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Azis Isaev*

Doctoral Student

Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic

720040, 36 Erkindik Blvd., Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5823-4277>

Historical background and development of military alliances in Central Asia

Abstract. The relevance of this study lies in the necessity of analysing the historical premises shaping the modern security system and the divergent defence strategies of Central Asian states amid geopolitical rivalry. The aim of the work was to trace and analyse the evolution of forms of military cooperation and political organisation in Central Asia – from pre-colonial nomadic state formations such as the Yenisei Khaganate to the establishment of contemporary national defence doctrines following the collapse of imperial and Soviet systems. The research employed historical-institutional and comparative-political analysis. It revealed that the military-political organisation of nomadic peoples possessed a complex state structure with a decimal system of troops and a developed hierarchy, while inter-state cooperation in the pre-colonial period, as demonstrated by the wars of Bukhara, Kokand and Khiva, remained situational due to internal contradictions. Political fragmentation facilitated the Russian conquest, which replaced independent alliances with forced integration into the imperial military structure, including the Turkestan Military District. During the Soviet period, this model evolved, reaching its peak in the mass mobilisation of the Second World War, strengthening centralisation and laying the foundations of national military narratives. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian countries began to form their own defence strategies, which can be divided into several types. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan relied on collective security through participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Kazakhstan adopted a multi-vector policy, balancing cooperation with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union to maintain flexibility and independence in its foreign policy. Uzbekistan, in turn, pursued an autonomous approach, seeking to minimise dependence on external alliances and focusing on strengthening its own defence capacity. The practical significance of the research lies in providing a comprehensive historical basis for deeper analysis of current geopolitical processes and the challenges to sovereignty faced by the region's states

Keywords: political unions; protectorate; post-Soviet period; trade routes; ulus

Introduction

The relevance of studying the historical background and development of military alliances in Central Asia, defined here as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, derives from the need for a systematic understanding of the centuries-long models of political and military consolidation that shaped the region's unique development trajectory. Such understanding makes it possible to identify mechanisms of alliance stability and fragmentation, to trace the influence of external factors on internal dynamics, and to explain the specificity of modern integration processes rooted in deep historical experience. The problem of political and military consolidation in Central Asia from the 10th to the early 20th century was closely linked to the region's geographic position as a buffer zone between great empires. In ancient and

medieval times, Central Asia experienced periods of fragmentation and unification under nomadic empires such as the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan and the Timurid state, where military alliances were based on tribal unions and trade routes of the Silk Road. As noted by U. Tomohiko (2018), by the 19th century the region found itself between the Russian and British Empires, leading to the colonisation of the territories of present-day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan by Russia, with partial Chinese control over Xinjiang. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the issue of Central Asian consolidation was defined by the need to balance national sovereignty with participation in international alliances amid global geopolitical competition. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the establishment of the

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*Corresponding author



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Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was motivated by the need to counter terrorism, separatism, and extremism, yet both structures faced internal contradictions and external pressure. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and United States (US) involvement after 2001, including the temporary deployment of military bases, strengthened Western influence but also provoked tensions with Russia and China. According to J. Miglietta (2024), the weakening of post-Soviet structures in the 2020s underscored the need to develop new models of regional stability addressing economic volatility, social conflict, and China's growing economic and military role. F. Bossuyt & B. Dessein (2021) presented an edited volume that systematically analysed European Union-China relations interaction in Central Asia through the lens of multi-level governance, normative power, and infrastructural agendas. The contributors demonstrated that great-power competition coexisted with functional complementarity in areas such as transport, energy, and border security, while the agency of regional states shaped and modified external initiatives. The study's extensive empirical base and comparative approach reinforced its analytical validity for applied regional-order and strategic-planning research. N. Namatbekova & K.T. Saliev (2021) examined Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy between Russia and the United States as a practice of limited balancing with elements of hedging, showing that policy instruments were constrained by domestic resources, transit dependence, and the need to maintain border security regimes. M. Stein (2018) traced the development of peacekeeping units in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as an intermittent process of "spurts and pauses", demonstrating that the institutionalisation of peacekeeping relied on external training, interoperability standards, and sporadic reforms, while personnel and logistical limitations hindered capacity-building.

A.E. Usenov (2024) analysed Kyrgyzstan's balancing strategy between Russia and the United States, concluding that historical and cultural factors shaped a distinctive approach aimed at maintaining equilibrium and avoiding full dependence on any power centre. B. Hierman (2024) examined the region's geopolitical processes as outcomes of major-power rivalry, creating security dilemmas for Central Asian states. The study indicated that these states adhere to an institutional multivector approach to preserve room for manoeuvre between external power centres, allowing them to maintain autonomy without breaking existing channels of cooperation. O. Hynek (2020) explored the geopolitical configuration of Central Asia in the 21st century as a function of power relations among regional and external political actors, concluding that interstate competition defined alliance regimes and institutionalised multi-vectorism, with alliance trajectories largely determined by external security guarantees and competing influence vectors. L. Derviş (2022) conducted a historiographical review of Turkish scholarship on the Yenisei Kyrgyz, systematising and evaluating the Turkish academic literature on this topic and noting that Turkish historiography had made a substantial contribution to early Kyrgyz history while retaining methodological and conceptual specificities. K. Usserova *et al.* (2025) investigated prospects for

regional development in Central Asia, focusing on economic and political dimensions, identifying key factors influencing integration and cooperation processes, and concluding that despite challenges, the region possessed significant potential for deeper economic and political engagement. Despite extensive scholarship on particular historical periods of Central Asia, there remains a lack of comprehensive works tracing the evolution of military-alliance models over an extended historical continuum – from the pre-colonial era to post-Soviet modernity. The purpose of this study was to examine and interpret the development of military collaboration and political structures in Central Asia, tracing the trajectory from pre-colonial nomadic entities like the Yenisei Khaganate to the formulation of modern national defence doctrines. To achieve this, the following objectives were set: to examine the nature and mechanisms of military cooperation in the pre-colonial period, focusing on the situational nature of alliances between khanates; to study the transition from independent alliances to enforced integration within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union; and to conduct a comparative analysis of defence strategies adopted by the independent Central Asian states after 1991 as a direct outcome of their preceding historical experience.

