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PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR INTEGRATION OF CENTRAL ASIA COUNTRIES

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Abstract. In the proposed study, contemporary integration processes in Central Asia are analyzed. The author examines the historical prerequisites for the formation of regional identity and highlights the key internal and external factors influencing cooperation among the countries of the region. Special attention is paid to the role of global players—Russia, the United States, and China—who strive to strengthen their presence and utilize the economic and geopolitical potential of Central Asia for their own interests. The paper underscores the relevance of initiatives such as the “Belt and Road,” the Eurasian Economic Union, and the U.S. “New Silk Road,” pointing to the need for a balanced approach in selecting future directions for integration. In conducting this study, a comparative analysis, examination of international organizations’ documents, and an interdisciplinary methodology are employed to account for the socio-cultural, political, and economic aspects of the process. As a result, the author identifies barriers related to differences in language, values, and politics, highlighting the importance of effective intercultural dialogue. In conclusion, it is argued that the countries of Central Asia must develop a joint strategy grounded in a shared historical-cultural foundation and reflecting the interests of all participants in order to achieve sustainable integration. The study demonstrates that harmonizing regional relations and strengthening multilateral ties contribute to the region’s stability and competitiveness on the global stage. Thus, the proposed model of collaboration, rooted in common cultural-historical legacies and alignment of interests with key external partners, lays the foundation for forming a unified economic and political space in the region.

Key words: integration, Central Asia, problems of integration, prospects for cooperation, global players, Russia, USA, China

Introduction

Within the scope of this research, the term “integration” refers to the unification of certain countries into a single entity with the goal of further economic, political, and cultural development. Currently, intercultural interaction among the countries of Central Asia is undergoing a transformational stage caused by a number of factors such as political modernization, integration processes, the development of innovative technologies, as well as the active attention from global “players” such as the USA, Russia, and China [1].

The contemporary modernization changes in Central Asia are reflected in the revision of the foreign policy courses of the countries in the region as well

as in the strengthening of the political significance of multilateral structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), ASEAN, and others [2]. For example, in Turkmenistan, with the advent of new leadership, processes of transformation began, and the country's policy started to change towards greater openness, intensified bilateral and multilateral dialogues. For countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, key tasks and priorities became the development of stable and friendly relations with regional neighbors [3].

At this moment, Central Asia, occupying a strategic position in the heart of Eurasia, faces a number of threats that could affect not only the national security of the countries in this region but also the security of other world regions. In this context, the idea of regional integration in Central Asia becomes particularly important. However, despite active attempts by the political leadership of the countries in the region, the integration process encounters a number of problems and challenges related to both internal factors and the external geopolitical environment [4].

Projects such as China's "One Belt, One Road", the USA's "New Silk Road", and Russia's "Eurasian Economic Union" are vivid examples of how global powers try to use the potential of Central Asia in their interests [5]. However, it begs the question: to what extent do these initiatives meet the interests of the Central Asian countries? And is history repeating itself when great powers sought to dominate the region without considering the interests of the local population?

It must be acknowledged that Central Asia indeed faces the need to define its regional identity. However, it is important that this process is based on the real interests and needs of the countries in the region, not external dictates. In this context, it is important to consider the cultural and historical features of the region as well as to take into account the interests of all Central Asian countries.

With this perspective, the main goal of this research is to analyze the current state of regional integration in Central Asia, identify the main problems and challenges, as well as determine potential directions for deepening integration processes in the region. To achieve this goal, the historical context and current trends of regional integration will be considered, an analysis of external and internal factors influencing the integration process, as well as an assessment of the role of major international actors such as Russia, China, and the USA in the integration processes of the region. The object of the research are the countries of Central Asia and their interrelations, while the subject is the processes of regional integration including the economic, political, and socio-cultural interaction of the countries in the region as well as external and internal factors affecting these processes.

