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FRANCE AND CENTRAL ASIA IN THE 1990S: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

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Abstract. After the collapse of the USSR, France has shown interest in establishing relations with the Central Asian states in many areas of mutual cooperation. France is one of the first European states to recognize the independence of the five new states in the region. This article provides a historical analysis of the development of cooperation with the Central Asian countries in the 1990s (1991 - 1999). The purpose of the works is to identify the most important milestones and factors that contributed to the development of their relations within the framework of the changing world order over the same period of time.

As a result of this study, the author developed three stages of the development of relations between France and Central Asia in the 90s (1991-1994, 1995-1997, 1998 - 1999) defines.

Russian and Kazakh historiography show that the foreign policy of the French Republic and its economic interests in the region (for example, Total) are inextricably linked. Diplomatic initiatives played a key role in creating a favourable investment climate for oil companies, whose achievements later strengthened France's political influence in the regions.

France sees cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool (soft power) that allows it to stay ahead of other external actors in the Central Asian region.

The study concluded that the 1990s were a crucial period in which France laid a solid institutional foundation for cooperation with countries in the region. France's ability to respond quickly to geopolitical changes, effectively balancing its economic interests and cultural influence, allowed it to establish a stable position.

Key words: France, Central Asia, energy policy, soft power, diplomacy, international relations.

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union provoked deep geopolitical changes in Eurasia, opened a new chapter in the history of international relations. The emergence of independent states in Central Asia posed a difficult task that required the development of foreign policy approaches that would be adapted to the world powers. In this context, France is one of the countries that has traditionally been active on the world stage, has diplomatically recognized the sovereignty of the Central Asian republics and has begun to develop multilateral cooperation.

According to the analyses, France has developed relations with the Central Asian countries very carefully and consistently. Initially, in the conditions of geopolitical instability of the early 1990s, this process was not so obvious, but over time it acquired a clear structure and focus. To understand the features of the process of establishing this relationship, it is necessary to study the historical context and key moments that shaped France's policy in the region.

At the end of the 20th century, France, due to the lack of experience in cooperation with the newly independent states, a pragmatic approach was chosen, combining economic interests with cultural and humanitarian projects.

Materials and methods of research

The methodological basis of this study is based on the principles of historical, objectivity, systematic analysis. The study uses a chronological approach to identify the main stages in the development of Franco - Central Asian Relations (1991-1994; 1995 - 1997; 1998 - 1999).

The comparative method is used to study the features of bilateral cooperation of France with each state of Central Asia. The study also uses elements of structural and functional analyses to assess the role of diplomatic institutions, energy companies and cultural organizations in shaping France's regional strategy.

The initial base includes official diplomatic documents, intergovernmental agreements, presidential speeches, statistical data, materials, from diplomatic archives. Analyses of the content of official statements and agreements made it possible to identify priority areas of cooperation and assess their institutional consolidation.

An interdisciplinary approach that combines the methods of History, Political Science and the theory of international relations makes it possible to comprehensively assess the political, economic and cultural dimensions of the regional policy of France.

Results and its discussion

During the study, a number of determining stages in the evolution of Franco – Central Asian relations were identified. The initial stage (1991-1994), which will be discussed below, was directly related to geopolitical changes after the USSR collapse and served as the basis for the further development of the partnership.

Since the beginning of 1992, the French government has shown its readiness to recognize the sovereignty of all five Central Asian countries and establish diplomatic relations with them. This strategy was implemented almost immediately: in 1992, diplomatic relations were officially established with all the countries of the region, and in a later period (1992-1993) embassies were opened in Almaty and Tashkent [1]. These measures are aimed at strengthening the position of Paris as the main European player in the post – Soviet space.

High-level visits had a decisive impact on the development of bilateral relations. An important event was the visit of French President François Mitterand to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1993, followed by a visit to Turkmenistan in 1994 [2], [3], [4]. The content and structure of the agreements concluded after these visits, as shown in Table 1, shows which areas of cooperation were the priority at the initial stage.

