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## Consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders: the evolution of agenda

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On September 14, 2023, the fifth consultative meeting of the presidents of Central Asian countries took place in Dushanbe. This format of informal meetings (as opposed to summits) is becoming one of the landmark events in the foreign policy of the participating countries. The next, sixth meeting, is scheduled for 2024 in Kazakhstan. Considering the short history of this format, it is too early to expect much from it, however, it is possible to follow the transformation of its agenda, the interests of the participating countries discussed at the meetings and possibly discuss the results of this negotiating platform.

Meetings of leaders of Central Asian countries in a narrow format had already happened before. The first took place in December 1991 in Almaty, the second in January 1993 in Tashkent, the third in January 1998 in Ashgabat, and the fourth in December 2001 again in Tashkent. The agenda then included issues of economic recovery, as well as economic and political cooperation, which was marked by the creation of the Central Asian Economic Community (1994), transformed in 2001 into the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation.

However, the difficulties of the first years of independence, especially economic ones, did not allow the development of full-fledged cooperation in this format. In addition, as it was offered by the Russian side, which was actively promoting its integration project in the region, the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation ceased to exist under the pretext of duplicating functions with the Eurasian Economic Community (Polonskaya, 2021).

The current series of meetings was officially initiated in 2017 by the recently elected President of Uzbekistan, Sh.M. Mirziyoyev. It was he who changed the country's foreign policy towards

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openness (Paderina, 2018). With the intensification of Uzbekistan's efforts to normalize relations with its neighbors, it became possible to revive such meetings. As a result, since 2018, they have been held in different Central Asian countries, with the countdown starting precisely from the meeting six years ago.

The resumption of meetings in a narrow circle of Central Asian leaders indicates not only a new dimension of their foreign policy, but also the traditional strategy of balancing between centers of power usual for smaller states (Balance of Power..., 2004). The great powers in Central Asia are represented at least by Russia and China, although both the US and the EU have their own interests there.

This format of interaction became especially urgent in the context of Russia's growing international isolation against the backdrop of its rapidly deteriorating relations with the West. After February 2022, the format of consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders hints to all interested parties that not only Russia can initiate integration in the post-Soviet area.

In addition, this format is intended to emphasize that the countries of Central Asia have ceased to consider themselves objects of someone else's foreign policy and have long been ready to move on to active role as independent subjects of international relations, at least in their own region. This was confirmed by the widely quoted words of N.A. Nazarbayev at the 2018 meeting: "In order to resolve the issues of the countries of Central Asia, we do not invite third parties" (Polonskaya, 2021).

### **National interests of participating countries on the agenda of meetings**

In March 2018, the first consultative meeting of the Central Asian leaders (the presidents of four countries and the chairman of the parliament of Turkmenistan) took place in Astana (Kazakhstan). Then the focus was on mutual trade between the participating countries and regional security problems, including the situation in Afghanistan, drug trafficking and religious extremism, illegal arms trade, etc. (Reliance on your own strength..., 2018). The agenda of the meeting also included issues of rational use of water resources in the region due to the environmental disaster of the Aral Sea and strengthening cultural and humanitarian cooperation through the organization of joint cultural events, the development of educational and tourist exchange (Urozov, 2018).

In addition, the importance of interaction within other international structures was noted, including the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, etc. In addition, the rhetoric of the meeting participants showed increased political correctness in relation to Moscow: the President of Kazakhstan, for example, said that security issues are being resolved jointly with the CSTO and Russia, and the Russian market, like the Chinese one, is attractive for Central Asian countries that do not plan to limit themselves to their region, etc. Such rhetoric was explained rather by the desire not to contrast the new format of relations with other platforms or cooperation with Russia (Dubnov, 2018).

This meeting continued the efforts of the Central Asian countries to resolve issues related to border demarcation and the establishment of transport links between the participating countries (Polonskaya, 2021). Significant steps in these directions were taken, however, earlier. Thus, the

conclusion of the Agreement on the junction point of the state borders of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan took place in Samarkand in 2017. And the discussion of the Uzbekistan Kyrgyzstan China railway, mentioned at the meeting, began at least 20 years ago, although the trilateral agreement on cooperation on the project construction of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway was signed only in 2022 (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and China signed..., 2022). Agreements on holding the year of culture of each participating state in the neighboring ones were previously reached on bilateral basis. For example, in 2018, the year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan was already underway, and 2019 was supposed to be the year of Kazakhstan in Uzbekistan (Urozov, 2018).

