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**POWER BALANCE IN CENTRAL ASIA:  
EXTERNAL POWERS IN THE REGION**

\*Uzakbayev N.<sup>1</sup>, Movkebaeva G.<sup>2</sup>

\*<sup>1</sup> Narxoz University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

<sup>2</sup> Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

**Abstract.** This article explores the evolving balance of power in Central Asia through an in-depth examination of external state actors and the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It begins by establishing the theoretical framework of the balance of power in international relations, highlighting its historical evolution and its application in contemporary geopolitical contexts. The core of the article is divided into two main analytical sections.

The first section examines the involvement of external powers – primarily Russia and China – in Central Asia. It details Russia's enduring influence through historical, economic, and military ties, including its use of energy infrastructure and regional security cooperation frameworks like the CSTO. China's growing footprint is assessed through the lens of the Belt and Road Initiative, large-scale infrastructure investments, and increasing trade and energy cooperation. The paper outlines how both powers strategically compete and sometimes cooperate in shaping Central Asia's political and economic future.

The second section delves into the SCO's institutional role in recalibrating regional geopolitics. It assesses the organization's contributions to regional security, economic cooperation, and multilateral diplomacy. The article argues that the SCO serves as a stabilizing framework that helps mediate external influence while offering Central Asian states a platform to assert collective interests.

Using historical analysis, contemporary data, and institutional review, the article concludes that Central Asia's balance of power is dynamically shifting, with China gaining increased influence alongside Russia's traditional dominance. The SCO, while often perceived as an extension of Chinese and Russian interests, also offers a mechanism for regional countries to navigate these power dynamics with greater agency.

**Key words:** Central Asia, balance of power, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia, China, regional security, geopolitical strategy, energy politics

**Introduction**

The balance of power theory in international relations has roots dating back to ancient times, but it gained prominence as a concept during the Renaissance and

early modern period in Europe. However, it is difficult to attribute the theory to a single individual, as it developed over centuries and was articulated by various scholars and statesmen. Some of the early thinkers associated with the balance of power concept include the Greek historian Thucydides, who wrote about power dynamics among states in his work "History of the Peloponnesian War" around 400 BCE [1]. Additionally, the Italian diplomat and political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli explored the concept in his writings during the Renaissance.

In the modern era, the balance of power theory became a central concept in international relations theory, particularly during the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. The Peace of Westphalia marked a crucial turning point in the evolution of the modern state system. Its recognition of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs laid the groundwork for the development of international law and the establishment of diplomatic norms. Moreover, the treaties established mechanisms for resolving conflicts through negotiation and diplomacy, setting a precedent for future diplomatic processes. The idea of the balance of power, which emerged in the aftermath of the Peace of Westphalia, has been a fundamental principle guiding the conduct of states in international relations [2]. Figures such as Cardinal Richelieu of France and, later, British statesmen like Henry Kissinger and scholars such as Hans Morgenthau contributed significantly to the development and application of the balance of power theory [3].

The concept of "balance of power" refers to a situation in which various nations or entities within a system maintain relatively equal levels of military, economic, or political strength to prevent any one entity from dominating the others. It is a fundamental principle in international relations and political theory. The balance of power theory suggests that when one nation becomes too powerful, it can pose a threat to the stability and security of other nations in the system. Therefore, other nations may form alliances, build up their own capabilities, or engage in diplomatic maneuvers to counterbalance the power of the dominant nation [4]. The balance of power can be maintained through various means, including alliances, treaties, arms control agreements, and the distribution of resources. It is often seen as a stabilizing force in international relations, helping to prevent conflicts and maintain peace by discouraging aggression and expansionism.

The balance of power has been a key factor in shaping the dynamics of international politics throughout history and continues to be relevant in the contemporary world [5]. In a state of quasi-anarchy, characterized by the absence of a highly developed and efficient government, law enforcement, legal systems, and supranational community, a current ally has the potential to transform into a future adversary [6].

The balance of power in Central Asia is a complex and evolving dynamic shaped by historical, geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors. Central Asia is a region comprising five former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan [7]. The region is strategically significant due to its vast energy resources, geopolitical location, and historical importance as a crossroads of civilizations. The region has been historically influenced by various empires and powers, including the Persians, Mongols, Russians, and Chinese. These historical legacies continue to shape the region's dynamics and relationships. The Central Asian countries have established various regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to foster economic cooperation, security coordination, and political dialogue among member states. These platforms influence the balance of power by shaping regional dynamics and alignments [8].

