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CENTRAL ASIA AS A GROWING REGION OF GLOBAL INTEREST: PROSPECTS AND RISKS IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Abstract. Central Asia is undergoing a profound geopolitical transformation, evolving from a perceived periphery of global politics into a pivotal hub of international trade, diplomacy, and energy security. This paper examines the region's rising significance by analyzing demographic growth, economic diversification, transport connectivity, and diplomatic agency while assessing key risks including great-power rivalry, environmental stress, and institutional challenges. Drawing on recent scholarship and geopolitical assessments, it argues that Central Asia is positioned to become a middle-power bloc in Eurasia, with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan emerging as strategic actors. However, sustained regional integration, balanced diplomacy, and adaptive governance will determine whether the region can navigate growing external pressures and internal vulnerabilities to shape its future trajectory.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Kazakhstan, geopolitics, regional integration, Belt and Road, climate.*

Жанат Момынқұлов

ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ – ЖАҒАНДЫҚ МҮДДЕЛЕР ТОҒЫСҚАН КЕҢІСТІК ЖӘНЕ ӨЗГЕРМЕЛІ ГЕОСАЯСАТТЫҢ КЕЛЕШЕГІ МЕН ТӘУЕКЕЛДЕРІ

Аңдатпа. Орталық Азия терең геосаяси өзгерістерден өтіп жатыр және бұрын әлемдік саясаттың шеткі аймағы саналған болса, қазір

халықаралық сауда, дипломатия және энергетикалық қауіпсіздіктің маңызды орталығына айналып барады. Осы мақалада аймақтың өрлеуі демографиялық өсім, экономикалық әртараптандыру, транспорттық байланыстар және дипломатиялық белсенділік арқылы қарастырылатыны, сондай-ақ негізгі тәуекелдер ретінде ірі державалардың бәсекелестігі, экологиялық және институттық қиындықтар бағаланады. Қазіргі зерттеулер мен геосаяси бағалауларға сүйене отырып, Орталық Азия Еуразияда орта ауқымды мемлекеттер блогына айналуға әлеуеті бар деп саналады. Әсіресе, Қазақстан мен Өзбекстан стратегиялық ойыншылар ретінде ерекшеленеді. Дегенмен, аймақтық интеграцияның тұрақтылығы, теңгерімді дипломатия және икемді басқару сапасы аймақтың сыртқы қысымдарды азайту және ішкі осалдықтарды шешу арқылы өз болашағын қалыптастыратынын анықтайды.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Қазақстан, геосаясат, аймақтық интеграция, «Белдеу және жол», климат.

Жанат Момынқұлов

ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ КАК РАСТУЩИЙ РЕГИОН ГЛОБАЛЬНОГО ИНТЕРЕСА: ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ И РИСКИ В МЕНЯЮЩЕЙСЯ ГЕОПОЛИТИКЕ

Аннотация. Центральная Азия претерпевает глубокую геополитическую трансформацию, превращаясь из воспринимаемой периферии мировой политики в ключевой центр международной торговли, дипломатии и энергетической безопасности. В статье рассматривается растущее значение региона через анализ демографического роста, экономической диверсификации, транспортной связности и дипломатической активности, а также оцениваются ключевые риски, включая соперничество великих держав, экологические нагрузки и институциональные вызовы. Опираясь на современные исследования и геополитические оценки, автор утверждает, что Центральная Азия имеет потенциал стать блоком средних держав в Евразии, при этом Казахстан и Узбекистан выступают стратегическими акторами. Однако устойчивость региональной интеграции, сбалансированная дипломатия и адаптивное управление определяют, сможет ли регион справиться с внешними давлениями и внутренними уязвимостями для формирования своей будущей траектории.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Казахстан, геополитика, региональная интеграция, «Пояс и путь», климат.

INTRODUCTION

Once regarded as a remote frontier, Central Asia has reemerged as a strategic epicenter of international importance in Eurasian continent. The region's geopolitical revival reflects a convergence of global and regional dynamics: Russia's declining influence in Caucasus and Central Asia following its war in Ukraine, China's economic rise and infrastructure diplomacy, the West's renewed engagement, and growing Middle Eastern and South Asian interest in Eurasian trade and energy corridors. The Central Asian republics are pursuing gradual reforms and pragmatic regional initiatives aimed at fostering economic diversification, strengthening security cooperation, and improving logistics and connectivity.

