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# CENTRAL ASIA AS A REGION? ANALYSIS OF THE REGIONAL ELITES DISCOURSE

## Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the approach of Central Asian elites to the region. The analysis was based on the statements and the official documents defining foreign policy strategies. Discourse analysis was the main research tool, semantic fields analysis was used for the statements' categorization.

I argue that the Central Asian presidents use the term Central Asia and identify with the region. Nonetheless, their narratives about the region differ significantly and do not form one consistent representation. There is no agreement at the level of defining the fundamental challenges that the region is facing, as well as choosing forms of cooperation within the region.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, regionalization, region, discourse analysis.

**JEL Codes:** F59

## Introduction

It seems, that Central Asia is a region commonly defined and determined from the outside (Kavalski 2010b, pp. 5–6). In other words, the dominating narrative about the region is created not by the regional politicians, but rather by the external actors. In this narrative, the region-builders are the states (e.g. Russia,

China, United States) or organizations (e.g. European Union, NATO) located outside the region, they are the: “political actors who, as part of some political project, see it in their interest to imagine and construct a region” (Söderbaum 2003, p. 19). Furthermore, they “disseminate this imagination to a maximum number of other people” (Neumann 2003, p. 161).

The dominance of this narrative might be possible due to the fact that Central Asia is often analyzed from a realistic perspective, its economic and geopolitical significance. As a consequence, the region is referred to from the perspective of the rivalry of the great powers (Fumagalli 2010, p. 180). This approach to research on Central Asia was dictated by recognized geostrategic theories, proving the great importance of the region. One could mention the Halford Mackinder concept of Heartland or the idea of Great Chessboard by Zbigniew Brzezinski. However, perhaps the greatest renaissance was experienced by the concept of the “Great Game” (Laruelle, Peyrouse 2015, p. 3). It referred to the nineteenth-century rivalry between Russia and Great Britain and it was later made known in the literature as the diplomatic battle of two intelligence agencies (Hopkirk 2011; Kipling 1991). In the nineties, after Central Asian countries gained independence, the term was recalled, and the region began to be described through the prism of the “New Great Game”. According to this concept, there is still an ongoing rivalry in the region, the only difference is the change of actors involved in the game. As a consequence, in this approach, the Central Asian states are considered as objects, as not really sovereign actors. It seems that it is a simplification, as Filippo Costa Buranelli aptly points out: “the metaphor of the new Great Game, rather than faithfully representing, clarifying and resembling the complex regional dynamics of Central Asia, obscures them like the worst of clichés” (2017, pp. 7–14). Nowadays, in Central Asia, there are sovereign states, that are no longer “mere pawns” (2011, p. 9), their choice of partners for cooperation is not as limited as in the case of the nineteenth-century rivalry (for instance: its wider than the choice of the historical kingdoms of Khiva or Bukhara). As a consequence, it is, highly probable that in Central Asia we are dealing not with the one great game, but with: “many ‘little games’, that are modular, evolving, negotiable, complementary, and not exclusive of one another” (Laruelle, Peyrouse 2015, p. 7).

Another factor is that the region did not create a common platform, it lacks an effective structure to manifest narrative and agenda. Most of the integration structures functioning in this area have a supra-regional character. Organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization were initiated by an

external actor, Russia or China. It can be argued that they are not strengthening relations but, on the contrary, they have a negative impact on the process of regionalization. They are the structures which aim is not to integrate Central Asia, but rather to protect the interests of external states. As R. Allison aptly points out, they have the “protective integration” character, and the current situation in Central Asia can be described as “virtual regionalism” (Allison 2008). The organizations, such as: the Aral Sea Rescue Fund and the Interstate Commission for Water Resources Management which consist solely and entirely of five regional states operate rather inefficiently (Rahaman 2012) and focus on a limited area of cooperation. Possibly the most noticeable and of great promise was the Central Asian Union project, the idea initiated by the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev (Rakhmatulina 2005, pp. 130–141). Unfortunately, this structure (which changed the name several times) have not brought any substantial results.

It should be noted that even the discourse analysis concerning Central Asia focuses on what has been said about the region by external actors, not internal. In the literature, one can find works analyzing statements made by the United States, Russian, Chinese, European Union or Indian politicians defining and determining Central Asia (Azizov 2011; Kavalski 2010a; Kushkumbaev 2016).