Materials and Methods

The source base of the study was formed from a wide range of narrative, documentary, and historiographical materials covering various historical periods of Central Asian development. To reconstruct early state formations and analyse their military-political organisation, medieval Persian and Chinese chronicles were used, notably the geographical treatise V. Minorsky & V.V. Barthold (2015) and the dynastic chronicle G. Clauson (1969). These texts enabled the identification of early diplomatic and military alliance forms as well as the specific interaction patterns between nomadic and sedentary societies. The period of Mongol conquest and the subsequent transformation of the ethno-political landscape were studied using works by N. Elias & E.D. Ross (1895) and R. Taylor (1972), allowing the tracing of the disintegration of ulus structures and the emergence of new nomadic unions. The formation of the Kazakh Khanate was examined through modern studies, including J. Lee (2019), which highlighted the features of the khanal institution and inter-dynastic relations. Particular importance was given to early-modern documentary materials. The collection of letters from Kazakh sultans to the Qing dynasty, published by J. Noda & T. Onuma (2010), enabled the reconstruction of diplomatic contacts and the assessment of external threats, notably from the Dzungar Khanate. Issues of anti-colonial resistance in the first half of the twentieth century were explored through sources on the Basmachi movement – such as reports by A. Hyman *et al.* (1996) and H.B. Paksoy (1999) – which revealed the movement's internal structure and reasons for decline. The analysis of the modern stage of regional consolidation drew upon both official documents and analytical studies. Key materials comprised R. Weitz (2018), the Astana Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2024), and J. Heckenthaler (2024), which examines the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on

shifting geopolitical dynamics. The national dimension was represented by the Embassy of Uzbekistan (2023), while the global perspective was provided by B.J. Cannon & A. Rossiter (2025), who substantiated Central Asia's strategic role in world politics.

The methodological framework combined several approaches. The historical method established a chronological sequence from the Kyrgyz Khaganate to the post-Soviet era and revealed causal links (Mongol conquests, khanate fragmentation, Russian expansion, Soviet integration). The comparative-historical method was applied to contrast nomadic and sedentary governance models and to analyse defence strategies of modern regional states. The systems approach enabled the consideration of Central Asia as a unified geopolitical region where shifts in individual actors (e.g., the rise of the Dzungar Khanate) affected the balance of power and prompted situational alliances. Critical source analysis allowed cross-comparison of Chinese, Persian, Russian, and Western texts, identifying contradictions and enhancing objectivity. The genetic method traced the origins of ethno-political communities and the evolution of Chinggisid legitimacy, as well as demonstrating how the Soviet military legacy influenced national army development after 1991. The geopolitical approach assessed the impact of major powers (Russia, China, the US) and transnational threats (terrorism, Afghan instability). Finally, institutional analysis distinguished the functions of the CSTO and SCO and incorporated national legal acts, including Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. LRU-458 (2018) and the Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan (1995). Thus, the combination of a multi-layered source base and interdisciplinary methods ensured a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of military-political processes in Central Asia – from medieval state formations to contemporary integration frameworks.

Results

Early Medieval foundations (6th-10th centuries): The Kyrgyz Khaganate. The military-political history of Central Asia is a complex sequence of events that has shaped the region's modern security landscape. The history of the peoples of this region, particularly the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen, can be traced from the early nomadic state formations to the intricate geopolitical interactions of the 21st century. The foundations of power in Central Asia were established in early state formations and preserved through the Mongol interregnum from the 6th to the 15th century. This era defined the ethnic, political, and military paths that shaped subsequent developments and contributed to the formation of modern Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz communities. The history of the Kyrgyz as a state ethnic group began with the Kyrgyz Khaganate, a steppe empire that dominated Central Asia in the 10th century at its peak. Its structure and military organisation exemplified the principles of nomadic governance. The Khaganate was a complex military-administrative formation that surpassed the level of a simple tribal union (Minorsky & Barthold, 2015). Politically, it included a hierarchy headed by a supreme ruler, known as Ajo, whose title evolved into the common Turkic title of Khagan and who held full political, executive, and military power. Beneath him were three high-ranking officials, titled bi, supported by a

multi-tiered administrative apparatus of six ranks of officials. This system enabled the governance of vast territories and ethnically diverse populations. Militarily, the Khaganate was organised according to the decimal system, typical of Eurasian nomads, which allowed for the swift mobilisation and command of large forces. Chinese sources from the Tang Dynasty indicated a total military strength of up to 100,000 troops, divided into 30,000 heavily armed elite cavalry from Kyrgyz tribes and 70,000 lightly armed auxiliary cavalry from vassal tribes, known as *kyshytys* (Clouston, 1969). This two-level structure provided striking power and territorial control.

The weaponry reflected advanced metallurgical skills, and the expertise in ironworking contributed to military superiority. The rise of the Khaganate involved a prolonged conflict with the Uighur Khaganate, culminating in the defeat of the latter in 840 CE. The war, lasting about 20 years, began in 820 when the Kyrgyz ruler Ajo, having allied with the Karluks, proclaimed himself Khagan. As noted by D. Satybaldiev *et al.* (2024), it concluded with the capture of the Uighur capital, Ordu-Balik, marking a period of Kyrgyz dominance on the Mongolian Plateau. Diplomatically, Kyrgyz rulers interacted with the Tang Empire, forming alliances against common enemies. The migration of the Kyrgyz from their Yenisei homeland to the Tien Shan sparked scholarly debates. The peak of military power on the Orkhon in the 9th century was not accompanied by long-term consolidation in the region, and the main shift of the Yenisei Kyrgyz to the Tien Shan is attributed by most researchers to a later period (15th-16th centuries). Historical and population-genetic data, particularly Y-chromosome haplogroups, indicated a synthesis of local proto-Kyrgyz groups and Yenisei migrants. The structure of the Khaganate, with its hierarchy, decimal army, and specialised weaponry, evidenced a developed state apparatus capable of conquest and managing a multi-ethnic empire. Despite the victory in 840, the Kyrgyz could not maintain control over the central regions of the Mongolian Plateau, retreating to the Sayano-Altai, illustrating the logistical limitations of peripheral powers (Satybaldiev *et al.*, 2024). Although the Kyrgyz achieved a decisive victory over the Uighurs and engaged diplomatically with the Tang Empire, their control over the Mongolian Plateau remained short-lived, with later migrations and local population dynamics shaping the region's political landscape.