The shift is also driven by demographic momentum and a changing global order. Central Asia's population has surpassed 85 million, with projections indicating significant growth, especially in Uzbekistan, which is set to exceed 40 million by 2029. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the region's emerging opportunities and risks, examining Central Asia's role as both a beneficiary and a driver of geopolitical change.

Central Asia is strengthening its political agency and sense of cohesion. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the driving forces shape the regional agenda through multi-vector diplomacy and transport projects. China reinforces the role of the SCO and the Belt and Road Initiative, while Europe and the U.S. expand economic cooperation, and Turkey and Gulf states increase regional investments. The region is striving to become more integrated into global networks.

Nevertheless, the key structural challenges remain: dependence on external actors in geopolitics, the negative impact of the Ukraine conflict, the uncertain situation in Afghanistan, lack of final consensus on water management, and climate threats. Kazakhstan mediates between global powers, Uzbekistan promotes regional openness, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan emphasize cultural and water resources, and Turkmenistan gradually opens through energy policy. In this context, external influences continue to pose risks to regional autonomy: Chinese and Russian investments foster economic dependencies, Western actors primarily compete for resource access, and climate and water challenges demand coordinated responses.

RESEARCH MATERIALS.

This study uses a *mixed-methods approach* to explore Central Asia's geopolitical transformation. It draws on *document analysis* of official

statements, government reports (Gov.kz 2024), multilateral publications (SCO, CICA), and policy briefs from leading research centers (DGAP 2023; Eurasian Research Institute 2024). A *literature review* of peer-reviewed articles, think tank studies, and regional analyses (Modern Diplomacy 2023; Cacialanalyst.org 2023) provides context for evolving trends.

To illustrate key dynamics, *case studies* of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan highlight their roles as emerging middle powers, with emphasis on multi-vector diplomacy, connectivity initiatives, and integration projects (AsiaPlus 2024). *Demographic and socioeconomic data* from the UN and World Bank further support analysis of population growth, urbanization, and labor shifts. By combining qualitative and electronic sources, the study *triangulates* evidence and connects empirical findings with geopolitical and development theories (Kaplan 2022; Mahbubani 2021; Cooley 2023), offering a comprehensive view of the region's transformation.

RESEARCH RESULTS. KEY DIMENSIONS OF CENTRAL ASIA'S STRATEGIC GROWTH AND POTENTIAL TRANSFORMATION

This study highlights that Central Asia is transitioning from a peripheral geopolitical space into a strategic hub of Eurasian connectivity, trade, and diplomacy. The region's growth trajectory and potential transformation are shaped by several interlinked dimensions:

Central Asia is no longer a passive geopolitical space, it is becoming a stage where regional actors carefully shape the script. Owing to the *Multi-Vector Agency* Kazakhstan exemplifies this transformation, leveraging multi-vector diplomacy to mediate conflicts and host global dialogues through platforms like the SCO and CICA while preserving close and flexible ties with Russia. Uzbekistan's foreign policy revival following power transit reflects a similar energy, as bold initiatives such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan corridor seek to redraw the region's transport map and extend its influence southward.

The region's greatest asset is its *demographic momentum and youth*: nearly half the population is under 30. Uzbekistan's rapid demographic growth gives it the weight of a future regional powerhouse, while Kazakhstan's investment-driven urban centers position it as a magnet for foreign capital. Including Afghanistan and Azerbaijan, the wider region could host over 200 million people by 2050, making Central Asia not only a logistics hub but also a dynamic economic and social space. Yet, beneath this dynamism lie structural tensions (youth unemployment, migration pressures, and widening

inequality) that could either propel innovation or destabilize progress if left unaddressed.

