

M.A. RAKHIMOV (*Tashkent/Uzbekistan*)

New political situation in Post-Soviet Central Asia

M.A. РАХИМОВ (*Ташкент/ Өзбекстан*)

Кенестік дәуірден кейінгі Орталық Азиядағы жаңа саяси ахуал

Abstract: *Central Asia regions during the course of many centuries was the center of trading-economic and cultural exchange between Asia and Europe, the major interlink on the ancient routs of the Great Silk Road. Contemporary newly independent Central Asian nations – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan consider development of alternative regional transport communications as important of the national regional strategy. Today's Central Asian states have become active participants in various projects, revival of the Great Silk Road that promote economic and political cooperation with countries of Europe and Asia.*

Keywords: *Central Asia, Great Silk Road, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Asia, Europe, transport, commutations, multilateral partnership.*

Central Asia is rich in historical heritage and cultural diversity. During the course of many centuries the region was the center of trading-economic and cultural exchange between Asia and Europe, the major interlink on the ancient routs of the Great Silk Road.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union Newly Independent Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - tried to form new bilateral and multilateral relations, and within a short time, the Central Asia nations were formally recognized by many countries followed by establishment of diplomatic relations with most of them. They have joined the main international organizations, among them the UN, OSCE and received memberships in regional organizations, including the Organization of Economic Cooperation (ECO) and Organizations of Islamic Conferences (OIC).

Central Asia's importance grew further in the eyes of the world due to the region's enormous natural resources, significant enough to play a pivotal geo-economic role in ensuring an energy delivery channel to the world market. The situation in post-Soviet Central Asia has transformed considerably in the second part of the 1990s and at the beginning of the millennium, when Russia reestablished its position and sphere of interest in Central Asia. China began activating bilateral and multilateral relations in Central Asia with start of the Shanghai process in 1996. Since 2001 the US creating its military bases in Central Asia countries. Although at the beginning of the 21st century, Europe and EU evinced their keen interest in Central Asia, none of them so far seems to have a unified strategy toward the region. This is partly due to internal peculiarities of European politics and largely due to evolving general geopolitical conditions, including the relations of the EU with the US and Russia. Central Asia also failed to develop a cohesive, common regional approach to the European policy.

Contemporary newly independent Central Asian nations – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan consider development of alternative regional transport communications as important of the national regional strategy and in results it was attempted to revival Great Silk Road and developed new transport communication to the East, West, South and North.

Central Asia is a land-locked region and geographical remoteness of Central Asia from the main seaports is a serious handicap to the region's wildly fledgling participation in the world trade. A common post-Soviet system of rail, road transport, communications network, gas and oil pipelines was bequeathed to Central Asia from the Soviet yesteryears. In such situation, the republics considered development of alternative regional transport network for communication as an important national and regional strategy. As a result quest began to develop

new transport communication corridors to the East and South and link them with the transport systems of neighboring countries like China, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and other countries.

Development of transport communications in Central Asia is not only economic, but also a political problem; both the leading world countries and nations of the region are interested in resolving that problem. One of the priorities for the countries in the region is development of transport corridors to seaports and international markets, construction of oil and gas pipelines, providing the efficient functioning of these routes, as well as finding out of alternative variants the most optimal and priority-oriented in the future.

Integration of the Central Asian countries into world economy, search their own place in the international arena, vindication of national interests at inclusion into regional and world politics undergoes in conditions of globalization of world economy and policy.

It should be mentioned, that the complex of the international relations between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries is characterized by uncertainty. The bipolar system has become a thing of the past and that requires revising and reassessing the activity of all international institutes established in the last century. Contributing to this process the globalization exerts increasingly pro-found influence on socioeconomic, military-political and other spheres of life of the humankind, including the principles of international co-existence.

World trade is a prominent aspect of globalization processes swiftly integrating capitals, technologies, services and information [International Politik 2002: 24]. Binding all new countries, regions and the entire continents into integrated networks, the global economy holds sway over the nature, intensity, and duration of bilateral and multilateral relationships.

Being in good agreement with the tendencies of global development the project of reviving the Great Silk Road provides creation of new opportunities for development of trade relations between Asia and Europe, joining efforts of dozens of countries standing at different levels of economic development, political models and structures.

