

# REGIONAL SECURITY IN CENTRAL ASIA: ADDRESSING EXISTING AND POTENTIAL THREATS AND CHALLENGES

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## ABSTRACT

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan confronted a number of serious internal and external security threats and challenges of political, military, economic, ethnic, religious and social nature, some of which have materialized or expired during the subsequent 27 years, while others still persist or are looming on the horizon. In this analytical article, the author reviews the main perceived regional security threats and challenges in Central Asia that can be categorized in several ways, but whatever classification is used it is important to understand that they are interrelated and influence each other. As many existing security threats have a transnational nature, the Central Asian states need to pool together their limited resources to effectively address them.

**Key Words:** Central Asia, Regional Security, Afghanistan, Russia, China, Terrorism, Transnational Crime, Regional Cooperation.

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## INTRODUCTION

The five post-Soviet states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, more commonly known to the outside world as “stans” – are strategically located at the crossroads of the Eurasian continent. The region is bounded by the Caspian Sea in the west, Russia in the north, China’s Xinjiang province in the east, and Iran and Afghanistan in the south. Together, the five countries have some 70 million people and an area of 4 million sq. km, with the diverse topography including vast, sparsely populated steppes of Kazakhstan, the densely populated Fergana valley that traverses Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, large deserts in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and rugged mountains of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018).

When the existence of the USSR formally ended in December 1991, the Central Asian states suddenly found themselves independent actors facing an uncertain future in the international scene. In fact, none of the regional leaders wanted or was prepared for independence; most of them did not oppose the August 1991 Communist coup attempt in Moscow (Najibullah, 2011). From that moment, however, they had to start forming their independent economies, domestic policies and sovereign state institutions, as well as begin determining their foreign policy orientations. Maintaining internal stability and searching for an appropriate place in the global community became a top-priority task and important test for the Central Asian leadership for a number of reasons, including the unexpected rapidity of the Soviet Union’s collapse and the lack of preparation among the national elites to enter the difficult international environment of that time. The post-Soviet “stans” confronted a number of serious internal and external security threats and challenges of political, military, economic, ethnic, religious and social nature, some of which have materialized or expired during the subsequent 27 years, while others still persist or are looming on the horizon.

In this analytical article, the author reviews the main perceived regional security threats and challenges in Central Asia that can be categorized in several ways: existing and potential, traditional and non-traditional, internal and external, military and non-military, hard and soft, and so on. Whatever classification is used, it is important to understand that these threats and challenges are interrelated and influence each other. As many security threats have a transnational nature, the Central Asian states need to pool together their limited resources to effectively address them. Any search for adequate collective responses and solutions to ensure long-term security and stability in the region should be based on a comprehensive and timely analysis of threats and challenges, which is the task of this article.

## AFGHANISTAN – A MAJOR SECURITY THREAT?

The unstable situation in Afghanistan remains a primary perceived extra-regional threat to security of Central Asia. Since the early 1990s, the protracted Afghan civil war and post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan by the United States have contributed to the uncertainty of the regional security environment and undermined prospects for the region’s economic cooperation with South Asia, at the same time making the U.S. military presence in Central Asia a reality. In the mid-2000s, when the U.S.-led Western coalition declared that it had defeated the Taliban and ousted Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, it seemed that a major security threat to the Central Asian governments

was removed. The declaration, however, turned out to be premature, with the Taliban bolstering its capacity and regaining ground in the war. As the military campaign intensified, Washington and its NATO allies promoted the idea that increased regional interconnectivity and economic integration of Afghanistan into Central Asia would serve as a pledge of security, stability and prosperity of both Afghanistan and post-Soviet Central Asian states, calling on the latter to play a meaningful role in resolving the decades-long conflict on their neighbor's territory and reconstructing the Afghan economy (Laruelle, 2017). To supplement the unreliable Pakistan route for non-military supplies to the International Security Assistance Force, NATO established the Northern Distribution Network partnering with the Central Asian states, which, in their turn, were interested in political and commercial gains from providing transit rights (Lee, 2012).