Central Asia's geography is being reimagined through a web of new transport corridors: China's BRI, the Middle Corridor, the Trans-Caspian route and the INSTC are transforming landlocked states into continental crossroads. Due to increasing *connectivity and diversification* of routes, Kazakhstan is emerging as a logistical keystone, with EU- and Turkey-backed initiatives offering much-needed alternatives to Russia-dependent routes. Still, heavy reliance on Chinese investment for BRI projects raises risks of economic dependency, sharpening the imperative for balancing or diversification and regional-led financing strategies. The region's renewed diplomacy works for ambitious transport projects aimed at reshaping connectivity and expanding influence southward.

Climate stress is a quiet but serious threat to regional development. The Aral Sea disaster, desertification, and pressures on key rivers like the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, Irtysh, and Ili highlight the urgency of stronger water cooperation. It is possible that in the mid-term future the Irtysh and Ili rivers will become strategically significant, comparable to the Caspian region. With Central Asia upstream dam projects and changing glacier flows are straining relations, while growing populations increase demand. Regional initiatives such as joint water commissions, basin-level agreements show progress, but lasting solutions will require better regional coordination and governance, smarter irrigation, cross-border infrastructure, and a cultural shift toward sustainable water use.

Cultural identity remains a powerful driver of regional cohesion. A shared history, linguistic ties, and intertwined traditions form a strong foundation for unity, even as national narratives sometimes diverge. Initiatives like Central Asia 2040 highlight a collective vision on linking trade, digital networks, and cultural diplomacy to shape a region that is not just interconnected but self-confident, modern, and united in its identity.

Great-power competition continues to define the regional landscape, yet Central Asian states increasingly assert themselves as strategic actors rather than passive arenas of influence. They balance and navigate a complex web of Russian security guarantees, Chinese economic power, Turkish soft diplomacy, and Western political engagement through sophisticated multi-vector strategies aimed at safeguarding sovereignty. However, this delicate balancing act carries significant risks: overdependence on any one partner may invite economic coercion, entangling security commitments, or political leverage that undermines autonomy.

Central Asia's political transformation is uneven but ongoing through *institutional modernization and developing governance*. Institutional reforms in governance, anti-corruption, and rule of law are key drivers for attracting foreign investment and fostering long-term growth.

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY.

Geopolitical repositioning and regional agency is a key factor in the region. Central Asia's geostrategic location, bordering China, Russia, South Asia, and the Middle East, has long shaped its security and economic outlook. Yet, the region is no longer merely a passive arena of great-power rivalry; it is increasingly asserting its own diplomatic agency.

Kazakhstan exemplifies this shift through its multi-vector diplomacy, positioning itself as a bridge between East and West and a mediator in regional conflicts, including its hosting of peace negotiations and its leadership within multilateral organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) (Geopolitical Monitor 2024). Uzbekistan's ambitious reforms under President Mirziyoyev have reinvigorated its foreign policy, promoting regional cooperation and connectivity projects, such as the Trans-Afghan railway and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan corridor (AsiaPlus 2024).

This emerging «middle power» dynamic signals a slow and careful departure from post-Soviet dependency on Moscow. Russia's war in Ukraine has accelerated the diversification of partnerships, with Central Asia engaging China, Turkey, the European Union, and Gulf states. As analysts from the German Council on Foreign Relations argue, this represents "a rare window of opportunity for regional states to shape their geopolitical future" (DGAP 2023).

Demographic transformation and socioeconomic potential of Central Asia are constantly growing. Demography is becoming Central Asia's most powerful strategic asset. With nearly half of its population under 30, the region is poised for significant labor force expansion. Uzbekistan's projected demographic boom positions it as a key growth engine, while Kazakhstan's focus on education and human capital along with fast urbanization of population. This potential capacity is transforming it into a gateway for global integration and foreign capital. Uzbekistan's demographic trajectory positions it as the most populous and fastest-growing state in Central Asia, with over 38 million people in 2025 and projections of 41 million by 2030. This rapid growth, concentrated in the densely populated Fergana Valley, signals a youthful population structure that could generate a substantial

demographic dividend if matched with investment in education, job creation, and innovation.

However, demographic growth presents challenges alongside opportunities: pressure on urban infrastructure, healthcare, housing, and natural resources, particularly water and land, is intensifying. Internal migration toward larger cities and regional centers will demand improved transport and social services, while high fertility rates highlight the need for women's employment opportunities and modern family planning policies.

