

The Interconnectedness of Central Asia and the Caspian Region: Current Issues

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Abstract. The article presents the main prerequisites and factors for the interconnectedness of the Caspian and Central Asian regions; the “window of opportunity” for the development of regional cooperation both between the states of the region and with neighboring countries was explored. The main factors determining the strategic importance of the region in the international arena, the importance of the large volume of hydrocarbon reserves, and the geographical location of the region are shown; interconnectedness of the countries of Central Asia and the Caspian states. As a result, the significance and prospects of interconnectedness between Central Asia and the Caspian region were revealed. In these regions, almost all the challenges and threats of globalization characteristic of the world system are manifested: multipolarity and economic confrontation between the West and the East; growing civilizational contradictions; depletion of natural resources; the likelihood of environmental and man-made threats on a planetary scale.

Keywords: Caspian region, Central Asian region, interconnectedness, interests of regional states, regional cooperation

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Introduction

At the present stage, geopolitical uncertainty remains in key regions of the world, negatively affecting regional security and cooperation. This is typical for the Caspian region, with the states of which Uzbekistan actively interacts on all topical issues.

The development of cooperation between the two regions is associated with a favorable political climate in Central Asia, where since 2016 regional cooperation on all pressing issues of the “common fate of the region” has reached a new level, in which the position of Uzbekistan plays a vital role.

After being elected President of Uzbekistan, Sh.Mirziyoyev began to pursue a new regional policy aimed at good neighborliness, the formation of effective favorable policies - necessary diplomatic conditions for bilateral and multilateral relations, to strengthen regional security and stability, taking into account new challenges and threats in the world and the region. All efforts of the Central Asian states, together with the international community, are also aimed at solving the Afghan problem. The main prerequisite for this was Uzbekistan’s proposals for a constructive solution to existing problems in the region by the Central Asian countries themselves on the basis of good neighborliness, taking into account interests and reasonable compromises. This initiative was accepted by all states of the region and made it possible to achieve a breakthrough in resolving a number of issues that in the past were sources of interstate tension. Prospects have emerged for the consolidation of the countries of Central Asia, the formation of an independent geopolitical subjectivity of the region and the strengthening of its unique cultural and civilizational identity

Since 2017, regional cooperation to ensure security in Central Asia has become a system-forming factor in the stability and sustainable development of the entire region. The main condition for this was the organization of regular consultative meetings of the heads of state of Central Asia [1] as an effective platform for confidential and constructive discussion and agreed solutions to common problems of the countries of the region; meetings were initiated by the President of Uzbekistan Sh.Mirziyoyev. This mechanism plays a key role in resolving problematic issues in Central Asia based on the principles of good neighborliness, mutual trust, equality, respect and consideration of each other’s interests¹.

The growing complexity of the international situation and the growing threat of international terrorism, including from Afghanistan, are pushing the countries of the region towards closer cooperation. In this regard, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy priorities involve the development of cooperation not only with the countries of Central Asia, but also with Afghanistan. As Sh Mirziyoyev emphasized in an interview with the Kazakh agency Kazinform, “intensification of contacts with neighbors also implies Afghanistan, the transition of which to a peaceful path largely depends on economic development, in which the countries of the Central Asian region can and should take part.”².

¹ Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh.Mirziyoyev at the international conference “Central Asia: one past and a common future, cooperation for sustainable development and mutual prosperity.” Samarkand, 2017.

² Mirziyoyev Sh. To Participants of the first international conference “Interconnectedness European Union and Central Asia: global gateway for sustainable development”, 2022. Available from: <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/5714>

The Central Asian states do not have direct access to maritime transport, which is why the transport and communications sector is a priority area of regional cooperation. In this regard, it is necessary to actively use transport corridors passing through Central Asia. As the head of Uzbekistan Sh.Mirziyoyev emphasized, the development of the Trans-Caspian multimodal route will be a great contribution to the further development of trade and economic cooperation between Europe and Asia, the access of Central Asian countries to foreign markets along the most convenient transport corridors³.

An urgent issue is also the expansion of cooperation with the Caspian states in such areas as trade and economic, food, energy and others. Today, most projects are implemented in bilateral formats within the CIS, UTC, and SCO. There is no comprehensive approach within the framework of the “Central Asia + Caspian region” format and mechanism.

This will update the study of the situation in the Caspian region, taking into account the interests of the Central Asian states. Existing studies can be divided into four groups.

The first group consists of the works of Uzbek scientists, which are devoted to the study of problems of regional security in Central Asia, the ideas of the countries of the region to counter modern challenges and threats, as well as cooperation with international organizations and foreign states in the field of security. [37].

The second group of studies is devoted to the works of scientists and experts from the CIS countries on issues of regional security in Central Asia (A.Grozin, I.Krugov, V.Kondratyev, etc.)⁴

The third group of studies is the works of Western researchers. Many research and analytical materials on the problems of the Caspian and Central Asian regions were published in the journal “Caspian Affairs” [49].

The purpose of the study was to study the characteristics and interconnectedness of the Central Asian and Caspian regions in the context of the development of modern international relations.