This paper comprises two comprehensive sections aimed at dissecting the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. The first section meticulously examines the intricate involvement of external powers within the region, exploring their strategies, interests, and impact on regional dynamics. In contrast, the second section delves into the multifaceted role and significance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in recalibrating the balance of power across Central Asia. By scrutinizing the SCO's mechanisms, initiatives, and diplomatic endeavors, this section unveils its evolving influence and its implications for regional stability and cooperation.

### **Materials and Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach to analyze the shifting balance of power in Central Asia, focusing on the roles of Russia, China, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The research design integrates three primary methodological components: historical analysis, document analysis, and secondary data synthesis.

First, historical analysis serves to contextualize the theoretical foundations of the balance of power concept. This involved a critical review of classical and modern texts in international relations theory, including works by Thucydides, Machiavelli, Morgenthau, and others. The goal was to trace the conceptual evolution of balance of power theory and its applicability to current geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia.

Second, a document analysis method was applied to official statements, policy papers, bilateral agreements, SCO summit communiqués, and speeches by political leaders from Russia, China, and Central Asian countries. These sources were selected from government websites, think tanks, and multilateral organizations to provide insight into strategic intentions and foreign policy narratives. Specific attention was given to SCO charters, resolutions, and regional cooperation programs to understand the organization's institutional role.

Third, secondary data synthesis utilized quantitative datasets from reputable

sources such as the UN Comtrade Database, the China Global Investment Tracker, and reports by international institutions, including the OSW (Centre for Eastern Studies) and Routledge publications. Economic indicators, trade volumes, and infrastructure investment figures were used to substantiate claims about China's and Russia's economic presence in the region.

By triangulating these methods, the study ensures analytical rigor and empirical validity. The multi-method approach allows for both macro-level theoretical reflection and micro-level examination of policies and practices. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how power is distributed, exercised, and contested in contemporary Central Asia.

## **Results and Discussions**

Central Asia has historically been a region of strategic importance, situated at the crossroads of major civilizations and trade routes. It's bordered by Russia to the north, China to the east, Iran to the southwest, and Afghanistan and the Caspian Sea to the south. This geographic position has made it a focal point for external powers throughout history, and it continues to be so in the contemporary geopolitical landscape. The rich natural resources of Central Asia have significantly contributed to the region's attractiveness for external powers. The region is endowed with significant oil and gas reserves, particularly in countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These resources are vital for energy security and economic development, making these countries attractive partners for energy-hungry nations [7].

Central Asia possesses abundant mineral and metal resources, including gold, uranium, copper, and rare earth elements. These resources are essential for various industries, including manufacturing, electronics, and construction, driving interest from countries with high demand for these materials. The presence of these natural resources makes Central Asia an attractive destination for investment and strategic partnerships for external powers seeking access to energy, minerals, water, and agricultural products. However, competition over resource extraction, control, and transportation routes can also lead to geopolitical tensions and rivalries in the region.

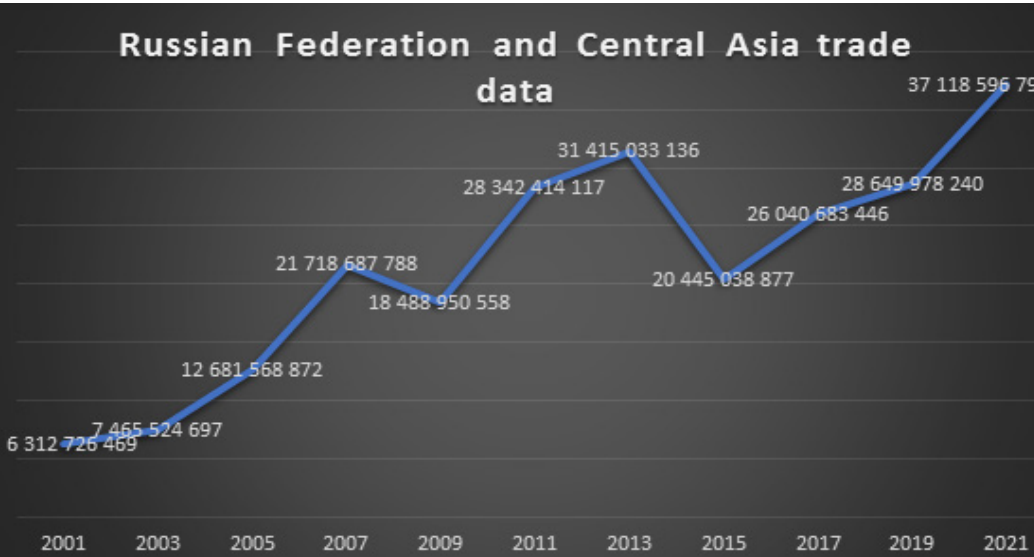
Russia has a significant historical, cultural, economic, and political presence in Central Asia. The region was part of the Russian Empire during the 19th century. Russia's expansion into Central Asia was motivated by strategic, economic, and geopolitical interests, including access to trade routes and the desire to counter British influence in the region. This influence persisted through the Soviet era, during which Central Asian republics were part of the Soviet Union.