In the further part of the article, the author decided to exclude external actors and focus solely on the Central Asian elites. The aim of the paper is to verify whether it is in the interest of the regional elites “to imagine” the region. In other words, aside from the outside-in narratives (created by the external actors), are there also inside-out narratives about Central Asia? Do the presidents of these countries identify with the region? Is the region treated as a whole, as a separate organism or is it only a sub-region, the element of the wider community? How the boundaries of the region look in this narratives, what are the tasks and challenges that the region is facing? Finally, do these narratives create, one consistent portrayal of the region?

## Materials and methods

The article focuses on the analysis of relations and contexts that appear together with the phrase “Central Asia” in the presidents’ statements. The analysis covered the statements of Central Asian leaders (mainly available at the official government websites) from January 2016 (in the case of Uzbekistan from

September 2016) to December 2017. References to a “region” or to “Central Asia” were found in 61 statements, only some of them will be cited below.

In addition, the most important strategic documents defining foreign policy priorities were also analyzed. In the case of three countries, these were the Concepts of Foreign Policy (Kazakhstan for 2014–2020, Turkmenistan 2017–2023, and Tajikistan from 2015). Uzbekistan has not issued a new concept since Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected on 4 December 2016 (*Uzbekistan* 2016). However, the president of Uzbekistan provided a lot of valuable information in one of the analyzed statements. During the conference in Samarkand, titled: “Central Asia: One Past and a Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity” S. Mirziyoyev stated his plans and ideas about the region in the detailed form (Mirziyoyev 2017b). The case of Kyrgyzstan is problematic. The last Concept of Kyrgyz Foreign Policy was issued in 2012, therefore for the needs of the analysis *The National Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2013–2017* (Natsional’nyy sovet po ustoychivomu razvitiyu Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki 2013) has been examined. In the Strategy, authorities outline, among other things, the main foreign policy objectives.

Discourse analysis was the main research tool. The definition presented by Charlotte Epstein was applied for the purpose of this article: “a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, categorizations about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way and therefore delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it” (Epstein 2008, p. 2). Within this approach, it is hard to find one commonly used framework, as pointed out by A. Holzscheiter: “in fact, any overview of the field must come to the conclusion that there are probably as many methodological frameworks as there are case studies” (Holzscheiter 2014, p. 18).

In the process of the statements’ categorization, the semantic field method has been used. It is a method used quite rarely in international relations studies. For the purpose of this analysis, it had to be moderately modified. The analysis of semantic fields was presented by Regine Robin. As the author points out, this method allows for: “searching the meaning of a text, sentence, word” and “requires (...) an apparent distribution of the statement string and the order of expression in order to put it back in accordance with significant readability” (1980, pp. 252–256). The semantic field analysis is about finding keywords and then categorizing them in terms of the function they perform. “Central Asia” was the keyword in this paper. In the analyzed texts the author was looking for: the associations (with what entity the subject is associated); the equivalents (synonyms that can replace the subject); as well as the actions directed at the subject (what action, according to the statement, must be taken

in Central Asia). A separate category of a “leader” has also been added. During the research, the author found out that elites in every country were describing themselves as leaders in certain specific spheres. The categories will be listed for each of the discussed countries.

## Results

**Table 1.** Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev

Leader	Equivalents	Associations	Activities aimed at the subject
Economy; the initiator of integration; heart of Eurasia	our region, the five (piatorka)	Eurasia; EAEU; Silk Road; EXPO; transport; economy; security; priority; new stage of development; nuclear-weapon-free zone; common history	the development of cooperation; regionalization; integration; creation of a security zone; promotion; creation of good neighbourly relations

Source: own elaboration.

President N. Nazarbayev frequently refers to the shared historical and cultural background of Central Asia region. For instance, during a meeting with the heads of diplomatic missions accredited in Kazakhstan, president N. Nazarbayev emphasized the intention to intensify cooperation in the region, based on the historical ties: „We will pay close attention to the historical, cultural, linguistic common roots” (Nazarbayev 2017c).

He identifies himself with the region and uses the term: „our region”. Interestingly, N. Nazarbayev also uses the casual, familiar term „pyatorka” (the five). Nonetheless, the concept of Eurasia seems to be more significant than the concept of Central Asia in the official discourse<sup>24</sup>. In one of the ana-

<sup>24</sup> The statement during the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of Kazakhstan independence may be illustration of this, N. Nazarbayev refers to Eurasia in the first place, and then (additionally) to Central Asia: „Kazakhstan is located at the centre of Eurasia and it is also a part of Central Asia” (Nazarbayev 2016).

lyzed statements he used the term “Central Eurasia”, but he defined it as a much wider area than it is usually defined in the literature (Nazarbayev 2016).

