

## BILATERAL RELATIONS OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES IN PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC CONDITIONS

Abdusamat Abdukhalilov

Researcher Tashkent State University Of Oriental Studies

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

**ABSTRACT:** - Today the Central Asian region includes five countries - Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. These countries gained independence after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and to this day the issue of regional cooperation and integration is one of the most pressing.

Although today all the countries of Central Asia emphasize that the direction of the region is a priority in their foreign policy, during the past period, due to the complex relations between the countries of the region and the processes of integration under the influence of external forces, they did not take place.

**KEYWORDS:** Soviet Union, Central Asian, economic competence, governments, negative impact

### INTRODUCTION

In the early days of independence, in particular, on December 13, 1991, a consultative meeting of the leaders of the Central Asian countries was held in Ashgabat, where the situation related to the disintegration of the USSR and the issues of further development of relations in the region were discussed. In fact, this meeting was a response to the meeting of the heads of state of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in Belovezhskaya Pushcha without the invitation of the Central Asian republics and the decision to dissolve the Soviet Union and establish the CIS without their consent.

At that time, the slogans “Turkestan is our common home” were heard. However, no one forced the young independent republics to unite. Such aspiration arose out of a natural need, so to speak, on the basis of a long-established historical law in the region [1]. Uzbek expert F. Tolipov admits that from 1991 to 2006, the process of integration in Central Asia continued continuously

and successfully. Over fifteen years, cooperation with neighbors has actively developed. This period had its share of difficulties. For example, the history of the formation of the European Union was not easy. Before the unification of 28 countries, there were many conflicts and losses. Unlike Europe, Central Asian countries are very close to each other historically, ethno-culturally, and in terms of value system. Its potential for integration is higher than that of Europeans. In a broad sense, integration means the institutionalization of multilateral cooperation. Regional institutions such as the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Foreign Ministers will be established, whose decisions will be binding for all participating countries. This can be observed in the recent past between Central Asian countries. The next step towards the regional integration of the Central Asian countries was the meeting of the heads of state in Tashkent on January 4, 1993. Presidents N.A. Nazarboyev, A.A. Akayev, S.A. Niyazov, I.A. Karimov and Chairman of the Supreme Council of Tajikistan E. Sh. Rahmonov met there.

At this meeting, the leaders of the Central Asian countries discussed in detail the political and economic situation in the countries of the region. They exchanged views on issues of further strengthening of mutually beneficial economic and humanitarian relations, confirmed their respect for each other's sovereignty.

As a result, the heads of state gave orders to the governments on price policy, development of communications, provision of energy resources, development of the problems of the Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea based on the interests of the countries of the region.

### **THE MAIN FINDINGS AND RESULTS**

On January 10, 1994, in Tashkent, the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Kazakhstan "On the creation of a single economic space" were signed in Tashkent for the purpose of unifying the Central Asian countries into an economic and political union. the contract was signed. This was an unprecedented event for the entire post-Soviet region, and it became a strong foundation for the joining of other countries of the region to this organization and the formation of a new regional actor in international relations. According to Article 1 of this agreement, the Single Economic Space "undertakes the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor and ensures a coordinated credit, budget, tax, price, customs, and currency policy" [1].

On April 30, 1994, a tripartite agreement was signed (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan) on the establishment of a single economic zone in Cholpon-Ota, Kyrgyzstan. Later, this union of the

Central Asian countries in the region was called the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) [2].

Tajikistan's reluctance to join the community can be interpreted in different ways, on the one hand, Tajikistan is the only Farsi-speaking country in the region, all other countries are Turkic-speaking, on the other hand, there was a civil war. At that time, joining this alliance could have a negative impact on the security of Tajikistan and the entire region. Other countries may be worried about the export of terrorist and extremist groups, the inability of the government to control the situation, the uncertainty of whether the country will become Islamic or secular, which will destabilize the peaceful coexistence of the countries of the region.

Nevertheless, in connection with the end of the civil war in Tajikistan, on January 5-6, 1998, a meeting of the five presidents of the Central Asian countries was held in Ashgabat. The main agenda of the meeting was to confirm Tajikistan's membership in the CIS.

In December 2001, a meeting of the presidents of the Central Asian countries was held in Tashkent, and the proposal of the President of Uzbekistan I. Karimov to transform the CIS into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) was supported. The agreement on the establishment of CACO was signed on February 28, 2002 in Almaty. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan became parties to the agreement. The new organization had more expanded goals and tasks. Participating countries agreed to ensure the continuity of the agreements and decisions previously adopted within the framework of the OIC [3]. It was a step from economic integration to political integration. It is not for nothing that the presidents evaluated it as a value in their statements.

