

GEOPOLITICAL STRUGGLE OF GLOBAL ACTORS IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION: CONCLUSIONS FOR UKRAINE

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Despite Ukraine's declared foreign policy course towards integration with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the actualization of other foreign policy directions has become critically important.

Over nearly 2.5 years of war, Ukraine has reassessed its bilateral relations with many countries and regions. The Central Asian (CA) subregion was already in focus in Ukraine's pre-war Foreign Policy Strategy (2021)¹. With the outbreak of the great war in 2022, the Central Asian vector has gained a qualitatively different significance in connection with the genocidal war waged by the Kremlin regime against sovereign and independent Ukraine.

The Central Asian region typically includes five countries – the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK), the Kyrgyz Republic (KR), the Republic of Tajikistan (RT), Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan (RUz). At the same time, some studies focus on a unified Central Asian geopolitical space that includes Afghanistan and Mongolia. This study will focus on the five countries, taking into account the security factor and the "new political reality" of Afghanistan.

The absence of the region's countries at the Global Peace Summit held in Switzerland on June 15-16, 2024, raises an urgent question about the need to change approaches and transform Ukraine's policy towards the region. This is necessary to involve these countries in the peace-making process based on the Ukrainian Peace Formula and to construct long-term mutually beneficial relations with the "Central Asian five".

¹ DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE №448/2021 On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine dated July 30, 2021 "On the Strategy of Foreign Policy Activity of Ukraine"

<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4482021-40017>

Situation Assessment

The geopolitical situation that began to develop in the Central Asian region as a result of Russia's treacherous attack on Ukraine in February 2022 continues to transform dynamically; there is an intensification of competition between regional and extra-regional players. Some countries are strengthening or damaging the regional positions of global actors such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Russian Federation (RF), the United States of America (USA), and the European Union. Recently, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) has confirmed its interest in the region. Thus, the intensification of geopolitical struggle in the Central Asian region has several reasons.

First, the failure of Russia's blitzkrieg against Ukraine and the protracted nature of the war has called into question the key narrative on which Russian influence in the region has long been based, namely Russia's ability to play the role of a "security guarantor" for Central Asian countries.

Second, attempts by the Russian leadership to create conditions to mitigate the effect of sanctions pressure in connection with aggression against Ukraine by using the jurisdictions of individual Central Asian countries.

Third, the likely intensification of geopolitical confrontation between the US and China in the coming years creates a demand for uninterrupted and sustainable access to critically important natural resources and minerals necessary for the development of both countries' capabilities, including their military industries.

Fourth, the membership of the region's countries in integration associations under the aegis of Russia or China, the creation and functioning of multilateral diplomatic formats under the "5+1" formula with the US, EU countries, Southeast Asian countries, as well as regional international platforms such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). The intertwining of strategic interests and economic competition of global actors put regional countries under constant external pressure.

The **Russian Federation** is one of the so-called "classical" actors in the Central Asian region. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries have remained in Russia's orbit of influence through various instruments of maintaining interstate ties. Russia's systematic work to cement its influence on regional elites throughout the period after Central Asian countries gained their independence resulted in close personal contacts. In turn, this was converted into support for Russian initiatives on the international arena.

Using integration associations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia ensured long-term relations in the political, economic, and security

spheres. To confirm this thesis, Russia maintains its military presence in three of the five Central Asian countries.

After the start of the full-scale war and the concentration of Russian efforts on the Ukrainian theater, there was a short-term weakening of Russia's political positions in the Central Asian region. The governments of Central Asian countries were under strong pressure from Russian diplomacy to ensure political and military support for Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

It is worth noting that Central Asian countries abstain from voting on UN resolutions that condemn the Russian invasion and raise issues of human rights violations in the occupied territories of Ukraine. However, some countries have clearly stated that they support the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Ukraine, conduct explanatory work on the inadmissibility of participation in the armed conflict on either side, and carry out criminal prosecution in cases where such participation is established.

At the same time, the trade volumes between Central Asian countries and Russia during the war period show growth, indicating indirect support for the viability of the Russian economy under sanctions pressure through Central Asian countries and their membership in the EAEU. Attempts by the Russian leadership to encourage Central Asian countries to more decisive integration within the framework of Russian integration projects with changes in geopolitical circumstances are unlikely to bring the desired results for Russia.

