

## KAZAKHSTAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN REGIONAL COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES<sup>1</sup>

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A feature of the countries of Central Asia is the difference in their foreign policy priorities. Of the states in the region, only Kazakhstan borders on two powers - Russia and China, and the land border of Kazakhstan with the Russian Federation is the longest land border in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that for Kazakhstan the leading foreign policy priorities were, are and will be Russia and China. It is no coincidence that the President of Kazakhstan K.-J. Tokayev went to Russia, and the ex-president went to China, to the Second Beijing Belt and Road Forum.

For Uzbekistan, which does not border either Russia or China, an acute problem is the neighborhood with Afghanistan. At the same time, the former minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan A. Kamilov refers to President Sh. Mirziyoyev, who believes that Afghanistan is part of the Central Asian region, since "for thousands of years, the peoples of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have developed in the same cultural and civilizational space." Therefore, Uzbekistan will develop close political, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian relations with Afghanistan. "We," emphasizes Sh. Mirziyoyev, "perceive the security of Afghanistan as the security of our country, a guarantee of stability and prosperity for the entire vast region" [1].

In connection with the dramatic development of the situation in Afghanistan, it is with Tashkent that Washington will primarily negotiate on the two most acute problems.

Kyrgyzstan, which borders on China, is oriented towards Russia in the military and political terms, and China in the financial and economic terms. At the same time, Bishkek, due to the difficult socio-economic situation and political

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instability in the country, is open for cooperation with states that are ready to provide sponsorship.

Tajikistan, due to geographical, ethnic and linguistic factors, is interested in deepening cooperation with Iran and Afghanistan. At the same time, Dushanbe maintains military-strategic cooperation with the Russian Federation, as well as financial, trade and economic relations with China.

Turkmenistan stands apart, which, due to its commitment to a policy of neutrality, continues to remain in a state of isolation.

The rivalry between the three leading powers in Central Asia was reflected in the topics of the meetings of the heads of the foreign affairs departments of the United States, China, and Russia with the foreign ministers of the Central Asian states in the 1+5 format. At the meeting of US Secretary of State A.Blinken with the heads of foreign affairs agencies of the countries of the region in an online format on April 23 this year, special attention was paid to the following issues:

- "to jointly solve common problems on the way to a prosperous and secure Central Asia, free to pursue its interests with various partners, including the United States."
- further "development of security cooperation between the United States and the countries of Central Asia as a means of promoting stability and regional security and countering cross-border threats emanating from Afghanistan."
- facilitating "regional connectivity and transit trade by expanding transport networks connecting Central Asia with South Asia via Afghanistan".
- "continuation of regional energy infrastructure and connectivity projects as a means of strengthening electrical connectivity and energy integration, promoting regional cooperation and providing transit revenues and reliable energy for Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia" [2].

Another range of issues was considered at the Second Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the People's Republic of China and the countries of Central Asia, held on May 12 this year. in full-time format in the Chinese city of Xi'an. The

ministers adopted the following statements: "On the development of interregional cooperation"; "About Afghanistan"; "On cooperation in the fight against COVID-19". At the same time, the task of jointly drawing up a Plan for Future Cooperation and efforts to create a Community of Common Destiny for China and Central Asia was put at the forefront. The meeting documents emphasized that China and the countries of Central Asia are actively involved in the joint construction of the Belt and Road, which gives special vitality to the ancient Silk Road [3].

At the third online meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Russia and Central Asian countries, held on October 16, 2020, attention was drawn to the further development of multifaceted interaction between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian states. In particular, the ministerial statement "On Strategic Directions for Cooperation" said that it is in the common "national interest to further actively develop interstate ties in order to strengthen security and stability in Central Asia, turn it into a zone of peace, prosperity, interethnic and interfaith harmony, long-term and prospective cooperation, energy and transport-transit interaction of continental importance" [4].

Held on July 16-17, 2021. The Conference in Tashkent "Central and South Asia: Regional Interconnection. Challenges and Opportunities", initiated by the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev with the active support of the United States, demonstrated the fundamental differences in the approaches to the "interconnection" of Central and South Asia by the main non-regional actors, on the one hand, and the states of Central Asia, on the other. If the United States once again declared the need for a comprehensive development of relations between Central and South Asia, not only in all key areas, including trade and economic, transport and logistics, energy, security, but also in the field of cultural and humanitarian relations, then other participants of the Tashkent forum actually ignored such a position of Washington,

Thus, in the C5+1 joint statement adopted on 16 July this year. The heads of the foreign affairs agencies of the United States and the countries of the region within the framework of the Tashkent Conference pointed out the need to look for opportunities to strengthen ties between the regions of Central and South Asia through trade, transport and energy ties, including through Afghanistan, and to

establish closer ties between the economies of Central and South Asia, and to promote cross-border business and people-to-people exchanges. Particular attention in this document was paid to strengthening the historical, cultural, civilizational and spiritual identity of the peoples of South and Central Asia and the restoration of cultural and humanitarian ties between these regions [5].