As it is known, the Great Silk Road became the name of a number of national and international documents and programs. In particular, we can mention the Act on the strategy of development of the Great Silk Road approved by the USA Congress in March 1999, as well as Enactments on development of independence and regional cooperation in Central Asia and in the Southern Caucasus [Silk Road Strategy 1999: 4-5]. There are also various economic and power generation projects of China on revival of "The Great Silk Road", the project of NATO Virtual Silk Highway, Japan's Silk Road diplomacy and others.

International transport communication projects.

As it was mentioned above for the states of Central Asia, development of transport communications has the significant importance from the economic, geographical and strategic viewpoints. In Central Asia, the extent of automobile roads exceeds 320 thousand kilometers, railways – 20 thousand, oil-and-gas pipelines – 40 thousand kilometers. In the countries of our region there are more than 100 airports, more than 20 of them are regarded international. However, the region has no direct access to the largest sea and ocean ports of the world.

Today's Central Asian states have become active participants in various projects, revival of the Great Silk Road that promote economic and political cooperation of the young states of Central Asia among themselves and with developed nations in Europe and Asia-Pacific region. At present, Central Asian republics, as well as China, Iran, Pakistan and countries of the Caucasus – Georgia and Azerbaijan – are involved in the process of organization and coordination of transportation arteries and communications connected Europe and Asia, East and West.

The countries of Central Asia participate in a number of transport projects. In particular, in May 1996 a rail link Tejen – Serakhs – Meshkhed – Bandar – Abbas, which connected the railway systems of the Central Asia with Iranian ports on Persian Gulf, and passed through Turkey to Europe. Reconstruction of the Tashkent-Andizhan-Osh-Sarytash-Irkeshtam motor highway would create conditions for intensive economic exchange between the Central Asian countries and China and would promote the intensification of regional economic cooperation not only in Central Asia, but also within the framework of the SCO and Organization of Economic Cooperation.

Stabilization and positive changes in Afghanistan grant new opportunities for Central Asian cooperation. Improvement of transport connection between Central Asia and Afghanistan would be a significant contribution toward future economic recovery and political stabilization of Afghanistan and also development of transport communications of Central Asia countries with the South and East Asia. In June 2003 Uzbekistan, Iran and Afghanistan signed agreement “On creation International Trans-Afghan corridor” and the agreement comprise the construction of a 2400 km highway road through Termez-Maza-e-Sharif-Heart to Iranian seaports Bandar-e Abbas and Chorbakhor. This road allows Central Asian countries reach the Persian Gulf and increase interlinks of Central Asia, Russia (West Siberia), and China (Hinjiaang) with the Middle East, Southwest Asia and Europe. In 2012 Uzbekistan by Asian Development Bank's financial support finished railway link “Termez-Maza-e-Sharif”.

Another trans Afghan project is transport corridor – Uzbekistan-Afghanistan and Pakistan is important for Central Asian countries trade though the Arabian

Sea on the doors of South, Southwest Asia and Middle East. The transport road project Murghab-Kulma connects Tajikistan with the Karakorum highway in China and Pakistan, and allow Central Asian nations access to the Pakistani ports of Karachi and Gwadar.

The condition of transport communications in a certain degree specifies the level of the state development. However, the countries of Central Asia fail to employ the full potential available in this area. It is necessary to involve investments more widely with a view of reconstruction, modernization, and upgrading the automobile roads and railways; to develop cooperation in the sphere of customs convention, to harmonize national legislations of the countries of region in the field of transport and customs houses. Alongside with that, it is necessary to pay attention to safety issues. Interrelationship in this trend alongside with providing safe transportation of cargoes also makes allowance for struggle against transnational criminality. The states of Central Asia are consistently integrated into the world economy. The volume of mutual trade with the states of other regions gradually grows.

Experts in the field of transport claim that soon the railway transport accepts responsibility for a certain part of freight traffic in the east-west direction. Particularly for this reason, the interest grows to the issue of transit transportation of cargoes through Central Asia. The countries of the region do much for modernization of the transport system. In particular, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is the member of more than 30 international conventions, agreements and contracts on questions of transport communications; the republic takes part in a number of international programs on integration of transport communications. For the last seven years Uzbekistan for this major branch of economy received foreign investments in the amount of 550 million US dollars. These actions are meaningful also because they serve for development both of the internal transport system, and of the international transport routs of the region.

