

THE FORMATION AND EVOLUTION OF THE REGIONAL
SECURITY SYSTEM IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract: This article examines the theoretical foundations of the concept of regional security, its role in the contemporary system of international relations, and the current challenges of ensuring security in the Central Asian region. The study analyzes the impact of traditional and non-traditional security threats, geopolitical competition, transnational crime, terrorism, extremism, environmental issues, and water resource-related challenges on regional stability. In addition, the role of regional cooperation institutions and international organizations in strengthening security is assessed from a scientific perspective. The findings demonstrate that an effective model of regional security should be based on interstate trust, political dialogue, economic integration, and the coordinated functioning of collective security mechanisms.

Keywords: regional security, Central Asia, geopolitics, threats, collective security, sustainable development.

In the 21st century, the international security system has undergone profound transformations, and alongside traditional military threats, non-traditional security challenges have become pressing issues at both the global and regional levels. Threats such as terrorism, religious extremism, irregular migration, cybersecurity risks, environmental crises, and transnational crime significantly affect not only the national security of states but also regional stability. Therefore, ensuring regional security has gained particular scientific and practical importance in contemporary international relations.

Central Asia is located at the strategic center of Eurasia and is distinguished by the intersection of geopolitical interests, its abundance of natural resources, and the presence of important transportation and communication routes. The region's geographical location directly influences its security system and creates conditions for the emergence of various internal and external threats. From this perspective, the scientific study of mechanisms for ensuring regional security is considered an urgent and significant task.

The theory of regional security constitutes one of the important branches of international relations studies. This concept refers to a set of mechanisms aimed at ensuring the political, economic, and military stability of states within a specific geographical region. A special place in the development of regional security theory belongs to the "Regional Security Complex Theory" developed by the British scholar Barry Buzan. According to this theory, the security concerns of geographically proximate states are closely interconnected, and the security situation in one state directly affects neighboring states as well¹. In this context, it should be emphasized that throughout world history, significant experience and various approaches to ensuring state security have been developed by major empires and states, including the Achaemenid Empire and the empire of Alexander the Great. These historical examples demonstrate that the

¹ Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

preservation of political stability, territorial integrity, and effective governance has always been among the primary objectives of statehood. The study of such historical experiences provides valuable insights into understanding the evolution of security systems and the formation of modern regional security mechanisms²there exists a rich historical legacy concerning the provision of state security in great empires and states such as the Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, Turkic Khaganate, Arab Caliphate, Mongol Empire, Ottoman Empire, Spanish Empire, British Empire, the Samanid State, the Khwarazmian Empire, the Timurid Empire, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

In the context of globalization, increasing attention has been paid to issues related to improving the effectiveness of mechanisms for ensuring state security. In this regard, it is important not only to equip armed forces with modern weapons and military technology and to ensure that military personnel possess advanced knowledge and practical military skills, but also to foster a deep understanding of national history. Developed countries continue to pursue policies based on historical experience and long-established traditions. Therefore, studying the experiences of rulers who established and successfully governed powerful empires, particularly their approaches to ensuring state security, remains one of the pressing issues in today's globalized world.

Furthermore, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the emergence of new geopolitical realities in the Central Asian region and fundamentally transformed the regional security system. The collapse of centralized governance and unified military-political security mechanisms that had existed within the Soviet framework created an institutional vacuum across the region. This situation imposed complex responsibilities upon the newly independent states, including the development of national security strategies, the establishment of defense systems, and the safeguarding of state sovereignty. Consequently, the initial stage of the formation of the regional security system was closely intertwined with the broader processes of state-building³. One of the key factors contributing to the increasing complexity of the security environment was the fact that the borders drawn during the Soviet period on the basis of administrative-territorial principles had not been fully formalized in accordance with international legal standards. The incomplete processes of delimitation and demarcation gave rise to border disputes, ethnic tensions, and disagreements related to the use of transboundary resources in certain areas. As a result, ensuring territorial integrity and the inviolability of borders became one of the priority directions of the security policies pursued by the states of the region. In addition, the economic crisis that emerged during the early years of independence, the disruption of production and supply chains, socio-economic instability, and the decline in living standards created favorable conditions for the intensification of non-traditional security threats. These factors contributed to the spread of radical ideologies, illegal migration, organized crime, and the growing activity of transnational security threats. From this perspective, it became evident that regional security issues could not be confined solely to military and political dimensions but were also closely interconnected with economic, social, and humanitarian factors.

