

THIRTY YEARS OF UZBEKISTAN'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: QUO VADIS?

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INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan became independent at a time when the Cold War era was over, and the “new world order” was in the making. The international community, great powers re-discovered Central Asia with its unique peculiarities and a centre of erstwhile Great Silk Road. Much has changed, however, in the past thirty years, and much has been written on the dynamics of great power rivalry in the region. Less is known about how things evolved within the countries of Central Asia.

This paper aims to contribute to understanding Uzbekistan's international relations by looking at thirty years of its engagement with the world and paying particular attention to the changes that we have seen in the past several years. In particular, the paper looks at departures in conceptual as well as practical levels between international relations of the former president, Islam Karimov, and the new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Karimov's period can be described as “Uzbekistan-1.0” and Mirziyoyev's as “Uzbekistan-2.0”.

UZBEKISTAN'S INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT SINCE 1991

The United States was one of the first powers that recognized the independence of Uzbekistan and established diplomatic relations. From the first years of independence, the US demonstrated the regional approach to the countries of Central Asia and advanced the Freedom Support Act (1992) and the Silk Road Strategy Act (1999).

Uzbekistan was perceived and described by American experts as a vital country of the region. The overall relations between the US and Uzbekistan were thriving to the degree that some observers evaluated this trend in Uzbekistan's foreign policy as pro- American. The 9/11 events raised the significance of Central Asia to a higher level in Washington's attitude to Uzbekistan and in March 2002 two states signed the Declaration "On Strategic Partnership". From October 2001 till November 2005 the US airbase was deployed in the southern province of Uzbekistan to conduct an operation in Afghanistan. The then President of the United States G.W. Bush sent thank you note to the then President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov for Uzbekistan's cooperation in US global war on terror.

Unfortunately, the tragic events in Andijan city of Uzbekistan in May 2005 reversed U.S.-Uzbekistan relations. Washington criticized Tashkent for indiscriminate use of force against terrorists. In response, the US airbase which was deployed on the southern airfield of Uzbekistan in 2001, was closed. The period of worsened relations, however, didn't last long. Starting 2008 the relations began to slowly improve reflecting the fact that Uzbekistan was a key country for Washington, DC, in its operation in Afghanistan and the US was important for Tashkent in its manoeuvring vis-à-vis Russia.

Nowadays, Washington and Tashkent are developing good cooperation. During President Mirziyoyev's visit to Washington in May 2018 two sides announced that "New era of a strategic partnership between the United States and Uzbekistan began". During that visit, the US pledged about \$ 5 bn investment package to Uzbekistan. Two sides have a so-called Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABC) mechanism. In February 2020 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Tashkent to attend the "C5+1" meeting with Central Asian foreign ministers and to meet with President of Uzbekistan. European Union's engagement with Uzbekistan has been shaped on two levels: on the bilateral level and within the European Central Asia Strategy. In April 1996, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was signed between the EU and Uzbekistan. In 2007 the first Central Asia Strategy of the EU was adopted. Overall, European agenda in the region comprised cooperation in such spheres as trade, investments, information and communication technologies, education, as well as democratic reforms, good governance and protection of human rights.

Despite "good start" in 1990-s the EU-Uzbekistan relations experienced, so to speak, existential test in the first decade of 2000-s. When a terrorist group Akromiya attacked a provincial Uzbek town Andijan in May 2005, the law enforcement forces cracked down on them.

Hundreds of innocent civilians were killed during the counter-terrorist operation. The US and European countries blamed the Uzbek government for "indiscriminate use of force" and demanded an international investigation of the Andijan events. However, Uzbekistan, having referred to its sovereignty, rejected the demand, prompting the EU to introduce sanctions on Uzbekistan in 2005. In 2008-2009 the sanctions were lifted, mostly due to the German chairmanship of the EU in 2007. The reason for such an improvement was perhaps the same as in the case with the US-Uzbekistan rapprochement.

On 24/01/2011 Uzbek president visited the EU and NATO Headquarters in Brussels. He met with the president of the EU Commission J.M. Barroso, the EU Commissioner on Energy G. Ettinger as well the NATO General Secretary Anders Rasmussen. The latter official stated that the Alliance didn't invite the president, and the visit was initiated by Tashkent itself. At the same time, Rasmussen stated the NATO has a constant dialogue with all partners, including discussion on democracy and human rights. Another topic that was discussed during the meeting was the operation in Afghanistan and the transit of cargo through the territory of Uzbekistan. During the visit, the sides signed Agreement on the Establishment of the EU diplomatic mission (Delegation) in Uzbekistan, Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the field of Energy, Memorandum on Intent on Implementation of DCI Indicative Program (2011-2013).