N. Nazarbayev emphasizes that Central Asia is a region that is not internally integrated. Perhaps, however, this state of affairs will soon improve, because, as noted in another speech, the five “is experiencing a new stage of development” (Nazarbayev 2016). He spoke similarly during a visit to the Friendship House in Taraz: “I came to you after my visits to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. As a result of our meetings and arrangements, all barriers and obstacles that were previously present are removed. Now there are all conditions for effective cooperation with our neighbours” (*Poseshchenie Doma Druzhby v Istoriko-Kul'turnom Tsentre «Drevniĭ Taraz»* 2017). In his opinion, Kazakhstan can contribute to the development of mutual ties, be an initiator (or even protector) of the regional integration. The provisions in the Kazakh Strategy on Foreign Policy are maintained in a similar manner. Due to the position of the economic leader, Kazakhstan is “acknowledging its responsibility and the role in the region, Kazakhstan will exert every effort to provide regional stability and security (...) Kazakhstan will strive to develop intra-regional integration in Central Asia” (*Kontseptsiia Vneshneiĭ Politiki RK* 2014).

In the described Strategy, the priority is given to “the development of cooperation in Central Asia” (2014). One can also read in the document that “the prospective goal is to transform the region into an integrated entity” (2014). In the chapter devoted to specific countries, relations with Russia and then with China are discussed first, however, cooperation with Central Asian republics is discussed in the third place.

N. Nazarbayev refers to integration, mainly economic, nevertheless, on this occasion he makes references to much larger regions or communities. It is worth noting that it was Kazakhstan and personally N. Nazarbayev who initiated the creation of the Eurasian block in 1994 (Sultanov 2005, pp. 4–5). First Kazakhstan president invites other states to the integration: “Integration is trust, friendship, stability in the region. Therefore, I invite all Eurasian countries to close integration and partnership” (Nazarbayev 2016). Kazakhstan’s president speaks about the need to cooperate with China as well, within the New Silk Road project. In his opinion, both great projects (BRI and EEU) do not contradict themselves, on the contrary, they even create wider opportunities, because, as he said on July 3, 2017: “EEU project and the economic belt of the Silk Road complement each other. This allows for the new positioning of entire regions, including Central Asia” (Nazarbayev 2017b).

The President of Kazakhstan devotes much attention to the promotion of the region and EXPO 2017 exhibition in Astana was a great opportunity to do so. On this occasion, he once again emphasized the role of Kazakhstan as a leader and stressed that it is the first of the Commonwealth of Independent States country that organized EXPO exhibition (Nazarbayev 2017a).

Kazakhstan wishes to be an economic leader, as well as a commercial leader. N. Nazarbayev sees Kazakhstan as a kind of transport and investment hub in the region. He points out that, in Kazakhstan exist “developed infrastructure to enter the markets of the EEU, Central Asia and China” (Nazarbayev 2017d).

**Table 2.** Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev

Leader	Equivalents	Associations	Activities aimed at the subject
the heart of the region; initiator of the nuclear-weapon-free zone (in the context of Islam Karimov’s actions)	region; our region; the heart of Eurasia; bridge	Afghanistan; priority; security; economy; transport; new atmosphere; potential; common history; culture; tradition; religion	integration; development of the cooperation; development of the transport infrastructure; border demarcation and delimitation; creation of the security zone; creation of good-neighbourly relations; promotion

Source: as in Table 1.

S. Mirziyoyev has already emphasized many times that Central Asia is the priority of his presidency. For instance, he emphatically pointed this out during his speech at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly: “today, Uzbekistan considers the region of Central Asia to be as the main priority of its foreign policy. And this is a conscious choice” (Mirziyoyev 2017a). He spoke similarly during many other meetings, even – according to Uzbek sources – during the private meeting with the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres (Mirziyoyev 2017b).