Beijing, focused on the implementation of its Belt and Road project, strongly opposed the "geopolitical games" around Central and South Asia. It is no coincidence that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, speaking at the Tashkent conference, instead of the name of the forum "Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity" used another term "connectivity in Central and South Asia." Based on this, Wang Yi focused on the need to develop openness, inclusiveness, partnership, adherence to the principles of mutual benefit, win-win, cooperation, and common security. And only then Wang Yi announced that China, supporting the construction of a transport corridor connecting Central and South Asia, proposes to jointly create large transport corridors connecting Europe with Asia, as well as the North with the South [6].

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. Lavrov proposed his interpretation of the agenda of the Tashkent Forum, declaring "the interconnectedness between Central and South Asia." In this regard, S. Lavrov, emphasizing the rapid degradation of the situation in Afghanistan, drew the attention of the initiators of the creation of transport, logistics and energy projects linking Central and South Asia to the need to consider the security situation in Afghanistan, as well as the threat of a "flow of instability" into neighboring states [7].

In our opinion, among the states of Central Asia, only Uzbekistan supports Washington's position on the comprehensive development of relations between Central and South Asia. Speaking with a welcoming speech at the opening of the Tashkent Forum, the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev once again emphasized the historical closeness of Central and South Asia. According to Sh. Mirziyoyev, the historical, cultural and civilizational community of Central and South Asia, the coinciding interests of the countries of the two regions and peoples create a solid foundation on which a common prosperous future can be built. In

this regard, the President of Uzbekistan said, the time has come, based on the huge historical, scientific, spiritual and cultural heritage of the peoples of the two regions, the complementarity of the economies, the availability of intellectual potential, to consolidate joint efforts, to turn Central and South Asia into a stable, economically developed and prosperous space. The head of Uzbekistan expressed confidence that only together it is possible to more effectively counter terrorism, extremism, transnational crime, including in cyberspace. Earlier, Sh. Mirziyoyev already proposed to the countries of Central and South Asia to approve a joint plan to combat terrorism and drug trafficking [8].

But, all the risks associated with the integration of Central and South Asia are circulated. Take only the demographic factor. South Asia is home to 40% of the Asian population and 22% of the world's population. In Uzbekistan, 35 million people live, in Kazakhstan even less - 19 million. Therefore, an attempt to unite Central and South Asia is similar to an attempt to unite a fresh lake with an ocean. In this case, according to the law of communicating vessels, equilibrium will be established in both water spaces and, consequently, fresh water in the lake will be displaced by sea water.

In addition, Tashkent understands such a complex factor as the confrontation between Pakistan and India, which take opposite positions on the Afghan problem. It's no secret that the Taliban enjoys the support of the Pakistani intelligence services, behind which, in turn, are the US and British intelligence services, whose activities are currently "sharpened" against China and Russia.

In this regard, it is impossible not to note two dangerous trends that are actively imposed on the countries of Central Asia from the outside: Russophobia and Sinophobia, on the one hand, the idea of uniting the Turkic-speaking states of the post-Soviet space under the auspices of Ankara on the basis of linguistic and cultural-civilizational identity, on the other.

## 2. Interest of Kazakhstan in cooperation with the states of Central Asia

The leadership of Kazakhstan pays great attention to the development of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Speaking at the General Debate of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly (September 25, 2019), President of

Kazakhstan K.-Zh. Tokayev noted that for decades the states of the region had weak economic ties, which hindered their sustainable growth. Now, based on common interests and challenges, the region has entered a new stage of development. In this regard, - said the head of Kazakhstan, - a close and constructive political dialogue between all five states of the region will contribute to trade, economic, investment and human interaction.

Based on this, K.-J. Tokayev expressed confidence that Central Asia is becoming a "global shareholder." In his opinion, the peoples of the region are bound by strong ties of common historical and cultural heritage, as well as a common future. Therefore, Kazakhstan, as the largest economy in Central Asia, is vitally interested in further strengthening mutually beneficial interaction between all states [9].

His position on the need to establish intra-regional cooperation President K.-J. Tokayev developed it while speaking at the general political debates of the next, 75th session of the UN General Assembly (September 23, 2020). Noting that Kazakhstan's focus is always on intra-regional cooperation, Tokayev stressed that at the moment Central Asia is undergoing a rapid transformation due to a significant expansion of interaction between the states of the region in various fields.