The second consultative meeting took place in November 2019 in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). The current presidents of 4 countries in the region and at that time the former President of Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayev took part in it. The participants discussed the opportunities of increasing cooperation in the areas of "trade, economics, investment, transport and transit, agriculture, industrial cooperation, environmental protection, energy, water resources, tourism, science and culture" (Second Consultative Meeting, 2019).

The topic of economic development was the focus of attention, reflected in the proposals of the President of Uzbekistan Sh.M. Mirziyoyev on the launch of an investment forum for countries in the region, the establishment of a regional council for transport communications, holding the first meeting of chambers of commerce and industry, creating a tourism brand for Central Asia and promoting joint tourist tour programs covering the entire region (Polonskaya, 2021). According to him, the priority areas of cooperation were trade and economic, investment, transport and communications and energy. In political terms, it was proposed to establish an interparliamentary friendship group of Central Asian countries. In the humanitarian sphere - to create a platform for cultural and humanitarian exchange "Central Asia - one past, common future." In addition, the need to more active use of the Multi-Partner Trust Fund for the Aral Sea region under the auspices of the UN was noted. The problem of Afghanistan was raised due to the security problems of the region (Second Consultative Meeting..., 2019).

Kazakhstan also supported the economic agenda, and its representative made a proposal to create a shortened analogue of a single market with the freedom of movement for goods, services and capital (without freedom of movement for labor) in Central Asia. In addition, the Kazakhstani side proposed to sign a multilateral agreement on good neighborliness and cooperation for the development of the region in the 21st century. In the security sphere, it was offered to hold a meeting of the Secretaries of the National Security Councils of the participating countries. In the humanitarian sphere, Kazakhstan suggested that the countries of Central Asia allocate 10 grants each for training students in the best universities in Kazakhstan (Second Consultative Meeting..., 2019).

The Turkmen side offered to create a five-party business council to develop a common strategy for enhancing cooperation in the areas of trade and economic cooperation, energy, transport, logistics and innovation (Berdimuhamedov proposed..., 2019). G. Berdimuhamedov also called for coordination of the work of the five Central Asian countries at other international platforms, in particular at the UN and OSCE, as well as in relations with external partners (EU, USA, Russia, Japan, South Korea). A special place in his speech was given to neighboring Afghanistan, reconciliation in which Turkmenistan strongly supported. He also addressed the problem of the Aral Sea, as well as the problem of

conserving water resources. In the humanitarian field, it was proposed to launch the Forum for Cultural Dialogue of Central Asia (Second Consultative Meeting..., 2019).

The Kyrgyz side has traditionally pointed out that meetings of Central Asian leaders do not prevent these states from building close relations with Russia and taking similar positions on other international platforms. On the economic agenda, however, the Kyrgyz leader went further than his Kazakh counterpart and proposed establishing freedom of movement not only of goods, services and capital, but also of people in Central Asia. He called for increasing mutual trade turnover by eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers, as well as developing transport corridors in the region. In addition, the Kyrgyz side actively promoted the environmental agenda, including the issue of ensuring the availability of water resources. Finally, he pointed out the need to deepen cooperation between border and customs structures, security and internal affairs agencies of the countries for ensuring the security of the region (Second Consultative Meeting..., 2019).

The Tajik side also advocated expanding trade and economic cooperation and ensuring freedom of movement of goods, services, capital and labor in the region. E. Rakhmon made a proposal to create a Central Asia Investment Fund to finance regional projects, as well as sign a separate Agreement to form a regional mechanism for interaction in transportation issues. In the security sphere, it was offered to intensify coordination of special, border, anti-terrorism and anti-drug agencies and hold regular meetings of heads of security agencies. The Tajik side supported Kyrgyzstan in the environmental agenda and in matters of water resource conservation in particular. In the humanitarian field, E. Rakhmon proposed developing a regional program of interuniversity and scientific exchanges and research and educational events. The need to develop the tourism industry was also mentioned (Second Consultative Meeting..., 2019).