Inclusion into the well-known transport corridor Europe - Asia (TRACECA) received a strong support of the European Union in the construction and modernization of highways and rail lines. However, for the complete realization of this idea, there are certain difficulties in formulating a common policy of the states through which the route passes, and the positions of various countries, including the U.S. and Russia.

In the context of development of transport and communication system, we should particularly note the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of transportation of hydrocarbon material from Central Asia and the Caspian region to international markets. In 2009, the construction of gas pipeline Central Asia - China (passing through the territory of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and

Kazakhstan) was completed, which allowed a stable transit corridor to be formed for natural gas as well as the direction to be diversified of hydrocarbon exports from Central Asia. In December 2010 in Ashgabat, there was also signed an intergovernmental agreement on construction of the pipeline TAPI (Turkmenistan - Afghanistan - Pakistan - India) [Bhadrakumar 2010: 2].

In October 2010 it was discussed the opening of the transport corridor Uzbekistan - Turkmenistan - Iran - Oman - Qatar and other Persian Gulf countries. By the spring of 2011, the leaders of five countries agreed on the technical details of this corridor and at the end of April 2011 in Ashgabat, the Foreign Ministers of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Oman and Qatar signed an agreement on establishing a new international transport corridor to connect Central Asia with the ports of the Persian Gulf.

Given the extremely complex geopolitical and geo-economic position of Central Asia, the countries need to advocate for the diversification of routes and directions for resource development of the energy-rich region. Perspective plans for new transportation projects will depend on how optimal is the balance of global, regional, interregional and national interests in implementation of projects. There is no doubt that the future of strong regional and interregional co-operation will contribute to stability and economic progress in Central Asia, and will make a significant contribution to the establishment of international stability at large.

Challenges and potential of multilateral cooperation in Asia

Regional cooperation and integration is one of the important aspects of contemporary international relations. From the mid 20th century to present, in different parts of the world, many political, economic and regional organizations have been gradually developing. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian republics tried to forge new bilateral and multilateral relations in every possible ways, including being co-founders of several regional organizations as stated above.

In the beginning of 21st century we see activation in Central Asia such leading Asian countries like China, Japan, Korea, India, which were mainly welcomed in the region and some countries attempted to implement not only active bilateral partnership, but also multilateral one.

In particularly, China initiated SCO, which has passed a number of interesting stages in its institutional and political development. In our view, there are two main periods in the process of formation and development of the organization. The first stage begins in 1996, when the principles were formed as well as structural mechanisms of development of multilateral relations of member

countries. This period is characterized by normalization of relations in a number of key issues of security, prevention of any possible conflicts between the participating countries, overcoming the mutual distrust, etc. Transformation of the “Shanghai Forum” in the SCO took place in June 2001 at the meeting of leaders of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in Shanghai (China), where Uzbekistan joined the organization as a new member-country. The year of 2001, we regard as the beginning of the second period in the development of the organization. There has been significant institutional establishment of the organization, the organization's charter was adopted, the secretariat was formed in China, the anti-terrorist center was opened in Tashkent, etc. At present, the SCO is an international instrument to coordinate the areas of multilateral cooperation. The results of our survey and interviews with experts from the countries of Central Asia and Russia carried out in 2006-2007 have shown that the majority of experts (90%) consider the SCO as the most successful organization in Eurasia [Рахимов 2011: 147]. Several countries have observer status, including India, Mongolia, Pakistan, Afghanistan. India has a positive perception of the potential of the SCO as an instrument for promoting regional economic integration, trade and ensuring energy security [Gulshan Sachdeva 2006: 32].

At the same time, certain shortcomings were marked in development of the SCO, in particular, most of the projects of the organization are mainly funded by Chinese investments, while other member countries could also wage more active investment policies. Japan also recognized the growing strategic importance of Central Asia in the context of international security and sought to play a more active role as an Asian nation in Eurasia. An interesting format for multilateral relations is the “Central Asia plus Japan” established in 2004 in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The main concepts of the interregional cooperation “Central Asia plus Japan” were proclaimed as follows: respect for different viewpoints and opinions, coordination and consistency of acts, and cooperation on a transparency basis. Proposed by Japan and supported by countries in the region “Central Asia plus Japan” represents a new format for regional and interregional cooperation. However, there is needed essential active implementation of the agreements and decisions, as well as expanding the range of cooperation of the participating countries.

