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Strategic Significance and Perspectives of the Caucasus-Caspian and Central Asian Regions

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Russian security and economic interests in the post-soviet republics in the Caucasian-Caspian and Central Asian regions are affected by the strategy of all the “big players”. The USA and the UK used Kazakhstan to undermine Russian interests by opening up a new “international financial center” – an offshore haven for Islamic banking aimed to attract Russian capital and to promote centrifugal tendencies in other Muslim republics. China as a rising global economic power is also expanding its influence in all post-soviet republics. However, China needs not only Russian energy and natural resources but also Russia’s role as a vital territorial bridge between Asia and Europe. In cooperation with China Uzbekistan opened a new economic think tank center aimed at expanding multilateral economic cooperation. However, these activities are coordinated with Russia in order to keep a balance in bilateral relations. Russia is counter-acting all centrifugal trends in the regions by using bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and increasing international cooperation worldwide.

Keywords: Caucasus-Caspian region, Central Asian region, Eurasia, post-Soviet space, Russia, SCO, USA, UK, Uzbekistan, economic think tanks, migration.

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The Caucasus-Caspian and Central Asian regions are of critical importance for Russia and occupy a significant place in its strategy in the post-Soviet space and throughout Eurasia. The loss of control over the traditional periphery of the former USSR and today’s Russia on the one hand, and the anti-Russian policy of the United States towards the post-Soviet countries on the other hand, further exacerbate existing

problems in Eurasia and are the sources of dangers for Russia. Despite formal “unions”, the practice of real politics shows that it is risky and dangerous to rely on such “allies”. An example, in this respect, is the situation in Kazakhstan, which, with the participation of the United States and Great Britain, is turning into a center of a new geopolitical order in Eurasia – along with the Latinization of the country a new center, the “international financial center conducive to the withdrawal of capital from Russia and the strengthening of centrifugal tendencies in the Muslim republics of Russia” has appeared (Nikishin, 2018: 5).

The Russian newspaper *Izvestia* wrote back in 2015 that “Starting in 2018, Russian companies will be able to go offshore in zones much closer than Cyprus or the Caribbean – in the first tax-exempt zone in the CIS region on the basis of the International Financial Center (MFC) of Kazakhstan which is under final preparation by the authorities. Legislation on the introduction of the so-called “Islamic banking” in the regions of the North Caucasus, Bashkiria and Tatarstan is being created as well.

In this regard, Alexander Nikishin emphasizes the fact that “an offshore center is being created on the Russian border within the frontiers of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Customs Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Community under the jurisdiction of the British Crown, potentially capable of absorbing Russian business, economy and finance (Pogosyan, 2015).

Against the background of these trends, the deepening of multilateral cooperation within the SCO, especially in the field of energy security, is even more important.

Review of Scientific Literature

The analysis of studies and publications on the problems in the Caucasian-Caspian and Central Asian regions shows that scientists treat them proceeding from different positions, depending on their geopolitical worldviews, geo-strategic or professional orientation (Chumalov, 2014). Some researchers focus on aspects of political relations – for instance N. Miller (Miller, 2017), while others emphasize some important, but specific aspects like the interests of certain big players – for example E.V. Mityaeva (Mityaeva, 2011).

Many Russian and Azerbaijani researchers have analysed the regional problems, including such authors as I. Aliev, I. Aleskerov, S. Zhiznin, E. Klenatskyi, A. Utkin, and many others (Alekserov, 2009).

The dynamics of geopolitical changes in both regions are considered also in the works of such authors as O.A. Arina, I. Aliev, A.I. Akhmedov, G.K. Voigolovskiy, K.S. Gadzhiev, A.N. Greshnevikov, A. Dugin, S. Zhiznin, A.G. Zadokhina, I.S. Zonna

(1999, 2002), G.A. Zyuganov, L.N. Kalinichenko, C.B. Kolchin, D.B. Malyshev, V.D. Pisareva, V. Semenov, I.N. Semenov and A.M. Ushkov (Aliev, 2013). They have analysed some of the current aspects of the situation in the Caspian region, but their publications lack integrity and complexity in assessing all the current developments in the regions (Klenatskyi, 2016).

Western researchers are also studying the problems of the both regions from their specific geopolitical worldviews, forecasts and perspectives (Cohen, 2007) and (Kalicki and Goldwyn, 2015).

The common denominator of western, mainly American and British studies and publications, is the perception of Russia as a threat to the USA and their allies in NATO, the need to safeguard American hegemony and the “right” to seize Russian natural, especially energy resources in Eurasia (Brzezinski, 2008).

The Russian researcher A. Nikishin has critically analyzed this hypocritical approach. He has revealed the deepest roots and driving forces of the Anglo-Saxon policy of the world hegemony and domination (Nikishin, 2018: 4).