However, the newly established organization could not advance to the next stage, the development slowed down, which may have been caused by external factors. On September 11, 2001, a new era in international relations began - the operation in Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries became important partners for both the West and Russia. On October 16, 2004, a historic event took place - Russia officially joined the CACO, which broke the concept and meaning of the CACO. A year later, on October 6-7, 2005, during the summit of the leaders of the CSTO member states, held in the Konstantinovsky Palace in St. Petersburg, Russian President Vladimir Putin put forward the initiative to merge the CSTO with EurAzES.

However, by 2006, the integration process had stalled. Because a powerful country that does not belong to the region - the Russian Federation - is admitted to the membership of the Central Asian

Cooperation Organization, as a result, the organization lost its image as a purely regional institution. Russia's accession to the CIS undermined the policy of Central Asian countries to form integration in the region. On January 25, 2006, at the regular meeting of the heads of the Eurasian Economic Union states in St. Petersburg, all the necessary formalities for the termination of the MOHT were agreed upon [4].

Russia is gaining strength in the international arena as the main partner of the region, and at the same time, it is almost vehemently opposed to any integration without its participation. According to Russian political scientist Ajdar Kurtov, “all integration processes and associations of any form, whether political or economic, should be formed with the direct participation of Russia, and only in this way can instability in the Central Asian region be prevented, otherwise the risk of the presence of the United States increases, which, in turn, begins to impose its behavior on the countries of the region” [5].

At the same time, after the 2005 Andijan events, relations with the US became tense. In such a precarious situation, the leadership of Uzbekistan turns to Russia and decides to become a member of the Eurasian Economic Community and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan joined these two structures. The leaders of the countries of the region considered the meeting within the framework of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization to be superfluous and later agreed to end it.

However, it soon became clear that the Eurasian Economic Community is not a structure that can meet regional interests and solve common problems. Therefore, Uzbekistan left it in 2008. It took ten years to restore integration in Central Asia [6].

Many experts have emphasized that China will implement the issue of integration, which was destroyed by Russia. Because China's “One Belt, One Road” initiative relies on transport and trade cooperation between countries. But this may be a misconception.

China builds relations with the countries of the region on the basis of the “face-to-face” principle, that is, it cooperates with each country individually and provides each country with benefits and grants taking into account its geographical and economic situation. China, like Russia, opposes an organization in Central Asia that does not take Beijing's interests into account, and the economies of all countries in the region are already more dependent on China and its loans. China is interested in the raw materials of Central Asia, but at the moment it is in no hurry to create its own industries, move production facilities and develop economic cooperation between the

countries. For now, Central Asia is considered only as a link between Europe and China (for the transportation of goods and passengers by land from China to European countries) and as a safe zone in case of increased unrest in Xinjiang [1].

In 2016, when Sh.M. Mirziyoyev came to power as the President of Uzbekistan, the issue of integration in Central Asia began to be raised again. On September 19, 2017, the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev expressed the following opinion in his first speech at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly: “Uzbekistan today gives priority to the Central Asian region in its foreign policy. This is a well-thought-out path”[7].

During this period, two important steps were taken to strengthen cooperation in the Central Asian region:

First, the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev, on November 10, 2017, at the international conference “Central Asia: unified history and common future, sustainable development and cooperation for development” held in Samarkand under the auspices of the UN, the consultation of the heads of the Central Asian states proposed to hold a meeting. As a result, another platform was formed, which allows for mutual trust and cooperation between the Central Asian countries, and until today three times of consultation meetings of the heads of state have been held. This mechanism was originally called a precautionary consultation meeting, because regional integration, which was “frozen” for ten years, could not be restored in an institutional form at once. It takes time for the scattered Central Asian republics to get to know each other better and find a common language.

Of course, the consultation meeting is a temporary format. It is advisable to improve it as soon as possible and turn it into a full-fledged integration structure. It is necessary to bring multilateral relations to a new level. Logically, regional integration should be more important for us than the remaining formats (CIS, SCO, EAEU, etc.).

Secondly, on June 22, 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution “Strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian region”. On June 22, 2020, an international conference was held in an online format dedicated to the one-year anniversary of this important event for the countries of Central Asia.

