Asia is also associated with China’s security cooperation, and Beijing sees a potential stronghold in the region that will help it fight Islamic extremism in its western Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

Kazakhstan, which has the largest economy among the countries of Central Asia, fully supports partnership with China and calls itself a “buckle” on the belt of the Chinese initiative. It expects considerable benefits from the new economic opportunities that China provides.

Kazakhstan was in the center of attention of China, having extended a gas pipeline to the PRC, and signed a number of trade and investment agreements with Beijing for \$ 30 billion. At the same time, China is expanding its economic presence throughout the entire Central Asian region.

Despite the mutual sympathy between Beijing and Moscow, which seems to be unfairly treated by world order, the Kremlin is very suspicious of the expansion of its Chinese presence in the region, although it does not determine the reasons for its suspicion.

At first, Moscow tried to compete with China’s growing influence in the hope

of preserving its mantle as the main economic force in the region. Moscow launched new energy projects, weakened Chinese initiatives, and actively supports an economic bloc called the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

But sanctions and a quarrel with the West over the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of crisis in eastern Ukraine in 2014 create obstacles for the EAEU, which is why Moscow needs new, more pragmatic relations with Beijing.

Against this background, the partnership between the two countries continues to expand.

Despite the development of partnerships and cooperation, Moscow is concerned about Chinese aspirations and the fact that as bilateral ties deepen, it will be assigned the position of a junior partner.

The Russian Federation and China rely on different systems of civilizational values. The strategy of China to strengthen its position in the international arena has proved its viability and effectiveness in comparison with Russia's foreign policy.

Moreover, the constraint in establishing a mutually beneficial partnership will remain the difference in the economic potentials of the Russian Federation and China. Under the conditions of Western sanctions and the chosen model of the "besieged fortress" behavior for the Russian Federation, structural reforms become difficult to implement.

If we look more broadly, due to the combination of the "Belt and Road" initiative with development strategies of different countries, significant progress has been made in the construction of the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor, the Asian-European transcontinental bridge, the Sino-Pakistan economic corridor and the China-Indochina corridor. The actual results of the Chinese initiative also include the construction of a friendship bridge in the Maldives, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti and Mombasa-Nairobi railways. By the way, the implementation of the latest project made it possible to create a total of 50 thousand jobs for local residents, which increased Kenya's economic growth by 1.5 percent.

From 2013 to 2017, the volume of trade between China and the countries of BRI grew by 4.9 percent. In 2000, exports to the OECD as a share of Chinese exports were around 61% while, for the BRI-participating economies, it was 19%. Subsequently, the trend in the share of BRI-participating economies has been continually upwards, reaching 34% in 2016, while that for the OECD declined gradually to around 49% (*OECD Business and Finance Outlook, 2018*).

For the 70 BRI "corridor economies" (excluding China), projects in all sectors that are already executed, in implementation, or planned are estimated to amount to US\$575 billion.

In 2018 alone, Chinese enterprises invested US \$ 15.64 billion in 56 BRI countries, which were directed directly to non-financial projects. In addition, the PRC has established, together with the member countries, more than 80 foreign zones of trade and economic cooperation, which opens up a new and wider space for Chinese investment.

All these facts indicate a rather dynamic development of the BRI project and provide the basis for the most daring forecasts. For example, World Bank analysts estimated that, with the "Belt and Road" initiative, 7.6 million people will be lifted from absolute poverty in the participating countries, 32 million will be eliminated from poverty, and household incomes will increase by 0.7- 2.9 percent. Foreign trade turnover will grow by 2.8–9.7 percent, and global trade will rise by 1.7–6.2 percent (*The World Bank, 2018*).

However, against the backdrop of positive news, more and more doubts are expressed about the true intentions of Beijing. Opponents of the BRI, especially Western analysts, are convinced that it leads to "violation of sovereign rights" and "colonization" of some participating countries. They explain this by the fact that by injecting huge investments in the development of partners, the PRC is thereby trying to drive them into debt traps with the subsequent deprivation of control over projects and aims to strengthen its global influence.

At the same time, according to some researchers, for China, which is rapidly turning into a global center of economic

attraction, ties with Central Asia do not have any serious macroeconomic significance. Today, the countries of the region are of interest to China, first of all, as a resource base, and economic interaction in other areas is somehow connected with the subsequent receipt by China of resources from the countries of the region (*Izimov, 2019*).

