ENHANCING COOPERATION FOR INTERCONNECTED REGIONAL SECURITY: CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES AND AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This article aims to delve into the evolving dynamics of cooperation between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan, particularly within the context of interconnected regional security challenges. The strategic significance of Central Asia as a crossroads of major geopolitical and economic interests sets the stage for understanding the transformations in this region, especially following the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan.

Methods: To achieve the stated objectives, the article employs a multifaceted approach. It begins by examining the historical context of Central Asia's relationship with Afghanistan, tracing the developments to the post-withdrawal era. The analysis encompasses shared security concerns, potential spillover effects of instability, and the rise of extremism. The research emphasizes the significance of regional cooperation as a viable mechanism to address common threats and foster stability.

Results: The findings of this study shed light on the key drivers and impediments to cooperation in the Central Asian region. Historical rivalries, border disputes, and divergent interests among regional actors are thoroughly analyzed. The existing cooperative frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), are scrutinized, and the role of external stakeholders, including major powers and international organizations, is examined in supporting and facilitating regional cooperation.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the article synthesizes the analysis by outlining potential areas of cooperation between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan. It highlights crucial areas such as border security, intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism efforts, trade, economic cooperation, and infrastructure development. Emphasizing the need for trust-building measures, diplomatic dialogue, and mutual understanding, the conclusion underscores the importance of these elements for the successful implementation of cooperative initiatives. Overall, this article makes a significant contribution to the scholarly discourse on regional security in Central Asia and Afghanistan, providing a foundation for further research and policy discussions aimed at fostering a sustainable and resilient security architecture in the region.

Keywords: Central Asia, region, threats, regional security, regional connectivity, foreign policy.

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REFORÇAR A COOPERAÇÃO EM MATÉRIA DE SEGURANÇA REGIONAL INTERLIGADA: PAÍSES DA ÁSIA CENTRAL E AFEGANISTÃO

RESUMO

Objetivos: Este artigo pretende aprofundar a dinâmica em evolução da cooperação entre os países da Ásia Central e o Afeganistão, particularmente no contexto dos desafios de segurança regional interligados. O significado estratégico da Ásia Central como encruzilhada de importantes interesses geopolíticos e econômicos prepara o terreno para a compreensão das transformações nesta região, especialmente após a retirada das forças internacionais do Afeganistão.

Métodos: Para alcançar os objetivos declarados, o artigo emprega uma abordagem multifacetada. Começa por examinar o contexto histórico da relação da Ásia Central com o Afeganistão, traçando os desenvolvimentos até à era pós-retirada. A análise engloba preocupações de segurança compartilhadas, possíveis efeitos de repercussão da instabilidade e do aumento do extremismo. A investigação salienta a importância da cooperação regional como um mecanismo viável para fazer face a ameaças comuns e promover a estabilidade.

Resultados: As conclusões deste estudo evidenciam os principais fatores e obstáculos à cooperação na região da Ásia Central. As rivalidades históricas, as disputas fronteiriças, e os interesses divergentes entre os intervenientes regionais são analisados minuciosamente. Os quadros de cooperação existentes, como a Organização de Cooperação de Xangai (OCX), são examinados e o papel das partes interessadas externas, incluindo as grandes potências e as organizações internacionais, é examinado no apoio e na facilitação da cooperação regional.

Conclusão: Em conclusão, o artigo sintetiza a análise delineando potenciais áreas de cooperação entre países da Ásia Central e o Afeganistão. Destaca áreas cruciais como a segurança das fronteiras, a partilha de informações, os esforços de luta contra o terrorismo, o comércio, a cooperação econômica e o desenvolvimento de infraestruturas. Sublinhando a necessidade de medidas de criação de confiança, diálogo diplomático e compreensão mútua, a conclusão sublinha a importância destes elementos para a implementação bem sucedida de iniciativas de cooperação. Em termos gerais, este artigo dá uma contribuição significativa para o discurso acadêmico sobre a segurança regional na Ásia Central e no Afeganistão, fornecendo uma base para novas discussões de investigação e políticas destinadas a promover uma arquitetura de segurança sustentável e resiliente na região.

Palavras-chave: Ásia Central, região, ameaças, segurança regional, conectividade regional, política externa.

