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**Two Years of Taliban Rule:  
Key Outcomes**

**U.S. Counterinsurgency Efforts  
against the "Taliban" in Afghanistan:  
Political Analysis and Assessment**

**Central Asia in the Foreign Policy  
Strategy of India**

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**Fostering Resilience in Central Asia:  
the Role of the European Union**

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# TWO YEARS OF TALIBAN RULE: KEY OUTCOMES

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**Abstract.** The article attempts to showcase the transformation of the Taliban based on a comparative analysis of the movement's characteristics development when the Taliban first came to power in 1996 and when they regained control in 2021. A detailed examination of the normative and legal foundations of the movement, its economic policies, and methods of foreign policy reveals and helps to better understand the nature of the Taliban movement's authority. The author addresses questions about why, despite the efforts of almost the entire global community, radical forces returned to power and what prospects modern Afghanistan, as a whole, and the Taliban movement, in particular, hold.

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, Taliban, Central Asia, security, Islamic State of Khorasan, terrorist organizations, humanitarian aid.*

## «ТАЛИБАН» БИЛІГІНІҢ ЕКІ ЖЫЛЫ: НЕГІЗГІ НӘТИЖЕЛЕР

**Еркін Тұқымов**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада «Талибан» қозғалысының 1996 жылы билікке алғаш келуі мен 2021 жылы Кабулды басып алғаннан кейінгі ерекшеліктеріне салыстырмалы талдау негізінде талдау жасалған. «Талибан» қозғалысының табиғатын жақсырақ түсінуге мүмкіндік беретін қазіргі Ауғанстан үкіметінің «Талибан» идеологиясының, экономикалық саясаты мен дипломатиясының құқықтық және реттеуші аспектілеріне шолу ұсынылады. Халықаралық қауымдастықтың күш-жігеріне қарамастан, радикалдық күштердің елді тез арада бақылауға алуының себептері ашылып, «Талибан» мен жалпы Ауғанстанның даму перспективалары да көрсетілген.

**Түйін сөздер:** *Ауғанстан, «Талибан», Орталық Азия, қауіпсіздік, Хорасан Ислам мемлекеті, лаңкестік ұйымдар, гуманитарлық көмек.*

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## ДВА ГОДА ПРАВЛЕНИЯ «ТАЛИБАНА»: ОСНОВНЫЕ ИТОГИ

Еркин Тукумов

**Аннотация.** В статье анализируется процесс трансформации движения «Талибан» на основе сравнительного анализа характеристик группировки во время ее первого прихода к власти в 1996 году и после захвата Кабула в 2021 году. Предлагается обзор нормативно-правовых аспектов идеологии талибов, эконо-мической политики и дипломатии современного афганского правительства, что позволяет лучше понять природу движения «Талибан». Выявляются причины, почему, несмотря на усилия международного сообщества, радикальные силы чрезвычайно быстро вернули себе контроль над страной, а также обозначаются перспективы развития движения «Талибан» и Афганистана в целом.

**Ключевые слова:** Афганистан, талибы, Центральная Азия, безопасность, Исламское государство Хорасан, террористические организации, гуманитарная помощь.

### Introduction

Against the backdrop of the armed conflict in Ukraine, the situation in Afghanistan does not attract the same level of attention from the global community as it did two years ago. On August 15, 2021, Afghanistan definitively came under the control of the Taliban movement. This was preceded by negotiations between talibs and the then-government of Ashraf Ghani and the United States, with Qatar's mediation.

However, the situation in Afghanistan continues to be closely monitored by neighboring countries, including those in Central Asia. Even though Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan, the situation in Afghanistan holds significant importance for its national security and interests. The primary concerns, in our view, are not only terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. While all these issues undoubtedly exist and

pose a considerable negative potential for Central Asia, the countries in the region are also highly concerned about the transit of goods and raw materials to South Asian countries, namely Pakistan with its population of 230 million and India with its 1.5 billion inhabitants.

For Kazakhstan, the transit of goods and raw materials through Afghanistan represents the most direct route to South Asia and the Indian Ocean ports, which holds immense economic and political significance today. Efforts in this direction have been ongoing for some time, initiated under the previous leadership and continued under the Taliban. For example, Uzbekistan, in collaboration with Kazakhstan and other interested parties, plans to implement the Trans-Afghan project. According to the Uzbek Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies (ISRS), "the construction of the railway will cost \$4.6 billion and take 5 years. Freight delivery

between Uzbekistan and Pakistan will take 3-5 days and cost 30-40% less than the current rates.” [1]

The benefits of cooperation are evident for Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, and the Taliban themselves. However, the prospects and stability of the new government in Afghanistan and the guarantees of security from the Taliban to potential investments made from the countries in the region are not entirely clear.

In this context, several pertinent questions arise concerning the assessment of risks and opportunities for the new Taliban government. Key questions, in my opinion, include: how effective and sustainable can the Taliban become as a provider of Afghanistan's national security? Will they be able to achieve at least partial international recognition and unite the country? How quickly can they grow into capable state managers in the complex task of governing a nation?

### **Methodology**

The research employs the method of discourse analysis of expert community assessments, content analysis of statements, public speeches, and press conferences of official representatives of the Taliban movement and other international parties.

In the study, comparative analysis and the historical method are used to demonstrate the distinctive and similar features of the Taliban in different years - during their first rise to power in 1996 and their second rise to power in 2021.

In addition to these methods, the article utilizes the analysis of official documents - reports and conclusions of international organizations, in particular, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to resolution

2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban movement.

### **Discussion**

There are different assessments of the prospects and possibilities of the Taliban movement. Some experts believe that, under certain conditions, the Taliban could become a provider of Afghanistan's national security, considering, of course, the Taliban's vision of public policy and its resources in ensuring Afghanistan's security. This point of view partly explains why the USA and their allies engaged in negotiations with the Taliban and left the country, despite the Afghan government's official arguments to stay and prevent the destruction of the progress made through joint efforts.

A lot was at stake. Over 20 years, the USA and their allies invested a vast amount of financial, military, and intellectual resources to build a new, "democratic" Afghanistan, where an inclusive government involving Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and other minorities would jointly govern the country, sharing common values. Training government officials, the army, and intelligence services through Western organizations was supposed to contribute to building sustainable and effective institutions capable of functioning without external influence. According to research conducted by Brown University, "the war in Afghanistan cost the USA over \$2.3 trillion, or \$300 million per day for 20 years.[2] In the country, an entire generation of Afghans grew up without experiencing Taliban rule, raised in conditions of relative freedom and human rights, although not without challenges.

However, the Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani did not merely succumb to the pressure of the Taliban; it fell rapidly, and the Afghan army hastily surrendered

to the banners of their former adversaries. The project of Afghan statehood, modeled on Western society with its elections and inclusiveness, essentially failed. The external consensus, primarily among the Western coalition, about the futility of staying in Afghanistan, led to the country's swift takeover in just two weeks, whereas during the first period, it took two years for the Taliban to achieve the same.

Afghanistan has entered a new stage of his contemporary history, which is undoubtedly comparable in some aspects to the first stage of the Taliban's rise to power in the country during the period of 1995-2001. However, there are also differences, which may not be significant at the moment but could potentially become stable trends. A comparative analysis will help us better understand the nature of Taliban's authority, answer questions about why, despite the efforts of almost the entire global community, radical forces returned to power, and what the prospects are for Afghanistan as a whole and the Taliban movement in particular.

To start with, during the negotiations with the previous government and the USA, the Taliban made several prominent promises that ultimately were not fulfilled. These promises mainly concerned the formation of an inclusive government, ensuring security within the country, respecting human rights, and women's rights, particularly girls' education and women's employment. None of these commitments were honored, and this laid the foundation for the current strategic problems in the country. First of all, this led to the complete non-recognition of the Taliban government by the UN and the entire global community, even including Pakistan, where the movement

was organized in 1994. Currently, there is active monitoring of the Taliban's activities to assess their compliance with the agreements. Whether the Taliban will evolve is a difficult and complex question, but it will ultimately determine not only the country's internal development and international community's support but also the survival and international recognition of the Taliban.

So far, there have been no indications of such intentions, which is one of the main outcomes of the Taliban's two-year rule. The Taliban did not feel compelled to uphold the promises of the Doha Agreement from February 2020. On one hand, these promises were seen as purely tactical maneuvers, permitted within the context of Islam. It is said in a Hadith of the Prophet, "War is deception." On the other hand, there were no significant consequences for the Taliban themselves in case of breaching the agreements. The USA and its allies are unlikely to engage in war with the Taliban, at least in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the lack of a unified response from the international community to the violations indicated different interests among the countries regarding the Taliban's rise to power. Despite a consensus regarding the recognition of the Taliban as an official government, there are differing views on acknowledging the movement as a terrorist organization.

Regarding the perception of Taliban in Central Asian region, while in the years 1996-2001 and earlier, all the capitals of Central Asia unanimously supported the Northern Alliance in its opposition to the Taliban, today, Central Asian countries, except Tajikistan, which has a particular position, have shifted to more pragmatic approaches. These countries do not officially recognize the Taliban as

the legitimate government but continue to engage with it on certain issues of mutual interest, such as the Trans-Afghan corridor, food supplies, humanitarian aid, terrorist organizations originating from Central Asia but present in Afghanistan, water issues, and more. For instance, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have begun the final stage of negotiations on the construction of the Trans-Afghan railway line, estimated to cost between 4.6 billion to 8.2 billion dollars, with a planned completion date of 2027. Expeditions have already commenced in Afghanistan to determine the route of the railway and conduct a feasibility study of the project.[3] In general, the list of issues is quite extensive, and their ongoing resolution cannot solely rely on official recognition.

### **"Taliban 1996" and "Taliban 2021"**

In the third edition of his seminal work "Taliban," Ahmed Rashid compares the Taliban of 1996 and 2021 and comes to the conclusion that "these are different Taliban in terms of generation and mentality. The first Taliban resisted any form of modernization, hanging computers and televisions on trees. They were united in their goal to rid the country of anything foreign, including those providing humanitarian aid. However, the 2021 Taliban are different in terms of education, experience, and rituals. Those who were in exile in Pakistan are better educated and politically astute, while their peers who stayed in Afghanistan for the war are uncompromising. Even more radical are those Taliban who were released from Guantanamo and Afghanistan's prisons, who will be unforgiving towards those who enjoyed life in Qatar and Pakistan while being part of the Taliban all this time." [4]

Other researchers are less categorical about the evolution of the Taliban, believing that there have been no fundamental changes in their ideological perception of the world. For example, Sayed Madadi, a former high-ranking official in Ashraf Ghani's government, concludes in his article "The dangers of empowering the Taliban" that during the war with Western forces, the Taliban "learned diplomacy and negotiation tactics, but their medieval thinking remained just as rigid." [5]

However, even though there may not be noticeable changes in their ideological foundation, there are political differences. One significant difference between the post-August 2021 military-political situation and the first Taliban takeover is that in Afghanistan today, despite remaining pockets of resistance, major ethnic communities like Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks are not providing unified and individual armed resistance to the Taliban, despite their absence in the new government. This is in stark contrast to the situation in 1996-2001 when the country was effectively divided into zones of influence between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance (officially known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan), which had a force of up to 60,000 people and controlled 10 north-central provinces of the country. The Northern Alliance primarily consisted of Tajiks and Uzbeks, opposing the Taliban, which was predominantly composed of Pashtuns. Thus, the conflict back then was mainly of an ethnic nature.

In this sense, it is suggested that the majority of Afghanistan's population, exhausted by 45 years of war since 1978, perceived the new takeover by an ambiguous organization like the Taliban as something inevitable but at the same

time understandable and acceptable, especially in contrast to idealistic Western values that seemed foreign and ineffective in the deeply traditional Afghan society. Most Afghans, regardless of their ethnic background, embraced the Taliban's rule with the expectation of a safer life and understandable rules in an Islamic society, albeit in a more "rigid packaging."

From the other side, while the Taliban offers a platform for an "ideal" Islamic state based on the traditions and norms of pure Islam, the ideas of Deobandism are not embraced by all Afghans, especially non-Pashtun ethnicities. This could potentially lead to ethnic divisions similar to the period of the first Taliban rule. Experts believe that behind the facade of the "peaceful" Talibanization of Afghanistan, there may be agreements among external powers, primarily Pakistan, which is described as the "main orchestrator of the situation in Afghanistan." [6]

However, as demonstrated by rich global experience, very often, "children" stop listening to their "parents" and may challenge them, showing their independence. The fact that the Taliban has significantly strengthened and gained considerable military-political experience over almost 30 years of its existence forces Pakistan to listen to their opinions. The current situation in Afghanistan can be described as a strategic consensus of interests among different players, including, first and foremost, the Taliban. It is noteworthy that Islamabad has also not recognized the Taliban government, despite being one of the three countries that recognized their first takeover.

A much more significant challenge for the Taliban today is the internal situation, specifically their ability to govern the country without experience in state

administration. For example, shortly after coming to power, a serious political scandal erupted in Kabul, where sons and relatives of high-ranking Taliban members started occupying top positions in the central government and ministries, replacing more competent candidates. The scandal escalated to the point that the head of the Taliban, the Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, had to intervene and issue a directive prohibiting all relatives of high-ranking Taliban members from holding any official positions. The logic behind this decision is pure pragmatism: it is one thing to fight against Western forces when the Taliban had all the necessary experience and combat abilities, but it is another to govern a state where they currently lack sufficient qualifications. The Taliban's governance also requires skilled administrators, and the leader of the Taliban seems to understand the weak points of the new government, although it does not necessarily mean that he intends to rectify them.

One of the fault lines that could cause a major rift and become a factor in a new civil war is the growing disagreements within the Taliban itself. According to an analytical report by the UN Security Council, "disagreements exist between the 'pragmatists,' who want to demonstrate greater interaction with the international community, and the arch-conservatives who adhere to Deobandi theological beliefs that are incompatible with certain values and policies of the international community. While the Taliban remains a cohesive and united organization, the presence of internal disagreements has created conditions for weakening the de facto regime governing the country." [7] The report's writers believe that internal rifts within the Taliban's leadership could

eventually lead to the breakdown of unity, providing grounds for the resurgence of a civil war in Afghanistan.

Equally critical for the Taliban government and the broader geopolitical environment of Afghanistan is the country's return to being one of the most reliable havens for the international terrorists.

Despite their commitments to fight terrorism, the Taliban has in practice facilitated even greater freedom of action for various terrorist organizations, of which there are approximately 20 in the country according to the UN. Some of the most well-known and significant among them are: "Al-Qaeda" (around 400 militants), IS-K (from 4,000 to 6,000 militants, including family members), "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan" (from 4,000 to 6,000 militants), "East Turkestan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party" (between 300 and 1,200 militants), "Jamaat Ansarullah" (from 100 to 250 militants), "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan" (from 150 to 550 militants), "Hatiaba Imam al-Bukhari" (80-100 militants), "Islamic Jihad Group" (200-250 militants), "Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan" (around 140 militants).[7]

The majority of these terrorist organizations support the Taliban and share their ideological beliefs. However, there are also those that challenge the Taliban, such as the National Resistance Front, the Afghanistan Liberation Front, and others. Among them, the most serious opponent of the Taliban is the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K), which was established as an ISIL affiliate back in January 2015. "IS-K is responsible for almost 50% of all civilian killings in Afghanistan recently, primarily in Shiite areas." [8].

### **Humanitarian Catastrophe Threat**

Long-term negative trends affecting the economic situation in Afghanistan include permanent political instability, high investment risks, practically non-existent infrastructure, low quality of human capital, climate change leading to reduced arable land, increased drought, and climate migrants. The arrival of the Taliban has added to this the sharp reduction in foreign financial aid and restrictions imposed by the Taliban on their own citizens. For instance, after August 2021, "the proportion of working women in the country's economy decreased to 15%, and the Afghan economy itself contracted by 30-40%." [8]

According to the World Bank, Afghanistan's economy was valued at \$20 billion in 2020, the last year before the Taliban's rule. International assistance in the form of grants financed around 75% of the country's government expenditures.[9]

In this regard, the conflict in Ukraine, though not acknowledged by anyone, undoubtedly distracts the attention of the world's most developed countries and the largest donors of international aid from the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the global increase in the price of wheat and energy resources inevitably affects the cost of humanitarian aid to Afghans and the internal prices within Afghanistan.