United States' policy in Central Asia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states have also experienced strong American influence and even pressure in almost all areas - in the political, military-strategic, economic and ideological spheres.

Central Asia is a significant, but not the only element of American strategy. However, given the critical importance of the countries of the region for establishing US hegemony over Eurasia, it can be predicted that the role and importance of the region will increase.

The interest and participation of the United States in the affairs of Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union was unstable and had its own ebbs and flows. They intensified after the American invasion of Afghanistan and the start of the anti-terrorism military campaign.

The new United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 correlates with US's progress towards rapprochement with the states of the region, and it is focused on Afghanistan, as well as prevention a growing China and Russia in Central Asia, because Washington considers these two countries their main opponents on the world order.

At the same time, it is important to note that the US geostrategic interests often clash and conflicts with the interests of other world power centers, such as Russia, China, the European Union and the countries of the Arab world.

This strategy aims to maintain Washington's dominance in the global economy and financial system, to consolidate America's military-strategic superiority and expand its geopolitical influence, to deter strategic opponents, which, according to the US security doctrine, include China and Russia, as well as to combat the so-called international terrorism, which in fact serves

the purpose of exercising control over the Islamic world.

Meanwhile, the US Central Command report for 2019 expresses concern about the limited military capabilities in the Central Asian region and the dominant role of Moscow here. And the State Department must look for ways to solve this problem.

After the withdrawal of the main NATO contingents from Afghanistan, the situation of US military bases in Bagram, Kabul and Herat will become more complicated. Even successful negotiations with the Taliban do not guarantee the protection of these facilities from the anti-American population and armed groups. Therefore, Washington needs safe air supply routes through Central Asia and the Caspian Sea or, in case of defeat in Afghanistan, new air bases in the region.

Therefore, there is very little room for the United States in this region, although America today again draws attention to Central Asia.

Washington is unable to compete with China's volume of investments, which it is brandishing in the region, and is unlikely to have the same determination to strengthen ties with it that Russia has. Instead, Washington can offer itself to local governments as an alternative if they face pressure from strong neighbors and want to have a counterbalance, developing their relations in the international arena.

However, in the coming years, America will be absorbed in the complex process of internal restructuring and transformation of understanding of its place in the world. Therefore, it is unlikely that someone else will want to actively intervene in the affairs of such a remote region as Central Asia, in addition to real fans of the "game", who are not so many in the USA.

In addition, the US policy in Central Asia is affected by difficult relations with Russia and Iran, Turkish, Pakistani and Indian factors, energy projects, as well as the problem of radical Islam.

The conflict of interests, which seemed inevitable, had already begun, and the adoption in these conditions of the United States of a new strategy for the region looked quite logical.

Thus, despite the rhetoric, the continuity of US foreign policy in the region remains, and it remains in the focus of attention of the current American administration. However, the invariability of US policy towards the region is also mentioned in the strategy itself, where priority is given to the formula C5 + 1, where “C” is the five republics of the region and “+1” is the United States.

Based on this, the preservation of almost all of the previous US strategic priorities in the region seems logical. We can say that the tasks outlined in the strategy of the Obama administration, in a slightly modified form, “migrated” to the strategy of Trump.

The priority of American policy towards Central Asia remains geopolitical modeling. The blocks of the strategy related to security, the economy, democracy and human rights are subordinate to this task.

The solution to the problem of maintaining and expanding stability in Afghanistan through the promotion of economic ties between it and the countries of Central Asia relates to geopolitical issues. The idea is not new - the concept of Greater Central Asia was developed during the presidency of George W. Bush. It involves the rapprochement of the Central Asian states and Afghanistan under US control and the further transformation of this geopolitical entity into a safe zone of sovereign states with a market economy, secular and open systems of government.

In turn, the Greater Central Asia project is just one of the “puzzles” in the US strategic game, the goal of which is to transform the whole of Eurasia into a large-scale controlled geo-economic space, including the Caspian region, Central Asia, the Middle East and South Asia.

All other areas presented in the strategy - reducing terrorist threats in the region, expanding economic ties between the region and the United States through American investment, supporting and strengthening the sovereignty and independence of Central Asian states, are somehow aimed at solving this problem.