1 INTRODUCTION

The persistence of a complex of challenges and threats in Central Asia is directly related to the situation in Afghanistan. In such circumstances, the four Central Asian states, with the exception of Tajikistan, are seeking to actively interact with Afghanistan to develop common approaches, considering it as part of regional interconnectedness. However, the participation of Tajikistan in August 2023 in the Ashgabat meeting of the leaders of the three Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan indicates an understanding of the factor of interconnectedness in the general context of regional security.
Regional interconnectedness is necessary for the socio-economic development of any state [1]. American expert F. Starr considers the use of the concept “post-Soviet space” as a definition of the region obsolete and suggests not using this concept [2]. F. Starr’s point of view is shared by Italian analyst F. Indeo, who views Afghanistan as a Central Asian state. He believes that the development of transport infrastructure in the region, including Afghanistan, will contribute to the development of regional connectivity [3]. According to experts, Afghanistan was part of Central Asia until the time when the countries of the region became part of the USSR. During this period, various barriers arose in Central Asia related to cultural and political values, as well as language, in particular, the Russian language was accessible to the population and all this contributed to the greater isolation of Afghanistan from regional processes [4].

As the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. M. Mirziyoev noted, the territory of Afghanistan cannot be allowed to remain a source of challenges and threats to our security. First of all, the growth of extremism and the export of radical ideology, the use of Afghan territory for subversive actions against our countries, and the risks of militants infiltrating across borders. It is important, through common efforts and decisive actions, to jointly stop the channels of transfer of terrorists from “hot spots” to Afghanistan [5].

Between August and December 2021, the number of Afghan refugees who crossed the Amudarya from Afghanistan to Uzbekistan is about 150 people. At the same time, Uzbekistan does not plan to forcibly deport them to Afghanistan, since the refugees themselves are ready to return back subject to a guarantee of security from the Taliban.

Given the current situation in Afghanistan, experts are skeptical about the future of the planned large projects. Some of them believe that the trans-Afghan corridor, aimed at strengthening regional connectivity between Central and South Asia, cannot be implemented in the current conditions and this issue may be relevant in 20-30 years.

At the same time, the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan and the rise of the “Taliban” to power may bring new impetus to the development of regionalization in Central Asia. This is due to the fact that in resolving regional issues, in addition to large states, the key role will be played by the states of the region by intensifying dialogue, cooperation, and the implementation of regional projects and programs.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) that border Afghanistan can exert some political influence on the Taliban. Almost all countries in the region are already engaged in a constructive dialogue with the interim government of the Taliban movement.

In these conditions, it seems necessary to strengthen regional connectivity in Central and South Asia, where Afghanistan is one of the key links. Central and South Asia have always been connected by reliable trade arteries and served as a bridge for the countries of the Middle East, Europe, and China. This is also stated in the works of the ancient Greek historian Strabo, who wrote that along the Oxus River - now the Amu Darya, “goods were delivered through the Caspian and Black Seas to Europe.” Back in the third and second millennia BC, a network of trade routes connecting us passed through the Khyber and Bolan passes[6]. The regions of Central and South Asia have a long history of mutually beneficial relations. There has always been a movement of goods and people between regions, which, in turn, connected their cultural and religious ties and influenced political relations.

The key moment for discussing and developing proposals for strengthening interconnectedness was the international conference “Central and South Asia: Regional Interconnectedness. Challenges and opportunities”, held on the initiative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. M. Mirziyoyev on July 14-15, 2021 in Tashkent. The results of the conference allowed us to draw the following conclusions.

Firstly, the conference became a key platform for discussing the further development of regional connectivity between Central and South Asia. Common challenges and threats, the spatial and geographic proximity of the peoples of the two regions can become a system-forming factor in the formation of a system of comprehensive interconnectedness.

In 2020, the total trade turnover between Central Asia and South Asia amounted to $4.4 billion (3.2% of the total foreign trade turnover of $142.6 billion). The largest shares in the trade turnover of the countries of Central Asia and South Asia are occupied by Kazakhstan (52.8%) and Uzbekistan (31.2%) [7] . Trade and transport are of strategic importance for Central Asia, since a number of countries in the region are separated from the sea by the territories of two states. Uzbekistan is interested in the development of transport and logistics infrastructure and integration into the transport corridors of the
EAEU countries, which will contribute to the development of its connections with world markets [8].

Secondly, the Afghan factor is named one of the main factors for the successful implementation of projects and programs within the framework of regional interconnectedness. Ensuring security in the country will allow the countries of the two regions to implement large infrastructure projects, and as a result, Afghanistan will become a bridge of comprehensive interconnectedness.

