

CENTRAL ASIA FROM DIFFICULTIES ON THE WAY OF RAPPROCHEMENT TO A NEW WAY OF INTEGRATION

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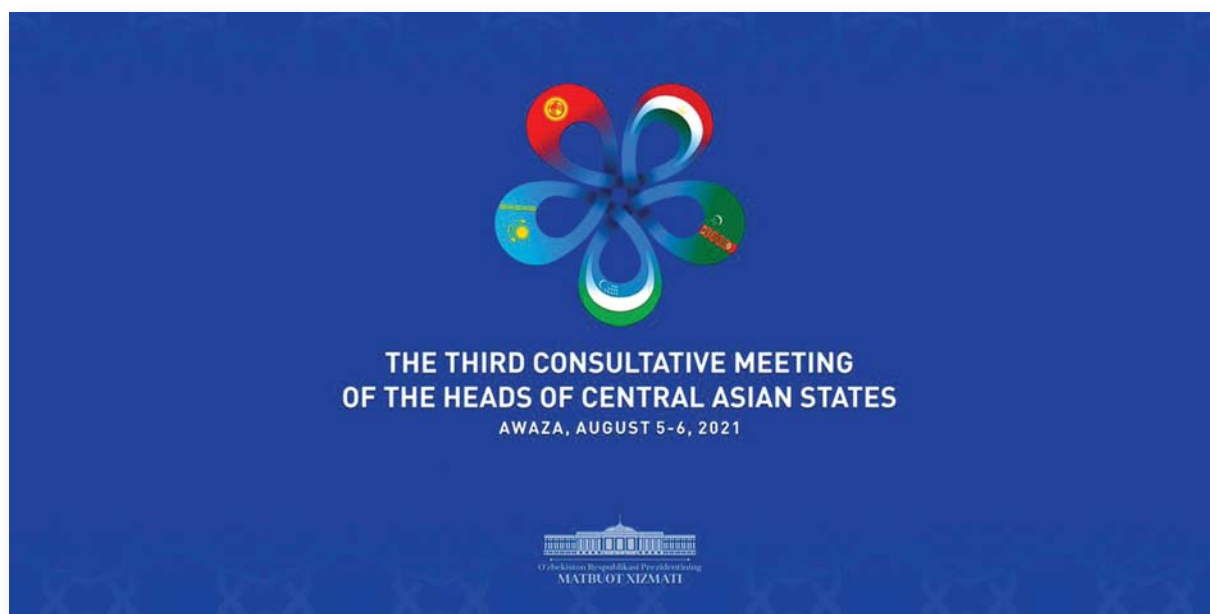
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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many former Soviet countries realized that complete separation would not be possible because of the deep intertwinement of their economies during the Soviet period. This was one of the reasons why the leaders of post-Soviet countries proposed to establish a regional organization to replace the Soviet Union. The first President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev, in November 1990, proposed to establish the “Confederative Union of Independent States.”¹ All Central Asian countries, and Belarus and Russia agreed to join this new Union. However, the idea of “Confederative Union of Independent States” fell through. In the first years of independence, integration projects under the names of “Central Asian Economic Community” and “Organization of Central Asian Cooperation” were initiated by Central Asian countries, too. These, however, were not proved to be realizable.

The integration process in Central Asia started after signing the “Common Economic Space Agreement” between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in 1994.² Tajikistan joined this treaty in 1998 after the civil war in this country ended. The “Central Asian Economic Community”³ was established in this year.⁴ In 2002, the “Central Asian Economic Community” was transformed into the “Organization of Central Asian Cooperation” (OCAC).⁵ The main focus of the OCAC was developing

economic, political, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation. Yet, the OCAC was also tasked with coordination of the joint action of its member states to maintain peace and stability in the region. In 2004, at the summit of the heads of states of the OCAC in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Russia joined the Organization. After that, Russia acquired a leading role as the main investment donor in Central Asia and the mediator in resolving conflicts among the member states. In 2005, at the Saint Petersburg Summit, it was decided to merge the OCAC with Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). This decision was made due to Uzbekistan’s joining to the EurAsEC, whereas other members of the OCAC had already been members of the EurAsEC. Officially, the two organizations merged to reduce financial costs as both organizations duplicated each other. After that, no independent, region-specific Central Asian multilateral organization was established until 2018.⁶