Additionally, S. Mirziyoyev talks about a new stage of development in Central Asia. During the aforementioned UN speech, he emphasized the increase in the level of trust and the new positive atmosphere in the region: “thanks to

joint efforts in recent months, the level of political confidence has significantly increased in the region. Fundamentally important decisions on many issues were found. (...) In a word, the absolutely new political atmosphere was created in the region in a short period of time” (Mirziyoyev 2017a). However, during the speech at the conference in Samarkand he pointed out that this is just the beginning: ”first results were achieved – it is not a reason to be self-satisfied. We are still at the beginning of our journey” (Mirziyoyev 2017b).

When compared to his predecessor, S. Mirziyoyev is definitely more prone to meet, discuss and even sign agreements with Uzbekistan neighbours. This new manner of conducting foreign policy is visible in the analyzed speeches as well. The President of Uzbekistan talks about the need to integrate, both in the sphere of security, as well as in the economy. He rarely refers to wider supra-regional communities, which in part may be the result of the isolationist policy of his predecessor. It is worth reminding that Uzbekistan left CSTO in 2012 and never declared its willingness to join the Eurasian Economic Union. The only supra-regional organization on post-soviet space of which the member Uzbekistan remains is SCO. In the analyzed speeches, any declaration to return to the CSTO or to join the EEU hasn't been found.

The statements do not reveal any willingness to play the role of the leader in the region. Similarly to Nursultan Nazarbayev, who describes Kazakhstan as the “center of Eurasia» (Nazarbayev 2016), S. Mirziyoyev uses the term «heart of Central Asia» for outlining his country's position (Mirziyoyev, 2017a), in all probability, it is more about the geographical location itself, and not about the potential of his country.

When describing the region, S. Mirziyoyev talks about «our region». When speaking about its geographical location, he defines it as «the heart of Eurasia (...) the bridge connecting Europe and the Middle East, South and East Asia» (Mirziyoyev 2017b). He also mentions the long-lasting bonds of brotherhood and good neighbourliness. Additionally, the Central Asian states are united not only by a common history but also by religion, culture and tradition (Mirziyoyev 2017b).

During the conference in Samarkand, S. Mirziyoyev defined the most important tasks that the region is facing. The priority is to develop economic ties. In this context, S. Mirziyoyev proposed to create the Regional Economic Forum, which would be a place for the debate on specific business projects. In addition, the president of Uzbekistan suggested creating the Association of the Heads of the Regions – where heads of districts and provinces could meet (Mirziyoyev 2017b).



S. Mirziyoyev frequently talks about the development of the transport infrastructure. This issue, according to S. Mirziyoyev, is the second priority for the region. The «Uzbekistan – Kyrgyzstan – China» railway project discussed at the meeting in Bishkek is a concrete example of this. He noted that this joint venture can contribute to enhance the value of internal trade in goods, as well as to increase the attractiveness of the region (*Novye Perspektivy Sotrudnichestva* 2017).

S. Mirziyoyev talks about creating a security zone in the region. This thread appears at almost every official meeting: “Uzbekistan is interested in the region being a zone of security, sustainable development and good neighbourliness” (Mirziyoyev 2017a). During the speech at the conference, S. Mirziyoyev described “intensification of cooperation” as one of the most important tasks (Mirziyoyev 2017b). This intensification may “provide security and stability in Central Asia” (Mirziyoyev 2017b). According to the president of Uzbekistan the whole region has to face such threats as illegal drug trafficking, terrorism, religious extremism, and cross-border crimes. In the context of security, S. Mirziyoyev reminds that his country (during the rule of I. Karimov) was the initiator of creating the nuclear-free zone (Mirziyoyev 2016). President of Uzbekistan also refers to the problem of delimitation and demarcation of borders, he claims that “prompt and definitive realization” of this issue is a priority task (Mirziyoyev 2017b).

In the context of regional (or even global) security, the president talks about the situation in Afghanistan: “Stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan is an important condition to ensure not only regional but global security, as well” (Mirziyoyev 2017a). Developing cooperation in Central Asia is “inextricably linked with achieving the peace in Afghanistan” (Mirziyoyev 2017b). Additionally, S. Mirziyoyev claims, that Afghanistan should be included in regional integration processes (Mirziyoyev 2017b).

