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**MULTIVECTORALITY OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES
IN THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY**

Phenomenon of the multi vector foreign policy conducted by five Central Asian states Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan emerged soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a response to plurality of possible directions for development of Central Asia, which for a long historical period served as a bridge connecting South and East Asia with Europe and the Middle East. The geopolitical and geostrategic position of Central Asia was the main factor for involvement of leading world actors in the region. In this conditions adoption of multi vector foreign policy, which suggests development of the progressive and balanced relations with the existing centers of power was the only possible variant for Central Asian states to strengthen their sovereignty and independence, gain an impulse for wide range of domestic reforms and invite investments for further development. Despite the fact that since 1991 have passed more than 25 years and the geopolitical system of relations in Central Asia has radically changed, the elites of the Central Asian republics realize that maintaining the multi-vector foreign policy in the format it was established in the period since independence has become a difficult task under current conditions. Reduction of the US presence in the region, ongoing crisis in Ukraine and China’s activation in Central Asian direction transform the geopolitical system of relations in Central Asia, which loses its flexibility and impedes the effective implementation of a multi-vector foreign policy. However, the weakening of some vectors and the parallel strengthening of others does not mean their complete disappearance from the foreign policy palette and the refusal of the Central Asian states to develop relations with each of the vectors, maintaining multivectorality.

Key words: Central Asia, Russia, China, The USA, geopolitics, multi vector foreign policy, narrowing of space, balancing, the Ukrainian crisis, the Silk Road Economic Belt

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**Жаңа геополитикалық кезеңдегі Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің
көп векторлық саясаты**

Орталық Азияның бес мемлекеті – Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан және Түркменстанның көп векторлық сыртқы саясат феномені Кеңес Одағының ыдырауынан кейін Орталық Азияның түрлі болашақ даму нұсқаларына жауап ретінде пайда болды. Орталық Азия ұзақ тарихи кезеңде Оңтүстік және Шығыс Азиямен Еуропа және Таяу Шығыс арасындағы байланыс көпірі болған. Әлемнің жетекші акторларының Орталық Азияға деген қызығушылығы аймақтың геополитикалық және геостратегиялық жағдайымен байланысты. Сол кездегі Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің көп векторлық сыртқы саясатқа бағыттануы өз мемлекеттерінің тәуелсіздігін нығайтуға, ішкі саясат реформаларын өткізуге және мемлекеттің болашақ дамуына арнайы бөлінетін инвестиция көлемін көбейтуге бағытталған шешім, себебі көп векторлық сыртқы саясат әлемнің ең басты мемлекеттерімен өткізілетін байланыстарда теңдікті сақтау

мүмкіндігі болып саналады. 1991 жылдан бастап 25 жыл ғана өткеніне қарамастан Орталық Азия аймағындағы геополитикалық қатынастар жүйесі өзгеріске ұшырады, мемлекеттердің басшылығы көп векторлық сыртқы саясатты бұрынғыдай ұстануы оңайға түспейтінін аңғаруда. АҚШ-тың аймақтағы мәселелерге қатысуының азаюы, Украина дағдарысы және Қытайдың Орталық Азия мемлекеттеріне деген жоғары қызығушылығы аймақ мемлекеттері үшін көп векторлық сыртқы саясат өткізуде кедергі болуда. Дегенмен Орталық Азия мемлекетінің бір немесе бірнеше векторы болып саналатын мемлекеттермен қарым-қатынастарының азаюы немесе керісінше байланыстарды нығайтуы көп векторлық сыртқы саясаттан бас тарту деп саналмайды.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Ресей, Қытай, АҚШ, геополитика, көп векторлық сыртқы саясат, кеңістіктің қысқаруы, теңдестіру.

