

**FINAL REPORT ON THE TOPIC "THE ROLE OF UZBEKISTAN IN ENSURING
SECURITY IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION: AN ANALYSIS FROM A NEOREALIST
PERSPECTIVE. GROWING THREATS AND WAYS TO ADDRESS THEM"**

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INTRODUCTION

The modern world is changing at an unprecedented rate. Changes are taking place politically, economically and geographically. The various theories of international relations serve as a tool to understand and analyse all events in the modern world. Analysing these events is not possible without studying and examining them through the prism of international relations theories. Every conflict, war, unprecedented economic growth will be explained by these theories. Ensuring security and stability are key factors in the development of countries. Let us consider and try to analyse the role of Uzbekistan in ensuring security in the Central Asian region. Consider and try to understand why ensuring security and stability are key factors in the development of countries. We will justify why neo-realism is suitable for describing the domestic and foreign policies of Central Asian countries. Consider the growing threats and outline concrete ways to address them.

Understanding Neorealism.

Neorealism is one of the most important theories in international relations. This theory is currently the driving factor for countries to ensure national security and stability. Neorealism emerged as a response to the crisis of classical realism and was a reaction to liberal approaches that predicted possible cooperation and harmony in international relations through international organizations and economic ties. The ideas of Neorealism were developed by Kenneth Waltz. In his writings, Waltz argues that neorealism builds on classical realist thought while introducing a more scientific and systematic approach to understanding international politics.

Realism emphasizes national interests and says that power is the only factor that determines the place of a state on the world stage. Neorealism, as a continuation of these ideas, will complement the importance of the Balance of Power. Balance of power is the central mechanism in neorealist theory by which states, motivated by their security in an anarchic system, will naturally seek to prevent the hegemony of any single state.¹ Also, neorealist ideas do not speak of the pursuit of maximizing power and force, but support the idea that states simply seek security. The pursuit of power can take many forms: military, economic, and diplomatic. Countries seeking a more secure environment may face many challenges in the international arena. The accumulation of military power may be perceived by other states as a threat to

¹ Theories of international relations. (2022). Bloomsbury Publishing.

stability, which eventually becomes the beginning of an arms race that will eventually end in the great collapse of one side in a given arms race. One prominent example is the Cold War, a military buildup that ended only after the collapse of one side. Neorealism provides a powerful theoretical framework from which to gain an understanding of international relations, especially in explaining patterns of conflict, cooperation, and competition between states.² Although the theory has its limitations, it continues to emphasize something valuable about the systemic structures and distribution of power in contemporary global politics.

Within neorealism, which emphasizes the structure of the international system, two subtypes of this theory are distinguished: both defensive realism and offensive realism. These two approaches differ in their interpretation of the goals and behavior of states in international politics. Defensive realism asserts that states seek first of all to ensure their security. The main goal of states is to exist in the conditions of the existing international system, and for this purpose they try to avoid conflict and aggression without creating threats to other states. A distinctive feature of defensive realism is to maximize security without pursuing the goals of maximizing influence and increasing power. It is important to preserve the current balance of power and minimize the emergence of threats. Creating all necessary measures to maintain the balance of power and stability is a first-degree objective.³ The theory of defensive realism explains well the behavior of European countries such as Switzerland or Sweden, which mainly adhered to the policy of neutrality and security within the existing international norms, avoiding aggression and maximization of force, focusing on ensuring their internal security. Also, countries in the Central Asian region such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan adhere to the theory of defensive realism. Offensive realism argues that states not only seek to preserve their security, but also actively seek to increase their power and influence. Proponents of offensive realism argue that the international system and policies implemented by countries are unpredictable and in order to ensure full security, states must become regional or global hegemon. Having achieved territorial security, one should also strive to expand its influence, economic and political. As China does in the regional arena, striving for the title of regional and world hegemon. Also, the creation of alliances in order to increase one's own influence is one of the good ways to increase influence. Looking at the last decade through the lens of offensive realism, we can justify the U.S. actions during the Cold War, with its attempts to spread liberal democracies around the world by actively participating in conflicts in Korea, Vietnam and the Middle East. All of these actions are examples of offensive realism. In this case, U.S. security is viewed through the prism of global dominance, which explains its intervention in various international affairs. It is impossible for a state to survive and maintain its interests in the competitive arena of international relations if it does not seek power.

