

REGIONALIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: A THEORETICAL ASPECT¹

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Abstract: *The processes of regionalization in Central Asia have their own specifics and are on the path of formation and development. These processes have shown their effectiveness in spite of existing obstacles and difficulties. In the article, the regionalization framework of Central Asia defines the territories of 5 states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.*

At the beginning of its formation, the regionalization process in Central Asia witnessed many changes. Firstly, the process of regionalization of the system of international relations, which appeared in the second half of the last century, was just beginning to spread throughout the world in response to the challenges of globalization. Secondly, the newly independent countries of the region faced with a transforming geopolitical situation and the tense attitude of external actors towards deepening cooperation in Central Asia. There are several theories of regionalization applicable to Central Asia.

In order to comprehensively study the issues of regionalization in the article, the following research methods were used: the principle of historicism, objectivity, the method of a systematic approach, comparative historical, the method of analysis and synthesis, institutional and structural functional analysis.

To reveal the theoretical components of the regionalization process, such approaches as realism, constructivism, and functionalism were used. They explain traditional forms of regionalism by such characteristics as geographical location, community of interests, interaction of the countries of the region and others.

At the same time, an approach from the perspective of globalization, regionalization and interdependence that allows us to consider such processes as "new regionalism" has been used. Constructivism provides an opportunity to understand the reasons for the emergence of new forms of cooperation and new communities.

It is relevant to study the proposed theories to determine the further course of transformation of interaction and cooperation between the countries of the region.

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Keywords: *Central Asia, regionalization, region, theory of regionalism.*

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Introduction

The contours of regionalization formed in the 90s of the last century in Central Asia have shown their effectiveness in spite of existing obstacles and difficulties. Traditionally, the Central Asian region refers to 5 countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

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At the current stage, there is a new impetus in the field of deepening cooperation and strengthening ties in the Central Asian region. It has support from both internal and external factors. This makes it possible to intensify the discourse on the theoretical component of the regionalization process in Central Asia.

Methodology

This article discusses the theoretical aspects of the regionalization process in Central Asia. To reveal the theoretical components of this process, first of all, such approaches as realism, constructivism, functionalism were used, which explain traditional forms of regionalism by such characteristics as geographical location, community of interests, interaction of the countries of the region and others.

At the same time, an approach from the perspective of globalization, regionalization and interdependence has been used, which allows us to consider such processes as "new regionalism". Constructivism provides an opportunity to understand the reasons for the emergence of new forms of cooperation and new communities.

In order to study comprehensively the issues of regionalization, the following research methods were used: the principle of historicism, objectivity, the method of a systematic approach, comparative historical, the method of analysis and synthesis, institutional and structural functional analysis. At the same time, for a holistic consideration of the features and general characteristics

of regionalization, methods of comparison and a systematic approach were applied.

The data in the article are obtained mainly on the basis of the "desk research" method, mainly from secondary sources, such as books, monographs, research papers and articles. Conclusions are also presented that the specifics of the formation of close cooperation between the states of the region have their own development contours and external influence has a direct impact on the possibility of an open integration policy in the region.

Regionalization in international relations

Widespread regionalization is a fact of today's international life. Regionalization affects almost all subsystems of international relations, geographically not always fully covering them. Many nearby areas are being regionalized in order to benefit from closer cooperation and economic interaction. In fact, regionalization is a process of regional structuring of space, increasing the role of regions in the socio-economic and political life of societies as a whole and citizens individually.

The term "region" defines a territory representing a complex territorial-economic and national-cultural complex, with the presence of a specific homogeneity of geographical, economic, historical, socio-cultural characteristics, as well as a sufficient level of interaction and common institutions of multilateral cooperation.

Factors as geographical proximity, common historical development, linguistic and ethnic similarities have an influence in the formation of the region.

