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Features of Ensuring Regional Security in Central Asia: An Analysis of the Geopolitical Situation

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Abstract

With the continuation of the Russia-Ukraine war and the seizure of power in Afghanistan by the radical Taliban movement, the issue of ensuring countries' security has taken a new dimension. These occurrences directly influence the global situation. This research aims to examine the primary security issues in Central Asia and identify regional threats within the evolving geopolitical context. To address the research objectives, various methods of cognition were employed, including historical, structural and functional, institutional, comparative, forecasting, political and legal analysis, classification, analogy, abstraction, analysis, and generalisation. The main results of this study include characterising the specifics of Central Asia and external threats to regional security, analysing the policies of the governments in the region to combat religious extremism and international terrorism, determining the prospects for establishing a collective defence organisation to develop mechanisms for countering these threats, and outlining the main activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation in maintaining regional stability and addressing the distribution of water and energy resources. The study also considered such security threats as cybercrime, human trafficking, separatism, interethnic conflicts, illegal migration, arms smuggling, and drug trafficking. This research's findings and materials have theoretical and practical applications. They may be helpful for researchers whose interests include the problems of national and regional security, political processes in post-Soviet Central Asia, and ethno-confessional conflicts in this area.

Keywords: Religious Extremism; Fight Against Terrorism; Political Conflict; Threat to Territorial Integrity; Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; Sustainable Development; Central Asia

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Introduction

The Central Asian region comprises five former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan (Dauren, 2019). After the collapse of the USSR, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia (CA) faced new challenges in forming their own security systems at different levels – military, technological, economic, and informational (Kassymzhanova et al., 2022; Maulenov et al., 2021). The long-interrupted statehood resulted from a situation in which the authorities of the newly formed countries had no governance competence, and there was also no experience of interstate relations between sovereign entities. At the same time, the region faced threats such as economic instability, high unemployment, ethnic tensions, the increasing influence of radical Islamism, environmental problems, illegal arms trade, and the growth of drug traffic from Afghanistan (Somzhurek et al., 2018; Spytska, 2024). Central Asian governments are confronting these problems internationally by engaging in military and political organisations and collaborating with significant geopolitical entities (Densmaa & Suren, 2023; Konieczny, 2023). They employ external resources, initiate interstate discussions on these matters, and improve their cooperation. Nonetheless, insufficient regional collaboration hinders successful security policies (Kocatepe and Şahin, 2024; Kalaganov et al., 2018).

The Central Asian states are addressing these challenges at the international level through participation in military and political organisations and cooperation with major geopolitical actors. They use external resources, initiate an interstate dialogue on these issues, and enhance their coordination. However, the current risks associated with the war in Ukraine and the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan require a review of security mechanisms in the Central Asian region (Paduraru & Voicu, 2020; Kullolli, 2024). These circumstances determine the relevance of this study.

Researchers from post-Soviet countries investigate the problems of Central Asian involvement in regional and international processes, with particular attention to security in its various dimensions. For instance, Nurgaliuly and Kazbekova (2021) consider the conceptual foundations of economic security in Kazakhstan as a component of national and regional security and highlight challenges related to the sustainability of the country's economy. They specifically focus on the experiences of other countries in ensuring economic security. Zaitseva (2019) explores the role of Central Asia in the geopolitical strategies of world powers and examines the dynamics of the region's involvement in integration processes for sustainable development on the world stage. The researcher also assesses how regional governments maintain and sustain security, highlighting critical issues in this area. Aryan (2022) examines the primary security challenges and threats facing Central Asian nations, as well as their positions and interests regarding resolving the Afghan situation, concluding that these states are keen to stabilise the situation in the neighbouring country due to its impact on their sustainable development. Khanaliyev (2020) examines the Middle East crisis's impact on Central Asia's states, analysing how civil wars, interstate conflicts, and terrorist activities in that region affect their security landscape.

In a similar context, Sullivan (2022) considers security issues in Central Asia related to the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan and the Taliban's seizure of power. The researcher argues that the primary concern for Central Asian countries is not merely the potential spread of radical ideologies or an imminent humanitarian crisis but rather the increased influence of Moscow on regional security following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Mingazutdinov & Mingazutdinova (2017) study threats to the security of Central Asian countries in connection with Russia's annexation of Crimea. They contend that this event disrupted regional power dynamics and raised concerns among Central Asian political leaders, prompting these states to distance themselves from Moscow, deepen cooperation with China and

the United States, and engage more closely with NATO.

