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Интеграционный процесс в центральной Азии как фактор обеспечения безопасности региона

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Аннотация. В данной статье исследуется процесс интеграции в Центральной Азии, а также взаимоотношения стран этого региона с мировыми державами. С обретением независимости Центральная Азия столкнулась с множеством межгосударственных проблем, актуализировавших вопросы региональной интеграции. В статье проведен анализ этапов интеграции, а также факторов, способствующих дезинтеграционным процессам. Обсуждаются также аспекты сотрудничества между странами региона в области водной дипломатии и приграничных отношений с целью укрепления границ с Афганистаном.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, региональная безопасность, региональная интеграция, конфликт, вызовы, угрозы

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Research article

The integration process in central Asia as a factor in ensuring the security of the region

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Abstract. This article examines the process of integration in Central Asia, as well as the relationship of the countries of this region with world powers. Since gaining independence, Central Asia has faced many interstate problems that have actualized issues of regional integration. The article analyzes the stages of integration, as well as the factors contributing to disintegration processes. The sides also discuss aspects of cooperation between the countries of the region in the field of water diplomacy and cross-border relations in order to strengthen borders with Afghanistan.

Keywords: Central Asia, regional security, regional integration, conflict, challenges, threats

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Introduction. At the end of the 20th century, the international order underwent significant metamorphoses. With the emergence of newly independent states in the post-Soviet space, the interests and views of key powers were transformed, and their strategies changed. Central Asia acquired exceptional importance for global players, finding itself in the center of attention of changing politics. In the wake of political independence of the countries of the region, new problems and challenges emerged: lack of experience in building statehood, unmarked borders, complex economic realities, the threat of terrorism and illegal drug trafficking. These factors became catalysts for the need for collective cooperation designed to resolve pressing issues that, without joint efforts, could threaten the stability and security of both the regions and the world as a whole.

Materials and research methods. In the face of growing global challenges such as terrorism, extremism and climate change, the countries of Central Asia face common threats that require coordinated efforts. The relevance of these issues determines the cooperation of the countries of the region in solving not only the internal problems of individual states, but also interstate ones, including a wide range of tasks facing them. The purpose of the work is to analyze the factors that actualize the need for close cooperation between the countries of Central Asia in order to eliminate risks that can destabilize the socio-political situation in the region. It is necessary to study the nature of these factors, which should contribute to the formation of effective mechanisms of interaction. An important element is the creation of joint initiatives aimed at developing infrastructure, exchanging information and jointly solving emerging problems. A key role in this process is played by interstate relations that promote dialogue and support projects aimed at stability in the region.

Research results and their discussion. The countries of the region, united by a thousand-year history, culture and religion, simultaneously strive to emphasize their uniqueness, distancing themselves from their neighbors against the background of differences in economic and political development. Nevertheless, each of them still retains the imprint of a single historical heritage. This is manifested in the commonality of hydropower, energy and transport systems, as well as in unresolved border disputes [1, p. 13].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the centralized system of economic organization was destroyed, many enterprises ceased to function, and the agricultural sector suffered enormous losses [2, p. 302]. Against the backdrop of these destructive results, regional cooperation in the security sphere began to experience many problems and encounter obstacles and difficulties. However, a weighty argument in favor of cooperation among the states of the region was the presence of common external threats and challenges, which, as practice has shown, no country can cope with alone, regardless of its power [3, p. 19].

It is obvious that current and potential sources of security threats to the region can be divided into external and internal [3, p. 19-20]. External threats include international terrorism, extremism, separatism, instability in Afghanistan, conflicts in the Middle East, international drug trafficking and arms smuggling. Internal factors include territorial disputes and border conflicts, political instability, transnational organized crime, as well as energy and water management issues, and environmental threats such as the drying up of the Aral Sea and climate change. Awareness of these interrelations emphasizes the need for joint efforts to ensure security and stability in the region.

Since gaining independence, the Central Asian countries have repeatedly sought integration in various spheres of life. The first steps in this direction were taken with the signing of the Treaty on the Establishment of a Single Economic Space between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1994. In 1998, Tajikistan joined the Treaty, which marked a new stage in the development of relations between the countries of the region, transforming the Treaty into the

Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC). The main goal of CAEC was the development of economic cooperation in the region. At the end of 2001, at the Tashkent summit, the presidents of the countries participating in the treaty, summing up the results of the integration processes, came to the conclusion that the economic basis cannot satisfy the goals of genuine cooperation, and decided to transform CAEC into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) [4, p. 229].

In the following years, integration initiatives continued to develop, demonstrating the desire of Central Asian countries not only to strengthen economic ties but also to increase their political stability. In the 2000s, new cooperation formats emerged, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union, which further contributed to strengthening mutual understanding and joint projects in this strategically important part of the world.

The key moment in the integration process was the creation of the Customs Union, which allowed countries to facilitate trade and jointly counter external economic challenges. This cooperation made it possible to significantly increase the volume of mutual trade and deepen production chains, as well as increase the competitiveness of goods in international markets.