A significant number of studies on the importance of Central Asia for Chinese foreign policy draw attention to the fact that for **China**, the CA region is important in terms of its resource base and potential for developing intra-regional connectivity. China's Belt and Road Initiative, often called the New Silk Road, defined a change in China's approach to Central Asia as a unified geopolitical and logistical space, for which it had to diplomatically compete with Russia and the USA.

With the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and a new focus on the Indo-Pacific region, the PRC gained a wide field for maneuver in a region where the image of the US as a reliable partner was questioned. China took advantage of the circumstances and increased its military presence in the CA region through political contacts, joint exercises, military personnel training, increased financial assistance and arms exports, as well as the development of military infrastructure². Clearly, such regional activity by China was in the focus of regional actors. As a result, China emerged as an acceptable alternative.

² China's New Military Posture in Central Asia (April 26, 2022) https://nesa-center.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-0426_Chinas-New-Military-Posture-in-Central-Asia.pdf

In May 2023, at the inaugural China-Central Asia Summit, PRC Chairman Xi Jinping presented the Chinese vision for the region's development and China's role in this process. The Chinese leader emphasized four key principles for building relationships: mutual assistance, joint development, universal security, and "eternal friendship"³. Under these conditions, Central Asian countries were made an advantageous diplomatic offer, the long-term consequences of which are currently difficult to predict.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the **United States of America** considered the Central Asian region as a zone of Russian security influence, so the region was of secondary importance until the Afghan campaign in 2001. For 20 years, American activity in Central Asia was primarily focused on supporting U.S. military operations in Afghanistan⁴. After the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 and with the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, U.S. policy in Central Asia is in the process of transformation in the context of new challenges and opportunities.

According to the "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity"⁵, approved during the Donald Trump Administration, Central Asia is a geostrategic region important to the national security interests of the United States, regardless of the level of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. The U.S. will work with Central Asian states to "build their resilience to short-term and long-term threats to their stability; strengthen their independence; and develop political, economic, and security partnerships."

In April-May 2022, there was an update of the strategic vision for most CA countries, with only Kyrgyzstan's new Integrated Strategy being [approved](#) in October 2023. These U.S. State Department documents express readiness to support the efforts of regional leaders towards democratic development, ensuring the rule of law and human rights, building an inclusive, diversified economy with expanded regional and international connections⁶. Considering the depth of bilateral relations, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are among the priority countries of American interest.

To elevate U.S. relations with the CA region to a new level and promote the concept of a prosperous, secure, and democratic region, the U.S. and Central Asia diplomatic platform (C5+1) was launched. U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken visited the CA region

³ President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech (May 19, 2023)

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202305/t20230519_11080116.html

⁴ U.S. Foreign Relations Committee: Subcommittee On Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism / Subcommittee Hearing "GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION AND ENERGY SECURITY IN CENTRAL ASIA" (March 8, 2023)

<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/4256a03b-bd57-ce05-be0d-2a8d19201bfb/03%2008%2023%20--%20Geopolitical%20Competition%20and%20Energy%20Security%20in%20Central%20Asia.pdf>

⁵ United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/United-States-Strategy-for-Central-Asia-2019-2025.pdf>

⁶ U.S. Integrated Strategy for Tajikistan (approved: 01.04.2022); U.S. Integrated Strategy for Uzbekistan (approved: 12.04.2022); U.S. Integrated Strategy for Turkmenistan (approved: 26.04.2022); U.S. Integrated Strategy for Kazakhstan (approved: 25.05.2022).

(Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) in February-March 2023 to participate in the C5+1 ministerial meeting⁷. In September 2023, the first summit of Central Asian and United States leaders in the "C5+1" format took place, resulting in a joint statement emphasizing a "new atmosphere of partnership within C5+1"⁸. Additionally, the B5+1 format was initiated, which will promote expanded economic partnership between the U.S. and CA. Thus, the U.S. has begun a new chapter in relations with the region.