The food security situation has significantly worsened since the Taliban came to power in August 2021. While the situation with food was somewhat managed through international food aid programs during the presidencies of Hamid Karzai (2004-2014) and Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021), providing external assistance became considerably more

complicated with the arrival of the Taliban due to their human rights suppression policy and their internationally unrecognized status. Consequently, the international community froze Afghanistan's billions of assets due to fears of them falling into the hands of the Taliban.

Difficulties with providing humanitarian aid from the international community does not mean it has ceased completely. In January 2022, the United Nations requested €4.4 billion in humanitarian aid to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan. The USA has already pledged \$300 million within this initiative.[10] Kazakhstan also provided 5,000 tons of wheat flour as humanitarian aid last year. Numerous other countries have also provided or are ready to provide humanitarian assistance.

However, the problem lies not only in the clearly insufficient scale of aid from the international community but also in the distribution of this aid within Afghanistan. Even before the Taliban, the distribution of humanitarian aid was subject to significant criticism, accused of corruption and lack of transparency. The withdrawal of almost all international forces from Afghanistan in 2021 neutralized all control systems for the distribution of humanitarian aid.

As a result, according to international assessments, Afghanistan leads the world in the number of people experiencing acute food shortages, with over 23 million people in need of food assistance, and approximately 95% of the population suffering from malnourishment.[11]

Despite predictions of a humanitarian catastrophe with millions of refugees and mass starvation at the time of the fall of Ashraf Ghani's government,

Afghanistan did not face such a scenario. Two factors played a role here: firstly, Afghanistan remains deeply agrarian, with over 70% of the population living in rural areas, where people have learned to survive during decades of war. Secondly, humanitarian aid did not entirely stop with the arrival of the Taliban and continued to be provided to Afghan farmers through grants. In 2022, more than 9 million Afghan farmers received assistance from the FAO through various projects aimed at livestock development, increasing vegetable production, cash transfer programs, and irrigation infrastructure reconstruction.[12]

As a result, some forecasts suggest that Afghanistan's wheat harvest this year could reach 5 million tons, which is 25% or 1 million tons more than in 2022. Considering that the country's current internal wheat demand is around 6.5-7.5 million tons, experts believe that Afghanistan may achieve self-sufficiency in the near future.

### **Taliban Economy Revenues**

Despite positive trends in food security, the country's economy lacks a clear vision for overcoming the ongoing crisis. Nonetheless, the Taliban continues to expand a complex taxation system to prevent economic collapse. The total revenue, according to the World Bank, amounted to 193.9 billion Afghanis (approximately \$2.2 billion USD) from February 22, 2022, to March 21, 2023 [13].

Another important source of revenue for the Taliban's budget is the export of food, coal, and textiles, which increased to \$1.9 billion USD in 2022 compared to \$850 million in 2021. Equally important and potentially a key source of income could be gold, lapis lazuli, and other

precious metal mining. As of 2020, the mining industry brought the Taliban \$464 million, and this figure likely increased after the Taliban came to power. In general, according to various estimates, the potential of natural resources, including rare earth materials, copper, and natural gas, in Afghanistan exceeds \$1 trillion USD.[8]

Despite promises to counter drug trafficking, similar to terrorism, the Taliban officially banned it, but they continue to profit significantly from it. The Taliban control drug traffickers and collect taxes from the sale of opium and methamphetamine. In 2022, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, drug traffickers and farmers made profits of \$1.2 billion USD, with the Taliban collecting taxes ranging from 5% to 7%. Methamphetamine generated \$150 million USD in revenue for the Taliban.[7, p.15]

### **Women's rights**

The Taliban, adhering to their commitment to Deobandism, a radical branch of Islam characterized by puritanism, extreme intolerance towards other Islamic branches, and rigid adherence to the norms of pure Islam, including the role and position of women in religion, from the very beginning established rules of conduct for Afghan women in everyday life.

As early as their first rule in 1996, the Taliban imposed very strict rules for women, which have remained largely unchanged since then and were reintroduced from August 2021. Experts have counted around 30 such rules: women are only allowed to work at home with rare exceptions for doctors and nurses (since men cannot treat women); women are prohibited from

leaving the house without a "mahram" (father, brother, or other close male relative who has access to the harem) or husband accompanying them; women cannot access regular medical assistance since there are few female doctors, and men cannot treat women; girls are not allowed to go to school, and young women are barred from universities and other educational institutions; women must be covered from head to toe and cannot show any part of their body, and so on.[14]

The situation with women's rights has further worsened with the Taliban's return to power. For example, "while previously wearing a hijab was considered acceptable, under the new norms, women are required to wear a niqab or burqa." [8]

Certainly, from the very beginning, the Taliban's spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, declared that "women can participate in society in accordance with Islamic law," but in practice, they became the first government in the world to ban education for women, which became one of the main reasons for the UN's non-recognition of the Taliban's official status and the imposition of sanctions, including freezing foreign accounts.

On the one hand, the unprecedentedly harsh requirements for women can be explained by Deobandism ideology and a rather primitive approach to understanding governance and society following medieval norms. On the other hand, over the course of 20 years of relatively free life in Afghanistan, a considerable number of independent women emerged, especially in major cities, ready to defend their rights, and this might have been a preemptive move by the Taliban to intimidate and subjugate the entire society.



## Conclusion

**The first conclusion** is that in the first two years of Taliban rule, neither the pessimistic scenarios of a humanitarian catastrophe, millions of refugees, nor a new civil war have materialized. Similarly, the cautiously optimistic assumptions about the pragmatism of the Taliban and their desire for international recognition in exchange for agreements on an inclusive government and human rights have also not come to pass.

"Taliban 2021," while not significantly changing their religious and ideological views from "Taliban 1996," has adopted a more pragmatic approach in domestic politics, attempting to find their formula for governing a complex society with a "perpetual war" and "everyone against everyone" syndrome. Having monopolized power in the country, the Taliban has managed to establish relative order and security, and most Afghans are trying to adapt to the "new-old rules."

The prospects of this situation and the viability of the social contract with the Taliban will largely depend on their ability to be the provider of security in the country and create at least minimal conditions for the economic survival of the majority of Afghans. While the Taliban is familiar with the first issue and has resources to solve, they face significant challenges with the second, which require finding compromises. This leads to the question, to which there is no clear answer yet, of whether the Taliban are capable of evolving their political and ideological views towards more moderate and constructive ones.

**The second conclusion** is that the main threat to the Taliban within the country comes not so much from other terrorist organizations, whose overall resources are insufficient for effective

confrontation with the Taliban without external support, but from potential fault lines within the Taliban itself, between the so-called "pragmatists" and "orthodox." During their temporary weakness, other internal forces might exploit this situation, potentially leading to a civil war within the country.

**The third conclusion** is that Afghanistan is no longer of such interest to major external players. Today, they are preoccupied with resolving problems in other regions of the world, from Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia. While it is challenging to predict how long this situation will last, in the foreseeable future, other regional countries, especially neighboring countries like Pakistan, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and some Arab countries, will take the lead in actively engaging with Afghanistan.

In the event of a gradual evolution of the Taliban towards deradicalization of the regime, restoring women's rights in possible conditions for an Islamic emirate, establishing a more inclusive government, and achieving full stabilization of the military-political situation in the country, Afghanistan could begin a gradual integration into trade, economic, energy, and transportation-logistics interactions with Central Asia, potentially leading to a more simplified visa regime for Afghan citizens.

However, at present, the more likely scenario appears to be the conservation of the situation, with internal problems gradually escalating and increasing risks of destabilization.

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# U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY EFFORTS AGAINST THE TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN: POLITICAL ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT

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**Abstract.** The article analyzes the reasons and consequences of the United States' efforts to combat the insurgents of the Taliban movement. The authors rely on David Galula's interventionist theory of "counterinsurgency warfare" and put forward a hypothesis that ignoring the local government – as one of the most important prerequisites for success in the fight against terrorist groups in Afghanistan – led to the resurgence of the Taliban rebellion and prolonged the Afghan conflict.

**Keywords:** *counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, indigenous government, Taliban, the United States, Afghanistan.*

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## АҚШ-ТЫҢ АУҒАНСТАНДАҒЫ «ТАЛИБАН» ҚОЗҒАЛЫСЫНЫҢ КӨТЕРІЛІСШІЛЕРГЕ ҚАРСЫ ӘРЕКЕТТЕРІ: САЯСИ ТАЛДАУ ЖӘНЕ БАҒАЛАУ

Фаиз Мұхаммед Заланд, Бақыт Рахымбекова

**Андатпа.** Мақалада АҚШ-тың «Талибан» көтерілісшілерімен күресу әрекеттерінің себептері мен салдары талданады. Авторлар Д.Галуланың "көтерілісшілерге қарсы күрес" туралы интервенциялық теориясына сүйене отырып, Ауғанстандағы террористік топтармен күресте жеңіске жетудің маңызды алғышарттарының бірі ретінде танитын үкіметті елемеу гипотезасына сүйену «Талибан» көтерілісінің қайта басталуына және Ауған қақтығысының ұзаққа созылуына алып келді деп болжайды.

**Түйін сөздер:** көтерілісшілерге қарсы күрес, терроризмге қарсы іс-қимыл, жергілікті үкімет, «Талибан», АҚШ, Ауғанстан.

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## УСИЛИЯ США ПО БОРЬБЕ С ПОВСТАНЦАМИ ДВИЖЕНИЯ «ТАЛИБАН» В АФГАНИСТАНЕ: ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ И ОЦЕНКА

Фаиз Мухаммад Заланд, Бакыт Рахимбекова

**Аннотация.** В статье анализируются причины и последствия усилий США по борьбе с повстанцами движения «Талибан». Авторы опираются на интервенционистскую теорию Д. Галулы о “борьбе с повстанцами” и выдвигают гипотезу о том, что игнорирование местного правительства – как одного из наиболее важных предварительных условий победы в борьбе с террористическими группировками в Афганистане – привело к возобновлению мятежа талибов и затягиванию афганского конфликта.

**Ключевые слова:** борьба с повстанцами, контртерроризм, местное правительство, «Талибан», мятеж, США, Афганистан.

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### Introduction

After the United States invasion on 07th October 2011 in Afghanistan, counterinsurgency efforts were the very essential steps to defeat Taliban's insurgency and to strengthen the post-conflict reconstruction, state-building and establishing a democratic government in Afghanistan. As discussed in detail below, the United States fought its history's longest war to defeat the Taliban insurgency, one strategy for doing so involved winning the “hearts and minds” of Afghans. However, the U.S. it failed in its stated objectives.

The main question of this research paper is therefore: Why U.S. Counterinsurgency efforts failed in Afghanistan? To respond to this question; we have focused on the explaining “counterinsurgency theory” in the context of Afghanistan. The underlying assumption of the counterinsurgency literature is that counterinsurgency can be won through a package of military, political and social actions under the strong control of a single authority.

Besides assessing the above-stated hypotheses, the present research studies counterinsurgency, counterterrorism campaigns in Afghanistan mainly from

the perspective of the United States' dual strategy approach to fighting the insurgency in Afghanistan (Counterinsurgency vs. Counter Terrorism) at the national level. Based on the literature review, it also attempts to identify the role of the lack of legitimacy of the Afghan government at the sub-national administration level played in allowing the Taliban's insurgency to take momentum after 2005. The following are some of the critical questions which this research aims to undertake for the discussion.

1. How far were the United States military capabilities well aimed in Afghanistan to defeat the insurgency in the country?

2. How did corruption, leadership incompetency and lack of military training in the ANDSF assist Taliban to win their insurgency war in past two decades?

3. What role Pakistan played in the failure of the United States' counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan?

Based on the theoretical foundation for the existing classical counterinsurgency efforts around the world; what should change, and adjustments should be considered in the future to win wars against popular insurgencies around the globe.

The wider focus of this study is on the Taliban resurgence and the United States counterinsurgency campaign the latter of which ultimately failed after 20 years of war. Owing to the time and scope of this research, the specific focus is on the counterinsurgency theory and its application in Afghanistan but in general; it illustrates that what went wrong in the United States' efforts in peace building and stabilization of Afghanistan in past two decades.

### **Research objectives**

This research has been designed, as

the title indicates, to examine what has happened on the ground in Afghanistan in past two decades, as it was termed a counterinsurgency campaign by the United States. Its primary objective is to better understand the failure of the United States external state and peace building efforts in Afghanistan. In doing so, it examines the nature of counterinsurgency efforts, along with their challenges and mechanisms at the national level. This analysis then provides the basis for a discussion of how the efforts went wrong.

### **Research methodology**

The qualitative research methodology makes the foundation of this research. The data used in this study comprised secondary academic sources and materials, as well as the one the article's author, Faiz Zaland Mukhammad field research in Afghanistan. He was working in Southeast region, attending many conferences, and meeting many of the state elites combining his experience of eight years with international aid agencies which supported local governance and community development. The secondary source materials used in this study includes a wide range of academic books, journals, research publications and papers, survey materials, the Afghan government, and international donor organization's policy papers, and finally investigative reports and articles from credentialed Afghan and international media outlets.

To elaborate on the failure of the United States counterinsurgency campaign, it is important to understand the essence of this theory and practice. David Galula's theory of "counterinsurgency" is not primarily military, but a mixture of military, political and social actions under the resilient control of a single authority. This observation leads us to one of the critical hypotheses of this research which is that

by ignoring Indigenous government— as one the most significant precondition for winning counterinsurgency – resulted in the return of the Taliban insurgency and prolongation of the Afghan conflict. Based on the counterinsurgency interventionist theory, this paper briefly analyses the cause and consequences of the U.S. counterinsurgency efforts and its peace and state-building failure in Afghanistan.

## Discuss

### What is counterinsurgency?

A well-known counterinsurgency theorist David Galula [1] proposes four "laws" for successful counterinsurgency campaign:

- It is must to win the support of the people; the main aim of counterinsurgency is to win public support to root out all the insurgents and stop further recruitment, rather than conquering the territory.

- Such support is most readily obtained from an active minority. Those willing to actively support a counterinsurgency operation should be supported in their efforts to rally the neutral majority and neutralize the hostile minority.

- It is imperative to consider that public support is conditional. What you do matters, and support can be lost if your actions are unfavorable to the population.

- The fourth and final law of counterinsurgency regards the "intensity of effort and massiveness of means." Counterinsurgency is comprehensive strategy which requires a large focus of efforts, resources, and personnel; it is unlikely that it can be pursued effectively everywhere at once. Rather, action should be taken in select areas, and resources moved as needed.

Counterinsurgency encompasses the attempts governments make to reinstate peace on the ground. The aim is to curtail

civilian deaths while strengthening the influence of governments in the country. Therefore, no singular strategy exists-counterinsurgent forces combine psychological, military, economic and political techniques to defeat the insurgency and win the "hearts and minds" of people.

From the very beginning, the term "counterinsurgency" was conflated with counterterrorism in Afghanistan's invasion by U.S. forces. When the Taliban insurgency was launched in spring 2002, U.S. forces were still conducting counterterrorism attacks all over the country, chasing Taliban affiliates and Al Qaeda members, but after the Obama Surge announced in late 2009, the term counterinsurgency become the favored term for American Generals in their war against Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Taliban insurgency was initiated in the southern provinces like Helmand and Kandahar; they started operating in small squad-size units; [2] while they launched larger attacks at the very beginning of 2005, which provided them a momentum almost in all Southern, Southeastern provinces. On the contrary, in 2006, the US secretary of defense Robert Gates asserted that the NATO/ISAF would not conduct long-term counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. [3]

At the very beginning of the invasion in Afghanistan, US military leadership chose a clearly enemy-centric strategy to combating Al-Qaeda and Taliban to achieve their objectives in Afghanistan which was later modified by surge as state to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" Al-Qaeda rather than Taliban.[4]

In an insurgency, insurgents cannot operate without the support of the local population and external support, violence against noncombatant civilians by security forces, whether intentional or accidental is

almost always entirely counterproductive to provide a more support to the insurgency. [5]

Therefore, counterinsurgency is defined by David Galula as “those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency.” [1, p.55] While Seth G. Jones defines counterinsurgency as a destroying insurgent force and their political organization in each geography over the long run.

