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## New Dynamics of Regionalization in Central Asia

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### Abstract:

This article analyzes the processes of regional cooperation in Central Asia from the perspective of economic development, regional security and cultural exchange, threats to sovereignty, development imbalances and geopolitical dynamics. The article pays special attention to the “Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia” and “Central Asia Plus” formats, and presents general conclusions and practical proposals.

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## INTRODUCTION

Issues of regional partnership have always been a priority in the agenda of Central Asian countries. The region is located at the intersection of the interests of major geopolitical actors, and its stable development, the dynamics of socio-political processes, and the changing internal and external conjuncture are determined by these factors. In such conditions, issues of regional cooperation development require a careful approach.

Active demographic growth is observed in Central Asia today. According to sources, the population of Central Asia is currently 77.5 million people. [1] According to UN projections, the region's population may reach 94.2 million by 2050. [2]

The above figures indicate that Central Asia is becoming a macro-region. This trend puts before the countries of the region the need to solve new complex socio-economic issues and encourages more cooperation and close cooperation for a mutually stable and conflict-free development.

## DISCUSSION

It should be noted that today in Central Asia, issues of regional cooperation are developing at two

levels, that is, in the form of dialogues with the states within the region and major power centers around it.

In fact, regional dialogue in Central Asia is not an issue on the agenda today. In 1994-2004, it operated in the formats called "Central Asian Economic Community" and "Central Asian Cooperation Organization".

However, due to the informal competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for "leadership" in regional issues, and differences in the level of socio-economic development, integration processes began to lose their inertia in a certain sense. As a result of joining the Eurasian Economic Community in 2004, Central Asia lost its character as an integration core. It took 13 years to revive these processes, and in 2017, with the active efforts of the leadership of Uzbekistan, a new format "Consultative Meetings of the Leaders of Central Asian Countries" was created.

Consultative meetings were held at a high level in all capitals of Central Asia, including March 2018 in Astana, November 2019 in Tashkent, August 2021 in Ashgabat, August 2022 in Bishkek, and August 2023 in Dushanbe. It can be said that one cycle has been completed in this regard.

The result of the regional dialogues was the increase in the level of mutual trust in high political circles, the positive indicators of trade and economic relations, especially in the border regions of Uzbekistan, when the environment of mutual understanding was formed and acquired a stable character.

If we turn to statistics, it can be seen that the volume of trade between Central Asian countries has increased several times. In recent years, the gross domestic product of the countries of the region has increased by 40 percent. For example, the turnover increased more than 2.5 times. The volume of mutual investments increased almost 6 times, and the flow of foreign direct investments increased by 45%. In addition, domestic regional tourism indicators have doubled. [3]

However, the processes also stand the test of time.

First, due to the border dispute between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan's eternal neutral position, there is a certain decline in regionalization processes in Central Asia.

Secondly, efforts to strengthen the institutional basis of regional cooperation are under pressure from geopolitical actors, as a result of which the format of cooperation remains unchanged.

Thirdly, the fact that there is no agreement on the recognition of the "Taliban" movement in neighboring Afghanistan by the international community, the turbulent situation remains, moreover, the addition of Afghanistan, which does not have legal obligations to the process of intensive water use, has a negative impact on the dynamics of regionalization.

Despite this, Uzbekistan is making steady progress towards constructive, mutually beneficial cooperation with all the countries of Central Asia. This is evidenced by the fact that the consultative meetings of the heads of state on issues on the regional agenda are becoming regular.

At this point, it is worth noting that the consultative meetings are not acceptable to all the powerful countries that are observing this process. Today, instead of active integration of Central Asia, there are power centers that want its division. The region is situated in such a way that external pressure is a natural process. The main thing is to be steady and persistent in creating an environment of solidarity, public diplomacy, and mutual economic interest aimed at preventing the intensification of competition between the power centers with their own interests in the region, and the involvement of Central Asian

states in this process.

The most important topic on the agenda of regional cooperation remains the issue of security. The first source in this regard is the fact that the issue of peace and stability in neighboring Afghanistan has not yet been resolved, and the second is the persistence of points of instability observed in the regions adjacent to Central Asia. Central Asian countries face common security challenges, including terrorism, drug trafficking, and border disputes.

The format of regional cooperation can facilitate the solution of these problems by implementing coordinated measures in terms of joint military exercises, information exchange and border control. This, of course, can ultimately serve to strengthen regional security and stability.