Table 1. Intergovernmental agreements signed during François Mitterand's trips to Central Asia (1993-1994)

Country	Year of visit	Main areas of cooperation	Agreements and Treaties
Kazakhstan	1993	Economic cooperation, energy, culture, education, environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agreement on cultural cooperation - Declaration on science and technology - Agreement between the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan and CNRS (National Center for scientific research of France) - Declaration on the establishment of direct air traffic Paris-Almaty - Cooperation between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs - Protocol on the establishment of an intergovernmental commission <p>The speech on September 16, 1993 focused on the signing of economic agreements (including loans of about 300 million francs), support for environmental projects (for example, saving the island), and the development of cooperation in science and education [5].</p>
Uzbekistan	1993	Economy, environment, science, culture, diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agreement on joint scientific activities and protection of Water Resources - Treaty on political support in international organizations - Framework agreement on cultural, scientific and technical cooperation [6].

Turkmenistan	1994	Diplomacy, economy, investment	Treaty of friendship - Agreement on mutual protection of investments - Agreement on the avoidance of double taxation - Agreement on cooperation between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs The creation of a permanent French diplomatic mission in Ashgabat was also announced [7].
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The analyses in Table 1 shows that France has a selective approach to the development of relations in the region. Kazakhstan has become a platform for comprehensive partnership, including Energy, Science, Environment, and cultural exchange. On the contrary, cooperation with Uzbekistan is limited only to scientific and environmental projects, while cooperation with Turkmenistan is focused on economic investment. This distinction reflects France’s pragmatic assessment of the potential and strategic role of each country in regional politics. From 1992 to 1994, France actively developed elations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as evidenced by the visits of Presidents Nazarbayev and Karimov [8].

These meetings not only deepened political dialogue and established personal contacts, but also paved the way for Economic Cooperation, which is dominated by the energy sector.

Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which have significant oil and gas reserves, have become natural targets for French energy companies. In 1992 and 1993, negotiations began with Kazakhstan on the involvement of French companies in the development of the Tengiz and Kashagan fields. France showed pragmatism by closely combining diplomatic efforts with private entrepreneurial interests: the state created favorable conditions for investment, and the successes of French corporations strengthened France’s political presence in Central Asia.

The initial stage of bilateral cooperation (in 1991 - 1994) was truly fundamental. It included rapid diplomatic recognition, the creation of the necessary institutional framework and the formulation of a pragmatic program of cooperation aimed at the energy sector. All these actions laid a solid foundation on which the Franco - Central Asian partnership was subsequently formed and developed.

The period of institutional consolidation and expansion of the scale of interaction (1995-1997)

In the period from 1995 to 1997, Franco - Central Asian relations underwent significant changes and reached a qualitatively new level. This period was characterized by the formation of strong institutional ties and a significant expansion of bilateral cooperation. Mechanisms of permanent cooperation have been created in various areas. The most important result of this period was the signing of several key intergovernmental agreements that created a reliable legal and organizational basis for a long - term partnership. For example, in 1996, an agreement as signed with Kazakhstan on cooperation in the field of education and science, including the exchange of students and the development of joint academic programs. Similar agreements with other states of the region strengthened the position of France. French companies played an important role as the driving force of economic diplomacy. Total and Elf Aquitaine (nowadays TotalEnergies part) also played an important role.

At the same time, France began to actively expand its cultural influence. The opening of French cultural centers in Almaty and Tashkent, the promotion of the French language through educational programs, the beginning of academic exchanges contributed not only to cultural rapprochement, but also to the formation of a French - oriented elite in Central Asia. The political dialogue has become more systematic and predicable. The annual regular meetings of the Heads of Foreign Affairs bodies and joint participation in international discussions on regional security and economics laid the foundation for a future comprehensive strategic partnership that includes politics, economics and culture.

A detailed description of the main directions and forms of institutionalization of this period is given in Table 2.

Table 2. The main vectors of institutional development of cooperation between France and Central Asia in the period from 1995 – 1997.