For a long time in Afghanistan, U.S. forces only focused on the direct approach of their counterinsurgency strategy in which they chased their enemy, and eliminate them, while after a decade of a failed counterterrorism and direct counter insurgency strategy, US government launched an indirect counterinsurgency approach to tackle the Taliban insurgency problem of Afghanistan.

Indeed, the Taliban’s insurgency was a typical case of the type defined by Fearon and Laitin [6] as a technology of a military conflict characterized by small, lightly armed groups practicing guerrilla warfare from their rural bases. While Counterinsurgency operations are generally complex, demanding, and expensive; therefore, in the absence of sufficient military, economic and political resource to establish security, it seems difficult to achieve the objective of “clear, hold and expand”. [2, p.77]. Roger Trinquier [7] rightly argues that winning counterinsurgency campaigns requires a package of actions – political, economic, psychological, military – that aims at the insurgents to be defeated and replaced with a legitimate government.

David Kilcullen [8] writes illustrates the differences between the classic and modern counterinsurgency approaches, as differentiated in the table below:

<b>Classical Counterinsurgency</b>	<b>Modern Counter insurgency</b>
National approach	International approach
Contained to the border of the state	Spilling over to the neighboring countries
Training Local Police	Evolving counterinsurgency strategy is required
Improving Local Governance	Building legitimate civil governance
Denying the insurgency and external support	Separating the insurgents from its support base
Denying outside sanctuary to the insurgents	Continuous detect and defuse is required (domestically and internationally)
Supporting Local Administration to take lead in defeating the insurgency	International Community Cooperation

**Table 1.** Differences between the classic and modern counterinsurgency approaches

The indirect counterinsurgency approach was aimed to win the “hearts and minds” on the ground which was focused more on a population-centric strategy. [9]

U.S. forces established Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) within

their military bases to work with local administration on the provision of the basic assessed projects like healthy drinking water, school buildings, health clinics etc. [10] PRTs were small, joint civilian-military organizations [11] while

PRTs were working in some cases as a parallel local administration [12] which were delegitimizing the Afghan Local Governor's presence in the province or district as they were not able to provide such basic public services. When David Petraeus was appointed as a commander in general in Afghanistan in July, 2010, he reassured the counterinsurgency strategy to work by affirming around denying the insurgency its sanctuary within the population and started training Afghan Police and Army to hold the territory so the insurgents Taliban do not return, while building local infrastructure, promoting good governance by supporting the local administration to return to area and trying to eliminate the political corruption.[13]

Counterinsurgency requires both conventional war capabilities and the ability to shape the Indigenous governments capability not only to run the country but also to fight the insurgency domestically. Essentially, the United States had both capabilities, the largest army in the world to fight its conventional wars anywhere in the world but how successful is this army in combating the insurgency was tested in Afghanistan where it failed in building the local capabilities. [2] Indeed, counterinsurgency not only enhances the capability of conventional war but also the capability to form the capacity of the Indigenous government and its security forces.

Thus, there are few significant issues in conducting counterinsurgency operations which must be prevented or at least minimized to achieve the targeted goals; these issues are very succinctly articulated by David Kilcullen as follows:

-counterinsurgent efforts usually attempt to enforce Western attitudes and values. therefore, ignoring the importance of cultural relativism on the ground, counterinsurgents forces lose the combat

of winning "hearts and minds" on the ground.

- counterinsurgency is costly in terms of both human life and resources. To kill insurgents, civilian lives are usually risked, on the other hand, if protecting civilians then more counterinsurgent casualties. Insurgents are often better off with their strategy of being decentralized and spread out over large areas, meaning they have the advantage of "hit and run" attacks.

- counterinsurgency is often ineffective to achieve the stated goal of bringing stability and support for the Indigenous government. The solution for unrest is usually political changes, not military intervention.

- counterinsurgency often lacks a clear end goal, or objectives may differ. The concepts of 'peace' and 'stability' may vary to the external counterinsurgent forces and Indigenous government.[7]

Therefore, to conduct and win a counterinsurgency strategy; it is significant to have a through description of the insurgency, the ground realities and gaining a popular support for achieving the defined objectives.

### **The Principals of Counterinsurgency**

As stated by Kilcullen, an insurgency is a structured, prolonged politico-military struggle organized to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power or other political authority while increasing insurgent control on the ground. Kilcullen adds that U.S. military field manual defines counterinsurgency as the 'military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency. Counterinsurgency as defined above is based on key principals guiding an efficient strategy to eradicate the insurgency whilst



protecting the local population, promoting good governance, eliminating enemy safe sanctuaries, and training the locals to take the fight to the very borders of a nation-state.[9] If we are still holding a classical approach to combat the insurgency, then we should limit our counterinsurgency doctrine to the borders of our country but if we believe in the modern approach to eliminate the insurgency then we require international communities support to fight the insurgency in its cross borders' sanctuaries.[14]

D.Galula states that the population represents the new ground for winning or losing the war against insurgency. If the insurgents manage to dissociate the population from the counterinsurgent forces or Indigenous government, they will win the war; thus, the battle for the population is a major characteristic of the revolutionary war. [1, p.55]

Counterinsurgency is mainly focused to “hold, keep and transfer” the ground and population from insurgent groups to transfer it to the local government; insurgent groups are using various tactics like yielding the population center against the indigenous government, mainly operating from rural areas, distributing propaganda to the local population and oppositions forces, threatening and intimidating the local population and conducting armed “hit and run” attacks on the indigenous government infrastructure and employees. Examples of armed attacks by any insurgency includes ambushes and raids using small arms and grenades; shelling using 107-mm and explosive devices (IEDs) [2] In reality, counterinsurgency operations are somehow of a political nature; therefore, they must always be supported with domestic, regional and global political decisions to be successful in a concerning country; otherwise, it will be much more

difficult to achieve the targeted results. [1, p.67] Therefore, the first principal is to draw a long-term political strategy which should be focused in creating a viable, sustainable stability through building or supporting local administration's effectiveness and legitimacy while marginalizing the insurgents from its local population base should be the priority to be considered to win the counterinsurgency campaign. In addition, an integrated civilian-military efforts, a genuine partnership with the indigenous government, population-centric operations, supporting the key personnel on the ground, building effective and legitimate local security forces to lead the counterinsurgency programs, and a region-wide approach to disrupt the safe havens of the insurgents across the border should be considered the far most significant principals of winning any counterinsurgency operations. [15]

During two decades of conflict in Afghanistan, U.S. and allied forces allegedly committed numerous violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) including (sometimes apparently intentional targeting of civilian and non-military targets and torture of prisoners. For example, April 05th 2010, the whistleblower organization Wikileaks released a leaked video of U.S. military, where two U.S. Apache helicopters shooting casually a group of men; several weeks later; few more reports were leaked by WikiLeaks; showing more that civilians were dying in U.S. detention, in September 2009, German – run provincial reconstruction team ordered U.S. air strikes on two fuel tankers; killing dozens of civilians; on August 16th 2007; angry Polish troops fired heavy machine gun and mortar into a small village, a wedding celebration became a horror scene, killing four women, a man and a baby; in fact, the biggest news in the leaked documents

were a large scale and previously known program of “kill-capture” operations against Taliban, using bombs, drones and night raids. [16] By consequence, the war to win the “heart and mind” of Afghan people was lost due to the absence of a government people could trust and the presence of international forces they feared.

A well-known Kazakhstani expert, the author of a fundamental study on the history and politics of Afghanistan, Sultan Akimbekov, rightly notes the existence of problems associated with the American presence, primarily with the inability to ensure the stable functioning of state institutions and, of course, security problems inside the country.[17]

### Counterinsurgency vs Counterterrorism in Afghanistan

Taliban resurgence took momentum by the summer of 2003; where every day one or two attacks were conducted by Taliban; August of the same year proved to be the deadliest up to that point with more than 220 soldiers and civilians killed all over the country.[18] As 1994, the rise of the Taliban depended on Pakistani support but also on the failure of the mujahidin groups to establish a stable government [19]; indeed, once more the history repeated itself in Afghanistan with a minor change this time; instead of the failure of mujahidin’s failed state formation, it was replaced with an ultimately unsuccessful attempt at democratization backed by the United States.

Jason Rineheart rightly explains the differences between counterinsurgency and counter terrorism which are illustrated below in the table:

Counterinsurgency	Counterterrorism
Sole military solution is not possible	Complexed strategy
Dual military – Political Solution	Lethal form of unconventional warfare
Population centric, separating insurgency from their support base.	Insurgent based, eliminating them everywhere.
Promoting local governance	-
Eliminating sanctuaries	Eliminating sanctuaries and alienating insurgents from their support base
Training locals to fight the insurgency	-
Confined to the borders of the country	Complexed strategy

**Table 2.** Differences between the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism

In the summer of 2004, Lt. Gen. David Barno, the new commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, launched new counterinsurgency tactics involving small bands of U.S. forces living in villages to win “hearts and minds” and collect better intelligence from the ground. [18] Absolutely, in the case of Afghanistan’s counterinsurgency operations, that the United States was most likely to be an

external actor – an intervening third party – in a counterinsurgency campaign conducted in a foreign country as stated in the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide [15] Unfortunately, after the United States invasion in Iraq, Afghanistan became “the other war” under the Bush Administration where resources were starved, attention was distracted, and these facts also assisted to the beginning

of the failure of the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan. [20]

The overall goal of a counterinsurgency campaign is to achieve control by

“building popular public support for an Indigenous government while delegitimizing and marginalizing the insurgents on the ground” as stated by the government of the United States. [21] Up until late 2006; the United States led all counterinsurgency campaigns where after, the command and control shifted to NATO.[2] Foreign forces are effective only when the indigenous forces lead the counterinsurgency operations; whenever The United States forces acted unilaterally; they posed stark civilian casualties and undermined the legitimacy of Afghan government.

Ahmad Rashid [18] indicates that the United States remained complacent about the Taliban as long as Pakistan continued to appear to chase al Qaeda; he reports that a senior CIA official told him that the Taliban were always considered a lower priority by the United States. While, in general, counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan were aimed to “clear, hold and expand” [2] which were ink spotted in contested parts of south and east of Afghanistan.

In 2010, when General David Petraeus took over McChrystal, the rules of engagement in Afghanistan shifted from counterinsurgency back to counterterrorism; where night raids, aerial bombardment, and drones were prioritized to fight the Taliban insurgency throughout the country.[22] Therefore, such duplicity in reversing the strategies to fight the insurgency in Afghanistan, has caused lack of coordination with the indigenous government, lack of cohesion with the regional countries to combat the terrorists hide-outs in Afghanistan and outside of Afghanistan has lead the whole

strategy of fighting Afghan insurgency to a failure.

### **Why U.S. counterinsurgency efforts failed in Afghanistan?**

The United States counterinsurgency strategy faced several challenges in Afghanistan; in spite of not having a strong, accountable indigenous government with incompetent police and military forces which crippled because of its vast corruption and counterfeit leadership; it faced a geographical (mountainous terrain) problem, ethnic division, tribalism, religious fissures and drastic economic conditions which all motivates insurgency in a weak state [5] like in Afghanistan have all caused it much difficult for U.S. forces to win its counterinsurgency struggle against Taliban’s insurgency during past two decades. Knowing better Afghanistan, Barnett Rubin, the academic expert rightly illustrates that Afghanistan is not an agriculture country; its largest industry is war, then drugs, then services while agriculture can be considered fourth or fifth down in the list.[19]

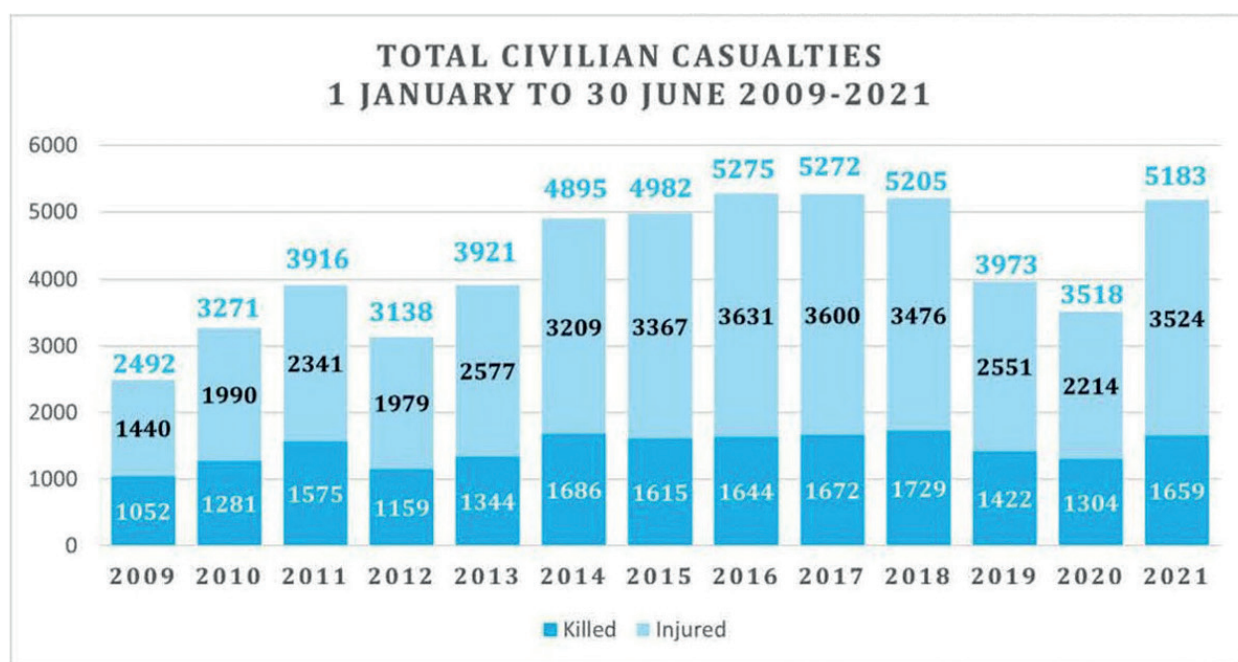
In fact, Afghanistan never had a modern state;[23] therefore, from the very beginning of the United States’ invasion in Afghanistan, the external state-building seemed a daunting task to achieve its goal of installing a stable democratic government. A senior State department member told Craig Whitlock in a lesson learnt interview that after 9/11 the U.S. invaded Afghanistan reflexively without knowing what they were trying to achieve. [24] As Thomas Barfield [20] stated that in pre-modern Afghanistan whoever gained power and could hold it considered legitimate if he could provide security and fend the off rivals, seems correct even now; as the Taliban denied the sole authority of the United State installed government in Kabul, which never gained

a public legitimacy in past two decades.

In addition, after spending nearly 2 trillion dollars, nearly 66,000 Afghan military and national police killed in the conflict, according to a report calculating the costs of the war and 47,245 Afghan civilians have been killed, per Brown University’s Costs of War project. Whereas, in the first half of 2021 alone, there were 1,659 Afghan civilians killed and 3,524 wounded — a 47 percent increase compared with the same period last year — the United Nations Assistance

Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported by Adela Suliman, but the United States has never accomplished the objective of installing a democratic, capable, responsive and accountable government in Kabul, which can provide the basic public services like public health care, power, transportation infrastructure and other basic services.[25]

The chart below portrays the civilian casualties per each year since 2009 as documented by UNAMA; it illustrates rise in the civilian casualties which aims



**Figure 1.** The civilian casualties per each year since 2009 as documented by UNAMA [25].

that the counterinsurgency strategy of the United States was not effective in protecting civilians through these years.

To understand the failure or success of the United States counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan; we are required to understand the capabilities of the Indigenous government in running the country: political legitimacy of the government, good governance capabilities and capacity of the security forces in fighting the insurgency on the ground.

