



## REGIONAL ASPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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### Spatial Approach to Studying Regional Security in Central Asia

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**Abstract.** The article presents the results of a study that employed a spatial approach to examine the formation and evolution of national and regional security systems in Central Asia. The study introduces the concept of the density of the defense policy space as an assessment of the quality and reliability of the regulatory and practical security system and the depth of involvement of external players in its formation. The relevance of assessing the contribution of each player in establishing a regional security system lies in the fact that Central Asia is undergoing a new stage of competition between major players for influence. The proposed package of projects by external players includes initiatives for defense cooperation and interaction in the field of military-technical cooperation. Since gaining independence in 1991, the regional states have relied on the Russian Federation to guarantee their security. In the current climate, it is important to assess the impact of the initiatives and projects of major actors such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), the United States, Türkiye and other major actors on the Russian-Central Asian common defense policy space. The article analyzes the region's existing security architecture at the time of the collapse of the USSR, the risks and challenges faced by the countries during the period of independence, as well as the initiatives and mechanisms employed by regional countries and external actors to ensure security, using a spatial approach. The study's main conclusion asserts that, after a series of crises, countries in the region ultimately formed a closed model of regional security based on security guarantees from the Russian Federation and significant political support from the PRC, having tested a balanced and diversified foreign policy defense model. Western countries have failed to secure the status of a security partner for Central Asian countries, with the exception of specific areas of cooperation in educational, peacekeeping, and biological programs.

**Key words:** multi-vectorness, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, security, foreign policy

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## Пространственный подход в изучении региональной безопасности Центральной Азии

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**Аннотация.** Представлены результаты апробирования использования пространственного подхода в изучении процесса становления и эволюции страновой и региональной систем безопасности в Центральной Азии. Введено понятие плотности оборонного политического пространства для оценки качества и надежности нормативной и практической системы безопасности и глубины вовлечения внешних игроков в ее создание. Актуальность проблемы оценки важности вклада того или иного игрока в формирование региональной системы безопасности обусловлено тем, что Центральная Азия переживает новый этап конкуренции крупных игроков за влияние, и практически в пакете проектов, предлагаемых внешними игроками, существуют инициативы по оборонному сотрудничеству и взаимодействию в сфере военно-технического сотрудничества. Поскольку с момента обретения независимости государств региона в 1991 г. основным гарантом их безопасности выступала Российская Федерация, в современных условиях возникает запрос на оценку, как инициативы и проекты Китайской Народной Республики (КНР), США, Турции и других крупных акторов влияют на общее оборонное политическое пространство России и Центральной Азии. Проведен анализ существовавшей архитектуры безопасности в регионе на момент распада СССР, риски и вызовы, стоявшие перед странами в период независимости, а также инициативы и механизмы обеспечения безопасности как самими странами региона, так и внешними игроками с использованием пространственного метода. Основным выводом исследования является утверждение, что апробирование странами региона сбалансированной и диверсифицированной внешнеполитической оборонной модели после ряда кризисов в конечном итоге подтолкнуло их к формированию закрытой модели региональной безопасности с опорой на гарантии безопасности со стороны РФ и значительной политической поддержки со стороны КНР. Западным странам не удалось закрепить за собой статус партнера в сфере безопасности для стран Центральной Азии, за исключением точечных сфер сотрудничества.

**Ключевые слова:** многовекторность, Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан, Туркменистан, Узбекистан, безопасность, внешняя политика

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### Introduction

Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the subsequent independence of the Central Asian countries, the young states of the region faced a series of challenges and risks to their internal and external security. A civil war was raging in Afghanistan, posing a serious threat to the entire region, as three countries —

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — shared long borders with the state in crisis (1,374 km, 804 km and 144 km, respectively). Moreover, groups that are ethnically close to the population of the Central Asian republics live in the north of Afghanistan, thereby creating opportunities for the export of radical Islamist ideas in the region. As a result, combatting radical

Islamist movements and terrorism has become a key challenge for these young states, which have established secular governments in societies where Islam has grown in popularity. The conflict over whether to follow a secular or Islamic path led to a civil war in Tajikistan.