Following the completion of the NATO combat mission and the withdrawal of most foreign forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the Taliban began its new resurgence exploiting the inefficiency of the Afghan security forces, internal political divisions in the Western-backed central government in Kabul and its inability to control the whole country (Azami, 2016). The security environment has been severely exacerbated by the presence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan in recent years (Mehrdad, 2018). Currently, the Central Asian governments fear that a further weakening, or even collapse, of the central Afghan government following an apparently imminent withdrawal of the remaining U.S. troops that should follow a recent temporary surge in troop numbers would lead to a rise of homegrown radicals with links to various terrorist organizations based in Afghanistan and, in the worst-case scenario, to the invasion of militants to their territories, as it was the case in the late 1990s (Trofimov, 2015). The related challenge that may have potential security implications and demands concerted efforts of the regional governments is the ongoing return of Central Asian nationals from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and other "hot spots", where they fought for ISIS and other extremist groups. Even if returning militants do not engage in direct confrontation with the governments of their home countries, they can set up sleeper cells that could be brought to life for terrorist activity at any time (Botobekov, 2016).

Therefore, increased counter-terrorism and counter-extremism cooperation between the regional law enforcement and security agencies, as well as a more active involvement of the Central Asian countries in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, may serve to minimize the destabilizing impact of negative developments in the neighboring country on the region. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan lead efforts to enhance Central Asia's security by contributing to the development potential of Afghanistan through the promotion of regional infrastructure, energy, trade, investment, transit and transport projects. While Astana prioritized Afghanistan and the nexus between security and development on the agenda of its January 2018 chairmanship in the UN Security Council (Altynsarina, 2018), Tashkent held an international conference on Afghanistan titled "Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Connectivity" in March 2018. Kazakhstan organized a visit of the UNSC delegation to Afghanistan, first since 2010, while Uzbek President Mirziyoyev announced that Uzbekistan was ready to create all necessary conditions for hosting direct peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban (Putz, 2018; Reuters, 2018). Nevertheless, the declaration adopted at the Tashkent conference emphasized that the future national reconciliation in Afghanistan should be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" (UN, 2018). Amidst an increasingly volatile security situation in

Afghanistan, it remains to be seen if expanded cross-border cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan, including via new railway, power transmission, and gas transportation initiatives, will help achieve a peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict and lead to positive mutual engagement and strengthened regional security.

## **RETURN OF JIHADISTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION**

As noted above, the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters returning to Central Asia is also significant, especially taking into account the fact that the region was the third largest place of origin for Salafi jihadists in Syria and Iraq. More than 4,000 Central Asian nationals sympathizing the cause of ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist organizations joined their ranks since 2012 (INSS, 2016). Their domestic radicalization and subsequent recruitment were caused not only by economic deprivation and poor social conditions, including low-paid jobs, but also by injustice, corruption, political repression and limitations on religious freedom imposed by the Central Asian governments. At present, as the ISIS is largely defeated, many surviving fighters are returning home, and some of them are determined to spread extremist ideas and continue jihad in their respective countries. Using strong ties with their fellow multiethnic jihadists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Xinjiang, the Caucasus and elsewhere, these seasoned militants may potentially engage in violent extremism, stage terrorist acts or even wage an asymmetric and insurgent warfare. While not capable of toppling the regional governments and establishing an ISIS-like caliphate, they would generate widespread internal unrest and instability in the Central Asian states (Karin, 2017).

At the national level, along with applying punitive measures for identified culprits, the authorities need to launch credible de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration programs as well as expand economic and educational opportunities for communities affected by or susceptible to fundamentalist propaganda. To reduce risk factors for further radicalization, competent government bodies should refrain from repressive-only approaches and avoid a temptation to use this security issue for curtailing civil liberties and tightening the grip of security services. At the regional level, the Central Asian governments, assisted by international and regional organizations operating in Afghanistan and Central Asia, should establish a cooperation mechanism to better coordinate their efforts and effectively counter a security threat posed by foreign combatants, including through closer interaction in information sharing, border control, and law enforcement.

