

PLACE AND ROLE OF ISLAM IN REGIONS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

IGOR DOBAEV. CENTRAL ASIA AT THE CROSSROADS
OF GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS

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Abstract. The article focuses on understanding the modern political processes taking place in the sovereign states of Central Asia in the post-Soviet period, basing on the historical past of these territories. It is shown that the current borders of the Central Asian states were determined by the Bolsheviks, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former borders of the union republics became interstate ones. This

circumstance has given rise to many ethnopolitical and ethnoterritorial conflicts, both within specific states and in interstate relations. It appears that the place and role of the new states of the region in the modern system of international relations have not yet been finally determined. In this regard, experts are considering a wide variety of scenarios for the development of the geopolitical situation in the region in the future.

Central Asia is a vast region that includes five post-Soviet states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. From the point of view of traditional geopolitics, it is part of the "Heartland" – a term that was introduced into scientific circulation at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Englishman H. Mackinder. Starting from the middle of the 19th century the struggle for control over this region was waged by two powerful rivals of that time – the land-based Russian Empire and the maritime Great Britain.¹ Russia won.

The history of the region is rich in events. The Huns, the warriors of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan, passed through there, in the 14th century a powerful Timurid state emerged with its capital in Samarkand, but in the 16th century it was replaced by the Bukhara Khanate. In the middle of the 16th century, having defeated the army of the Delhi Sultans, the descendant of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, Babur, founded the Great Mughal Empire in part of the territories of modern India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, by the 19th century the political map of the region changed: on the territory of Central Asia and part of modern Kazakhstan there were three monarchical states: the Kokand and Khiva khanates and the Bukhara Emirate. The Kokand Khanate, with its capital in Tashkent, included most of modern Uzbekistan and the southeastern part of Kazakhstan; Khiva – present-day Turkmenistan, part of Uzbekistan and the southwestern territories of Kazakhstan, and the Bukhara Emirate (Bukhara) – Tajikistan and part of Uzbekistan.

In the last third of the 19th century Central Asia became part of the Russian Empire. The Khanate of Kokand, which offered fierce resistance to the advance of the imperial troops, was abolished and directly incorporated into Russia, and the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva became its vassals. All these territories were united into the Turkestan Governor-General with a centre in Tashkent, which included the Transcaspian, Samarkand, Semirechensk, Syrdarya and Fergana regions, as well as the Bukhara Emirate and the Khanate of Khiva, which were vassals of the Russian Empire. Gradual but large-scale diverse reforms began, with the goal of organically incorporating Turkestan into provincial Russia. However, these large-scale plans were not implemented due to the outbreak of the First World War, the coups d'état of 1917 and the civil war that followed.

Events during the civil war in Central Asia developed dynamically and dramatically. Soviet power was established there after the October events of 1917, and already in January 1918, the counter-revolutionary separatist uprising of the local Moslem nobility, who tried to create "Kokand Autonomy" in the Fergana Valley, was suppressed. However, it was not possible to completely localize this movement; as a result, the Bolsheviks soon encountered a broad movement of rebels – Basmachism, the ideological basis of which was pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism (Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Turkmen are Turkic peoples; Tajiks belong to the Iranian branch of the Indo-Europeans; they all profess Islam, predominantly Sunni).²

If in 1918 the main centre of resistance was the Fergana Valley, then in 1919–1920 it spread throughout almost all of Central Asia. Inciting religious fanaticism and acting under the slogan of "holy war against the infidels," the leaders of the gangs pursued the goal of separating Turkestan from Soviet Russia and restoring medieval feudal orders there. The leaders of the Basmachi had a relatively wide supporter base, which included the bai, most of the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie and

the Moslem clergy, who had significant influence on the mentality of the bulk of the local population. This made it possible to put together numerous gangs, freely navigate the developing situation, and also be supplied with weapons, ammunition, food and horses.