Another pressing issue for the region was the border question, since the demarcation of borders within the USSR in the first half of the 20th century was carried out with a view to enhancing the manageability of the region within the context of a united state. This resulted in a variety of problems and contentious issues when the Central Asian countries gained independence. The numerous challenges confronting these young states required an integrated approach to forming their own defense system and building relations with neighboring states and major players within the context of establishing a sustainable regional security system in Central Asia.

The Russian Federation has become a logical and natural security partner for regional countries, since the regional security architecture was initially formed during the Soviet taking into account of Moscow as a center. This trend was further intensified by the presence of the limited contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan in 1979–1989. As was to be expected, the Collective Security Treaty was signed as early as 1992, providing security guarantees through cooperation within the post-Soviet space under the leadership of the Russian Federation.<sup>1</sup> An exception was Turkmenistan, which adopted an isolationist approach to foreign and defense policy and was officially recognized by the UN as neutral (Mirzekhanov & Tulpakov, 2018).

In addition to the intraregional security model, the Central Asian countries, as part

of their multi-vector foreign policy, have begun to diversify their security approaches by engaging in cooperation programs with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Prokhorenko, 2024), primarily through the Partnership for Peace program.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, this interaction within the framework of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan led to the deployment of Western military installations in the region and the involvement of regional players in full-fledged military cooperation with Western countries (Starr, 2005).

Over time, the loss of operational dynamics in Afghanistan and the blurring of its ultimate goal caused the United States and its allies to gradually lose their position in the region. First, after the Andijan events of 2005, the Western coalition was forced to leave Uzbekistan, and then by 2014, the last US military base at Manas airport in Kyrgyzstan was closed (Pritchinn, 2022a). The unexpected and hasty withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan has significantly weakened the position of the United States as a potential guarantor of the security of the countries of the region. In the context of the subsequent destabilization of the situation in Afghanistan, it was Russia that acted as a key guarantor of security for the Central Asian countries, conducting a series of exercises with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as ensuring the supply of new weapons to Tajikistan. The crisis in Kazakhstan in January 2022 also demonstrated that, except for Russia and its partners in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), none of the external players are prepared to rapidly stabilize the situation and contribute to its normalization in the region. The Ukrainian conflict is posing new challenges to the

<sup>1</sup> From the Treaty to the Organization // Collective Security Treaty Organization. (In Russian). URL: <https://odkb-csto.org/25years/> (accessed: 11.02.2025).

<sup>2</sup> Partnership for Peace Programme // NATO. June 28, 2024. URL: <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/partnership-for-peace-programme?selectedLocale=> (accessed: 11.02.2025).

approaches of Central Asian states to ensuring security (Davydov, 2022b).

The main research question posed in the article pertains to the evolution of the approaches adopted by the five Central Asian states in ensuring national and regional security, particularly in the context of the formation of their statehood and the broader transformation of the international situation, both globally and within the region. The chronological framework of the study is 1991–2024.

The hypothesis of the study is that, since gaining independence to the present day, Central Asian countries have failed to establish an effective and stable system of their own and regional security, relying heavily on external guarantees, primarily from the Russian Federation. At the same time, Russia's conservative defense strategy, which focuses on preserving the security formats in the region that existed at the time of the collapse of the USSR, coupled with its proactive approach and commitment to ensuring the security and stability of the region's countries, has enabled Moscow to maintain its status as the primary guarantor of Central Asian security.

The methodological basis of the research was developed by scientists from the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO). The Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) advocates a theory of political space, which will be applied to assess security and defense capabilities.

The concept of political space has been considered by various schools of political science and defined in different ways (Prokhorenko, 2015, p. 26). The founder of the Russian school of political space studies, N.A. Kosolapov, links it to the territory, which in turn is “the sphere of direct human habitation and vital activity” (Kosolapov, 2005a). However, the physical and geographical characteristics of a territory are not the only important factors: what makes

a territory a political space is its organization. It is acknowledged that the process of organizing a territory can take a long time, involving several important stages — from physical capture, economic development to the formation of political, legal, technological, informational and other superstructures. When forming these superstructures, it is proposed that space should be regarded as a “virtual structure created in order to build a certain concept, theory, for the sake of organizing representations on the basis of which social practice and/or part of it can be built and reproduced” (Kosolapov, 2005b, p. 6).