Materials and methods

The research is based on methods of systemic and situational analysis. The method of situational analysis was used as part of the implementation of the scientific project of the Tashkent State University “Interconnectedness of Central and South Asia”, within the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Grozin A. Meeting in the Caspian Sea: how Uzbekistan is becoming the engine of Central Asia. 2021. <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20210809/vstrecha-na-kaspii-kak-uzbekistan-stanovitsya-motorom-tsentralnoy-azii-20014034.html>; Krugoviykh I. Expert: “Caspian issues” directly concern Uzbekistan. 09.28.2019. Available from: <https://nuz.uz/v-mire/43575-ekspert-kaspiyskaya-tematika-napryamuyu-kasaetsya-uzbekistana.html>. Kondratyev V. Uzbekistan is increasing cooperation with the countries of the Caspian region. 22.03.2022. Available from: <http://casp-geo.ru/uzbekistan-narashivaet-sotrudnichestvo-so-stranami-kaspijskogo-regiona/>

framework of which its participants also conducted a content analysis of the media of the states of the Caspian and Central Asian regions. The authors also conducted an expert survey (30 experts) among specialists dealing with problems of interconnectedness in modern conditions. As materials for the study, the authors used materials from international conferences, round tables held at the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies and in other analytical and research structures of the states of the Central and Caspian regions. Separately, official documents of the states of Central Asia and the Caspian region concerning the interconnectedness of the Central Asian and Caspian regions over the past 30 years were analyzed.

Results

Some aspects of studying the Caspian region

At the present stage, the situation in the Caspian region is largely determined by the geographical position of the countries of the region, the availability of hydrocarbon resources, the development of transport corridors, geopolitical and geo-economic factors, the general regional situation and differences in the national interests of the states of the region [1].

At the present stage, the Caspian region, due to its natural resources and oil and gas deposits, is called the center of gravity for the interests of large states of the world [7]. Considering the interconnectedness of Central Asia and the Caspian region, many researchers believe that the states of the two regions will attract the attention of global actors and the fate of the world will be decided in these regions [30].

In the theory of international relations, the study of the Caspian region is given priority. First of all, this is due to the geographical location of the states of the Caspian region, the influence of the processes occurring in the region on other adjacent regions of the world, and the development trends of the region itself.

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Russia form the Caspian region, but this definition is formal and not fully developed [8]. In this regard, in practice and in the works of researchers, different definitions are used in relation to the Caspian region. For example, some Russian researchers, based on the geographical location of states, define the Caspian region as states located in geographic proximity to the Caspian Sea. According to this indicator, the Caspian region consists of Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran [27].

Some scientists consider the concept of the “Caspian region” through geopolitical processes [11]. Some researchers consider the Caspian Sea as a constituent element of the Caucasus and Central Asia [19]. Some scientists consider the Caspian region through the concepts of an international region. Expert on the theory of regions M.Lagutina notes that global regions are new elements of global regionalization, the main characteristics of which are the presence of a common space, nature and transnational networks [16].

A group of scientists believes that a cross-border region is an international region [14], a form of organizing cross-border cooperation [38]. It is characterized by the continuity of the territory, the presence of regional trans-border organizational and legal structures as elements of the region [13], the presence of a systemic infrastructure (in the case of the Caspian region – transport and industrial), close political and socio-cultural ties between them. In the classification of regions, the Caspian region should be classified as an international macroregion [32]. According to Z.Brzezinski, the Caspian region includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, Afghanistan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan [2]. A number of Russian scientists in the Caspian region, in addition to the five Caspian states include Transcaucasia, Central Asia and Turkey [9]. In turn, the concept of “Greater Caspian region” is actively used in scientific research [35].

An analysis of the literature shows that the main problems in studying the Caspian region are, firstly, the geopolitical situation; secondly, issues of legal status; thirdly, relations between states in the region and international relations; fourthly, the interests of international actors. Thus, an analysis of the scientific development of the topic allows us to conclude that the issue of interconnectedness of the Caspian and Central Asian regions is of significant interest to researchers.

Conclusion

The Caspian states – Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran form the “Caspian axis”, which is complemented by the “Caspian arc”, consisting of countries adjacent or interconnected with the region – Armenia, Afghanistan, Belarus, Georgia, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Ukraine. At the same time, the European Union, China and the United States, despite their distance from the Caspian Sea, have a significant influence on it, according to their national interests [11]. This is the concept of viewing the Caspian region through a system of concentric circles-belts, in which the “core” is formed by coastal states, to which countries nearby or connected to them in historical, economic, geopolitical and other respects, as well as global centers of power, gravitate.

From the point of view of the concept of ethnocultural division of the countries of the world by S.Huntington in his book “The Clash of Civilizations and the Transformation of the World Order,” the Caspian region is located on the border of a hypothetical intercivilizational clash between Orthodox (Russia), Muslim (Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) and Buddhist (Republic of Kalmykia within Russia) formations.

The historic breakthrough in resolving the problems of the Caspian Sea, achieved at the Caspian Five summit held on August 12, 2018 in Aktau (Kazakhstan), creates the preconditions for a serious change in the situation in a number of areas of the economy and geopolitics of the Central Asia and South Caucasus region. Uzbekistan will also be able to reap numerous benefits. First of all, from the growth of the purchasing power of the Caspian countries and from the increase in transit cargo flows along the China-Central

Asia-Caspian Sea-South Caucasus line, which will open up new opportunities for the export of Uzbek products. Opportunities will also open up for investment by Uzbek companies in joint projects for oil and natural gas production.

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