## RESULTS

Central Asian countries recognize the importance of economic cooperation for their development. Efforts within the framework of international structures such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road initiative seem attractive as they aim to expand trade, investment and infrastructure ties between countries. This can lead to increased economic growth, job creation and improved living standards.

The integration model based on the principle of language and cultural compatibility unites the countries of Central Asia as well as Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Hungary in the form of the Organization of Turkic States. These processes create opportunities for cultural exchange and people-to-people interactions, promote mutual understanding, tolerance and appreciation of different cultures, and foster a sense of regional identity and unity.

At this point, one should not forget the concerns of sovereignty. Some Central Asian countries may be concerned about losing their sovereignty or becoming too dependent on major regional powers. The integration initiatives carried out by countries such as Russia, China or Turkey also raise questions about the level of influence and control they have over the region's economy and politics.

Located among Russia, China, India and Iran, the region is the most sensitive part of geopolitical balance of the Eurasian continent. The disturbance of this balance may provoke strategic threats of various kinds. For example, the potential threats within the region: extremism, separatism, nationalism, parochialism, drug traffic, and other kinds of threats could constitute a source of threat for Europe's security as well. That includes the situation in Afghanistan, which is integral part of regional security of Central Asia [4].

Central Asia's strategic location, wealth of natural resources, and the fact that it serves as a transit center between Europe and Asia are factors that increase its importance for global powers. In the conditions of today's geopolitical turbulence, the interest of the major power centers in the Central Asian region has increased significantly, and the "Central Asia Plus" format is gaining importance in this regard. This is confirmed by the activation of more than 10 cooperation dialogues with the United States, South Korea, Japan, India, China, Russia, the European Union, the Cooperation Council of Arab States in the Persian Gulf and other countries in this format.

While this dialogue format was previously at the level of foreign ministers, it can be observed that in 2022-2023, it has risen to the level of heads of state with the European Union, China, and the United States.

All these dialogue formats were previously at the level of foreign ministers, but in 2022-2023, it can be observed that they have risen to the level of heads of state with the European Union, China, and the United States.

This may mean that the great states seeking their interests in Central Asia have chosen the path of dialogue, and that constructive approaches to the "targeted" solution of mutually beneficial cooperation issues in the region are coming to the fore.

In addition, it is gratifying that in the formation of the agenda of cooperation in Central Asia, the power centers are turning more and more to the issues of socio-economic development of the countries of the region.

On the other hand, the Central Asian countries are also interested in constructive dialogue with the world's leading actors on equal terms. The reason is that the multilateral dialogue platform serves to ensure the balance of geopolitical forces, preventing clashes of conflicting interests in the region.

It is important that the countries of the region develop common approaches to joint action, otherwise such communication formats may not go beyond the simple exchange of information.

Taking this into account, it can be noted that within the framework of these dialogues, Uzbekistan is trying to further coordinate efforts and strengthen practical cooperation with all neighboring countries. For this purpose, it is putting forward a number of proposals and initiatives for development based on the long-term agenda, prospective plans and tasks of regional partnership in trade, investment, transport and humanitarian spheres.

In general, the complex geopolitical competitive environment prevailing in the world and around Central Asia increases the need to develop closer cooperation mechanisms. The integration processes in Central Asia remain under geopolitical influence as external powers such as the USA and the European Union, Russia, China and Turkey seek to exert their influence in the region. [5]

## CONCLUSION

Today, it is desirable to maintain the format of regular consultative meetings. Its further institutionalization and organizational transformation can lead to the interference of external actors, as well as the failure of aspirations for regional integration. Taking into account this situation, it is important to increase the frequency of consultation meetings at the level of various institutions in order to ensure regional unity, and to maintain the priority of principles of mutual interest and consensus in any issue.

Since the level of economic development, infrastructure and human capital of Central Asian countries are different, it is necessary to develop an inclusive development model in order not to create more economic inequalities in the region. On the one hand, through this, integration efforts serve to eliminate these disparities, and on the other hand, they can open new perspectives for strengthening and expanding multi-sectoral cooperation.

In the future, in order to further encourage the ideas of solidarity and cultural commonality, which will allow the creation of a "good neighborly space" among the peoples of the region, it is possible to develop strategic programs for the formation of the conceptual basis of the regional identity in Central Asia and its implementation.

In conclusion, while regional cooperation processes in Central Asia have potential benefits for economic development, regional security, and cultural exchange, they also raise concerns about

sovereignty, developmental imbalances, and geopolitical dynamics.

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