The main forces of the Basmachi were defeated by the Red Army in the early 20s, but they and their Western patrons managed to escape final defeat. In 1924–1925 the Basmachi, with the active assistance of Great Britain, reorganized and received centralized control under the leadership of Ibrahim Beg, the nuker of the former Bukhara emir. He was actively supported, trained, supplied with weapons, ammunition and equipment by a number of foreign intelligence services, primarily Great Britain. After heavy losses during military clashes with the Red Army, the Basmachi, as a rule, went to the territory of Afghanistan, where ethnic groups related to them lived (and still live – *I. D.*) in the northern provinces – Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, etc. There they regained their strength, replenished their troops with people and weapons, receiving comprehensive assistance, first of all, from the British (to a much lesser extent, the territory of Persia (since 1935 – Iran – *I. D.*) was used for the same purposes). As a result, in the second half of the 20s the Soviet government undertook harsh political pressure on Afghanistan. As a result, the Afghan Emir Amanullah Khan sharply limited assistance to the Basmachi, forcing some of them to leave the country.

However, at the end of 1928, a rebellion broke out in Afghanistan with the support of the British, as a result of which power was seized by the adventurer Bacha-i Sakao (“son of the water-carrier”), closely associated with the British intelligence services, an ethnic Tajik, with whom the “best intelligence officer of all times and peoples” Colonel of British intelligence Lawrence of Arabia allegedly worked. As a result, the position of the Basmachi in Afghanistan has improved dramatically. In this regard, Red Army troops twice (in April 1929 and June 1930) crossed the Afghan border, destroying Basmachi gangs and their

support infrastructure throughout the north of Afghanistan, right up to the spurs of the Hindu Kush. Bacha-i Sakao was overthrown and killed. King Nadir Shah, who came to power in Afghanistan, after a harsh Soviet ultimatum, disarmed part of the Basmachi troops, and in the spring of 1931, the bases of the irreconcilable Ibrahim Beg were struck by a sudden attack by the cavalry of nomadic Turkmen, who were well paid by the Afghan government, apparently with Soviet money. By this time, the mood of the Central Asian population had also changed and its representatives began actively join voluntary Basmachi-fighting detachments, and in the mass mentality and in the mass mentality bandits were no longer perceived as "basmachi" (raiders), but as "dushmans" (enemies) and "shaitans" (demons).

Only after this the Basmachi movement began to fade away. However, their individual attacks were recorded until 1939-1940. The last Basmachi groups disappeared after the Soviet Union and Great Britain agreed in 1942 to stop subversive activities from the territory of Iran and especially Afghanistan, which once again emphasizes the geopolitical conditionality of the Basmachi in the territory of Soviet Central Asia. However, in the post-Soviet period, in some Central Asian states Basmachi leaders are often glorified for political purposes, presented as fighters who defended the interests of their peoples.

In the post-revolutionary period in the USSR, national-territorial demarcation of the territory of the Central Asian region was carried out. As a result of this process, which lasted from 1925 to 1936, four union republics were formed within the Soviet Union: the Kirghiz SSR, the Uzbek SSR, the Tajik SSR and the Turkmen SSR. Part of the territory of the former Central Asian possessions of the Russian Empire, during the national-territorial delimitation, was included in the formed Kazakh SSR, making up the southern part of this union republic. Kazakhstan also received serious gains in the north due to the alienation of the territories of the Cossack troops from the RSFSR. Thus, administrative boundaries during the Soviet period often changed their

configuration, thereby creating a potential for conflict in the future. At that time, the Central Asian region was called "Central Asia and Kazakhstan."