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Многовекторность государств Центральной Азии в новой геополитической реальности

Феномен многовекторной внешней политики, проводимой пятью государствами Центральной Азии, Казахстаном, Узбекистаном, Кыргызстаном, Таджикистаном и Туркменистаном, появился вскоре после распада Советского Союза в ответ на множество возможных направлений развития Центральной Азии, которая в течение долгого исторического периода служила мостом, соединяющим Южную и Восточную Азию с Европой и Ближним Востоком. Геополитическое и геостратегическое положение Центральной Азии стало основным фактором вовлечения ведущих мировых акторов в регион. В этих условиях принятие многовекторной внешней политики, которая предполагает развитие прогрессивных и сбалансированных отношений с существующими центрами силы, было единственным возможным вариантом для государств Центральной Азии, с тем чтобы укрепить свой суверенитет и независимость, получить импульс для широкого круга внутренних реформ и привлечь инвестиции для дальнейшего развития. Несмотря на то, что с 1991 года прошло более 25 лет, а геополитическая система отношений в Центральной Азии значительно изменилась, элиты центральноазиатских республик осознают, что поддержание многовекторной внешней политики в том виде, в каком она установилась в период после независимости, в нынешних условиях становится трудной задачей. Сокращение присутствия США в регионе, продолжающийся кризис на Украине и активизация Китая на центральноазиатском направлении трансформируют геополитическую систему отношений в Центральной Азии, которая теряет гибкость и препятствует эффективной реализации многовекторной внешней политики. Однако ослабление некоторых векторов и параллельное укрепление других не означает их полного исчезновения из внешнеполитической палитры и отказа центральноазиатских государств развивать отношения с каждым из векторов, сохраняя многовекторность.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Россия, Китай, США, геополитика, многовекторная внешняя политика, сужение пространства, балансирование.

Introduction

From the very beginning all the Central Asian states to different extents conduct the multi vector foreign policy aimed at cooperation with as many external partners as possible. However, by the nature of foreign policy, the states of the region are clearly divided into two groups. The first group includes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. They strive for maximum openness for integration in all possible directions and eagerly participate in the work of various international organizations and always advocate for strengthening of integration

within their framework. The second group includes Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. They prefer not to give the powers of national states to multilateral international organizations. Despite membership in various regional organizations, bilateral relations are more preferable for them. Tajikistan holds the middle position between these two groups of states. Because it is quite difficult to talk about the multi-vector nature of Tajikistan's foreign policy, comparing it with previous states.

In general, all the foreign policy interests and priorities of the countries of Central Asia described above are: firstly, determined by internal political

and cultural characteristics; secondly, are very uncertain both in terms of the choice of key external partners, and in terms of determining the region of the world to which they are oriented; thirdly, extremely unstable over time. At the same time, there is a certain paradox here, on the one hand, the Central Asian states need some kind of external partner, which, as Russia in Soviet times, would be able to solve the complex problems of the region, on the other hand, for a combination of very serious domestic political and foreign policy reasons, which have deep historical roots, they are not ready to make a choice in favor of any one key partner. To this end, all Central Asian states pursue a “multi-vector” foreign policy of willingness to cooperate with any external partners (Russia, the United States, China, EU countries, Turkey, Islamic states, etc.), ready to help in solving problems of the region. However, their political elites, having entered into the taste of independence, allowing them to monopolize the resources of entire countries, are not yet ready to give a “controlling stake” to some external force. Moreover, they often use cooperation with one of the major foreign countries as an additional argument in favor of attracting the interest of its international competitors. In other words, a multi-vector policy often involves “playing” one partner against another.

It is important to emphasize that the multi-vector nature of the external policies of the Central Asian states is not a short-term phenomenon. This is a phenomenon that has persisted for more than 25 years, but serious changes that occurred recent years in the structure of world politics have had a significant impact on the capabilities of the Central Asian states to continue a multi-vector foreign policy, which is caused by narrowing of the space for maneuvering between vectors.