Based on the above concept of considering space as an organized superstructure within a specific territory, it is proposed that modern politics be regarded as an independent space. At the same time, the space of domestic politics can be distinguished as a superstructure of political relations within a single territory bounded by state borders, as well as international relations, which include a superstructure of the sum of interstate relations on a global scale. Within the framework of the general political space, separate spaces can be identified that relate to certain areas of relations, in particular security, which is the focus of this study, economic relations, legal space, etc., acting as an artificially constructed structure and intended for the better organization of domestic and/or international relations (Kosolapov, 2005b, p. 6).

The differentiation of states is manifested in the process of their development. Some countries show a more complex and dense spatial structure consisting of important spaces that have already been marked (the degree of the development of the political and legal system, technological, social, and informational), while others are less effective in developing their organization and sustainability. As a common system and practice of international relations

emerges, states become independent spaces for human activity.

A special phenomenon of international relations is globalization, in which there is a certain blurring of the clear link between the country's territory and its superstructures in the form of political and economic spaces, as globalization manifests itself in the creation of a global economic space dominated by the interests of supranational political and economic actors. For the purpose of dilution, various instruments are used in the form of separate spaces, for example, a financial space based on the dominance of the US dollar, or an international regulatory space dominated by the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Kosolapov, 2005b, p. 10).

The unification of states into unions, as exemplified by the European Union, or the disintegration of states, as evidenced by the collapse of the USSR, give rise to a new configuration of political and economic spaces, as well as special superstructures of interstate relations (Kosolapov, 2005b, p. 6). In this context, the post-Soviet countries, namely the states of Central Asia, will be examined in greater detail.

Until 1991, this region was part of the Russian Empire for almost a century and a half, then of the Soviet Union. As all other parts of the vast country, it experienced significant transformations, including changes to its political and social systems, processes of modernization and industrialization, complication and saturation of political, economic, social, technological and other superstructures. In 1991, the process of territorial division first took place;<sup>3</sup> however, this did not result in the automatic division of political and social superstructures and

spaces. For example, the countries of the region remained almost until the mid-1990s in the single currency area with the center in Moscow, as they continued to use the Russian ruble as the national currency. Similar supranational settings were maintained in the migration sphere, which was due to the preservation of the common visa-free space (with rare exceptions). Therefore, the establishment of spaces and superstructures autonomous from the Russian Federation in the countries of the region proceeded in a gradual way, and the reverse process was observed on some issues. Consequently, within the context of Eurasian integration, during the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union, a common integration economic space with freedom of movement of goods, people, services and finance was formed with the participation of three Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as members of the organization, and Uzbekistan as an observer country.

In the context of this study, the main focus in using the spatial approach is on the security superstructure and the formation of a regional defense system. Analyzing the process of forming the security spaces of individual Central Asian countries after gaining independence and the region as a whole, reveals a complex, multidimensional comprising elements such as:

- autonomous and independent spaces in the form of national armed forces, border troops, special services, etc.,
- pinpoint inclusions into the national defense space in the form of military installations by external players (military installations of the Russian Federation in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the presence of Russian border guards on the Tajik-Afghan and Turkmen-Afghan borders before 2000, the temporary presence of military installations of the Western anti-terrorist coalition

<sup>3</sup> The process of delimiting and demarcating borders between the Central Asian republics has not yet been completed, and territorial disputes between the countries of the region continue to the present day.



in Afghanistan, informal Chinese facilities in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of the Republic of Tajikistan),

– the supranational security space represented by the CSTO with its deeply structured regional security system of the participating countries, the regulatory and legal aspects of the functioning of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), elements of interaction between NATO and Central Asian countries, as well as individual security elements such as the unified air defense system Russia with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,<sup>4</sup>

– fragmented supranational defense spaces in the form of bilateral agreements between Central Asian countries or with the participation of external players, for example, bilateral agreements between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan<sup>5</sup> or Russia and Uzbekistan.<sup>6</sup>

At first glance, it may seem that the security space of the Central Asian countries is very diverse, complex and multicomponent. Within the framework of existing methodological tools, it seems to be a rather difficult task to substantiate the importance of each of the settings and rank the spaces according to their significance. To assess the significance of the security space superstructure in the region, it is proposed to introduce the concept of security space density, and to use the following four criteria as a methodological basis for assessing density in interstate relations:

1) the depth of the system of obligations, i.e. the level and depth of guarantees of mutual security established by interstate agreements,

2) the elaboration of the regulatory framework for cooperation, the breadth and detail of the scope of cooperation in the field of security,

3) the degree of overlap/discrepancy between the national interests of the Central Asian countries and those of external players involved in the formation of the security system,

4) practical steps and real actions to ensure security within the framework of existing legal and political practices, the assessment of which requires an analysis of existing security mechanisms, as well as precedents for their use.