Whereas, Afghan warlords were another big challenge for winning counterinsurgency in Afghanistan; warlords and tribal militia posed a significant challenge to the counterinsurgency campaign during past two decades; Afghan governments tried their best to reassign the warlords away from their geographical power bases but their local networks continued to influence the local administration and challenge the central governments, such as, when Afghan Local Police (ALP) failed in

Wardak Province in 2012; McChrystal's population centric counterinsurgency was considered a failure, the United States started equipping and supporting local anti-Taliban factions who were known as former warlords in the province.[22]

Anand Gopal writes that Afghan state became criminalized, one of the most corrupt in the world, as thoroughly wicked as the warlords it sought to outflank.[26]

In addition, for the United State to win the counterinsurgency war against Taliban they required to understand the "Taliban's" political, military structure and the population where they obtain shelter and recruitment.[27]

The International Community led by U.S. failed in all above three dimensions, they were conflicting themselves by supporting Pakistan's role in combating Taliban and supporting a corrupt government in Kabul for past two decades.

Afghanistan's mountainous terrain provided a particularly useful sanctuary for Taliban because it was difficult for Afghan Government and U.S. forces to navigate them easily; in addition to their main hideouts in Pakistan and on the Durand Line; the general Afghanistan's terrain was also helpful for "Taliban's" resurgence and fighting the U.S. longest war of the history.

Indeed, the success of any counterinsurgency campaign requires a long-term commitment on the political, economic and military fronts to be coordinated with relevant operations on the ground to defeat the insurgency and win "brain and mind" of local population. History reveals that most of the counterinsurgency campaigns are not won by external forces, but by indigenous forces; therefore, building local capacity to fight the insurgency is far more significant than the capacity of the occupier forces.

Since the beginning of the U.S. invasion

in Afghanistan; it seemed that the United States have underestimated the significance of the Indigenous government's capability to fight the insurgency on the ground; there were very little attention to support and create a trained a capable police and army in Afghanistan.

In counterinsurgency campaigns, the police must be involved in the community at all levels, such as monitoring border posts, and patrolling cities, villages, and highways; in fact, building the police in counterinsurgency should be a first priority than the creation of the army because the police are the primary forces of the government in towns and villages across the country. Unfortunately, this goal was not achieved in Afghanistan.

The Taliban were able enough to fight the Afghan government on many levels, as the capability of the government forces were challenged by vast corruption on their leadership level, lacking training fighting a hit and run tactical war, lacking strong leadership, many were led by local strongmen or warlords; for example, in his two terms elected government, Hamid Karzai had only limited control over his own government, many of his top officials led militias that had fought against Taliban with U.S. support and which lacked legitimacy and resources like ammunition, transportation capabilities and were politically divided which aggravated the problem of the lack of effective leadership on the ground to fight Taliban insurgency and win the war for their country.[20].

The very spread of corruption – which Jones defines as the misuse of entrusted power for private gain - undermined all that could have been achieved by undermining public support for the government and increased support for Taliban in the outskirts of main cities of the country.

In fact, endemic corruption hampered

economic growth, undermined the rule of law, and vastly damaged the legitimacy of the government across the country [28]. As Francis Fukuyama [23] defines a good state institution must transparently and efficiently serve the needs of its citizen; the objective of installing such a good government in Afghanistan was never achieved.

Another factor, which undermined the United States counterinsurgencies efforts in Afghanistan, was external support for Taliban in the region which directly correlates with insurgents' success on the ground.

External support can take two forms: first, foreign governments; diaspora or international networks can provide direct assistance to the insurgents and second, is the freedom to use foreign territory as a sanctuary. In the case of Taliban, received both from Pakistan.

The Pakistani state directly supported "Taliban's" member to obtain training, medical treatment in Pakistan. Meanwhile Pakistani sponsored Kashmir Jihadi groups supported by religion-political parties such as the Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI) were able to recruit and maintaining training bases in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda and Uzbek jihadist groups and the Islamic Movement of Easter-Turkistan (ETI) are also reported to have supported the Taliban across the Durand Line. [19]. In the sum, Afghan insurgency included a dangerous combination of local and transnational supportive groups.

As Parvez Musharraf (2006) claimed that their support for Taliban was for two reasons; first Taliban will bring peace to Afghanistan; second that Taliban will defeat anti-Pakistan Northern Alliance. In fact, the general belief among strategists was that Pakistan wanted a stake in Afghanistan, to ensure it did not end up with a government that was pro-India

in Kabul. [29] In terms of sanctuary, the availability of a territorial base for insurgents outside of their home state is directly correlated with the failure of the counterinsurgency efforts. [5] The Taliban were successful in gaining the second type of external support as using Pakistan's territory to rest, regroup, receive medical care and recruit for their season war in Afghanistan during past two decades.

In fact, JUI purposefully handed over Pushtunabad, a large sprawling outskirts of Quetta, Baluchistan to the Afghan Taliban; they forced or bought out the local residents and soon owned every home, shot, tea stall and even hotels in this area; new Madrassas were built to recruit a new young generation for their war in Afghanistan. [19].

The ISI and other Pakistan government agencies provided several types of crucial assistance to Taliban:

- Medical care was provided to the injured Taliban who retreated from fighting in Afghanistan.

- Pakistan hosted several of "Taliban's" main training bases.[20]

- They provided Taliban intelligence assistance to aim timely their targets inside Afghanistan. [30]

- Pakistan also provided Taliban financial resources, liquidated their narco funds, allowed them to collect local donations and receive donations from Gulf countries. [19]

- Pakistan assisted Taliban in logistics in crossing the Durand Line on timely basis in spite of having Border Management, SoP agreements with Afghan Government in past two decades.[30]

While Ali Jalali adding to the above list of assistance; that Pakistan is providing Taliban staging areas, recruiting centers (madrassas) and safe havens to launch war inside Afghanistan.[31] In addition, the "Taliban's" economic resources derived

from networks to the Afghan Diaspora in Pakistan, Gulf and to the Pakistani administration in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan [19].

### **Conclusion**

Governance challenges, external support for Taliban and weak capacity of indigenous security forces were critical factors in failing the United States counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan. External factors play a significant role in failed counterinsurgency efforts, particularly. Pakistan's military establishment's approach to the war as a function of its main institutional and national security interests.

An even greater role was played by the failure to increase the capacity of the Indigenous government. The United States should have focused more on the efforts to improve the performance and legitimacy of the Afghan Government and improving the quality of police and other security forces rather than focusing solely on fighting the Taliban.

Finally, to win counterinsurgency campaign in any country; it is essential to transform the weak state into a legitimate and more stable state to prevail its acceptance across the population. One aspect of this is working with indigenous forces (especially police), effectively train and mentor them as quickly as possible and momentarily back-fill indigenous forces with enough forces to achieve the stated security tasks.

A lesson for future counterinsurgency operations is that is crucial to empower local forces like police and army and local administrations to be able to hold their territory long enough to re-establish close working relations with local people to deny sanctuary to the insurgents. Counterinsurgency involves the attempts governments make to restore peace. The aim is to minimize civilian deaths while strengthening the influence of governments. No strategy exists-counterinsurgent forces combine psychological, military, economic and political techniques.

The U.S. could have done more to try to defeat the insurgency and counter terrorist groups in Afghanistan as well as to achieve state building and peace building objectives if they could have convinced the region, especially Pakistan to cooperate towards these aims Afghan problem. Meanwhile, the United State should not have limited its counterinsurgency efforts to the territory of Afghanistan, but chased the insurgents inside Pakistan, Iran, and other regions where their sanctuaries were located.

To sum up, this research paper argues that poor governance, vast corruption, lack of regional cohesion in defeating "Taliban's" insurgency especially Pakistan's frequent negative interference in Afghanistan and lack of legitimacy of the Afghan Government has undermined the United States counterinsurgency efforts in past two decades in Afghanistan.

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# CENTRAL ASIA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY OF INDIA

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**Abstract.** In the early 1990s, India's foreign policy strategy faced the challenge of reevaluating the country's position and role in the emerging new international order. This prompted India to change its approach to foreign policy. The dominance of the United States in global politics actually led to a temporary autonomy of India's foreign policy within the frameworks of the emerging opportunity for New Delhi to possess nuclear weapons (intensive interactions with the United States, Israel and countries of the Association of South-East Asian Nations). However, starting from the 2000s, India began to perceive itself as a country capable of exerting a balancing influence in the world (nuclear deal between India and the United States, solidarity with China on climate change and trade issues, and broadening of ties with Russia and other major regional countries). This trend in Indian foreign policy continues to this day. India has become more sensitive to its capabilities and understands the expectations that the world has for it. Thanks to the expanded neighborhood policy (the concepts of "Act East", "Think West", "Northern Policy", "Connect Central Asia"), India has managed to form an almost new foreign policy course aimed at promoting partnership for development far beyond South Asia, including the Central Asian countries.

**Keywords:** *India, Central Asia, foreign policy strategy, trade and economic cooperation, security.*

## ҮНДІСТАННЫҢ СЫРТҚЫ САЯСИ СТРАТЕГИЯСЫНДАҒЫ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ

**Мұхит Асанбаев**

**Аңдатпа.** 1990 жылдардың басында орын алған жаңа халықаралық тәртіптің ықпалы Үндістанның сыртқы саясат стратегиясының қайта қарастырылуына

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әкеліп, бұл елдің сыртқы саясатқа деген көзқарасының өзгеруіне түрткі болды. Америка Құрама Штаттарының жаһандық саясаттағы сол кездегі үстемдігі тіпті Үндістанның сыртқы саясатының қысқа мерзімді автономиясына әкеліп соқты десек қателеспейміз (Үндістанның ядролық қаруды қолдану мүмкіндігіне ие болуы, оның АҚШ, Израиль және Оңтүстік-Шығыс Азия елдері қауымдастығына мүше елдермен қарқынды өзара іс-қимыл әрекеттері шеңберінде). Бірақ 2000-шы жылдардан кейін Үндістан өзін әлемде теңдестіруші ықпал жасауға қабілетті ел ретінде қарастыра бастайды (Үндістан мен Америка Құрама Штаттары арасындағы ядролық келісім, климаттың өзгеруі және сауда бойынша Қытаймен ынтымақтастық, Ресей және басқа да ірі аймақтық елдермен байланыстардың күшеюі). Үндістанның сыртқы саясатындағы бұл үрдіс күні бүгінге дейін жалғасуда. Бұған Үндістанның өз мүмкіндіктеріне дұрыс баға беріп, әлем елдері оған қандай үміт артып отырғандарын жіті түсіне бастауы түрткі болды.

Кеңейтілген көршілестік қағидасы саясатын жүргізу арқылы Үндістан Оңтүстік Азия шеңберінен тыс жатқан аймақтармен, оның ішінде Орталық Азиямен маңызды серіктестікті дамытуға бағытталған жаңа сыртқы саясатын қалыптастыра алды («Шығыс елдері саясаты», «Батысты ойла», «Солтүстік саясат», «Орталық Азияға барар жол» тұжырымдамалары).

***Түйінді сөздер:** Үндістан, Орталық Азия, сыртқы саясат стратегиясы, сауда-экономикалық ынтымақтастық, қауіпсіздік.*

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## ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ ВО ВНЕШНЕПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ СТРАТЕГИИ ИНДИИ

**Мухит Асанбаев**

**Аннотация.** В начале 1990-х годов внешнеполитическая стратегия Индии столкнулась с проблемой переосмысления места и роли страны в условиях формирующегося нового международного порядка, побудившего страну изменить свой подход во внешней политике. Доминирование США в глобальной политике привело фактически к краткосрочной автономии индийской внешней политики в рамках появившегося у Нью-Дели возможности использования ядерного оружия (интенсивное взаимодействие с США, Израилем и странами, входящими в Ассоциации государств Юго-Восточной Азии). Но уже после 2000-х годов Индия начинает рассматривать себя как страну, способную оказывать уравнивающее влияние в мире (ядерная сделка Индии и США, солидарность с Китаем в вопросах изменения климата и торговли, наращивание связей с Россией и другими крупными региональными странами). Этот тренд в индийской внешней политике сохраняется и поныне. Индия стала более тонко чувствовать свои возможности и понимать ожидания, которые мир возлагает на нее. Благодаря политике расширенного соседства (концепции «Действуй на Востоке», «Думай о Западе», «Северная политика», «Соединим Центральную

Азию»), Индии удалось сформировать практически новый внешнеполитический курс, направленный на продвижение партнерства в целях развития далеко за пределами Южной Азии, в том числе в отношении стран Центральной Азии.

*Ключевые слова:* Индия, Центральная Азия, внешнеполитическая стратегия, торгово-экономическое сотрудничество, безопасность.

## Introduction

Since gaining the political independence of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, India pursued a policy of expanding its trade and economic ties to establish the strong economic, political, and geopolitical influence. Historical narratives about cultural connections with Central Asia served as a good foundation for India's active involvement in the affairs of the region.

The initial steps in this direction were taken in the early 1990s when the then Prime Minister of India, Narasimha Rao, visited Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (1993), Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan (1995). In addition to the signed agreements aimed at expanding Indian trade, investments, and development assistance in the region, this visit emphasized shared secular values and drew attention to common threats such as religious fundamentalism, terrorism, violence, and drug-financed crime. These shared security interests were the driving force behind India's interaction with the region [1].

However, a series of events, including the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997), the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan (1996), the nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan (1998-1999), and the increasing influence of the United States and China in Central Asia, made some adjustments. India's promising advancement in the region narrowed down to military-technical cooperation with the Central Asian countries,

including assistance to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.

Another activation of the Central Asian direction in India's foreign policy took place with the formulation of the "Connect Central Asia" policy in 2012. It placed special emphasis on the ongoing political and economic integration of Central Asia with the world and highlighted the region's position in extended neighborhood with India. The essence of this policy was to promote India's economic cooperation with Central Asia, with a focus on strategic collaboration in the areas of security and energy, including close consultations on Afghanistan [2].

Since 2014, India's foreign policy objectives have received a new impetus for development under Narendra Modi's "civilizational tasks," which prompted New Delhi to take more active steps towards shifting global dominance to the Asian direction [3]. The nationalistic, in its essence, vision of India's new role in the world, as Narendra Modi, who had just assumed the post of Prime Minister of the country, saw it and tried to convince his compatriots of it, turned out to be very useful, since narratives about India as the largest Asian democracy and a growing economic power had lost relevance by that time.

Thus, the aspiration of New Delhi to position itself as a major global player becomes an important component of the country's foreign policy strategy in the context of India's immediate and

extended Asian neighbors, whether it is the Indian Ocean region, Southeast Asia, East Africa, or Central Asia. While positioning itself as an influential Asian power center, India demonstrates flexibility and dynamism, which is clearly reflected in its foreign policy towards Central Asia. In this region, New Delhi balances its interests and contradictions with global powers present here while advancing its own agenda on various bilateral and multilateral cooperation issues. It is not coincidental that the current generation of Indian politicians and experts views Central Asia as a territory of growing economic potential and strategic importance for India. In this regard, let us analyze India's foreign policy strategy in this region at the contemporary stage, which has the potential for strengthening but also faces factors hindering its implementation.

### **Methods and results of the study**

The article is based on the theory of neoclassical realism, according to which India's foreign policy strategy is determined by a combination of domestic and foreign policy factors, with a decisive role played by domestic factors. This allowed for the identification of India's foreign policy concept regarding Central Asia, which involves rejecting the unilaterally conflictual understanding of the nature of international politics. Based on this understanding, the ruling circles of the country formulate the current security policy and ways for the state to respond to conflict threats in international relations.

The methodological basis of the study includes methods of historicism, systematic approach, comparative analysis, and content analysis. The method of historicism allowed for the identification of the main stages in

the formation of India's foreign policy strategy towards Central Asia in the short and medium term. Through a systematic and comparative analysis, similarities and differences between regional and global policies of India were identified. The content analysis was used to study excerpts from the speeches of top state officials, official documents, and various facts and trends reflected in them.