Methods and theoretical approaches to multi vector foreign policy

Within the framework of the stated problem we relate on the system of scientific principles, among which the principle of an objective approach to the study of foreign policy is of high importance. To analyze geopolitical changes in Central Asia and their impact on a multi-vector foreign policy we use the systemic method. Comparison of changes in the foreign policy of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, with the aim of finding the best ways to adapt multi-vectorality to a new geopolitical reality, suggests the use of a comparative method.

Theoretically, the starting point lies in the understanding of the term “multi-vector foreign policy”, as it developed in Central Asia – the only region that has such geopolitical pluralism, uniting the world’s leading actors in the face of Russia, the US, China, the EU, India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey (Казанцев, 2008: с.32-50). Theoretically, a multi-vector foreign policy is defined as «development of the progressive and balanced relations with the existing centers of power and leading world and regional actors aimed at extraction of maximum political and financial benefit from relations with each of them» (Сартоп-зода, 2009). At the same time, the practical dimension of multi-vector foreign policy by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan differs significantly from each other. In this regard, it is necessary to take into account certain characteristics of the foreign policy of these states, which depends on the internal political and cultural characteristics. Multi-vector foreign policy is quite sensitive to any geopolitical transformations that entail changes in the balance of power. Thus, events qualitatively changing the geopolitical system of Central Asia entail changes in the foreign policy of the Central Asian states, changing the place and strength of foreign policy vectors.

Results expected after the studying are expressed in the following theses: (a) the geopolitical changes of recent years that have occurred in Central Asia, narrow the space for foreign policy maneuver by the states of the region; (b) as a result of a change in the regional balance of power, there is a weakening of some vectors and parallel strengthening of others; (c) the Central Asian states continue to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy despite the narrowing of the space for foreign policy maneuver.

The subject of our study is the multi-vector foreign policy of the states of Central Asia, and the working hypothesis is the idea that narrowing the space for foreign policy maneuver, as a result of geopolitical transformations in Central Asia, does not entail a rejection of a multi-vector foreign policy.

Discussion in the context of studying the problems of multivectorality in the new geopolitical reality

The foreign policy of the Central Asian states attracts wide attention of researchers from the states having interests in this region. The multi-vector foreign policy of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan that has existed for 25 years has become a subject of discussions of

the effectiveness of such policy and its peculiarities in the dynamically changing geopolitical conditions of Central Asia. The events of recent years related to the reduction of the US presence in the region, the crisis in Ukraine, the aggressive policy of Russia in the post-Soviet space and the activation of China in the Central Asian direction caused a number of difficulties for the multi-vector foreign policy of the Central Asian states. The influence of these events on the region and the foreign policy of the Central Asian states was reflected in the works of experts, academicians and scientists from the countries which are deeply involved in the region – Russia, China and the United States and others.

Discussing the region of Central Asia after 2014 Jeffrey Mankoff writes that: “the US policy for most of the past two decades has been to drive the countries of Central Asia to the West, while limiting the influence on them of large autonomous neighbors: China, Iran and, most of all, Russia. Nevertheless, strategically today, Central Asia is much more pluralistic than in the mid-1990s, thanks to both new pipelines and increased investment from countries such as China and Turkey” (Mankoff, 2013). Ariel Cohen writes that Central Asia has radically changed after the US withdrawal in 2014 and vacuum created by the United States now is being fulfilled by Russia and China. In this conditions the new US administration cannot afford it to just sit and look on the region’s dynamics under auspices of China and Russia from the bleachers (Cohen, 2017). Joshua Walker discussing the Central Asian shift to Russia and China after 2014 writes that “whether or not the administration in the United States has the boldness and willingness to explore the opportunities of the truly last international strategic frontier will have profound implications on its influence across the entire continent for the next century” (Walker, 2016). Paul Stronski examining Central Asia in Trump’s policy arguing that reduction of financial assistance to the region and uncertainty of the US policy towards region under the new administration make the Central Asian states to move towards other players involved in the region (Stronski, 2017). I. Bolgova asserting that the Ukrainian crisis had a significant impact on the geopolitical situation in Central Asia, detailed in her work how events in Ukraine affected the foreign policy of the Central Asian states (Bolgova, 2015). S. Randitz conducted an analysis of the new geopolitical situation in Central Asia focusing mainly on the reduction of the Russian influence in the region and position of the Central Asian states to the Ukrainian crisis (Radnitz, 2016). K. Telin pays his attention to the internal changes in the Central