The integration process in the region included all the republics of Central Asia, except Turkmenistan, which declared itself as a neutral state and preferred to establish bilateral relations instead of multilateral ones. A new stage of Central Asian integration began in 2016 after Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in Uzbekistan. By the initiative of Mirziyoyev, consultative meetings of the heads of states of Central Asian countries began to be organized. Today, more than ten years after the abolition of the OCAC, a



new dynamic in regional integration is emerging in Central Asia. This article explores reasons that prevented the Central Asian states from effectively conducting multilateral format of cooperation in the region in the period of 1991 and 2005 and the reasons behind the changes in the integration process after 2016.

Central Asian Integration Process

Back in June 1990, the heads of the five Central Asian republics held their first meeting in Almaty (Kazakhstan) and adopted a plan to coordinate their actions in political, economic, and social spheres. In January 1993, Central Asian leaders met in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and adopted the “Tashkent Protocol” to create a common market between Central Asian states.⁷ Central Asian leaders also made commitments to strengthen economic cooperation and coordination of environmental policies, particularly in relation to the Aral Sea. As an outcome of the Tashkent Summit, an agreement on creating a regional newspaper with its headquarters in Almaty and a regional TV channel broadcasting from Tashkent was reached. However, the Tashkent Summit turned out to be rich in rhetoric but poor in practice. The civil war in Tajikistan and the neutrality of Turkmenistan made it difficult to implement the signed documents. Countries of the region developed economic cooperation to a certain extent, but the proposal of creating regional TV and newspaper were not effectuated due to the dispute on the working language of regional mass media. The agreement on the Aral Sea came up dry, too.

On 11 January 1994, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a protocol to establish “Common Economic Space” (CES). Kyrgyzstan joined in on 1 February. As a result, these three countries opened up their customs for free movement of goods, services, and capital between each other and agreed on coordinating budgetary, pricing, and custom, credit and tax policies. At the Almaty Summit on 8 July 1994, the heads of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan decided to create a political body called the “Interstate Council.” “Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs” and “Council of Ministers of Defense” were also created within the framework of the CES. A permanent working body was created with the name “Executive Committee of the Interstate Council” for coordinating CES functions. At the next summit in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) on 5 August 1994, “Central Asian Bank for Cooperation and Development” was founded by the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan with an initial capital of 9 million US Dollars.⁸ Superpower competition on Central Asia, leadership competition between Central Asian states, unsolved border issues, and water problems, however, halted the integration process.

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**Conflict of Interest:
The Beginning of the Great Game**

After 2001, Central Asia gained significance for the external players such as Russia, China, and the United States, because of Afghanistan’s proximity, and region’s strategic location and natural and other resources, that is, Kazakhstan’s and Turkmenistan’s large gas and oil reserves; Uzbekistan’s agricultural production, particularly cotton; and Kyrgyzstan’s and Tajikistan’s hydropower sources. Accordingly, Russia, China, and the United States developed regional integration perspectives in line with their geopolitical objectives.⁹

Currently, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Russia-led “Eurasian Economic Union” and Uzbekistan has an observer status. China is also one of the main economic partners and creditors of the Central Asian countries. Importantly, all Central Asian states are partners of China’s Belt and Road initiative, which is the main investor country in the region. For the US, Central Asia became more important following the declaration of ‘the war on terror’ as the region became a corridor to Afghanistan. In such a context, the US created the C5+1 (Central Asia and the US) platform for regional cooperation. Japan and South Korea also established some regional formats for cooperation.

Importantly, the aforementioned external actors desire integration by the Central Asian countries only under their supervision. An independent integration process led by the regional countries is not seen as a favorable prospect by these actors since they think that may result in the emergence of a single ‘Turkestan,’ which may be a challenge against their regional objectives.¹⁰

Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan: The Leadership Issue

In Central Asia, two countries - Kazakhstan with natural resources and a developed economy and Uzbekistan with more than 40% of the Central Asian population and the greatest military potential - race for



regional leadership. This results in a competition between these two countries.¹¹ Kazakhstan has the biggest area in a region bordering China and Russia. Uzbekistan is situated in the heart of Central Asia providing it with strategic significance and advantages. Kazakhstan with its ‘open-door’ foreign policy has developed the close economic and political ties with the West and China. Since its first years of independence, Kazakhstan has been an advocate of multilateral cooperation in the region. Uzbekistan, until 2016, was one of the ‘closed’ countries in the region with an authoritarian regime.