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the initiative of the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, this region began to be called Central Asia in 1992. The former Soviet republics became sovereign states with the borders that were determined by the Bolsheviks. As already noted, four republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) are inhabited predominantly by Turks, and Tajiks belong to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of peoples. Tajiks, like Persians and Pashtuns, are descendants of the ancient Aryans, and the Tajik language can be called a dialect of Persian (Farsi). The total area of the countries of Central Asia is slightly more than 4 million sq.km, and the population is about 70 million people. The region is an immeasurable depository of natural resources. There are huge deposits of oil (Kazakhstan), gas (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), gold, copper, uranium, in total more than 100 types of mineral raw materials. However, due to the presence of a number of conflict-producing factors, including those caused by the historical past, it is necessary to talk about positive or negative medium-term and long-term trends in the development (up to 2050) of the situation in the region with a certain degree of caution.

In particular, the region is expected to experience accelerated demographic growth of titular ethnic groups, with a simultaneous reduction in the share of the Russian and Russian-speaking population and a decline in the influence of Russian culture. As a result, according to some data, by 2050, if current trends continue, local elites will no longer speak Russian, with all the ensuing consequences. The serious rejuvenation of the indigenous population is accompanied by the growth of ethnic, religious and political extremism. We are talking, first of all, about expanding the ideology and practice of pan-Turkism and radical Islamism. The predominantly raw materials nature of the

economies of the countries of the region, stagnation of industrial production, job cuts lead to demodernization of public life, powerful migration processes, primarily to Russia, which is fraught with the emergence and strengthening of ethnic enclaves in the most developed regions of the Russian Federation.

Almost all states in the region have developed authoritarian and neo-patrimonial regimes, which, as we know, are very unstable. The preserved traditional social system of local societies, which is based on clans, tribes and tribal unions, is not able to predetermine the modernization of these states. Authoritative domestic political scientist A.B. Krylov notes that although "in reality, all post-Soviet states have all the mandatory attributes of Western democracy: parliament, political parties, public, non-governmental and human rights organizations, universal suffrage; a declared commitment to the principle of separation of powers, etc., but at the same time all this is of a decorative nature and has little effect on the real mechanism of functioning of power and on the daily life of society."³ The above can be directly applied to all post-Soviet states of Central Asia.

In connection with the borders arbitrarily drawn during the Soviet period, international and interethnic conflicts arise and develop, including based on the lack of water resources and unfair, according to some experts, water distribution.

In January 2022, during the attempted coup in Kazakhstan, external observers, perhaps for the first time, heard about the Kazakh zhuzes (senior, middle and junior), the tribes and clans included in their composition, and the primacy in the state of representatives of some clans of the senior zhuz. However, it should be borne in mind that similar traditional social systems exist in other Central Asian countries, as well as in some Russian subjects. Of course, these points must be well known and taken into account in practical activities. As the main character of the famous Soviet-era film, Red Army soldier Sukhov, said, "The East is a delicate matter..."

The consequence of the conflict-generating factors noted above is the “fragility” of the states in the region, the instability of their development, and high security risks. All this leads to centrifugal tendencies, which are aggravated by external influences. During the Soviet period, the Central Asian republics were politically and economically isolated from the outside world and external influence. They were predominantly connected with other Soviet republics. In the post-Soviet period, the dominant factor in the foreign policy of these states was the multi-vector nature of foreign policy and foreign economic relations. The multi-vector policy lies, first of all, in the fact that the leaders and elites who have come to power in new states do not want to again become “younger brothers” not only in relation to Russia, but also to other states. However, this kind of multi-vectorism, especially in relation to the collective West, is extremely dangerous. Numerous successful and failed “color” coups in the post-Soviet space, inspired by Western intelligence services, clearly indicate this.⁴ Thus, the attempted coup in Kazakhstan revealed that for many years the West, primarily the United States, had been purposefully creating a network of “liberal-oriented” NGOs and NCOs in this republic. Their number ranges from 16 to 20 thousand. Thousands of similar structures operate in other Central Asian states, especially in Kyrgyzstan. As a result, this republic has become a record holder for “color” events, where they were recorded three times: in 2005, 2010, and 2020. At the same time, in Turkmenistan, artificially closed from external influence, there were no attempts to carry out “color” coups, since there are no Western or pro-Western NGOs there, and the authorities harshly suppress all attempts to create them.