Regionalization is a complex process of region formation and regional integration. In the scientific literature, the concept of "regionalization" is used in two meanings²:

1. Intra-state regionalism - the process of transferring part of state powers in the political and economic spheres to regional bodies and organizations.
2. International regionalism - the process of conscious expansion and intensification of interactions between countries connected by geographical proximity, similarity of conditions and forms of life, the

² Achkasov V.A. What is regionalization? // Bulletin of St. Petersburg State University. Series 6: Philosophy. Cultural studies. Political science. International relations. – 2006. – N 3. – P. 24 – 35.

purpose of which is to create and use the positive effects of group cooperation in various spheres of public life.

At the same time, the regionalization of the system of international relations, being a fairly new phenomenon, is interpreted by most researchers subjectively, in relation to a specific study.

This is due to the fact that there is no clear understanding among experts of how the region develops and what motivates the participants in the process. For example, three options for understanding regionalization are proposed for consideration: as the activity of regional powers; as the formation of regional and integration groupings, as well as as the political basis and driving force of regionalism.

In this regard, socio-cultural, economic, political (national self-determination) and other forms of regionalization are distinguished. Historically, these forms of regionalization have developed in parallel, and sometimes preceded each other and strengthened mutual positions. In many cases, certain factors, forcibly or peacefully imposed on one or another neighboring ecumenes, contributed to such forms of regionalization. In Europe it was Christianity, in the Middle East and Central Asia it was Islam. Despite the all-encompassing nature, the researchers still managed to come close to this task and reveal the concept of "regionalization". The most successful matrix for this macro-process was formulated by A.D. Voskresensky, believing that regionalization is the formation of economic ties in the region based on the geographical proximity of states³.

Regionalization is also considered as a dynamic process with many aspects, taking place with the participation of state and non-state actors in a given geographical space. At the same time, experts note the main difference between regionalization and integration, where the latter means deepening cooperation through the creation of interstate and supranational institutions.⁴

In the case of Central Asia, regionalization is of great importance, as it is supported by the countries of the region themselves.

The countries of the Central Asian region are characterized by emerging statehood and strengthening sovereignty. On the way to closer cooperation, the countries are undergoing a process of regionalization. This process implies a

³ Voskresensky A.D. Concepts of regionalization, regional subsystems, regional complexes and regional transformations in modern international relations. // *Comparative Politics*. – 2012. – № 2. – P. 30–58.

⁴ Regionalization in Central Asia. Strategy of Kazakhstan. – Almaty, Friedrich Ebert Foundation. – 2019. – 92 p.

transition from disparity of views to the expansion of convergence, from lack of cooperation to complementarity in the field of economic development, politics, culture and security. In essence, this means the concentration of activities in the region, both in the field of trade and population movement, ideas at the regional level. This interaction can lead to the formation of regions and, in turn, to the emergence of regional entities, networks and organizations.

In most cases, researchers focus on projects of external factors. Regionalism is regarded as attempts by external forces (China, Russia, the United States) to promote either their own versions of regional organizations, or the formation of a Central Asian regional framework that would correspond more to their geostrategic structures (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union and various projects related to the concepts of "Greater Central Asia" and "Central Eurasia").⁵

Some researchers in their works on the example of Central Asian countries note the complexity of the development of regional initiatives when all participating states are characterized by the presence of authoritarian or strong presidential regimes.⁶

Experts also note that the Central Asian countries have their own project for the development of the region, which is aimed at realizing the interests of the participating countries.⁷ A clear manifestation of the the Central Asian countries' own project initiation was laid after President Sh. Mirziyoyev came to power in Uzbekistan. He repeatedly emphasized in his program speeches and published documents that the main priority of the country's foreign policy is the development of multifaceted and mutually beneficial relations with the countries of Central Asia.

Prerequisites for the formation of the Central Asia region

Central Asia is a vast region of Eurasia that has no access to the World Ocean. Central Asia was first described as a separate region by the German geographer Alexander Humboldt in 1843. Historically, Central Asia was a prosperous region along the Silk Road. Due to its location, the Central Asian region has always played the role of a crossroads of trade, cultural and

⁵ Kushkumbayev S. Central Asian Lego: Who Is Configuring the Region? Almaty, Friedrich Ebert Foundation. – 2016. – 41 p.