The **European Union's** interest in Central Asia remains within an economic paradigm. Despite geopolitical changes in the region, the EU continues to be guided by its strategy for the region, which was approved in June 2019. The strategy outlines three priority areas for EU engagement: partnership with Central Asian states and societies to ensure resilience (human rights and democracy, security, environmental challenges); partnership for prosperity (supporting economic diversification and private sector development, promoting intra-regional trade and sustainable connectivity); and supporting regional cooperation in Central Asia⁹. In light of recent events, developing a new Strategy becomes a relevant task for the future composition of the European Commission.

The EU's involvement in the region is dictated by geostrategic considerations and infrastructure potential. In implementing the [Global Gateway Strategy](#), individual EU countries and European financial institutions have focused their efforts on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR, Middle Corridor)¹⁰. Low levels of both intra-regional connectivity and connectivity with the outside world limit CA countries in economic growth. Establishing a transport corridor between Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye and the Black Sea region, as well as Europe, will have a positive economic effect.

The revitalization of political dialogue between CA countries and individual EU members is practical confirmation of the change in European policy towards the region¹¹. There is an intensification of the Central Asian vector in the foreign policy of **Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands**, and others. After February 2022, high-level visits took place, and

⁷ Secretary Blinken's Travel to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and India. Press Statement (February 23, 2023)

<https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-travel-to-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-and-india/>

⁸ The White House C5+1 Leaders' Joint Statement (September 21, 2023) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/21/c51-leaders-joint-statement/>

⁹ Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership", Brussels, 15.5.2019; JOIN(2019) 9 final https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf

¹⁰In January 2024, an Investors Forum was held, which is designed to contribute to the long-term goal of making the TITR a "multimodal, modern, competitive, sustainable, predictable, smart and fast route connecting Europe and Central Asia in 15 days".

¹¹ Kryzys jako szansa. Nowy etap relacji UE i Azji Centralnej (26.04.2024)

https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/komentarz_591_0.pdf

economic forums were held with the participation of European businesses in the "C5+1" format.

Some EU countries, such as **Hungary**, have turned their attention to the region for their own motives. In particular, Hungary's "Opening to the East" (Hungarian: "Keleti Nyitás") policy, which was launched in the 2010s, allowed Central Asian countries to be involved in some of Budapest's initiatives. Moreover, after the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, there has been an active political dialogue at the highest and high levels between Hungary and CA countries. Hungary continues to create long-term partnerships with CA countries based on economic, cultural, and educational foundations¹².

The desire for further deepening ties between the EU and Central Asia is based on the position that the EU has "red lines" that it will not cross for economic gain, and at the same time, the EU also strives to build partnerships that do not require abandoning other partners.

It's worth noting that by the end of 2024, the first-ever summit of EU and Central Asian leaders is expected to take place, which will formalize C5+EU cooperation at the highest political level¹³. Under current conditions, additional opportunities are opening up for cooperation between the EU and CA countries.

The United Kingdom has reassessed **the Central Asian vector of its foreign policy**. The appearance of a [report](#) by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons on the UK's engagement in the Central Asian region with recommendations for the government (November 2023) signaled that the UK is attempting to recalibrate its foreign policy towards CA, taking into account new geopolitical trends.

The visit of the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Lord David Cameron, to the region on April 22-26, 2024, aimed to send signals to both CA countries and global players. For Central Asian governments, this signal is that the United Kingdom seeks to help CA countries increase their resilience by diversifying foreign policy and addressing pressing economic issues. At the same time, for global players from the opposite camp, this visit demonstrated the UK's determination to act in a united front with partners to counter attempts to destroy the sovereignty and independence of smaller countries.

The main outcome of the visit was another "diplomatic offer" for the political leadership of CA countries. The UK's influence on the world stage, its active diplomatic and

¹² The Hungarian government has opened educational opportunities under the "Stipendium Hungaricum" scholarship program. Hungary annually provides 250 places for citizens of Kazakhstan, 200 places for citizens of Kyrgyzstan, 30 places for citizens of Uzbekistan. Since 2023, this program has also been available for citizens of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

¹³ European Parliament Brief: The EU strategy on Central Asia: Towards a new momentum? April 26, 2024
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762300/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)762300_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762300/EPRS_BRI(2024)762300_EN.pdf)

investment activities make it a desirable partner for Central Asian governments. The British government's rhetoric about the absence of the need to choose in favor of a specific partner is attractive, but how practical it will prove remains unclear.