The position of the West in the economies of the countries of the region has also become significant. In particular, in Kazakhstan, up to 70 per cent of assets in the oil industry ended up in the hands of Western “partners.” Since the main oil fields are located in the west of the republic, in the settlement territory

of representatives of the junior Zhuz, they fell into serious socio-economic dependence on Western oil companies, which have the main assets in this industry. Of course, Western companies are interested, first of all, in making a profit, and not in spending on social projects. Therefore, most of the local population lives poorly, one might say, in poverty, and the country's leadership has not solved this problem in any way. Moreover, the country's leaders lined their pockets. It is not surprising therefore that the first protests with economic demands began precisely in the west of Kazakhstan, and only then, being just the detonator of subsequent processes, they developed on the territory of the senior Zhuz, primarily in Almaty, the former capital of Soviet Kazakhstan.

From the point of view of economic macro indicators in Central Asia, the leading positions are occupied by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, where the economy, due to the presence of oil and gas, is of a raw material nature. At the same time, the level of productive economy is extremely low, hence the shortage of jobs and high unemployment. Impressive indicators of annual GDP, as well as per capita GDP, are recorded here. However, the distribution of income received is clearly inequitable, resulting in widespread poverty. There are no hydrocarbons in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, so these states are experiencing difficulties economically. According to official statistics, the poorest state in the region is Tajikistan, followed by Kyrgyzstan. As for Uzbekistan, under the current president Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power in 2016, the socio-economic situation in the republic is clearly on the rise, which allows this country to take a leading position in the Central Asian region. At the same time, it should be noted that the shadow economy is overdeveloped in the region, often associated with crime, primarily drug trafficking, mainly from Afghanistan.

The above conflict-generating factors create high security risks in the region. In general, experts consider the following

scenarios for the development of the geopolitical situation in the region for the future:

1. *"Reintegration of the post-Soviet space."* Initially, in the post-Soviet period, the emphasis was placed on the reintegration of the post-Soviet space within the CIS, which turned out to be an amorphous organization. Then the process of accelerated bilateral and multilateral integration began. First of all, this concerns the union state of Russia – Belarus. At the same time, multilateral military and economic cooperation with other sovereign states is developing. The CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) emerged, a military-political structure that includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In January 2022, this organization demonstrated its effectiveness by providing assistance to Kazakhstan, which was subject to terrorist attacks. The Eurasian Economic Union also operates, which includes all of the specified CSTO members, except Tajikistan. The central link of these integration projects is the Russian Federation, without which they would not be possible. In addition, Russia has military bases located on the territory of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which strengthens its geostrategic potential. However, despite these integration projects, there is no need to talk about recreating a mini-USSR, due to a number of reasons. Nevertheless, Russia's influence on diverse processes in Central Asia is undeniable, and these positions should be purposefully strengthened.

2. *Western liberal project.*⁵ This project consists of attempts by the collective West to exercise control over the Central Asian region. Great importance is attached to strengthening its geostrategic potential, since the region borders the main geopolitical competitors of the West: Russia, China and Iran. Let us note that after the events of September 11, 2001, the United States already had military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, developed military cooperation with a number of states in the region, their attempts at a military presence in the Caspian Sea were recorded, etc. However, the consolidated West is clearly

stagnating, and the actual flight of American troops from Afghanistan has sharply weakened their position in the region. As a result, there are currently no states willing to provide their territory for the deployment of American bases.

Another direction of Western expansion in the region is geo-economic interests, which consist in control over resources, primarily hydrocarbons. Already today, Western companies have serious assets in this area. In order to ensure the stability of its economic presence and protect itself from possible nationalization, the West is interested in weak states that are dependent on them, the constant turnover of local leaders and elites, for which purpose "colored" events are instigated.