⁶ Libman A., Vinokurov E. Autocracies and Regional Integration: The Case of the Eurasian Economic Union and Its Predecessors. Mimeo. – 2015.

⁷ Laumulin M. Central Asia in the era of transformation. – Astana, 2021. – 464 p.

civilizational exchanges on a global scale. After the advent of sea and air transportation in world trade, the region lost its central place in global exchange routes. The fall of the Central Asian region under the political and military influence of an external power also played a role here.⁸

The geopolitical concept of "Central Asia" appeared in 1993 at a meeting of the heads of state of the region in the city of Ashgabat. At the same time, it is worth noting the existing other descriptions of the region. For example, the United States considers Central Asia in a broader geopolitical structure as Greater Central Asia, Turkey as part of the Pan-Turkic Union, China as part of the New Silk Road, in the USSR the concept of "Central Asia and Kazakhstan" was used. However, the term "Central Asia" is becoming the most recognized for the countries of this region themselves.

The countries of the region differ in resource potential. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan have significant reserves of hydrocarbons and metals, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are rich in hydro resources, their location allows them to regulate the flow of the main rivers of Central Asia, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, and provide irrigation of agricultural lands throughout the region. Precious stones and gold occupy a significant place, especially in Kyrgyzstan.

In Central Asia, several attempts have been made to create a region-wide association.

In April 1994, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement on the creation of a Economic Union. In March 1998, Tajikistan joined the treaty. In July of the same year, it was decided to establish the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC). However, many agreements within the framework of this association have not been implemented. In December 2001, the CAEC was transformed into the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC). The results of the new grouping's activities also turned out to be insignificant, so Russia's entry into the organization predetermined its unification with the EurAsEC. Thus, on September 7, 2005, at the summit of the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation in St. Petersburg, it was decided to merge the Organization "Central Asian Cooperation" with the EurAsEC.

The countries of the region have not held meetings for quite a long period of time. The objective reasons for the obstacles to the development of

⁸ Canfield Robert L. Restructuring in Greater Central Asia: Changing Political Configurations. // Asian Survey 32 (10). University of California Press. – 1992. - P. 875–887.

cooperation and interaction are water and border disputes, security threats, and more.

At the current stage, there is a revival of interest in Central Asian regionalism. In addition to internal initiative and political will, there is an external dynamic that considers the CA-5 framework as a viable field for the development of regional cooperation initiatives.

The revival of meetings of Central Asian leaders at the highest level on the initiative of Kazakhstan, the resumption of Uzbekistan's participation in the regional policy of Central Asia, the initiatives of external forces such as the European Union, the United States or Japan to hold multilateral meetings in the format of "Central Asia + 1" or the emergence of the Chinese project "One Belt, One Road" explain the resumption of the discussion on Central Asian Regionalism.

Since 2018, four Consultative Meetings of the heads of Central Asian States have been held. The format of the consultative meetings is currently a fairly flexible and adaptive mechanism for coordinating the actions of the countries of the region.

The main results of the Consultative Meetings of the heads of Central Asian States can be considered in this table:

№	Date of the event	Venue	Results of meetings
I	March 15, 2018	Astana, Kazakhstan	The summit discussed issues of expanding political, trade, economic and humanitarian cooperation between the countries of the region, joint counteraction to terrorism, extremism, smuggling of narcotic substances and weapons, strengthening security and stability in Central Asia.
II	November 29, 2019	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	A detailed joint statement was signed, in which interest in deepening trade, economic, transport and energy ties, strengthening water and environmental security was expressed.
III	August 6, 2021	Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan	A detailed joint statement on regional cooperation was signed

IV	July 21, 2022	Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan	<p>Documents signed at the Cholpan-Ata Summit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the XXI Century. • The concept of interaction of the Central Asian States within the framework of multilateral formats • "Green Agenda" Central Asian Regional program; • Roadmap for the development of regional Cooperation (2022-2024)
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Source: compiled on the basis of data on the official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan - <https://akorda.kz/>

Holding Consultative meetings on a regular basis testifies the political will of the heads of States and is a good basis for maintaining a dialogue on regional integration issues.