A new initiative for strengthening economic ties between Uzbekistan and the business community from the European Union was inaugurated in Brussels on 12 November 2019. A not-for-profit, non-government organization, titled "Europe-Uzbekistan Association for Economic Cooperation", which is registered in Brussels with a representative office in Tashkent, established in order to support primarily European business activities in Uzbekistan, rendering various support & insights to the private businesses either already working or trying to enter Uzbekistan market.

Russia's engagement with Uzbekistan has been controversial. In the 1990s, just like all former Soviet republics, Russia was preoccupied with issues and tasks related to post-Soviet adaptation to a new reality. Initially, Central Asia and Uzbekistan were of a low profile in Moscow's foreign policy. Many experts argued that Russia didn't have any clear-cut strategy towards Central Asia. Moreover, President Karimov tried to position himself and his country as relatively independent from Russian influence and diversify international orientations as much as possible.

Despite ups and downs in Tashkent-Moscow interactions, two states signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement (2004) and Alliance treaty (2005). On the bilateral level, two states accrued a significant package of cooperation assets. Russia is the main destination for Uzbek labour migrants, where currently more than 2.2 mln migrants are working. During President Mirziyoyev's last visit to Moscow in April 2017, Russia pledged about \$16 bln investment package. Russia is the second-largest foreign trade partner of Uzbekistan after China.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that, given the permanent character of geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West, in Russia's engagement with Uzbekistan (just like with other newly independent states), geopolitics has been and still remains an explicit or implicit factor, since Moscow needs allies. Therefore, Moscow's post-Soviet integration attempts have been controversial. In 2006 Uzbekistan joined the then Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAzES) in the context of Tashkent's worsening relations with the US and EU after the Andijan events but withdrew from it in 2008. Uzbekistan also ceased its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2012, which in Tashkent's view was evolving towards a military block.

Nowadays, the question of Uzbekistan's possible joining the Russia-led Euro-Asian Economic Union (EAEU) is widely discussed in both Uzbekistan and Russia. The issue became the hottest topic in political discourse among experts and politicians of Uzbekistan, the discourse that deeply split them into two camps – proponents and opponents of membership. Moscow currently is doing its best to lure Tashkent into the EAEU, which in all likelihood is a Russian geopolitical project than a genuine multilateral integration structure. After a half-a-year-long debates, Mirziyoyev finally stated in January that Uzbekistan perhaps would decide to become an observer, not a full member, in EAEU.

China is the major foreign trade partner of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan-China relations during the post-Soviet era have evolved without any serious problem. During Mirziyoyev's visit to Beijing in May 2017, China pledged a \$23 bln investment package and both sides decided that in the near future the bilateral trade turnover would be increased from the current nearly \$5 bln to \$10 bln. Uzbekistan is a member of China-initiated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) since 2001 and supported Xi Jinping's "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB) initiative which is the continental part of the global "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) Initiative.

Given this complicated regional environment, in terms of influence, China will, above all, resort to its soft power assets. Education (two Confucian schools in Uzbekistan as well as studying of Uzbek students in Chinese universities), shuttle trade, tourism, people-to-people communications, cultural and scientific exchanges, alongside infrastructure, become the end and the means of connectivity simultaneously. Soft power as a form of power projection, in general, has its transformative impact. That's why it is also considered by many as a geopolitical tool.

Given China's proximity to Central Asia and implications of SREB-related projects for neighbouring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Uzbek expert community as well as society are experiencing ambivalent feelings of Sino-phobia and Sino-philia which cannot but cause some confusion concerning perceptions and apprehensions of possible Chinese expansion and domination in the region.

Turkey initially identified itself as a role model for Uzbekistan as well as other Central Asian countries. Uzbekistan initially was interested in adopting the Turkish model of building a secular and democratic system in a country with the prevailing Muslim population. However, later on, Uzbekistan-Turkey relations didn't meet expectations because Uzbek political opposition which fled the country after their suppression found shelter in Turkey. Uzbekistan even suspended its participation in Turkey-initiated Turkic Council. Only after Mirziyoyev's coming to power, relations between two states began to improve, and Uzbekistan returned to the Turkic Council.