### **Perspective on India's foreign policy strategy in Central Asia through the prism of assessing the cooperation potential**

According to India's foreign policy strategy, Central Asia falls within the so-called "extended neighborhood" zone, where New Delhi aims to balance the influence of other states and prevent the infringement of its own interests. Along with Central Asia, this direction of Indian foreign policy also includes the Persian Gulf region, East Africa and Southeast Asia, indicating the secondary importance of the said group of countries for India's foreign policy. Moreover, the economic interaction with Central Asia remains on the fringes of India's economic policy. While the trade with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and the Association of South-East Asian Nations) accounts for 12.7% and 11.5% of India's trade volume, respectively, the trade with the Central Asian countries represents only 0.2% of India's trade volume. In contrast, in 2019, India's trade volume with China and Russia exceeded this figure by 30 and 20 times, respectively.

At the same time, the trajectory of India's foreign policy towards Central Asia is shaped by the existing balance of powers and interests among Russia, China, the United States and the EU in

the region. The key phases of India's foreign policy strategy towards Central Asia, starting from the concept of the "North Policy" (in the early 1990s), the elevation of India's bilateral relations with regional countries to the status of "strategic partnership" (in the late 2000s), the "Connect Central Asia" policy (2012 to 2014), and culminating in the first India-Central Asia summit held on January 27, 2022, should be considered in this context.

However, there are several factors that can influence the activation of India's policy towards Kazakhstan in the short term.

Firstly, in the sphere of security and cooperation, the activation of Indian policy in this region is connected to its immediate proximity to Afghanistan and the security threats emanating from that country, including terrorism, religious extremism, and illegal drug trafficking. It should be noted that any potential increase in security threats to India originating from Afghanistan or supported by Pakistan is an important component of the country's foreign policy agenda. Moreover, India does not exclude the possibility of radicalization in other Central Asian countries. In this case, New Delhi will be forced to adjust its policy to address these problems. In Indian expert circles, it is believed that the intensification of religious extremism in Central Asia can influence the Muslim population in India. At the same time, the influence of domestic politics within India on its foreign policy priorities cannot be disregarded. Thus, if there is a hardening of the existing rhetoric or a change in government of India towards a more radically inclined Hindu political leadership, there is a possibility of altering approaches to security issues in

the region and, consequently, reducing the intensity of India's cooperation with Central Asian countries, not to mention the escalation of India and Pakistan, India and Afghanistan relations.

It is important to understand that India's political course towards the countries of the region will continue to be built to a large extent on the basis of India's historical narratives regarding its common cultural and civilizational heritage with the countries of Central Asia, which in the case of Kazakhstan looks much less convincing than in comparison with neighboring Tajikistan or Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the continuation of India's policy of humanitarian cooperation with Kazakhstan, including organizing cultural events, student exchange programs, establishing Hindi study departments, and providing material assistance for disaster relief efforts.

Secondly, the significant change in the established balance of powers and interests between Russia, China and Western countries, as well as the intensification of their competition in Central Asia, compels India to actively engage in the region, particularly in the areas of security and military cooperation. In this context, one can expect India to intensify its policy in Central Asia to balance the increased influence of global powers and protect New Delhi's strategic and economic interests in the region. This is especially relevant considering the risk of certain countries in the region, including Kazakhstan, falling into economic dependence on China, which motivates India to pursue a more active presence in the region. The promotion of self-sufficiency and equi-spaced distancing of the region is an important link of India's foreign policy in

the Central Asian direction. India assigns the countries of the region, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the role of an important transit point for Indian goods and services that are delivered to the region and beyond.

At the same time, India's attention to Afghanistan is incomparably greater than the issues of cooperation with the Central Asia countries [5], especially after the seizure of power by the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, in 2021. India is well aware that the return of the Taliban has led to a continuous escalation of the situation in the neighboring countries bordering Afghanistan. New Delhi's concern in this regard is linked to the potential intensification of activities by certain radical organizations, which pose specific threats and risks to the security and stability of Central and South Asian countries. The danger for India in this case is that various terrorist organizations may exploit the Taliban's movement to build into power and use the territory of Afghanistan for planning and committing terrorist attacks in other countries, including on the territory of India.

At present, India has reestablished contacts with the Taliban movement and seriously considers the possibility of cooperating with the new Afghanistan authorities. This is because without security in Afghanistan and access to the country, India is unlikely to establish effective connectivity with Central Asian countries. In this regard, India intensively develops a transport corridor, the key link of which is Iran [5]. India is pushing forward transportation infrastructure projects aimed at connecting Afghanistan with Central and South Asia. One such project is the development of the North-South International Transport Corridor, which extends to Afghanistan and passes

through the territories of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, potentially linking India with Europe and other countries.

The agreement on the North-South project provides for the transportation of goods from Indian ports to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, then from the Caspian port of Bandar-e Azali to Astrakhan city and then to St. Petersburg through Russian railways. As the idea of a transport corridor was implemented, Mumbai was chosen as the main port of India, and Chabahar was chosen for Iran [5].

India has high hopes for the implementation of projects on the North-South transport corridor through the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar. Despite the fact that currently the main used port remains the Iranian Bandar Abbas, the prospects for the delivery of goods from India to Iran through this port remains problematic due to the US sanctions imposed on Iran (Bandar Abbas is subject to sanctions). Another Iranian port, Chabahar, is considered a more promising crossing point for India as it is not subject to US sanctions. India's interest in developing the infrastructure of the Chabahar port in this regard is obvious. Its use for the organization of cargo flows in the North-South direction allows India to gain access to natural resources and commodity markets of Afghanistan and Central Asia, as well as supplies of goods to Eurasian markets through the territory of Kazakhstan.

In April 2023, Mumbai hosted the first meeting of the joint working group of India and Central Asian countries on the issues of Chabahar, which was also attended by the representatives of Iran and the UN World Food Program. One of the key issues discussed at the meeting

was the development of Shahid Beheshti terminal and the use of Chabahar port by the Central Asian countries [6].

The intensification of India's policy within the frameworks of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can be seen as part of measures aimed at expanding trade and investment ties and New Delhi's active engaging in the affairs of Central Asia in order to strengthen the mutual interaction in the fields of economy, security, and regional stability.

With its full membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organization since 2017, India has gained access to discussions on security, economic and cultural cooperation among the member states of this intergovernmental organization. In an effort to gain full access to the organization and its activities, India, as its membership in SCO has already shown, will promote its own agenda, despite contradictions from other participants. The results of the SCO's summit in Qingdao, in 2018, are noteworthy in this case, when all countries, with the exception of India, supported China's Belt and Road Initiative [7].

In addition to its economic interests in SCO, India has a foreign policy interest in joining the free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which will most likely be based on the Indian-Russian free trade agreement. This will lead to a much larger free trade agreement involving Kazakhstan, India, Russia, Armenia, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan [4].

India is also one of the most active participants in CICMA, overseeing counter-terrorism issues and serving as a coordinator for implementing confidence-building measures in priority areas such as "Energy Security", "Development of Secure and Efficient Transport Corridors"

and "Human Dimension". Although the latter has become a contrast to the policy pursued by New Delhi regarding the religious minorities of the country, India, in general, shares the urgent tasks facing the CICMA to transform this dialogue platform into a full-fledged international organization in order to strengthen and unite the potential of Asian countries in the regional and international agenda [8].

Besides, in the short and medium term, a new impetus will be given to the policy of India's expanded participation in the economy and politics of Kazakhstan within the frameworks of the Delhi Declaration adopted in 2022, aimed at institutionalizing the cooperation between India and Central Asia at the regional level. The agreements adopted as a result of this declaration on holding the India and Central Asia's summit every two years, holding regular meetings of the Ministers of foreign affairs, trade and culture, as well as meetings of the secretaries of national security councils, demonstrate the prospect of strengthening the Indian policy [9] and its defense diplomacy in Central Asia [10].

Overall, India's future foreign policy initiatives regarding its participation in the activities of SCO and EAEU should be seen as a new trend chosen by India to counter the growing influence of China and Russia within these organizations. This trend aligns with India's interests in ensuring a more proportionate involvement of other participants, including India itself and the Central Asian countries in the activities of these organizations.

Thirdly, ensuring access to the latter's natural resources will remain one of the main priorities of India's foreign policy in Central Asia. For example, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are major producers

of energy resources. In this regard, India is committed to ensuring stable and reliable energy supplies from these countries to meet its growing energy needs, even though it lost its previous positions in these two countries earlier. It is no coincidence that India has invested in the development of oil and gas fields in Kazakhstan, having signed a number of agreements on the import of oil and gas. At the same time, purely economic factors, such as changes in the structure of trade, fluctuations in commodity prices and shifts in global economic conditions, can also contribute to changing India's policy towards Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. For example, an increase or decrease in energy demand will prompt India to adjust its policies accordingly to reflect this change.

At the same time, there are circumstances that prevent India from pursuing a more active policy in Central Asia. Among them, transport and logistics constraints should be noted primarily. The geographical location of Central Asia has predetermined India's limited access to the resources and markets of Central Asia. Such factors as distance, infrastructure and tariffs are the main obstacle to the expansion of trade and investment between India and the Central Asian countries. In addition, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are the most vulnerable countries in the world from the point of transports and logistics, as they not only have no access to the sea, but also border solely with countries that also have no access to the seas and oceans. In addition, international sanctions imposed on Iran, security issues and border disputes with Pakistan, as well as ongoing instability in Afghanistan and the lack of international recognition

for the current Afghanistan government, along with unresolved relations between Kabul and Dushanbe, are among the main obstacles to India's active engagement in the Central Asian countries. These difficulties will hinder the establishment and maintenance of strong ties between India and the countries of the region, both in present and future.

### **Conclusion**

The issues of Central Asian integration anIn general, India's foreign policy strategy in Central Asia in the short and medium terms is determined by a variety of factors formed taking into account changes in regional and global conditions. Therefore, India's foreign policy will develop permanently in response to changing global and regional challenges and potential changes in its domestic and foreign policy, which will lead to a significant intensification of its policy in the Central Asian countries.

At the same time, India will continue to emphasize multilateralism in its foreign policy, as it seeks to play a more active role in shaping the global agenda and addressing regional and international security issues.

In this regard, the prospective main goals of India's foreign policy remain as follows: continuation of building the strong partnership relations with the Central Asian countries within the frameworks of SCO, EAEU and in "India and Central Asia" format; strengthening the trade and economic ties between India and the region (trade, investment, tourism, energy cooperation, technological collaboration, and infrastructure development); cooperation in the field of security and defense (training of the military personnel from the Central Asian countries in India,



conduction of joint military exercises, collaborative peacekeeping activities in conflict zones, and counter-terrorism efforts). It is expected that there will be an expansion of the contractual and legal frameworks for cooperation between India and the Central Asian countries, as well as an intensification of diplomatic dialogue to address regional and international issues.

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# CENTRAL ASIA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF IRAN AND TURKEY

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**Abstract.** This article examines the issue of the Iranian-Turkish geopolitical rivalry in Central Asia. The intensifying anti-Russian sanctions are putting the Central Asian countries in front of a difficult choice. Iran and Turkey are also actively interested in Central Asia, using various tools to promote their own interests. The analysis of Turkish and Iranian policies in the region allows us to draw certain conclusions and model their prospects.

**Keywords:** *Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, geopolitics, competition.*

## ИРАН МЕН ТҮРКИЯНЫҢ СЫРТҚЫ САЯСАТЫНДАҒЫ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ

Әділбек Ермекбаев, Ғабит Жұматай, Әйгерім Алтынбек

**Андатпа.** Бұл мақалада Орталық Азиядағы иран-түрік геосаяси бәсекелестігі туралы мәселе қарастырылады. Ресейге қарсы санкциялардың күшеюі Орталық Азия елдерін күрделі таңдау алдына қойып отыр. Иран мен Түркия да өз мүдделерін алға жылжыту үшін әртүрлі құралдарды қолдана отырып, Орталық Азияға белсенді қызығушылық танытуда. Аймақтағы Түркия мен Иран

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саясатына жүргізілген талдау белгілі бір тұжырымдар жасауға және олардың перспективаларын модельдеуге мүмкіндік береді.

*Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Иран, Түркия, геосаясат, бәсекелестік.*

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## ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ ВО ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ ИРАНА И ТУРЦИИ

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**Аннотация.** В данной статье рассматривается вопрос об ирано-турецком геополитическом соперничестве в Центральной Азии. Усиливающиеся антироссийские санкции ставят страны Центральной Азии перед сложным выбором. Иран и Турция также активно интересуются Центральной Азией, используя различные инструменты для продвижения своих собственных интересов. Проведенный анализ турецкой и иранской политики в регионе, позволяют сделать определенные выводы и смоделировать их перспективы.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральная Азия, Иран, Турция, геополитика, конкуренция.

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### Introduction

Analyzing the geopolitics of modern conflicts, Russian expert Truevtsev [1] identifies the competition between Iran and Turkey in Central Asia as part of the broader Afro-Asian zone of political instability. Central Asia, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has historically been a region of confrontation between civilizations and empires.

The "Big Game" between England and Russia for dominance in the region holds particular significance. However, the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 temporarily halted the geopolitical struggle for Central Asia. During the Soviet era, the region was isolated and cut off from external influence, with Moscow severing ties with Turkey and Iran. The Soviet authorities implemented policies to widen the gap between the peoples of Central Asia and these neighboring countries, including introducing the Cyrillic alphabet, forcing Russification, and promoting atheism.

Turkey's foreign policy preferences also shifted under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, further contributing to the regional balance of power. The stability of the region was maintained by differences in religious views, which suited the major powers and ensured stability.

However, with the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of newly independent states in Central Asia, along with the conflict in Afghanistan, the idea of regional instability and the resurgence of the "Big Game" for dominance in the region emerged. In addition to Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan became involved in geopolitical rivalries in Central Asia, with China also emerging as a significant player in the region.

Iran considers itself an important player in Central Asia, emphasizing its geostrategic advantages, such as control over transit routes that could provide Central Asian countries with alternative options for exporting their natural resources bypassing Russia [2]. Iran

also highlights its relative stability and increasing international role.

For Turkey, especially since the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Central Asia has become a crucial region for expanding and strengthening its influence.

### **Methodology**

The methodological basis of the study is the fundamental principles and paradigms of classical realism and neo-realism in international relations theory. The end of the Cold War was the turning point in the history of the Central Asian newly independent nations and this landlocked area was drawn into geopolitical competition among regional and world powers. These great-power rivalries in Central Asia were conceptualized by some Western pundits as a new “Great Game” [3], and the region was widely seen as the “Eurasian Balkans” [4] in a pure classical perspective of realism and neorealism. Such rigid and static worldviews and discourses emerged during the Cold War that emanated from the principles of the realist school of thought in international relations. One of the key tenets of classical realism, according to Hans Morgenthau [5], is that international relations are always dominated by rivalry and struggle among state actors for power and domination.

The key concepts of neorealism were defined and developed by prominent scholars of this school such as Morgenthau, Gilpin, and Keohane as such: global politics is dominated by the state actors, states are constantly engaged in the geopolitical contest and struggle for power, hence the nature of international politics is to a large extent conflictual, and thus each state actor is responsible for ensuring its own security and well-being [6]. Although there was a paradigm shift in the 1990s in the realm of geopolitics

and foreign policy, the presence of Cold War mentality was felt across all spectra that were deeply embedded in the mindset of leading pundits and strategists in the West as well as in Russia. This kind of mentality is defined as the prevalence of worldviews and security perceptions that were dominant during the Cold War era [7].

Premised on such realist and neorealist principles although the newly independent states of Central Asia have been regarded as sovereign political actors, the region itself and the five ‘stans’ are seen through the prism of classical standpoints which are widely considered to be arena where the “New Great Game” is underway [3]. According to Cooley, in the 1990s and 2000s, the region was dominated by so-called the Big Three represented by Russia, China, and the USA have sought their geopolitical, economic, and security interests in Central Asia for the most part to access Caspian energy resources [3]. In this process, the Central Asian nations have been considered the clients of Russia, or even just pawns on a global chessboard. Meanwhile, besides so-called the Big Three, other regional powers such as Turkey and Iran have joined this power struggle in Central Asia, viewing the region as a natural realm to project their influence [3]. It is argued that in this geopolitical contest both Turkey nor Iran have no enough capabilities to dilute and eventually put an end to Russian hegemony in the region, at least they have the capacity to resist and undermine the reintegration of the Central Asian republics with Russia [4]. Thus the key tenets of classical realism and neorealism are employed in this research to shed light and explore the contest and struggle between Ankara and Teheran in the region.