During his speech at the fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev noted the most important aspects of the meetings: «We are consistently addressing the difficult tasks of ensuring security, stability and sustainable socio-economic development in Central Asia. On this path, many barriers have been removed, conditions created for the free movement of our citizens, active cultural and tourist exchanges. An enabling environment for the growth of mutual trade and investment has been created. In the last five years alone, the volume of intraregional trade has doubled. We have also launched the joint industrial cooperation projects, creating efficient value chains and developing transport and energy infrastructure. Most importantly, all these positive changes are being felt by our fraternal people».⁹

There is an opinion about the declarative nature of the decisions taken at these Consultative Meetings regarding the processes of regionalization. However, it is worth noting that the history of one of the most successful models of regionalization – the model of the European Union – at its initial stages had a period of declarative statements by leaders and government officials. During the development of regionalization in Europe, the political will had rather poor statistical data or indicators.

⁹ <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/5360>

The following statement by the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev also draws a parallel with the period of the formation of the European Union and at the same time puts emphasis on the historical unity of the Central Asian countries: «In the region we are united by economic interests, cultural heritage, language, religion and environmental challenges, and we face common external threats. The founding fathers of the European Union could only wish that they had so much in common. We must direct our efforts towards closer economic integration, a common market and a single currency».¹⁰

Theoretical aspects of regionalization in Central Asia

There are several theoretical approaches to regionalization that can be applied to Central Asia. One of them is the concept of "neorealism", which asserts that States will cooperate only if it benefits them. According to this theory, the Central Asian states can cooperate to strengthen their economic and political position on the world stage.

Neorealists (as well as realists) consider phenomena in international relations through the prism of ensuring national security and international order. As one of the leading representatives of modern neorealism, Kenneth Waltz emphasizes: "In the same way, a country acts in accordance with its national interests, which means, having studied its security requirements, it tries to follow it. It's simple and also very important. Following the concept of national interests means that diplomatic and military moves must be carefully planned accordingly for the survival of the State under threat. The corresponding action is calculated depending on the situation in which the state finds itself".¹¹

The paradigm of neorealism in the theory of international relations provides a practical set of methods and tools for modeling national interests in the foreign policy of the state. The use of these theoretical and methodological developments in the conditions of Central Asia's entry into the period of transformation allows timely analysis of regional policy. This step is considered necessary in the new conditions, taking into account the challenges and threats to the national security of the Central Asian states.

¹⁰ Kushkumbayev S. Central Asian Lego: Who Is Configuring the Region? Almaty, Friedrich Ebert Foundation. – 2016. – 41 p.

¹¹ Waltz K. Theory of International Politics. — Addison-Wesley, 1979. - P. 134.

Another approach is the concept of "transformational regionalism", which suggests that regional integration can be used to overcome internal problems such as conflicts and social inequalities. This approach may be especially important for Central Asia, where internal conflicts and social problems can hinder the economic growth and development of the region.

The geopolitical school from the first years of the independence of the countries of the region primarily focused on the need to balance between the great *Deja vu*. The main geopolitical feature of the region and the reason for the interest of regional and non-regional players in it is the favorable geographical location at the intersection of the North-South and East-West transport corridors, and the availability of the richest raw materials, such as oil, gas, uranium, gold, other non-ferrous and rare earth metals, as well as cotton and grain.

Theoretically, regional integration in Central Asia can be based on such principles as community of interests, mutual benefit and equality.

Convergence theory is also an important theoretical aspect of regionalization. She argues that countries united in regional integration structures are converging on a number of economic, social and cultural indicators. In Central Asia, this can manifest itself in the unification of legislation, reduction of trade barriers and improvement of the general standard of living of the population.