Mongol conquest and the formation of post-Mongol Central Asian states (13th-18th centuries). The Mongol conquest of the 13th century marked a turning point in Central Asia. It destroyed existing states and reconfigured the ethno-political map, integrating the region into the Mongol Empire. After Genghis Khan's death in 1227, Central Asia passed to Chagatai as the Chagatai Ulus. Kyrgyz tribes submitted in 1207 but repeatedly rebelled (1217, 1218, 1273-1280), showing resistance. The Ulus was multi-ethnic, with a Mongol elite that underwent Turkification and Islamisation (Taylor, 1972). By the mid-14th century, the Ulus split, with the western sedentary part (Maverannahr) coming under the control of Turkic emirs, leading to the rise of Timur, while the eastern nomadic part became Moghulistan, covering present-day Kyrgyzstan, south-eastern Kazakhstan, and parts of Xinjiang. Moghulistan

functioned as a nomadic confederation with limited power under Chagatai khans, influenced by emirs, especially the Dughlats (Perdue, 2005). Kyrgyz tribes played an opposition role in Moghulistan. By the 15th century, the Moghul khans retreated to Eastern Turkestan. By 1510-1511, under the leadership of Tagai-bi (Muhammad-Kyrgyz), the Kyrgyz drove the Mughals from the Tien Shan, advancing toward independent statehood. The Mongol era contributed to the formation of large ethno-political groups through the Ulus framework, from which the Uzbek and Kazakh alliances emerged from the eastern wing of the Golden Horde. After the breakdown of the Mongol Ulus, Central Asia entered the era of khanates from the 15th to the 18th century, characterised by competition for resources, trade routes, and dominance, as well as opposition to external threats like the Dzungar Khanate (Perdue, 2005). The political division of the Turkic-Mongol tribes of Desht-i-Kipchak in the 15th century definitively formed the Uzbek and Kazakh ethnicities. The Uzbek Ulus, led by Abulkhayr Khan (1428-1468), united nomads and captured the cities of Urgench and Syganak. A defeat by the Oirat in 1457 weakened it. Discontent led to the migration of Janibek and Kerei to Moghulistan, where Esen-Buga allocated lands in the Chui and Talas valleys (Elias & Ross, 1895). This group, named the “Cossacks,” expanded after Abulkhayr’s death in 1468, founding the Kazakh Khanate in 1465. Muhammad Shaybani Khan led the Uzbeks south, conquering Maverannahr (1500-1507) and capturing Samarkand, Bukhara, and Herat from the Timurids, solidifying Uzbek sedentary rule (Lee, 2019). The initial division was political but led to cultural divergence, with Uzbeks integrating into urban culture while Kazakhs retained nomadism. Ecological differences shaped systems. The Kazakh structure included three juzes (Uly, Orta, Kishi) as flexible military-administrative units. The Khan’s power from the Tore clan was limited by bi and batyr. Armies consisted of universal cavalry militias, with juzes guarding directions and batyrs leading in wars. The Uzbek khanates were sedentary monarchies with autocratic power and bureaucracy, combining Turkic-Mongol and Persian-Islamic traditions. Armies combined professional troops (nukers/sarbazs) with tribal militias (kara-cherik) and artillery, though they lagged technologically. The Chinggisid principle, based on the legitimacy of power solely for descendants of Genghis Khan, provided the legal basis for rule but caused instability due to numerous claimants to the throne, leading to frequent internecine conflicts and political fragmentation. The Uzbek khanates faced the dilemma of dependence on nomadic cavalry in sedentary centres, complicating modernisation.

By the 17th-18th centuries, the Dzungar Khanate, founded in 1635, became the dominant force in Central Asia due to political centralisation and the active use of firearms. The growing Dzungar threat contributed to the formation of the Kazakh-Kyrgyz alliance, which reached its peak in the Battle of Anrakai (1729-1730), ending in the defeat of the Dzungars and the liberation of previously captured territories (Beisembaeva, 2025). According to J. Lee (2019), the use of firearms by the Dzungars disrupted the existing military balance in the region while also demonstrating the nomadic societies’ ability to rapidly adapt to new war technologies. The outcome of political

and military confrontations in Central Asia was largely determined by the course of the Qing-Dzungar Wars. As P.C. Perdue (2005) emphasised, the destruction of the Dzungar Khanate by the Qing Empire in the 1750s eliminated the previous threat to Kazakh and Kyrgyz lands. However, the region remained a site of continuous conflict. From the 16th to the 18th centuries, Kazakh-Uzbek wars were concentrated mainly in the Syr Darya Valley – a key area for both transit trade and agriculture. During this period, the region represented a zone of perpetual military conflicts, depleting human and material resources, weakening defence capacity, and increasing the vulnerability of local state formations to external and internal threats. The nomadic structure of Kazakh society facilitated mobile warfare and raiding tactics but poorly suited the governance of sedentary urban centres, reinforcing the structural divide between the steppe and the cities. By the late 18th century, the weakening of Central Asian states was evident in the decline of their political and military strength, caused by prolonged internal conflicts and resource depletion. The prolonged wars with the Dzungars undermined the strength of Kazakh and Kyrgyz tribes, internal fragmentation persisted, and technological backwardness relative to the Russian and Qing empires gradually increased (Noda & Onuma, 2010). The political and military vacuum in the region significantly facilitated the Russian Empire’s expansion into the steppe territories, marking the end of the era of nomadic dominance in Central Asia.