This study aims to analyse the main threats to regional security in Central Asia in the light of new geopolitical realities and consider possible responses. Its object is regional security as a component of the area's sustainable development. The structure of the study reflects this objective. The research employs a combination of general scientific and specialised political science methods, including historical, comparative, legal, and forecasting approaches, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the region's security dynamics which is explained in the Materials and Methods section. The first part of the Results examines the geopolitical and institutional features of Central Asia's security position, with attention to national vulnerabilities and external pressures. Following this, it focuses on the role of regional cooperation in addressing environmental and water-related challenges, which are increasingly recognised as critical dimensions of security. The final analytical section addresses shifting geopolitical alignments in the region, particularly in response to the war in Ukraine and evolving international power dynamics. These thematic strands are then integrated into the Discussion section, which reflects on the implications of the findings for the region's long-term stability. The Conclusion offers a synthesis of key insights and outlines strategic recommendations for enhancing cooperative and sustainable approaches to regional security.

Materials and Methods

This study focuses on the various threats and challenges to security in Central Asia. To address this, the author employed both general scientific and specialised methods. Specifically, abstraction, analysis, classification, analogy, and generalisation were used. The empirical data for the study was enriched by reviewing journal articles, proceedings from international academic and professional conferences, and reports from the Eurasian Development Bank on the region's socioeconomic conditions (Vinokurov et al., 2022).

A range of political science methods, alongside those from related disciplines, were also applied: historical, political and legal analysis, comparative, institutional, structural and functional, and forecasting methods. The historical method provided the foundation for studying the origins and evolution of threats to regional security in Central Asia, as well as the causes of conflicts between states in the region since the early 1990s. Particular attention was given to the issue of state borders, which were artificially drawn during the Soviet era, with little regard for ethnic or geographical factors, and the "Afghan factor" in the context of regional instability over the last 30 years. Using political and legal analysis, the author investigated regulations, international treaties, conventions, and agreements that define national security mechanisms in Central Asia and characterise interstate relations. Documents on measures to counter international terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and arms trade were considered.

Using comparative analysis, the study identified both common and unique aspects of national security across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, distinguishing them from other Asian nations. This approach also facilitated an assessment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation's efforts in maintaining regional stability. It allowed for examining the conflicting geopolitical interests of the United States, the European Union, China, and Russia in Central Asia. Using forecasting techniques, the research projected potential trajectories for ethno-national conflicts in the region, particularly regarding strategies to address crises in the Fergana Valley, which spans Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The study also evaluated prospects for resolving the Afghan crisis, which remains a significant barrier to Central Asia's development.

The institutional method enabled an analysis of the activities of Central Asian governments in the area of security, including internal and external threats. It provided insights into the current state of security in the region. The possibility of

creating a new collective security organisation in the region was also explored, one that could strengthen peace and stability while addressing the challenges posed by globalisation and modern threats. The structural-functional method provided a framework for understanding Central Asia's position within the international system and for assessing its impact on geopolitical processes. Additionally, it allowed for an analysis of the strategies and mechanisms of interaction between major global powers concerning security in Central Asia and an evaluation of the region's role in the foreign policies of Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union.

Results

Specifics of Central Asia's Position in Regional Security

These countries' geographic location presents both advantages and challenges. They hold considerable economic potential at the crossroads of East-West and North-South trade routes. However, their proximity to powerful states such as Russia and China, as well as to regions with long-standing conflicts like Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, creates additional complexities (Mykytchuk, 2022). A key geopolitical advantage of Central Asia lies in its rich natural resource reserves, which have attracted the interest of global powers. The region's governments focus heavily on developing the oil and gas sector (Alkuwaiti, 2020; Umyshev et al., 2020). The presence of significant hydrocarbon deposits and an expansive transport infrastructure positions Central Asia as a key player in the global energy supply chain, strengthening the region's energy security (Kurylo et al., 2023; Rasoulinezhad et al., 2022). Among the major global powers, China, Russia, and the United States exert the most influence on Central Asia. Beijing, in particular, is enhancing political and economic ties with the region through its ambitious "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which aims to create a vast transcontinental network of infrastructure and trade corridors linking China with Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. (Kokoshin & Kokoshina, 2022). For Central Asian countries, "One Belt, One Road" represents both an opportunity to modernise transportation systems and attract foreign investment, and a challenge in terms of managing economic dependency and maintaining political autonomy