The present study tested a method of assessing the density of the political security space in Central Asia and its main foreign policy partners: the Russian Federation (including in the CSTO format), the United States (including in the NATO format), China and Türkiye, and regional security initiatives were considered. An analysis was conducted for each area using the four outlined criteria, enabling an assessment of the security space density in the Central Asian region to be made.

### **Security Risks and Challenges for Central Asia**

Since gaining independence, the Central Asian states have faced a whole range of security challenges. On the one hand, the establishment of independence and state agency of any state is impossible without the formation of its own security system — the formation of the armed forces and the organization of border protection. As will be demonstrated in the following section,

<sup>4</sup> Partnership for Peace Programme // NATO. June 28, 2024. URL: <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/partnership-for-peace-programme?selectedLocale=> (accessed: 11.02.2025).

<sup>5</sup> Treaty on Allied Relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan // GOV.KZ. June 18, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/article/details/171373?ysclid=m60o73jl8t559646164> (accessed: 21.02.2025).

<sup>6</sup> The Treaty on Allied Relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Uzbekistan // The President of Russia. November 14, 2005. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/4709> (accessed: 02.02.2025).

the republics of the region used the defense infrastructure inherited from the common security space created during the Soviet era. This is especially true of the external security contours — the external borders with Afghanistan, China and Iran. At the same time, it was the Afghan border that posed the greatest external threat to national and regional security due to the risk of radical Islamist movements and terrorist activity being exported (Malysheva, 2014). Another escalation related to the risk of destabilization from Afghanistan occurred in 2021 as a result of the unexpected and emergency withdrawal of the American contingent from the country (Malysheva, 2022).

Interstate conflicts and tensions in relations have become an integral part of the political security space in Central Asia and a challenge for many regional players. At the same time, the reasons for such tension ranged from personal hostility between the leaders (the relations of the Presidents of the Republic of Tajikistan, E. Rahmon, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, I. Karimov, or the heads of the Republic of Kazakhstan, N.A. Nazarbayev, and the Kyrgyz Republic, A. Atambayev), contradictions over the water use of common rivers, and ending with border conflicts. The most acute of the interstate conflicts, the border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, has led to several serious escalations involving the two countries' armed forces.<sup>7</sup>

The complex of internal crises that occurred at various stages during the formation of the independence of the Central Asian

countries has also become a serious challenge to the stability of the political space. The most tragic example was the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992–1997 (Murtazin, 2018). In 2005, radical groups organized armed protests in the Uzbek city of Andijan, which were brutally suppressed by the authorities of the republic. In July 2022, serious protests also occurred in Karakalpakstan in connection with Tashkent's plans to deprive the autonomous republic of a number of constitutional privileges (Fefelov & Timoshenko, 2023). Kyrgyzstan experienced three unconstitutional changes of power in 2005, 2010 and 2020 (Pritchyn, 2021). In 2010, tragic events occurred in Osh (Kyrgyzstan) due to the ethnic conflict in the Ferghana Valley of the republic.<sup>8</sup> Kazakhstan has also experienced several serious crises, one of which led to a serious destabilization of the situation in the republic in January 2022 (Pritchyn, 2022b).

Thus, it is possible to identify three categories of challenges to the security space in Central Asia:

- external threats to regional security,
- interstate conflicts and confrontations,
- a set of internal challenges, including the risks of political destabilization, the threat of an unconstitutional change of power, interethnic conflicts, separatist and secession processes, etc.

The analysis of external players' involvement in the formation of the region's political security superstructures will be based on their ability to contribute to the mitigation of existing challenges, as determined by the typology of existing risks for Central Asian countries.

<sup>7</sup> Pritchyn S. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: It Is Impossible to Be Friends and Conflict // Russian Council on International Affairs. September 30, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/kyrgyzstan-i-tadzhikistan-druzhit-nelzya-konfliktovat/> (accessed: 21.02.2025).