At first glance, the tasks of promoting human rights and supporting

the rule of law are a little out of this chain. But this is not so. The advancement of democratic rhetoric is not only a tribute to tradition, but also an instrument of American policy in the region. The tool is somewhat outdated, but still effective. However, it is noticeable that if earlier democratization was a fundamental principle of US foreign policy, it's kind of “whip” now it goes in conjunction with the “carrot” - investments.

The European Union's Strategy for Central Asia. The European Union, as a single geopolitical actor, until the end of the first decade of the 21st century practically did not manifest itself in the region. At the time of the collapse of the USSR, the EU was focused on internal reforms; it was becoming an independent subject of international relations. Then, the period of its expansion began due to the entry into it of the countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

Thus, Central Asia has long been on the periphery of the foreign policy interests of the European Union. Against the background of a significant number of domestic and foreign policy problems requiring concentrated attention of Brussels, the Central Asian region was not considered as a top priority.

EU cooperation with the countries of the region was carried out in the «background» on the basis of partnership and cooperation agreements signed in the mid-90s.

Due to geopolitical factors, the European Union has not claimed, and now does not claim to be a key player in Central Asia. Nevertheless, the EU has always sought to maintain its presence in the region and promote its interests, adapting to the ongoing local changes.

In May 2007, the European Union Strategy for Central Asia was adopted, which for 12 years served as the main program document of the EU, regulating the key directions of inter-regional cooperation.

At the same time, ten years of the Strategy's implementation have shown that it no longer fully reflects modern reality and is no longer able to effectively serve as a guideline for interaction between the parties.

In June 2017, the EU Council on Foreign Affairs came up with a proposal to prepare a completely new strategic document that would reflect the modern vision of cooperation between the two regions, as well as take into account current geopolitical realities, changing needs and new opportunities of the countries of the Central Asian region.

On May 15, 2019, after two years of work, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented to the European Parliament and the Council the Joint Communication “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”, which has become de facto new EU Strategy for Central Asia. This Communiqué entered into force on June 17, 2019 after the adoption of the relevant conclusions of the EU Council.

Unlike the 2007 Strategy, in its new program document the EU intentionally refused to form any specific thematic platforms. This is due to the desire to give the new document maximum flexibility, as well as to maintain its relevance for a long time (*Joint Communication “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”, 2019*).

At the same time, the 2019 EU Strategy, in essence, is a reissue, albeit a much more detailed one, of the previous document, in which the main ideas remain unchanged - interconnectedness, sustainable, comprehensive and rule-based initiatives, which is definitely beneficial.

In conclusion, it is necessary to note that the interaction of Central Asian countries with Europe should not provoke grumbling from the Chinese or Russian side. Politically, Europe can no longer have a significant impact on the stabilization of the region and its periphery, where Afghanistan is located, which has turned the efforts of external powers into an unhealed wound of Eurasia. Here the opportunities of Europeans to help and harm are minimal.

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Conclusion. Despite the fact that Russia, the USA and the EU seek to solve fundamental problems, and not their consequences, the Chinese approach may seem more pragmatic to Central Asian states for this moment, as it offers more practical solutions in the short and medium term.

Thus, rigid infrastructure projects are more consistent with the logic of local authorities than “abstract” democratic reforms. At the same time, in addition to the obvious advantages, Chinese economic expansion is fraught with the risk of developing dependent relations for Central Asian states, whose economy lags far behind the Chinese one, which can only be avoided if political and diplomatic efforts are consolidated.

As the former Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Erlan Idrissov has mentioned in his interview to the “Astana Times” magazine back in 2015, far from being at the center of a re-run of the Great Game, Kazakhstan, and, I would add all the Central Asian states, are at the heart of what could be a Great Gain for all in terms of regional and global stability and prosperity, and is adamantly promoting this vision for all to embrace (*Idrissov, 2015*).

In the context of increasing globalization, which, nevertheless, takes place against the background of continuing contradictions of leading world actors, the institutional mechanisms of cooperation in Central Asia with the constructive involvement of all interested parties can become an important component of stability and security.

Today, there is a clear understanding that in the current turbulence of geopolitical and geoeconomics processes, the Central Asian states need to defend their place in the global system of relations more actively, which would adequately correspond to their existing potential.

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