



Central Asia and regional security

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the politico-military cooperation among the Central Asian countries viewed as a key factor in ensuring the regional security. Today, the geopolitical tension in the surrounding regions, the worsening situation in Afghanistan, as well as intraregional socio-economic problems directly affect the security situation in Central Asia. In this regard, the question arises as to how well the Central Asian states are able to meet these challenges. The analysis of the situation in the region in the 1990s and at the beginning of the new century shows that attempts have been made to establish a regional security system based on military cooperation among Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, unregulated interstate relations in Central Asia, the lack of political will to cooperate with leaders of neighboring countries and the combination of external and internal threats have contributed to the creation of a regional security system based on the multilateral structures with the involvement of external actors.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, Central Asia¹ is one of those regions of the world where security issues are always on the agenda. In the international community the Central Asian region (hereinafter referred to as the “CAR”) is still associated with drug trafficking, danger of religious extremism and terrorism, and the underdevelopment of political and civil institutions. To this day, five countries in the region are still not in the position to regulate the arising problems finally. The aggravation of the terrorist threat in Afghanistan, as well as difficult situation around Syria contribute to further securitization of the region.

The unsatisfactory state of security in the CAR today leads to a search for an answer to the question: Why it happened that these five countries have become so vulnerable to external challenges and cannot cope with intraregional problems up to this day? Was well-known Zbigniew Brzezinski right when he called the CAR “the Eurasian Balkans” and is this definition of the security situation in the region still relevant? To answer these questions, we have tried first to analyze the latest challenges and security threats in the region. It has been also important to reveal the main approaches to the analysis of security problems in the region and to identify the theoretical basis on which our study relies.

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¹ Central Asia is a geographical area, which was called “Central Asia and Kazakhstan” during the Soviet era. It includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. These countries have common problems by virtue of a single historical past. Therefore, the consideration of them separately as “Central Asia” is justified from a scientific point of view.

The second section examined the process of regional cooperation in the political and military sphere as a key component of the entire security system in the CAR. Here we tried to analyze whether Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Turkmenistan has a neutral position) attempted to create a regional security system based on military cooperation or whether they relied on external actors initially. The question had been raised as how their attempts for ensuring the security were commensurate with the challenges. The third section sets the task of enlightening the formation of a multilateral security mechanism with the engagement of external actors as the result of the failure of regional cooperation in the field of military security.

2. Current state of security in Central Asia

2.1. Challenges and threats in the CAR

Today, the challenges and regional security threats have not been changed much compared to the first decade of the 21st century. Central Asia continues to serve as a bridge for a thriving drug trade from Afghanistan. Drug traffickers transport heroin and opium from Afghanistan through the “Northern Route”, which passes through Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to final destinations in Europe and Russia. Drugs are also being brought to China and Iran. Transnational criminal organizations use transparent borders of the region, bribe the border services. Moreover, illegal migrants and other exploited people move through illegal routes passing through national borders. The states of the region are still powerless to overcome such a negative situation. Due to the lack of mutual understanding, underdevelopment of interstate dialogue and interaction among them, the external threats are not only neutralized, but many issues of intra-regional importance remain unresolved and present real threats to the stability.

During the years of independence, the terms describing friendly relations and cooperation among the five countries were not in the political discourse in Central Asia. Moreover, the distrust of each other, confrontation and clashes with human casualties happened due to limited access to water and land resources, unresolved problems of border areas and enclaves. The modern history of the CAR knows even such extraordinary examples as the mined fields between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, bloody interethnic clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. Closed borders between the countries of the region, the break-up of trade and economic relations have become commonplace for the region.

The threat of terrorism and religious extremism is “the Sword of Damocles” constantly hanging over the CAR because of the proximity of the region to Afghanistan and the Middle East. The belonging of the region to the Islamic world supports the suspicion of possible religious radicalization in these countries. Central Asian countries have experienced the destructive actions of terrorist groups. Thus, in the capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, there were suicide attacks carried out by the group “Union of Islamic Jihad” in 2004. In 2010, members of the religious extremist group “Zaishul Mahdi” claimed responsibility for several terror attacks in Kyrgyzstan. In 2011, the terrorist group “Jund al-Khalifat” launched attacks in two large cities of Kazakhstan. In 2016 in Kyrgyzstan, members of the group “Katibad Tauhit al-Jihad” claimed responsibility for terror attack. In the same year, Kazakhstan experienced another terror attack. In terms of the number and intensity of terrorist attacks, the CAR does not stand out against the background of other regions of the world.

Today experts assess ambiguously the reality of the threat of terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia. There are publications concerning this issue with an alarmist attitude, and with a disappointing prediction of an impending catastrophe due to the invasion or ascent of “dormant” structures in the region. Kazakhstani experts consider the level of terrorist danger in the CAR as low (Karin, 2017). American expert R. Weitz assesses the situation as follows.

Some officials from Central Asia may exaggerate the threat of regional terrorism in order to justify the suppression of their political opponents and an independent civil society, but there is no clear evidence that this trend has become more prominent lately. The situation has changed, that is, the previous focus on Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has been replaced to the so-called Islamic State. Of course, the Islamic State is a major terrorist group, whose activities threaten many countries. If it strengthens its presence in Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and China will face a serious threat. However, now its influence on Central Asia is insignificant, and its Central Asian militants in Iraq and Syria are dying in large numbers (Weitz, 2016).

We can agree with the Kazakh expert Yerlan Karin (2017) about the real state of the threat of terrorism in the region.

But now there is a danger that badly prepared radicals of the first wave can be replaced by militants who have gained considerable experience of fighting in Afghanistan and Syria. So far, there is no presence of such organizations as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State in the region. At least, there is no direct connection between recent terror attacks and the activities of these organizations. However, their active activities in Afghanistan and Syria have an inspiring effect for the region's radicals (Karin, 2017).

In any case it must be taken into consideration that militants can return (according to various estimates, there are from 3 to 6 thousand people from the CAR) from Syria and Afghanistan, ready for the most radical actions and bringing into their ranks new adherents.

In our opinion, internal socio-economic problems of Central Asian countries have a greater self-destructive capacities, in comparison with external threats. The global trend of decreasing prices for oil and gas, metals, which form the basis for the export of Central Asian states, deprives them of all chances to raise their social and economic spheres. The economies of these countries show vulnerability before external macroeconomic factors. Therefore, in 2015 there was a large-scale devaluation of the national currencies of the region's states. The depreciation of national currencies ranged from 25 to 85%. Devaluation

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