The frosty relations between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan began to thaw away after the election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the new president of Uzbekistan. The new President of Uzbekistan has chosen a policy of good neighborly relations and this helped the strengthening of Uzbekistan’s relations with the regional countries. In fact, it was with the initiative of Shavkat Mirziyoyev that the first consultative meeting of the heads of Central Asian states was organized.

**Water and Border problems:
A Way to Integration or a Cause of conflict?**

The Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers are the main water sources for all of Central Asia. Syr Darya originates

АЗИЯ МАМЛЕКЕТ
ЧЫЛАРЫНЫҢ
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Central Asia From Difficulties on the Way of Rapprochement to a New Way of Integration
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in Kyrgyzstan and Amu Darya in Tajikistan. Accordingly, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can regulate the flow of these rivers, which means that they can control the flow of water to the lower reaches, that is, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In fact, this is one of the reasons of the conflicts in the region.

The absence of consolidated interstate water distribution agreement covering the region has been one of the most acute problems since the collapse of the Soviet Union until today. At the same time, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, demarcation and delimitation of the state borders in Central Asia has become a major issue. The roots of this problem go a century back. In the middle of the 1920s, Moscow carried out an administrative-territorial reform in Central Asia dividing the region into five countries. Unfortunately, Moscow's reforms did not consider some important features of the Central Asian region such as the geographical distribution of ethnic groups. Accordingly, different ethnic groups remained within the borders of different states constituting minorities. Since in the period of the Soviet Union borders between Central Asian states was only a formality, these did not turn into important problems.¹²

After independence, however, disagreements and conflicts arose because of the absence of demarcation and

delimitation in some parts of the borders. Various solutions have been proposed to solve border disagreements such as territorial exchanges, however these proposals did not always result in solutions and conflicts continued. The latest armed clashes on Tajik-Kyrgyz border in April 2021 was bloody because of these unresolved conflicts. Fortunately, the presidents of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan publicly adhere to peaceful rhetoric and call for good neighborly relations. In any case, active multilateral dialogue and cooperation is still needed to solve the water and border problems.

Central Asian Five: A New Stage of Integration

A new stage of Central Asian integration began in 2016 after Shavkat Mirziyoyev's coming to power in Uzbekistan. Cooperation with all Central Asian countries has become a key priority of Tashkent's foreign policy. In this connection, dialogue with all states of the region was activated again by the initiative of Mirziyoyev. As a result, in March 2018, the first consultative meeting was held with the participation of the heads of all Central Asian states.¹³ This event was the first meeting of representatives of all Central Asian countries, which was not initiated by external players after the abolition of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization.

In the first consultative meeting, water and energy problems, security, cultural and humanitarian issues, and cooperation in trade, economy and transportation issues were discussed. The heads of the states noted that cooperation between the Central Asian countries was significantly strengthened over the past years and declared their agreement to hold consultative meetings annually.

The second consultative meeting of the Central Asian leaders was held on 29 November 2019 in Tashkent. At this summit, central Asian leaders stressed the importance of agreeing on a common vision of cooperation in the region. Likewise, the importance of economic and trade relations were highlighted. The president of Uzbekistan proposed establishing “Central Asian Investment Forum” with the headquarters in Tashkent and holding annual meetings of the heads of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The importance of security issues in the region, expansion of cooperation in the energy sector, as well as cultural, humanitarian, and tourism potential of Central Asia were especially emphasized during the meeting.¹⁴ Attention was also paid to the transit potential of Central Asia and the improvement of the transport system within the region. Accordingly, formation of the “Council for Transport Communications” was proposed. Significantly, Kazakhstan put forward the idea of concluding a “Treaty on Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the XXI Century,” which would reflect the basic principles of interaction between states of the region. Moreover, it was decided to hold regular meetings of foreign ministers in the form of political consultations and expert meetings annually.