Thirdly, the states of the two regions are themselves interested in the formation of regional interconnectedness. In ensuring security, there are unresolved problems between individual states in the regions. However, they are all interested in solving them within the framework of regional interconnectedness, primarily in order to ensure security in Afghanistan. At this stage, cooperation with Afghanistan is carried out with all countries of Central Asia.

3 METHODOLOGY

Today, all these countries give priority to establishing long-term stability and sustainable peace in Afghanistan. Resolving the situation in Afghanistan opens up wide opportunities for building up trade, economic, and investment ties, and strengthening transport and communication interaction between the countries of Central and South Asia [9].

Uzbekistan pursues a good-neighborly and friendly policy towards Afghanistan, which is based on taking into account the national interests of both countries, generally accepted principles and norms of international law, and is aimed at ensuring lasting peace, stability, security, and sustainable development in Central Asia.

According to Kazakh researcher R. Burnashev, Uzbekistan views Afghanistan as a bridge through which it can gain access to South Asia and the Middle East, which is why it is relevant to involve Afghanistan in regional processes [10].

An important role in the development of historical Uzbek-Afghan relations has traditionally been played by the key geographical location of Afghanistan, which for many centuries was located along important trade routes, connecting South and East Asia with Europe and the Middle East. In this context, Afghan territory served as a crossroads in trade, economic, scientific and cultural relations in Asia, which contributed to the growth of economic well-being of local peoples.
These processes were accompanied by active interaction between the peoples of Central Asia and Afghanistan, who formed a single civilized space in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity and language. Thanks to the Great Silk Road, trade and economic relations between the countries of the region continuously developed, and political and diplomatic ties were strengthened. However, over the past 40 years, Afghanistan has become an arena for the clash of interests of global and regional powers.

Diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan were established on October 13, 1992. In the foreign policy strategy of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan is seen as an integral part of the Central Asian region, in which this country acts as an important component of Uzbekistan’s initiative to form transregional interconnectedness of Central and South Asia, aimed at transforming the region into the largest transport, trade and economic hub.

For Uzbekistan, the priority of relations with Afghanistan is also demonstrated by the functioning of the institution of the Special Representative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Afghanistan since 2017, as well as the position of Deputy Minister for Foreign Economic Cooperation in the Ministry of Investment and Foreign Trade (MIFT) since November 2020.

Since 2002, supplies of electrical energy have been carried out to Afghanistan on the basis of annually concluded direct agreements between “NES” JSC and the Main Directorate for Electrification of Afghanistan “Brishno Shirkat”.

In 2002, the supply volume was only 62 million kW/h. Every year this volume of exported electricity increased to 200 million kW/h. and in 2018 reached 2.5 billion kW/h. In accordance with the agreement reached in August 2020, Uzbekistan will supply electricity to Afghanistan until 2030 [11].

In such conditions, the countries of Central Asia are actively interacting with the authorities of Afghanistan. In 2019, in Tashkent, within the framework of the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia, a Joint Statement was adopted, in which the countries of the region expressed their readiness to provide all possible assistance in the speedy achievement of civil peace and harmony in Afghanistan.
4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan were established in 1992 [12]. In the issue of resolving the Afghan conflict, Kazakhstan proposes to shift the focus to the humanitarian and economic components, including by promoting the implementation of joint economic and infrastructure projects and education programs. Kazakhstan annually provides humanitarian assistance in the form of supplies of wheat flour and granulated sugar.

Kazakhstan also supports almost all regional formats dedicated to the Afghan settlement (Tashkent Conference, Istanbul Process, Moscow Format, London Conference, Bonn Conference). At the same time, Kazakhstan stands for the active involvement of Afghanistan in the integration processes of Central Asia.

On January 19, 2018, under the chairmanship of Kazakhstan, the UN Security Council held its first ministerial-level debate on the topic “Building a Regional Partnership in Afghanistan and Central Asia as a Model of Interdependence of Security and Development” [13]. In January 2018, within the framework of Kazakhstan’s presidency of the UN Security Council, a meeting was held “Formation of a regional partnership in Afghanistan and Central Asia as a model of work in an area combining security and development issues”. At the meeting, a statement was adopted emphasizing the impossibility of resolving the Afghan conflict by military means, and participants noted support for the implementation of measures in Afghanistan with the participation of Central Asian states to establish stability [14].

