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Research Article

ISSUES OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION OF CENTRAL ASIA AT THE PRESENT STAGES

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the cooperation of the countries of Central Asia in recent years on the development of regional integration and their meetings in this regard. And also, the reasons that prevent the Central Asian states from effectively conducting a multilateral format of cooperation in the region are being investigated. The steps that need to be taken by the countries of Central Asia to establish effective multilateral cooperation in the region are analyzed.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia, integration, region, cooperation, dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

One of the key trends in modern world development is the activation of integration relationships between various subjects, including individual territories, regions, and entire groups of countries. However, regional integration is not a new phenomenon. Since

the Soviet Union's collapse, several attempts at regional cooperation among the newly formed Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have achieved limited results. The Republics of Central Asia have a long

common history, and the prospects for integration in the region are relevant and broad. Central Asia, home to more than 74 million people, is of great geostrategic and geo-economic importance. The history and culture of the peoples, the economy and infrastructure of the countries of the region are closely interrelated.

Since 2016, the countries of Central Asia have begun a new stage of enhancing regional cooperation, which emphasized economic cooperation. The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly noted, “A peaceful, economically prosperous Central Asia is our most important goal and key task. Uzbekistan is resolutely inclined towards dialogue, constructive interaction and strengthening of good neighborliness. We are ready for reasonable compromises with the countries of Central Asia on all issues without exception.”

The first summit of the leaders of the region was held in March 2018 in Nur-Sultan (for the first time in 13 years). The agenda of the meeting of the leaders of the countries of the region included issues of expanding cooperation, including in the field of trade, transport and logistics, industrial cooperation, innovation, food security, tourism, cultural and humanitarian exchange and other areas. Particular attention was paid to strengthening cooperation in a joint response to modern challenges and threats to the stability and sustainable development of Central Asia.

Central Asia saw the start of processes leading towards regional integration and international co-operation in

2018, reversing political barriers and isolationist policies in place for many years, observers say. Although the intention behind such a session was not to make official decisions, political analysts say the significance of the event cannot be overstated, given that it was the first meeting of regional leaders in nearly a decade.¹ Participants and observers praised Shavkat Mirziyoyev for initiating the meeting, a significant departure from precedent and opening doors for future co-operation.

Following up on the March 15 meeting, Central Asia’s top diplomats met in **Kyrgyzstan July 20-22 in 2018**. The five foreign ministers met in Cholpon-Ata, Issyk-Kul Province, to discuss current events, regional and international issues, and efforts to potentially implement co-operation agreements. With each official meeting, Central Asian states are taking another step toward deepening regional co-operation, observers say. “The tendency to deepen co-operation is apparent,” almat Ismagambetov, a political scientist from Almaty said, adding that he believes that the most important thing to do is to put agreements into practice.²

On November 29, 2019 the Consultative meeting of the heads of states of Central Asia took place in the city of Tashkent in which the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, President of Turkmenistan, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Elbasy participated.

¹ 2018: A year of pivotal events in Central Asia. https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/01/04/feature-02

² Central Asia's foreign ministers set to meet in Kyrgyzstan by Arman Kaliyev. https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/07/19/feature-01

The agenda of the summit included the expansion of regional cooperation in the political, trade, economic, investment, transport and communication, cultural, humanitarian, and other fields. While at the summit, the leaders decided to meet annually before the holiday of Navruz.

The participants of the meeting based on common aspiration of the participating states of Consultative meeting towards expanding multilateral mutually beneficial interaction, deepening regional cooperation and solidifying good-neighborly relations among the countries of the region. In addition, affirming that realization of the initiative to organize regular Consultative meetings of the heads of states of Central Asia as an in-demand dialogue platform with an aim to discuss urgent issues of regional cooperation will promote further strengthening multilateral interstate partnership and cooperation in the region.³

In 2020, the summit was planned to be held in Kyrgyzstan, but due to the coronavirus pandemic, it was postponed for a year. **On August 6, 2021**, a Consultative meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia was held in the Avaza National Tourist Zone of Turkmenistan. The parties considered the key aspects of the development of political, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation between the countries of the region. A constructive exchange of views on issues of regional stability took place. The Presidents discussed topical issues of regional cooperation and exchanged views on pressing issues of international development. They also agreed to strengthen foreign policy cooperation, including by

holding regular five-party meetings between the Foreign Ministries of the region's countries.