Materials and methods

In this study, an interdisciplinary approach was utilized, drawing from political science, international relations, sociology, and cultural studies. A range of primary sources served as the foundation, including official documents, legislative acts, and intergovernmental agreements from Central Asian states,

supplemented by reports and policy briefs from international organizations. Comparative analysis was employed to examine integration models and practices in other regions such as the European Union, ASEAN, and the Visegrad Group. Additionally, a historical-contextual method was incorporated to trace the evolution of relations in Central Asia from the post-Soviet era, identifying key socio-cultural and geopolitical factors shaping current integration processes.

As an additional step, a content analysis was conducted on official documents related to the activities of integration associations, which made it possible to identify dominant narratives and assess the practical challenges of regional integration.

Thus, this comprehensive and detailed methodological approach enabled the identification of both commonalities and divergences in integration aspirations, as well as a deeper understanding of how factors such as security, economic development, and cultural interaction intersect. This multi-dimensional framework was chosen to most accurately reflect the interconnected economic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions of integration processes. The chronological scope of the research covers the period from the early 2000s to the present, with reference to earlier historical periods where relevant. As a result, the study provides a holistic understanding of the structural, institutional, and cultural factors shaping the trajectory of integration in Central Asia.

Results and discussion

To date, scholars have proposed differing explanations for the nature and mechanisms of implementing integration processes. This is due to both certain theoretical-methodological approaches and the practice of existence of integration unions in different regions of the world.

Turning to the works of Ziyadullayev N.S., Ziyadullayev N.O., we find that actual communication with representatives of other cultures, both at home and abroad, opens up the most obvious examples of cultural collisions. Such conflicts become the plots of jokes, funny stories, and causes of troubles [6].

According to the authors above, different levels of barriers that arise in the process of integration in the Eurasian space are distinguished:

- language barriers;
- barriers in non-verbal communication;
- stereotypes as barriers in intercultural interactions;
- differences in value orientations.

When building their behavior in accordance with the norms of their culture, participants in the integration process fail in most cases because each actor has a set of norms, values, rules, and settings.

To illustrate intercultural barriers, one can refer to conflicts related to religious and linguistic differences that arise in the cross-border areas of the Fergana Valley. On the other hand, successful practices of dialogue are evident in joint cultural and educational initiatives, such as national culture festivals held in Kazakhstan or the establishment of inter-university exchange programs between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Issues of integration in Central Asia have always been in the focus of the political leaders of the states in the region. For example, issues of regional security were actively discussed at the meeting of Central Asian leaders in Tashkent in 2000 [7]. At this meeting, the heads of state of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of combating terrorism, extremism, and other threats, which actually became the basis for creating a «Defensive Alliance» to protect the interests and security of the countries in the region.

However, it should be considered that the presence of such political players on the world stage as Russia, the USA, and China makes it impossible to create a security system in Central Asia without their participation. These countries have entered into strategic opposition in this region. Their relationships here represent an intense rivalry between major players for dominance over less powerful countries. While the interests of these powerful states may intersect, there are also deep disagreements between them regarding the redistribution of zones of influence in the post-Soviet space and the formation of a unified strategy in conditions of increasing globalization [8].

Russia is historically connected with Central Asia, and its presence in the region is determined not only by economic and political interests but also by cultural and historical ties. Russia seeks to restore its positions in the region, relying on a common history, cultural connections, and economic cooperation [9].

The policy of Central Asia after the collapse of the USSR at the end of the 90s was reflected in the Middle East, but the centuries-old cooperation with Russia, marked by close economic ties, determined the further vector of development. Russia historically represents an important part of this vast Eurasian continent and continues to actively participate in regional affairs. Russia has many tools for influencing its neighbors, and it is becoming increasingly clear that other global powers cannot fully replace Russia's role in this region, especially considering Russia's current efforts to strengthen ties with Central Asian countries such as the CSTO and the EAEU [10].