With the beginning of the new 21st century, geopolitical processes in Central Asia began to acquire a complex form, which had a direct impact on regional integration. After the events of September 11, 2001 in New York, the United States began a military operation in Afghanistan, placing its military contingents at bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, which could not but cause wariness on the part of Russia. After these events, the regional integration process of the Central Asian countries plunged into a state of passivity. Russia's accession to the OCAC and the subsequent merger of this organization with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) marked a new stage in the geopolitical landscape. The merger of the two structures, along with Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the EurAsEC and Turkmenistan's choice of a politically neutral course, gave rise to disagreements in interstate relations. The current situation was further complicated by the influence of external powers and many other factors that hinder harmonious integration. Thus, the desire for unity and cooperation in this diverse region has been threatened, leaving its peoples waiting for change and solutions to pressing issues.

The integration process of the Central Asian countries was practically frozen for more than a decade, and from 2006 to 2016 they switched to bilateral formats. The reasons for this freezing were not only external geopolitical forces, but also internal problems, including the deterioration of interstate and interpersonal relations, sometimes caused by subjective factors. However, since 2016, there has been a gradual revival of integration initiatives in Central Asia. The countries of the region began to realize that cooperation in such a globalized environment can lead to significant benefits and strengthen political stability. To this end, steps were taken to restore mutual trust and establish dialogue between governments.

One example is the creation of joint economic projects that not only improve trade but also attract investment in infrastructure. Central Asian countries have begun to work together on security issues, which has become especially relevant in the context of external threats and instability. This assistance contributes to a deeper understanding of common challenges and opportunities, which strengthens interaction between states.

In addition, increased cultural and humanitarian exchanges ease historical tensions and enable nations to better understand each other. Events such as joint festivals, conferences, and youth exchanges play an important role in shaping a positive image of neighbors and creating a solid foundation for long-term cooperation.

In the international arena, Central Asia is also actively seeking to diversify its partners, which demonstrates a pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Establishing relations with both Eastern and Western countries opens up new opportunities for economic growth and political stability in the region, promoting more balanced and multi-vector development, which gives

reason to believe that, despite previous difficulties, Central Asia is gradually finding ways to integrate and self-regulate in the new geopolitical reality.

Thus, three stages can be distinguished in the integration processes in post-Soviet Central Asia:

1) The first stage covers the period from the collapse of the Soviet Union until 2006. The collapse of the USSR became a catalyst for many initiatives aimed at solving pressing economic and social problems. Each of the countries faced the consequences of the transition to a market economy, and the need for joint efforts became obvious. One of the most significant steps was the signing of Treaty on the Formation of the Common Economic Space (CAEC, since 2002 – OCAC), within the framework of which the countries of the region sought not only to improve trade relations, but also to harmonize their legislation, investment climate and infrastructure. This cooperation implied deeper integration, contributing to the improvement of the region's competitiveness in the international arena. The signing of the Treaty on the Formation of the OCAC in 2002 symbolized the beginning of a new stage in economic relations between the states. Despite various difficulties, including political disagreements and economic challenges, the desire to combine instruments and resources contributed to the creation of a more stable basis for further interaction. This period laid the foundational principles that later became the basis for deeper integration processes in the region;

2) The second stage of integration processes covers the period from 2006 to 2016. During this period, internal and external challenges increased significantly, which negatively affected the stability and reliability of cooperation between the Central Asian states. Conflicts related to the distribution of water resources, especially between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, escalated, leading to economic and political friction. Tensions also arose due to competition for control over energy routes, which created additional barriers to constructive dialogue. In addition, the activation of external players such as China and the United States introduced new elements into the complex geopolitical situation. The formation of new economic initiatives, such as the Belt and Road, forced the countries of the region to rethink their strategic interests and seek ways to get closer to powerful neighbors. This created the necessary preconditions for cooperation, but also intensified regional disagreements. Despite the integration efforts, interstate relations in Central Asia remained under pressure from old problems and new challenges, requiring a comprehensive approach to achieve agreement and sustainable development in the future. In particular, against this background, the merger of the OCAC with the Eurasian Economic Community gave impetus to the activation of Russian policy in the post-Soviet space and determined the course for the further strengthening of the Eurasian Economic Community and the CSTO;

3) The third stage begins in 2016 and continues to the present. It is characterized by the resumption of the active phase of the integration process, which coincided with the coming to power of Sh. Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan. One of the key areas of his foreign policy has become the development of friendly relations with neighboring Central Asian states. Since 2018, Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State have been organized to deepen interaction, where the most important issues of international politics, economics, security and culture are put on the agenda. In September 2023, another meeting was held in Dushanbe, at which issues of sustainable economic development and strengthening good-neighborly relations were discussed [5]. The return to active cooperation in Central Asia has become a significant step towards the creation of a single economic and cultural space in the region. Particular attention is paid to joint projects in the fields of infrastructure, energy and trade. It is noteworthy that each of these events becomes a platform for discussing not only current problems, but also a strategic vision of the future. An important aspect of integration is also cooperation in the field of security, especially in the context of combating terrorism and drug trafficking. The participants in the meetings emphasize the need for joint efforts to ensure stability and peace, which is the key to the successful development of all countries in the region. These efforts culminated in the signing of a number of agreements aimed at deepening mutually beneficial partnership. The governments of the countries are actively working to create a favorable investment environment, which attracts foreign investment and

stimulates economic growth. Thus, the third stage of the integration process in Central Asia, which began in 2016, demonstrates the countries' strong commitment to cooperation and mutual assistance, which contributes not only to the economic but also to the cultural prosperity of the entire region.