Currently, neither Russia nor China is taking significant steps to increase their military presence in the region. While Russia seeks to counterbalance the growing influence of the United States and its allies by reinforcing the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the organisation still lacks sufficient weight to be considered a dominant force in regional security. In contrast, NATO actively strengthens bilateral relations with Central Asian nations, demonstrating a more proactive approach to regional engagement (Mingazutdinov & Mingazutdinova, 2017). Central Asia is also one of the most densely populated and ethnically diverse regions (Kongyratbay, 2023). The largest ethnic groups include Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Karakalpaks, and Turkmens, with about 80 other ethnic communities also residing in the region (Tutinova et al., 2018). As such, territorial disputes are a key issue in the region's political landscape. Following the collapse of the USSR, independence was often seen as a way to assert the sovereignty of the titular nation and prioritise its interests, which sometimes threatened interethnic harmony and contributed to conflicts (Khamzin et al., 2016; Nurtazina and Toktushakov, 2017). The unresolved border disputes in Central Asia continue to heighten the potential for conflict among the region's states and ethnic groups (Kongyratbay, 2021; Pietkiewicz, 2017).

Over the past 30 years, only Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have definitively resolved their borders. Territorial disputes continue to arise in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (Apakhayev et al., 2017; Jeong et al., 2022). For example, the Fergana Valley is a particularly high-risk region, home to around 14 million people across a territory of just 300 by 150 km. One-third of the population is from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while half of Kyrgyzstan's population also lives there. People of different nationalities live side by side (Serikzhanova et al.,

2024; Toktomushev, 2018). Despite attempts to address these issues, the countries have been unable to agree on border demarcation or resource distribution for decades. The resolution of these tensions may be more achievable through regional integration, whether through existing organisations or the creation of new political, economic, or military alliances.

Security threats in the region have intensified due to the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan. This has led to an increase in religious extremism, drug trafficking, disinformation, terrorism, and organised crime. These threats often overlap and exacerbate one another. Central Asia is a crucial transit area for opium and heroin originating from Afghanistan. In 2020, around 70% of world opium production originated from Afghanistan, as reported by the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021). A significant proportion of these narcotics traverse Central Asia, with around 60–70% of heroin confiscated in the region being smuggled through Tajikistan from Afghanistan. This trade sustains as an organised crime and finances extremist factions like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and the Taliban. Proceeds from drug trafficking are used to finance armed groups, purchase weapons, and fuel terrorist activities, further destabilising the region (Badovskis et al., 2017; Kokoshin & Kokoshina, 2022). Many of these threats are linked to the "Afghan factor." Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan share borders with Afghanistan, where conflicts have raged for almost four decades, undermining security and stability both within Afghanistan and across Central Asia. Moreover, organised crime in the region has become increasingly international, often connected to global terrorist networks.

The situation worsened in 2021 when the militant Islamic group Taliban seized power in Afghanistan. The Taliban controls significant revenue from the export of opium and heroin, with the production of narcotics steadily rising. The routes for drug trafficking from Afghanistan, including through Central Asia, have also expanded (Amanbekova, 2019; Azemi, 2025).

Corruption in the region further exacerbates the situation, contributing to a growing drug addiction problem, which in turn threatens the health and stability of the population. This complex of issues poses a serious security threat to Central Asia (Marat & Botoeva, 2022). An important initiative to counter the drug threat is the "Channel" operation under the framework of the CSTO. This operation helps identify and control drug trafficking networks from their origin to consumption points. To further combat drug trafficking, Central Asian countries need to enhance border control, improve information-sharing mechanisms, and strengthen cooperation among law enforcement agencies. Additionally, regional rehabilitation programs for drug users and educational initiatives promoting healthy lifestyles could help reduce drug demand.