Another Russian scientist – Professor V. Degoev, using a more diplomatic approach, writes: “In international politics, as in politics in general, there are always elements of the game – either explicitly or inexplicitly. The clash of interstate interests, corporate or personal passions, uncommon or banal political types occur in the playing field where *diplomatic competition and compromises alternate with conflicts and wars*. With a greater or less universality of the general rules of such a game, bets placed in it are different. And, as it happens with the passage of historical time, they multiply so much that they create a dangerous, irrational excitement, involving more and more new players” (Degoev, 2013).

A large group of Russian researchers, including A.A. Kazantsev, A.E. Maltsev and K.E. Meshcheryakov share the *post-Soviet version view proposed by N. Nazarbayev*. However, another group, including such scientists as A.D. Bogaturov, A.E. Dundich, V.G. Korgun and others, prefer a different view – the one that *modern Central Asia is the successor, but not the equivalent of Soviet Central Asia*. Therefore, the modern political and geographical scope of Central Asia should include not only the 4 former Central Asian Soviet Union republics Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, but also Kazakhstan. Our review of these multiple studies shows that each of them reflects one or another individual subjective view. This is normal and understandable, especially having in mind the geopolitical significance of both regions and the existing contradictions among interested parties. Our overall conclusion is that

every publication deserves attention as a concrete useful contribution to the scientific research of the relevant regional problems. However, irrespective of the vast variety of all available studies and publications, there is still a gap – not all aspects have been revealed fully or critically enough. This could be accepted as a proof of the relevance and novelty of our present study.

Multilateral Cooperation in Eurasia

The countries of the Caucasian-Caspian and Central Asian regions, along with bilateral relations, are also developing cooperation in the energy sphere on a multilateral basis. On the one hand, they are trying to preserve and not to deteriorate their relations with Russia, but, on the other hand, they are also trying in every possible way to strengthen their energy independence and take advantage of cooperation with Western countries, especially in the field of foreign investment and modern technologies.

The first ideas and projects on multilateral energy cooperation were initiated by Russia within the CIS at the beginning of the current century. So, in 2001 the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed the creation of an energy union of the CIS member countries, in particular, oil and gas exporters, similar to OPEC with the participation of Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The idea of such a merger was argued by the fact that the CIS countries could not only compete, but also coordinate their oil policy with the policies of the OPEC member countries on a mutually beneficial basis. The initiative of Kazakhstan was also explained by the fact that it is one of the world leaders in terms of its potential hydrocarbon reserves (Nazarbayev, 2018).

In 2002, during talks in Kazakhstan, Russia put forward the idea of creating the Eurasian gas union in order to stabilize prices and solve problems around the legal status of the Caspian Sea. The initialed agreement provided for the participation of Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan signed the agreement, but two months later unilaterally refused to participate in the gas union. Some analysts believe that the Chinese factor played the main role here.

Another important initiative of Russia for energy integration in the post-Soviet space was the creation of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). The main goal of the community was the integration of the customs policy of the former Soviet republics. It lasted from 2001 to 2014 and was temporarily replaced by a new interstate formation – the Eurasian Economic Union (Evraziiskoe Ekonomicheskoe Soobshchestvo, 2018).

The Eurasian Economic Union was initiated in 2010. The new organization put forward more long-term and deep integration goals – full integration of the economic potential and policies of the post-Soviet republics and the creation of a common economic space. It included Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Moldova has observer status.

The main goals (stages of integration) include the creation of a free trade zone, a customs union and a single economic space. The main governing bodies are the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, the Intergovernmental Eurasian Economic Council and the Eurasian Economic Commission (Evraziiskii Ekonomicheskii Soiuz, 2018).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

A new important stage in the development of integration processes, including the sphere of energy security, came with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. The SCO was created by 5 states, known as the “Shanghai Five” – Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (Shankhaiskaia Organizatsiia Sotrudnichestva (SCO), 2018).

The Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was signed in St. Petersburg and came into effect on September 19, 2003. It sets the goals and principles of the organization, its structure and main areas of activity.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a permanent intergovernmental international organization. Within its framework, multilateral cooperation covers all major spheres, namely, political and diplomatic, trade and economic, as well as cultural and humanitarian. The total number of the SCO member states is 18. They have different status, more specifically:

8 Member States, including India, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan;

4 states with observer status, including Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, Mongolia;

6 countries are partners in the dialogue, including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka. In June 2017, the Council of Heads of State in Astana decided to grant the status of a member state of the Organization to the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In July 2018, Turkey announced its interest in fully participating in the SCO.

For all major macroeconomic indicators, the SCO is the largest intergovernmental international organization. The territory of the participating countries is 34.3 million km². The total gross domestic product (GDP) after accepting India amounted to 20

trillion dollars. Given the demographic factor, we can say that neither the potential of the US nor the potential of the EU can be compared with the potential of the SCO (Hakimov, 2017).