The meeting was marked by both an expansion of the agenda and new symbolic steps. In particular, the Kazakhstani side proposed establishing a Central Asia Day (Nazarbayev proposed..., 2019), and the Uzbekistani side proposed establishing a Central Asian Prize for achievements in the field of science, culture and art, holding university forums and regional sports games. The Tajik side proposed organizing alternate days of Central Asian culture in each of the participating countries (The President proposed..., 2019).

*National agenda for the Second Consultative Meeting*

	Security	Trade	Investment	Transport and logistics	Water resources	Culture and humanitarian links	Ecology	Energy	Tourism
Kazakhstan	+	+				+			
Kyrgyzstan	+	+		+	+		+		
Tajikistan	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+
Turkmenistan	+	+		+	+	+		+	
Uzbekistan		+	+	+		+	+	+	+

However, most of the initiatives, both general and very specific, voiced by the leaders at the meeting actually meant the creation of additional platforms for interaction on narrower issues. However, not all of them ended up appearing. One example of implemented projects was the Interparliamentary Assembly of Central Asian States, proposed by the Uzbekistani side, which nevertheless managed to be held in February 2023 in Turkestan (Kazakhstan).

It is unlikely that the countries of Central Asia will be able to create a single market, which was mentioned at the Second Meeting, especially since at the meeting itself, differences in the positions of the countries on its content became noticeable. In particular, the participants did not agree on the need to introduce freedom of movement of labor in region. In addition, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union, which means they must comply with the customs regime at the borders with other Central Asian countries. And on a bilateral basis, difficulties often arise between the countries of Central Asia when transporting across the border, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan periodically conflict over borders (Panfilova, 10.09.2023). And yet, the topic of transport connectivity and increasing trade in the region remains on the agenda of the Consultative Meetings.

The third consultative meeting planned in Kyrgyzstan was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic and the change of government in the country and therefore took place only in August 2021 at another site – in Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) in the Avaza National Tourist Zone. The participants focused on the situation in Afghanistan, regulation of migration flows, the need to increase mutual trade and develop transport infrastructure.

The Uzbekistani side promoted ideas for developing economic cooperation, for which it received the support of Kazakhstan (Intensify trade and recognize Covid passports..., 2021). In particular, there was a call for the development of industrial cooperation and the creation of long added value chains through digital technologies, etc. The need was voiced to sign an Agreement on the general directions of regional trade and economic cooperation and the resumption of transport links in the region after the pandemic. In this regard, Sh.M. Mirziyoyev put forward an initiative to create a Regional Center for the Development of Transport and Communication Interconnectedness under the auspices of the UN. Due to the aggravation of the food security problem during the pandemic, it was proposed to monitor its level and organize regularly the meetings of the ministers of agriculture. In addition, it was proposed to create a unified information system for the recognition of testing and vaccination certificates, develop a regional green agenda program, hold a Youth Forum of Central Asian countries and begin the practical implementation of the tourism program “One tour - the whole region” (the President of Uzbekistan spoke at the Consultative meeting. ..., 06.08.2021).

The Kazakhstani side also actively promoted the economic agenda and the need to increase mutual trade, in particular by strengthening the logistics infrastructure. One of the real steps was the bilateral decision of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to create the International Center for Trade and Economic Cooperation “Central Asia”, the foundation of which was laid in April of the same year, a few months before the Consultative Meeting (Kussainova, Ekberova, 2021). A similar example is the joint project of the two countries to build the Darbaza-Maktaaral railway. The call was again made for the creation of new platforms for interaction, in particular, the Council of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Central Asian Countries, previously voiced by the Turkmen side, as well as for the use of the Astana International Financial Center as an economic platform for cooperation between

regional and foreign investors. Kazakhstan, in line with its internal agenda for digitalization of economy, suggested moving to the implementation of joint projects in the areas of artificial intelligence, big data analysis and online commerce, as well as joint management of water resources in the region based on digital solutions (Speech by the President of Kazakhstan..., 2021).

President of Kyrgyzstan S.N. Zhaparov spoke for the development of trade, economic, transport, logistics and water-energy ties in the region, as well as for consolidating the efforts of countries against the pandemic. He pointed out that the national strategies for sustainable development of the Central Asian countries should complement each other, especially in the transition to clean electricity through the development of hydropower. He also noted the need to strengthen cultural and humanitarian ties (Zhaparov called on the Central Asian countries... 06.08.2021).