² Болдуин Д. А. Неолиберализм, неореализм и мировая политика // Вестник Московского университета. Серия 12. Политические науки. 2012. №2. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/neoliberalizm-neorealizm-i-mirovaya-politika>

³ Walt, Stephen M. "International Relations: One World, Many Theories." *Foreign Policy*, no. 110, 1998, pp. 29–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149275>. Accessed 27 Dec. 2024.

John Mearsheimer is the main theorist of offensive realism. In his work *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), he argues that great powers always seek hegemony because it is the only way to ensure their security in the face of global anarchy.⁴ Mearsheimer emphasizes that states that seek hegemony have a better chance of survival in a competitive international system. Also, with regard to the ideas of Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book "Choice: World Domination or Global Leadership," one can see quite clearly an example of the ideas of offensive realism. Making a comparative analysis of defensive and offensive realism, one can say that the main difference between these divisions is in the goals and strategies of states.⁶ Defensive and offensive realism show two different points of view on international relations. While defensive realism focuses on the balance of power and the avoidance of aggression, offensive realism holds that it is important to maximize its power in view of survival and security. Both have been influential, providing helpful tools for scholars to study state behavior as a response to global anarchy.

It is worth noting that Neorealism does not accept idealistic ideas that international cooperation and cooperation can change the essence of international relations and that security can be achieved through negotiation and cooperation. But it recognizes international institutions and negotiations as a tool to promote the interests of the country. But negotiation and cooperation cannot ensure lasting peace and cooperation of countries in the international arena. The relevance of neorealism in the modern world is reflected in most of the ongoing global growing events: the struggle for resources, territorial disputes and military build-up in different parts of the world. All this shows that the politics of power remains the center of international relations. Countries in the era of globalization and interdependence of states have become more interested in ensuring their security and the growth of national interests at the expense of international cooperation. Taking into account all of the above, let us consider the Central Asian region and the role of Uzbekistan in ensuring security in this region and analyzing from the point of view of neorealism, let us consider the growing threats and ways to address them.

The Central Asian region represents the territories of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and is an important geopolitical region. Central Asia has always been an object of interest for world powers because of its strategic location, rich natural resources and significant potential for trade and transit. But the last decade shows a growing interest in this region. The reason for this is the region's strategic location at the intersection of several major geopolitical axes. The region is on the border with Russia, China, the Middle East region and of course Afghanistan. Applying neorealism to Central Asia, we can say that all post-Soviet states in this region are oriented towards the protection of their national interests, which are

⁴ Lobell, S. (2017, December 22). Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-304>

⁶ Snyder G. H. Mearsheimer's world: Offensive realism and the struggle for security // *The Realism Reader*. – Routledge, 2014. – C. 188-196.

usually related to security, territorial integrity, and economic benefits. In conditions of instability caused by internal and external threats, each state tries to ensure its security and strengthen its positions.

The Role of Uzbekistan in Ensuring Security in the Central Asian Region.

Uzbekistan has a key role in maintaining the stability and security of the region. The ideas of defensive neorealism are inherent to Uzbekistan. Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan has sought to build a strong, defensible army. Without pursuing the goals of expansion or seizing the territories of neighboring countries. In the last decade, Uzbekistan has pursued an active domestic and foreign policy, choosing the path of development of the country, directing funds for the development of the economy, as well as improving the social life of citizens, strengthening diplomatic relations with neighbors, as well as with world powers. Uzbekistan is making efforts to resolve territorial disputes in Central Asia. Improving relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is a prime example.

Adhering to the policy of non-alignment to military blocs, Uzbekistan is actively developing military cooperation by conducting bilateral military exercises with neighboring states, as well as implementing Joint Border Control Initiatives.⁷ All this speaks of the desire to ensure defensive realism. President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mironovich said: "Combat potential and high spirituality should become two powerful pillars of the Armed Forces of Uzbekistan." Under the leadership of the President, Uzbekistan is implementing a comprehensive program of military modernization. Analyzing the recent events in Kazakhstan, namely the protests of 2022 clearly showed that the largest country in Central Asia in terms of military potential is not able to ensure the stability of the Central Asian region as a strong and key player. However, against the background of these capabilities, there are serious security threats that threaten the stability of the entire region. And Uzbekistan as a factor of security of the region, through the prism of neorealism, pays great attention to border security.

Central Asia and Afghanistan.