Iran supposedly was inclined in 1990-s to saturate its Central Asia policy with its religious brand but failed to find any support in countries of the region in this respect. Karimov proposed construction of Tedjen-Serakhs-Mashhad railroad connection in 1997, and due to this project, Uzbekistan is connected with Persian Gulf area via Iran.

Japan, South Korea also have their own Central Asia strategies. These states have very positive relations with Uzbekistan, based on mutual goodwill approach and mutual benefits, and invest in various branches of Uzbek economy as well as provide development assistance projects.

UZBEKISTAN'S VIEW OF ITS FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA: WHAT CHANGED?

The foreign policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan has undergone dramatic fluctuation since gaining independence – from pro-American extreme to pro-Russian one and back again. Such a "pendulum" action of the newly independent Central Asian state reflects its two ambivalent and interrelated stances: Tashkent's perception of the international system as an old stage of power politics – a somewhat Soviet syndrome; and uncertain geopolitical situation that emerged in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. So the Soviet syndrome and post-Cold war geopolitical perplexity confused Uzbekistan's international behaviour and ideational debates.

The first concept of a Foreign Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan, adopted in 1993, declared such principles as:

1. non-participation in any military-political bloc;
2. active participation in international organizations;
3. de-ideologization of foreign policy;
4. non-interference in internal affairs of other states;
5. the supremacy of international law and
6. the priority of national interests.

The second Foreign Policy Concept was adopted in September 2012 and declared, among others, four "no"s:

1. no to the deployment of foreign bases in Uzbekistan;
2. no to the membership in any military bloc;
3. no to the participation in international peace-keeping operations; and
4. no to the mediation of any external power in the resolution of regional conflicts in Central Asia.

This policy affirmed a "national interests first" principle but did not make clear whether and why national interests dictate four such "no"s and what the national interests by-and-large are. One of Tashkent's recent foreign policy "innovations" was the shift to bilateralism as the key principle of its international and regional actions, which means that the country now aims to deal with major international and regional issues on a bilateral level.

In the practical realm, Uzbekistan's international relations under President Karimov drifted from engagement policy in 1990-s to isolation in 2000-s. In 1994 President Karimov proposed the concept "Turkistan is our common home" to boost the regional integration of Central Asian countries. New diplomacy of independent Uzbekistan was quite successful at the time, although with ups and downs. Uzbekistan managed to sign strategic partnership agreements with a number of global and regional powers: US, Russia, China, India, Japan, South Korea. Engagement with such international organizations as UN, CIS, CSTO, SCO, NATO, OSCE, OIC was quite successful – on the one hand and controversial – on the other.

President Karimov stated in 2005 that the situation of "geopolitical uncertainty" emerged in Central Asia, which means that the interests of great powers intersect in the region, creating thereby geopolitical perplexity. This situation of uncertainty together with the growing threat of global terrorism and war in Afghanistan stipulated Tashkent's foreign policy shift from more complex multilateral engagement to the principle of bilateralism, the latter been adopted, perhaps, as rather a protective measure in the context of growing turbulences in both the international system and within the region.

At the same time, Tashkent's stance on regional affairs also changed for the worse. 2006 was a point of bifurcation: after the tragic Andijan events, Uzbekistan decided to join the EvrAzES of which three other Central Asian states were already members. After this, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) was merged with EvrAzES and stopped functioning. As a result, year by year, regional problems began to exacerbate. Karimov even warned of the possibility of "water wars" in the region. Meanwhile, Karimov's decrepit regime, political exhaustion and his death in 2016 "gave birth" to the new regime.

Since 2016, Uzbekistan-2.0 is now all about moving back from isolation to re-engagement. This re-engagement is stipulated by two reasons: a) self-isolation of Uzbekistan – the strongest state in the region – has caused, as was said above, exacerbation of regional problems; b) the personality of the new leader who realized the urgency of new reforms in both domestic and foreign policy. New President Shavkat Mirziyoyev proclaimed Central Asia to be a priority in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. He managed to sign strategic partnership agreements with all neighbouring states.

The President made visits to Russia, US, China, France, Germany, India, UAE, Azerbaijan, South Korea, Japan, Turkey and advanced several international initiatives at the UN GA which adopted corresponding special Resolutions [1]. Uzbekistan also changed its position towards Afghanistan and hosted a big official international conference on Afghanistan which was attended by representatives of 21 countries.

