

Central Asian Integration: Current Status And Prospects

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Abstract: Many scholars are currently researching integration processes in Central Asia. The region's ancient history suggests that a civilizational approach is the most appropriate approach to studying the region, as it will facilitate a deeper understanding of the characteristics of regional integration.

Keywords: Civilization, Central Asia, regionalism, integration, security, interstate cooperation.

Introduction: When studying the civilizational foundations of Central Asia, it is necessary to consider the opinions of historians. Russian historian E. Rtveladze, in his study of the origins of civilization in Central Asia, noted that the history of Central Asia extends back to ancient times. Archaeologists have established the fact that it was inhabited as early as the Lower Paleolithic. During the Neolithic (6th-4th centuries BC), three extensive archaeological cultures emerged in Central Asia: the Jeitun, Hissar, and Kelteminar cultures [6].

In the study of Central Asia, the works of the Russian scholar and sinologist A.Khodjaev, prepared on the basis of a deep, comprehensive study of Chinese sources, are of great importance [4].

The sources note the peculiarities of international relations in the region in different periods of history.

Researcher R.M. Alimov noted that Central Asia's location between Buddhist, Islamic, Confucian, and Christian cultures contributed to it becoming a crossroads of various civilizations [2].

It seems that the civilizational foundation of the region will serve as a solid basis for the integration of the region, despite the presence of some pessimistic approaches in the academic community [7].

In this regard, the opinions of foreign scholars on Central Asia should be noted.

Since the Central Asian countries gained independence

in 1991, the preconditions for regional integration were already in place.

The former Soviet republics long existed within the same borders as they do today, within a single Soviet political and economic system, interdependent in economic and infrastructural terms, and at the same time were very close in terms of historically established socio-cultural traditions and mentalities. The post-Soviet states of Central Asia had similar economic structures, were close in standard of living, and were once part of a single technological and educational system, which created favorable starting conditions for integration processes. Another factor driving regional rapprochement was the desire to enhance the region's international standing, thereby increasing the weight and authority of its member countries and strengthening their negotiating positions in relations with major external players [5].

The first steps to strengthen cooperation in Central Asia date back to the 1990s. The desire to restore cooperative economic ties between Central Asian countries existed long before the formation of the CIS. In June 1990, at the initiative of the Kazakh side, the leaders of the then Union Republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan—met for the first time in Almaty and signed an Agreement on Economic, Scientific, Technical, and Cultural Cooperation. In January 1991, at a meeting of the heads of these republics in Tashkent, a number of

decisions were made on joint economic restructuring, taking into account existing production capacities to meet the needs of the regional market for goods.

Subsequently, the Treaty on the Creation of a Single Economic Space (SEES) was concluded (1994), and on July 17, 1998, the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) was formed, which later became the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO).

Documents such as the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) Integration Development Strategy for the Period up to 2005 and the Program of Priority Actions for the Formation of a Single Economic Space up to 2002 were adopted. It was assumed that the completion of the free trade zone would be followed by the creation of customs, payments, and currency unions, culminating in the formation of a single market for goods, services, and capital. Overall, more than 50 economic projects were approved and approximately 160 multilateral documents were concluded within the CAEC framework, but most of them were never implemented. One of the main reasons for this was the low share of mutual trade within the region, which continued to rapidly decline as countries in the region began to increasingly focus on extra-regional trading partners [5].

This suggests that the idea of regional integration in Central Asia has been relevant since independence.

There are a number of definitions of integration offered by various scholars studying this phenomenon. Some have become classic and generally accepted. For example, Ernst Haas (1958), one of the founders of integration theory, defines it as a process in which political actors in several separate national entities decide to transfer their loyalties, expectations, and political activity to a new center, whose institutions have or require jurisdiction over the preceding nation-states. The end result of the political integration process is a new political community superimposed on the previous communities. Deutsch (2015) believed that this occurs due to increasing cross-border communication and interaction. He also coined the term "security community," which is formed through such interaction. Integration is an entirely new phenomenon in the practice of international relations, emerging in the second half of the 20th century.

The most widely used interpretation of the evolution of integration forms in Western scientific literature is that of researcher B. Balassa, published in 1961 in his widely acclaimed work, "The Theory of Economic Integration". Balassa identified five forms of integration: free trade areas, customs unions, common markets, economic unions, and "full economic integration". The typology was based on criteria such as the abolition of

discrimination against companies of different nationalities and the degree of liberalization of the movement of production factors. Each subsequent stage is distinguished from the previous one by a higher degree of liberalization of the movement of production factors. At the highest stage, harmonization and unification of economic, social, and monetary policies occurs [8].

The world is currently witnessing a new stage in the development of Central Asia. In March 2018, the first consultative meeting of the region's heads of state was held in Astana (now Nur-Sultan). The next consultative meeting took place on November 29, 2019, in Tashkent. The summit emphasized the importance of agreeing on a common vision for cooperation in the region. It was noted that in recent years, agreements had been reached on important issues that had remained unresolved for many years, representing significant progress. Considerable attention was paid to trade and economic relations, particularly because, thanks to the successful reforms of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's trade turnover with the region's countries has more than doubled in recent years, and the number of joint ventures has quadrupled. In this regard, the Uzbek leader proposed establishing a Central Asian Investment Forum in Tashkent and holding annual meetings of the heads of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The importance of security issues in the region, expanding cooperation in the energy sector, as well as the cultural, humanitarian and tourist potential of Central Asia were particularly emphasized [3].

As the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan notes, "today, Central Asia is a space of dynamic development and fruitful cooperation, opening up new opportunities for sustainable growth and prosperity. The region is rapidly integrating into the global economy: its investment attractiveness is growing, export opportunities to third markets are expanding, and transit potential is expanding. Last year, mutual trade between our countries reached \$10.7 billion, and total investment in Central Asia increased by 17 percent" [1].

It is noted that with an objective approach to the problem of deepening regional cooperation in Central Asia, it becomes obvious that it is the ethnocultural dominant that serves as the basis that can lead to an active, more trusting dialogue between the states of the region in the economic, transport and communications, political and other spheres [3].

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that new regionalism is currently relevant at the theoretical and practical levels, as regionalism has become a trend in global development. This approach implies the participation

of not only the state but also civil society institutions and border territories, which will facilitate cross-border integration processes. Central Asian countries have different capabilities and development models, and despite this, these capabilities should be aimed at consolidating the region. Therefore, regional integration is a long-term goal, and the measures taken by Central Asian countries in politics, economics, and foreign policy will take the form of gradual integration, strengthening regional identity, increasing the level of economic, cultural, and social interactions, and will enhance Central Asia's role in global politics.

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