Central Asia, in the comments of S. Mirziyoyev, is related to the issue of water resources management. It is worth noting that disputes over the construction of hydroelectric plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have subsided. The objections of I. Karimov, to the projects of the Rogun or Kambar – Ata barrages, were very firm. They manifested itself in withholding gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as in suspension of the rail traffic (parts to build the Rogun Dam, Tajikistan import from Iran), and finally, they took on very sharp forms, such as a statement that could be treated as a threat of war (for further details see Menga 2015). S. Mirziyoyev does not repeat the words of his predecessor. The project to build the Rogun dam is probably still

not convenient for Uzbekistan elites, but the new president does not escalate the tension and so far does not speak out directly on the subject. Furthermore, another controversial project, namely the Kambar – Ata hydroelectric plant in Kyrgyzstan, obtained the consent of the Uzbek authorities. During a meeting with A. Atambayev, President S. Mirziyoyev said: “We will build the [Kambarata-1 station] together. Because it is indispensable to us, we need it” (*Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan Open New Chapter in Relations 2017*).

S. Mirziyoyev talks a lot about the need to promote and build the region’s position. During one of the meetings with N. Nazarbayev, he emphasized the fact that Kazakhstan became a non-permanent member of the Security Council and emphasize that it is a possibility to defend the interests of the region on the international arena (Samadov 2017).

Finally, what is worth emphasizing, the president of Uzbekistan speaks about the need to organize “regular consultative meetings of the Central Asian presidents” (Mirziyoyev 2017b). Nonetheless, he points out that it should not be a permanent organization with an institutional structure. Such meetings would be directed only to synchronization of crucial tasks that the region is facing (Mirziyoyev 2017b). It should be noted that this idea has already been implemented. Till January 2020, two such consultative were held, first in Astana in March 2018, second in Tashkent in November 2019 (Hashimova 2019).

**Table 3.** Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Equivalentents</b>	<b>Associations</b>	<b>Activities aimed at the subject</b>
The heart of the Silk Road; peace; diplomacy; infrastructure projects	our region; region	the Caspian Basin; the Silk Road; United Nations (mainly about UNRCCA); Afghanistan; neutrality; security; transport; promotion; common history	dissemination of diplomatic solutions; development of transport infrastructure; creating conditions for economic and social development; creation of good neighbourly relations

Source: as in Table 1.

While in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan one can see a desire for integration, at least in the declarative sphere, Turkmenistan's approach to this issue is completely different. The first president of the country, Saparmurat Niyazov (who died in 2006) created an isolated regime with the personality cult (for further details see Ochs, Cummings 2003). His successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov continues to pursue a policy of isolationism, and even autarky, to some extent. This approach to politics is visible in his statements. Not once has he explicitly mentioned intra-regional integration, he appealed only to the trust and good neighbourliness.

Instead of integration, the president of Turkmenistan speaks about the need to create conditions for economic and social development. For instance, during a Cabinet of Ministers meeting in February 2017, he said: "in this regard, the content of the regional strategy of Turkmenistan is as follows: development and solution of the most important issues of broad international cooperation, full assistance in creating favourable geopolitical and economic conditions in Central Asia" (Berdykmmuhamedov 2017c). He frequently refers to large economic and infrastructure projects. When speaking at the Organization for Economic Cooperation Summit he marked: "the National Program for the Development of the Turkmenistan transport system is associated with the expansion of regional and international cooperation in this sector. Our country initiates large-scale infrastructure projects and implements them jointly with foreign partners" (Berdykmmuhamedov 2017d). These major projects are to be implemented with the support of richer neighbours, Central Asia in the statements of Berdymmuchamedov is often combined with China, Turkey or Russia.

It should be reminded that Turkmenistan is a neutral country, and its neutrality was confirmed in 1995 by the General Assembly of the United Nations (*Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan* 1995). This feature of the system is still emphasized in the president's statements as well as in almost every official document. Obviously, such a position has to affect the attitude to the question of possible integration. Turkmenistan sees its role in the region, as well as in the world, mainly as a singer of peace, as a promoter of diplomatic solutions: "the basic principles emanating from the neutrality status of our state – strengthening universal peace and security, expansion of relations based on good-neighbourliness, friendship and brotherhood, ensuring stable development, in the future will remain priority directions of the foreign policy of independent Turkmenistan" (Berdykmmuhamedov 2017b). For example, in January 2017 during a speech at the Turkmenistan's

Council of Elders, G. Berdymukhammedov emphasized the role of his country: “Through our productive activities, we continue to make a great contribution to strengthening peace and stability in the region, creating an environment of good-neighbourliness and cooperation” (Berdymukhammedov 2017a). References to Central Asia in the statements of G. Berdymukhammedov are connected to the cooperation with the United Nations Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia.