The biggest achievement in Tashkent's foreign policy has undoubtedly been the revitalization of regional cooperation which is vital for Uzbekistan located at the centre of the region and surrounded by other Central Asian countries. At the initiative of Mirziyoyev, the First Consultative Meeting of five Central Asian leaders took place in Astana in March 2018. The second Consultative meeting was in Tashkent in November 2019. The third one is scheduled for 2020 to take place in Bishkek.

President Mirziyoyev's Address to Oliy Majlis (parliament) of Uzbekistan, 25 January 2020, was symptomatic in terms of Ups and Downs of foreign policy. He mentioned the ongoing debates on the issue of possible membership of Uzbekistan in EAEU and stated that the decision would be adopted after a thorough study of the issue in the parliament. Anyhow, Uzbekistan would seek just an observer status, not membership, he said.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES

As Uzbekistan's foreign policy sees major "overhaul", there are several issues that will require close attention both from policymakers and the broader community of observers.

First, for the mid-term perspective, the most important issue for Uzbekistan's international relations is to become a real and responsible leader of Central Asia and, together with four neighbouring countries, advance regional integration. Responsible leadership means neither static position, like being at the top of the hierarchy, nor a hegemonic dominance.

It is rather a dialectical concept designating capacity, accountability, initiative, and will to address common interests and inspire joint actions. Unfortunately, the last decade's trend in regional interactions reveals the motion on the scheme 'integration-cooperation-connectivity'. This was so, perhaps, due to frustration that was caused by the failure of the integration process which successfully started in 1991 (after the collapse of the Soviet Union), successfully proceeded through several stages but interrupted in 2006 after the merger of the CACO with EvrAzES. The pace of regional interactions of states concerned has been slowing down, so to speak, by inertia, until Uzbekistan's exit from self-isolation. Now, Tashkent must reverse this trend back from connectivity to integration by directing Consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders, which were revitalized in 2018, towards stronger institutionalized formats.

Second, Uzbekistan must overcome the 'small country complex' which often limited its manoeuvring vis-à-vis great powers and thereby reduced the capacity of the state to act as an independent actor. It is a matter of the fact that Central Asia is permanently facing geopolitical challenges – so-called Great Game – causing foreign policy bifurcations. Uzbekistan must learn how to avoid being a hostage of geopolitical manipulations.

Third, Uzbekistan, like other Central Asian countries, is also facing a normative challenge. This is a complicated and nuanced issue. For instance, the promotion of democratization and human rights has always been on the agenda of the West with respect to post-Soviet countries and conditioned western support to them. China or Russia never promoted a normative agenda in the region. Uzbekistan has to determine its foreign policy course taking into account this challenge.

Fourth, Tashkent's position toward Afghanistan needs to be modified. Although Tashkent tries to demonstrate goodwill approach with respect to Afghanistan and initiated multiple diplomatic steps supporting peace in this country, the situation there doesn't improve. In this context, Uzbekistan was adhering to the principle "Hope for better but prepare for worse". It is becoming obvious that the regional framework for resolving Afghanistan question is not sufficient without stronger peace-making and peace-enforcing efforts on the part of the international community.

Successfully addressing the above challenges will require, among others, changes in approaches to deliberating and doing policies. In this regard, three related recommendations could be proposed.

First, foreign policy of Uzbekistan has thus far been formulated and implemented predominantly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The MFA, however, remains one of the most “closed” state institutions. Even the Foreign Policy Concept is not available for the public. Therefore, the primary task is to reform the MFA and make it more open and accountable for foreign policy success or failure.

Second, international relations in the 21st century are becoming very complicated with multiple constants and variables affecting international relations and foreign policy-making of states. In these conditions, state agencies will face more problems and challenges which they will not be able to fully comprehend and tackle without getting contributions and assistance from think-tanks and non-state experts. Therefore, the state-private partnership is needed to improve quality and raise the efficiency of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Relatedly, international actors, such as OSCE, EU, the World Bank that support regional cooperation projects, should similarly invest more in the activity of civil society organizations, especially think-tanks, to enrich and broaden policy debates and discussions. ✕

NOTES

[1] For example, on 22 June 2018, the UN General Assembly at the plenary session adopted the resolution "Strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian Region"; on 12 December 2018, the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan was put into practice. During the plenary session of the UN General Assembly, the resolution "Enlightenment and religious tolerance" was adopted.

[2] The constants are about such factors of IR system as the permanence of geopolitics, great power rivalry, principles of international law and the like. Variables imply changing character of the world order, international turbulences, changing nature of security threats and so on.

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