The Tajik side raised environmental issues at the meeting, voicing proposals to declare 2025 the International Year of Glacier Conservation and to create an International Glacier Protection Fund. President E. Rahmon emphasized the importance of developing trade and economic cooperation, as well as establishing interaction in the fields of industry, energy, transport and cultural and humanitarian fields. He spoke in favor of closer cooperation between security forces in countering security threats (Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, 06.08.2021).

The Turkmen side expressed solidarity with E. Rahmon on the environmental agenda and confirmed its initiative to develop the UN Strategy aimed at implementing measures for the development of low-carbon energy, as well as the creation, under the auspices of the UN, of an international "Road Map" for the development of hydrogen as one of the priority areas in the energy sector. The problem of the Aral Sea has also received its share of attention (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 19.08.2021). The President noted that energy is a key component of the national economies of the countries in the region; therefore it is necessary to develop partnerships in this area and the infrastructure necessary for supplies. It was proposed to create a five-party working body that would analyze and develop proposals to increase the volume and diversify trade turnover among countries. Due to the pandemic, there were also calls to counter both traditional and new security threats in the region (Speech by the President of Turkmenistan..., 06.08.2021).

Kazakhstani side also put forward a proposal to create, under the auspices of the UN, a Network of Regional Centers for Disease Control and Biosafety and the International Biosafety Agency. The initiative of the President of Uzbekistan to develop cooperation in medicine and medical research was supported by his Kyrgyz colleague (Intensify trade and recognize Covid passports..., 2021).

The humanitarian topic sounded vague, although the parties agreed to develop a regional program of interuniversity and research exchanges and establish a Forum for cultural dialogue in Central Asia called "Central Asia: one past and one future." Considering the location of the meeting, issues of tourism development were also raised. In addition, a single symbol of the consultative meetings of the heads of Central Asia was adopted and the Badge of Honor of the heads of state of the region was established (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 19.08.2021).

*National agenda for the Third Consultative Meeting*

	Security	Trade	Industry	Transport and logistics	Water resources	Culture and humanitarian links	Ecology	Others
Kazakhstan		+		+				Digitalization Medicine
Kyrgyzstan		+		+	+	+	+	Research, Energy
Tajikistan		+	+	+	+		+	Energy
Turkmenistan	+	+		+			+	Energy
Uzbekistan		+	+	+			+	Tourism, Medicine, Research, Youth policy

The third meeting began to acquire parallel events. Thus, on its margins the Economic Forum of Central Asian Countries was held, which became a place for bilateral meetings and negotiations of interested parties (Ministry of Investment, Industry and Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 07.08.2021).

The final Joint Statement said a lot about the need to intensify cooperation in various areas, including in the field of intraregional trade, which since the beginning of the meetings (2018) has grown by only 12% (Speech by the President of Kazakhstan..., 2021). Much fewer specific proposals were formulated. For example, it was stated that there was a need to create a regional Conference on transport communications, agree on a corresponding program and agreement on the joint development of the transportation system in Central Asia. In this regard, the Uzbekistani idea to create a Regional Center for the Development of Transport and Communication Interconnectedness under the auspices of the UN was also included in the text of the final statement. However, the first meeting of the relevant Central Asian ministers took place only in 2023 in anticipation of the Fifth Consultative Meeting.

Bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan developed much more successfully in this area, allowing for the implementation of large investment projects. In particular, the construction of the Turkestan-Shymkent-Tashkent high-speed railway subsequently began, which is planned to be completed in 2024 (the Turkestan-Shymkent-Tashkent railway line is promised to be completed..., 28.06.2021).

Other specific proposals included in the text of the Joint Statement included the creation of a five-party Council of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the development of a regional Inter-University and Research Exchange Program, the creation of a Network of Regional Centers for Disease Control and Biosafety under the auspices of the UN and the International Biosafety Agency, reporting to the



Security Council UN (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 08/19/2021). However, these ideas still remain on paper, and some ideas, for example, on the establishment of a Forum for Cultural Dialogue in Central Asia, began to wander from the agenda of one meeting to the next, without finding any real implementation.