This resolution is primarily of historical significance for Central Asian countries. This is a sign that the cooperation between our countries has entered a qualitatively new stage of development [8].

First, the resolution was a clear confirmation of the strong political will and commitment of the leaders of the Central Asian countries to comprehensively strengthen trust and good neighborliness in the region, as well as their desire to actively deepen cooperation between our countries. From the high platform of the UN, the countries of the region once again emphasized that rapprochement and expansion of cooperation in the region is a necessary and irreversible process. It is based on a strict political choice and has a deep historical background.

Secondly, for the first time in a single international document, the Central Asian countries strengthened a general and comprehensive consensus on the priority areas of cooperation in the region, received the support of the international community on the main areas of mutual cooperation that meet all interests.

Thirdly, the resolution became an expression of the general readiness of the Central Asian countries to mutually support regional and international initiatives, to recognize their important role in ensuring security and sustainable development in the region. In a word, it was an important contribution to promoting the common interests and needs of the entire region in the international arena.

Fourthly, this very important document has become a confirmation that the Central Asian countries are ready to take responsibility for the fate of the region. He confirmed that the Central Asian countries are capable of playing a key and priority role in solving the current problems of the entire region through negotiations and consultations based on consensus, equality and respect for each other's interests. It was emphasized once again that Uzbekistan is determined to work together to contribute to the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Fifth, the support of the resolution by the UN General Assembly turned into a high recognition by the international community of the importance of Central Asia in ensuring security and sustainable development, and the growing interest of world countries in cooperation with the region in various fields.

Today, not only major political players such as the USA, Russia, and China, but also middle-class countries such as Iran, Turkey, and India are trying to strengthen their position in our region. Against the background of such geopolitical games, it is necessary to strengthen the status of mutual cooperation between Central Asians.



Moreover, modern geopolitics is very different from the “Great Game” of the last century. Empires no longer face each other. They are fighting in the information space. It is true that invisible hands are also attacking the countries of Central Asia.

There is only one way to repel external threats. Sister republics need to solve problems together, not individually, forming a unified position on important political issues, renouncing the influence of leading countries, acting primarily on national interests in any situation makes the Central Asian countries strong.

It is worth noting that the pandemic led to a slight restriction of relations between the Central Asian countries. Under the conditions of COVID-19, the volume of mutual trade has decreased.

The pandemic has had a serious impact on the economies of the “Central Asian Four” - a drop in oil prices (Kazakhstan) and a sharp decrease in demand for workers from these countries and the closing of borders (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan). At the same time, accumulated reserves (Kazakhstan) and large domestic potential (Uzbekistan) allow for rapid growth. The remaining countries depended on the recovery of migration flows and political stability (Kyrgyzstan) [9].

According to experts, the leaders of economic development are Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, countries rich in natural resources, the largest in the region in terms of economy, market capacity, and a large population. But their success can only partially be explained by the availability of natural resources. In the results of the economic development of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, first of all, willingness and political will played a decisive role in systematic work on planning, development, diversification of the economy, creation of a favorable legal environment for investors.

In Central Asia, Kazakhstan is the leader in terms of economy. The Republic has significant economic potential, a wide market (17 million people + the markets of the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union), a legislative framework aimed at attracting investors, a set of non-state economic development programs, and, accordingly, strives to create favorable conditions for investors in these areas. The republic has become an important transport center of Eurasia as part of China’s “Silk Road Economic Belt” projects.

After the successful transition of power, Uzbekistan took a high place in the ranking due to its extensive domestic market (more than 30 million people), diversified economy, its own resource base and political stability. The large-scale plans set by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on the

systematic reform of the republic's economy and the creation of favorable conditions for investors also testify to the republic's investment attractiveness [10].

The rest of the countries - Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - today lag behind their neighbors in terms of economic competence, having opportunities and competitive advantages, they could not create sustainable economic models, did not take their place in the international markets for the division of labor. Due to the strict political regime and complete state control over the economy, Turkmenistan, despite its huge reserves of natural gas, could not become the Caspian analogue of the prosperous Arab monarchies. Due to political instability and difficulties in protecting private property, Kyrgyzstan is unable to realize its investment potential, but the republic's tourism, education cluster and light industry are showing good results. Tajikistan has managed to implement a number of infrastructure projects through active cooperation with major partners (primarily China and Iran). At the same time, due to its uncompromising position on the largest project - the Rogun hydroelectric power plant, on the one hand, the republic could not attract foreign investors, and on the other hand, the relations with the large neighbor and economic partner Uzbekistan became a barrier, which had a negative impact on the situation in the economy.

