

## CENTRAL ASIA IN MODERN GEOPOLITICS

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### Abstract

The article analyzes the geopolitical position and situation of Central Asia. It examines the regional characteristics of Central Asia, its place in today's global geopolitical processes and system of interests, its geopolitical opportunities and complexities, as well as the main factors shaping the geopolitical interests of powerful states and global power centers in the region.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, states, region, Russia, China, European Union, USA, geopolitics, position in global politics, territorial resources, geopolitical processes, system of interests, geopolitical opportunities and challenges, powerful states, global power centers.

### Introduction

Central Asia is a strategically significant region located in the central part of the Eurasian continent. Today, it is considered a territory where the political interests of global powers – especially Russia, China, the European Union, India, Iran, and Turkey – intersect. Central Asia is one of the key zones in global geopolitics in terms of energy resources, trade routes, and regional security. It encompasses the countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. In modern international relations, the region possesses an independent geopolitical status and must be considered in relation to Russia to the north, China to the east, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan to the south, and Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Europe to the west via the Caspian Sea. However, some geopolitical experts regard it as an integral part of the Eurasian region.

Central Asia can be considered one of the largest reserves of energy resources such as gas and oil in the world, as well as a crucial part of ancient and newly emerging overland trade, economic, transport, and transit routes. For centuries, the region has been the object of contention among states and territories. It is a geopolitical crossroads where the strategic goals and interests of global powers intersect.

However, since the fall of the Turan (Timurid) Empire, Central Asia has lived under the pressure of global geopolitical powers for over 500 years [Rajabov Sh. 2018. p. 276]. Even today, it is a zone of rivalry, particularly between Russia and China. Russia views Central Asia as a southern buffer zone and as part of its “sphere of influence” [Brzezinski Z. 1998. p.

256]. To preserve this position, Russia consistently emphasizes political cooperation with the region (e.g., through CSTO and the EAEU).

China, in contrast, aims to become the leading economic power in the region, primarily through its “One Belt, One Road” initiative” [Hasanov A. 2016. p. 538]. Today, Central Asia serves as one of China’s major markets for its goods. In the future, China intends to develop infrastructure in the region and transform it into an economically and financially dependent area, aligned with its own interests and serving as a production zone.

The policies of Russia and China regarding the region generally aim to maintain a balance of influence. Given their mutual need for cooperation in resisting external pressures on the global stage, they tend to avoid direct confrontation over access to Central Asian resources [Brzezinski Z. 1998. p. 256]. This approach is particularly relevant for China. Even if China were to push Russia out of Central Asia in pursuit of its goals, it understands that the region’s historical, ethnic, demographic, and other longstanding ties with Russia could still play a significant role [Alimov R. 2019. p. 320].

Another key factor negatively affecting the development of Central Asia’s geopolitical position is the persistent “instability and unrest” in neighboring Afghanistan [Jo’rayev A. 2020. p. 200]. This has long hindered the region’s development toward the south. Even today, the Taliban government in Afghanistan poses a security threat to Central Asian countries. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have adopted cautious positions in dealing with the Taliban. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, meanwhile, are engaging in dialogue and attempting to strengthen economic cooperation [Alimov R. 2019. p. 320].

Conflicts over energy and water resources also play a significant role in the strategic geopolitical development of Central Asia [Karaganov S. 2019. p. 320]. Uzbekistan, which holds a leading position in the region, has experienced fuel, gas, electricity, and water shortages throughout its independence period. This has weakened its potential geopolitical influence across the region and compelled it to focus continuously on domestic concerns. The issues of water scarcity and the effective use of energy sources remain some of the main topics of contention among the countries of the region. As a result, the potential for Central Asian countries to act as a unified force capable of defending against external political pressure is significantly diminished. Individually, the countries of the region are unable to protect themselves from either Russian or Chinese influence.

Naturally, the geopolitical status of the region has not escaped the attention of global powers such as the United States and the West [Alexander Cooley. 2012. p. 272]. The U.S. and Europe are attempting to limit the influence of Russia and China in Central Asia. However, their efforts are closely tied to global political competition with Russia and China, rather than aimed at the true development of the region—something Central Asian countries are well aware of. In other words, the U.S. and Europe have infused all their relations in the region with the goal of defeating Russia and China in the ongoing territorial and economic conflicts, which reduces the belief among Central Asian states that these international interactions will genuinely contribute to enhancing their geopolitical status [Mironenko S. 2015. p. 300]. As a result, such relations have remained vague and largely ineffective.