**Iranian-Turkish competition:  
history and current development**

The rivalry between Iran and Turkey has deep historical and civilizational roots that trace back to the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran. This rivalry encompasses religious, historical, and cultural dimensions. During the Ottoman and Safavid periods, these two powers were significant adversaries, competing for dominance in regions such as the Caucasus and the Persian Gulf. The European powers often benefited from the enmity between the Ottomans and the Safavids. The expansion of the Russian Empire southward into the Caucasus and Central Asia led to conflicts between Russia and both the Ottomans and Iran. However, Russia also provided Persia with some leverage to contain the Ottoman Empire.

Given that the Ottomans were perceived as the greatest threat by Armenians, Georgians, and other Christians in the Caucasus, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was seen as beneficial not only for the great powers but also for the region's indigenous population. While the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the semi-independence of Iran from British influence somewhat reduced the intensity of the rivalry, it did not eliminate the spirit of competition between the two states. In the post-bipolar era, both Ankara and Tehran have positioned themselves as the Muslim world's geopolitical, spiritual, and cultural centers. This is evident in the rhetoric of leaders such as Erdogan and spiritual leaders in Iran.

Despite historically opposing approaches to the Middle East, both Iran and Turkey remain significant players in the Syrian conflict. However, Moscow has managed to prevent a direct clash between the two states. Turkey opposes Iran's growing influence in the region, as Iran seeks to create a chain of Sunni states in the Middle East that are aligned against

Tehran. Referred to as the "Sunni axis," this bloc includes Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Pakistan. Ankara aims to involve Turkic-speaking states in this geopolitical rivalry. However, there are several challenges that hinder the implementation of Turkey's agenda in the region.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, which was a counterbalance to Iran in the region, and the establishment of a Shiite government in Baghdad opened new prospects for turning Iran into a powerful regional player. Yet geopolitical confrontation between Iran and Turkey rose to a new round of tension, especially with Erdogan's ascent to power which has sought to restore the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the Mideast. The first war in Karabakh served as the reason for the resumption of Iranian-Turkish hostility, in which Iran indirectly backed Armenia in the face of the threat of Turkey's growing influence and pan-Turkic sentiments in the Caucasus [8].

The "Shia Triangle" or "Shia Crescent" refers to a geopolitical alliance of Iran, Syria, and Iraq with the prevalent use of the Shiite populations of Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen [9]. This is in turn seen as a manifestation of growing Iranian influence in the region. Although the Iranian authorities have repeatedly stated that Saudi Arabia and Israel have become beneficiaries of Washington's anti-Iranian propaganda in the region, after all, Iranian influence may well create problems not only for the region's transit infrastructure but also may pose a threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Iran's increasing influence in Syria through its support for the government of Bashar al-Assad enables it to exert influence in Lebanon through its alliance with Hezbollah. This allows Iran to pressure Israel, gain access to

Mediterranean ports in Lebanon and Syria, and utilize these countries as transit routes for energy resources, bypassing Turkey and the volatile Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Aden. The 25-year gas export contract between Ankara and Tehran is set to expire in the near future, and Turkey has not yet expressed interest in renewing it, indicating a preference for Azerbaijani gas.

Diversifying export destinations would enable Iran to play a significant role in the global energy sector and reduce its reliance on countries within the "Sunni crescent." Additionally, maintaining control over the "Shiite crescent" region would prevent the consolidation of transit potentials among Arab monarchies and Turkey. However, Iran's energy strategy relies on the lifting of sanctions, which would require Iran's compliance with international demands regarding its nuclear program. Even without the easing of sanctions, Iran retains the ability to exert control over Syria through the Assad regime. Iran aims to fuel sectarian tensions in the region, using this as a tool to pressure its regional rivals.

Turkey, with its complex and strained relationship with Iran, views Iran's position in the region with concern. While both countries refrain from directly accusing each other, a growing sense of rivalry is often observed among diplomats. The Turkish Foreign Minister, in his speech at the Munich Conference, referred to the situation in the Middle East as a result of "sectarian politics," without specifying the responsible party [10].

While it is challenging to reconcile the vital interests of Ankara and Tehran, both powers perceive Kurdish separatism as a threat, which could potentially foster a rapprochement between Turkey and Iran. The pursuit of Kurdish independence has the potential to bring the two sides closer.

However, the Middle East region has become a battleground for confrontation between Iran and Turkey. Given that the strategic interests of Tehran and Ankara are intertwined in this region, further escalation of geopolitical rivalry raises the possibility of the conflict spreading to Central Asia. Although Turkey and Iran have shown some restraint, but it is not entirely ruled out that their relations could escalate further.

### **Iranian and Turkish Policy in Central Asia**

The fall of the USSR and the emergence of sovereign states in Central Asia and the Caucasus changed the geopolitical configuration in the region. For the newly independent Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia, Ankara has become an important partner, although the level of economic and political influence of Ankara has been minimal. In the light of Russia's temporary retreat and disengagement from Central Asia in the 1990s Turkey and Iran endeavored to fill the power vacuum in the region. In this case, if the historical-civilizational commonality of the peoples of Central Asia gave advantages to Turkey, then Iran has a very unfavorable situation. The demise of the USSR was not beneficial for Tehran, since the resulting vacuum could be filled with forces extremely unfavorable to the Islamic Republic, such as Turkey and the United States. Tehran's anti-Western policy has become the reason for its isolation, and the newly independent states of Central Asia could compensate Tehran for the losses from isolation and provide an opportunity to enter new markets. Central Asia was regarded as a vital market, particularly there was a need to restore the economy after the costly Iran-Iraq war. Isolated Iran needed the Central Asian markets and the death of Islamic Revolution leader Ayatollah

Khomeini contributed to building a more pragmatic foreign policy in Iran [11].

While the Middle East is seen as an arena of Iran's aggressive policy, Tehran is showing its pragmatism towards Central Asia. Pragmatism is primarily due to Tehran's understanding of the underdevelopment of both political and orthodox Islam in Central Asia [12], and the dominance of secular heritage supporters and nationalists. In Central Asia, Iran is perceived as a threat and is seen as a force advancing the Islamization of the region. The paradox of Iran's policy is to support local Islamist groups that urged Central Asians to become "good Muslims" in their daily practice whereas Tehran seeks to curb Sunni radicalism in the region [13]. In its foreign policy, Tehran is more critical of the Western presence in the region.

The religious difference of Iran from the Turkic world was used as the main trump card as a balancing force in the politics of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Although Iran shares a common language with Tajikistan, the religious factor has always played an important role. Despite Iran has always backed Tajikistan, especially during the difficult period for Tajikistan of the revolt of the Uzbek colonel Mahmud Khudaiberdiev, relations between Dushanbe and Tehran could not be considered friendly. Then it was about the consultations held between the Tajik and Iranian security forces, and the alleged role of the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani "to save" the government of Emomali Rahmon [14]. However, relations with Dushanbe left much to be desired, in 2013-2016, a corruption scandal arose related to the financing of infrastructure projects in Tajikistan by Iranian businessmen. Against the backdrop of this incident, another scandal broke out related to the visit of the leader

of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, Muhiddin Kabiri, to Tehran [15], where he was met at the highest level, even though in Tajikistan he was accused of anti-government activities.

As a response to these events in 2016-2017, cultural representations of the Islamic Republic in Tajikistan were closed, which caused indignation among official Tehran [16]. In addition to the above incidents, Tajikistan took a number of diplomatic measures that did not inspire optimism for Iran. During the aggravation of Iran-Saudi relations, President Emomali Rahmon made an official visit to Riyadh, and in 2017 Tajikistan took part in the Arab-Islamic-American summit, which was clearly anti-Iranian in nature. Dushanbe thus demonstrated its readiness for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, Iran's key rival in the region, while placing the religious proximity above the linguistic one. Relations returned to normal only after 2019. The gradual withdrawal of the American military troops from Afghanistan, and the Taliban's return to power created a threat to ethnic Tajiks and Hazara Shiites traditionally backed by Tehran. Although this fact could bring Tehran and Dushanbe closer together to act as a united front against the Taliban, this configuration is unlikely due to a number of factors. In light of its takeover of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime seeks to gain international recognition and build strong ties with neighboring countries. Being under pressure from the United States, the former Afghan government in Kabul joined the sanctions against Tehran. Yet when the Taliban regained control of the country, they declared their readiness for constructive dialogue and, as a gesture of goodwill, opened the previously closed floodgates on the Helmand River and released water into the Iranian province of Sistan suffering from water shortages.

The next important factor is the growing influence of China in the region and the establishment of a dialogue between Kabul and Beijing on the use of the territory of Afghanistan as a transit zone.

With respect to the Central Asian nations, as opposed to Turkey, Iran has quite restrained plans. Iran has linguistic and religious proximity with the Persian-speaking communities in Central Asia as well as shares a common border. At the same time, Tehran plays an important role in the economic and political life of the countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia [53]. In addition to supporting the government of Emomali Rahmon, Iran has sought to build strong ties with Azerbaijan. However, in the process of determining the political and legal status of the Caspian Sea, Tehran adhered to positions that did not coincide with the interests not only of Baku but of Ashgabat. Moreover, the demonstrative flights of the Iranian Air Force near the Turkmen and Azerbaijani territorial waters almost led to an armed incident [17]. Although Iran was the main trade and economic partner, it can be assumed that Tehran's aggressive behavior largely induced Azerbaijani-Turkish rapprochement. The declaration of the neutrality of Turkmenistan was beneficial for Iran, thus it was possible to avoid the emergence of a threat from the north. Ashgabat considered Tehran a new trade and economic partner and relations between the two countries have been stable, despite disagreements over the Caspian Sea. In the Afghan issue, Turkmenistan adhered to neutrality, yet after the Taliban took control of the country in 1996, Ashgabat started negotiations with the Taliban through the mediation of Pakistan on laying a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan. This in turn enraged and caused Tehran's discontent, which

led to the temporary recall of the Iranian ambassador from Turkmenistan.

Although Tehran's relatively moderate relations with the Central Asia nations over the past few years were reduced to a minimum, recently the active expansion of Chinese capital in the region has become a catalyst for the intensification of Iran's policy in post-Soviet Central Asia, which some experts tend to call Tehran's "new Central Asian turn" [18]. Central Asia has become an important element in ensuring the security of the Islamic Republic, which a priori determines the high priority of this vector in Iran's foreign policy. The implementation of this policy has been developed in three main dimensions: geo-economic, civilizational and "realpolitik" [19]. Iran's activity in the Central Asian market also intensified after the signing of an agreement on a free trade zone with the member-states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Although relations reached a qualitatively new level after Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power in Uzbekistan, they were slightly spoiled due to the harboring of Uzbek Islamist leaders in Iran [20]. In 2019, Uzbekistan joined the China-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway route introduced a year earlier, thus developing its transit potential [21].

As Tehran's assertion in Central Asia as a dominant power is unlikely in the region as a dominant power is unlikely, Iran's priority is to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the Central Asian nations by providing them with a transit route for exporting their oil and gas to foreign markets. Iran is seen as an important transport corridor for the countries of Central Asia, yet the complex geopolitical processes in the South Caucasus, especially the Karabakh crisis, made Iran a likely partner to enter the world market. However, the US sanctions made this prospect very vague and less



favorable harming Iran's capabilities. In these circumstances, Turkey sought to take advantage of Iran's shrinking sway. Control over the transit of hydrocarbons from Central Asia could give advantages to Tehran in negotiations with the EU and the US to ease the crippling sanctions. Cooperation with the Central Asian nations enables Iran to strengthen economic ties with China, which has recently been active in the framework of the "One Belt, One Road" strategy [22]. Moreover, further strengthening Sino-Iranian cooperation could change the balance of power in the region [23].

Central Asia has been a top priority in Turkey's foreign policy. For Turkey, the region has always been strategically important, Ankara puts a great emphasis on the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic commonality with the region's nations. Prior to the Russian colonial conquest of the region, the Ottoman Empire's influence in Central Asia was rather limited or nonexistent. Besides, the local rulers and khans were in no hurry to recognize the Ottoman sultan's spiritual leadership of the Islamic world as the former did not wish to acknowledge the symbolic supreme authority of the latter striving to maintain their sovereignty [24]. During the Russian-Ottoman wars throughout the 19th century, the colonial expansion of tsarism in the region intensified, and the Turks repeatedly tried to use anti-colonial actions in the region as an instrument of eroding Russia's growing influence.

Having penetrated deeper southward, Imperial Russia started to build fortifications in the Caspian region during the 1830s, which alarmed the Ottoman authorities. The growing Russian expansion in Central Asia and the Caucasus led to the increased activity of Turkish agents who sought to encourage anti-Russian sentiment among indigenous

populations. In most cases, the Turkish agents consisted of Muslim preachers of the Sufis of the Naqshbandi tariqa which gave rise to Turkish religious propaganda in Central Asia. At that time, many facts about the arrest of Turkish subjects for anti-colonial propaganda and incitement to kill Russian settlers in the region were revealed. An increasing influence of the Turks in the region angered the Russian colonial authorities who took necessary steps to curb the subversion arresting Turkish subjects for anti-colonial propaganda and incitement to kill Russian settlers in the region. The intensification of religious propaganda was due to the fact that the religious community united the ethnic groups in the region in the anti-colonial struggle. The uprising of 1898 in Andijan was spearheaded by religious leaders such as Dukchi Ishan.

Along the Central Asian khanates, the Turks sought to establish relations with the Kashgar ruler Yakub Beg, who tried to achieve recognition and support for the state he created from the Ottoman Empire and Germany [25]. The German Kaiser influenced the Sultan and used Turkey as an ally against Russia and Britain. In this case, Saliev argues that "all of this indicates that during this period the Ottoman Empire actively used religion and its institutions in its geopolitics in Central Asia, which, however, had a limited effect, since the region had long been more connected with Russia" [26. p.129]. The Turkish agents tried to use the discontent in the region for their own purposes during the First World War, in particular, to ease the pressure of the Russians on the Caucasian front, an attempt was made to give the uprising of 1916 in Central Asia a pro-Turkish character. At that time, anti-Russian propaganda was mainly carried out from the territory of East Turkestan, where, according to reports from the

tsarist intelligence, German-Turkish intelligence activity increased [27]. During the establishment of Soviet rule, Turkish activity in Central Asia dwindled and virtually ceased to be visible. Only the disintegration of the Soviet empire allowed for the resumption of relations between Turkey and the Central Asian nations.

Current Turkish policy towards the Central Asian republics can be divided into three main periods. The first period is characterized by the fact that, for the secular republics of the region, a religious revival could create significant problems. In 1991, in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, religious authorities tried to declare their political ambitions on the wave of a religious renaissance, a little later, religious groups provoked a conflict that escalated into a civil war in Tajikistan. The religious nature of the regime in Iran, against the background of the secular in Turkey, was the least popular. In contrast to Iran, the collapse of the USSR was greeted enthusiastically in political circles in Turkey, as British scholar Gareth Winrow notes: “The sudden rediscovery of almost forgotten peoples of Turkic origin led to inflated hopes and unrealistic expectations on the part of some Turkish officials” [28. p. 3].

In the first period, Turkey increasingly focused on pan-Turkic sentiments. Backed by the United States although Ankara hoped to establish itself in the region as a “big brother”, this policy met resistance from local authorities and the population [29]. The first period was also characterized by the fact that despite Turkey’s obvious desire to assert itself in the region, it was not always possible to build well-established relations. For instance, the initiative of “Turkic unity” proposed by Turgut Ozal was rebuffed by the leaders of the Central Asian republics. Former

President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev described these events as follows: “It seemed to many that Turkey would be able to solve all our problems ... But what did this mean in reality? This meant abandoning the newly acquired independence and breaking off traditional relations with neighbors. This also meant just substituting the old big brother with a new one” [30. p. 196].