Area of Cooperation	Specific Initiatives and Projects	Participants	Year	Outcomes and Significance of Institutionalization
Legal Framework	Agreement on cooperation in education and science	France – Kazakhstan	1996	Established legal mechanisms for academic collaboration, including exchanges and joint research programs.
	Conclusion of similar agreements with other regional states	France – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan	1995–1997	Formation of a common legal space for multilateral cooperation in the fields of science and humanities.
Energy Sector	Participation of Total and Elf Aquitaine in the development of the Kashagan oil field	French companies, Government of Kazakhstan	1996	Institutionalization of France’s role in the energy sector through consortia, long-term contracts, and legal guarantees.
	Expansion of French energy companies in the region	Total, Elf Aquitaine, governments of Central Asia	1995–1997	Securing investments and technology transfer through stable agreements and institutionalized business platforms.
Culture and Education	Opening of French cultural centers in Almaty and Tashkent	Alliance Française, local administrations	1995–1996	Establishment of permanent francophone institutions as instruments of soft power and cultural diplomacy. By 1997, several thousand students studied French in the region [9].
	Launch of academic exchange programs	Campus France, universities in Central Asia	1996 –1997	Formalization of educational mobility and creation of sustainable frameworks for human capital development.
Political Dialogue	Establishment of annual consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs	MFA of France - MFAs of Central Asian states	Since 1995	Institutionalization of foreign policy coordination mechanisms.
	Participation in international conferences on security and regional development	France, regional states, OSCE, UN, others	1995-1997	Integration of Central Asian countries into Euro-Atlantic security and diplomatic architecture.

By 1997, as shown in Table 2, France and Central Asian countries had established comprehensive cooperation. The most successful industries were energy and culture, where significant progress has been made, such as significant investments in energy and an increase in student exchange programs. However, the interaction was uneven: it developed more actively with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and not so large-scale with other republics. This period was the basis for a future strategic partnership, covering the political, economic and cultural aspects of France’s regional policy.

The period 1998 – 1999 marked the transition of the Franco - Central Asian partnership to the practical implementation of projects and the strengthening of existing agreements. An important step was the signing of a memorandum of cooperation in the energy sector between France and Kazakhstan in 1998. This agreement contributed to the expansion of the participation of French companies in the development of the Kashagan and Karachaganak fields, as well as in key energy transportation projects.

At the same time, France has strengthened its role in ensuring regional security due to international efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking, especially in connection with the worsening situation in Afghanistan and its impact on Central Asian countries.

Cultural and humanitarian ties have also been strengthened through student and scientific exchanges, joint conferences and cultural events for the general public. All this helped people get to know each other better and left a positive impression of France in the region [10].

Ultimately, this period can be considered the transition from the establishment of simple diplomatic relations to a reliable, comprehensive partnership that paved the way for further cooperation in the 21st century.

Study of comparative approaches to the interaction of France with the states of Central Asia.

In the 1990s, France showed a clear differentiation in its relations with the states of Central Asia, based on a combination of objective realities and subjective foreign policy goals. An analysis of French interaction in the region shows a clear hierarchy of priorities. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been elevated to the status of objects of comprehensive strategic partnership based on complementary interests.

France has developed multi-vector cooperation with Kazakhstan, in which the energy component (including the Tengiz, Kashagan, Karachaganak fields) is harmoniously combined with intensive political dialogue and cultural exchange.

Uzbekistan was important due to its large population and location on the map, which helped to ensure regional stability. At the level of the Ministry of foreign affairs, regular contacts were maintained with both countries and important intergovernmental agreements were concluded. France was primarily interested in Turkmenistan for its energy potential, but due to the closed nature of its political system, cooperation is primarily with economic projects in the energy sector.

In terms of regional priorities of France, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan took the second place. Bilateral cooperation between these countries focused primarily on the humanitarian dimension, including educational initiatives and the promotion of French – language education, as well as regional security aspects. Limited economic potential and internal instability, especially the civil conflict in Tajikistan (1992 - 1997), hindered the rapid development of cooperation.

The analyses showed that in the 1990s, France pursued a pragmatic policy in Central Asia, prioritizing bilateral cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and was considered as a most promising partner. This approach made it possible to effectively use limited opportunities while maintaining diplomatic ties with other states in the region. As a result, an effective strategy emerged in the early 2000s that created a solid and stable foundation for the continued growth and deepening of bilateral ties.

Conclusion

We believe that the 1990s were crucial for the institutionalization of ties between France and Central Asian countries. Rapid diplomatic recognition, the opening of embassies, signing of the first bilateral agreements, the launch of cultural exchange programs laid a solid foundation for all subsequent interactions.

In our opinion, the historical significance of this period lies precisely in the creation of stable dialogue mechanisms (political, cultural, economic) that ensure the sustainable development of relations, demonstrating their reliability even in a changing international environment.

Thus, we are convinced that the French approach to the region in the 1990s can be described as a strategically justified synthesis of economic pragmatism and soft power tools. This contrasts with the American emphasis on democratization or Russia's dependence on historical and cultural ties.