Regional integration should take into account the interests of all segments of society. This means that regional integration processes should take into account the interests of not only political and economic elites, but also ordinary citizens, small and medium-sized businesses, as well as vulnerable groups of the population. In this case, the theory of "new regionalism" can be considered, which suggests that regionalization should be based on the principles of openness, flexibility and voluntariness, and should also include many participants and cover a wide range of issues.

The source for the formation of this approach was theoretical research, which received rapid development in the period after the end of the Cold War. In the New Regional Approach, Bjorn Hettne and Frederick Soderbaum consider meta-theoretical approaches such as global social theory, social constructivism and comparative regional studies to be the starting point of the "new" regionalism. The authors emphasize the broad and interdisciplinary

nature of the topic of regionalism, while the essence of the processes of regionalization, in their opinion, requires a detailed theoretical outline.¹²

A key component of the "new" regionalism is the pooling of resources, which creates the basis for economic, energy, environmental, political, social and cultural cooperation. Thus, this form of cooperation is created by establishing a functioning infrastructure between partners, representing a rather positive effect from the formation of the region and the subject of potential interest of states. At the same time, the formation of regions is considered mainly according to the functional principle. Functional studies focus on non-state actors, focusing on non-territorial factors such as culture and the market.

In economic terms, regionalism means the interdependence of countries and the interests of economic entities beyond national borders, but limits the scope of these trends to regional frameworks.

Regionalization theories have several main goals:

- this is to improve the economic efficiency and competitiveness of the region by creating a more favorable environment for business, developing trade relations and investing in key industries.
- another reason is to increase the security and stability of the region by reducing the risks of conflicts and increasing interaction between States.

An important aspect of the regionalization of Central Asia is to ensure the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in the regionalization process, as they are a key factor in economic development.

It is also important for the countries of the region to cooperate in solving common problems, such as the fight against terrorism, drugs, poverty and other socio-economic problems. The absence of a well-formed regional security system and a region-wide security doctrine is compensated by the participation of regional countries in such organizations as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

For example, the SCO promotes the strengthening of economic and political ties between the countries of the region, as well as ensures security and cooperation in the fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism. In his

¹² Hettne B., Soderbaum Fr. Theorising the Rise of Regionness // *New Political Economy*. – 2000. - №5. - P. 113-124.

speech at the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the SCO member states in September 2020, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev noted the following: "Central Asia should be a link between Europe and Asia, and we are ready to promote integration processes that will contribute to economic growth, prosperity and sustainable development in the region".¹³

Ensuring peace, security and stability in the region is also supported by the CICA, which was established as an international forum. The initiative to convene the CICA was proposed by Kazakhstan and supported by a number of other Asian countries. The CICA now has 28 member states and it is undergoing the process of transformation into a full-fledged organization. The CICA pursues a policy based on the principles of sovereign equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of the member States and economic, social and cultural cooperation in order to achieve its main goal – to expand cooperation by developing multilateral approaches to strengthening peace, security and stability in Asia.

Despite the difficulties, the process of regionalization in Central Asia continues and has great potential to improve the lives of people in the region.

Conclusion

Thus, regionalization in Central Asia is an important process that allows the countries of the region to strengthen economic, political and cultural ties among themselves, as well as to increase their international prestige and influence.

The commonality of regional problems in different spheres requires the joint efforts of the regional participating countries themselves.

However, it is important to understand that regionalization in Central Asia may face various obstacles, such as differences in political systems, cultural traditions, economic models, etc. Therefore, successful regionalization requires the support of all participating States, as well as the adoption of common rules and regulations that will contribute to strengthening cooperation and development of the region as a whole.

¹³ <https://www.akorda.kz/en/speech-by-the-president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayev-at-a-meeting-of-the-council-of-heads-of-state-of-the-sco-member-states-in-an-expanded-format-2683815>

New geopolitical realities form updated requirements for the development of the Central Asian region. Further development of the region is likely to strengthen the form of regionalism that will best meet the requirements of security and interaction. At the same time, the degree of participation of global powers in solving regional problems will, as is practically already happening, be regulated by the region itself on the basis of a balance of interests.

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