## **TRANSNATIONAL CRIME AND TERRORISM NEXUS**

Transnational organized crime is another cause of security concern for the regional governments as it has political, economic and societal consequences for the Central Asian societies. Illicit drug trafficking originating in Afghanistan and reaching all the way to Russia and Europe via Central Asia is the most dangerous transnational crime as it has implications not only for the region, but also for the entire world. Similar to Afghanistan, where the absence of viable economic opportunities pushes the local population towards opium production and trafficking, Central Asian nationals are engaged in the illicit

multi-billion dollar drug trade, which is facilitated by both militants and corrupt officials (Omelicheva and Markowitz, 2016). According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, in 2017, compared to the previous year, the area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan increased by 63% to 328,000 hectares, and the estimated total production of opium grew by 87% to 9,000 metric tons (UNODC, 2017). This dramatic increase in the production of Afghan opiates creates multiple security challenges for Afghanistan, its Central Asian neighbors and other transit and destination countries.

There are other crimes that transcend the borders, such as human trafficking, sex slavery, illegal migration, illicit arms trade, smuggling of goods, etc., which not only damage economies and domestic stability but also exacerbate corruption undermining the nascent efforts to install good governance and the rule of law. Transnational organized criminal groups are linked to terrorists, extremists and other non-state actors with violent agendas, providing them with funding to support subversive activities that adversely affect government authority and threaten regional security. Therefore, the Central Asian states need to continue strengthening their law enforcement and security capabilities and engage in active international cooperation to eradicate serious non-traditional threats posed by transnational organized crime, which exerts negative influence on the Central Asian societies by weakening state institutions and hindering long-term economic development. To combat the proliferation of transnational organized crime, the Central Asian countries should adopt an integrated and comprehensive program of action and share best practices and lessons learned, with the support of the relevant UN agencies and the regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

## **RUSSIA – CENTRAL ASIA: LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP**

Another potential threat is increased pressure on the Central Asian states or even interference in their domestic affairs on the part of the region's major external players, Russia and China, with Moscow trying to restore its hegemony and Beijing seeking to consolidate its economic dominance. At the end of the Soviet era, Central Asia was home to nearly 10 million Russians and other Slavs who numbered disproportionately high in the local political, administrative, technological and military elites. Two thirds of these 10 million lived in Kazakhstan, where they nearly outnumbered the Kazaks, while in the other republics the Russian population has been considerably smaller (Peyrouse, 2008). In fact, Kazakhs constituted a national minority in their homeland, and Kazakhstan was probably the most Russified Soviet republic. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a fear that a separatist movement would arise in Russian-dominated northern Kazakhstan (Diener, 2015). At the same time, it should be acknowledged that both sides refrained from radical moves on this issue: despite aggressive rhetoric from domestic nationalist forces, Russia never supported, at least openly, separatist trends, while Kazakhstan was cautious in its nation-building efforts and language policy so as not to give Russia a pretext to use pressure to protect ethnic Russians.

It is worth noting that in their policy towards Russia, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states have always tried to emphasize common interests and avoid antagonizing conflicts of interests. Nevertheless, facing uncertain

future and nationalist policies pursued by the new elites, ethnic Slavs left Central Asia in great numbers (Bandey and Rather, 2013). This has had a considerable detrimental effect on the economy and infrastructure of the Central Asian states, as ethnic discrimination during the Soviet days produced few local leaders in the military, industrial, legal, diplomatic or managerial fields. In the early 1990s, Russia was preoccupied with its loss of the superpower status and own domestic problems. Eventually, however, political, economic and security implications of Russia's neglectful attitude towards the region forced it to reconsider its Central Asian policy. Though the Russian efforts to deny outside participation in regional geopolitics have largely failed, Russia still considers Central Asia within its sphere of influence and believes it has special rights, interests, obligations and responsibilities in the region. While in the 1990s Moscow lacked capital to pursue an expansive policy in Central Asia, since the mid-2000s Russia has accumulated resources to put such plans in action (Laruelle, 2017).