Russian expansion and the subjugation of Central Asian khanates in the 19th century. In the 19th century, the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia was shaped by the complex interaction of the Bukhara Emirate, the Khivan Khanate, and the Kokand Khanate (Fig. 1). These states, characterised by their multi-ethnic populations and reliance on tribal structures, were in a state of constant rivalry, which led to the situational and short-term nature of their military cooperation. The military organisation of the khanates reflected the characteristics of their socio-political structures. The armed forces were predominantly made up of irregular militias, called kara-cheriks, which were summoned during wartime. With the strengthening of central authority and the intensification of internal conflicts, efforts were made to form permanent armies. In Bukhara, the core of the army consisted of the emir’s and nobility’s nukers, with a hierarchy from sergeants to colonels. Under Nasrullah (1827-1860), regular infantry and artillery were created with sarbokhona barracks. In Kokand, Alim Khan formed an army from mountain people, including cavalry (sipoh), artillery (gunner), and infantry (soldiers). Khiva relied on Turkmen cavalry, which created both a military force and internal instability. Reforms in the khanates were initiated not in response to the Russian Empire’s threat but in an effort to strengthen their power structures and conduct military campaigns for control over Tashkent, Khojent, and Ura-Tube (Khalikova & Xoliqova, 2020). This approach limited strategic foresight in the face of growing Russian expansion. In the Kokand-Bukhara war of the 1840s, Bukhara allied with the Kazakhs of Kenesary Kasymov, whose 4,000 soldiers, including the forces of Zhankoji Nurmukhamedov, captured the fortresses of Suzakh, Sauran, and Zhulak, weakening Kokand on two fronts.

The alliance collapsed due to differing goals – Kenesary aimed to regain Kazakh lands, Nasrullah sought hegemony, and Zhankoji fought Khiva. This demonstrates that

temporary alliances in 19th-century Central Asia exacerbated internal strife, deepening regional fragmentation (Morrison, 2020).

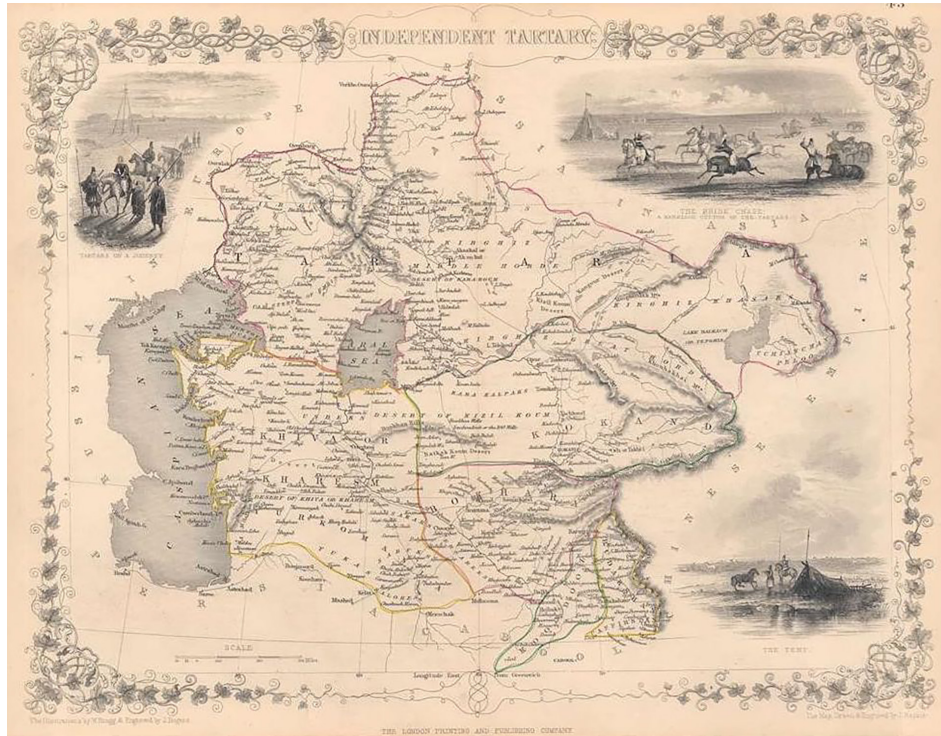


Figure 1. Map of Central Asia in the mid-18th century

Source: R.M. Martin & J.F. Tallis (1851)

As noted by A. Morrison (2020) The internal disunity of the khanates contributed to the success of the Russian Empire's southward expansion. The Russian expansion was not a unified, pre-planned campaign, but rather formed through successive actions initiated mainly by local military commanders aiming to strengthen border security and enhance imperial prestige. The expansion occurred in stages, with the successive partitioning of khanate territories. The capture of the Kokand fortress Ak-Mechet in 1853 by a detachment under General Perovsky revealed the vulnerability of the Syr Darya defensive system. A key event was the capture of Tashkent in 1865 under General Chernyayev. Tashkent, a key trading and strategic centre, became a dividing factor between Bukhara and Kokand. At a critical moment, after the death of the Kokand military leader Alimkul, the population of Tashkent appealed for support from the Bukhara emir, but his intervention was untimely and ineffective, revealing the absence of a coordinated defence system. Instead of recognising the Russian Empire's advance as a common threat, the rulers of the khanates viewed each military defeat as a local issue for the neighbouring state, seeing it as an opportunity to strengthen their own influence. Bukhara's entry into the conflict ended in defeat at the Battle of Irjar in 1866, after which Russian forces occupied Khojent and Jizak without significant opposition, isolating the Ferghana Valley. The conquest of Central Asia was not only a military but also a political triumph for Russia, which utilised existing contradictions, defeating

its opponents one by one. After the military defeat of the Kokand Khanate and the transformation of Bukhara and Khiva into protectorates in 1868 and 1873 respectively, the nature of military cooperation in the region fundamentally changed. It ceased to be voluntary and became compulsory. Russian political agencies were established in the capitals of the khanates, overseeing all military affairs. In this new reality, the armies of Bukhara and Khiva were repurposed as auxiliary forces of the Russian Imperial Army (Morrison, 2020). Knowledge of local terrain, language, and customs became essential in the campaigns for the "pacification" of the region, especially in wars against Turkmen tribes. Former rivals were involved in cooperation under imperial leadership to suppress resistance from neighbouring groups. The protectorate system proved to be an effective and economical mechanism of imperial control, wherein local military-administrative structures were used instead of direct control over vast territories, minimising the losses and expenses of the metropolis while creating the illusion of partial autonomy for local elites. Compulsory "cooperation" served as a tool for consolidating imperial power, directing the military potential of subordinate territories against unruly groups.