It is particularly important to emphasize that differences in the foreign policy orientations and geopolitical priorities of the Central Asian states also had a significant impact on the process of forming a unified regional security space. While some states preferred active participation in

² Rajabov, Q., & Qandov, B. *Dynasties and States in World History*. Vol. 3. Tashkent: "O'zbekiston" Publishing House, 2015, pp. 37–40.

³ Abdullaev, K. *Regional Security in Central Asia: Challenges and Mechanisms of Cooperation*. Tashkent: Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2019. 268 p.

integration and security structures led by Russia, others pursued a multi-vector foreign policy and sought to expand cooperation with Western countries, the Asia-Pacific region, and international organizations. The diversity of these geopolitical approaches complicated the formation of a common strategic position on regional security issues and influenced the pace of institutional development of regional cooperation mechanisms⁴. As a result, the formation of a regional security system in Central Asia can be viewed as a complex and multi-stage process shaped by a variety of historical factors, including post-Soviet transformation, state-building processes, border-related issues, socio-economic instability, and competition among geopolitical interests. These factors subsequently served as the fundamental basis for the development of regional security institutions and cooperation mechanisms.

The 1990s were characterized by a significant deterioration of the security environment in Central Asia and the intensification of transnational threats. During this period, one of the most serious sources of regional security threats was the ongoing armed conflict in Afghanistan, accompanied by political instability and the weakening of state governance institutions. In particular, the rise of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 1996 generated new geopolitical and military-political security challenges for the Central Asian states. Consequently, the countries of the region began to regard threats emanating from the southern direction as a priority issue within their national security strategies.

The impact of instability in Afghanistan on Central Asia was manifested primarily through the increased activities of religious extremist and radical groups. Attempts by certain extremist organizations to penetrate the region, the spread of radical ideologies, and the formation of illegal armed groups posed serious threats to both domestic and regional security. At the same time, as one of the world's major centers of narcotics production, Afghanistan contributed to the expansion of drug trafficking, turning Central Asia into an important transit corridor for international narcotics networks. This, in turn, facilitated the growth of organized transnational crime, corruption, and illicit financial flows⁵. Furthermore, the presence of terrorist infrastructure, militant training camps, and illegal armed groups operating in areas bordering Afghanistan significantly increased the level of military threat facing the states of Central Asia. The practical manifestation of these threats became particularly evident in the armed incursions and terrorist activities that occurred between 1999 and 2001. In particular, attempts by militant groups to infiltrate the Batken region of the Kyrgyz Republic and areas of the Fergana Valley exposed vulnerabilities within the regional security system and underscored the necessity of strengthening interstate military cooperation.

At the same time, the deep economic crisis of the 1990s, the disruption of economic ties inherited from the Soviet period, rising unemployment, and increasing social stratification further complicated security challenges across the region. In particular, ethno-demographic pressures in the Fergana Valley, ethno-political tensions, and disputes related to the utilization of natural resources intensified factors of instability. Likewise, ethnic conflicts in southern Kyrgyzstan and the Tajik Civil War, which lasted from 1992 to 1997, clearly demonstrated the interconnected nature of the Central Asian security space. The Tajik Civil War, as one of the largest internal armed conflicts in the history of the region, had a profound impact not only on national security but also on regional stability. The conflict illustrated that transnational threats

⁴ Allison, R. *Central Asia and the International System*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2004. 214 p.

⁵ Bohr, A. "Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order." *International Affairs*, 2016, Vol. 92, No. 2, pp. 477–495.

do not remain confined within state borders and that armed groups, irregular migration, and extremist ideologies can rapidly spread to neighboring countries. As a result, the Central Asian states increasingly recognized the need to move beyond purely individual approaches to security and place greater emphasis on regional cooperation, collective security mechanisms, and integrated security policies.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the formation of the security system in Central Asia has been shaped by complex historical, political, and geopolitical processes. The geopolitical vacuum that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the challenges of state-building, border-related issues, economic crises, and ethnopolitical tensions contributed to the destabilization of the regional security environment. At the same time, the prolonged instability in Afghanistan, international terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, and other transnational threats compelled the Central Asian states to seek new mechanisms for ensuring security.

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