Overall, in the president’s statements, the term Central Asia is used less often than in the discourse of other presidents. In some of the speeches it’s difficult to determine whether he defines Central Asia as “the five” (referring to N. Nazarbayev term) or maybe he also includes other states. In the statements, Central Asia is associated with the countries of the Caspian Basin (Berdymukhammedov 2017a). One can only guess that apart from Kazakhstan, it is mainly about Azerbaijan and attracting this country to regional cooperation.

In the statements of the Turkmenistan president, Afghanistan appears as well. Similar to other leaders, he underlines the importance of the situation in Afghanistan for security in the entire region: “In this regard, I want to emphasize that peace, security and harmony in Afghanistan have been and still remain the key conditions for the progress in the region”. In the further part of the statement, he delivers a solution to Afghanistan’s problems: “the most effective way in this context is Afghanistan’s participation in the implementation of major regional and international infrastructure projects” (Berdymukhammedov 2017a).

Finally, because of potential economic benefits, Turkmenistan defines its place in the international arena through the prism of the Silk Road. The concept of Turkmenistan as the heart of the Silk Road is confirmed in the statements, as well as in the title of the book, recently published by the president. Additionally, it was also a motto in the country in 2018 (*Turkmenistan – serdtse Velikogo Shēlkovogo puti* 2018). The Silk Road is mentioned also in the historical context. In the strategy, one can find references to the common regional historical and cultural heritage (Strategy 2017).

It should be noted that in one of the analyzed statements – during a meeting with the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev – Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov mentioned the promotion of the region. Organized in 2017, the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games were, in his opinion, a unique opportunity to advertise the region: “this is our common celebrity – the celebrity of all Central Asian countries. This is an indicator of our solidarity and

cohesion. Representatives of 64 countries take part in the Games” (*Peregovory s Prezidentom Turkmenistana Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedovym* 2017).

**Table 4.** Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev

Leader	Equivalents	Associations	Activities aimed at the subject
Freedom; art; tourism	our region; region	Eurasia; EAEU; CAREC; security; economy; tolerance; transport; common history [Turkic nations]	integration; development of cooperation; development of transport infrastructure; creation of good neighbourly relations

Source: as in Table 1.

Frequently, in the A. Atambayev’s statements, interests of the region are connected with wider supra-regional communities or international organizations. He talks about the need to develop good neighbourly relations. The 4th president of Kyrgyzstan speaks about the integration of the region, but he usually links it with the integration in already existing structures, for instance within the Eurasian Economic Union: “being a part of EAEC, we must actively develop our trade and economic relations with both great China and other neighbours in the region” (Atambayev 2017a). He also mentions the integration within the CAREC program. This structure consists of five Central Asian countries, as well as China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mongolia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

In the cultural context, A. Atambayev appeals to panturkism, or a cultural community with Turkish peoples: “The Kyrgyz belong to the Turkic branch (...) as the President of the country and as a man who was himself carried away by this idea [Panturkism], and who is very fond of Turkey and the fraternal Turkish people” (Atambayev 2017b). At the end of this speech, A. Atambayev refers to the transition to the Latin alphabet by neighbouring states (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and soon Kazakhstan). He claimed that the transition to the Latin alphabet from the Arabic one at the beginning of the 20th century was unnecessary. Thus, the great heritage of Arab culture was cut off, in which the nations of Central Asia were inextricably linked, and even

were ones of its creators. A. Atambayev is critical of today's reforms, claiming that the Cyrillic was a kind of cultural link between the nations of Central Asia and other Turkic nation (Atambayev 2017b).

Kyrgyzstan strongly emphasizes the issues of hydropower, the country's desire to build more dams and hydroelectric power plants, attention is being paid especially to the Kambar – Ata project. In official documents, a lot is being said about the development of transport infrastructure, which is often connected with the CAREC program: "CAREC countries developed an action plan to remove obstacles to trade and transport. The Kyrgyz Republic is an active participant in this program and intends to initiate regulatory reforms while maintaining and improving the sections of the regional road infrastructure" (Natsional'nyy sovet po ustoychivomu razvitiyu Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki 2013).

In A. Atambayev's statements, one can find references to the concept of "Kyrgyzstan as Switzerland of Central Asia" or to the idea of "Democracy Island", promoted by the first Kyrgyzstan president Askar Akayev (Marat 2008, p. 44). A. Atambayev treats his country as a regional leader in the sphere of freedom and civil liberties. It is worth recalling one of his statements: "Kyrgyzstan should become the most comfortable country for people to live in the region. A country of free and wealthy people who can choose their own path in life. A country of justice and responsible authority" (Atambayev 2017a).