With the “Taliban” movement coming to power in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan began to identify approaches to strengthen cooperation with the country’s authorities. In September 2021, at a meeting of the Council of Heads of State - members of the SCO, the President of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev proposed organizing a hub in Almaty for delivering aid to Afghanistan [15]. Such dynamics of activation for Kazakhstan are also necessary to improve approaches to the Afghan issue, which for many years have not been as active as compared to other Central Asian countries. As Kazakh expert D. Satpayev notes, unlike Uzbekistan, for a long time the Afghan factor was not a key factor for Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, not only due to the fact that Kazakhstan does not have a common border with this state but also due to the lack of strong specialists in Afghanistan. Also, Kazakhstan did not have any levers of influence on the situation in this country,
including due to the fact that there are many fewer Kazakhs living in Afghanistan than Uzbeks, Tajiks, or Turkmen [16].

Relations between Tajikistan and Afghanistan have also been developing since 1992 when diplomatic relations were established between the countries. Currently, there are 7 bridges on the border between the two countries. Currently, the construction of the eighth bridge across the Pyanj River is underway, the corresponding Agreement was approved by the Government of Tajikistan in April 2019. The bridge will connect the Khatlon region of the Republic of Tajikistan with the Afghan province of Takhar.

Tajikistan supports the efforts of the countries of the region to ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan. Dushanbe advocates the integration of Afghanistan into the regional processes of Central Asia and the entry of Kabul into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In March 2021, the next meeting of the “Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process” conference was held in Tajikistan on the topic “Strengthening consensus for peace and development. As a result, the Dushanbe Declaration was adopted [17].

The Istanbul Process was launched in 2011 as a joint effort between Turkey and Afghanistan to develop economic development and security efforts in Afghanistan. To date, ministerial conferences “Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process” have been held in Istanbul (2011), Kabul (2012), Almaty (2013), Beijing (2014), Islamabad (2015), Amritsar (2016), Baku (2017). On December 9, 2019, a ministerial conference “Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process” was held in Istanbul on the theme “Peace, Partnership, Prosperity” [18].

Tajikistan remains a consistent supporter of all international efforts aimed at restoring lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. At the meeting of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, President of Tajikistan E. Rahmon emphasized that the current crisis in Afghanistan is a threat to regional security and stability in Tajikistan, which has a border with Afghanistan with a total length of almost 1,400 km. The rise to power of the Taliban, listed as a terrorist group by the UN Security Council, further complicated the already difficult geopolitical process in the region. According to E. Rahmon, only dialogue with the participation of all layers of Afghan society, including Afghan Tajiks, can lead to the establishment of lasting peace and stability in this country [19].

Turkmenistan is also actively increasing cooperation with Afghanistan. Turkmenistan's participation in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan consists of
providing humanitarian assistance, training national personnel, and providing medical care to the population of border areas.

Security issues between the two countries are discussed within the framework of the Joint Turkmen-Afghan Commission for Security Cooperation, which continues to meet after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, has established a dialogue with the Taliban in order to continue cooperation and ensure regional security in Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstan’s position on the peace process in Afghanistan is to support the efforts of the world community to establish peace and stability in Afghanistan and the adjacent region, as well as its readiness to promote regional projects such as CASA-1000.

According to Kyrgyz media reports, Kyrgyzstan became the first country in Central Asia to hold a meeting with representatives of the “Taliban” after they came to power in Afghanistan [20]. At the meeting of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, President of Kyrgyzstan S. Japarov noted that due to the situation in Afghanistan, the security of Central Asia comes to the fore. In this regard, he proposed holding a Central Asia-UN summit in 2022 and creating a Center for Combating International Organized Crime in Bishkek within the SCO [21].

At the same time, according to the State Commission for Religious Affairs, the “Taliban” movement is banned in Kyrgyzstan and recognized as a terrorist organization and is also involved in other terrorist groups, including “Al-Qaeda, banned in Kyrgyzstan [22].

On March 27-28, 2018, at the initiative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. M. Mirziyoev, the Tashkent International Conference on Afghanistan “Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Interaction” was held”[23]. As a result of the conference, the participants adopted the Tashkent Declaration, which became the fundamental basis for the peace process in Afghanistan due to the following compelling reasons. First, it emphasizes that peace and security in Afghanistan are essential to ensuring stability in Central Asia. Second, an Afghan-owned political settlement supported by regional cooperation, as well as regional economic cooperation and connectivity is key to the peace and prosperity of Afghanistan and the entire region [24]. Thus, the “Central Asia + Afghanistan” format is a necessary part of the comprehensive interconnectedness of regional security, in which Afghanistan should be considered as part of the Central Asian region.
China’s policy towards Afghanistan is examined from the point of view of its security interests due to the Xinjiang factor. China needs the border with Afghanistan to be stable and secure. Beijing does not want Afghanistan to have the opportunity to train terrorists to organize the destabilization of the situation in Xinjiang. In this regard, China is conducting various operations (intelligence, propaganda, information) on this issue [25].