One of the few implemented proposals voiced at the meeting was the holding of a Central Asian Youth Forum in 2022 on the Uzbekistani initiative (Turanazarova, 21.07.2022). Also, the documents proposed for development at the meeting, in particular, the Central Asian regional program “Green Agenda” and the Roadmap for the development of regional cooperation (2022-2024), were subsequently adopted at the fourth consultative meeting in 2022.

The fourth consultative meeting was held in July 2022 in Cholpon-Ata (Kyrgyzstan). At the initiative of the host state, cultural cooperation and interaction in the information sphere were actively discussed. In particular, it was offered to create a common television channel and a series of television projects about the potential of the region, as well as to coordinate the work of national news agencies in order to counter the incitement of conflicts in the information space (At the summit of the countries of Central Asia it was proposed to create a regional television channel, 2022). The host party also advocated expanding cooperation in the field of hydropower, in connection with which Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan promised to invest in hydropower projects in Kyrgyzstan (Fourth Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Leaders..., 2022). President of Kyrgyzstan S.N. Zhaparov emphasized the importance of cooperation in border delimitation, in which he was supported by the Kazakhstani side, who proposed creating an expert platform in the region on this matter (National Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, 21.07.2022). However, this did not prevent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan from clashes on the border in September of the same year.

The President of Kazakhstan set out the priorities of cooperation in Central Asia in his speech in the following order: strengthening interactions in security and diplomacy, eliminating factors of instability in the region, forming an economic basis for interaction, increasing transport connectivity and countering climate challenges (Speech by President K.-Zh. Tokayev at the IV Consultative meeting..., 21.07.2022). The Kazakhstani side advocated the continuation of the development of joint transport infrastructure and the loading of already created logistics corridors in order to strengthen the transport connectivity of the region (Tokayev: Kazakhstan is ready to participate in the construction of the Trans-Afghan Highway, 2022), which was due to the narrowing of available transport corridors for Central Asian countries caused by sanctions against Russia since February 2022. In addition, the Kazakhstani side developed the text of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborhood and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century.

Uzbekistan promoted the development of trade and economic cooperation, in particular, for the creation of a Central Asian space for industrial localization and import substitution, the development of border trade zones, and digitalization of the economy. For the same purpose, the President of Uzbekistan proposed holding an annual Forum of Regions in order to increase their investment attractiveness and solve security problems through joint efforts (Mirziyoyev advocated the creation of a Central Asian space..., 2022).



The Tajik side recalled the continuing security threats in the region, including terrorism, extremism, illicit trafficking in weapons and drugs, as well as the situation in Afghanistan. In this regard, it was proposed to promote coordination between the intelligence services of the countries in the region. In addition, E. Rahmon also spoke in favor of strengthening economic cooperation, namely the expansion of trade, cooperation and the development of transport corridors (Participation in the fourth Consultative meeting of the heads..., 21.07.2022).

The new President of Turkmenistan S. Berdimuhamedov supported the topic of security, pointing to such threats as attempts to destabilize the internal political situation in the countries of Central Asia, the terrorist threat, military-political conflicts near the borders of the countries of the region, the illegal use of information technologies, etc.

*National agenda for the Fourth Consultative Meeting*

	Security	Trade	Investment	Transport and logistics	Water resources	Culture and humanitarian links	Ecology	Others
Kazakhstan	+	+		+			+	
Kyrgyzstan			+		+	+		Border issues
Tajikistan	+	+		+				Cooperation
Turkmenistan	+							
Uzbekistan	+	+	+					Industrial cooperatio Digitalization

As a result of the meeting, the three leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed an Agreement on Friendship, Good Neighborhood and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century (On the Draft Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan..., 2022). The leaders of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan refrained from signing, citing “the need for coordination with domestic legislation,” although traditionally Turkmenistan distances itself from any obligations within the framework of regional cooperation, and Tajikistan cannot overcome differences with its neighbors (Panfilova, 07.08.2023). In addition, the Concept of interaction of Central Asian states within multilateral formats, the Central Asian regional program “Green Agenda” and the Roadmap for the development of regional cooperation (2022-2024) were adopted.

