'Middle powers' in the post-Soviet space in the context of the necessity for regionalization of international relations

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In the context of the global transformation of international relations, regional powers, which can be considered as middle power, are gaining increasing influence and importance. In the post-Soviet space, and in particular in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, several countries can be classified in this category. Among them are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. A comparative analysis of these three players shows that Kazakhstan has the largest natural reserves and the largest territory, while Uzbekistan's strengths are its industrial potential and population size. Compared with its neighbors, Azerbaijan, with its smaller geographical size and scale of the economy, has managed to solve a number of important tasks as an independent player, in particular, to implement a number of large infrastructure projects that will realize the country's energy and transit potential, restore its territorial integrity after losing part of its territories in 1994.

Keywords: Middle powers, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, South Caucasus

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Introduction

In the conditions of the crisis in international relations caused by the erosion and decline of the influence of international organizations, primarily the UN; the escalation of a complex array of conflicts, including the Russia–West and China–West confrontations; as well as a noticeable crisis of globalization and the demand for an alternative to the dominant Western global financial world system, there is a requirement for a serious attempt at the regionalization of international and economic relations. Such a transformation requires significant political and economic strengthening of regional players that, by promoting their regional agenda, can ensure the diversification of the existing order of international relations away from the traditional centers of power – the United States, China, the EU, and the Russian Federation – and lead to a real transition to multipolarity. The main role in this transformation will be assigned to actors that have been termed ‘middle powers’. At the same time, such a transformation may be associated with the risk of turbulence and conflict at the global and regional levels.

Researchers have identified several possible scenarios for such a change in the system of international relations. The first is the formation of a new hegemon; the second the restoration of the rule of the collective West, as in the period of the late 1990s to early 2000s; and the third is the rise of the middle powers, and their growing role in global governance.[1]

An analysis of the current political and economic situation in the world suggests that the implementation of the first scenario is complicated by the fact that China, as the main contender for the role of the new hegemon, does not yet have the full, necessary range of capabilities and power to become an unambiguously dominant player in the world, capable of forming its own rules of the game in the international arena and imposing them on its partners and opponents. The United States and Western countries still retain control over the global financial market and represent a powerful consolidated force in the economy. Militarily, China ranks below the United States and Russia, despite the growing power of its armed forces.

The second scenario is also unrealizable. The United States and its allies, the European Union, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and Japan, with all their economic power, are unable to form an international system

1 R.Keohane, *After Hegemony*, (Princeton University Press, 1984).

in which they, by relying on their economic and military levers, could regain the status of a truly dominant player in the world.

Thus, we see that, in the conditions of the impossibility of implementing the first two scenarios in a pure form, there is a gradual diversification of international relations with the formation of regional orders. Researchers also classify different variants of the formation of such orders: the establishment of regional hegemony by a great or middle power, or the strengthening of regional institutions, that is, collective rule.[2] The regional order is characterized by a common set of rules and practices that the states of the region agree with and that help them achieve common interests. Such an order can be either hierarchical or equal. At the same time, in the regional order, important roles are played both by large players, which seek to dominate, and medium-sized players, which also identify their interests and, by virtue of their capabilities and tools, participate in the formation of interaction conditions and rules of the game within the regional order.[3]

Turning to the assessment of the characteristics of countries that can be considered as middle powers, it is worth noting that physical criteria are important: geographical size, scale of economy, military power, etc. But we must also consider a number of other parameters that cannot always be unambiguously calculated numerically. There is, for example, the question of political will, the effectiveness of political management, and the strategy of building relations with large and regional players, as well as the ability to achieve their goals in the international arena, where they may be in conflict with other players, even large ones. The assessment can also include as a parameter the ability to initiate and implement large inter-state projects that can change the economic and political regional configuration.

‘Middle powers’ in the post-Soviet space

In the post-Soviet space, three players can be simultaneously considered as potential middle powers. These are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and

2 Lake, D., “Regional Hierarchy: Authority and Local International Order”, *Review of International Studies*, 2009, 35(1), pp. 35-58.

3 Safranchuk, I., Zhornist, V., Nesmashnyi, A., Chernov, D., “The Dilemma of Middlepowermanship in Central Asia: Prospects for Hegemony”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol.20 №3 July-September, August 10, 2022, pp.116-133.