The second consultative meeting showed that the Central Asian countries are ready to keep the course on building up regional cooperation. Now, more than ever, the question of the region’s future and the possible forms of interaction best suited for Central Asian integration has been raised to the top of the regional agenda.

It is also important that today there is a mutual interest and political will of the leaders to promote

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regional cooperation. It should be noted that Tashkent and Nur-Sultan are the driving forces of the development of multilateral cooperation in the region. The other three capitals are likely to follow the initiatives of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.¹⁵ The new open policy of Tashkent and the reforms of Mirziyoyev changed the ‘balance of power’ in the region and revived the integration processes since Uzbekistan is the only country that borders regional countries. In this context, the meetings can be considered as a great personal achievement of the new president of Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan, in turn, has always supported the idea of integration in the region. In fact, in recognition of the personal merits of Nazarbayev in promoting Central Asian integration, the first president of Kazakhstan was elected the honorary chairperson of the Tashkent consultative meeting.

The third consultative meeting of the heads of the states of Central Asian countries was held in Turkmenistan in August 2021 with the participation of the five Central Asian leaders. At this meeting, parties discussed the development of political, trade, economic, cultural, and humanitarian interactions in the regional level. A constructive exchange of views took place on issues of the threats to regional security and regional stability. Central Asian leaders agreed to strengthen foreign policy cooperation by holding regular five-sided meetings between the foreign ministries of the region’s countries. Particular attention was paid to create favorable conditions for partnership in the energy sector and expanding cooperation between the countries of the region in the transport and communication field, in particular, by maintaining the effective functioning of the existing transport corridors and establishing new ones. The leaders exchanged views on the development of trade relations and increasing the volume of export-import operations. Agreements were reached to increase the diversification of mutual trade and industrial cooperation between the regional states.

One of the important components of the third consultative meeting’s agenda was the consolidation of the efforts of the countries of the region to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. In the process of the third consultative meeting, new steps were taken to develop relations between Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, the two countries in the region with thorny relations, so far. Notably, at this meeting, in accordance with the decision taken by the presidents of the Central Asian countries, a Badge of Honor was awarded to the President of the Republic of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon for outstanding services in the development of friendship, good-neighborliness, mutual understanding, and cooperation between the Central Asian states, to strengthen peace and security in the region. As a symbolic gesture, the President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov

presented the Badge of Honor to his Tajik counterpart.¹⁶ After the meeting, relations Tajikistan and Turkmenistan began to show signs of rapid 'normalization.' In such a context, Turkmenistan opened up its territory for the transit to and from Tajikistan, which was closed few years ago.

Conclusion

Despite the existing intra-regional problems, the prospects of regional integration seems bright. In general, considering the region's current situation one may argue that this trend needs to be sustained for the following reasons.

Firstly, one of the most serious threats to the region's security is the spread of extremism and terrorism. Today, there is no common policy among the Central Asian countries to combat extremism and terrorism. Obviously, coordination of actions in combating terrorism and extremism is a major necessity for all the Central Asian countries.

Secondly, changes in the situation in Afghanistan and its potential impact on Central Asian states should be taken seriously. Today, there are diverse views on

recognizing the Taliban's government in Afghanistan. Tajikistan publicly declared that it will not recognize the Taliban government until all the Afghan population and minority groups, particularly the Tajiks, are represented in the government. Other Central Asian countries are trying to establish communication channels with the Taliban. A coordinated policy in this area is important to ensure the stability and security of the region.

Thirdly, the rational use of water resources and taking into account the concerns of all countries of the region will benefit of the entire region. At the same time, it will reduce not only tensions but also diminish the influence of foreign players.

Fourthly, demarcation and delimitation of the state borders has been a major challenge in the region for decades.¹⁷ Currently, the borders have mostly been demarcated, leaving areas that require far-sighted policies and respect for mutual interests.

In sum, there are still issues to be resolved. Central Asia has been transforming during the last decade. The leaders in the region have begun to understand the importance of the establishment of mechanisms for regional cooperation. Considering the current trends, the future of regional integration looks bright in Central Asia.

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