In this regard, the Head of Kazakhstan expressed confidence that a prosperous, strong and united Central Asia meets the interests of both local and global stakeholders. According to Tokayev, rational use of transboundary water resources plays an important role in the context of regional stability. Therefore, he proposed the creation of a Regional Water and Energy Consortium. And in order to coordinate the development agenda in Central Asia, the Head of Kazakhstan proposed to institutionalize the UN Regional Center for Sustainable Development Goals in Almaty [10].

## 2.1. Transport and logistics cooperation and infrastructure competition in Central Asia

Kazakhstan continues to advocate mutually beneficial transport and logistics cooperation between the countries of Central Asia. In his message to the

people of Kazakhstan (09/01/2020), President K.-J. Tokayev emphasized that a new infrastructural frame of the transport system has been formed in the republic, the country's integration into global transport corridors has been ensured, and the historical status of Kazakhstan as a link between Asia and Europe has been restored. At the same time, the head of state draws attention to the need for pragmatic approaches in cooperation in the infrastructure sector due to the presence of high competition in the region.

According to Tokayev, alternative projects have appeared in the Central Asian region that can reduce the transit potential of Kazakhstan. In this regard, it is necessary to consolidate the leading role of the transport and transit sector of Kazakhstan not only in Central Asia, but also in the Eurasian space. To ensure the country's competitiveness in this sector, Tokayev believes, it is necessary through breakthrough infrastructure projects, attracting new states and companies, increasing the level of service and the speed of transit routes [11].

## 2.2. Kazakhstan's support to the countries of the region in the fight against the coronavirus epidemic

The coronavirus pandemic has had an extremely negative impact on the republics of Central Asia. Quarantine restrictions in foreign countries, primarily in Russia, have led to the fact that about 40% of labor migrants who previously worked in the Russian Federation have lost their jobs. Many migrants returned to their homeland to wait out the crisis at home. This dealt a serious blow to the economies of the Central Asian states. In particular, economic growth rates have slowed down, production volumes have decreased, unemployment has increased, trade and industrial regional ties have weakened, there are interruptions in the supply of food and consumer goods, domestic demand has decreased, inflation has increased, and the devaluation of national currencies has continued [12].

The deterioration of the socio-economic situation could not but be reflected in the growth of protest moods. If earlier dissatisfied and socially active citizens could go to work in Russia and other foreign countries, then for the second year they have been deprived of such an opportunity. In this situation, President K.-J. Tokayev, based on humanitarian considerations, decided to provide assistance to the population of the Central Asian countries. Already in March 2020, 5 thousand

tons of flour were sent to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as humanitarian aid. In accordance with the request made by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan R. Kazakbaev during his visit to Kazakhstan on October 28, 2020, the Government of Kazakhstan provided Bishkek with medicines and personal protective equipment free of charge, as well as financial and technical assistance [13].

2.3. Kazakhstan and the reconstruction of Afghanistan - The effectiveness of cooperation between the countries of Central Asia largely depends on the internal political situation in Afghanistan.

For a long time now, the possibility of destabilization of the situation there after the withdrawal of American troops has been worrying in Kazakhstan, as a result of which flows of Afghan refugees may pour into the countries of Central Asia. Given that the armed forces of Tajikistan, numbering about 9,000 servicemen, will not be able to effectively cover the Tajik-Afghan border with a length of 1,430 km, one should expect a breakthrough of militant gangs across the border. This may cause a flow of refugees already from Tajikistan. Since the socio-economic situation in Central Asia is not the best at the moment, the influx of refugees may further aggravate the situation in the region.

Proceeding from this, Kazakhstan stands for the involvement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. In particular, speaking at the SCO summit on November 10, 2020, K.-J. Tokayev noted that Kazakhstan is ready to continue cooperation within the framework of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group with an emphasis on the socio-economic rehabilitation of this country [14].

2.4. Kazakhstan and labor migration in the region

The coronavirus pandemic in Russia and its consequences (high airfare, expensive labor patents, manifestations of xenophobia, etc.) have forced many labor migrants from Central Asia to look for work in Kazakhstan. According to official statistics, the number of Uzbek labor migrants in this republic has increased by about 10 times over the past 5 years. Despite the closure of borders due to the pandemic, in January 2021, according to official data from the Ministry



of Economy, there were more than 200,000 Uzbek citizens in Kazakhstan. The second largest group are migrants from Kyrgyzstan.