The idea of Eurasian integration is deeply rooted in the historical memory, geographical connectivity of regions, and similarity of stages of economic and cultural development. On the one hand, Eurasian integration is seen as an attempt to recreate unity in the territory of the former USSR, based on universal principles of freedom, democracy, and market economy, similar to those applied in the European Union. The Eurasian union aims to become one of the key players on the world stage, serving as a bridge between Europe and the rapidly developing Asia-Pacific region.

Opponents of the Eurasian concept point out that the specificity of the Eurasian zone lies in the difficulties or unwillingness of the countries of the region to follow the declared values and to meet European norms of democracy and market economy. This leads to the creation of their own unique alternative space [11].

Proponents of the Eurasian ideology consider it as a philosophy for peoples with a common historical heritage who are afraid of losing their uniqueness in a world where large associations dominate.

The USA, on the other hand, sees Central Asia as a region of strategic interest, especially considering its rich energy resources and geopolitical position. The US strategy in the region is aimed at strengthening its presence, control over energy resources, and creating alternative transport routes. However, such an approach can cause concerns among the countries of the region and lead to conflicts of interest with other global players [12].

US projects such as “Greater Central Asia” and “New Silk Road” are attempts to create alternative economic and transport corridors bypassing Russia. These initiatives are aimed at deepening ties between Central Asian countries and South Asia, particularly with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The main goal is to reorient the economic flows of Central Asian countries from the traditional direction to the north (Russia) to the south [13].

Projects such as the TAPI gas pipeline and CASA-1000 are part of this strategy. They propose the creation of infrastructure that will allow Central Asian countries to export their energy resources to the south, bypassing Russia. This could lead to a significant economic and geopolitical rethinking of the role of the region on the world stage [14].

China is actively promoting its “One Belt, One Road” project, which involves creating a transportation and infrastructure network linking China with Europe through Central Asia. This project can bring economic benefits to the countries of the region, but it can also increase these countries’ dependency on China, which may raise concerns among other global players.

According to the World Bank, total investments under the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia reached approximately USD 19 billion by 2019 [17]. At the same time, according to estimates by the International Monetary Fund, trade flows between China and the Central Asian countries increased by 70% between 2013 and 2020 [18].

China’s interests in Central Asia, particularly in the construction of hydroelectric power stations and infrastructure projects, are closely related to its broader geopolitical and economic goals in the region. Significant Chinese investments in the hydroelectric sector of Central Asia are notable, for example, a major Chinese hydroelectric project in Central Asia represents a cascade of five dams with a capacity of 480 MW on the Tentek River in the Almaty region of Kazakhstan. This project, worth \$15 billion, was announced in December 2018, although negotiations on financing with Chinese banks continue. In addition to large-scale projects in Central Asia, there is potential for micro-hydroelectric solutions that can be integrated into the existing irrigation network with energy storage, offering a levelized cost of energy below €0.03/kWh [15].

The construction of hydroelectric power stations has a historical context that dates back to the Soviet era when large dams were built in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to use water resources, and downstream countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan shared their oil and gas reserves in winter. China’s participation in

hydroelectric projects is seen as a means to foster regional cooperation, especially between historically hostile countries such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Chinese investments contribute to regional energy security, economic growth, and decarbonization, as discussed at forums such as the Central Asia Energy Trade and Investment Forum 2023, which brought together politicians and stakeholders from Central Asian countries and international institutions.

It is important to note that Central Asia faces a choice: to follow external dictates or to seek its own development path based on its interests and needs. The experience of Eastern European countries such as Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, which created the “Visegrad Group”, can serve as an example for Central Asian countries [16]. However, it is important that such a union is based on the real interests of the countries of the region, not external dictates.

Alongside this, it is worth considering scenarios of independent integration, in which the Central Asian countries aim to develop their own unified economic space without the decisive involvement of major powers. For instance, if the countries of the region were to establish an effective free trade area and agree on mechanisms for mutual investment, this could reduce their dependence on external actors. Although implementing such an approach in the near future appears challenging, this scenario holds potential, provided there is sufficient political will and an increased level of mutual trust among the region’s elites.