Russia maintains significant economic ties with Central Asian countries, particularly in energy. Natural gas is a key component of Russia's economic ties with Central Asia. Countries like Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan possess vast natural gas reserves, and Russia serves as a major market and transit

route for their gas exports. Gazprom, Russia's state-controlled gas giant, has long-term contracts with Central Asian producers for the purchase and transit of natural gas, which contributes to Russia's energy security and economic interests. In addition to natural gas, Central Asian countries also export oil to Russia [9]. Kazakhstan, in particular, is a significant oil producer in the region, and Russian companies have invested in oil exploration and production projects there. Russia's oil refineries process crude oil from Central Asia, and the two regions engage in bilateral trade of oil and petroleum products.

Since Gazprom lost a significant part of its European market, the Russian company has been looking for opportunities to export natural gas to new destinations, including Central Asia. Since the autumn of 2022, Russia has stepped up its diplomatic efforts, extending an offer to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to form a so-called gas union, the main aim of which is to ensure that Gazprom gains access to Central Asia's transmission infrastructure. For their part, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are interested in obtaining Russian gas in view of the inefficient development of their own fields, which do not produce enough gas to meet their high domestic demand while meeting their obligations to export their own gas to the People's Republic of China.

The first tangible result of Russia's efforts came in October, when it started exporting gas to Uzbekistan. Russia will deliver 2.8 bcm of gas per year under a two-year contract that was signed in June 2023 [10]. Its unique feature is that the gas flows in reverse, transiting Kazakhstan via the Soviet-era Central Asia-Center pipeline; historically, it was the Central Asian countries that supplied gas to Russia.



Kazakhstan via the Soviet-era Central Asia-Center pipeline; historically, it was the Central Asian countries that supplied gas to Russia.

Chart – Russia and Central Asia Trade (UN Comtrade Database <https://comtradeplus.un.org/>)

Russia plays a crucial role in security cooperation with Central Asian states. It is a member of several regional security organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is a key framework for security cooperation among Russia and several Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The CSTO was established in 1992 to address common security threats and challenges in the region, with a focus on counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and border security. Russia plays a leading role within the CSTO, providing military support, training, and equipment to member states [11]. Russia maintains military bases in several Central Asian countries, which serve as strategic assets for regional security and the projection of Russian power. For example, Russia operates the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan and the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan. These bases support various functions, including border security, counterterrorism operations, and peacekeeping missions. They also serve as hubs for training exercises and joint military drills involving Russian and Central Asian forces [12].

In addition to military cooperation, Russia engages in regional diplomacy to promote security and stability in Central Asia. Russia participates in multilateral forums and diplomatic initiatives aimed at addressing regional security challenges, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) [13] and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Through these forums, Russia seeks to foster dialogue, cooperation, and confidence-building measures among Central Asian states and other regional stakeholders.

Overall, Russia's involvement in Central Asia is multifaceted, spanning economic, security, cultural, and diplomatic dimensions. While Russia continues to maintain its influence in the region, it also faces competition from other external actors, including China and the United States, which also have significant interests in Central Asia [14].

Central Asia has traditionally been within the sphere of influence of Russia, especially since the Soviet era. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region became more open to external influences. China's increasing presence in Central Asia serves as a counterbalance to Russian influence, providing the Central Asian states with an alternative partner and reducing their dependence on Russia.