For Central Asian states, demographic expansion requires strategic reforms to avoid unemployment, inequality, and environmental strain. Balanced social development and regional cooperation will be key to transforming this growth into a long-term advantage. Persistent social inequality risks destabilizing fragile political systems. Regional governments must convert this demographic dividend into human capital by investing in education, technology, and governance reforms. A failure to do so may exacerbate migration pressures and political unrest, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Connectivity and the quest for diversified routes is of great importance for connectivity within the Organisation of Turkic states. Infrastructure and logistics are at the heart of Central Asia's transformation. For decades, the region relied heavily on Russian transit corridors for trade. Today, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), and North-South Transport Corridor are reshaping its economic integration and geography. From the Uzbek perspective key transport routes linking Central Asia and Afghanistan, highlighting their strategic importance. It emphasizes infrastructure projects like the Trans-Afghan railway corridors (Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar or Torghundi-Herat-Kandahar-Spin-Boldak), underscoring their potential to provide Central Asia with direct access to South Asian and Indian Ocean ports, reduce reliance on Russian and Iranian routes, lower logistics costs, and enhance regional trade integration. However, progress remains contingent on regional security and political stability.

Kazakhstan is becoming a key Eurasian logistics hub, using its Caspian ports and expanding railways to link China, Central Asia, and Europe. The Middle Corridor (TITR), backed by Turkey and the EU, offers a strategic alternative to Russian routes, boosting resilience amid sanctions. Modernized Aktau and Kuryk ports strengthen Caspian connectivity with the South Caucasus and Europe, while the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway opens access to the Persian Gulf. On the Chinese border, Khorgos Gateway, a major dry port, anchors Belt and Road trade flows, and the Moyinty railway

upgrade improves freight speed and capacity. These projects strengthen the positions of Kazakhstan as a transit and investment hub, enhancing its geopolitical weight and economic diversification. These projects in Central Asia allow local states to diversify partnerships, enhance bargaining power, and attract investment.

Yet, connectivity competition also carries risks. Heavy reliance on Chinese financing and infrastructure might lead to open competition with Russia, debt vulnerabilities and political leverage, echoing debates about the “debt-trap diplomacy” narrative. Effective regional coordination is essential to ensure that transport diversification strengthens sovereignty rather than deepens dependency.

The next issues are climate change, water security, and environmental pressures make the region struggle from lack of investments and expertise. Climate change is one of the most underappreciated threats to Central Asia’s stability. The shrinking of the Aral Sea, desertification, and water scarcity illustrate the consequences of decades of environmental mismanagement. As water demand intensifies due to population growth, energy needs, and Afghanistan’s irrigation projects, transboundary tensions could escalate.

Water cooperation is becoming a core security priority for Central Asia. The region faces a worsening water crisis driven by climate change, population growth, and inefficient irrigation. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya, once fed by melting glaciers, are shrinking as glaciers recede and rainfall patterns shift. Outdated Soviet-era infrastructure, cotton monoculture, and weak water governance have caused severe waste and ecosystem collapse, most starkly seen in the Aral Sea disaster. Disputes between upstream states (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), focused on hydropower, and downstream countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), reliant on irrigation, strain relations and threaten food, energy, and economic security.

While Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have advanced bilateral frameworks and international partners are investing in climate adaptation, deeper regional governance and climate diplomacy are essential. Modern irrigation technology, basin-level management, and stronger cooperation are key to preventing water from becoming Central Asia’s most pressing geopolitical flashpoint. Kazakhstan also faces shared river challenges with China and Russia, adding urgency to water diplomacy. The rising geostrategic importance of the Caspian Sea and Lake Balkhash further underscores the need to overhaul Soviet-era water management agreements and establish a sustainable, regionwide framework for resource governance.

Issues of cultural identity present certain challenges to achieving regional cohesion. Despite shared cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage,

Central Asia has struggled to forge a unified regional identity. Soviet-era borders and divergent national trajectories have reinforced fragmentation. Yet, recent summits in Astana and Samarkand underscore a growing sense of collective responsibility. Initiatives like the “Central Asia 2040” vision seek to institutionalize regional identity through digital cooperation, trade harmonization, and cultural diplomacy (Modern Diplomacy 2023).