Iran also has its own interests in Afghanistan, which is strengthening its influence. Iran’s policy in Afghanistan in recent years has been aimed at implementing the following strategic objectives: 1) the creation of a buffer zone to contain the US policy of building a line of instability on the Iran-Afghan border; 2) strengthening its role as a defender of the “Shiite belt” from the Middle East to South Asia” (10-15% of the population of Afghanistan professes the Shiite branch of Islam, 18 of the country’s 34 provinces are Persian-speaking); 3) promoting its interregional transport and energy projects in Afghanistan; 4) maintaining leadership in the Afghan market for the export of their goods.

From 2002 to 2013 Iran allocated more than $900 million for various projects in Afghanistan. At the same time, Iran is considered one of the leaders among many of Afghanistan’s partner countries in effectively fulfilling its obligations. Iranian representatives took part in almost all important international events to discuss the socio-economic reconstruction of Afghanistan [26].

Pakistan occupies an important place in the development of regional connectivity. For these purposes, the Pakistani side gives priority to expanding the transport and communications component of cooperation in order to intensify trade and economic exchanges. An important event in this regard was the signing of a trilateral agreement (Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) on the implementation of the “Trans-Afghan transport” corridor [27].

It is important to note that Pakistan has two sets of objectives in the region. The first group is economic issues, among which experts identify the following main areas.

Diversification of trade and economic relations by expanding the geography of foreign economic partners. The need for this is explained by the dominance of developed countries (USA, EU, China) as partners in Pakistan’s foreign trade, which is the main reason for maintaining a high level of foreign trade deficit, which at the end of 2020 amounted to 23 billion dollars (exports - 22 billion, imports – 45 billion dollars). At the
same time, according to World Bank estimates, Pakistan’s total export potential is more than $88 billion, which is 4 times higher than current volumes.

In these conditions, it is important for Pakistan to develop new markets in order to redirect its export flows, including towards the states of Central Asia. Guided by such aspirations, Pakistan initially intends to increase the volume of trade with the Central Asian states to $5 billion per year. (the current level of trade turnover does not exceed $300 million).

Another factor determining the need for Pakistan to be involved in Central Asian processes of economic cooperation, experts call India’s active obstruction of Pakistan’s integration into political, trade, and economic processes in South Asia. New Delhi is trying to isolate the Pakistani side in the region by creating allied organizations without involving Islamabad in their work.

Under these conditions, the existing only regional format of cooperation involving Pakistan and Afghanistan, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), has turned into a paralyzed structure. The SAARC Free Trade Agreement remains unused. As a result, the volume of Pakistan’s trade turnover with regional countries still does not exceed 8% of the total volume of its trade exchanges with the outside world.

Given this trend, Pakistani political and expert circles are calling for the need for Pakistan to actively join the Central Asian economic integration processes in order to compensate for the ineffectiveness of the country’s policy in South Asia.

Developing relations with Central Asian states is in line with Pakistan’s goals of turning the country into a major regional transit hub. Despite the official declaration by the leadership of Pakistan of the success of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, the timing of their implementation is delayed, and the economic efficiency does not yet justify the invested financial resources.

The main CPEC project, the port of “Gwadar”, has not yet been able to turn into a major transport hub: at present, there is practically no regular movement of cargo ships there. In addition to this, Islamabad’s debt from Beijing is growing. The Pakistani side will have to pay $40 billion as loan repayment to China over 20 years by 2038 for projects already implemented under the CPEC.
Under these conditions, there is an increasing demand for the full use of the transit potential of Pakistani ports (“Karachi”, “Kasym”, “Gwadar”) by attracting regional states to their use.

The second group of goals is related to issues of military-strategic and geopolitical significance. Pakistan views its northern neighbors - Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia - as a kind of security belt. In this regard, Islamabad fears the prospects of strengthening New Delhi’s position in Afghanistan and Central Asia - the formation of a course loyal to India in states located to the north.

For this reason, Islamabad jealously monitors New Delhi’s activity in the region and tries to counter it. However, Pakistan’s own capabilities do not allow it to act as a counterweight to Indian influence and seriously increase its economic presence in Central Asia. These factors show the focus of Pakistan’s modern Central Asian policy on solving vital economic and political problems.