Although Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are striving to develop economic and diplomatic cooperation with the West, this has not yet had a significant impact on strengthening Central Asia's position in global politics. Therefore, it must be said that the main directions of Central Asia's geopolitics remain largely traditional [Marlene Laruelle, Sebastien Peyrouse. 2013. p. 280]. Uzbekistan is trying to assert itself as a leading state in Central Asia, maintaining equal diplomatic relations with the USA, Europe, China, and Russia, and on this basis aims to enter the global political arena. It is also engaging in dialogue with the Taliban, seeking to open routes to South Asia and its sea ports through Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is striving for multifaceted cooperation in Central Asia by maintaining political and military cooperation with Russia (as a member of the CSTO), expanding economic ties with China, and developing oil and gas trade with the West.

Tajikistan's priorities are continuing military and security cooperation with Russia, safeguarding against Taliban threats, and strengthening cultural and economic cooperation with Iran.

Kyrgyzstan attempts to maintain a balance between Russian and Chinese influences, lives as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and strives economically to free itself from dependence on Kazakhstan and China.

Turkmenistan, meanwhile, pursues a policy of neutrality and cautious relations with external powers, developing cooperation in the energy sector with China and Iran, and supports stability in Afghanistan hoping for the development of the TAPI gas pipeline [Yuldashev A. 2021].

It is evident that the geopolitics of Central Asian states lack regional unity, and this situation prevents the region from becoming an independent and strong subject of world politics [Kozhokin E. 2002. p. 312]. Therefore, in the future geopolitical life of Central Asia, attention should be paid to several important directions. First and foremost, regional states must realize regional cooperation and integration. They need to establish strong economic cooperation, create a common political platform to ensure sovereignty and security, and implement an independent foreign policy concept and practice capable of responding to the military-political influence of Russia and the economic pressure of China.

To achieve this, regional countries must transition to applying the concepts of functionalism and neofunctionalism in their policies. The European Union can be seen as an example of results achieved through the application of these concepts.

Functionalism refers to the political unification of certain territories, states, or regions through economic integration. The theory of functionalism appeared in Europe in the first half of the 20th century and further developed especially after World War II. Its main idea is that cooperation in economic and technical fields between states leads to political unification. As economic and technical cooperation between states increases, political conflicts decrease. Cooperation begins in certain fields and gradually spreads to others. Such cooperation leads to a gradual transformation of state sovereignty [Gadzhiev K. 2019. p. 400].

Functionalism played an important role in the European integration process. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), established in 1951, was the initial example of the

functionalist approach. Economic integration in European countries led to political rapprochement, which resulted in the formation of the European Economic Community in 1957 through the Treaty of Rome.

Neofunctionalism refers to the revival of functionalism under new conditions and technological opportunities, representing a new wave of integration [Huntington S. 2003. p. 603]. Integration in one sector requires integration in others as well. The development of technology in Europe led to new approaches in practical implementation. As a result, new forms of applying functionalism were discovered and implemented. Neofunctionalism began to develop widely from the 1950s-60s as a continuation of functionalism. Its main proponent, Ernst B. Haas, introduced the concept of the "spillover" effect to explain integration processes. According to the main ideas in this framework, if states integrate in a certain sector, this process will spread to other sectors. Economic integration accelerates political integration [Bogaturov A. 2012. p. 720]. This opens the way for support of the integration process by various actors—governments, businesses, and civil society. As a result, the European Union expanded integration processes based on neofunctionalism. Through the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the transition from an economic union to a political and financial union began. The introduction of the euro currency also demonstrated the influence of economic integration on political processes.

Understanding European geopolitics also requires analyzing the modern directions of European geopolitics and the related political actions. The idea of EU enlargement is of great importance in modern European geopolitics [Abdurahmonov Q. 2019. p. 50]. From 2004 to 2024, the EU admitted several new members such as Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Finland, and Sweden, which increased its economic and political power as a geopolitical force in world politics.

Relations between Europe and the USA also play a significant role in European geopolitics. This is a result of the EU's new neofunctionalist ideology. Cooperation between NATO and the European Union is strengthening, but the EU remains an independent political force in foreign policy.

In conclusion, Central Asia is an important part of global geopolitics due to its strategic location, energy resources, and security issues; however, it remains a weak participant in international politics. Interests of Russia, China, the USA, Europe, and Middle Eastern countries intersect in the region. Central Asian states strive to develop a unified independent foreign policy and to shape their position in global competition. The implementation of functionalism and neofunctionalism theories as concepts can greatly assist in achieving these goals. Functionalism and neofunctionalism play a crucial role in organizing integration processes. If Central Asia accelerates integration processes in the future, it can become a strong region in the global political arena. However, the dominance of national interests, the balance of power in international relations, and geopolitical threats can complicate this process, even leading to its fragmentation. This is especially important as Central Asia is already becoming a primary battleground for global geopolitical powers.

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