The instability in Afghanistan, exacerbated by the Taliban's return to power and the resulting humanitarian crisis, has led to a surge in migration. While most refugees have sought refuge in Iran and Pakistan, some aim to reach Central Asia. Under the guise of refugees, extremists may enter the region, potentially increasing terrorist threats. In response, the Central Asian countries, except Tajikistan, have imposed strict restrictions on Afghan refugees. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are only willing to accept ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, while Uzbekistan has agreed to provide transit but not resettle refugees. Turkmenistan has refused to accept Afghan refugees altogether, opting instead to engage in dialogue with the Taliban (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 2021). As a result, the migration of Afghan refugees to Central Asia has been limited and has not significantly impacted the region's socio-economic situation. However, security concerns remain.

Role of Regional Cooperation in Ensuring Environmental and Water Security in Central Asia

The security threats in Central Asia also include environmental issues that attract the attention of the international community. However, the measures taken at the moment have not led to

their solution. Health risks to the region's inhabitants arise from the lack of clean drinking water, the threat of radioactive contamination, and the remnants of facilities involved in the development and production of nuclear materials (Doroshkevich et al., 2017; Olimov, 2022). Water security in Central Asia is closely tied to energy, food, and environmental concerns, making the region unique in this regard. The upstream countries of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are home to the Karakoram, Pamir, and Tien Shan Mountain ranges, often called "water towers" because of their large glacial reserves. Water resource management is a critical security issue for Central Asia, as the region is home to the two largest inland bodies of water, the Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea, both of which face severe ecological degradation (Bayanbayeva et al., 2023; Umbetbayeva et al., 2016). Over 80% of the water in Central Asia comes from transboundary rivers, and competition for water resources has led to regional tensions, particularly between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

In Soviet times, the upper-reach republics supplied water to the lower-reach countries, which were rich in hydrocarbons and mineral resources. In contrast, the lower-reach countries provided in return coal, oil, and gas (Romanchuk et al., 2018). After the Central Asian states gained independence, water and energy resources management had to shift towards market-based approaches. Several important decisions have since been made at the level of heads of state, including implementing joint programs and projects in the sector. These efforts have helped maintain water security and prevented conflicts over resources. However, the current situation focuses more on coordinating five national strategies than on fostering regional cooperation. The solution to this issue would be creating a unified water policy for Central Asia, but there is no interstate dialogue on this matter.

Addressing environmental problems requires complex organisational, technical, and financial measures, which are costly (Koshkinbaeva et al., 2019; Kovach et al., 2024). The states in the region currently lack the necessary resources to tackle these challenges. Furthermore, resolving specific environmental issues in Central Asia will require amendments to legislation and changes in specific economic activities and agriculture. For example, the deterioration and inefficiency of irrigation systems remain a key issue. Transporting water to agricultural fields through canals results in water loss (Akhatov et al., 2018; Nakonechna & Samsonova, 2021). In addition, farming with the help of irrigation ditches is wasteful due to the emergence of modern irrigation methods. From this, it can be concluded that, given the inability of the states of the region to contain the degradation of the ecological situation, it can be concluded that in the future it is possible to increase the impact of environmental problems on the state of security in the region (Rikhsiev, 2021).

Areas of Activity of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation in the field of Maintaining Stability in Central Asia

The creation of the SCO after the collapse of the USSR was a necessary step in maintaining stability in Central Asia. The formation of such an organisation was predictable, as the presence of two influential states in the region —Russia and China — necessitated the establishment of a multilateral dialogue to safeguard the region from Western influence. The SCO is a permanent intergovernmental organisation that has prioritised regional security and set objectives to combat terrorism, extremism, and separatism (Dzhantaleeva, 2019; Khan, 2023).

All Central Asian countries have joined the SCO except Turkmenistan. It also includes China, Russia, India, and Pakistan. The organisation's main goals include strengthening good neighbourliness between countries, promoting their effective cooperation in the economic, political, environmental, cultural, scientific and technical sectors, joint maintenance of peace and stability, and promotion of a just international order. However, the SCO is not a military alliance, and its members only interact

through defence structures for anti-terrorism purposes. The organisation's foundational documents do not include a military component and lack a joint defence structure. As a result, it remains unclear how the SCO members would respond to ethnic or religious conflicts, both within the region and beyond (Xue & Makengo, 2021). Currently, the SCO's activities are limited to meetings, consultations, and operational-tactical exercises conducted under the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO (Bazarova, 2021). Thus, the SCO has yet to establish mechanisms to ensure regional security fully. Its current interaction formats are insufficient to address emerging threats (Scepanovic, 2022).