Countries of the Muslim world: the Republic of Türkiye, Arab countries, and of course Iran, show a persistent interest in the Central Asian region. Moreover, each country offers its own investment-economic and ideological basis for cooperation.

Türkiye is actively working on implementing the concept of the "Turkic world" within the institutional mechanism – the Organization of Turkic States, OTS (Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, observers – Turkmenistan and Hungary). As noted by the German SWP, Ankara's close cultural ties with Central Asian republics, combined with the latter's readiness to diversify their external relations away from Moscow and Beijing, give Türkiye more leverage in the region¹⁴. Simultaneously, the Turkish side is developing alternative logistic routes (particularly through Iraq's territory), also aiming to promote peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) promotes an Arab vision of interregional economic cooperation, using the recently created mechanism "Central Asia-Gulf Cooperation Council" ("C5+Gulf countries"). One of the ultimate goals is to develop transit corridors that will increase connectivity between the Gulf countries and Central Asia, investing in the development of transport links throughout Eurasia.

Given the geography, the most acceptable land route from the perspective of direct logistics between the Gulf and Central Asia passes through Iran. However, geopolitical and infrastructural constraints are forcing Gulf countries to invest in alternative routes.

There is an active political dialogue at the level of relevant ministries, visits of business delegations. Gulf countries are actively participating in energy, transport, and logistics projects in Central Asia. Thus, the investment factor will remain one of the key factors for CA countries. However, security risks due to the activities of terrorist groups in Afghanistan are of particular concern to Gulf countries.

Iran, in turn, being an ally of Russia, is trying to maximize its achievements in the international arena, including through the CA region. For the IRI, the region of Central Asia and the Caucasus has great geostrategic importance due to historical, civilizational, linguistic, religious, and cultural ties.

¹⁴ Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity: Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey (October 2022) https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C64_MiddleCorridor.pdf

The region's potential as a space for political and economic maneuvering under the pressure of sanctions regimes makes Central Asia an important element of Iran's "resilience". President Ibrahim Raisi [called](#) improving relations with Central Asia "one of the top priorities of foreign policy". With its membership in the SCO in July 2023, Iran will try to solve a number of tasks, in particular, to cement the level of relations that has developed with Russia and China since the beginning of the full-scale war against Ukraine. Despite the ambitions of the Iranian leadership, Iran's economy is in decline, and international isolation limits the country's ability to attract partners in Central Asia.

With CA countries, Iran focuses on visa liberalization, trade development, agriculture, energy, mining industry, transport and logistics projects, water-ecological and cross-border cooperation, development of tourism relations and reducing security threats, particularly focusing on joint fight against extremism, terrorism and drug trafficking, but cautiously offering discussions on potential cooperation in the defense-military direction.

To achieve its goals, Iran's private sector is given a key role in the country's economic diplomacy. The desire to establish an Iran+Central Asia transport chain by developing railway, road, and sea transport hubs is a response to Russia's request to ensure the trade capabilities of both countries under sanctions.

Iran traditionally has close ties with Tajikistan due to cultural affinity and a shared vision of steps to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Iran will coordinate their policies towards the Taliban government to ensure Afghanistan's ethnic diversity in government formation. Although Iranian experts assess that a favorable strategic and geopolitical situation for Iran is forming in Central Asia, countries such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are refraining from establishing closer relations with Iran despite general regional trends.

It is noteworthy that Iranian diplomacy in recent years has also been actively developing bilateral relations with Kazakhstan and restoring the dynamics of relations with Turkmenistan. In June 2022, the presidents of [Kazakhstan](#) and [Turkmenistan](#) paid official visits to Tehran. From Iran's perspective, visits by Central Asian presidents are a signal that the countries in the region are set to develop cooperation despite sanctions obstacles.

The reaction of CA countries to the death of the IRI president and members of the government delegation was indicative: CA leaders sent telegrams to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, visited Iranian embassies in their countries to personally express condolences to the Iranian people and make appropriate entries in the Book of Condolences, and the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, [made a visit](#) to Tehran, where he personally participated in ceremonial events.