China's presence and influence in Central Asia have been growing steadily over the past few decades. Central Asia holds strategic significance for China due to its vast energy resources, geographical proximity, and potential as a market for Chinese goods. China has been investing heavily in Central Asian countries through infrastructure projects, such as roads, railways, pipelines, and energy facilities. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plays a significant role in this



regard, as it aims to enhance connectivity and trade between China and Eurasian countries [15].

The region is rich in natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas. China has been investing in energy projects in the region to secure its energy needs. For example, China has constructed pipelines like the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline network to import natural gas from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. China has become one of the major trading partners for Central Asian countries. Bilateral trade between China and Central Asian states has increased substantially over the years, driven by China's demand for natural resources and Central Asia's need for Chinese goods and investments [16].

According to the China Global Investment Tracker the total volume of Chinese investments and contracts within the BRI in 2013 – 2020 was USD 755.17 billion (as of November 20, 2020), of which 297 billion was in the energy sector, 185.34 billion in transport, 73.22 billion in real estate, 57.44 billion in metals, 22.58 billion in utilities and 15.67 billion in chemicals. At present, trade between China and the five Central Asia republics has risen from US\$ 1.8 billion in 2000 to more than US\$ 30 billion in 2016, while the five states' trade with Russia amounted to only \$23 billion [17].

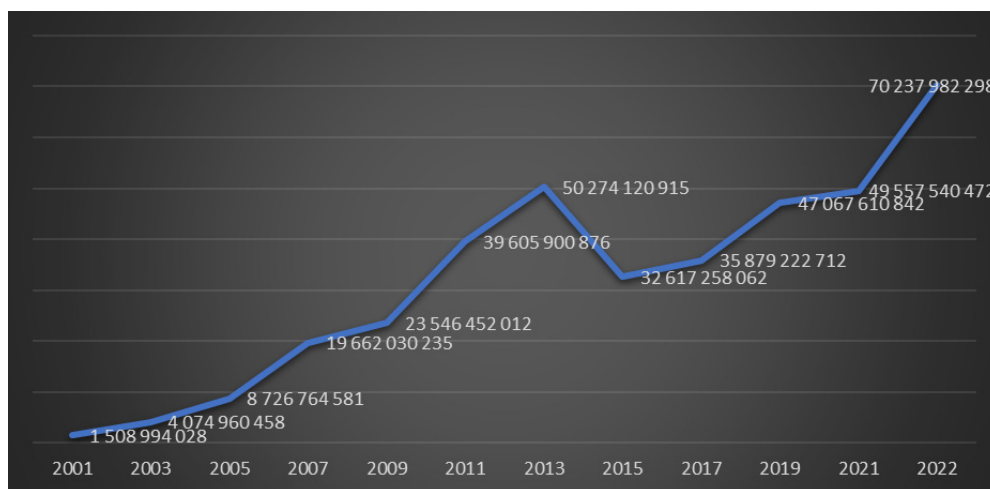


Chart – China and Central Asia Trade  
(UN Comtrade Database <https://comtradeplus.un.org/>)

China has also engaged in security cooperation with Central Asian countries, particularly in the areas of counterterrorism and regional stability. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which China is a founding member, serves as a platform for security dialogue and collaboration among its Central Asian members (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) as well as Russia and China [9].

China's engagement in Central Asia is part of its broader strategy to expand its sphere of influence beyond its immediate borders. By investing in infrastructure projects and forging economic ties with Central Asian countries, China seeks to increase its political and economic influence in the region, thereby enhancing its role as a global power.

Central Asia occupies a strategic geographical position, linking China to Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia [7]. Through its investments in infrastructure, such as the development of transportation corridors and pipelines, China aims to enhance connectivity between these regions, facilitating trade and economic integration. This strategic connectivity also strengthens China's position as a key player in global trade and geopolitics. Central Asia is an area of geopolitical importance due to its proximity to Afghanistan, Iran, and other volatile regions. China's engagement in Central Asia includes security cooperation aimed at promoting regional stability and combating common threats such as terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in which China plays a leading role, serves as a platform for security dialogue and cooperation among Central Asian states and other member countries [18].

China's presence in Central Asia is also driven by its efforts to diversify its supply routes for energy imports and exports. By developing alternative transportation corridors and pipelines through Central Asia, China reduces its dependence on maritime routes, which are vulnerable to geopolitical tensions and disruptions [19].