For Central Asian countries, Afghanistan is not just a neighbor with whom they have to share a long and difficult to defend border, but also a source of many challenges, ranging from extremism and terrorism to drug trafficking and geopolitical instability. The Afghan issue has always remained one of the main risk factors for Central Asian countries. The region continues to be vulnerable to the threats of terrorism and Islamic extremism, especially after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021. The Taliban has gained strength in Afghanistan, and this has also contributed to the transition to an active regime of terrorist groups based in Afghanistan.⁸ These groups continue to influence stability in the region, creating

⁷ Ахмедов Хуршид Тулкин Угли Участие Узбекистана в развитии военно-политической интеграции и обеспечении региональной безопасности в центральноазиатском регионе // Постсоветские исследования. 2019. №4. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/uchastie-uzbekistana-v-razviti-voenno-politicheskoy-integratsii-i-obespechenii-regionalnoy-bezopasnosti-v-tsentralnoaziatskom>

⁸ Малышева Д. Б. Афганский кризис и постсоветская Центральная Азия // Мировая экономика и международные отношения. – 2017. – Т. 61. – №. 8. – С. 14-23.

security threats not only for the border countries, but also for the entire Asian region as a whole. It is worth noting that the headquarters of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is located in the city of Tashkent. And it is on the territory bordering Afghanistan that the Southwest Special Military District was established to ensure the integrity and inviolability of the territorial borders of the Republic of Uzbekistan. We can clearly understand that the only factor in maintaining the inviolability of borders is the strength provided by a strong and defensible army.

Afghanistan is one of the largest producers of drugs. Drug trafficking is not only an economic threat to Central Asian countries, but also a serious threat to the security of logistical routes. The length of the borders between Afghanistan and Central Asia, as well as the presence of vulnerable border sections, create conditions for active drug trafficking that passes through the territory of countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Narcotic substances produced in Afghanistan reach Europe, Russia and even China. Central Asian countries are proving to be important transit and transportation points for such traffic. This contributes to the growth of organized crime, corruption and deterioration of public security, and threatens the social and economic foundations of the countries in the region.

Central Asian countries are still defined by carefully calibrating their pragmatic interests regarding Afghanistan and avoiding any official interactions as well as recognizing the Taliban government, which may send the wrong message to countries that do not have a typical relationship with the Taliban government. To fix the Afghan problem, Uzbekistan is applying a very smart and farsighted solution.⁹ By using the tool of negotiation it is establishing relations with the Afghan side. By investing in Afghanistan, helping to improve the economic and social situation in that country, thus making Afghanistan dependent on foreign aid. For Uzbekistan, the issue of recognition has not been an obstacle to maintaining trade relations with Afghanistan. In 2022, Uzbekistan exported over \$750 million worth of goods to Afghanistan, while imports from Afghanistan were at a much lower value of \$9.3 million. By doing so, Uzbekistan is trying to address one of the most important risks for the country and the entire region.

Economic threat to Central Asian countries.

One of the most significant factors describing the Central Asian economy in the last decade is the exponentially growing economic dependence on China. China has become the largest economic partner for most Central Asian countries, which has led to the opening of new opportunities for growth and development, but on the other hand has created serious risks and threats associated with excessive dependence on one external player. An important role in this process was played by China's new economic course, in particular the "One Belt, One Road" initiative focused on strengthening ties with neighboring countries to expand trade and energy

⁹ Boltaev, H. (n.d.). Central Asia's Relations with Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan. 2024. <https://iais.uz/storage/files/1/KmuMEJ-20240304130446%20copy.pdf>

cooperation. China has become the largest trading partner of most countries in the region. In 2020, China's trade turnover with Kazakhstan amounted to more than 14 billion dollars, with Kyrgyzstan - about 2 billion dollars, with Tajikistan - 1.5 billion dollars. It should not be forgotten that China is actively investing in infrastructure and energy projects in Central Asian countries. As part of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative¹⁰, China is building transportation corridors, railroads and highways, as well as developing energy projects, including pipelines and power plants. China has become the largest buyer of oil and natural gas from Central Asia, especially from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The Chinese market absorbs significant volumes of the region's energy resources, creating economic dependence on price fluctuations in the Chinese market.¹¹ Given all of the above, the dependence is growing, which poses certain economic threats.

Risks caused by economic dependence on China.