Yerkin Baidarov argues that Central Asia’s integration depends on a consciously built regional identity, based on shared history, cultural heritage, and territorial continuity rather than imposed narratives. He identifies civilizational synthesis (nomadic–sedentary cultures, Islamic traditions, Turkic and Iranian-Tajik influences, Soviet legacy) as a natural foundation for unity. Common challenges like climate and environmental risks can further drive cooperation. Baidarov stresses that self-shaped identity is key to strengthening the region’s geopolitical standing, resilience, and competitiveness (ISRS.uz). Though, Central Asia’s regional identity is challenged by divergent national narratives, competing historical interpretations, and the persistence of Soviet-era ethnic policies that fragmented traditionally intertwined cultural ties. These divisions, compounded by varying political systems, social problems and external influences, hinder deeper integration and a shared regional vision.

Kazakhstan has been particularly active in promoting cultural soft power, hosting international forums on religious dialogue and regional integration platforms. Such efforts not only strengthen Central Asia’s collective voice in global affairs but also support domestic stability by fostering a sense of belonging among diverse communities.

Regarding strategic risks, the competing interests of major powers create a complex dilemma that exposes the region to substantial political, economic, and security vulnerabilities. While Central Asia’s geopolitical agency is increasing, so too are its vulnerabilities. The region faces a complex balancing act between Russia’s historical and information influence, China’s economic power, Turkey’s cultural ties, and Western strategic interests.

China’s sensitive security agenda and deepening role through the BRI and trade agreements has elevated its influence, but also sparked debates about overdependence and strategic autonomy. China’s growing security ambitions within regional blocs pose risks of strategic dependence through closer political cooperation, surveillance infrastructure, and intelligence-sharing agreements that expand Beijing’s influence over domestic security agendas. For example, more aggressive secularization due to joint commitments might push states towards tighter control of social media and civic-religious influence. These dynamics may spark discontent, erode

regional sovereignty, limit policy autonomy, and entangle states in China's geopolitical rivalries, particularly with the West and Russia.

Russia remains a major security actor through organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), though its capacity is diminished. Meanwhile, U.S. and European engagement focuses on energy diversification, counterterrorism, and resilience against Russian and Chinese dominance. This triangular dynamic offers opportunities for multi-vector diplomacy, but mismanagement could entangle the region in great-power competition.

Russia's security role in Central Asia carries risks of overdependence through military bases, CSTO commitments, and arms sales that keep regional states within Moscow's strategic orbit. This influence can limit policy flexibility, constrain diversification of security partnerships, and indirectly draw the region into Russia's geopolitical alignment, international isolation and confrontations, particularly with the West.

CONCLUSION

Central Asia is no longer a «blank spot» on the map of global politics. The region is increasingly asserting its voice, using diplomacy and economic tools to project influence, while its natural resources and strategic transport corridors have become essential to the plans of major powers. Positioned between Europe and Asia, it has the potential to grow into a prosperous and stable hub with modernizing infrastructure, diversifying economies, and strengthening digital connectivity to integrate more deeply into global supply chains and attract sustainable investment.

Three decades after the Soviet collapse, Central Asia is entering a defining phase. Its demographic momentum, resource wealth, and connectivity potential are drawing renewed global attention, but this transformation is not without risks. Geopolitical competition, climate stress, institutional weaknesses, and external dependencies remain pressing challenges. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as the region's largest states, are emerging as influential «middle powers,» using multi-vector diplomacy to navigate external pressures while seeking balanced domestic development.

Regional initiatives like the «Central Asia 2040» vision offer a roadmap for cooperation, but their success depends on trust-building and stronger governance. For policymakers and scholars, understanding Central Asia is no longer optional, it is vital. The region's trajectory will shape Eurasia's power dynamics, energy security, and global trade flows, positioning it at a crossroads between vulnerability and opportunity, with the chance to redefine itself as a key player in twenty-first-century geopolitics.

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