In these conditions, India is also actively involved in the system of regional interconnectedness, despite the lack of a full-fledged leap over the past 30 years due to the existing number of problematic issues.

First, India is geographically separated from Central Asia, due to which trade with Central Asian countries is mainly carried out through the ports and transport network of Iran.

Secondly, India’s main competitor is China, to which New Delhi cannot be a real competitor in the region. Third, the situation in Afghanistan does not allow the implementation of large projects with Indian participation. In this regard, and also considering Afghanistan as a priority area of foreign policy, India seeks to prevent the strengthening of an anti-Indian government in Afghanistan [28].

For India, the key instrument of multilateral cooperation in Central Asia is the SCO, which in 2017, together with Pakistan, received membership in the Organization.

India has developed constructive relations with almost all members of the SCO, not counting Pakistan and China. If with Pakistan it is more connected with territorial disputes, then with China for the sphere of economic influence on the Asian continent. These factors prevent the full development of the potential of all member countries of the Organization, as well as the development of consensus on conceptual issues on the SCO agenda.
For example, India is categorically against the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, although all other SCO members support and actively participate in the implementation of projects jointly with China [29]. With this approach, India demonstrates its determination to define its presence and interests within the SCO.

Thus, India, despite the presence of different approaches within the SCO, is interested in strengthening its position in the Central Asian region. For these purposes, India is working with all Central Asian states, both in bilateral and multilateral formats in the field of economics and security.

Historical ties with Afghanistan, the strategic location of Afghanistan, and Turkey’s close military-political partnership with Western countries play an important role in Ankara’s active participation in resolving the situation in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and its socio-economic restoration.

Türkiye is pursuing an active foreign policy towards Afghanistan. According to experts, by intensifying its Afghan policy, Ankara is simultaneously solving several problems: 1) the location of Afghanistan at the junction of international transport corridors provides Turkey with access to large markets in Southeast Asia; 2) involvement in the Afghan crisis allows the Turkish side to position itself on equal terms with the “global powers”; 3) Ankara’s participation in resolving the Afghan conflict creates a window of opportunity to expand interaction with the countries of Central Asia, which meets Turkey’s strategic interests in ensuring a long-term presence in the region.

Turkey’s foreign policy towards Afghanistan is based on four main principles: maintaining the unity and integrity of Afghanistan; ensuring security and stability in the country; formation of a political structure in which public participation is one of the priorities; restoring peace and prosperity by eliminating terrorism and extremism. In accordance with these goals, Turkey continues to contribute to the development of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan both at the bilateral level and within the framework of multilateral mechanisms, in particular at the UN and NATO levels.

Türkiye and Afghanistan have maintained friendly relations for many years. The basis of bilateral interaction is determined by the absence of borders, geopolitical ambitions, and religious and cultural communities [30].

From the very beginning of its activities within the military coalition, Turkey refused to participate in military campaigns against the Taliban, direct combat operations against terrorists, as well as operations to combat drug production and trafficking [31].
To a large extent, Turkey’s participation was expressed in the use of “soft power”. In 2002, the international coalition forces in Afghanistan created provincial teams to restore devastated areas, provide security assistance in the reconstruction of countries, and facilitate dialogue between the transitional administration of Afghanistan and regional leaders [32]. These teams served as a liaison between peacekeeping forces, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, local authorities, political and military leaders, and the civilian population.

5 CONCLUSION

The peoples of the modern countries of Central Asia have been linked by ties of friendship and kinship for three millennia. The importance of Central Asia in international relations is due to two factors. Firstly, Central Asia has historically been a territory that has made a significant contribution to the development of socio-economic, cultural, and political processes in the world. Secondly, Central Asia, given its geostrategic location, has always played a significant role in trade and cultural exchanges on a global scale. The commonality of history, similarity of cultures, traditions, language, and unity of religion serve as a solid basis for relations between the states of the region, which are the main components of interaction in all key areas of regional cooperation. These issues are becoming the main topics of meetings of regional leaders in both bilateral and multilateral formats. This is evidenced by the content of numerous bilateral negotiations between the leaders of states in the region, as well as their meetings within the framework of multilateral forums in the UN, SCO, CIS and others.

In the period 2017-2021, as part of consultative meetings, the heads of state of the region identified priority areas of cooperation, developed a number of key initiatives to strengthen regional cooperation in the field of economics, politics and security, which is why this mechanism plays a key role in solving key problematic issues and in developing proposals for further trade and economic development in the Central Asian region.
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