Multilateral cooperation within the framework of the SCO is constantly expanding and deepening. China plays an especially important role in this direction as the main economic competitor of the USA in the world. Recently, President XI Jinping of China announced a new idea of creating “think tanks” of the SCO countries in the sphere of economy which would strengthen the potential and cooperation of research and analytical centers of all participating countries. There is no doubt that the deepening of multilateral cooperation in this area within the SCO will further enhance the strategic importance of the Caucasian-Caspian and Central Asian regions of Eurasia, the role and significance of Russia as a bridge linking Asia and Europe and will also improve the prospects for integration of all the participating countries in the SCO.

The Creation of Economic “Think tanks”

The need for the closest possible cooperation of the leading economic “think tanks” of the SCO countries has been discussed for a long time, but the real movement in this direction has begun relatively recently. At the SCO summit in Astana in June 2017, President XI Jinping proposed to establish a Union of think tanks on economics in his speech. Later, in a joint communique on the results of the 16th meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the SCO member states held on November 30-December 1, 2017 in Sochi, it was noted that the heads of delegations consider “the possibility of establishing a mechanism for cooperation between research and analytical centers of the SCO member states on economic issues as important”. In accordance with this, the *“Concept on the Formation of the Consortium of the SCO Economic Centers”* was approved and this mechanism of interaction and cooperation has recently emerged. The purpose of the Consortium is to stimulate regional economic and scientific cooperation and joint economic development of the SCO member countries. The consortium is a non-governmental mechanism which includes one research institute from each of the SCO member states and is open to participation of interested analytical centers of the member states, observer states and partner states in the dialogue of the SCO. The consortium will conduct joint research on the topical issues of medium-term and long-term economic cooperation in the SCO space, organization of scientific conferences and seminars, thematic courses and internship programs for specialists. There is also a joint issue of publications in

Chinese, Russian and English, in particular, the “Consortium Cooperation Chronicle” and “Reports on Joint Research Activities”. In general, the Inaugural Conference and the Economic Forum of the SCO have already become a platform for the exchange of expert opinions on the issues of deepening and expanding economic cooperation in the SCO space. The “Beijing Consensus” focuses on “creating new opportunities in the development of regional economic cooperation.”

The Republic of Uzbekistan supports further expansion of mutual exchanges of industrial products in demand on the markets of the SCO countries; formation of favorable conditions for stimulating mutual trade; launch of efficient transport and transit corridors to increase the volume of cargo transportation; creation of modern infrastructure which will make the region one of the global transit transport and logistics centers (Zhiltsov, 2013). These measures should be carried out on the basis of the principles of economic expediency and validity and also take into account the common interests of the states of the region (Guseinov, 2011).

The most important areas of cooperation are:

- 1) promotion of multilateral cooperation in transport and formation of international transport corridors as a bridge between Asia and Europe;
- 2) implementation of joint infrastructure projects that ensure the expansion of economically sound transport, communication opportunities and transit potential of the region.

The President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree “On Measures for State Support of the Establishment of the Center for People’s Diplomacy of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Uzbekistan”. The document reads: “In order to implement the initiatives and proposals put forward by the Republic of Uzbekistan at the meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO member states on June 9, 2017 in the city of Astana, as well as the full use of the mechanisms of people’s diplomacy for the successful implementation of the objectives of the Strategy for the five priority development directions of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021 (Sotrudnichestvo Kitaia i Uzbekistana, 2018).

1. To agree with the proposals of the Committee on Interethnic Relations and Friendly Relations with Foreign Countries under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan (hereinafter – the Committee), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education, the Ministry of Physical Culture and Sports, the State Committee for Tourism Development, the Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Arts, the Youth Union, the Creative Union of Journalists and

the Writers' Union to create, under their foundation, the Center for People's Diplomacy and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Uzbekistan (hereinafter referred to as the Center) in the form of a *non-governmental non-profit organization* as an institution with the following main tasks and areas of activity (Miller, 2017):

- assistance in strengthening mutual trust and good neighborliness, inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony, development of inter-civilizational dialogue among the SCO countries;

- participation in the expansion of cultural and humanitarian ties with the SCO countries;

- organization of reciprocal visits of delegations;

- creating conditions for establishing a friendly atmosphere of interaction between civil society institutions, including youth and women's organizations of the SCO countries;

- to promote the development of cooperation between the SCO countries in the information sphere, the formation of information resources and interaction with the media with a view to broadly explaining the goals, objectives, priorities of activities and fundamental principles of the SCO, the preparation and regular publication of information and analytical materials on the achievements of the SCO countries in cultural and humanitarian sphere;

- the use of instruments of people's diplomacy with a view to bringing the SCO countries and their peoples closer together, strengthening the spirit of mutual trust and good neighborliness.