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Uzbekistan. Each of these countries, according to a number of economic indicators – area and population, military power, and disposition in its subregion – can be designated as a middle power with its own set of characteristics. As part of this article, the current author will conduct a comparative analysis of these three regional players in order to identify, among them, the actor(s) that can really be considered regional middle powers.

All three countries differ from their neighbors in their advantage in population size. Uzbekistan is the largest country by population in Central Asia and, in the coming years, will become second to Russia in the entire post-Soviet space, with a population of 36 million, according to the latest estimate[4]. Kazakhstan, with a population of about 20 million people, ranks second in the region. Azerbaijan is a dominant player in the sub-region of the South Caucasus, its population of 10 million surpassing its combined neighbors – Armenia and Georgia –twice over. Geographically, Kazakhstan is among the 10 countries with the largest areas at 2.7 million square kilometers. In comparison, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have more modest territories of 86,600 and 446,000 square kilometers, respectively.

According to these indicators, then, all three states can be considered as middle powers in their regional context. In economic terms, they are also all leaders in their subregions. Kazakhstan is the leader in Central Asia in terms of nominal and per capita GDP. In 2022, Kazakhstan's GDP was $220.623 million, and the country was ranked 55 in terms of GDP of the 196 economies for which the IMF publishes data[5] and its GDP per capita was $11,312. In contrast, the GDP of Uzbekistan was $80,392 million in 2022, ranked 73 by the IMF, with a per capita GDP of $2,326. Uzbekistan is thus noticeably inferior to Kazakhstan in terms of economic indicators, especially per capita GDP, but it demonstrates high development dynamics and ambition for economic growth. Therefore, according to economists, the gap between these countries will fall.

Azerbaijan, with a GDP of $78,721 million in 2022, was number 74

4 See Worldometers on "Population of Uzbekistan", Available at: https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/uzbekistan-population/ (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

5 See Countryeconomy on "Kazakhstan GDP - Gross Domestic Product" Available at: https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/kazakhstan?year=2022 (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

in the IMF ranking. With a GDP per capita of $7,773 in that year, Azerbaijan is an unambiguous economic leader in the South Caucasus in this regard.[6]

In the matter of economic development, Uzbekistan is somewhat inferior to its neighbors. In order to consolidate the status of an economic middle power, official Tashkent needs to ensure progressive rates of economic development in the coming years, outstripping its neighbors in many ways.

Military capability is an important factor in positioning a state as a middle power. All three countries examined are at a fairly high position in Global Firepower's Military Strength Ranking. Azerbaijan took 57th place, and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan 62nd and 63rd places respectively. At the same time, unlike the Central Asian republics, the Azerbaijani army has real, successful combat experience, having won the Second Karabakh War with Armenia in 2020 in difficult geographical terrain. Also, thanks to systematic work, including strengthening its military potential, Azerbaijan managed to fully restore its territorial integrity by establishing sovereignty over its Karabakh region in September 2023, an outcome that is strategically important for the development of the country. Neither Kazakhstan nor Uzbekistan have faced such challenges to their security, nor have they had the opportunity to test their armed forces in real combat conditions, especially in conditions of modern, flank warfare with the use of modern models of military equipment. Therefore, the proximity of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Azerbaijan in this rating is significantly hypothetical, and, among the three countries we have chosen to examine, Baku best fits the definition of a middle power in the military context.[7]

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An important element of state capacity is the ability to implement large infrastructure projects that are designed to fundamentally change the weight and status of an actor and enable it to realize its geopolitical and export ambitions. In this regard, Azerbaijan is a leader in the post-Soviet space, as a player that fully uses its strengths, that is, an

6 See Countryeconomy on "Azerbaijan GDP - Gross Domestic Product", Available at: https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/azerbaijan (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

7 See Global Firepower Index's 2023 Military Strength Ranking, Available at: https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

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advantageous geopolitical position and the availability of natural resources, to maximize its strength in the international arena. Thus, having no independent outlet for its main export product, oil, Baku, with the involvement of interested countries and investors, built the strategically important Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum oil and gas pipelines, and implemented the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), thereby securing Azerbaijan's status as an important energy partner of the European Union.