According to the text of the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborhood and Cooperation, the parties promised to hold consultations “in the event of a situation arising that poses a threat to the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity” of one of them and to refrain “from the use of force or the threat of force in interstate relations between themselves, and undertake not to join military alliances, blocs or other associations of states directed against the Contracting Parties.” In addition, the parties pledged to “prevent the use of their territories, communications systems and other infrastructure by third states to the detriment of state sovereignty, security, stability, constitutional order and territorial integrity” of the signatories to the Treaty. In addition, the Agreement stated that the parties would promote the development of interaction between themselves in a wide range

of areas from healthcare to space research, from the development of the transit and transport potential of the region to the promotion of a single tourism brand (Agreement between the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic..., 20.07.2022).

The Joint Statement on the results of the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia, adopted against the backdrop of Russia's growing isolation, pointed out the need to increase the effectiveness of various international mechanisms into which countries wanted to integrate in this regard. If previously the UN was most often mentioned in such documents, now the list has expanded to multilateral formats "Central Asia+", international and regional organizations.

Due to the international situation, considerable attention was paid to the issue of coordinating efforts to ensure security, an expanded list of threats of which was given in the statement. In addition, the countries reaffirmed their desire to cooperate on a wide range of issues from trade and investment to digitalization, from transport and logistics solutions to countering environmental challenges.

What was relatively new in the statement was a proposal to hold regular meetings of the heads of emergency departments, promote the study of national languages and dissemination of literature, promote the participation of women in political, economic, social and other activities in Central Asia (Joint Statement of the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia, 21.07. 2022).

Finally, the fifth anniversary consultative meeting, held in September 2023 in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), was devoted to the development of mutual trade and investment, transport, regional security (in particular, due to the situation in Afghanistan), youth policy, health and etc.

The host state noted as a priority the need to ensure stability and security in the region, develop trade and infrastructure, and effectively use hydropower resources. The President of Tajikistan offered to develop separate cooperation programs in such areas as agriculture, industry and the introduction of new technologies. As the specific initiative the creation of the Association of Media of the States of Central Asia was mentioned (CIS Executive Committee, 15.09.2023).

The Kazakhstani side voiced proposals to increase mutual trade and expand the trade range of exports, create a digital database of commodity producers, develop an action plan for the development of industrial cooperation, and develop the Trans-Caspian transportation route through the introduction of digitalization and infrastructure modernization. The Kazakhstani side offered to develop an action plan for industrial cooperation in the region, including the formation of a closed production cycle. It was also in the interests of Kazakhstan to develop the Trans-Caspian transport route, the capacity of which K.-Zh. Tokayev promised to raise. He also noted the successes of Kazakhstan in expanding the network of branches of its universities in Central Asia, which is further facilitated by the cooperation formats accompanying the consultative meeting - forums of rectors and researchers of Central Asian countries. As the party hosting the next consultative meeting, Kazakhstan advocated its accompaniment by the Dialogue on Security and Cooperation in Central Asia at the level of Secretaries of the Security Councils and the Forum of Historians of the States of the Region (CIS Executive Committee, 15.09.2023).

President of Kyrgyzstan S.N. Zhaparov primarily focused on the need to develop cooperation in the issues of water use and hydropower in particular, which are closely related to the consequences of climate change. Among his specific proposals was the resumption of cooperation in accordance with the Agreement on the Use of Water and Energy Resources of the Syrdarya River Basin, signed in 1998 by the three states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which were later joined by Tajikistan (Turkmenistan does not participate in it) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan , 16.10.2019) and the establishment of a Regional Center for the implementation of energy-efficient and resource-saving technologies in Bishkek. He also called on countries to invest more actively in the water sector of Kyrgyzstan to introduce modern technologies in it. In the trade and economic sphere, he called for greater openness of markets and diversification of mutual trade, as well as the development of the necessary transport infrastructure. In the field of security, the situation in Afghanistan and Syria, as well as a wide range of threats, received his attention, and therefore he supported the idea of developing cooperation between the Security Councils and the competent authorities of the countries of the region (CIS Executive Committee, 15.09.2023).

The President of Turkmenistan has traditionally put forward the idea of creating, under the auspices of the UN, a new format for meetings of the Dialogue on Security and Cooperation in Central Asia and establishing a specialized structure of the Regional Center for Technologies Related to Climate Change in Central Asia. In the trade sphere, the Turkmen side suggested creation of a Central Asian Chamber of Commerce to coordinate the development of trade and the implementation of major investment projects, the launch of the Energy Dialogue between the participating countries and a common transport and logistics platform (Speech by the President of Turkmenistan..., 2023). In addition, it was offered to establish a Council for New Technologies, which would coordinate their implementation (CIS Executive Committee, 15.09.2023).