Particular attention was paid to creating favorable conditions for partnership in the energy sector, expanding cooperation between the countries of the region in the transport and communications field, in particular by maintaining the effective functioning of existing and forming new transport corridors.

The fourth Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian heads of states was held in the resort town of Cholpon-Ata on the shores of Issyk-Kul in **Kyrgyzstan on July 21 in 2022**. The current leaders of the five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – all attended the meeting. The Consultative Meetings in Central Asia are all about gathering together in order to discuss the pressing issues of the region and coming up with useful recommendations, while avoiding being involved in legally binding commitments. This new formula for renewed regional cooperation in Central Asia seems to be working quite well compared to the previous attempts of the Central Asian states to forge rigorous, formal regional integration institutions with mutually binding legal agreements.⁴

Another important development was the first meeting of the foreign ministers of the Central Asian states, held a day before this year's Consultative Meeting itself. This is seen as one of the main steps toward the consolidation of political trust among leaders and officials in the region. Moreover, the joint declaration defined the Consultative Meetings "as the unique

³ Joint Statement of the Consultative meeting of the heads of states of Central Asia.
<https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/joint-statement-consultative-meeting-heads-states-central-asia>

⁴ What Happened at the Latest Central Asian Leaders' Meeting? By Aizada Nuriddenova. July 23, 2022 // <https://thediomat.com/2022/07/what-happened-at-the-latest-central-asian-leaders-meeting/>



mechanism of maintaining political dialogue, discussing and identifying further perspectives of regional interactions on a high level,” thus making the character of this new format clear and marking its consistent nature. The Consultative Meetings are now a new normal in Central Asia.⁵

However, there are a number of reasons hindering the progressive process of rapprochement in the region.

In recent years, Central Asia has increasingly attracted the attention of external players. The key factors causing interest in this region are its favorable geostrategic location and significant raw material reserves. In addition, Central Asia is a convenient and profitable geopolitical region that allows the transportation of strategically significant resources to the largest states of the world. World powers such as: Russia, China and the USA, where each of the parties offers its integration projects. Strengthening the geopolitical rivalry of global centers - Russia, China and the United States, and deepening the multi-vector nature of various structures - the EAEU, SCO, C5 + 1.

Central Asia has significant reserves of water resources, however, the issue of its distribution is still acute in the region. The absence of a consolidated interstate agreement on the regulation of the distribution of water resources, covering all the countries of the region, is one of the most pressing issues. The main source of water resources are the two largest transboundary rivers of Central Asia - the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya.

The borders between the states of Central Asia were drawn, first of all, taking into account the national

attribute. At the same time, the factor that the population at that time remained nomadic was not taken into account, so the national composition of the territory could change. In practice, the Central Asian countries faced a number of unresolved issues: incomplete delimitation and demarcation of borders with neighbors, the formation of enclaves.

In general, it is necessary to note several important steps, having overcome which, one can speak of a progressive movement towards regional integration in Central Asia:

The first step is to form the political will to strengthen integration processes. When resolving any contentious issues related to the distribution of water, energy and the construction of new transport corridors, mutual respect, equality, the ability to listen and hear each other's problems play a key role. A favorable situation in the region will give impetus to the development of multilateral cooperation.

The second step is to build up trade and economic cooperation. The creation of a capacious Central Asian market with the reduction of various barriers would increase the trade turnover between the countries of Central Asia.

The third step is the creation of a single information space. Without a common information field in the region, it will be very difficult to build the process of coordination, and in the future, integration.

The fourth step is an orientation towards a similar outwardly political course. For the prospect of

⁵ What Happened at the Latest Central Asian Leaders' Meeting? By Aizada Nuriddenova. July 23, 2022 //

<https://thedi diplomat.com/2022/07/what-happened-at-the-latest-central-asian-leaders-meeting/>



integration, the formation of a coordinated foreign policy of the region is of no small importance.

In recent years, the question of the future of the region and what form of cooperation is best suited to Central Asia has become more relevant than ever. Regular dialogue at different levels can contribute to a gradual transition to a multilateral format of cooperation and initiate the institutionalization of regional relations. Given the transition to multilateral cooperation, one can speak of regional integration.

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