Additionally, A. Atambayev defines Kyrgyzstan, as well as the entire region as tolerant, in which people of different religions have lived for centuries: "so, in our region, from the beginning, people of different nationalities have lived, their worldview combined traditional beliefs with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam" (Atambayev 2017c).

Kyrgyzstan also aspires to be the financial, cultural and tourist centre of the region. One of the strategy' goals is to: "To create conditions for the creation of the international banking and financial centre in Kyrgyzstan as well as the regional centre of contemporary art in Central Asia" (Natsional'nyy sovet po ustoychivomu razvitiyu Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki 2013). Elsewhere in the Strategy, it is stated that one of the Kyrgyzstan goals is to: "become one of

the regional tourism centres in Central Asia” (Natsional’nyy sovet po ustoychivomu razvitiyu Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki 2013).

**Table 5.** Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmon

Leader	Equivalents	Associations	Activities aimed at the subject
Hydro energetics	region; our region	Silk Road; Afghanistan; cooperation of regions; Aral Sea Fund; security; economy; hydroelectricity; common history	development of infrastructure; transport network; creation of a security zone; anti-terroristic network (within the CSTO); creation of good neighbourly relations

Source: as in Table 1.

Similarly to the president of Turkmenistan, G. Berdymukhammedov, the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmon, refers to Central Asia in a manner that it is difficult to determine how he is defining the region. Relatively often he turns to the concept of the Greater Central Asia (Starr 2008), without naming it directly. One can get the impression that for President E. Rakhmon, the region should consist not of five but of six countries: “an important factor is, in particular, the inclusion of Afghanistan in regional integration processes in order to strengthen economic and commercial relations with it” (Rakhmon 2017b). Furthermore, E. Rakhmon mentions cooperation of the whole region with Pakistan, as well as uses the concept of “cooperation of regions” – Central Asia with South Asia. For example, during the meeting with Pakistan Prime Minister he pointed out: “it was stressed that it [cooperation between Pakistan and Tajikistan] would seriously promote the expansion of regional integration, as well as strengthen the peace and the stability in the vast region of Central and South Asia” (Rakhmon 2017a). Overall, it should be pointed out that the concept of Central Asia in the selected statements of E. Rakhmon is blurred and it is not entirely clear what the President of Tajikistan means by using the term “region”.

Undoubtedly, the analysis shows that for Tajikistan, it is important to build a security zone in the region. In this context, references to Afghanistan were observed. E. Rakhmon believes that the stability in Afghanistan is the

important factor for the security in the region: "normalization of the situation in Afghanistan, the establishment of peace and full stability in this neighbouring country is very important for our states" (Rakhmon 2017a). Speaking at the 72<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, E. Rakhmon recalls Afghanistan, not only in terms of security but also in terms of regional integration: "In this case, in particular, an important factor is the involvement of Afghanistan in regional integration processes through strengthening economic and trade relations with it" (Rakhmon 2017b).

President E. Rakhmon when speaking about regional security refers to supra-regional institutions, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In the official Tajik documents, Central Asia is often associated with water resources management, hydro energetics or water diplomacy. These issues have separate parts in the Concept of Foreign Policy of Tajikistan, in the strategy, one can read about the idea of the International Hydro-energetic Consortium or the activities of International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (*Kontseptsiia Vneshnei Politiki Respubliki Tadjikistan* 2015). At the Budapest Water Summit, President E. Rakhmon emphasizes that 60% of the water resources in the region are being formed in Tajikistan (Rakhmon 2016b). The need to develop infrastructure is closely related to hydropower, Tajikistan has been promoting the CASA – 1000 project (Central Asia – South Asia), which assumes building vast energy transmission lines towards South Asia. President E. Rakhmon believes that due to its geographical location, his country may be a transit point between the regions. Speaking about CASA, he once again refers to the one broad region: "the ceremony of launching the CASA-1000 project for the construction of a high-voltage power transmission line is a symbol of practical cooperation between the countries of the vast Central and South Asia region, is a memorable and historically significant event for all of us" (Rakhmon 2016a).