Asian republics caused by the geopolitical transformations on the post-soviet space and Central Asia in particular (Telin, 2016). B. Zogg conducted an analysis of the impact of the Russian policy in the post-soviet space on the geopolitical transformations in Eurasia and competition with China and the USA in the Central Asia (Zogg, 2016). A. Vorobyev in his analysis arguing that China displaces Russian and American influence in the region which also affects the multi-vector foreign policy of the Central Asian states (Vorobyev, 2017). Niklas Swanström & Pär Nyrén analyzing the Chinese policy in Central Asia arguing that it radically changes the geopolitical landscape of the region reducing the influence of the other states (Swanström & Nyrén, 2017). F. Indeo having analyzed the Chinese strategy towards Central Asia, comes to a conclusion that China replaces Russia as the main trade and economic partner in the region, which at the same time affects the foreign policy of the Central Asian states who gravitate more to the Eastern Neighbor (Indeo, 2017).

Narrowing of the space for maneuvering

The success of the multi-vector foreign policy conducted by the Central Asian republics during the 1990s and 2000s was largely explained due to the interest in the region by key players and their attempts to prevent the single domination of any of these powers. Despite the obvious contradiction between the geopolitical interests of Russia, China and the United States in the region, there have emerged a quite flexible system of relations which flowing in a competitive format, avoided a direct clash between powers involved, and created space and opportunities for Central Asian state to maneuver. Not limited by the choice of just one vector in the foreign policy the states of Central Asia thus maintained the balance of power in the region. But last years this system has begun to undergo major changes. The first such change is the reduction of the US presence in Central Asia. Last years were marked by several obvious defeats of Washington in the region. The withdrawal of the Transit Center from Bishkek, the unsuccessful attempts to identify the US military presence in Uzbekistan, the completion of the active phase of the NATO military operation in Afghanistan – all this allows us to conclude that the US interest in the region has significantly declined. The shift in the focus of US interests to the Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Ukraine requires a redistribution of resources and entails a review of the United States regional strategies. A wide range of issues of economic and military-political cooperation between the US and the Central Asian republics, discussed mainly in a bilateral format, is now being discussed

in the framework of the new “C5 + 1” format initiated by the Barack Obama administration in 2015 and considering Central Asia as a whole region. Dialogue of this format is designed to focus on three main areas: the first is the economy and how economically it is possible to connect Central Asia with a wider region and with the United States, the second is the environment and the solution of the problem of climate change, and the third is security with special emphasis to the threat of terrorism and stability issues in Afghanistan (C5 +1 Fact Sheet, 2017).

Despite the change of power in the White House after the victory of Donald Trump in the presidential election, the format of “C5 + 1” remains preferable for the United States, which does not seek to return to the region and significantly reduce financial assistance to the Central Asian republics (Forbes, 2017). This creates a situation in which the vacuum created by the United States, caused by a sharp reduction in its military and financial presence in the region, will be filled by other powers involved in the region, primarily China and Russia. In such conditions, the space for foreign policy maneuver by the Central Asian republics is considerably narrowed. The weakening of one of the foreign policy vectors forces the Central Asian states to make a choice between Moscow and Beijing, with all the ensuing consequences. Such a situation on the one hand creates a certain level of clearness, but on the other hand imposes a serious responsibility for the choice of the Central Asian states, which are traditionally committed to multi-vector foreign policy.