On the other hand, integration in Asia faces a number of challenges due to the complexity and increasing heterogeneity of Asian communication styles, necessitating a revision of Western research approaches in this area. Practical steps and perspectives to overcome these problems include strengthening intercultural dialogue and cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and the outside world. For example, the dialogue between the Central Asian countries and the Republic of Korea demonstrates the importance of intercultural interaction in strengthening international relations and cooperation in culture and education. Since 2000, the Central Asian countries have made significant socio-economic progress, but they need to overcome certain problems for further development.

Positive changes in intercultural communication and integration can help create a favorable climate for knowledge and experience exchange, strengthening diplomatic and economic relations, and increasing the level of understanding and respect among different cultures and peoples of the region. However, at a practical level, many still do not consider a well-connected Central Asia a realistic goal in the short term, highlighting the need for strategic planning and interaction at many levels to achieve these goals.

In conclusion, Central Asia is at a crossroads and faces a number of complex challenges. On one hand, the region attracts the attention of global powers that seek to strengthen their positions. On the other hand, the countries of the region must define their priorities and development strategies to ensure their sovereignty, stability, and prosperity of their peoples.

To strengthen the theoretical foundation of the study, it is advisable to draw on the experience of ASEAN and the EU, where one can observe mechanisms for

conflict resolution, the formation of supranational institutions, and the creation of single economic spaces [19] (Table 1).

Table 1 - The experience of ASEAN and the EU

Criteria	ASEAN	European Union	Opportunities for Central Asia
Historical context of formation	Emergед in the late 1960s as a response to regional instability, with a focus on conflict prevention and economic growth among Southeast Asian nations.	Established after World War II, initially as the European Coal and Steel Community (1951), later transforming into a deeper political and economic union with common institutions.	Central Asia can draw from both ASEAN's post-conflict stabilization model and the EU's historical continuity to reduce tensions and build shared structures.
Supranational institutions	Formal supranational bodies (e.g., the Secretariat) exist but have limited authority; most decisions are made by consensus.	A robust system of supranational institutions, including the European Commission, European Parliament, and Court of Justice, which hold real regulatory powers.	Central Asia may follow ASEAN's flexible model while gradually adopting EU-style coordination mechanisms with expanding mandates, respecting sovereignty.
Conflict resolution mechanisms	Emphasizes the «Asian way» – informal consultations, diplomacy, consensus-building, and step-by-step confidence-building measures.	A legalistic system with structured institutions for dispute resolution; prioritizes legality and binding norms via directives and regulations.	Central Asia could blend ASEAN's flexible diplomacy with the EU's rule-based system to develop arbitration mechanisms and build legal capacity.
Single economic space	Focus on free trade area (ASEAN Free Trade Area – AFTA); economic integration is progressing, but large disparities in development remain among members.	Developed a Customs Union, Single Market, and eventually an Economic and Monetary Union (euro); features high-level economic integration and uniform business regulations.	Central Asia can start by reducing trade barriers and harmonizing standards, with long-term goals for deeper economic ties, while acknowledging development and infrastructure gaps.