For 27 years of independence, the Central Asian states have been pursuing, with different degrees of success, pragmatic multi-vector foreign policies trying to maintain balanced relations with all the great powers, but recent geopolitical developments and contradictions between the West and Russia have narrowed their room for maneuver, especially that of Kazakhstan, creating preconditions for scenarios implemented by Moscow in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Despite the fact that Kazakhs are now a majority of the population and the threat of separatism weakened with the transfer of the nation's capital to Astana, many Kazakhstani Russians are still uncomfortable with the loss of their privileged status and do not seem eager to fully accept the idea of the Kazakh statehood (Zardykhan, 2004) or learn the Kazakh language (Burkhanov, 2017). In addition, U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia that followed Moscow's involvement in Ukraine have put a significant pressure on the Russian economy, and Kazakhstan as the country closely integrated with Russia in political, military and economic terms via a network of regional organizations, including the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), has also been affected by the growing Western sanctions (Voloshin, 2018).

In general, Central Asia resists Russia's desire to continue treating the region as its exclusive sphere of influence, but by promoting the EEU Moscow has received an upper hand in reintegrating the region as its backyard. Russia is also allergic to Central Asia's own integration initiatives unwilling to support projects not directed from Moscow. It is not obvious that Russia strives for restoring the Soviet Union in some new form, but, given the existence of politicians in Russia who wish so, Central Asia remains sensitive to any such attempts. At the same time, given geographic, historic, demographic, cultural, economic and other factors, there is no other alternative for Central Asia than close or even allied relations with Russia. Being neighbors in a strategically important and vulnerable region, Central Asia and Russia should jointly address common challenges, such as international terrorism, religious extremism, illegal migration, drug trafficking, and other threats.

## **CHINA – FRIEND OR FOE?**

In the first years of independence, there was a great level of mistrust and prejudice toward China in Central Asia instigated by a historic fear of a Chinese invasion – the precedent seen in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was considered a major source of a

potential military threat for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states as there were unresolved Sino-Soviet territorial disputes (Peyrouse, 2016). Nevertheless, realities of independence dictated the need for Central Asia to engage directly with China to solve existing problems and establish mutually beneficial cooperation. It should be noted that in developing positive relations with China, the regional leaders were more inclined to show flexibility, or even amenability, while in relations with Russia they combined disobedience with conciliatory moves. The engagement with China was seen as part of the declared multi-vector foreign policy strategies of the Central Asian countries: playing the "Chinese card" was regarded necessary to balance Russia, the United States and other powers. At the same time, China itself had to be counterbalanced. The independence of the Central Asian countries led to heightened tensions in China's western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region with a large Muslim population of the Turkic origin. Concerned with a potential destabilization of its territorial integrity, China was vitally interested that the newly independent states of Central Asia, in which large Uighur diasporas exist, refrained from supporting the Uighur separatist movement, and Beijing eventually succeeded in this endeavor (Fuller and Starr, 2018).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a major issue in the Central Asian-Chinese relations was the process of border delimitation and demarcation. Following years of intensive negotiations, the border settlement documents were signed, but it appears that China employed aggressive diplomacy during the negotiations to get the bulk of the disputed territories. All the Central Asian states had to make some territorial concessions, though they also sought to combine the border settlement process with the mutual reduction of military forces along the borders (Pannier, 2016). Despite accusations of a betrayal of national interests that surfaced domestically, the Central Asian governments hailed the outcome as a major victory: it was asserted that by solving border issues with China a major possible reason for a military conflict with China was removed. However, there was one important omission – the Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan, failed to link the border settlement with a critical issue of water usage on the Chinese side of the border to achieve an effective consensus on water rights (Stone, 2012). This problematic issue still remains a potential bone of contention, while China has already started to implement its plan of diverting part of water flows of trans-border rivers for domestic usage trying to convince its counterparts that water diversion would not cause significant damage to Central Asia's economies and environment (Zhang, 2017).