The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) is a military and political alliance aimed at strengthening peace and stability based on the collective protection of its member states' sovereignty and territorial integrity. Established in 2002, the CSTO arose from the Collective Security Treaty signed in 1992 by Armenia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Currently, the CSTO includes Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, while Uzbekistan withdrew in 2012. The participating countries have identified several security threats, including international terrorism, the recruitment of citizens into terrorist organisations, incitement of interethnic tensions, and territorial disputes among CSTO members. To address these threats, the CSTO aims to enhance defence capabilities, strengthen military and technical cooperation, intensify efforts against terrorism, and improve cooperation on the issue of border protection (Kaszuba, 2019). Despite these efforts, it was a purely regional and effective organisation in Central Asia, which included all five countries and was aimed at working on the main areas of joint cooperation, including in the field of security (Yurong, 2015). The reason for this, first of all, was the contradictions in relations with each other. However, the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan, the rise of security threats, and changing regional and global dynamics could encourage these states to

cooperate more closely in facing these challenges.

Shifting Geopolitical Alignments in Central Asia Due to the War in Ukraine

The ongoing war in Ukraine has placed Central Asian governments in a challenging position. They find themselves balancing conflicting loyalties: while Moscow remains their primary political and economic partner, they risk facing Western sanctions if they support the Russian Federation (Preobrazhensky, 2022). Therefore, the countries of the region prefer to take a neutral position. It is worth noting that there is no benefit for Central Asian countries in forming any associations with a country in international isolation. Consequently, Central Asian countries have initiated or intensified diplomatic engagement with actors whose growing presence in the region has historically been viewed with apprehension by the Kremlin, for example, Türkiye (Usenov, 2021). Kazakhstan openly demonstrates an independent foreign policy and economic course (Vilks et al., 2024). The President of the country, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has repeatedly stated that he does not recognise the annexation of the Ukrainian regions, and the territorial integrity of Ukraine cannot be the subject of bidding with the Russian Federation (Reuters, 2022). The persistent fighting in Ukraine has led to considerable fatalities among military personnel and civilians, including women, children, and the elderly (Table 1).

Economically, distancing themselves from Moscow is more complicated for Central Asian countries, as Russia still holds leverage through energy projects. In 2022, Kazakhstan expanded its cooperation with countries such as Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, particularly in negotiating new agreements for the supply and export of petroleum products. President Tokayev announced plans to increase oil shipments across the Caspian Sea by 1.5 million tonnes, using the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline that connects Azerbaijan to Turkey's Mediterranean coast. Kazakhstan responded to Russia's repeated blockages of the Caspian Consortium pipeline,

through which Kazakhstan exports about 80% of its oil (Pavlysh, 2022). Kazakhstan also maintains strong economic ties with China. Meanwhile, given the long-standing cooperation between Washington and Tashkent, Uzbekistan will likely prioritise its relationship with the United States. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are expected to align more closely with Kazakhstan, while Turkmenistan will likely maintain its traditional stance of neutrality.

Future studies in Central Asia may evaluate the efficacy of current regional security frameworks, such as the SCO and the CSTO, particularly concerning future concerns like cybercrime and climate change. Research may also investigate the influence of transnational concerns such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and organised crime on regional security, especially how these elements correlate with radicalisation and instability. Furthermore, evaluating the impact of environmental concerns, namely water and energy resources, on intensifying regional conflicts may yield significant insights for long-term security plans.

Table 1: Casualties and Humanitarian Impact of the Ukraine Conflict	
Total Civilian Casualties	**At least 10,000 killed, over 18,500 injured**
Child Casualties	**569 killed; at least 1,229 injured**
Female Prisoners of War	**Reports of Extreme Cruelty, including beatings and sexual violence**
Older Adults Affected	**Approximately 5 million, predominantly women**
War Crimes Against Civilians	**Documented cases of torture, including sexual violence, against civilians**
Source: United Nations Security Council (2023), NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (2022).	

In the short term, augmented intergovernmental dialogues among Central Asian nations might facilitate improved information exchange and collaborative initiatives to combat cross-border concerns such as terrorism and drug trafficking. Joint training initiatives in counter-terrorism and cybersecurity can enhance regional security forces (Sheryazdanova et al., 2024; Yevseiev et al., 2022). Furthermore, transnational environmental collaboration, shown by forming a Central Asian Water Commission, might mitigate water scarcity and alleviate conflicts around resource management. To achieve long-term solutions, the establishment of a Central Asian Security Council might enable coordinated security tactics while promoting economic interdependence through trade and infrastructure initiatives would mitigate political tensions. Collaborating with international entities such as the UN and the EU may bolster the region's initiatives for lasting peace and security.