Role of major powers / external actors	Influenced by China, the US, and Japan, but maintains relative autonomy through internal solidarity and shared interest in stability.	Acts as a global power in its own right, attracting investment and engaging externally with strong financial and policy instruments.	Central Asia is influenced by Russia, China, the US, and others; a balance must be struck between attracting investment and preserving autonomy—ASEAN’s diplomacy and the EU’s unified foreign policy offer contrasting but useful lessons.
Cultural and educational cooperation	Develops student exchange programs (e.g., ASEAN University Network), hosts regional cultural festivals, and promotes grassroots integration through people-to-people initiatives.	Has a comprehensive set of educational (Erasmus+, Horizon 2020) and cultural cooperation programs under EU initiatives.	Central Asia could implement inter-university exchange programs, regional cultural festivals, and shared education standards to foster a regional identity without eroding national traditions.
Flexibility vs. depth of integration	High flexibility in decision-making; members retain considerable independence and often lack unified positions on key issues.	Achieves deeper integration but sometimes experiences «sovereignty crises» (e.g., Brexit) and difficulties coordinating among numerous states.	Central Asia might combine ASEAN’s flexible, consensus-based approach with the EU’s long-term strategies for deeper economic and political convergence, depending on political will and mutual trust.
Scenarios and lessons for Central Asia	Integration evolves «from the bottom up» through trust-building, cultural/educational ties, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises.	Institutionalized integration with binding regulations, supranational governance, and centralized coordination in economic, political, and legal spheres.	The key is clarity of goals (e.g., trade liberalization, security cooperation, infrastructure coordination). Gradual trust-building, reliance on regional assets, and selective adoption of supranational tools could guide integration in a realistic and context-sensitive manner.

This table outlines the key approaches to integration in ASEAN and the EU and compares them with the specific realities and prospects of Central Asia, where external influence is high, and inter-state trust still requires significant development.

In particular, ASEAN has demonstrated the importance of gradually building trust and establishing close communication at the levels of business, education, and culture. In the context of Central Asia, such models show that even in conditions of significant political fragmentation, it is possible to achieve compromise and mutual benefits.

The author emphasizes that only a combination of coordinated and mutually acceptable solutions by the countries of the region in the specified areas can stimulate the process of integration in Central Asia. In this case, the states of the region are presented with positive prospects in creating a highly integrated politico-economic region capable of competing with other leading regions of the world.

Conclusion

One of the key aspects to consider in the further development of integration processes in Central Asia is taking into account the interests of all participants. It is essential to strive to create a model of integration that considers the specifics of each country, including its historical, cultural, and economic characteristics. Only such an approach will allow for long-term stability and prosperity of the region.

The period of transformation opens new horizons for deepening dialogue and cooperation between the countries of the region. Political modernization and the aspiration towards integration may help overcome historical disagreements and create a favorable environment for joint development. The advancement of innovative technologies can facilitate knowledge and experience sharing, which is crucial for socio-economic growth. Active attention from global powers can bring new investments and technologies to the region, contributing to its integration into the world community. Finally, strengthening the role of multilateral structures can help form common regional agendas and strategies, essential for sustainable development and intercultural understanding in Central Asia.

Moreover, successful integration requires active interaction at all levels – from governmental to public. Creating common educational, cultural, and scientific programs, developing transport and infrastructure networks, and deepening economic cooperation – all contribute to strengthening the ties between the countries and peoples of the region. In contemporary conditions, regionalization positively affects not only economic processes but also the formation of an international relations system.

In the context of a systemic crisis affecting the states of the region, the role of external factors significantly increases. Much depends on the balance of interests in the Central Asian region of global powers – the USA, Russia, and China. Consequently, various scenarios for the realization of the regional integration process are possible: absorption of the region by external forces, or

a “network model of regional integration,” practically expressed in the political initiatives of Kazakhstan’s leadership to transform the network of bilateral agreements into a successful regional union; and finally, the creation and development of supranational, transboundary consortia, and a “compensatory” model of economic relations, enabling the mutually beneficial exploitation of the most significant resources.