At the same time, Baku is systematically increasing its transit potential through the development of its own transport infrastructure and the construction of transport corridors with its neighbors. Thus, in recent years, land and marine (Caspian Sea) transport capacities have been radically updated. The maritime infrastructure allows Azerbaijan to be an important element of the extant North–South Transport Corridor. Moreover, Azerbaijan has completed work on another important transport mode: the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, which makes it possible to provide the shortest access route through the territory of Azerbaijan from the Caspian basin to the markets of Türkiye, Georgia, and on to the EU. With the implementation of projects passing through Armenia that are currently under discussion within the framework of the normalization of bilateral relations, Baku could, in coming years, become a key transport hub for a number of major Eurasian infrastructure projects: the Russian–Iranian North–South route; the Chinese One Belt, One Road initiative; and the Turkish regional Middle Corridor.

In contrast, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan's historical record of independent implementation of strategically important megaprojects is not comparable to that of Azerbaijan. Thus, Kazakhstan has been unable to implement the strategically important Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, which would reduce its dependence on Russia for the export of oil and other goods, and at least partially realize the huge transit potential of Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan has not yet been able to implement any of the major infrastructure projects, with the participation of its neighbors, that have been announced. As a result, the prospects for Tashkent's main project, the construction of a transport corridor that would link Central and South Asia through Afghanistan and Pakistan, remain vague.

Serious progress has not yet been observed in other major transport projects in which Uzbekistan is vitally interested, in particular the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway. Although the preparation of a feasibility study for this project has already begun, the main question remains, who will finance the longest part of the 280-km long railway through Kyrgyzstan, and on what terms? Bishkek is not ready to take out new loans in conditions of high external debt, and China and Uzbekistan are also not yet ready to take on the costs of building an expensive infrastructure project.

In terms of energy, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, unlike Azerbaijan, are in an energy crisis. Thus, according to the estimates of the Ministry of Energy of Kazakhstan, the republic will have a shortage of electricity, with a peak deficit of 5.5 billion kWh/y, until at least 2029. According to a report of the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, of 37 combined heat and power plants operating in the country, only 7 stations were registered as being in the so-called ‘green zone’, which means that the level of equipment wear is acceptable and does not carry risks for electricity and heat generation. Of the rest, 11 thermal power plants were registered as ‘yellow zone,’ with moderate wear, and 19 as high-risk ‘red.’ So, in general, the average wear of equipment in Kazakhstan is 66%, and wear at a number of thermal power plants in the country, in particular in Uralsk, Stepnogorsk, Taraz, Kyzylorda, and Kentau, exceeds the critical level of 80%.[8]

In Uzbekistan, over the six years from 2016 to 2022, electricity consumption by the population increased by 40%. The domestic share in the total structure of electricity consumption increased from 26.4% in 2016 to 28.9% in 2022. Demand for electricity from the population is expected to grow by 5–5.3% annually until 2035. According to the same study, taking into account only growing domestic demand for electricity, Uzbekistan needs to increase its power generation capacity by 70–80% of the existing level by 2035, and this does not take into account the country’s ambitious plans for economic development.

According to the head of state, at the time of the most acute energy crisis in Uzbekistan in January 2023, there was an electricity shortage

8 Kun.uz, *Until 2035, the demand of Uzbek citizens for electricity will grow annually by 5-5.3%*, January 31, 2023, Available at: https://kun.uz/ru/news/2023/01/31/do-2035-goda-spros-uzbekistansev-na-elektroenergiyu-budet-rasti-yejyegodno-na-5-53 (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

of 3.1 billion kWh, including 1.1 billion kWh in the regions of the Fergana Valley (Andijan region: 384 MkWh; Namangan: 288 MkWh; Ferghana: 441 MkWh).[9]

Against this background, Azerbaijan has not only fully provided itself with electricity through the modernization of existing gas-fired power plants, but is also implementing a large-scale project to organize the export of electricity to the EU.

Conclusions

Summing up, our research reveals that, according to the totality of the analysis of various factors and characteristics among the three potential players that could be considered middle powers, in many respects only Azerbaijan meets the requirements for this status. Although having a smaller land area and population compared to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan nevertheless managed to build a more effective foreign policy that, by the 32nd anniversary of its independence, allowed the country to restore its territorial integrity, build a system of balanced relations with major regional and extra-regional players, and develop a system of large inter-state infrastructure projects that are key to the country's long-term influence and economic growth.

9 Kun.uz, *By 2030, electricity consumption in Uzbekistan will amount to 120.8 billion kWh*, Available at: https://kun.uz/ru/news/2023/01/28/k-2030-godu-potrebleniye-elektroenergii-v-uzbekistane-sostavit-1208-mlrd-kvtch (Accessed: January 5, 2024)