Central Asia's interaction with China has developed through such a regional institution as the SCO that originates from the "Shanghai Five" mechanism of confidence building and force reduction in the border regions. For Beijing, the SCO is an instrument to address new challenges and threats, including terrorism, separatism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration, by promoting military and intelligence cooperation, as well as to reinforce economic collaboration among the SCO member states. It is noteworthy that in addressing sensitive border and separatism related issues China preferred to engage in bilateral talks with the individual Central Asian states, but chose a multilateral forum to deal with more general issues. In the 2000s, China, like Russia, was irritated by the prolonged U.S. military presence in Central Asia, but, in the end, this presence proved to contribute to the consolidation of the SCO. Following the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan events in Uzbekistan in 2005, the U.S. strategic position in Central Asia weakened, while Russia, and to a lesser extent, China tried to

capitalize on these events and further erode the U.S. standing in the region in a renewed struggle for influence which was dubbed a new "Great Game" (Cooley, 2012). Among the three major powers, however, China succeeded the most in addressing its short and long-term interests in the region. Sharing a common border with three of the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), China successfully resolved the issue of delineation of the entire former Sino-Soviet border. It also managed to prevent any involvement by the Central Asian states in China's own ethnic minority issues. Through the SCO, China also tries to deepen its security cooperation with the region (Pannier, 2017). By employing pragmatic approaches in its relations with the Central Asian states, Beijing has increased its economic presence, especially in the region's oil and gas sector. Therefore, China's rising influence in Central Asia comes as no surprise: strategic economic and security interests result in the increased Chinese involvement in the region. In its turn, by developing energy transportation infrastructure jointly with China, Central Asia diminished its dependence on transit options via Russia (Swanstrom, 2005).

Currently, China aggressively promotes its Belt and Road initiative by relocating its industrial capacities to the region and creating via massive infrastructure projects new supply chain routes across Central Asia that connect it with Europe (Laruelle, 2018). In the future, this may lead to the possibility of China's military involvement to protect its investments or energy-related imports. Besides, recent economic deals with China have started fierce discussions in Central Asia about implications of the Chinese expansion into the region: there are fears that the regional states compromise their economic security by borrowing heavily from China and allowing Chinese companies to acquire their strategic assets; apprehension also remains about increased Chinese labor migration. Despite all visible achievements in Central Asia-China relations, there is still a fear that China nurtures a more ambitious plan vis-à-vis Kazakhstan and the entire region. China's seemingly responsible and predictable policy is regarded as part of its elaborate strategy aimed to gradually increase the pace of its engagement in the region and patiently achieve real domination.

Notwithstanding all the above considerations, it is understood too well that the future of Central Asia is closely related to that of China. The regional leadership acknowledges that China which has already become a driving force of the global economy is set to play an even more important role in world politics, not to mention Central Asian affairs, and that there is no alternative to developing stable and friendly relations with this potential world hegemon based on trust and mutual understanding. Though China is committed to expanding its engagement in the region, it is early to say that the Chinese presence is visible in virtually all spheres of life in Central Asia. The region makes attempts to exploit its geographic advantages to improve its geopolitical perspectives; for instance, it has begun to serve as a transit corridor linking China's booming economy to European markets (Ordabayev, 2015). Being an importer of crude oil and owner of local energy assets and transportation networks, China should be interested in Central Asia's stability. In addition, for the sake of peace on its own periphery, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, it is in China's interest to maintain good neighborly and effective security relations with its Central Asian partners. At the same time, it appears that to survive between the two powerhouses such as Russia and China the Central Asian states need continued cooperation with the West as a stabilizing factor for maintaining the strategic balance in the region and promoting regional integration, but the challenge is to attract the attention

of Washington and Brussels, which is focused elsewhere.

## **CENTRAL ASIA: IS REGIONALIZATION POSSIBLE?**

In the regional context, since gaining independence, Central Asia, at least in a declarative way, has strived to become a zone of security, good neighborliness and friendship. Artificial boundaries of the newly independent Central Asian states that Moscow had established during the Stalinist era without paying much attention to the distribution of ethnic groups presented a cause for concern (Freni, 2013). Therefore, the crucial challenge was to avoid bloody conflicts caused by mutual territorial claims and interethnic tensions. The ruling elites of the Central Asian states have always emphasized that their countries have much in common – in terms of their historic fate, culture, language and religion. Given these uniting factors, one should have expected much closer relations among post-Soviet “stans” after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. However, divergent interests and needs of the Central Asian nations were detrimental to regional cooperation and integration (Rosset and Svarin, 2014). Numerous reasonable integration initiatives have largely failed, prevented by persistent mutual suspicion among the regional leaders, and, in spite of many areas for cooperation, efforts to promote political and economic partnership in the region have so far led to modest progress. No visible improvements have been achieved since independence in such issues as the movement towards a Central Asian free trade area (let alone a customs union or common market) and the creation of regional consortia for hydropower and water management, transportation, construction and other sectors.