Central Asia's incorporation into imperial and Soviet military systems. In the early 20th century, after the fall of the Tsarist regime and the establishment of Bolshevik power, the Basmachi movement emerged in Central Asia, representing an attempt to form an anti-colonial coalition (Khalid, 2015). The movement consolidated various

social groups, including former officials of the khanates, tribal leaders, clergy, and peasants, under the ideological principles of Islam and Pan-Turkism. However, the movement's effectiveness was undermined by internal factors typical of the 19th-century khanates, such as the lack of a unified command structure, competition between leaders, and deep regional and tribal divisions that hindered the creation of a unified front of resistance (Hyman *et al.*, 1996). The suppression of the Basmachi movement marked the end of the era of independent military cooperation in the region and the transition to full integration of local forces into the structures of the Soviet military system, thus eliminating the possibility of maintaining autonomous organisational forms (Paksoy, 1999). The Turkestan

Military District, established during the Tsarist era, became a key instrument of Soviet control in Central Asia. During the Second World War, millions of residents from the Central Asian republics were mobilised into the Red Army, forming national military units that operated as elements of a centralised system, not as independent allies (Table 1). An example of this is the 316th Infantry Division, later renamed the 8th Guards Panfilov Division, formed in Alma-Ata and Frunze from Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. This process reflects the evolution from fragmented alliances of the khanates and unsuccessful attempts at unified resistance to full integration into the imperial military structure, marking the loss of sovereign military subjectivity and independent military cooperation in the region.

Table 1. Number of mobilised citizens from Central Asia in the Second World War

Soviet Republic	Estimated population (circa 1941)	Number of mobilised recruits	Estimated military losses	% of mobilised population	Key national formations
Uzbek SSR	~6.5 million	~1,400,000	~330,000-550,000	~21.5%	89 th , 95 th Separate Rifle Brigades
Kazakh SSR	~6.1 million	~1,200,000	~400,000-600,000	~19.7%	100 th , 101 st , 102 nd , 151 st Brigades; 105 th , 106 th Cavalry Divisions
Kyrgyz SSR	~1.5 million	~365,000	~90,000-100,000	~24.3%	107 th , 108 th , 109 th Cavalry Divisions
Tajik SSR	~1.5 million	~300,000	~60,000-90,000	~20%	17 th Guards, 104 th Cavalry Divisions; 98 th , 99 th Brigades
Turkmen SSR	~1.3 million	~300,000	~70,000-85,000	~23.1%	68 th , 72 nd Mountain Infantry Divisions; 97 th , 98 th Cavalry Divisions

Note: SSR – Soviet Socialist Republic

Source: compiled by the author based on V. Davis (2023)

Military alliances during the Soviet period were a unique phenomenon, fundamentally different from classical alliances between sovereign states. For the Central Asian republics, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, “alliance” meant not voluntary partnership but full and unconditional integration into a unified, centralised military-political system governed from Moscow, which applied equally to all the republics in the region, including Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. The latter, however, adhered to a neutral position according to the Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality of Turkmenistan (1995). This system, built on the foundations of the Red and later the Soviet Army, utilised regional military districts as the primary tools for control and mobilisation. An analysis of this period shows how the republics, deprived of their own military subjectivity, became a strategic resource and an integral part of the Soviet Union's global military machine, leaving a deep and contradictory legacy that determined their defence policies after 1991. The main instrument of military integration and control in the region was the Turkestan Military District (TurkVO), and later, due to worsening Soviet-Chinese relations, the Central Asian Military District, which was separated from TurkVO in 1969 (Klein, 2019). These districts were not merely military groupings but comprehensive military-administrative structures that unified doctrine, personnel training systems, logistics, and armaments across Central Asia. The officer corps was

formed and trained according to unified Soviet standards, creating a shared military culture and worldview among representatives of different nationalities. A total of 37 national divisions and 27 separate brigades were formed in the region. This step, dictated by the acute military necessity of the fall of 1941 and sanctioned by the State Defence Committee Resolution, had significant demographic and socio-political consequences. On the one hand, it allowed for mass mobilisation of human resources, and on the other hand, the creation of units like the 316th Infantry Division (later the 8th Guards Division) laid the foundation for post-war national historical narratives. The division had a multinational composition, and its 107th Rifle Regiment was primarily staffed in Frunze (Kyrgyz SSR), later replenished mostly with recruits of Kazakh and Kyrgyz nationality, whose share reached 75-80% of the personnel. The episode of the battle near Moscow, canonised by the Soviet military press, became an important symbol of the contribution of the peoples of Central Asia to the common victory and remains an element of national historical consciousness in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Davis, 2023). Kyrgyz SSR's contribution also included the creation of three national cavalry divisions (107th, 108th, and 109th) in late 1941. Other units formed in the republic, such as the 385th Infantry Division, 40th, and 153rd Separate Rifle Brigades, also actively participated in combat. Kazakhstan's contribution included the creation of the 100th and 101st Rifle Brigades, as well as the 106th National Cavalry

Division. However, the service for soldiers from Central Asia was associated with significant difficulties. Systemic issues such as language barriers, insufficient combat training, and, in some cases, biased attitudes from the command staff objectively led to higher losses among soldiers from the region.