Central Asian countries believe that cooperation with Japan is strategically important and will contribute to closer trade ties, economic and investment relations between Eurasia, the Middle East, and Asian-Pacific region.

Like Japan Republic of Korea is one of a key partner of Central Asian countries. Since 2007 on multilateral base annually has been organized forum

“Republic of Korea – Central Asia”, aimed at strengthening and extension of cooperation in economy, information, communications technologies, construction and transport, science, culture and tourism. In 2007-2012 in frames of the “Republic of Korea – Central Asia” were created terms for discussing issues for strengthening and further development of cooperation in various spheres, including matters of development IT sector, agriculture, medicine and health, implementing system of “E-government”, growing energy-effectiveness and nature recourses, construction and infrastructure, science and technologies, finances, textile. Central Asian countries positively view Korean initiative to do support for realization of programs for industrial diversification and widening mutual benefit cooperation.

In twenty years down the lane since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Central Asian countries and India, there have been periodic exchanges of high-level visits, inter-governmental commissions, foreign office consultations, working groups and other institutional mechanisms to systemically work out how to further develop and strengthen bilateral relations. Currently, Central Asian countries are the largest beneficiary under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. India has been offering human resource development training to 300 candidates annually from this region. India has set up small scale projects in the region in diverse sectors, such as food processing, technical training and information technology and English language courses.

India’s bilateral trade with all the Central Asian countries taken together stands at a modest US\$ 340 million in such fields as pharmaceuticals, textiles, metallurgy, chemicals and also in the fields of hydrocarbons, mining, mineral processing, construction and industrial production. At present more dozens projects are designed for implementation, including those in joint prospecting, exploration and production of hydrocarbons with India’s leading Oil company – the Oil and Natural Gas Commission. Besides, manufacturing of fiber-optic cables, a number of projects on the production of substances and various medicines are also under way. Agreements have been penned with leading textile companies on deep processing of cotton, silk and raw leather to produce and retail finished goods. In the field of information and communication technologies, projects are agreed upon for manufacturing smart phones, tablet PCs and Internet set-top boxes, as well as power sources based on solar-hybrid technologies.

Central Asian nations has consistently supported India’s aspiration to be granted a permanent membership in the UN Security Council. At the same time the policy makers in India do not believe in the policy of exporting democracy, they would be very sympathetic to political changes as they know that Indian

interests would be served better by opening the region to further democratic changes and more economic reforms.

There are challenges in the relations between Central and India and general South Asia, including limited direct surface transportation routes that has posed a major handicap in further developing economic and trade ties between India and Central Asia. The existing flights connections from Almaty, Ashgabat and Tashkent have potential for expansion in terms of capacities and frequency. The tourist flow and movement of people would also benefit from this. The recent steps taken by Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to increase road and rail connectivity could be linked to further development of the International North South Transport Corridor. In May 2006, the Indian government also officially approved its participation in the US\$ 5 billion Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. Recently Kazakhstan also expressed its interest to this project.

After US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Japan, India, Uzbekistan, other Central Asian and different countries are actively participating in the reconstruction and rebuilding of Afghanistan. The U.S. made structural changes at the administrative level and grouped countries of Central and South Asia under a new bureau in the State Department. Latter was announced New Silk Road strategy bring closer South and Central Asian countries.

Central Asia and India averred that stability in Afghanistan would open up wider vistas for regional cooperation and help institute and advance cost-effective routes, reducing the distance between the markets of India and Central Asia. In this regard, as the two sides noted, prospects emerging from setting up Central Asia-Persian Gulf land transport corridor as well as Trans-Afghan access strip have been telling.

From the commitments of the international community and multilateral institutions, it is clear that a massive effort to rebuild Afghanistan's transport network and economy is underway with Central and wider Asian participation.

In summer 2009, the United States crystallized these ideas in establishing the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), as a series of logistic arrangements linking the Baltic and Caspian ports with Afghanistan via Russia and the Central Asian states. This strengthening of the partnership between the United States and Central Asia will increase the stakes for Central Asian interests in Afghanistan. The US has a more generally adopted and wider regional view linking Central Asia strongly with the South Asian region.

Central Asian countries also participate in the reconstruction process in Afghanistan. Stabilization of Afghanistan is the key factor of security of Central

Asia and the future international communication project thought Afghanistan also would foster broad Asian and Central Asia partnership.