The total population of Central Asian countries is about 75 million people. In 2019, the total foreign trade turnover of the Central Asian countries was 168.4 billion dollars, the gross domestic product of the countries of the region was 303 billion dollars in nominal terms, and 918.3 billion dollars in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP). The rates of economic development of Central Asian countries also showed high growth rates of 4-7 percent.

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, in 2020, the growth rate of the gross domestic product decreased in all countries. However, according to the forecasts of the World Bank, in 2021, the economy of the countries of Central Asia will show significant growth again. All Central Asian countries, except Turkmenistan, are members of the CIS Free Trade Area Agreement, which has a duty-free trade regime [11].

It should be noted that the level of participation of Central Asian countries in interregional trade is different. Thus, by the end of 2019, the share of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in the volume of trade between Central Asian countries was the lowest in their total turnover and was 4.8 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively. At the same time, the participation of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in



interregional trade was the highest - 30.6 and 19.8 percent, respectively. Uzbekistan took an intermediate place with an indicator of 12.4 percent.

The foreign trade of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is less focused on the regional market, as their exports of hydrocarbons are mainly delivered to countries outside the CIS (EU, China, Russia), and imports are dominated by machine-building and machine-building products.

At the same time, the share of exports between the countries of Central Asia is much higher, excluding the volume of commodity exports of mineral products and metals. Thus, there are prospects for increasing the volume of regional trade between non-primary products, which are of interest to all countries of the region, especially finished products with added value. In this regard, expanding the possibilities of mutual access of the neighboring countries to their domestic markets will help in many ways to solve their tasks of increasing the export of finished products, because mutual trade in many non-marketable goods in trade, they may not be competitors, but partners.

In particular, the creation of regional value chains, including industrial and agricultural clusters, which can provide a compensatory effect in reducing transaction costs in Central Asia, will help to increase the export opportunities of commodity producers. In this regard, it is necessary to take measures to increase the volume of cross-border trade and cross-border investments in order to develop regional value chains [11].

## **CONCLUSION**

In short, it can be said that today there are a number of problems in the development of regional integration and cooperation in Central Asia. Today's military conflict on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is an example of this. This issue was not considered regionally. Both countries sought to find outside mediators. Russia and Turkey appeared as the main mediators. However, the border disputes between the Central Asian republics are mainly of a local nature. They are not high intensity problems. In this situation, the search for an opportunity to resolve the neighbors by regional consensus within the format of the meetings of the heads of state will preserve the geopolitical independence of the region.

The presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan immediately expressed their reaction to the military conflict on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. However, the joint statement was not adopted. Therefore, regional unity is still not strong. The following conclusions were reached by researching the

relations between the Central Asian countries in the conditions of the pandemic and post-pandemic:

1. Today, all the countries of Central Asia emphasize that the direction of the region is a priority in their foreign policy, but due to the complex relations between the countries of the region and the influence of external forces, integration processes did not take place during the past period. From 1991 to 2006, the process of integration in Central Asia continued continuously and successfully. Over fifteen years, cooperation with neighbors has actively developed. By 2006, the integration process had stalled. Because the Russian Federation, a powerful state that does not belong to the region, will be accepted as a member of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization. As a result, the organization lost its image as a purely regional institution. Russia's accession to the CACO undermined the policy of the Central Asian countries to form integration in the region.
2. In 2016, when Sh.M. Mirziyoyev came to power as the President of Uzbekistan, the issue of integration in Central Asia began to be raised again. At the invitation of the President, a consultative meeting of the heads of the Central Asian states took place, and meetings were held in Kazakhstan in 2018, Uzbekistan in 2019, and Turkmenistan in 2021. As a result, another platform was formed, which allows for mutual trust and cooperation among the Central Asian countries.
3. The total population of Central Asian countries is about 75 million people. In 2019, the total foreign trade turnover of the Central Asian countries was 168.4 billion dollars the gross domestic product of the countries of the region was 303 billion dollars in nominal terms, and 918.3 billion dollars in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP). The rates of economic development of Central Asian countries also showed high growth rates of 4-7 percent. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, in 2020, the growth rate of the gross domestic product decreased in all countries. However, according to the forecasts of the World Bank, in 2021, the economy of the countries of Central Asia will show significant growth again.

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