Discussion

The topic of national, regional, and international security remains highly relevant at the present stage of historical development. Therefore, it is a focal point for researchers worldwide. Central Asia's security challenges are especially interesting to scholars from post-Soviet countries. However, there are works by Western European and American scholars on this subject. In particular, Mayer considers the issue of security cooperation between the governments of the region's countries (2021). The researcher calls the interaction between the states moderate. It includes bilateral and multilateral ties with the participation of Russia and China. According to the researcher, the situation with regional security may change in the coming years, as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have taken a course to deepen cooperation within Central Asia. Moreover, this, in turn, will contribute to integrating Central Asian states to repel common threats. However, the author does not consider the growing influence of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) on the region's countries. This omission is due to the limited formal engagement between NATO and the

Central Asian states compared to the more institutionalised ties with Russia, China, or regional organisations like the SCO and CSTO. While NATO has undertaken partnership initiatives such as the Partnership for Peace and security cooperation programs, its presence remains largely peripheral. Geopolitical sensitivities and the strategic interests of Russia and China in the region often constrain it. Central Asian governments have traditionally maintained a cautious stance toward aligning with Western military blocs to avoid antagonising their primary regional partners. Nonetheless, the evolving geopolitical landscape may warrant a closer examination of NATO's influence in future research.

Lemon (2018) also views Central Asia through the prism of security. The researcher suggests that the region is threatened by many crises related to environmental problems, illegal migration, religious extremism, drug trafficking, and the influence of supranational associations. The author tries to consider the term security in its various aspects and in the context of internal threats, such as high levels of corruption, unemployment, and economic instability. The researcher is convinced that internal challenges threaten the region's security more than external ones.

Similarly, Hynek (2020) investigates Central Asia as a geostrategic region in the contemporary geopolitical conflict. The researcher believes that the Central Asian countries occupy an important geostrategic position. Therefore, they attract the attention of world powers. After the collapse of the USSR, they remained in the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation, but the rapid growth of the Chinese economy changed the situation. Therefore, Moscow and Beijing are currently competing to consolidate their dominant position. The researcher demonstrates three possible scenarios for the development of the situation. Historical connections, particularly in the oil and gas industry, suggest Russia will maintain its position as the primary ally of Central Asian nations. While China will continue developing economic initiatives in the region, its political influence will

remain limited. An alternative scenario sees China gaining regional prominence through economic investment, though it lacks the political leverage needed for complete regional authority. A third possibility involves Russia and China sharing influence with divided responsibilities. However, this arrangement would likely be temporary, as both nations ultimately seek to establish themselves as the region's primary long-term partner with Central Asian states.

Afghanistan fell largely under Taliban control during the summer of 2021, prompting many citizens to seek ways to leave the country due to safety concerns. This situation has raised alarms in Central Asian nations, which are concerned that an incoming wave of Afghan refugees could include extremist elements, potentially compromising their national security. The problems of the "Afghan factor" in the context of security in Central Asia are considered by Sullivan (2022). The researcher suggests that the main danger faced by Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan lies not so much in the potential spread of radical Islamic beliefs or the impending humanitarian crisis as in the increase in Moscow's influence in the region. According to the researcher, in the future, the Central Asian countries will struggle to preserve their sovereignty as an increasingly isolated Russia seeks to preserve its zone of influence in the post-Soviet space and the status of a world power. At the same time, it is worth noting that Sullivan (2022) only describes the role of Western countries in stabilising the situation in Afghanistan and does not take into account the efforts of other centres of power, such as China. After all, Beijing has repeatedly pointed out the need to support all parties in achieving an inclusive political settlement of the conflict through dialogue as soon as possible.

Earlier, the same topic was researched by Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh (2016). They concluded that, although all five states in the region share concerns about the situation in Afghanistan, they prefer bilateral rather than collective approaches to cooperation in the context of ensuring stability in Asia. At the same

time, according to these two researchers, the threats (terrorism, extremism, and organised crime) emanating from Afghanistan are secondary to the Central Asian countries. But the main challenges for Central Asia come from the region itself. This refers to territorial disputes between states, low living standards of citizens, and economic instability.