In the post-war years and during the Cold War, the military system of Central Asia operated centrally. The Afghanistan War (1979-1989) became a pivotal moment: the Turkestan Military District was used as the primary centre for managing and supplying the 40th Army. Initially, soldiers from the Central Asian republics (Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen) were deployed in combat units, assuming that their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic proximity to the Afghans would ease the completion of tasks. However, expectations were not met, as soldiers often made contact with local populations, showed sympathy, and, in some cases, fraternised or deserted, which caused concern among the command. Thus, at the beginning of 1980, most Central Asian soldiers in combat units were replaced with Slavic civilians, mostly from the central regions of the Soviet Union (Miglietta, 2024). Nevertheless, the republics continued to play a key role in the war. Special forces units were formed in cities such as Chirchik (Uzbek SSR) and Kapchagay (Kazakh SSR) to conduct “caravan warfare” under Operation Veil, aimed at intercepting supply routes for the Mujahideen from Pakistan and Iran. The Afghan war provided significant combat experience for a generation of officers from Central Asia, but also exposed the limitations and vulnerabilities of the Soviet military system in an asymmetric conflict. Thus, the Soviet period left behind a dual legacy. On one hand, it created a deeply integrated military space, a unified infrastructure, and a standardised personnel training system, which led to a strong dependence of the newly formed states on Russia after 1991. On the other hand, the experience of the Second World War and the formation of national units fostered the emergence of national military identities, which later became the foundation for the creation of their own armies. This contradiction manifested itself in the various defence strategies adopted by the countries in the region (Klein, 2019).

Defence strategies formed in Central Asian states after 1991 were a direct consequence of the overall Soviet legacy and the unique challenges faced by each republic. The collapse of the USSR left the newly independent countries with only fragments of the unified military infrastructure, particularly parts of the Turkestan Military District, whose command centres and logistical infrastructure were oriented toward solving tasks on the scale of the entire Union, rather than ensuring sovereign defence (Mahmud & Hossain, 2025). This led to widespread military weakness, a lack of modern weaponry, and a severe shortage of personnel, as a significant portion of the experienced officer corps chose to continue serving in the Russian Armed Forces. Under these conditions, each state had to develop its own survival model, which led to the formation of radically different approaches to ensuring national security (Ozdilek, 2025). For the Kyrgyz Republic, characterised by its complex mountainous terrain, limited economic resources, and vulnerable southern borders in the Ferghana Valley, the CSTO has played a central

role in shaping national defence policy, as highlighted by Z. Arynov & T. Umirbekov (2025). The catalyst that definitively determined this strategic choice was the Batken events of 1999-2000, when incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan demonstrated the inability of national forces to independently neutralise such large-scale threats (Stein, 2018). The subsequent deepening of integration within the CSTO was manifested in the placement of a Russian airbase in Kant, regular participation in joint exercises such as Rubezh, and receiving material and technical assistance, which partially compensated for the lack of its own resources (Gelfgat, 2014). Tajikistan, whose emergence as an independent state was marred by the civil war of 1992-1997, took an even deeper path of dependence on external security guarantees. The conflict led to the complete collapse of the national armed forces and state institutions, making Russian military intervention a decisive factor for the survival of the ruling regime. As a result, the Russian 201st military base, inheriting the infrastructure of the Soviet 201st motorised rifle division, became not only an element of allied relations but a de facto guarantor of Tajikistan’s stability and sovereignty (Davidzon, 2022). Thus, the defence strategy of Dushanbe was formed under the influence of existential threats from internal instability and proximity to Afghanistan, leading to a conscious delegation of significant portions of military sovereignty to Russia in exchange for security. Kazakhstan, with significantly larger economic resources and a more stable domestic political situation, adopted a fundamentally different strategy known as “multi-vectorism”. This doctrine involved building balanced relations with all key global power centres – Russia, China, and the West. In the military sphere, this manifested in simultaneous participation in the CSTO, which ensured strategic partnership with Russia, and active cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace programme, signed in 1994 (U.S. Assistance to..., 2001). This interaction with the North Atlantic Alliance was aimed at improving operational compatibility, reforming the defence sector, and preparing peacekeeping contingents according to Western standards, allowing Astana not only to strengthen its own army but also to diversify its security partnerships, avoiding full dependence on a single ally (Bossuyt & Dessein, 2021). Uzbekistan, in turn, pursued strategic autonomy and regional leadership. Inheriting the most powerful military grouping of the Turkestan Military District, Tashkent initially sought to implement an independent defence policy. The culmination of this course was Uzbekistan’s withdrawal from the CSTO in 2012 and the subsequent adoption of its 2018 Defense Doctrine, which legally secured the country’s non-aligned status, prohibited foreign military bases on its territory, and banned participation in military operations abroad (Embassy of Uzbekistan, 2023). The doctrine was supported by an ambitious program for modernising the armed forces and developing its own defence-industrial complex, including the production of armoured vehicles and unmanned aerial systems. Thus, Uzbekistan bet not on collective security or balancing between powers but on building a self-sufficient military machine capable of asserting itself as an independent centre of power in the region (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative analysis of defence strategies in Central Asian countries

State	Strategy name	Key factors	Primary approach	Relations with external powers
Kyrgyzstan	Reliance on Collective Security	Limited resources, complex terrain, vulnerable southern borders (Batken events 1999-2000)	Deep integration into CSTO to compensate for lack of own forces	Russian airbase in Kant, participation in joint exercises, military-technical assistance
Tajikistan	Dependence on External Security Guarantees	Devastating civil war (1992-1997), collapse of state institutions, threat from Afghanistan	Delegation of sovereignty in security to Russia in exchange for stability	Key role of Russian 201 st military base as a guarantor of stability and sovereignty
Kazakhstan	Multi-vector policy	Significant economic resources, stable internal political situation	Balancing relations with key power centres (Russia, China, West)	Simultaneous participation in CSTO and cooperation with NATO through "Partnership for Peace"
Uzbekistan	Strategic Autonomy and Regional Leadership	Inherited powerful military grouping from Turkestan Military District, desire for leadership in the region	Building a self-sufficient military force and developing its own defence-industrial complex	Withdrawal from CSTO (2012), legal non-aligned status, ban on foreign military bases

Source: compiled by the author based on F. Bossuyt & B. Dessein (2021), I. Davidzon (2022), S.E. Ozdilek (2025), K.U. Mahmud & M.S. Hossain (2025)