Besides Kazakhstan, the Uzbek leadership did not support Turgut Ozal’s initiative either. Relations with Tashkent became more complicated in 1993 when the Turkish authorities granted asylum to the Uzbek opposition leader Muhammad Salih, who was convicted in his homeland of undermining national security. Tashkent’s attempts to extradite oppositionists by the Turkish authorities were unsuccessful [31], and after the failed assassination attempt on Islam Karimov, the Uzbek authorities tightened control over religious organizations, including almost all Turkish educational institutions in the country were closed, and students in Turkey were immediately recalled to the homeland. Strained relations reached a climax in 2011 when the Turkish parliament included Uzbekistan among the unfriendly countries [32]. Despite the optimistic start, relations with Kyrgyzstan were far from being the best. They were also overshadowed after President Almazbek Atambaev refused to close Turkish educational institutions associated with the religious authority Fethullah Gulen, who was accused in Turkey of attempting a coup d’état [33]. It can thus be noted that despite the fact that relations were established, the first stage of Turkish-Central Asian relations did not meet the expectations of the Turkish leadership. Several factors can be identified as the reasons: first, the geographical remoteness of Turkey itself from the region; second,

the strong cultural and political influence of Russia, and third, the level of Turkey's economic presence was much limited. This also manifested itself during the period of aggravation of Russian-Turkish relations, when the authorities of Kazakhstan [34] and Kyrgyzstan [35] showed pro-Russian commitment. During the meeting of the 68th session of the UN General Assembly, while discussing the Crimean crisis, the Central Asian republics were among the countries not supporting the condemnation of Russia's annexation of the peninsula [36].

The second stage was characterized by the expansion of the economic, political, cultural, and humanitarian influence of Turkey within the framework of multilateral platforms. During this period Ankara increasingly gave priority to its "soft power", including the propaganda of Turkish culture, language, and even cuisine has intensified. It is worth mentioning that this trend has intensified around the world with the advent of the Justice and Development Party [37], the Turkish film industry has changed the genre of serials and talk shows, giving preference to propaganda, where "they present a sanitized, idealized version of Turkish life [38]. The activities of Turkish educational centers in the countries of Central Asia also intensified. In addition to the existing Manas International University in Bishkek and the Khoja Ahmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University in Turkestan, a large number of language courses, lyceums, research centers, universities were also opened, the quota for students from Central Asia was also expanded under the program of academic mobility, state and waqf grants for studying at universities in Turkey. Moreover, many clergymen appeared in spiritual institutions and competed with graduates of Arab religious

centers. In most cases, representatives of "pro-Turkish views" actively positioned themselves as anti-Salafi and received the sympathy of local religious communities, primarily Sufis.

The inception of a new third stage in Turkish foreign policy has been facilitated by several factors, some of which were independent of Turkey itself. Firstly, these geopolitical changes emerged after the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent imposition of economic sanctions. Secondly, this is the situation in Xinjiang, where the pressure on ethnic and religious minorities has intensified, and Turkey has tried to use both moments to its advantage.

### **Pan-Turanism in Central Asia: Opportunities and Risks**

Xi Jinping's rise to power marked a new stage in history, notably the growing Chinese economic expansion in Central Asia and throughout the world was overshadowed by a repressive policy against ethnic and religious minorities in domestic policy. Although this issue requires careful study and is not the subject of this article, it is difficult to argue what was the root cause of this kind of policy. There are several overlapping and conflicting interpretations of this issue. While some are inclined to believe that the growing pressure is a manifestation of the "proletarian spirit" of Comrade Xi, others argue that increased pressure on Muslims is a reaction to the growing cases of involvement of China's Muslims from Xinjiang in Islamist groups in Afghanistan [39] and Syria [40]. Uyghur separatism has on numerous occasions represented a threat to China. During the 1990s and beginning of 2000s separatist sentiments grew among Muslims in Xinjiang. Turkey and the United States strive to effectively use this for their own purposes.

On the one hand, the issue of violation of the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in China is the subject of disagreement between the West and Beijing, and between Ankara and Beijing on the other [41]. Erdogan has spoken out more than once against China's crackdown on ethnic minorities in Xinjiang [42; 43]. Ankara does not hide its sympathy for political dissidents and Muslim activists from Xinjiang, most of whom have taken refuge in Turkey. In addition to defectors from Xinjiang, citizens of Kazakhstan who express anti-Chinese and anti-Russian rhetoric, activists of the 'language patrols' have also found refuge in Turkey. Regarding the latter, it is worth noting that they have become more frequent recently, despite the attempt by the authorities to suppress such kinds of actions.

Besides China, Iran is forced to deal with separatist tendencies, especially among Iranian Azerbaijanis [44], yet not as harshly as China does. It should thus be noted that for Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan, where a significant proportion of Turkic-speaking communities live pan-Turkism poses a threat. Any manifestation of pan-Turkism is painfully perceived by the ruling elites of these countries. Despite the efforts to curb the spread of Pan-Turkic ideas in the Turkic republics of Central Asia, there is a tendency for Turkish President Erdogan to grow in popularity, in most cases be perceived as the leader of the Turkic world [45]. Relationships that have been slightly tainted in the past years have evolved from "unwanted big brother" to strategic [46]. Turkey thus seeks to open the gates to Central Asia and the South Caucasus with the help of military, economic, and cultural tools to change the regional balance of power in favor of its interests [47].

Sensing changes in geopolitics and the

desire of the Central Asian nations to keep the balance of power in the region, Ankara is actively pursuing a policy to strengthen its position. Against the backdrop of growing Sinophobia and Russophobia in the region, Erdogan is pursuing strengthening Turkey's influence in the region, as in the case of the map of the "Turkic world" presented to Erdogan by Turkish nationalist leader Devlet Bahçeli [48], which can be perceived as a direct challenge to Russia and China. In this sense, Ankara is counting on possible support from the West, since they see the development of pan-Turkism opposition to the Kremlin-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In turn, Moscow sees an external trace in the growth of anti-Russian sentiments and it seems not accidental that the article by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [49] about the growth of xenophobia against Russians, and a hint that it was orchestrated "from outside". The Central Asian public is accustomed to this kind of statement by individual Russian politicians, but this article published by Sergei Lavrov, an experienced diplomat, and Putin's closest associate, had a clearly defined purpose. And it is not without reason that this article was published on the eve of the VIII summit of Turkic-speaking states in Istanbul.

## Conclusion

It is evident that Central Asia is a strategically important region in global politics. The latest events in Kazakhstan in the first half of January 2022 showed that Russia has no intention to allow Kazakhstan to get out of its influence. It is abundantly clear that although Turkey and Iran have sufficient capabilities to challenge Russia, it seems they will not be

able to completely oust Russia and China. Yet they may well create competition for them and use anti-Chinese and anti-Russian sentiments for their own purposes.

It is worth noting that Iran's bet on Islamist groups during the 1990s did not yield significant benefits to Tehran, but rather strengthened the position of its geopolitical rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The weak presence of Shiite communities in Central Asia, except for Tajikistan's Badakhshan province, induced Tehran to provide support to Sunni political Islam. Although Tehran's policy achieved a particular effect during the 1990s in Tajikistan, in other republics Iran did not find support from the secular and religious elites. Today, Tehran's priority in Central Asia is to boost economic cooperation with the five republics, at the same time maintaining Iran's role as an alternative corridor for entering the foreign market, bypassing Russia. As part of the implementation of this strategy, it will be beneficial for Tehran to escalate the tense situation in the South Caucasus and prevent the launch of the Zangezur corridor. In light of the January 2022 events, the damaged reputation of Kazakhstan as a stable country will push China to quickly implement a project to build a railway in the direction of Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan. It is obvious that such a scenario, namely building the Chinese railway network is beneficial for Iran. Turkey has become more active in the region over the past decade, relying on pan-Turkic sentiments, accompanied by the demonization of the image of Russia and China.

Growing political pressure from Russia and the economic expansion of China, especially in light of the latest developments around Afghanistan, leave Central Asia in a difficult situation, which

makes Turkey the only alternative to get out of the "geopolitical lockdown". At the same time, the further dissemination of pan-Turanism can change the geopolitical configuration in the region, the strengthening of Turkey and Pan-Turkic ideas is of concern to China, Iran, and Russia, respectively. To deter and erode Ankara's growing influence in Central Asia the geopolitical axis "Moscow-Beijing-Tehran" with the prospect of joining Kabul may emerge.

It is worth mentioning that for the Western world led by Washington, the probability of the creation of the continental "Moscow-Beijing-Tehran" triple block is perceived as threatening and a potential source of geopolitical tensions in Eurasia, which was consistently warned by leading American strategists [4]. Specifically, such a powerful alliance may emerge if the US keeps seeking an antagonistic and hostile relationship towards Beijing and Tehran, which in turn may induce further rapprochement among Iran, China, and Russia. Despite the persistent cautions made by certain American strategists of risks to perpetuating Washington's hostility towards Tehran, which may eventually result in the rapprochement of Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran, American attitudes towards not only Iran but with respect to Russia and China have largely remained antagonistic. Instead of encouraging closer cooperation between Turkey and Iran, Washington has further aggravated the geopolitical situation in Eurasia by imposing economic sanctions and isolating Iran and Russia, as well as by containing Beijing's growing economic and geopolitical influence in the region. China's rise as a global power through BRI and its cooperation with Russia and Iran may lead to further diminishing and eroding American and Western influence in Eurasia.

Under the Obama administration, Washington sought to soften its relationship with Tehran by concluding the Iran nuclear deal that curtailed Tehran's nuclear program, and in response the US agreed to lift sanctions imposed on Iran [50]. With Donald Trump's rise to power, however, Washington withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed back all sanctions, thus sour and belligerent relationships between the US and Iran have resumed. Moreover, the Donald Trump administration sought to limit its foreign policy engagement and tightened its immigration policy under the pretext of preventing foreign terrorists from entering the US [51]. This reversal in American policy towards Iran has forced Tehran to seek closer cooperation and partnership with Russia, China, and the Central Asian nations. Notably, Iran has sought to cooperate with the members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) led by the Kremlin as well as Tehran was granted an observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) [50]. From this perspective, Iran could play a significant role in the region and could connect the Central Asian countries to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Moreover, the further rapprochement of Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran may be

achievable in the long run despite the existing disagreements among them.

Western-backed Ankara is not interested in the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran triple alliance and in order to prevent and undermine such a scenario Turkey is leveraging ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties with the Central Asian republics, particularly placing a great emphasis on Pan-Turkic ideas and kinship [52]. In addition to cultural affinity, Turkey has pursued to leverage its soft power and secular Islamic democracy by creating a network of Turkish secondary schools and higher educational institutions across the region and offering scholarships to young people from Central Asia for studying at universities in Turkey.

It would be in the interest of the Turkic-speaking countries to shun excessive popularization of the Pan-Turanism and Pan-Turkic ideas that irritate their powerful neighbors. With respect to Turkey and Iran, it is necessary to give preference to economic pragmatism and work on the principle of the "Asian paradox", whereas political problems should remain in the shadow of economic cooperation. Only, in this case, all parties would be able to achieve real progress in the framework of long-term cooperation.

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# FOSTERING RESILIENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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**Abstract.** The study of EU policy towards Central Asia is important for understanding the nature of the integration project itself. The programs implemented by the European Union in Central Asia is very important in terms of developing its potential in the international arena, the ability to turn its «normative power» and economic power into political influence. Central Asian countries' cooperation with the EU in its development has passed through several phases. The current period seeks to consolidate and expand the EU's position in Central Asia. The EU as a reliable partner has a strong interest in seeing Central Asia as a stable, rules-based and connected area. According to the new 2019 Strategy, the goal of the EU is foster resilience through knowledge-sharing (training, monitoring, mentoring and advising) and financial aid. Resilience is a main message in this strategy. The EU policy is aimed at transforming Central Asian states in accordance with its own vision and interests. The EU connects this ultimate goal with the democratic and economic development of Central Asia and this indicates that normative component of the EU foreign policy is still crucial one. Such approach implemented within the framework of various formats does not always achieve its goal and faces resistance from national elites.

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*Keywords: Central Asia, European Union, resilience, normative power, strategy, democracy.*

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## ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДА ТҰРАҚТЫЛЫҚТЫ НЫҒАЙТУ: ЕУРОПАЛЫҚ ОДАҚТЫҢ РӨЛІ

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**Андатпа.** ЕО-ның Орталық Азияға қатысты саясатын зерделеу интеграциялық жобаның мәнін түсіну үшін маңызды. Еуропалық Одақтың Орталық Азия елдеріне қатысты жүзеге асырып жатқан бағдарламалары оның халықаралық аренадағы әлеуетін дамыту, «нормативтік күші» мен экономикалық қуатын саяси ықпалға айналдыру мүмкіндігі тұрғысынан қызығушылық тудырады. Орталық Азия елдерінің ЕО-мен ынтымақтастығы өзінің дамуында бірнеше кезендерден өтті. Қазіргі уақытта ЕО-ның Орталық Азиядағы ұстанымдарын нығайтуға және кеңейтуге бағытталған. Еуроодақ Орталық Азияның ережелер мен өзара тәуелділікке негізделген тұрақтылық аймағына айналдыруда сенімді әріптес ретінде болуға тырысуда. 2019 жылғы жаңа Стратегияға сәйкес, Еуроодақтың басты мақсаты аймақ мемлекеттерінің икемділігін нығайтуда олармен білім алмасумен (оқыту, мониторинг, тәлімгерлік және кеңес беру) және қаржылық көмек берумен айқындалады. Тұрақтылық – бұл стратегияның басты идеясы болып табылады. ЕО саясаты Орталық Азия мемлекеттерін өзінің көзқарасы мен мүдделеріне сәйкес өзгертуге бағытталған. ЕО бұл түпкілікті мақсатты Орталық Азияның демократиялық және экономикалық дамуымен байланыстырады және бұл ЕО сыртқы саясатының нормативтік құрауышы әлі де шешуші рөл атқаратынын айқындайды. Түрлі форматтар аясында жүзеге асырылатын мұндай көзқарас әрқашан өз мақсатына жете бермейді және ұлттық элитаның қарсылығына тап болуда.

**Түйін сөздер:** Орталық Азия, Еуропалық Одақ, тұрақтылық, нормативтік күш, стратегия, демократия.

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## ПОВЫШЕНИЕ УСТОЙЧИВОСТИ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: РОЛЬ ЕВРОПЕЙСКОГО СОЮЗА

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**Аннотация.** Изучение политики ЕС в отношении Центральной Азии важно для понимания сущности самого интеграционного проекта. Программы, реализуемые Европейским союзом в отношении стран Центральной Азии, представляют интерес с точки зрения развития его потенциала на международной арене, способности превратить свою «нормативную силу» и экономическую мощь в политическое влияние. Сотрудничество стран Центральной Азии с ЕС в своем развитии прошло несколько этапов. Текущий период направлен на

укрепление и расширение позиций ЕС в Центральной Азии. ЕС позиционирует себя как надежного партнера, проявляя серьезную заинтересованность в превращении Центральной Азии в зону стабильности, основанную на правилах и взаимосвязанности. Согласно новой Стратегии 2019 года, целью ЕС является повышение устойчивости посредством обмена знаниями (обучение, мониторинг, наставничество и консультирование) и финансовой помощи. Устойчивость является основным посылом этой стратегии. Политика ЕС направлена на преобразование государств Центральной Азии в соответствии со своим видением и интересами. ЕС связывает эту конечную цель с демократическим и экономическим развитием Центральной Азии, и это указывает на то, что нормативная составляющая внешней политики ЕС по-прежнему остается решающей. Такой подход, реализуемый в рамках различных форматов, не всегда достигает своей цели и встречает сопротивление национальных элит.

***Ключевые слова:** Центральная Азия, Европейский союз, устойчивость, нормативная власть, стратегия, демократия.*

### **Basic provisions**

According to its global foreign and defense policy strategy, one of the strategic goals of the European Union (EU) is to ensure its decisive role in international relations. Accordingly, the study of its foreign policy, as well as the main contradictions that arise when interacting with non-European countries, is especially promising, since this directly affects the possibility of the European Union becoming a global actor in world politics. The importance of the Central Asian region in international relations is growing. This is primarily due to its exceptional geographical position, which can be used to create a trade corridor between Europe and Asia.