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ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ ЕЛДЕРІНІҢ ИНТЕГРАЦИЯСЫ МӘСЕЛЕЛЕРІ МЕН БОЛАШАҒЫ

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Аңдатпа. Осы зерттеуде Орталық Азиядағы қазіргі интеграциялық үдерістер талданады. Автор өңірлік бірегейліктің қалыптасуына ықпал еткен тарихи алғышарттарды қарастырып, аймақтағы мемлекеттердің ынтымақтастығына әсер ететін негізгі ішкі және сыртқы факторларды атап көрсетеді. Зерттеуде Ресей, АҚШ және Қытай сияқты жаһандық ойыншылардың рөліне ерекше назар аударылған, өйткені олар Орталық Азияның экономикалық әрі геосаяси әлеуетін өз мүдделеріне пайдалану мақсатында өңірдегі ықпалын күшейтуге ұмтылады. Жұмыста «Бір белдеу, бір жол», Еуразиялық экономикалық одақ және АҚШ-тың «Жаңа Жібек жолы» бастамаларының өзектілігі атап көрсетіліп, интеграцияның келешектегі бағыттарын айқындауда теңгерімді тәсілдің қажеттілігіне мән беріледі. Зерттеу барысында салыстырмалы талдау, халықаралық ұйымдардың құжаттарын зерделеу және пәнаралық әдіснаманы қолдану арқылы үдерістің әлеуметтік-мәдени, саяси және экономикалық қырларын ескеруге мүмкіндік жасалады. Нәтижесінде автор тілдік, құндылық және саяси айырмашылықтардан туындайтын кедергілерді анықтап, тиімді мәдениетаралық диалогтың маңыздылығын ерекше атап көрсетеді. Қорытындыда Орталық Азия елдері тұрақты интеграцияға қол жеткізу үшін ортақ тарихи-мәдени негізге және барлық қатысушылардың мүдделерін ескеруге сүйенген бірлескен стратегия әзірлеу қажет деген тұжырым жасалады. Зерттеу аймақтық қатынастарды үйлестіру және көпжақты байланыстарды нығайту өңірдің жаһандық аренадағы тұрақтылығы мен бәсекеге қабілеттілігін арттыратынын көрсетеді. Осылайша, ортақ мәдени-тарихи тамырлар мен жетекші сыртқы серіктестердің мүдделерін үйлестіруге негізделген өзара іс-қимыл үлгісі аймақта тұтас экономикалық және саяси кеңістікті қалыптастыруға берік негіз қалайды.

Тірек сөздер: интеграция, Орталық Азия, интеграция мәселелері, ынтымақтастық перспективалары, әлемдік державалар, Ресей, АҚШ, Қытай

ПРОБЛЕМЫ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ ИНТЕГРАЦИИ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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Аннотация. В предлагаемом исследовании анализируются современные интеграционные процессы в Центральной Азии. Автор рассматривает исторические предпосылки формирования региональной идентичности и выделяет ключевые внутренние и внешние факторы, влияющие на сотрудничество государств региона. Особое внимание уделяется роли глобальных игроков – России, США и Китая, стремящихся укрепить свое присутствие и использовать экономический и геополитический потенциал Центральной Азии в собственных интересах. Работа подчеркивает актуальность инициатив вроде «Один пояс, один путь», Евразийского экономического союза и «Нового Шелкового пути» США, указывая на необходимость сбалансированного подхода в выборе дальнейших направлений развития интеграции. В рамках исследования применяются сравнительный анализ, изучение документов международных организаций, а также междисциплинарная методология, позволяющая учесть социально-культурные, политические и экономические аспекты процесса. В результате автор выявляет барьеры, связанные с различиями в языковой, ценностной и политической плоскостях, и подчеркивает значимость эффективного межкультурного диалога. В заключении делается вывод о том, что для достижения устойчивой интеграции странам Центральной Азии необходимо разработать совместную стратегию, опирающуюся на общий историко-культурный фундамент и учитывающую интересы всех участников. Работа показывает, что гармонизация региональных отношений и укрепление многосторонних связей способствуют повышению стабильности и конкурентоспособности региона на мировой арене. Таким образом, предложенная модель взаимодействия, опирающаяся на общие культурно-исторические корни и согласование интересов с ведущими внешними партнерами, создает основы для формирования целостного единого экономического и политического пространства региона.

Ключевые слова: интеграция, Центральная Азия, проблемы интеграции, перспективы сотрудничества, мировые игроки, Россия, США, Китай

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