<sup>8</sup> Ethnic Clashes in Southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. The Dossier // TASS. June 10, 2015. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/info/2033902?ysclid=m66a7gkpx8144529294> (accessed: 21.02.2025).

## **The Security Space of Russia and Central Asian Countries: Mechanisms and Tools for Resolving Regional Security Issues with Russia's Involvement**

Even without new agreements, Russia retained oversight of the regional security system thanks to the security architecture that had been established by the time the Central Asian republics gained independence. In the difficult situation in Afghanistan, Russia retained its responsibility for the defense of the outer southern border of the region, being responsible for the security of the borders of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan until 1999 and the borders of Tajikistan until 2005.<sup>9</sup> Thus, with the exception of the Uzbek section, for the first 10–15 years of independence, the Russian border troops were actually responsible for the external security of the borders of Central Asia, which was provided for by bilateral agreements.<sup>10</sup>

When assessing the level of obligations within the framework of military and defense cooperation between the Russian Federation and the countries of the region, then it is necessary to take into account both multilateral agreements within the framework of the CSTO and obligations under bilateral agreements (Krivopalov, 2021).

Within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (with Uzbekistan having suspended its membership in 2021), the foundational principle of the agreement is Article 4: “If one of the participating

States is subjected to aggression (an armed attack threatening security, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty), then This will be considered by the participating States as aggression (an armed attack threatening security, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty) against all States.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, by now the CSTO has evolved into a full-fledged defense organization with permanent institutions and a military reserve in case of external and internal threats. As part of its obligations under the Collective Security Treaty, the Russian Federation has several military installations in the region, including the 201st military base in Tajikistan and an airbase in the Kyrgyz city of Kant.<sup>12</sup>

The level of mutual obligations between the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan is also that of allies, despite Uzbekistan not being a member of the CSTO. As outlined in the Article 4 of the Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Uzbekistan, in the event of threats to the security of one of the parties, “a consultation mechanism is launched to coordinate positions and coordinate practical measures to resolve such a situation.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition, it is important to acknowledge the establishment of a unified air defense system of Russia with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which is part of the process of forming a unified sky security space over most of the region. It is also important to mention that in terms of equipping their armed forces, the

<sup>9</sup> How Russia Guarded the Borders of Neighboring Countries: A History of the Issue // *Kommersant*. October 21, 2008. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1044942?ysclid=m6g7w4hh58983522872> (accessed: 21.02.2025).

<sup>10</sup> Collective Security Treaty of May 15, 1992 // Collective Security Treaty Organization. URL: <https://www.jscsto.org/upload/iblock/273/2734e030c2747ee8b4f711b4e048875b.pdf> (accessed: 12.02.2025).

<sup>11</sup> From the Treaty to the Organization // Collective Security Treaty Organization. (In Russian). URL: <https://odkb-csto.org/25years/> (accessed: 11.02.2025).

<sup>12</sup> Russian Military Infrastructure in Central Asia // *Kommersant*. June 17, 2017. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3328655?ysclid=m6g8kf59xm185670551> (accessed: 21.02.2025).

<sup>13</sup> Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Uzbekistan // President of Russia. June 16, 2004. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/1945> (accessed: 21.02.2025).



Central Asian states mainly rely on Russian weapons supplied on preferential terms.

Thus, the CSTO member states, along with Uzbekistan, have developed allied relations with Russia, including mutual protection and defense obligations in the event of security threats. This development signifies the manifestation of the highest level of security space density. Accordingly, the regulatory framework setting out security mechanisms is as detailed as possible, providing for various situations to which a joint response is possible.

Assessing the convergence or divergence of approaches of the Russian Federation and the Central Asian states to security, it can be stated that the interests of the two countries coincide as much as possible in the issue of global regional security. It is important for Russia that the region is stable and reliably protected from external threats; the Central Asian countries themselves want the same thing. The discrepancy can be observed in ensuring the sovereignty of the countries of the region in relations with the Russian Federation. Dependence on Moscow in all aspects, including defense, is considered a challenge in the region, which is why the governments of the Central Asian states pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, as well as attempts to diversify the defense space by forming security superstructures with other major players (Pritchин, 2023).