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ФРАНЦИЯ ЖӘНЕ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ 1990-ЖЫЛДАРЫ: МЕМЕЛЕКЕТАРАЛЫҚ ҚАТЫНАСТАРДЫҢ ҚАЛЫПТАСУ ТАРИХЫ

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Андатпа. Мақалада Франция мен Орталық Азия мемлекеттері (Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан, Түрікменстан) арасындағы қатынастардың 1990-жылдардағы қалыптасуы мен даму үдерісі тарихи тұрғыдан талданады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – КСРО ыдырағаннан кейінгі халықаралық тәртіптің трансформациясы аясында бұл байланыстардың қалыптасу кезеңдерін, негізгі факторлары мен динамикасын анықтау.

Зерттеу нәтижесінде авторлық үш кезеңнен тұратын кезеңдеу үлгісі ұсынылады («үш фаза»: 1991–1994, 1995–1997, 1998–1999), бұл жіктеу саяси-дипломатиялық және экономикалық маңызды оқиғаларға негізделіп бөлінген. Мақалада үкіметаралық келісімдер мен жоғары деңгейдегі ресми сапарларға қатысты мәліметтер жүйелендірілген.

Қазақстандық (отандық) тарихнамада Францияның дипломатиясы мен бизнесінің (мысалы, Total компаниясының) тығыз байланыста әрекет еткені көрсетіледі: дипломаттар мұнай компанияларының жұмыс істеуіне жағдай жасаса, ал олардың табысы өз кезегінде Францияның аймақтағы саяси ықпалын күшейтті.

Сондай-ақ Францияның мәдени дипломатиясы («жұмсақ күш») стратегиялық құрал ретінде қолданылғаны баяндалады. Бұл Францияға өзге сыртқы ойыншыларға қарағанда артықшылық берді.

1990-жылдар Франция мен Орталық Азия арасындағы ынтымақтастықтың институционалдық негіздерін қалау кезеңі болды деген қорытынды жасалады. Жаңа геосаяси жағдайларға Францияның жедел бейімделуі, экономикалық мүдделер мен мәдени ықпалды ұштастыруы оған келесі онжылдықтарда аймақта тұрақты орнын қамтамасыз етті.

Түйін сөздер: Франция, Орталық Азия, энергетикалық саясат, жұмсақ күш, дипломатия, халықаралық қатынастар.

ФРАНЦИЯ И ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ В 1990 – Е ГОДЫ: ИСТОРИЯ СТАНОВЛЕНИЯ МЕЖГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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Аннотация. С момента обретения независимости Центрально-азиатских стран Франция проявляет интерес в углублении сотрудничества со всеми 5 странами в регионе. Эта статья проводит исторический анализ развития эволюции отношений с Центральной Азией в 1990-х годов по 2000. Цель работы заключается в том, чтобы выявить важные этапы и факторы содействующим динамике развития их отношений на фоне меняющегося мирового порядке в то время.

В качестве результата научной работы автор выявляет три основных этапа (с 1991 по 1994 годы, с 1995 по 1997 годы и с 1998 по 1999 годы) становления отношений между Францией и Центральной Азии. В работе представлен последовательный обзор межправительственных соглашений и встречи на высшем уровне глав государств и министров.

Отечественная историография показывает, что внешняя политика Французской Республики и ее экономические интересы в регионе, особенно в сфере крупного бизнеса (к примеру Total), тесно взаимосвязаны. Дипломатические инициативы были ключевым фактором в создании благоприятного инвестиционного климата для нефтяных компаний, чьи достижения служили в последующем для расширения французского политического влияния в регионе.

Франция рассматривает культурную дипломатию в качестве стратегического инструмента (мягкой силы), позволяющее ей опережать других внешних игроков в Центрально-азиатском регионе.

Исследование приходит к выводу, что 1990-е годы стали решающим периодом, когда Франция заложила надежные институциональные основы для сотрудничества со странами региона. Способность Франции оперативно реагировать на геополитическую трансформацию, эффективно балансируя между экономическими интересами и культурным влиянием, позволила ей закрепиться в регионе на долгие годы.

Ключевые слова: Франция, Центральная Азия, энергетическая политика, мягкая сила, дипломатия, международные отношения.