3. *"Sinocentric world."* We are talking about strengthening China's geopolitical influence on the states of Central Asia. Beijing believes that the Central Asian region plays a strategically important role in ensuring the national security of modern China. As for Russia, this region acts as a kind of deep rear for it, especially since China has a common border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Since the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (East Turkestan), where Moslem Turks live, is located in the north-west of China, the PRC is in no way interested in implementing in Central Asia the pan-Turkist project initiated by Turkey, or the Western liberal model, which fuel separatist processes in East Turkestan. Unlike other centres of power, China is implementing its geopolitical project in the region, first of all, through strengthening its geo-economic positions, which are bearing positive results. At the same time, the full achievement of the goals set by China in this region is hardly possible due to the wary attitude of the local population and elites to the historical past in their relations. In addition, the negative perception of China and the process of "Sinoization" is fueled by the internal policies of the PRC in East Turkestan.

4. *"Pan-Turkist integration."* As noted, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are predominantly inhabited by Turks. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, there

was only one Turkic state – the Turkish Republic. In the post-Soviet period, five such countries appeared on the political map of the world: four in Central Asia and Azerbaijan. In the 1990s in Turkey, there reigned an atmosphere of euphoria regarding the possibility of implementing a pan-Turkic project to unite all Turkic states, with the leading role of official Ankara. However, Turkey did not and does not have the necessary resources to implement such a large-scale project, especially in Central Asia, where Turkey's pan-Turkic aspirations are opposed by global players – Russia, China and collective West. In this regard, in recent years, Turkey has set a course for gradually strengthening its influence in the region, relying on “soft power” (economy, education, science, etc.), creating a new structure in 2021 – the “Organization of Turkic States.” Taking into account the above, the implementation of the “pan-Turkic integration” project seems unlikely, especially since the local elites are not eager to exchange one “big brother” (Moscow) for another (Ankara).

5. *“Islamist integration – caliphate.”* The vast majority of the region's population are Sunni Moslems. Since the late 80s here, as in other parts of the post-Soviet space populated by Moslems, not without outside influence, a process of politicization and radicalization of Islam was observed⁶. However, the practical experience of implementing the ideas of radical Islam had an excessively negative impact on the local population. The civil war in Tajikistan, the failed coup d'état in 2005 in Uzbekistan, inspired by the “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” (now the “Islamic Movement of Turkestan”), the participation of local Islamist militants on the side of the “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria⁷, and finally their attempted coup d'état in January 2022 in Kazakhstan seriously undermined the position of Islamists in Central Asia. However, it seems premature to discount them in the general balance of geopolitical forces.

6. *“Central Asian integration”.* Individual states in the region are in no way subjects of regional, much less global,

geopolitics. They act only as objects of these processes. Their economic and political integration could increase their geopolitical potential. This process, as practice shows, is facilitated in those regions where there is a central leading state. There is currently no such state in Central Asia. For a long period, Kazakhstan claimed this role, but after the events of January 2022, it lost its chances for regional leadership. Uzbekistan's potential is growing, but it is still not enough to achieve a leading position. Moreover, as already noted, there are numerous conflicts, open and latent, between the countries of the region. As a result, the states of Central Asia interact much more actively with extra-regional actors than with each other, and regional institutions and organizations find themselves increasingly dependent on other states.

Some analysts do not exclude the complete collapse of statehood in Central Asia. However, the likelihood of such a scenario occurring is extremely low. In conclusion, we can conclude that the Central Asian states are not subjects of regional geopolitics. Here, at this stage, the Russian, Chinese and Western geopolitical projects dominate, and the pan-Turkic and Islamist ones are secondary, but they should not be discounted.

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VALENTINA SCHENSNOVICH. GEOPOLITICS OF TAJIKISTAN IN MODERN CONDITIONS AND STRATEGIC TASKS OF THE STATE. *Analytical Review*

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