### **Introduction**

The societies in the Central Asia and for EU-Central Asia relations are witnessing turbulent and transformative times. In the background of the global pandemic, conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the increased assertiveness China leave the EU appearing as a powerless, geopolitically inactive actor. These changing realities demand a critical

reflection on the limits and potential of EU-Central Asia relations. In 2019, the EU launched new Strategy for Central Asia to pursue concrete efforts towards improving the relations with the five post-soviet republics. One of its stated objectives is to assist the region develop as a «more resilient, prosperous and closely interconnected economic and political space».[1] Boosting resilience has lately become popular in the EU's foreign policy. The resilience concept was previously outlined by the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in June 2016 and intended to deal effectively with the changes and challenges taking place at the international level. The rise of resilience at the EU level coincided with a shift from the normative ambitions of the European Security Strategy (2003) to the more pragmatic foreign policy advocated by the Global Strategy (2016).

The purpose of this article is to determine whether the recent “resilience turn” in EU foreign policy is the adequate response to current challenges in the region, and how we could understand the practical application of this new policy concept. For the EU, supporting

resilience means strengthening “the capacity of societies, communities and individuals to manage opportunities and risks in a peaceful and stable manner, and to build, maintain or restore livelihoods in the face of major pressures.” [2] Thus, while having a stronger focus on local stakeholders, resilience is also closely aligned with managing global and local risks, and recovering from conflicts and crises. However, there is considerable uncertainty concerning this concept, and views vary from resilience being a trendy word to being another ambitious effort to make the EU’s regional approach more effective.

### **Description of materials and methods**

This study required to consider the works of domestic and foreign authors devoted to general theoretical problems of EU’s foreign policy issues and specifics of EU relations with Central Asian states. In the study, such methods as comparative analysis and historical method are used to solve the goals and objectives set by the authors. Comparative analysis is used to compare the main priorities goals of the EU policy towards Central Asia since 1990s, while historical method enabled to analyze the evolution of the European Union's policy in Central Asia, the main contradictions and dilemmas that determined the effectiveness of its activities.

### **Results**

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine impacts regional affairs in Eurasia, including European Union - Central Asia relations. This conflict and its political and economic consequences would enable the European Union and Central Asia to develop closer partnerships, especially

in energy sector. Visits of several high-ranking EU officials, including European Council President Charles Michel can be interpreted as an indicator of this goal of the EU. One of the main purposes of these contacts is developing energy-focused economic collaborations and expanding existing and developing new international transport corridors between Europe and Central Asia to facilitate global production and supply chains. And it's becoming increasingly clear that Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries will not squander the opportunity to fuel a new trend in its relations with European partners. This trend would benefit both sides. However, being a very ambitious actor, the EU’s impact is limited and mainly manifested by promotion a resilient government and society through its normative power and developmental aids. Such factors as lagging decision-making process of the EU and its structures on initiatives regarding Central Asia and Central Asia’s geographical remoteness, presence of normative influence of other actors like China and Russia are not conducive to fostering EU’s region-driven approach in building resilience in Central Asia.

The EU is criticized for its persistent efforts to export European solutions in the Central Asian reality. The political elites of the Central Asian countries perceive EU normative politics as a threat to stability, which in fact impede positive fruitful relationship. China and Russia use other narratives that are perceived positively by Central Asians due to their like-mindedness.

### **Discussion**

From the beginning of the 1990s, the EU has gradually begun to build its interaction with Central Asian states by

identifying the most important areas for itself. The priorities and tasks of the EU in the region have been outlined in the report «EU's relations with the newly independent states of Central Asia», issued in 1995. This document provided the backbone on pursuing a common policy towards Central Asian countries.[3] The legal basis for cooperation was laid down in 1995-1996 with the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with all Central Asian countries.

During the first years of cooperation, the main EU interests in the region focused on ensuring the stable development of the regional states and their transition to a just and democratic political system, energy cooperation and infrastructure projects.

In practice, «Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States» (TACIS) was the main tool to ensure the socio-economic development of the Central Asian states. Economic growth, as well as reducing poverty and unemployment were absolute prerequisites for regional states' stabilization of the region which have faced various obstructions at times.

In 1996, the Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE) program was launched to ensure the EU interests in the energy sector. The main purpose was the cooperation in the development of infrastructure for sharing energy resources. Infrastructure projects were implemented with the help of the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) program, the key task of which was to create transport hubs for a stable exchange of goods and services between the EU and other project participants. The renewal of the transport system of the region was a necessary condition for the integration of the Central Asian republics into the global economy.

At that time, these abovementioned programs were the only tools of cooperation in which Central Asian states were included. At the same time, no special programs for the region were developed in the 1990s since the region was not a priority for the EU and it was confirmed by smaller amounts of assistance compared to other countries of the post-Soviet space.

As the operation of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan had launched, the EU issued a strategy document on policy in Central Asia where special emphasis was placed on the importance of assistance in ensuring security and stability in the region. The EU created two programs for the exchange of experience in the field of border control and countering drug trafficking: the «Border Management Program in Central Asia» (BOMCA) and the «Central Asia Drug Action Program» (CADAP). Meanwhile, during this period value-based initiatives are also actively promoted.

In addition to ensuring stable development, the TACIS program offered assistance in building democratic political systems and a market economy. The normative aspect of the EU foreign policy met a level of resistance. These shortcomings were catalysts for the dilemma of foreign policy choice, which was reinforced due to the characteristics of the region and its environment. Andijan uprisings of 2005 were one of the main stumbling blocks. The EU issued an unequivocal condemnation of the Uzbek government's position by appealing to respect human rights. [4] The EU sanctions had rather a symbolic effect and negatively affected bilateral relations.

In 2007, the EU strengthened its level of regional political approach by adopting

first long-term strategy where energy cooperation has become one of the key interests. In the 2000s, EU's increased attention to the concept of energy security was associated with energy resources supplies as a tool of pressure in interstate relations. It was reinforced by the implementation such projects like the Nabucco gas pipeline and the Trans-Caspian oil pipeline.

In the face of the persisting threats of cross-border crime, terrorism and drug trafficking across the Central Asia, cooperation in security sector was continued. In this area, the BOMCA and CADAP programs remained the main instruments of EU policy. These EU «soft security» initiatives were characterized by a lack of integrity and no specific goals had been set, which was also a hallmark of EU foreign policy in general. [5]

The EU has consistently tried to consolidate its own vision of key areas of cooperation through the implementation of real initiatives. This period is characterized by the consolidation of the pragmatic component of the policy, the EU quite clearly defined its own interests in the region, offering specific solutions to existing problems in the form of various programs. The EU's impact has enhanced, the results were seen in the numbers of programs for the Central Asian region and the frequency of meetings, visits and dialogues. All this indicated about growing influence of the EU.

The EU's value-based approach has retained its priority in the Strategy-2007. The EU initiated the launch of annual dialogues on human rights with the leaders of the countries. However, the effectiveness of these dialogues, as well as the overall EU policy in the field of human rights protection in Central Asia, remained at a low level due to the lack of

specific goals, generic and vague agenda, while specific problems and violations were rarely discussed. [6] The EU does not always take into account all divergences that exist among Central Asian countries in resolving regional issues therefore a number of their programs are poorly implemented.

The EU was unable to develop a unified approach to the region that would link all policy areas into an integrated system. Experts described this problem through criticism of the tactical nature of the 2007 strategy that was not a kind of consolidated model for building interaction with the region. [7] Moreover, the value-based component did not have any real effect. European experts agreed that the key problems of bilateral relations were perceived by various EU bodies differently, preferring to exclude human rights violations from the agenda. Having developed specific interests in the 2007 strategic document, the EU failed to balance them with the priorities of its own normative policy. [8]

Many Kazakhstani experts were unanimous in reiterating that in recent years there has been a noticeable decline in the EU activity in the region. «The EU is more focused on its own internal problems. The EU is in the process of improving instruments of cooperation, including regional ones». [9]

The EU lags behind other actors as Russia and China. Russia and China continued to increase their influence by developing projects for multilateral cooperation with the Central Asian states, which was perceived by the latter as a format of interaction corresponding to their interests. The Central Asian states have also adopted some legislative practices from these external actors that indicated a convergence of governance

models.

Consequently, the EU policy passed through regional countries' reluctance since the EU tried to connect interests with the ideas about security and political development, which in fact led to non attractiveness of its values. Accordingly, the EU tried to strengthen normative component of own foreign policy that wasn't effective in Central Asia due to their political systems and impact of regional actors.

The strategy has been amended and improved four times to increase its effectiveness. A major drawback of the 2007 strategy was its comprehensiveness with lack of effective tools and low interest of the Central Asian countries. At least the Central Asian countries have already gained experience in multilateral cooperation with the EU.

### **An overview of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia**

The new EU Strategy for Central Asia was approved in 2019 at the meeting of the Council of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the EU. EU's intention to take relations with Central Asian countries to a new level has been stated.

The process of updating the EU Strategy in Central Asia had started in 2015, when the new conclusions of the EU Council on a strategy for Central Asia were issued. The necessity to adopt a new Strategy was justified by the emerging new geopolitical realities, as well as the growing demands and opportunities for enhancing cooperation. For the EU, transport infrastructure projects have always been an important part of the cooperation. According to this document, such projects would facilitate integration of the region into the world economy and accelerate aggregate welfare gains. [10]

This policy direction was later raised

again in the document «Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy» issued in 2018. The growing interdependence of Europe and Asia, which is manifested in the strengthening economic and political ties encouraged to adopt this document. In order to ensure further cooperation, it was found necessary to develop interconnectedness between the two continents, which would assist expand employment opportunities and increase economic growth. The strategy mentioned Central Asian states as one of the key beneficiaries of connectivity. It is also very important that document underscores «sustainability» as a central variable in the development of infrastructure that ensures connectivity of the two continents. [11]

The abovementioned goals implemented through the projects in the field of assistance in building infrastructure, in deregulating customs regimes, and stimulating intraregional trade. In general, 51 million euros were allocated to projects in this area until 2020. [12] Accordingly, the focus in the energy sector has shifted to ensuring sustainable consumption of energy resources and the creation of a region-wide energy infrastructure. The new concept of energy cooperation appeared in the new EU strategy of 2019, in which the rational use of energy resources was a way to solve economic problems and improve the overall resilience of the region to external and internal shocks.

A similar approach was developed in the 2016 EU global strategy. The strategy introduces the concept of «resilience» which embrace stable and economically developed states in neighboring regions. [2] The promotion of state and societal resilience in its proximity is caused by rational considerations, since instability could negatively impact on EU's interests,

while a resilient state is a secure state, and security is crucial for prosperity and democracy. Consequently, investing in neighboring states surrounding Europe could prevent possible risks and enable to address challenges. According to 2019 Strategy for Central Asia, one of the three stated priorities in the region was ‘partnering for resilience’. The Partnership for Resilience implies that “the EU will partner with Central Asian countries in anticipating and addressing the challenges affecting their socio-economic goals and security and enhancing their ability to embrace reform and modernization”. [1] These measures encompass such areas like democracy promotion, border management and environmental protection, including the distribution of water resources and management of energy sources.

The 2019 Global strategy does link resilience to democracy: “A resilient society featuring democracy, trust in institutions, and sustainable development lies at the heart of a resilient state” [1]. It was reiterated in 2019 strategy for Central Asia as well. The main aim of EU is to assist states build their resilience through knowledge-sharing (training, monitoring, mentoring and advising) and financial aid. In general, the EU could serve as a mentor to build resilient and responsive states. This requires enhancement of human rights and constructive state-society relations.

The enhancing resilience was soon put into practice. Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), the Central Asia Covid-19 Crisis Response Programme (CACCR) became the main programs in this area and these instruments focused on cooperation not only with governmental structures, but also involved representatives of grassroots organizations to this dialogue.

However, in terms of resilience support, it is highly improbable that it would have a real impact because of EU’s limited capacity in Central Asia. Such factors as lagging decision-making process of the EU and its structures on initiatives regarding Central Asia and Central Asia’s geographical remoteness, presence of normative influence of other actors like China and Russia are not conducive to fostering EU’s region-driven approach in building resilience in Central Asia.

### **The EU and Central Asian geopolitical situation**

The EU strategy faces competing visions from both China and Russia. There is a noticeable strengthening of the Chinese influence, which is associated with the expansion of its economic involvement in the region. This trend was initiated by the Chinese President Xi Jinping through the implementation of the One Belt, One Road strategy. The goal of this ambitious project was to create a trade corridor between Europe and Asia, which involves the involvement of \$1 trillion in investment.[13]

Central Asia is one of the core elements for the development of this strategy, which is reflected in the Chinese infrastructure projects financed in the region. [14] However, China’s development assistance programs are somewhat different from the initiatives proposed by EU countries. Non-interference, respect for sovereignty, joint development and mutual benefit are the main principles for offering aid, while Western countries are insisting on the importance of human rights and democracy standards in their aid programs. [15] Chinese investment is presented as a tool to weaken the EU’s normative influence, because it suggests the Central Asian countries an alternative that are more attractive when European aid



continues to insist on certain conditions. The leaders of the Central Asian states are inclined to rather positively perceive the Chinese economic assistance due to the absence of any conditions imposing certain values.

In addition, European investments do not have a significant impact due to the existence of special conditions in Central Asian states, which include inefficient management structures. [16] Consequently, the internal characteristics of the Central Asian republics also play a crucial role in weakening the mechanisms of EU normative policy.

Russia also has a significant influence on the Central Asian states especially in security sector. Russia is a member of several organizations that also include the Central Asian states. Among them are the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the SCO. Russia has certain advantage over the EU since it has channels for constant dialogue and cooperation in the field of security while latter one relies mainly on individual consultations with state representatives.

The potential of Russia's influence in the region is diverse, and its involvement in cooperation with the Central Asian republics is deeper than that of the EU. The relative similarity of political development models and the similarity of security concepts provide Russia with a certain advantage over the EU, which insists on promoting its values in interaction with the states of Central Asia.

Thus, the central element of this stage in the development of EU policy is the gradual shift of focus towards resilience as a necessary condition for the stability of the political and economic systems of the region. This trend is complemented by the emergence of the strategy

"Connecting Europe and Asia - building blocks of the EU strategy", which notes the need for increased investment in sustainable infrastructure development in Central Asia. There is also a certain decline in the importance of projects in the field of energy security, along with delays in the implementation of EU initiatives in this area.

In the 2019 Strategy, Central Asia was no longer considered solely as a source of energy, the region began to be perceived as a transit area for trade flows. The region's new role as a transit area is also associated with the growing importance of external actors.

In fact, in the EU's view, Central Asia is increasingly important transit region and the development of transport infrastructure there could bring benefits, including to its trade relations with China. The security of the region and trade relations between the Central Asian states are connected with Russia's stance, because due to its traditional influence and various projects of interstate cooperation, it plays an extremely important role in these areas. It is also impossible to exclude Afghan factor, which was also identified as a constant source of threats to the region.

The realization that the region was becoming an object of increased competition between great powers also forced the EU representatives to transform their approach to the Central Asian countries and highlight those areas of cooperation in which the EU had obvious advantages. The reorientation towards interaction with external actors is also linked to the broader objectives of the EU foreign policy that implies interconnectivity of Europe and Asia.

## Conclusion

Generally, it can be pointed out that

the EU's stance towards Central Asian region is evolving. Resilience building is a key pillar in the 2019 EU Strategy. The resilience construction in Central Asia is mainly implemented through multilateral platforms as well as provide humanitarian aid.

The EU has focused its attention on projects in the field of transport infrastructure, which also influenced the growth of the importance of external actors.

The EU is facing one of the greatest

challenges ever as current conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the reallocation in its budget is affecting the resilience-building efforts in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, the EU remains one of the most important geopolitical and geo-economic actors that determine the future and security of Central Asia and the EU must finally act as a serious security power. Europe should act more confidently demonstrate more realism in the area of democracy.

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