In terms of practical security measures, the Russian Federation has played a key role in ensuring the security of various countries in numerous crisis situations, starting with

preventing the Islamist uprising in Afghanistan,<sup>14</sup> responding to the Western anti-terrorist coalition's withdrawal from the country in 2021,<sup>15</sup> actively contributing to ending the civil war in Tajikistan (Karimova, 2009) and ending with supporting the constitutional order in Kazakhstan during the mass protests in January 2022 (Pritchин, 2022b).

In addition, Russia supplies weapons and military equipment to Central Asian countries on preferential terms and sometimes even on gratuitous basis, thus maintaining its leadership as their key partner in the field of military-technical cooperation (MTC).<sup>16</sup>

Thus, after analyzing the four criteria for the density of the defense policy space of the Russian Federation and Central Asian countries, it can be concluded that there is a high degree of overlap and interdependence for each of them:

- the commitments within the framework of the CSTO and on a bilateral basis reflect the high level of the allied relations, Russia is actually the guarantor of the region's security,
- the regulatory and legal framework for security cooperation has been maximally elaborated, addressing issues ranging from joint responses to external challenges to military-technical cooperation and assistance in maintaining internal political stability in the region's states,
- Russia and the countries of Central Asia are characterized by a high degree of convergence in their national interests, which consists in the desire to ensure the external security of the region and promote internal political stability and security. The only difference lies in the desire of the countries of the region, through interaction with

<sup>14</sup> Zakvasin A. Moscow Outpost: How Russian Troops Saved Tajikistan from Islamists // RT. March 8, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <https://russian.rt.com/science/article/489814-tadzhikistan-rossiyskie-pogranichniki?ysclid=m6gacuyy86358881893> (accessed: 21.02.2025).

<sup>15</sup> Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan Conducted Large-Scale Military Exercises // Ren-TV. August 10, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://ren.tv/news/v-rossii/867282-rossiia-tadzhikistan-i-uzbekistan-proveli-masshtabnye-voennye-ucheniia> (accessed: 20.02.2025).

<sup>16</sup> Russia Donated Weapons Worth P320 Million to Tajikistan // RBC. October 29, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5db7dc3d9a7947b8ade2c93a?ysclid=mhq12tnjak677810970> (accessed: 20.02.2025).

external players (to varying degrees), to ensure a certain level of autonomy and sovereignty in their relations with the Russian Federation,

– Russia's practical steps and real actions to ensure regional security are exhaustive, and for all three types of challenges (internal, external and interstate), none of the crises in the region has been left without Moscow's direct or indirect involvement.

In other words, the density of the defense space of Russia and the Central Asian countries can be assessed as very high, since almost all the required conditions of the common defense space have been fulfilled.

### **Approaches of China, the USA and Türkiye to Participation in Ensuring Regional Security in Central Asia**

In terms of military and military-technical cooperation, China, Türkiye, and the United States (along with their NATO allies) can be identified as major external players in the Central Asia. It should be noted that none of these three actors have any specific mutual or unilateral security obligations with any of the region's five countries.

When assessing the regulatory framework as an element of the political defense space, it is important to note the existing bilateral agreements between the countries of the region and the United States, China and Türkiye (Svistunova, 2024). Security cooperation is present either within the framework of separate agreements or as part of common strategic declarations. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that relations with none of the three major external players are of an allied nature on security issues. Only certain elements of interaction are spelled out, such as the development of cross-border cooperation (with China) (Ionova, 2013), the development

of military-technical cooperation (with China (Yufei, 2023) and Türkiye (Svistunova, 2023)). Consequently, the legal and political space is fragmented and lacks substantial serious security tools.

As for the coincidence/discrepancy of national interests, due to the geographical proximity of the Central Asian countries and China, there are similar approaches and views on regional security and stability, with the possible exception of such elements as, for example, the situation of Muslim ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of the PRC.

Due to their remoteness from the region, Türkiye (Vernigora, 2023) and the United States theoretically have no overlapping interests with Central Asian states in the field of security. However, cooperation with non-regional players is important for the Central Asian republics as part of creating a certain counterweight to powerful neighbors, primarily Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.