The extension of the Ukrainian crisis also had a certain impact on the geopolitical configuration of the region and multi vector foreign policy of the Central Asian states. At the same time, the main significance of the events in Ukraine lies in the fact that they clearly showed the urgency of solving the internal problems of the Central Asian states, as well as the need to take into account the interest of external forces in destabilizing the domestic political situation. Moreover, when expressing their official position on Ukrainian events, and the Crimean referendum in particular, all the key features of the multi-vector foreign policy of the states of Central Asia manifested themselves. Astana, Tashkent, Ashgabat, Bishkek and Dushanbe did not make a single statement, in which they would unequivocally condemn one of the parties of the conflict.

The government of Turkmenistan refrained from any judgments about the events in Ukraine. This position confirms the fidelity to the course

of positive neutrality and complete disinterest in relation to the affairs of other states, including neighbors. The position of Tajikistan regarding the Crimean referendum was highlighted by its indistinctness even against the background of a very balanced approach to these events by other states of Central Asia. Not wanting to spoil relations neither with the West nor with Russia, Dushanbe simply took a wait and see attitude. In general, the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the foreign policy of Tajikistan was primarily expressed by the fact that Tajik officials deliberately emphasized the “multi-vector” nature of the country’s foreign policy (Ferghana Information Agency, 2014). The most pro-Western position in the Crimean issue was taken by Uzbekistan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of this republic issued a statement in which the referendum in the Crimea was not explicitly mentioned, but it was said about the “territorial inviolability and political independence of any state”(The MFA of Uzbekistan, 2014). The position of Kyrgyzstan on the referendum in Crimea was distinguished by some ambiguity. On the one hand, official Bishkek on March 11, 2014 stated that President Viktor Yanukovich is illegitimate, and the only source of power in Ukraine is the people. However, after the referendum in the Crimea, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan recognized its results (The MFA of Kyrgyzstan, 2014). As for Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan issued a statement saying “in Kazakhstan, the referendum passed in the Crimea is perceived as the free expression of the will of the population of this autonomous republic and refer to the decision of the Russian Federation in the current circumstances with understanding”(The MFA of Kazakhstan, 2014).

The factor of rising China is extremely important for Central Asia, where the influence of the “Eastern neighbor” is constantly growing. China’s desire to engage in active economic interaction, the willingness to invest impressive amounts of money in the implementation of projects necessary for Central Asian countries, gradually melt political alertness and push the elites of the countries of the region to increasingly closer interaction with the great neighbor. Against the background of the US presence reduction in the region and the aggressive policy of Russia in the post-Soviet space, the factor of China’s activation in the Central Asian direction can play a key role in changing the structure of the multi-vector policy of the states of Central Asia.

In recent years, Central Asian states have fully experienced the change in the strategy of

the economic policy of the Chinese leadership, manifested in the explosive growth of investment abroad. Impersonation of the new economic strategy of Beijing was the initiative “One belt – one road”, which directly affected the countries of Central Asia with large infrastructure projects and multi-billion contracts. It was in Astana in the autumn of 2013 that Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the initiative of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (China’s embassy in Kazakhstan, 2013). In recent years, economic cooperation between China and the countries of Central Asia has been actively developing in an upward and without a specific binding to the SREB initiative – on a bilateral contractual basis. However, this was happening in the frames of the same approach, implying a massive export of investments, the use of Chinese production capacities and labor abroad.

The western regions of China are more connected with Central Asia. Thus, almost one third of the total trade of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China today falls on Kazakhstan (China’s Ministry of Commerce, 2017). Beijing’s program documents on the development of the western regions of Central Asia play an important role. “It is necessary to use the unique geographical advantages of Xinjiang as a window to the West, deepen the exchange and cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia on the basis of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” to create a transport hub, a business logistics center and a culture, science and education center, as well as the key area of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (China’s Embassy in Kazakhstan, 2015).