The security system in Central Asia in the 21st century represents a multi-level structure shaped by regional threats and the interests of global powers. This structure cannot be reduced to a unified system of alliances, as it includes several organisations with different functional roles, complemented by national strategies and alternative cooperation mechanisms (Cannon & Rossiter, 2025). Amid geopolitical instability caused by cross-border terrorism, ethnic conflicts, and resource competition, the structure reflects a balance between collective and individual approaches to ensuring stability. The main components of the regional security system include two key organisations, the CSTO and the SCO. The CSTO, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as members in the region, functions as a military-political alliance. The organisation's charter goals focus on collective defence of sovereignty and territorial integrity against external aggression, with a preference for political methods of resolution. The practical activities of the organisation are ensured by regular military exercises, such as "Unbreakable Brotherhood" and "Border", aimed at improving the coordination of collective forces, practicing joint scenarios, and integrating military potential into a unified system (Weitz, 2018). The SCO, which includes all Central Asian states except Turkmenistan, is not classified as a military alliance in the traditional sense. Its competencies in security are focused on joint counterterrorism, separatism, and extremism efforts, with an emphasis on preventive measures and coordination of efforts. The central mechanism of the SCO is the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure based in Tashkent, which coordinates the activities of the special services and law enforcement agencies of the member states, including information exchange, joint investigations, and the development of unified approaches to monitoring threats. Military cooperation within the SCO is carried out through regular anti-terrorist exercises, "Peace Mission", aimed at practicing joint operations against terrorist threats, thus enhancing the interoperability of armed forces and exchanging experience in asymmetric conflicts (Astana Declaration of..., 2024). Overall, the CSTO and the SCO play complementary roles, with the first ensuring mechanisms for collective defence and direct intervention, and the

second focusing on preventive measures against non-traditional threats and strengthening regional cooperation. An important aspect of the regional security system is the national strategies of Central Asian states, reflecting their geopolitical position and historical context. Kazakhstan employs a multi-vector foreign policy, involving participation in both the CSTO and SCO, as well as cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace program, initiated in 1994, which allows integration of international standards into the national defence system and expands access to resources. Uzbekistan, which has twice withdrawn from the CSTO, enshrined its non-aligned status in the 2018 Defence Doctrine, excluding participation in military-political alliances and the placement of foreign military bases, with a focus on diversifying partnerships. In this context, bilateral military cooperation with various countries is developing, including technology exchanges, joint exercises, and arms supplies aimed at strengthening the national defence potential (Embassy of Uzbekistan, 2023). Since the 2020s, the role of the Organization of Turkic States has increased, developing cooperation in defence and security through joint initiatives, including border control coordination and data exchange, potentially contributing to the formation of an additional regional integration mechanism based on cultural and ethnic ties. The combination of these factors creates an environment in which Central Asian states aim to preserve autonomy through balancing between various centres of influence to minimise risks and optimise benefits from interaction. In the context of global changes, such as the growing influence of China through the One Belt, One Road initiative and the escalation of tensions in Afghanistan after the NATO withdrawal in 2021, the region's security architecture is evolving toward greater flexibility and multi-levelness (Heckenthaler, 2024). This is manifested in the expansion of bilateral agreements, such as military-technical cooperation between Kazakhstan and Turkey, and the activation of the SCO as a platform for coordinating responses to new threats, including cybersecurity and climate risks affecting water resources. The analysis showed that despite the historical dependence on Russia, the countries of the region are increasingly orienting themselves toward

diversified partnerships, reflecting a transition from post-Soviet inertia to independent geostrategic positions.

Discussion

A critical analysis of the presented results showed that the military-political history of the peoples of Central Asia represents a cycle in which internal fragmentation and the inability to form stable, long-term alliances have consistently led to the loss of sovereignty in the face of external threats. Beginning with internecine wars between the khanates, which drained resources and hindered technological modernisation, and culminating in situational, short-lived alliances in the 19th century against the Russian Empire, the elites of the region have consistently demonstrated an inability to overcome local ambitions for the sake of a common strategic goal. The significance of this historical pattern lies in the fact that it proves that the subjugation of Central Asia was not simply the result of superior military power from external empires (the Qing and later the Russian Empire), but a logical consequence of chronic political disintegration. The conducted research presented the outcome of analysing the macro-historical trajectory of military-political fragmentation in Central Asia, while the work of P. Annick (2022) explored the Kyrgyz-Tajik border dispute. The main result of this study was the conclusion that the historical inability to form alliances led to the loss of sovereignty in the region to external forces. In turn, P. Annick's key finding was that the contemporary border conflict is a direct consequence of this imperial legacy, specifically the arbitrarily drawn Soviet borders. The difference in the results of the two studies lies in their level of generalisation. This research formulated a general historical pattern for the entire region, while P. Annick's work reached a specific conclusion about the root causes of a local conflict. Despite the different scales, the conclusions of the author of the current study serve as confirmation of the results of the conducted research. It was shown how the general historical regularity manifests itself in contemporary interstate enmity, reinforcing the thesis of the destructive influence of the imperial past. An analysis of the current geopolitical situation in Central Asia, as presented in the work of J. Engvall (2023), revealed an active process of diversification in foreign policy ties and a desire for strategic autonomy among the countries of the region. Within this approach, there was a noted weakening of traditional Russian hegemony and a strengthening of the roles of other global and regional players, such as China and the EU, which allows the Central Asian countries to pursue a more independent foreign policy. This approach contrasts with historical studies, which focus on the long-term factors that defined the political trajectory of the region. From a historical perspective, it was demonstrated how centuries of internal fragmentation and the inability to form stable alliances consistently led to the loss of sovereignty and the deep dependence on external empires, primarily the Russian and Qing Empires. As a result, a persistent pattern was identified that determined the subordinate position of the region. Comparing these two analytical focuses showed that they are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. The conclusions regarding the current desire for diversification can be understood as a direct reaction of modern political elites

to the very historical vulnerabilities caused by fragmentation. The analysis of long-term patterns of dependence provides the necessary context for understanding the scale and significance of contemporary geopolitical shifts, emphasising that the observed processes are attempts to overcome a deeply entrenched historical legacy. K. Baizakova (2025) conducted an analysis of the multifaceted interactions between the EU and the Central Asian states, focusing on mutual perceptions, common interests, and practical aspects of cooperation in the fields of security, economics, and civil society. In contrast, the research presented here focused on the military-political history of the peoples of Central Asia, tracing their evolution from early nomadic empires through Mongol conquests, Russian expansion, and Soviet integration to defence strategies after 1991. This historical approach revealed patterns of forced alliances, resistance, and subsequent dependence on external forces, such as the role of the CSTO for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which shaped contemporary approaches to security. The differences in the results are due to the different focus of the studies. K. Baizakova analysed contemporary bilateral and multilateral practices, whereas this research emphasised long-term internal fragmentation and integrations that influenced the receptiveness of the countries in the region to EU initiatives. Overall, the historical legacy of military subjugation and adaptation explained the asymmetries in mutual perceptions and interests noted in the work of K. Baizakova (where Central Asian countries viewed the EU as a partner for diversification, not as a primary guarantor of security).