President of Uzbekistan Sh.M. Mirziyoyev spoke in favor of the formation of a free trade zone in the region and the adoption for this purpose of the Program for the formation of sustainable trade and logistics chains in the region, the expansion of cross-border trade, etc., as well as holding regular meetings of relevant ministers and the creation of the Economic Council of the States of Central Asia. He outlined promising areas for industrial cooperation, and also proposed developing a long-term Strategy for the development of industrial cooperation in the region. In order to increase the transit potential of the region, it was offered to develop a separate Agreement on Transport and Transit, prepare a Program for Liberalization of the Transport Services Market and consider the possibility of establishing an integrated digital platform for international transport. In order to ensure energy security, he advocated expanding cooperation between line ministries and specialized national companies, including those dealing with the energy infrastructure. In the area of food security, it was offered to prepare a regional partnership program with the support of the FAO. In order to formulate a regional climate agenda, it was offered to establish a climate dialogue at the level of relevant ministers and adopt a regional strategy for countering climate change.

In addition, the idea of an international media platform “History and culture of Central Asia: one past and a common future” was voiced with the involvement of researchers and members of the public to promote the cultural heritage of the region in the world. In the field of youth policy, it was suggested that a Center for Empowerment and Self-realization of Central Asian Youth, where issues of their professional training and employment would be resolved, should be established. The ideas of providing regional research and educational grants and scholarships for talented youth, as well

as development of a program to counter the radicalization of youth were mentioned. Finally, in the field of security the development of an Interstate Program for the protection and strengthening of the borders of the countries of Central Asia and the formation of a Regional System of Forecasting, Prevention, Early Warning and Joint Response to Emergency Situations were discussed (CIS Executive Committee, 15.09.2023).

The Joint Statement following the meeting traditionally placed security issues in the first place, again, as was customary before the Fourth Meeting, emphasizing the importance of the UN role in this issue without mentioning other formats of cooperation. Issues of trade and economic cooperation traditionally occupied second place; in particular, an innovation was the idea of expanding the share of national currencies in mutual payments, which, apparently, was due to Russia's experience under sanctions, which confirmed the unreliability of dollar assets. In addition, the importance of promoting industrial cooperation in the region and expanding its transit potential was mentioned. Finally, the statement indicated the need for interaction on issues of mitigating the effects of climate change and developing cultural and humanitarian cooperation. New topics included proposals for joint submission of applications for the inclusion of cultural sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List and support for the broad participation of women in all kinds of activities, first mentioned at the previous meeting were highlighted (CIS Executive Committee, 15.09.2023).

*National interests in the agenda of the Fifth Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Leaders*

	Security	Trade	Investment	Transport and logistics	Water resources	Culture and humanitarian links	Ecology	Others
Kazakhstan	+	+		+		+		Digitalization
Kyrgyzstan	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	
Tajikistan	+	+		+				Mass media
Turkmenistan	+	+		+			+	Innovations Energy
Uzbekistan	+	+		+		+	+	Industrial cooperation Energy Youth policy

As a result of the meeting, a package of five documents was adopted: in addition to the traditional Joint Statement of the Heads of State of Central Asia, an Agreement on Strengthening the Interconnectedness of Land Transport in the Region, an Agreement on General Directions of Youth Policy, and a Road Map to Support Health and Well-Being in Central Asia for 2022-2025 were signed, as well as the Regulations on the Council of National Coordinators for Consultative Meetings. The latter, in particular, was proposed by the Tajik side and is intended to monitor the implementation of the agreements reached, which indicates a desire to achieve results from the meetings, without leaving the voiced intentions solely declarative.

In addition, a separate statement was adopted by the Heads of State of the founders of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, namely the presidents of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where the key role of water resources in the sustainable development of the region and ensuring its food and energy security was noted. The parties emphasized the importance of coordinating interaction on issues of the climate agenda, including the use of information and communication technologies for water resources management, the implementation of joint projects and the development of regional youth movements for environmental protection (Dushanbe Statement..., 2023).