In general, China's engagement in Central Asia is shaped by a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and strategic considerations. By investing in infrastructure, forging economic ties, and promoting security cooperation, China seeks to enhance its influence in the region while securing access to vital resources and strengthening its position in global geopolitics.

## Conclusion

The geopolitical landscape of Central Asia is undergoing a significant transformation, marked by a dynamic interplay between traditional and emerging powers. The region's strategic location, abundant natural resources, and historical ties to major powers like Russia and China have positioned it at the center of 21st-century geopolitical calculations. This article has examined how the balance of power theory continues to offer a relevant analytical framework for understanding these shifting dynamics.

Russia's historical, economic, and military presence remains deeply embedded in the region, rooted in both the legacy of the Soviet Union and ongoing institutional connections such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Its continued investments in energy infrastructure, security cooperation, and regional diplomacy underscore its intent to preserve its sphere of influence. However, Russia's grip is no longer unchallenged.



China's rapid rise as a global power has introduced a compelling counterbalance to Russian dominance in Central Asia. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has extended its economic reach into the region, financing and constructing large-scale infrastructure projects, developing trade corridors, and becoming a key energy partner. This shift is reflected not only in trade volumes and investments but also in the political alignment of several Central Asian states that increasingly view China as a strategic alternative to Russia.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) emerges in this context as a crucial regional institution that embodies the complex interdependence among Central Asian states and their powerful neighbors. While often criticized for being dominated by China and Russia, the SCO nonetheless provides a platform for dialogue, conflict de-escalation, and multilateral engagement. It offers Central Asian countries a forum through which they can assert their interests, participate in shaping regional norms, and engage with external powers on more balanced terms.

In conclusion, the balance of power in Central Asia is not static but fluid, shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical ambitions. Russia and China remain the dominant actors, but their roles are increasingly defined by both cooperation and competition. At the same time, Central Asian states are not mere passive recipients of foreign influence; they actively navigate these dynamics, seeking to preserve autonomy and leverage competing interests to their advantage. The region's future will likely continue to be shaped by this delicate balancing act, in which institutions like the SCO play an increasingly significant role in maintaining stability and enabling regional agency in a multipolar world.

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## **ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ КҮШТЕР ТЕПЕ-ТЕҢДІГІ: ӨНІРДЕГІ СЫРТҚЫ КҮШТЕР**

**\* Узакбаев Н.<sup>1</sup>, Мовкебаева Г.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>\*1</sup> Нархоз университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан

<sup>2</sup> әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан

**Аңдатпа.** Бұл мақалада сыртқы мемлекеттік субъектілерді және Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымының (ШЫҰ) рөлін терең зерттеу арқылы Орталық Азиядағы дамып келе жатқан күштер балансы зерттеледі. Ол халықаралық қатынастардағы күштер тепе-теңдігінің теориялық негізін құрудан, оның тарихи эволюциясын және қазіргі геосаяси контексттерде қолданылуын көрсетуден басталады. Мақаланың өзегі екі негізгі аналитикалық бөлімге бөлінген.

Бірінші бөлімде сыртқы державалардың, ең алдымен Ресей мен Қытайдың Орталық Азияға қатысуы қарастырылады. Ол Ресейдің тарихи, экономикалық және әскери байланыстары арқылы, оның ішінде энергетикалық инфрақұрылымды және ҰҚШҰ сияқты аймақтық қауіпсіздік саласындағы ынтымақтастық шеңберін пайдалану арқылы тұрақты ықпалын егжей-тегжейлі сипаттайды. Қытайдың өсіп келе жатқан ізі «Белдеу және жол» бастамасы, ауқымды инфрақұрылымдық инвестициялар және сауда мен энергетика саласындағы ынтымақтастықты арттыру арқылы бағаланады. Бұл мақалада екі державаның Орталық Азияның саяси және экономикалық болашағын қалыптастыруда стратегиялық бәсекелестігі және кейде ынтымақтастығы туралы айтылады.