2. To take into consideration that the different sources of financing various activities of the Center are:

- *government subsidies, social orders and grants* allocated within the framework of social partnership;

- *technical assistance funds, grants from international and foreign governmental, non-governmental organizations, commercial banks and other organizations* allocated to support the activities of the Center;

- *charitable donations* of legal entities and individuals;

- other sources not prohibited by law.

3. To grant the Center the following rights:

- to request and receive the necessary statistical and analytical information from ministries, departments and other state organizations within the framework of the tasks assigned to it free of charge;

– gratuitous use of conference halls and concert halls under state ownership for scientific, cultural, spiritual and educational activities (according to the schedule agreed with the subjects in charge of which they are located).

4. The Committee, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should assist the Center in working with the SCO and other international and foreign organizations to raise funds for technical assistance, grants to provide material and technical and information support for the Center's activities, and invite foreign experts to participate in the activities of the Center;

The Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Physical Culture and Sports, the State Committee for Tourism Development and the National Television and Radio Company to assist the Center in establishing and developing cultural, humanitarian, sports and other ties among the SCO countries, organizing events in the sphere of culture, sports, tourism and the media.

5. To recommend the Center within two months to develop and approve a "roadmap" for the organization of the Center's activities.

6. The Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Physical Culture and Sports, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education, the State Committee for Tourism Development, the National Television and Radio Company, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the regional and the city of Tashkent administrations to assist the Center in organizing and conducting cultural, sporting and other events, including by providing gratis facilities for temporary use of conference rooms and other property.

7. To house the Center at the address: 45, Bobur street, Yakkasaraysky district, Tashkent, with a "zero rate" rent.

8. The Ministry of Finance shall ensure the necessary funds as follows:

– for capital repairs and equipment of the building where the Center is located in 2018 within the parameters of the state budget of the Republic of Uzbekistan;

– labor expenses of employees of the Center in accordance with the regulations established for the employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

9. The khokimiyat (Administration) of Tashkent will provide the Center with all necessary modern computers, office equipment, furniture and equipment in two weeks.

10. The Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall ensure, in accordance with the established procedure, the connection of the Center to the telephone network and the Internet.

11. The Uzbek Press and Information Agency, in conjunction with the National Library named after Alisher Navoy, shall provide permanent electronic access to

the library's information database and the databases of the leading foreign licensed information and library resources.

12. To recommend JSC "Uzavtosanoat" to transfer to the Center 1 unit of a new vehicle of the brand "Lasetti" as a charitable donation.

13. The Ministry of Justice will, within a week's time, ensure the state registration of the Center in accordance with the acting national legal regulations.

14. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the request of the Center, must arrange entry visas for foreign specialists attracted to the events held by the Center, without consular fees.

15. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, at the request of the Center, must ensure the extension of visas, as well as the issuance and extension of temporary residence permits at the place of temporary residence to foreign specialists employed for work at the Center, without charging a state fee.

16. The National TV and Radio Company and the National Information Agency will ensure wide coverage among the population of the goals and objectives of the Center's activities, including print and electronic media, as well as in the worldwide Internet information networks.

17. The control over the implementation of this resolution will be entrusted to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan A.N. Aripov and the Secretary of the Security Council under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan V.V. Makhmudov.

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Стратегическая значимость и перспективы Кавказско-Каспийского и Центрально-Азиатского регионов

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Безопасность и экономические интересы России в постсоветских республиках Кавказско-Каспийского и Центрально-Азиатского регионов затронуты стратегией всех «крупных игроков» мировой политики. США и Великобритания использовали Казахстан, чтобы противостоять российским интересам, созданием нового «международного финансового центра» – оффшорного убежища для «исламского банкинга», направленного на привлечение российского капитала и поощрения центробежных тенденций в других мусульманских странах. Китай как поднимающаяся глобальная экономическая сила расширяет свое влияние во всех постсоветских республиках. Однако он нуждается не только в энергетических и других природных ресурсах, но и в роли России как жизненно важного стратегического моста между Азией и Европой. В сотрудничестве с Китаем Узбекистан создал новый экономический «мозговой центр», предназначенный для расширения многостороннего экономического сотрудничества. Эти действия, однако, координируются с Россией, чтобы сохранить баланс в двусторонних отношениях. Россия противодействует всем центробежным тенденциям в регионе, используя средства двусторонней и многосторонней дипломатии, расширение международного сотрудничества на мировой сцене.

Ключевые слова: Кавказско-Каспийский регион, Центрально-Азиатский регион, Евразия, постсоветское пространство, Россия, США, ШОС, экономические мозговые центры, Узбекистан, миграция.

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