For Washington, close cooperation with Central Asian countries in the defense sector is highly desirable, as it creates opportunities for pressure on geopolitical competitors — Moscow and Beijing. While the interests of the United States and the regional states appear to coincide at first glance, the implementation of this American strategy has consistently had a negative impact on the security of the Central Asian republics (Voitolovsky, 2021). Thus, the deployment of military facilities in Central Asia as part of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan did not contribute to improving the security of the region, moreover, the unexpected withdrawal of American forces from the region created a number of security challenges (Davydov, 2022a).

In terms of practical steps or real actions taken by the aforementioned countries to ensure

regional security, the following examples can be highlighted.

Perhaps the most practical approach is that of China, which, on the one hand. Although it has no direct defense obligations to the countries in the region, it simultaneously provides informal assistance to Tajikistan in ensuring the security of its border with Afghanistan in the most inaccessible region of the republic — the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. Thus, according to the Western press, China has built a secret military base in the Murghab region to control the Afghan border area.<sup>17</sup> China has also become the main supplier of equipment for ‘safe city’ systems for the largest megacities and capitals of Central Asia (Titarenko, 2021). In addition, Beijing pointwise supplies various types of military equipment to the armed forces of the republics, usually on a preferential and grant basis, creating prerequisites for future closer cooperation. At the same time, the countries do not conduct joint military exercises or training on a bilateral basis.<sup>18</sup>

Türkiye has a similar, but even more limited strategy. In any crisis situation, Ankara declares its readiness to act as a security guarantor and moderator in the event of a conflict (as it did during the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict),<sup>19</sup> but then does not take any real practical steps. At the same time, Türkiye is also promoting developments in its military-industrial complex (MIC), primarily unmanned technologies,

by supplying trial batches to several countries. Türkiye has made the most progress with Kazakhstan, as the parties have reached an agreement on the production of various types of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) under a Turkish license.<sup>20</sup>

It can thus be concluded that, following comprehensive analysis of all elements of the defense space, the countries of the region have formed the densest space with China. However, its density is inferior to that of the Russian-Central Asian security space, although there is a positive trend. The United States and Türkiye have an even more limited defense policy space with countries in the region with limited prospects for improving its density.

## Conclusion

Testing the spatial approach method and analyzing the density of the political defense space of Central Asian countries and major external players makes it possible to visually assess the depth, quality and reliability of existing mutual security systems. A thorough examination of the elements of the defense policy space reveals the profound influence and involvement of the Russian Federation in all aspects of security. In fact, with rare exceptions, Russia and the countries of Central Asia have formed a single security space with a very high density. At the same time, an examination of the

<sup>17</sup> British Media Report on China's Secret Military Base in Tajikistan // Eurasia Daily. July 11, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2024/07/11/britanskie-smi-soobshchayut-o-sekretnoy-voennoy-baze-kitaya-v-tadzhikistane> (accessed: 26.02.2025).

<sup>18</sup> Khranchikhin A.A. Beijing Is Taking Over the Countries of Central Asia // Independent Military Review. January 26, 2023. (In Russian). URL: [https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2023-01-26/5\\_1222\\_asia.html?ysclid=mhqletlrka518609751](https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2023-01-26/5_1222_asia.html?ysclid=mhqletlrka518609751) (accessed: 26.07.2025).

<sup>19</sup> Türkiye Is Ready to Support The Settlement between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan // Report.Az. May 1, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://report.az/ru/v-regione/turciya-gotova-podderzhat-uregulirovanie-mezhdu-tadzhikistanom-i-kyrgyzstanom> (accessed: 02.07.2025).

<sup>20</sup> The Production of Turkish ANKA UAVs Will Be Organized in Kazakhstan Ministry of Industry and Construction of the Republic of Kazakhstan // GOV.KZ. (In Russian). May 11, 2022. URL: <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mps/press/news/details/369527?lang=ru> (accessed: 02.02.2025).

density of the common space of Russia and the countries of Central Asia reveals a significant decrease between 2001 and 2014, coinciding with the period of military presence by the United States and its allies in the region. However, this space underwent a complete restoration in the subsequent period.

As China's economy strengthens, a cautious and gradual formation of a limited but systemic defense space is currently emerging between

China and other countries in the region. Türkiye is trying to shape certain elements of the defense space, primarily through military-technical cooperation. The United States has not yet been able to fully restore the elements of the defense space that existed during its presence in Afghanistan until 2021; therefore, its contribution to ensuring the regional security of the Central Asian republics is limited to military-political contacts.

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