In the Tajik Foreign Policy Concept, relations with Russia are discussed in the first place, nonetheless, Central Asian republics are mentioned already in the second. Additionally, in the Concept one could read about the common history of Central Asia and about the desire to develop cooperation based on centuries-old traditions and cultural heritage: "Tajikistan supports further development of cooperation based on the positive, centuries-old and constructive experience of the friendly coexistence of the Central Asian people" (*Kontseptsiia Vneshnei Politiki Respubliki Tadjikistan* 2015). The profoundly emphasized issues also include: the cooperation in solving ecological problems and the discussed issue of water resources management, closely related



to hydropower. The priority, according to the Concept, is to solve all problems through diplomatic methods (*Kontseptsiia Vneshnei Politiki Respubliki Tadjikistan* 2015).

## Conclusion

Comparing the selected statements of Central Asian presidents and national foreign policy concepts, one can find several similarities. The elites emphasize the necessity of cooperation in the sphere of security. As a consequence, the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan (especially in the context of terrorist groups activities) is of considerable importance for them. The analysis shows that the elites are interested in economic integration, in particular, they would like to create better investment conditions in the region. Nonetheless, there is no agreement as to the forms of such activities. Almost every president considers his country to be the regional leader in certain specific areas (N. Nazarbayev – economy, transport, E. Rakhmon – water resources, hydropower, A. Atambayev – culture, art, freedom, E. Rakhmon – diplomacy). At the end of this similarity account, one should also note that Central Asian elites agree that it is necessary to develop good neighbourly relations.

When it comes to differences, they can be found already at the stage of determining the boundaries of the region. The president of Turkmenistan, G. Berdymukhammedov, links Central Asia with the countries of the Caspian basin, probably referring mainly to Azerbaijan. The president of Tajikistan, E. Rakhmon speaks about including Afghanistan in regional cooperation. He also introduces the concept of “cooperation of regions” (meaning Central and South Asia).

Almost all countries want to intensify economic ties, but there are significant differences in understanding the forms of such economic cooperation. Kazakhstan, as well as Kyrgyzstan, mention the need for integration, but usually in conjunction with the Eurasian Economic Union. Almost every Central Asian state links integration with another external project – the Chinese initiative of the Silk Road Economic Belt.

With regard to the institutional structure, only the president of Uzbekistan suggests concrete proposals. He is proposing the integration of regions inside Central Asia by initiating meetings at the level of the heads of regions. In 2017, S. Mirziyoyev postulated conducting regular consultative meetings of

the heads of states, and since that time two such meeting took place. All other presidents mentioned the necessity of dialogue and development of good neighbourly relations, but they did not propose specific institutional solutions in the analysed period.

All these differences should not lead to the simple conclusion that cooperation in the sphere of security or the economy in Central Asia will not develop. The article concerned only the level of discourse in a limited period of time. The institutional structures, the level of economic cooperation or joint activities in the sphere of security, etc., were not analyzed.

Undoubtedly, the article shows that Central Asian elites use the term Central Asia and identify with the region. There are the inside-out narratives created by the elites. However, they are not coherent with each other. One could argue that there is a lack of agreement, even at the initial stage, as to how to define the boundaries of their region. Disagreements also appear in determining the most important challenges and the tasks that the region is facing. The elites are also not in agreement as to how and with whom to cooperate, both in the sphere of economic integration and in the sphere of security. These differences may lead to the conclusion that if Central Asian republics do not find a consensus, do not create a consistent narrative the region will be further considered as a “region determined from the outside”.

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## **AZJA CENTRALNA JAKO REGION? ANALIZA DYSKURSU REGIONALNYCH ELIT**

### **Streszczenie**

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie podejścia centralnoazjatyckich elit do kwestii regionu. Rozważania oparta na wystąpieniach oraz kluczowych dokumentach definiujących strategię polityki zagranicznej. Analiza dyskursu była podstawowym narzędziem badawczym, analiza pól semantycznych posłużyła do kategoryzacji wypowiedzi.

Autor argumentuje, że centralnoazjatyccy prezydenci używają terminu Azja Centralna i identyfikują się z regionem. Niemniej jednak ich narracje na temat regionu różnią się w znacznym stopniu i nie tworzą jednego spójnego obrazu. Brakuje zgody w zakresie determinowania podstawowych wyzwań, jakie stoją przed regionem oraz wyboru form współpracy regionalnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Azja Centralna, regionalizacja, region, analiza dyskursu.

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