For the first time, the meeting was attended by a head of state not part of the Central Asian region, President of Azerbaijan I. Aliyev. In addition, representatives of international organizations, the head of the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia, K. Imnadze and the Director of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, H. Kluge, who presented a video message from the UN Secretary General A. Guterres, were present. It was this attention and encouragement from the UN, in particular, that the participants had previously sought by putting forward various initiatives under the auspices of the Organization (for example, the creation of a Network of Regional Centers for Disease Control and the International Biosafety Agency, as well as the development of environmental strategies at the third meeting).

In addition, the consultative meeting, through the efforts of the host Tajik side, was accompanied by a large number of events. In particular, the Second Forum of University Rectors and the First Forum of Researchers from Central Asian Countries, the Economic Forum, the Forum of Young Entrepreneurs, the First Meeting of Ministers of Transport, etc. were held in parallel. (Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia in Tajikistan, 2023). A symbolic gesture was the awarding of the former President of Turkmenistan G.M. Berdimuhamedov with the previously established Badge of Honor of the Heads of State of Central Asia.

### **Meeting results**

Given the vagueness of the wording and the multiplicity of proposals voiced at consultative meetings, it is difficult to indicate the results of them. In general, attention is drawn to the opportunistic nature of national agendas, their frequent modification and the significant influence of external events on the proposals being voiced, including the pandemic or sanctions against Russia. The most consistent topics on the agenda of all meetings remain trade and economic cooperation, development of transport and logistics infrastructure and security.

However, competition between the countries of Central Asia does not yet allow these initiatives to be fully implemented, despite the loud statements of the leaders. Thus, on logistics issues, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan compete for the role of a regional logistics center (Gasimov, 2023). Clashes periodically arise on the joint borders of states, and the desire for short-term gain often outweighs considerations for the development of long-term trade and economic cooperation, which is unlikely given the contradictions between the requirements of the EAEU single market, which includes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and the idea of free trade in the Central Asian region (Panfilova, 10.09.2023). Only security issues, perhaps, in the event of an aggravation, may somewhat cool down national ambitions, but not for long.

Some specific proposals made at the meetings had already been announced earlier. For example, discussions on the construction of the Uzbekistan Kyrgyzstan China railway mentioned at the 2018 meeting began long before that. Similarly, many proposals for the creation of structures under the auspices of the UN, mentioned at consultative meetings, were usually previously discussed by representatives of Central Asian states in relevant UN bodies, including the Network of Regional Centers for Disease Control and Biosafety and the International Biosafety Agency.

Most initiatives concerned the creation of new specialized platforms for interaction, which have not yet been implemented in the form of long-term projects. Therefore, it seems quite logical to attempt to monitor on an ongoing basis the implementation of proposals voiced at meetings. Individual activities that were outlined at the Consultative Meetings were then carried out after a significant period of time and until they turned into a stable format of relations. These are, for example, the Central Asian Youth Forum, held in 2022, or the Inter-Parliamentary Forum of Central Asian States, first organized in 2023.

Filling most of the initiatives put forward with real content will be hampered by the limited resources available to Central Asian countries. In this regard, we can expect them to seek aid from international donors in order to implement similar initiatives, for example, from the UN, the WHO or the World Bank Group. However, since the third meeting, there has been a noticeable tendency for the Consultative Meeting to become overgrown with parallel events of a similar regional format. From the fourth meeting, documents of a strategic nature and, for now, medium-term roadmaps designed to ensure systematic cooperation, began to be adopted.

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As a result, during the existence of the consultative meetings format, their agenda has expanded, although issues related to stimulating trade and economic cooperation, transport connectivity of the region and security issues remain central to the negotiations. The leaders of the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, traditionally promote the agenda in these three areas at these meetings, as does Tajikistan. Relatively recently, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also began to advocate industrial cooperation more actively, and Kazakhstan, in addition, brought the internal agenda for digitalization into the format of consultative meetings of leaders of the entire region. Kyrgyzstan has mainly focused on issues of security and availability of water resources in the region. Proposals from Turkmenistan most often relate to security issues, trade and economic cooperation and the environment.

In general, the efforts of the parties to give a high status to the event are noticeable. However, given the large number of proposals voiced at the meetings, it was logical to decide in 2023 to establish a body that would monitor the implementation of such initiatives. How much this will help transform the format from declarative to working, it will be seen soon.

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