Regional integration was impeded by mutual suspicions and, not least, by Kazakhstan’s and Uzbekistan’s ambitions for the leadership in Central Asia and resulting fears of their smaller neighbors about a new “elder brother.” In the early 1990s, two regional security initiatives were put forward by the leaders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Nazarbayev and Karimov, to compete for success and international recognition: both have been realized since but questions remain about their future viability that largely depends on support of outside powers (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012). Kazakhstan’s idea was the Conference for Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which was eventually established under the *Almaty Treaty* of June 2002, after a decade-long diplomatic work. CICA, one of Nazarbayev’s pet projects, was conceived as an OSCE-style, pan-Asian security organization, but it seems incapable to overcome contradictory interests of its participants and will likely remain only a discussion forum for security issues. The competing Uzbek project, a Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (CANWFZ), was formally completed in September 2006, when the *CANWFZ Treaty* was signed in Semipalatinsk. Nevertheless, the potential of the CANWFZ as the only regional security initiative that unites all the five countries of the region has yet to be fully utilized due to the absence of practical implementation mechanisms and insufficient cooperation between the Central Asian states in the CANWFZ framework.

Military cooperation within Central Asia remains weak. During the Tajik civil war, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan contributed small units for peacekeeping and border control activities in Tajikistan, but the effort lacked coordination and largely appeared to justify the presence of the significant Russian military contingent in the country. Later, with support from NATO,

the same countries created the Centrazbat, a joint regional military unit to serve as the Central Asian peacekeeping force (GlobalSecurity.org, 2011). After participating in several exercises held as part of NATO's Partnership for Peace program, however, the Centrazbat ceased to exist due to a lack of commitment from the regional leadership. Nowadays, military exercises that involve the Central Asian states are held under the CSTO, SCO and NATO umbrellas. Maintaining high military readiness in the region with a rich potential for interstate and interethnic conflicts which is also a possible target for competition and intervention by outside forces is crucial for Central Asia's security. As one of the most dangerous perceived threats is economic dominance of outside powers in the region (or even control of the national economies), as well as possible infringements on political sovereignty of the Central Asian states, more active military cooperation between them seems necessary to withstand such potential threats.

Mutual relations between the Central Asian countries have always been difficult consisting of border incidents, trade bans, railway closures, gas supply cuts and even border mining. The regional states still learn to coexist, but with the leadership change in Uzbekistan in 2016 and new Uzbek President Mirziyoyev having declared strengthening links with the neighbors as his major foreign-policy priority (Weitz, 2018), the intraregional relations are gradually improving: border issues are being addressed, and economic disputes are now solved by more civilized methods. It remains to be seen if the ongoing reforms in Uzbekistan could become the main driving force of a regional rapprochement and promote political, economic and humanitarian cooperation in Central Asia (Zakirov and Nevskaya). At the same time, a new U-turn in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, which is quite possible in the future, may restore a previous status-quo which would be unfavorable for enhanced Central Asian partnership. One of the major potential threats is a failure of the current efforts to rejuvenate cooperation among the Central Asian states and possible interstate armed conflicts in the region over territorial and border disputes or access to scarce resources, such as water. Moreover, these already serious sources of tension are aggravated by historic and ethnic animosities, which have led to escalations in the past. To avoid a war and maintain a delicate balance of interests at the regional level, the governments of the Central Asia countries will have to continue negotiations to resolve the long-standing issues between them. It appears that the most important strategic task for the Central Asian states is to ensure their unity which is based on their common historic, ethnic and cultural roots, as well as shared interests and challenges. The unity is indispensable for securing political stability, military security, and economic prosperity, and for effectively exploiting differences among major powers to guarantee that no external player has a monopoly on influence in the region.