The revival of new active relations between the Central Asian countries raises hopes for a quick solution to the challenges and threats facing the region, especially after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan (*author* - a banned movement in Russia). As a result of this event, some problems and concerns about possible consequences for Central Asia have arisen. First of all, the region is faced with an influx of refugees from Afghanistan, which can worsen the already difficult economic and social situation in the Central Asian countries. Illegal acts in Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey confirm the activation of terrorist cells. In light of recent events, it is becoming especially important for the Central Asian countries to strengthen security cooperation and move towards integration in order to effectively prevent future threats to the stability of the region. In addition, there is a threat of the spread of extremist ideologies in the region. For example, the Taliban has links with extremist groups such as the Islamic State, which can use Afghanistan as a springboard for its operations in Central Asia. The question of the security of the borders of Central Asia also arises: weakening of controls can lead to the flow of weapons, drugs and other illegal goods through the region. In response to these challenges, some states, such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have begun to strengthen border security and conduct joint exercises (Commonwealth-2022). However, the global implications of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan for Central Asia remain to be seen, and much will depend on the international community's further actions towards this movement, as well as the reaction of the countries in the region.

Of undeniable importance for the region is the Aral Sea problem, which is a serious ecological disaster in Central Asia. The Aral Sea used to be the fourth largest inland water body in the world, but due to improper water management and the construction of irrigation systems that feed its rivers, the water level has dropped catastrophically. This has led to devastating consequences for the region's ecosystem: a reduction in biodiversity, the disappearance of various fish species, and the contamination of water and soil with toxic substances that threaten the health and livelihoods of local populations.

International organizations, in cooperation with the Central Asian states, are taking steps to address the Aral Sea problem by implementing projects to restore the ecosystem, improve water management, and reduce pollution. However, an effective solution to this problem requires concerted action and long-term efforts from all stakeholders. The start of construction of the Kush-Tepa Canal in northern Afghanistan in March 2022 has given new impetus to the discussion of the growing water shortage in Central Asia [6, p. 112]. In the context of the crisis in the Aral Sea region, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), established in 1993, has become an important mechanism for dialogue and cooperation in solving acute environmental and socio-economic problems of the region [7].

One of the key aspects of solving the Aral Sea problem is the need to optimize the distribution of water resources between the countries of the region. In conditions where each country seeks to meet its own needs, conflicts over water become inevitable. Effective cooperation and joint water management can help avoid such conflicts and promote sustainable development. It is necessary to establish common standards and rules for water use, which requires political will and multilateral negotiations.

In addition, ecosystem restoration requires a comprehensive approach that includes both conservation measures and economic initiatives. Supporting local communities in the transition to sustainable agricultural practices and alternative sources of income can reduce dependence on water resources. Education and awareness programs on the importance of ecology should be an integral part of development strategies.

Only through joint efforts can we achieve positive results in restoring the Aral Sea and improving the lives of the region's population. It is important that all countries involved in this problem act not only in their own interests, but also take into account the common goals of sustainable development and environmental protection [8].

Conclusion. Thus, in the context of a growing security threat, the Central Asian countries are forced to reconsider their approaches to cooperation and integration. One of the key aspects of this process is the creation of a multi-level security system that would ensure not only border protection, but also the prompt exchange of important information between states. The establishment of joint anti-terrorist structures, as well as regular exercises and exchange of combat experience can significantly increase the combat capability of regional forces.

In addition, an important step in the integration process is the development of economic cooperation, which will help create sustainable ties between countries. Effective trade relations, the creation of joint ventures and infrastructure projects will allow countries to take advantage of their competitive advantages and improve the overall standard of living of the population. Economic integration will also help strengthen political stability and reduce social tensions in the region.

An important place in this process should be occupied by cultural ties between the countries of the region, which help to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding. Support for educational programs and projects in the field of cultural heritage can become the basis for the formation of common values, which in turn will contribute to the successful integration and strengthening of the positions of the Central Asian states in the international arena.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that several key aspects are important for the formation of the integration system of the region. Firstly, it is necessary to demonstrate political will that will facilitate the implementation of integration initiatives. Secondly, the creation of a single economic and information space that will serve as a reliable basis for productive cooperation is of paramount importance. Thirdly, special attention should be paid to the good-neighborly policy of the countries of the region, because it forms a solid foundation for further progress in the field of integration. These elements create a harmonious system filled with mutual trust and aspiration for common progress. Integration is becoming not just a strategic choice, but also a natural process, a response to the challenges of the time, which requires cohesion and cooperation, ensuring sustainable development and prosperity for all countries of the region. True integration is the path to unity, which leads to the enrichment of not only economic ties, but also cultural interactions, strengthening friendly ties between peoples.

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