One of the main economic threats is the high vulnerability of Central Asian economies. If China faces an economic slowdown, for example as a result of internal crises or various conflicts, the countries of the region will inevitably be affected. Due to the fact that China is the main consumer of resources, if demand falls for energy resources or if its economy slows down, then Central Asian exports can considerably fall. For example, in 2015, oil prices fell as a result of the slowdown in China's economy, which negatively reflected on the economies of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan: their budgets heavily relied on oil and gas exports to China. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated that China's economic woes could spread to Central Asia and reduce demand for the region's goods and services. An important aspect of concern is the trade dependence of Central Asian countries on China. As the largest supplier of goods to the region, China puts a significant strain on local production. This leads to significant shortages in local production, including in important sectors such as agriculture and industry. Chinese-made goods, as well as textile, electronics and household appliances produced by Chinese companies, fill local markets, making it difficult for local industries to develop. Chinese goods often have lower prices, making them competitive with local products.

China has been a very active lender and investor in Central Asia, risks of debt dependence on that country notwithstanding. Chinese investment serves to materialize specific infrastructure projects: roads, energy facilities, and such. However, long-term commitments on loans create the financial risks of countries. For example, in Turkmenistan, where Chinese loans comprise a big share of external debt, the debt situation may turn into serious threats to financial stability. Especially the problem is sharp in Tajikistan, which actively borrows from China and builds infrastructure with its means. According to the assessment of the World Bank, more than 30% of the

¹⁰ Изимов Руслан Юсупжанович, Мураталиева Замира Тулкуновна Центральноазиатский трек инициативы «Пояс и путь»: возможности и риски // Вестник международных организаций: образование, наука, новая экономика. 2018. №3. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/tsentralnoaziatskiy-trek-initsiativy-royas-i-put-vozmozhnosti-i-riski>

¹¹ Чжочао, Ю., & Грозин, А. (2022). Политика Китая в отношении Центральной Азии. Litres.

external debt of Tajikistan in 2022 related to Chinese loans. As China's economic presence in Central Asia increases, so does its political influence. Countries in the region are beginning to fear that dependence on Chinese economic ties could lead to a loss of economic and political independence. China could use economic pressure to advance its interests in the region, which could cause internal political and social tensions.¹²

As risks exist, there are ways to avoid them that can help Central Asian countries reduce their economic dependence on China. First of all, Central Asian countries should seek to diversify their external trading partners and not limit themselves to China. Developing trade relations with other countries in the region will help reduce risks. It is also important to stimulate domestic production to reduce dependence on Chinese imports. Investments in local industry, agriculture and technology startups can boost domestic production and create jobs. Developing economic and trade integration within Central Asia, for example through the Eurasian Economic Union, may be one way to reduce dependence on China. Instead of relying on a single country, regional ties and partnerships can be developed, making the economy more resilient and flexible

Conclusion.

Neorealism as a theory of international relations continues to be one of the most relevant in the context of explaining global political processes and national security. Neorealism attaches great importance to the structure of the international system, as well as the balance of power, which can be clearly seen in defensive and offensive realism. In the geopolitical environment, Uzbekistan tries to ensure territorial security and puts itself forward as a key player in maintaining stability in the Central Asian region.

Neorealism serves as a tool for analyzing state behavior, emphasizing the importance of the balance of power in international relations. Uzbekistan in Central Asia vividly demonstrates how the countries of the region, including taking into account specific threats, can adhere to the principles of defensive realism in an effort to ensure their security, minimize risks and maintain stability in the face of global and regional instability. Uzbekistan's foreign policy is aimed at maintaining neutrality, as well as preventing accession to military blocs and, as a consequence, resolving conflicts through diplomatic settlement. At the same time, economic dependence on

China is becoming an increasingly significant threat to the countries of Central Asia. China is actively investing in the region's infrastructure and its role in the economies of these countries is growing. Unfavorable changes in China's economy may have a significant negative impact on the economies of the Central Asian countries.

Thus, despite the difficulties and threats, Uzbekistan, as well as other Central Asian countries, continue to follow the principles of defensive realism, focusing on

¹² Джан Лунмэй Цифровая экономика Китая: возможности и риски // Вестник международных организаций: образование, наука, новая экономика. 2019. №2. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/tsifrovaya-ekonomika-kitaya-vozmozhnosti-i-riski>

protecting their national interests and strengthening their defense capabilities, which is an important tool for ensuring stability and security.

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