The activation of Islamists in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in recent years and the spread of radical ideas are of great concern for Beijing. So, in August 2016, a suicide bomber attacked the embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Bishkek (The MFA of China, 2016). None of the Chinese diplomats then suffered, but the alarm remained. The Chinese authorities are not interested in activating the Islamists in the troubled Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Here, Beijing has been fighting the terrorist underground for many years. The issues of combating terrorism and maintaining regional stability China and Central Asian states today discuss as in bilateral format so through cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The economic presence of China in the Central Asian states is becoming increasingly systematic and complex. If in the 1990’s and 2000’s. Chinese investments went mainly to the fuel and energy

sector, then in the second decade of the 21st century, cooperation has spread more widely to other sectors of the economy such as infrastructure, construction and agriculture. Over the past few years, China has become the main importer in three Central Asian countries: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. As for exports, China has become the main destination for products from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (China statistical yearbook, 2016). The peculiarity of the economic interaction of the Central Asian countries with China in recent years has been the alignment of their domestic programs of economic development with the interests and strategy of Beijing (Kazakhstan’s President website, 2017).

Also it is impossible to ignore the certain level of Sinophobia that is present in the Central Asian countries. As Beijing’s influence in the region grows, so do fears in the societies of Central Asian countries about the possible strengthening of Chinese expansion. An example of this was the protests against the amendments to the Land Code that swept through the cities of Kazakhstan in the spring of 2016 and had anti-Chinese overtone (Kazakhstan’s Prime-Minister website, 2016).

However, in addition to actively forming the loyalty of the political elites of the Central Asian states, Beijing is pursuing a large-scale policy of attracting foreign youth to study in Chinese universities. The number of students from Central Asian countries studying in Chinese universities is growing every year. So, for example, in 2016, 13 thousand students from Kazakhstan were studying in China (China’s Embassy in Kazakhstan, 2017). A similar situation is observed in other countries of the region. The Chinese authorities are currently considering the possibility of transforming Xinjiang into an educational zone oriented toward Central Asia. In the case of Beijing’s success on the humanitarian front, China will not only have a serious economic impact on the life of the Central Asian states, but will also grow its “soft power” here as the generations change.

Conclusion

Summarizing all that was discussed above, we can conclude that the multi-vector foreign policy conducted by the Central Asian states is currently facing a number of difficulties. The geopolitical system of relations in Central Asia is radically changing and the elites of the Central Asian republics realize that maintaining the multi-vector system in the format it was established in the

period since independence has become a difficult task under current conditions. The decline of the US presence in Central Asia under Obama, which is also continued by the new administration of D. Trump has shifted the focus of foreign policy priorities to the nearest neighbors of Central Asia in the face of Russia and China, thereby reducing the space for foreign policy maneuver. This was the first sign of a multi-vector spin. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the Crimea's accession to Russia and the rapid deterioration of relations between Russia and the West have placed the Central Asian states in front of a difficult foreign policy choice. The ambiguous position of the Central Asian republics on the events in Ukraine is another sign that it is becoming more difficult to adhere to the multi-vector nature in the new conditions. The growth of Chinese influence in Central Asia has become the reason for the underlining and strengthening of the Chinese vector in the multi-vector foreign policy

of the Central Asian states. China's promising economic projects, investment activity and growing trade volume with Central Asia made Beijing the main economic partner for the region. The long-term trend is a gradual decline in the activity of Russia and the United States in the Central Asian direction and the parallel strengthening of China's influence. In this conditions an even greater reduction in the space for the foreign policy maneuver of the states of Central Asia is seen. The synergistic effect of all these events largely transforms the geopolitical system of relations in Central Asia, which loses its flexibility and impedes the effective implementation of a multi-vector foreign policy. The weakening of some vectors and the parallel strengthening of others, however, does not mean their complete disappearance from the foreign policy palette and the refusal of the Central Asian states to develop relations with each of the vectors, despite the fact that balancing them becoming more difficult.

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