Representatives of Central Asian countries believe that cooperation with India, Turkey, Japan, Korea and other countries is strategically important and will contribute to closer trade ties, economic and investment relations between Eurasia, the Middle East, and Asian-Pacific region. Talking on perspective of the broad partnership in Asian continent, we could mention the concept “Broader East Asia” or “Eastern Eurasia” [Tomohiko 2008: 117-118].

There are challenges in the relations between Central, South and West Asia, including limited direct surface transportation routes that has posed a major handicap in further developing economic and trade ties. Improvements in India-Pakistan relations and stability in Afghanistan would be a crucial input into linking South and Central Asia. In this regard, active dialogue and cooperation between Russia, China, US, Iran is a necessary prerequisite. South and Central Asian countries need to develop bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation.

Conclusion

Central Asia is an important region in the world arena because of geopolitical location and rich energy resources in Central Asia and the Caspian region. At the same time region confronting a number security challenges, including the issue stability and reconstruction in Afghanistan. Regional cooperation in Central Asia and Eurasia can become an important factor in the maintenance of peace and security in the region, which are necessary for stable economic growth and development. Prospects of economic and political cooperation speed and scale of these processes will depend on the readiness of national economies to carry out the proper reforms and introduce the forms and methods of institutional, political and economic regulation adopted in the world practice.

Different international experience in economic and political transformation is relevant for Central Asia. Central Asia’s relations with leading Asia is very important to further cross Asian cooperation, which allow for close partnership not only in the wider Asian context and beyond.

Central Asia republics consider development of alternative regional transport communications as important of the national regional strategy and in results it was developed new transport communication to the East and South and link it with the transport systems of neighboring countries. A well-developed regional transport system in Central Asia is potential for regional prosperity and good opportunity develop regional and international transport network and substantial trade relations and will facilitate foreign investment from foreign countries.

There are different ideas on the future prospects of the broader bilateral and multilateral partnership and here I think it will be good to develop a new concept which can be conventionally entitled “The Concept of Broad Partnership on Silk Road” which will be the basis for intercontinental space of trust, political dialog, mutual understanding and a wider range of cooperation among European and Asian countries and also other nations from different continents.

For widening co-operation among the different countries, regional and international organizations on the revival of the Great Silk Roads as a transport and communication route, I think it is necessary to propose the following:

- Firstly, it is necessary to enlarge academic partnership and joint projects in the Central Asian and South Asian studies;
- Secondly, development of institutional framework of regional cooperation in CA and concentrated on the particularly projects, including on water sharing;
- Thirdly, development of transport communications in Central Asia is interlinked also with growth of the international tourism in the region. For progress in this filed, it is necessary to establish new routes with attendant infrastructure, including convenient airports.
- Fourth, CA countries should continue partnership on alternative transport corridors and pipelines as well as cooperation in solving a wide range of problems.

In summary, it ought to be remarked that Central Asia was actively involved in the international trading, economic and cultural communications during the existence of the ancient Great Silk Road. However, after the significant decline in trade relations, the region fell into the period of stagnation. Today the hour has struck for restoration of vigorous and intensive regional and international cooperation in the vast Asian and Eurasian space. Contemporary challenges and the process of globalization of the international relations demand large-scale partnership and extended cooperation. The new Silk Road communication strategy will made positive changes in the geo-strategic and economic situation in Central, South and West Asia and future develop international cooperation with different regions of the world.

Reference

Рахимов М. Международное сотрудничество Узбекистана в контексте обеспечения стабильности и устойчивого развития в Центральной Азии. – Ташкент: Tangi Nashr, 2011.

Bhadrakumar M. K. Pipeline project a new Silk Road // Asia Times. – Honkong. – 2010. – december 16.

Gulshan Sachdeva India's Attitude towards China's Growing Influence in Central Asia // THE CHINA AND EURASIA FORUM QUARTERLY. – 2006. – №3. – Vol. 4. International Politik. World Trade. – 2002. – № 6.

Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999. 106th Congress. 1st Session // <http://www.eurasianet.org/resouse/regional/silkroad.html>.

Tomohiko U. Japan's Diplomacy towards Central Asia in the Context of Japan's Asian Diplomacy and Japan-U.S Relations.