## **BUILDING PARTNERSHIP FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY**

With regard to other significant security threats and challenges, environmental issues remain an unresolved problem for Central Asia, which is one of the world's most vulnerable regions in terms of environmental security. Common problems include old issues inherited from the Soviet Union (desiccation of the Aral Sea, uranium and radioactive waste sites, desertification, and soil erosion) and new problems (the ecological dimension of transboundary water management, glacier ice loss, and climate change). Without closer regional cooperation in solving or mitigating these environmental

problems, the future development of Central Asia will be put at high risk due to potential negative ecological and socioeconomic consequences. For instance, the Central Asian countries face serious health and environmental dangers from abandoned and unprotected uranium mines, uranium tailings, and radioactive waste storage facilities. Due to the proximity of these sites to densely populated areas, the primary concern is that potential natural or intentional disasters or other emergencies in adjacent areas could critically affect the environment, economy, and public health of the entire region (Humphrey and Sevcik, 2009). Efforts of the international community to prevent health and environmental hazards have so far been undermined by the inadequacy of allocated technical and financial resources. Therefore, cross-border cooperation between the Central Asian states is needed to promote an effective and efficient remediation of such sites in accordance with international safety standards and practices. In this regard, the parties can use the provisions of the CANWFZ Treaty, the preamble of which states that one of the CANWFZ purposes is “promoting cooperation in the environmental rehabilitation of territories affected by radioactive contamination”, while its article 6 specifically deals with the Soviet nuclear legacy (NTI, 2009). Establishing a cooperative mechanism in the CANWFZ framework would enable its member states to pursue a more coordinated policy in such areas as safety and security of uranium tailings and radioactive waste disposal.

Similarly, the regional governments should recognize that climate change does not recognize national borders and that, despite the differences in climatic conditions on the territory of the Central Asian states, common trends are observed in this area (World Bank, 2018). It is obvious that efforts of individual countries are not enough to make progress in addressing global warming and its consequences in the entire region. In order to achieve more or less tangible results in this direction, joint actions of all the Central Asian states are necessary, and close interaction should be carried out not only at the official interstate level, but also between their professional, academic, expert and business communities, as well as non-governmental organizations. The building of a regional dialogue on climate change issues will allow to clearly outline goals of such interaction and develop a common vision of a climate-sustainable future, making it possible to exchange information between relevant agencies of the Central Asian countries, particularly their meteorological services. In a region-wide context, it is premature to talk about the development of a consolidated strategy for limiting greenhouse gas emissions and adaptation to climate change, but the parties could explore opportunities for joint action, for example, in obtaining financial and technical assistance from the UN Green Climate Fund and other donor organizations. In addition, the countries could cooperate in raising awareness of their citizens about climate change and green economy, as well as in developing the culture of responsible and efficient consumption of energy, water, food and other goods.

## **CONCLUSION**

Post-Soviet Central Asia opened to the world after the collapse of the USSR and found itself in a zone of intense cross-civilization influences. Several processes – of modernization, Westernization, spread of Islam and other religions, and national rebirth – began to simultaneously unfold in the region, which was historically part of the ancient Silk Road, but played no

role in contemporary international affairs before 1991. Because of the so-called 'power vacuum' and destabilization of regional security created by Russia's partial military and political departure from the region, Central Asia faced various security related issues having become an arena for major powers and regional players to compete for influence. Although much progress has been achieved in securing and guarding the national borders in the region, nowadays, in terms of security, Central Asia still confronts a number of serious threats and challenges, ranging from terrorism to climate change. To be able to successfully tackle them, the Central Asian states must improve their mutual cooperation and coordination. In the interest of future stability and prosperity, they should focus on their converging interests, promote mutual trust, build an equal dialogue and solve outstanding issues that prevent effective regional security collaboration. It is also important to obtain necessary assistance from interested foreign partners, as well as international and regional institutions. Such assistance would help the Central Asian governments to resolve the issues inherited from the Soviet Union and develop adequate responses to the present-day challenges and threats. Cooperation with Central Asia is also in the best interests of the leading powers because it contributes both to reducing regional security risks and strengthening their political and economic positions in the region.

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