Екінші бөлім ШЫҰ-ның аймақтық геосаясатты қайта калибрлеудегі институционалдық рөлін зерттейді. Ол ұйымның аймақтық қауіпсіздікке, экономикалық ынтымақтастыққа және көпжақты дипломатияға қосқан үлесін бағалайды. Мақалада ШЫҰ Орталық Азия мемлекеттеріне ұжымдық мүдделерді бекіту үшін платформа ұсына отырып, сыртқы әсерге делдалдық жасауға көмектесетін тұрақтандырушы негіз ретінде қызмет ететіні айтылады.

Тарихи талдауды, заманауи деректерді және институционалдық шолуды пайдалана отырып, мақала Орталық Азияның күштер балансы динамикалық түрде өзгеріп жатыр, Қытай Ресейдің дәстүрлі үстемдігімен қатар ықпалды күшейтеді деген қорытындыға келеді. ШЫҰ көбінесе Қытай мен Ресей мүдделерінің кеңеюі ретінде қабылданса да, аймақтық елдерге осы қуат динамикасын үлкен агенттікпен басқару механизмін ұсынады.

**Тірек сөздер:** Орталық Азия, күштер тепе-теңдігі, Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымы, Ресей, Қытай, өңірлік қауіпсіздік, геосаяси стратегия, энергетикалық саясат

## БАЛАНС СИЛ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: ВНЕШНИЕ ИГРОКИ В РЕГИОНЕ

\*Узакбаев Н.<sup>1</sup>, Мовкебаева Г.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>\*1</sup> Университет Нархоз, Алматы, Казахстан

<sup>2</sup> Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби,  
Алматы, Казахстан

**Аннотация.** В этой статье рассматривается меняющийся баланс сил в Центральной Азии посредством углубленного изучения внешних государственных субъектов и роли Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС). Она начинается с установления теоретической основы баланса сил в международных отношениях, подчеркивая ее историческую эволюцию и ее применение в современных геополитических контекстах. Основная часть статьи разделена на два основных аналитических раздела.

В первом разделе рассматривается участие внешних держав — в первую очередь России и Китая — в Центральной Азии. В нем подробно описывается устойчивое влияние России через исторические, экономические и военные связи, включая использование ею энергетической инфраструктуры и региональных структур сотрудничества в области безопасности, таких как ОДКБ. Растущий след Китая оценивается через призму инициативы «Один пояс, один путь», крупномасштабных инвестиций в инфраструктуру и растущего торгового и энергетического сотрудничества. В статье описывается, как обе державы стратегически конкурируют, а иногда и сотрудничают в формировании политического и экономического будущего Центральной Азии.

Во втором разделе рассматривается институциональная роль ШОС в перекалибровке региональной геополитики. В нем оценивается вклад организации в региональную безопасность, экономическое сотрудничество и многостороннюю дипломатию. В статье утверждается, что ШОС служит стабилизирующей структурой, которая помогает опосредовать внешнее влияние, предлагая государствам Центральной Азии платформу для отстаивания коллективных интересов.

Используя исторический анализ, современные данные и институциональный обзор, статья приходит к выводу, что баланс сил в Центральной Азии динамично меняется, при этом Китай приобретает все большее влияние наряду с традиционным доминированием России. ШОС, хотя ее часто воспринимают как продолжение китайских и российских интересов, также предлагает региональным странам механизм для управления этой динамикой сил с большей степенью свободы действий.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральная Азия, баланс сил, Шанхайская организация сотрудничества, Россия, Китай, региональная безопасность, геополитическая стратегия, энергетическая политика

***Information about the authors:***

*Uzakbayev N. – Senior lecturer of Narxoz University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: nurlan.uzakbaev@gmail.com, nurlan.uzakbayev@narxoz.kz*

*Movkebaeva G. – doctor of historical sciences, professor of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Ph.D. in History, Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: gmovkebaewa@mail.ru*

**Авторлар туралы мәлімет:**

*Узақбаев Н. – Стариший преподаватель Университета Нархоз, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: nurlan.uzakbaev@gmail.com, nurlan.uzakbayev@narxoz.kz*

*Мовкебаева Г. – доктор исторических наук, профессор, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: gmovkebaewa@mail.ru*

***Информация об авторах:***

*Узақбаев Н. - аға оқытушы, Нархоз университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: nurlan.uzakbaev@gmail.com , nurlan.uzakbayev@narxoz.kz*

*Мовкебаева Г. - тарих ғылымдарының докторы, профессор, ал-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: gmovkebaewa@mail.ru*

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