After the election of the new IRI president, the course for developing relations with the region's countries will receive a new impetus. Building institutional capabilities within the structure of Iran's Foreign Ministry itself and strengthening coordination between various institutions in the context of implementing the Central Asian vector will allow Iran to offer a more substantive multilateral format. Among the likely initiatives for the CA region will be the creation of a C5+Iran diplomatic platform, similar to those with the US, Japan, EU, China, and others. Given the regional conjuncture and global confrontation between certain poles of attraction, it is quite likely that Iran in the CA region will continue to act as a reinforcing component of Russia's influence, while simultaneously supporting China's interests.

During these years, some of the most active Asian countries interacting with Central Asia and offering their cooperation formats have been Southeast Asian countries such as **Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore**. Political and economic dialogue is taking place with **Vietnam**, and interest in the region is also observed in **Malaysia**.

Special attention should be paid to the dynamics of **relations between CA countries and the South Caucasus**, particularly with the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia, primarily dictated by transport and logistics considerations. The tension in Armenia's relations with Russia and the further process of transforming the Armenian government's foreign policy orientations create opportunities for mediation for certain countries in the CA region (particularly the Republic of Kazakhstan), which in the future will allow satisfying ambitions of regional leadership to maintain stability and security in the Caucasus-Central Asian space.

Thus, the geopolitical struggle of global actors in the Central Asian region occurs at many levels involving partner countries and is not limited to such dimensions as political-diplomatic, economic, technological, informational, or cultural-humanitarian.

Forecasts and Prospects

Sustainable development and security in Central Asia require substantial amounts of external financing to build intra-regional connectivity and solve security problems. International organizations and their financial institutions, such as the World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Asian Development Bank (ADB), Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) offer CA countries investment portfolios to realize the region's economic potential.

According to [EBRD](#) forecasts, economic growth in Central Asia will slow from 5.7 percent in 2023 to 5.4 percent in 2024, as intermediary trade with Russia has reached a plateau, and spring flooding negatively affects Kazakhstan's growth prospects. Next year, growth will be up to 5.9 percent.

The geopolitical struggle for the region by global leaders sets appropriate political frameworks that will become increasingly difficult to transcend. If the war continues, the cumulative sanctions impact on the Russian economy, and consequently on the economic well-being of Central Asian countries, will become stronger. Moreover, there is uncertainty regarding the political line of the new U.S. Administration towards China after the presidential elections in November 2024.

Potential trade wars between the U.S. and China, under conditions of maintaining and increasing sanctions pressure on Russia due to its aggressive war against Ukraine, will create a dangerous intra-regional dilemma for CA countries. In these conditions, the political leadership of CA countries will face a difficult foreign policy choice. Under current circumstances, countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are likely to adhere to a choice in favor of the Russian-Chinese vector. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will try to maintain dialogue with European and American partners, relying exclusively on their economic and investment interests. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan, as a neutral country, although gravitating towards the Turkic space, will maintain close relations with China.

Although Russia and China offer a wide range of economic projects in various fields, the common interest of these two actors will remain the use of the Central Asian geopolitical space to solve their own foreign policy tasks. China's relations with CA countries, like CA countries' relations with Russia, do not and will not have the character of an equal partnership. For CA countries, China will remain a more relevant partner for balancing both Western interest and Russian influence.

The economic interest that China shows in the transport and logistics dimension of the CA region is based on the Chinese side's desire to expand its access to European markets. Thus, one of the geopolitical consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine is the urgent need to ensure the implementation of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route idea. The development of the TITR will become possible as a result of intra-regional integration between CA countries based on the national interests of the countries, not the dictate of Russian interests.

The efforts of Central Asian leaders to ensure progressive and sustainable development for their societies will conflict with what Russia offers as a regional actor. At the same time, the Chinese perspective will depend on whether CA countries will be ready to accept conditions dictated by Chinese interests in the global arena.

The return of the United Kingdom to the region was perceived negatively by Russia and China. Whether the increased British interest in the region will persist after the early parliamentary elections on July 4, 2024, remains unclear. There is a possibility that the UK will maintain its level of interest in the region due to economic presence and the need to protect its own investments.

Islamic radicalization will remain a problem for stability in the region and a kind of "response" to the real situation with the standard of living and economic development. At the same time, there is some speculation on the theme of the "three evils" (terrorism, radicalism, extremism) by Russia to maintain and strengthen its presence in the region as an "anti-terrorist force".