Umarov (2020), in a similar context, investigates the problems of ensuring security in Central Asia. The analysis suggests that Central Asian nations have successfully maintained their sovereignty and avoided armed conflict since the conclusion of Tajikistan's civil war in 1997, defying predictions of regional instability. The study proposes the emergence of a distinct regional security framework in Central Asia while acknowledging Afghanistan's considerable influence on regional security dynamics. The researcher identifies several external factors shaping Central Asia's security landscape: deteriorating U.S.-Russia relations, disagreements between traditional Western allies on global and regional issues, worldwide escalation in terrorist activities, ongoing Middle Eastern conflicts, and China's expanding international presence.

The role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the process of neutralising regional threats is investigated by Garbuzarova (2021). The author argues that the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan has intensified regional threats, addressing which has long been a core priority of the SCO. The organisation has always sought to play an active role in resolving the Afghan issue, trying to prevent destructive influence on the alliance states. According to the researcher, now the SCO needs to use a lot of political and diplomatic potential to prevent possible destabilisation of the situation. Vasa and Nurimbetov seemingly examine the institutional transformation and development trends of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2022). The 2017 enlargement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) enhanced its geopolitical influence and created new opportunities for member states to collaborate on multiple levels. However, ongoing territorial disputes between SCO members pose persistent security challenges to the region, with no immediate resolution in sight. Nicharapova (2019) explored this same issue. The author suggests that the primary purpose of the SCO's creation was to control the situation in Central Asia. At the same time, the organisation, with the assistance of Russia and China, helps to maintain stability in the region. With more than 20 years of history and the economic potential of the participating countries, the SCO can become a real force in the international arena and compete with other organisations.

From this, it can be concluded that the topic of ensuring security in Central Asia does not lose its relevance and is considered based on the new geopolitical realities and the alignment of forces on the world stage. However, the factor of instability in Afghanistan is considered important and unchangeable. It is still impossible for the international community to resolve the situation in the country. Therefore, the Central Asian States need to create a collective organisation that would help to repel external threats emanating from Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The security issue in Central Asia has become particularly relevant in light of the unstable situation in Afghanistan and geopolitical transformations in the world. These circumstances provoke new challenges and reinforce long-standing threats to regional security. This leads to the search for modern ways out of potential crises and creating conditions for the stable development of the Central Asian countries. The Central Asian states are trying to counter security threats together by initiating an interstate dialogue and participating in international economic military, and political organisations, such as the SCO and the CSTO. However, at the moment, there is no single structure that would include all the countries in the region. This complicates the process of ensuring regional security at the proper level and promptly responding to external challenges. The creation of such an alliance would contribute to solving several regional problems.

In addition, Central Asian states can neutralise some threats by studying the experiences of other countries. In particular, in the fight against the spread of drugs, it is necessary to abandon forceful methods in favour of the implementation of preventive measures, as well as the treatment and social rehabilitation of drug addicts. The threat of criminal punishment cannot force a person to give up narcotic substances and begin to lead a healthy lifestyle. At the same time, active anti-drug propaganda has demonstrated its effectiveness in Israel, Switzerland, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. Therefore, the experience of these countries can be applied in the states of Central Asia, where the drug threat has increased after the seizure of power in Afghanistan by the Taliban. In addition, in light of the war in Ukraine, the Central Asian countries need to protect themselves in defence terms because territorial disputes between them have remained unresolved for three decades and may enter a phase of active confrontation. It is possible to strengthen the defence potential and effectively repel threats to territorial integrity by establishing cooperation with allies, making the military and industrial complex one of the key sectors of the economy, and developing the armed forces in all directions, taking into account potential military threats and risks.

Future research opportunities in this field include conducting detailed case studies of individual Central Asian nations' approaches to national security. Additionally, this work provides a foundation for examining how regional states engage with global powers and international organisations in matters of defence cooperation.

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Ethical Approval

The study was conducted without human/animal participation. Ethical approval is not required.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Author Contribution

A single author produces this study, so the author is responsible for producing the whole study from conceptualisation, data curation, methodology, writing-original draft preparation, visualisation, investigation, supervision, editing, writing-reviewing, and using the software. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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The study was conducted without human participation. Informed consent is not required.

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