In January of this year, according to the State Migration Service of Kyrgyzstan, about 35,000 Kyrgyzstanis worked in Kazakhstan. According to the official statistics of Tajikistan, about 14,000 citizens of this country worked in Kazakhstan before the pandemic. There are no data on the number of citizens of Turkmenistan working in Kazakhstan [15].

### 3. Kazakhstan and the prospects for Turkic-speaking integration

A lot of comments and rumors, especially in the media, were caused by an informal meeting of the heads of the Cooperation Council of seven Turkic-speaking states, which took place online on March 31, 2021. This summit demonstrated the desire of states that consider themselves to be part of the Turkic world to adapt to the conditions of the transition stage from unipolar to multipolar world order.

At the forum, a number of original proposals were made by the Honorary Chairman of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States, the ex-president of Kazakhstan. In particular, he proposed to revive the Great Silk Road through the Caspian Sea under the name "Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor" (or "Turan Corridor"), which can become the safest and shortest trade route between Europe and Asia, will effectively use the benefits of the Chinese initiative "One belt is one way.

In our opinion, this project does not consider a number of factors: a) the availability of ferries for the transport of goods across the Caspian Sea; b) availability of berths; c) the time spent on loading and unloading cargo on the eastern and western shores of the Caspian Sea; d) the cost of transshipment of goods; e) possible risks when transporting goods through the Caspian Sea, etc. [16].

More realistic and pragmatic is the speech at the summit of the President of Kazakhstan K.-Zh. Tokayev, who urged to jointly look for new opportunities to strengthen cooperation between the Turkic-speaking countries. Since the pandemic caused an unprecedented economic crisis, which led to a reduction in

the volume of trade between Kazakhstan and the member countries of the Turkic Council by 11.2%, the head of Kazakhstan proposed to create a “Special economic zone” in the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan, uniting Turkish countries. This is w> June but, according to Tokayev, use trade and economic opportunities of the city located at the crossroads of trade routes and has the necessary resource base, human capital and tourism potential.

Tokayev called the effective and fair use of transboundary water resources, which are the key to stability and prosperity of the countries of the region, an important task to strengthen Turkic cooperation. He announced the readiness of Kazakhstan for the joint implementation of projects for the construction of hydraulic structures.

The next task, according to the Kazakh President, is the implementation of joint projects in such areas as artificial intelligence, digitalization, analysis of large amounts of data, and online commerce. Tokayev called for speeding up work on the creation of the Turkic Investment Integration Fund, the first joint financial institution, by offering to place its headquarters in the Astana International Financial Center.

Further, the Kazakh president proposed to form a common cultural and educational space. The first step in this direction could be cooperation in the field of education. For these purposes, according to Tokayev, the Great Turks educational fund should be created to coordinate interaction between universities on academic mobility, internships, and advanced training.

Kazakhstan is ready to allocate 50 grants (Yassawi scholarship) to train young people from fraternal countries under the undergraduate program at the International Kazakh-Turkish University named after Khoja Ahmed Yassawi in Turkestan. And, finally, in order to improve the status and strengthen the institutional structure of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking Countries, the head of Kazakhstan proposed to transform it into a full-fledged organization [17].

For the national-populist-minded part of Kazakhstani society, oriented towards Turkey, which claims to be the leader of the Turkic world, this path is

one of the desired vectors of Kazakhstani foreign policy. Moreover, the Turkic integration is seen by national populists as an alternative to Kazakhstan's rapprochement with China and Russia. Thus, A. Sarym, a deputy of the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan from the ruling Nur Otan party, a member of the National Council of Public Trust under the President of the Republic, called on Kazakhstan and Turkic-speaking countries to move away from cooperation with China and Russia.

The world is in a state of sanctions wars, confrontation between the West and China and Russia, Sarym said. In this situation, Kazakhstan should not take sides in conflicts, but resolutely defend itself against any attempts to be drawn into, in his words, other people's showdowns. At the same time, Sarym argues, it is necessary to fully support the desire of Azerbaijan, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to develop cooperation with the countries of South Asia - India, Pakistan, Afghanistan [18].

In other words, A. Sarym and his supporters actually support the American plan of Greater Central Asia, the purpose of which is the unification of Central and South Asia, the refusal of the Central Asian states from mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia and China within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union, Belt and Road.

This position of the Kazakh national populists is not shared by all Kazakh society. The well-known publicist D. Ashimbaev believes that the idea of unification with Turkey arose at the dawn of independence, when Turkey was a democratic secular state. Now, with this country, which is steadily becoming Islamized and using increasingly aggressive rhetoric, no one in the post-Soviet space, with the exception of Azerbaijan, shows much desire to integrate. It became clear to everyone, - Ashimbaev emphasizes, - that Erdogan is not acting in the interests of the Turkic world [18].