Reducing the level of radicalization, and consequently the terrorist threat, is directly related to economic development, improving the welfare of citizens of Central Asian countries, and security stabilization through an inclusive political process in Afghanistan. With the support of the current level of political and economic ties with Russia, sustainable economic development of CA countries will not be observed.

Conclusions

Ukraine's partners have reassessed the role of the Central Asian region for their foreign policy. Russia's war against Ukraine, China's position, and the potential armed conflict over Taiwan, as well as competition for rare earth metals, have forced Central Asian countries to reassess their relations with global actors operating in the region.

Central Asia has become the subject of increased interest from British, American, and European partners due to attempts by the Russian leadership to use the jurisdictions of countries in the region to reduce sanctions pressure on its economy.

The long-standing perception of the Central Asian region through the Russian information and analytical prism has resulted in a lack of strategic vision for the development of bilateral relations between our country and the region. As a result, Ukraine is losing economic opportunities, there is a recorded trend of declining trade with the CA region, and with the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, unfavorable political and diplomatic conditions are being cemented.

Despite the fact that the political leadership of some CA countries tried to diversify foreign policy ties even before the start of the great war, only after 2022 did this trend become dominant. The return of geopolitical rivalry to the region, the intensification of economic problems due to Russia-provoked market instability and disruption of supply chains, against the background of climate shocks, forces Central Asian countries to balance the influence of global players and seek optimal configurations with extra-regional players, considering their affiliation to one camp or another. After 2022, the most widespread format of interaction became platforms using the "C5+1" formula, which is actively used by all regional players.

Competition between major powers in the region requires flexibility in approaches from Central Asian countries to maximize potential benefits from the circumstances. At the same time, the presence of Russian military bases, close economic ties with the Russian military-industrial complex, as well as the development of contacts with China on the military-technical track, significantly narrows any potential opportunities in the direction of diversifying the nomenclature of armaments. Current trends indicate a significant interest of CA countries in Turkish armaments, despite the fact that Türkiye is a member of NATO, the main military-political opponent of the Russian collective security project known as the CSTO.

Ukraine and Central Asian countries have historical ties conditioned by their shared Soviet past. Until 2014, the political dialogue and economic relations between Ukraine and the CA region had positive dynamics.

With the beginning of the great war, Central Asian countries proclaimed a position of neutrality, calling on both Russian and Ukrainian sides for a "political-diplomatic settlement of the conflict". This neutrality is evident in the media sphere, where news about the war in Ukraine is covered considering the positions of all sides. However, unlike the first stage of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, public opinion in Central Asian countries has changed after February 2022 towards sympathy for the Ukrainian people due to the aggression of the neighboring country.

The probability that the political position of CA countries regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war will change is low. Even in wartime conditions, Ukraine possesses several advantages in terms of prospective partnerships, which can be converted into corresponding mutually beneficial economic and cultural-humanitarian achievements.

At the same time, the political conjuncture for strengthening Ukraine's political dialogue with the region will remain unfavorable, dictated both by the security concerns of CA countries themselves regarding their own borders and internal political stability, and by Ukraine's objective ability to influence the geostrategic situation in the Central Asian region while the country is in an active phase of war with one of the key regional actors.

It's worth understanding that currently in Ukraine, not only the fate of the European security architecture is being decided, but also the foundations for the future coexistence of the transatlantic (NATO) and Eurasian (CSTO) collective security systems are being laid. Moreover, further weakening of Russia will result in increasing the attractiveness of the Chinese security model based on the SCO's activities. The constructive coexistence or confrontation of these models depends on the results of the war in Europe.

Recommendations

Ukraine's desire to develop relations with the region based on the principles of international law and in the spirit of mutual respect requires a long-term planning horizon.

The most promising and simultaneously mutually acceptable from the point of view of political context is the humanitarian dimension of cooperation. Interpersonal contacts, cooperation between charitable foundations, cooperation between representatives of media, expert, scientific and academic circles can lay a solid foundation for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Therefore, there is an obvious urgent need to change Ukraine's approaches to working with the countries of this region in the long term. The dynamics of the region opens a "window of opportunity" that Ukrainian diplomacy should take advantage of.

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