A. Hakobyan (2025) analysed the influence of military conflicts on post-Soviet alliances, focusing on the role of such conflicts in strengthening or weakening regional alliances, including the CSTO, in Central Asia. This study highlighted the significance of local clashes, such as the Batken events of 1999-2000, in forming Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's dependence on external military support, as well as the limited coordination within alliances due to internal contradictions. In contrast, the research presented here covered the centuries-long military-political history of Central Asia, tracing its evolution from the Kyrgyz Khaganate to Soviet integration and post-Soviet defence strategies, focusing on the impact of historical fragmentation on contemporary alliances. The differences in results are due to the different scope of analysis: A. Hakobyan focused on contemporary conflicts and their direct impact on alliances, while the current research revealed long-term historical factors, such as Mongol conquests and Russian expansion, which formed the region's propensity for fragmentation and external dependence. Thus, the historical context uncovered in this study complements the conclusions of A. Hakobyan, emphasising how long-standing trends shaped the responses of Central Asian countries to military conflicts and their alliance obligations. R. Pomfret (2025) analysed the geopolitical position of Central Asia, considering the region as a place of competition between neighbouring countries, China and the EU, for trade and strategic interests. This study emphasised the role of economic and political factors, including dependence on the CSTO and Chinese initiatives like the One Belt, One Road project, in shaping the foreign policy of the countries in the region. In contrast, the research presented here

covered the military-political history of Central Asia from the 6th century to the post-Soviet period, focusing on the impact of historical processes, such as Mongol conquests, Russian expansion, and Soviet integration, on the formation of contemporary defence strategies. The differences in results stem from the focus: the author of the discussed research concentrated on contemporary geopolitical and economic dynamics, while this study uncovered historical roots explaining the region's tendency for fragmentation and external dependence. For example, the historical decentralisation of Kyrgyz and Kazakh tribes, as described in this study, justified their dependence on the CSTO, which correlated with Pomfret's analysis of Russian influence. In the study by V. Wallace & A. Rodriguez (2024), it was established that the crisis in Kyrgyzstan was caused by a combination of internal political instability, economic weakness, and external geopolitical competition. The conclusions highlighted the vulnerability of state institutions, which increased the influence of external powers. The research presented here revealed a persistent historical pattern of Central Asia, characterised by political fragmentation and a limited ability to form stable alliances, leading to the loss of sovereignty and dependence on external empires. The results differ in scale and temporal scope: V. Wallace & A. Rodriguez analysed contemporary crisis factors at the national level, focusing on current political actors, whereas this research revealed the long-term structural causes of the region's vulnerability. The historical analysis complements the conclusions of V. Wallace & A. Rodriguez, showing that Kyrgyzstan's contemporary geopolitical vulnerability is a manifestation of centuries of structural weakness. The military-political history of Central Asia demonstrates a persistent pattern: internal fragmentation and the inability of elites to form long-term alliances became the fundamental cause of the loss of sovereignty. The region's subjugation to external empires was not just a result of their military superiority but rather the logical consequence of political disintegration. This deeply rooted historical legacy of dependence and fragmentation directly affects contemporary processes, explaining the causes of local border conflicts, which are a result of the imperial past, as well as the contemporary desire of the countries in the region for diversification in foreign policy and strengthening autonomy as a conscious attempt to overcome historical vulnerability. It defines the characteristics of interactions with global players, where external partners are seen for balancing rather than as primary guarantors of security. Contemporary crises and political instability in individual countries are also specific manifestations of this long-standing structural weakness.

Conclusions

The study presented a comprehensive diachronic analysis of the military-political history of Central Asia,

tracing the evolution of statehood, military organisation, and interstate interactions from early nomadic empires to the modern defence doctrines of the 21st century. It is shown that the development of the region was cyclical: periods of consolidation and the formation of complex state structures were consistently followed by phases of deep political fragmentation. It was established that the Kyrgyz Khaganate (9th-10th centuries) constituted a developed state entity with a clear military-administrative hierarchy and the capacity to govern a multi-ethnic population. The Mongol era became a turning point, unifying military practices through the ulus system and the principle of Chinggisid legitimacy, while also laying the foundations for the formation of new ethnopolitical communities – the Uzbeks and the Kazakhs. The division of these ethnic groups in the 15th century, initially political in nature, was later reinforced by economic and cultural differences, resulting in a long-term divergence in their military-strategic models. The analysis of the 19th century showed that the reforms of the Kokand, Bukhara, and Khiva khanates were primarily focused on internal politics and failed to counter the expansion of the Russian Empire. This indicated a systematic underestimation of external threats. Subsequent Russian conquest and Soviet integration completed the process of the region's loss of military subjectivity, transforming its population into a mobilisation resource for the centralised imperial system. The Soviet legacy proved to be dual: on the one hand, it facilitated the formation of national military cadres, while on the other, it consolidated technological and doctrinal dependence on Moscow, which determined the dynamics of defence systems after 1991. The Batken events (1999-2000) demonstrated Kyrgyzstan's inability to counter irregular threats independently and accelerated the country's integration into the CSTO, confirming the region's dependence on collective security mechanisms. The contemporary security system of Central Asia is forming as a multi-level structure combining the CSTO and the SCO, national strategies, and alternative platforms. This transition from post-Soviet inertia to diversified partnerships reflects the region's aspiration for greater autonomy and adaptation to a changing geopolitical environment. Future research may focus on the impact of digitalisation and new military technologies on the defence strategies of the countries of the region.

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