In our opinion, in the 21st century, compared to the 90s of the last century, when the United States acted in the countries of Central Asia, using Turkey as a kind of battering ram, the situation has changed. However, now Erdogan has quarreled with Washington, as a result of which he has lost financial support and has ceased to act as a percussion instrument of the collective West in the region.

Accordingly, Turkey has lost a significant part of its attractiveness in the eyes of the Kazakh society.

Thus, rumors and assumptions about the growth of Turkey's influence in Kazakhstan after Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, achieved with the direct military support of Turkey, a NATO member, have no basis. Moreover, the assumptions that Kazakhstan is allegedly considering the inclusion of its Armed Forces in a defensive union within the framework of the "Turkic Council" created by Turkey are groundless.

Of course, Turkey does not leave hopes for the creation of a "Turkic world" and the establishment of its dominance not only in the Trans-Caucasus, but also in Central Asia. However, without purposeful support from the United States and the collective West, this is impossible. Moreover, such plans of the unpredictable Erdogan do not correspond to the geopolitical interests of Beijing and Moscow.

#### 4. Reformatting the International Order and Perspectives for Central Asia

There are currently many opinions about the impact the pandemic will have on world politics and the global economy. Unfortunately, the 46th President of the United States, John Biden, concluded that, according to him, it is possible to overcome new global challenges - from the pandemic to the climate crisis and the proliferation of nuclear weapons - only by "countering the growing ambitions of China, which seeks to compete with the United States ", and "Russia's firm intention to discredit and destroy the American economy" [19]. As the US has lost its monopoly leadership in the world, Biden is making strenuous efforts to create alliances - in Asia it is the "quartet" (USA, Australia, South Korea, Japan) against China and Russia, in Europe - an anti-Russian and anti-Chinese alliance based on NATO and the EU.

In the growing confrontation between the collective West and Russia, a special place is given to Kazakhstan. The White House will seek to disrupt the connection of the Eurasian Economic Union with the Silk Road Economic Belt, a significant part of which passes through the territory of Kazakhstan. At the same time, the US is still interested in integrating the countries of Central and South Asia within the framework of the New Silk Road project. It cannot be ruled out

that a plan may arise in the White House to create a dividing barrier in Central Asia between Russia and China, by analogy with the emerging cordon between Russia and Europe, where Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia have already formed “bricks” into the wall separating them. Ukraine and Georgia.

At the same time, Washington will try to convince the population of Central Asia of the aggressiveness of Russia, on the one hand, and of the economic expansion of China, on the other, although the history of the past two decades convincingly shows that it is the United States, contrary to international law, that poses a threat to the security and territorial integrity of many countries. Suffice it to recall the NATO military action led by the United States against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in March 1999.

The results of the "Arab spring", inspired by the US and Western countries, did not justify their hopes. According to Western experts, chaos reigns in Libya and Yemen, the war continues in Syria and Iraq, and a military dictatorship reigns in Egypt. The current US Secretary of State A.Blinken had to admit the perniciousness of the former power politics, saying: “We will not promote democracy through costly military interventions or attempts to violently overthrow regimes. We have tried this tactic in the past. They have given democracy a bad name and they have lost the confidence of the American people.” “We,” the Secretary of State concluded, “will do things differently” [20].

At the same time, it should be considered that Russia is in a tough confrontation with the United States. This confrontation will continue in the medium and most likely in the long term. Accordingly, Russia's relations with the European Union will worsen, in which anti-Russian sentiments will be fueled by the efforts of Poland and the Baltic States.

In the event of further aggravation of relations between the United States and the collective West, on the one hand, Russia and China, on the other, Kazakhstan, as a member of the SCO, must remain a strong link between Russia and China, provide a reliable rear for Moscow and Beijing, contribute to the integration of the EAEU and Economic Belt of the Silk Road. In the event of open military aggression against the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan will have to fulfill its obligations arising from Article 4 of the CSTO Treaty, which provides, in

particular, for providing the victim of aggression with the necessary assistance, including military assistance, in the exercise of the right to collective defense in accordance with Article 51 UN Charter.

It cannot be ruled out that the countries of Central Asia may be chosen to carry out "color revolutions". For these purposes, foreign "producers" will be able to take advantage of the difficult socio-economic and socio-political situation in the states of the region. It is also possible that Islamist radicals and militants from the so-called " sleeper cells " of ISIS, primarily in the Fergana Valley, as well as organized criminal groups behind the drug mafia and interested in destabilizing the situation in the region, will be connected to the "color revolutions".

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