

UZBEKISTAN IN A NEW ROLE? MIRZIYOYEV'S POLICY OF OPENING TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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Uzbekistan with its population of some thirty million is the most populous country and is the strongest military power in post-Soviet Central Asia. We find within its borders the most outstanding ancient cultural centres of the region; Tashkent was the capital of the Turkestan Chief Government in the period of tsarism, as well as in Soviet times; later it developed into the main administrative and logistical hub of Soviet Central Asia. Thus, among the Central Asian republics, besides Kazakhstan, it is probably Uzbekistan that has the best chance of being seen as the regional leader.¹

However, it seems that in the first 25 years of the country's independence, this potential was mostly untapped, at least under the presidency of Islam Karimov. There is a general consensus among analysts that under President Karimov, Uzbekistan was basically a police state, and his regime is regarded as having been one of the most repressive political dictatorships in the world.² In the area of foreign affairs, the Karimov government, seen as draconian even by Central Asian standards, conducted a rather isolationist policy. Similar to Turkmenistan, the country made every effort at keeping its distance from regional integration for perceiving this as a possible threat to its sovereignty; it preferred bilateral interstate relations rather than multilateral cooperation.³ Uzbekistan is one of the few countries that is not a member of the World Trade Organisation.⁴ After long drawn-out negotiations, the country has no more than an observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union.⁵ Similarly, in 2012 it withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Moreover this happened for the second time, as in 1999 they had suspended membership in the organisation, and re-entered again in 2005.⁶

Although the first president's often repeated 'multi-vectoral' foreign policy had its unquestionable successes, primarily in maintaining the regime's stability, which was Karimov's top priority, by the last years of the late president's rule the country had become rather isolated in the international arena. In addition, Uzbekistan's relations with all its neighbours had been very tense, especially with Kyrgyzstan because of the borderlands and enclaves along the borders,⁷ and with Tajikistan primarily because of rivalry in water sharing.⁸

Savkat Mirzijojev, after the death of President Karimov in 2016, was typically seen as a weightless transition figure, or even as a puppet of National Security Service headed by Rustem Inoyatov. Analysts' general assumption was that in his exercise of power, the new head of state would represent continuity with the Karimov regime.⁹ It has to be admitted that both hypotheses have proved to be mistaken. Politically, Mirziyoyev has turned out to be a surprisingly autonomous actor ready to innovate. Shortly after assuming power, not only did he successfully consolidate his own personal power, but also began introducing wide-ranging reforms to the Karimov system.

Mirziyoyev's Opening: The New Neighbourhood Policy

Compared to the Karimov regime, the most noticeable paradigm change with President Mirziyoyev is in his Central Asian regional and neighbourhood policy. In his first year in the office, he visited every neighbouring Central Asian republic,¹⁰ including the notoriously

isolated Turkmenistan. In March 2017, in the course of the meeting in Ashgabat between President Mirziyoyev and Turkmen President Berdimuhamedov, the two presidents signed a number of bilateral agreements, primarily concerning energetics, trade and transport. While visiting the northern Turkmen province of Lebap, they inaugurated a new bridge on the Amu Darya, the border river between their countries.¹¹ In long-term dynamics, the strengthening of Uzbek-Kazakh cooperation seems even more significant than links with Turkmenistan. As noted above, these are the two countries that seem to have the best chance of assuming regional leadership. While Uzbekistan is weightier in terms of its population and military power, Kazakhstan is much larger, and economically it has outperformed Uzbekistan over the past decades. In the early 1990s, according to official statistics, Uzbekistan's GDP per capita was higher but Kazakhstan soon outdid its southern neighbour (by 1997 the latest) because of its impressive economic growth based on exporting raw materials at increasing prices. It should be added that the 2014 drop in oil prices and the trade embargo against Russia hit the national economy of Uzbekistan to a lesser extent than Kazakhstan.¹²

All this would not automatically lead to rivalry between the two countries, although under Karimov's rule relations were reserved at best. Under his presidency Uzbekistan would repeatedly close down its border with Kazakhstan for long periods and their cooperation within regional organisations was also very limited mostly because Uzbekistan's isolationist approach. The only regional organisation that both countries were members of in the Karimov era was the China and Russia dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which Uzbekistan joined in 2001. Thus, Uzbekistan was already a founding member of the SCO but did not attend the meetings of the the 'Shanghai Five' (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan).¹³ Since Mirziyoyev entered office, in addition to the SCO, Uzbekistan has joined the Turkic Council as well.

In March and April 2017, Mirziyoyev paid two visits to Nursultan Nazarbayev, the then president of Kazakhstan. In the course of their first meeting in Astana (the city that has since been renamed Nur-Sultan after the first president), Nazarbayev greeted warmly his "colleague," the president of a country that is a

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"brother," and they signed as many as 92 bilateral agreements, primarily concerning trade between their countries.¹⁴ In April, they decided to reopen a border crossing point in Saryagash, a little town an hour's drive away from Tashkent. The reopening is not so much to facilitate trade as to shorten the route between the Uzbek cities of Tashkent and Samarkand by allowing transit.¹⁵



While solutions are being proposed to overcome border disputes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, demarcating the equally problematic Uzbek-Tajik border poses similar problems. Here it is an added difficulty that the mine fields that Karimov had ordered to be laid have to be cleared.

Progress in the relations with two other neighbours, namely Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has been even more considerable, because under the Karimov regime tensions with these countries sometimes went as far as open enmity. The Uzbek minority in the southern provinces of Kyrgyzstan (primarily in Osh and Jalalabad) repeatedly suffered ethnic cleansing, for example, in 1990 and 2005. Karimov saw the two poorer and considerably less stable countries as potential sources of security threats. This view was certainly not unfounded, as we should remember that around 2000 there were armed incursions into the territories of Uzbekistan by the Jihadist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) coming from the poorly guarded Kyrgyz border sections. In retaliation, the Uzbek air force bombed Kyrgyz areas, and Karimov's characteristic reaction was to lay landmines in the Uzbek-Kyrgyz (and Uzbek-Tajik) border areas.¹⁶

On top of all these conflicts, Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations were further aggravated by serious disputes over the common border. Because of disagreements over territorial rights, after gaining independence the rightful demarcation of country borders did not happen. The 1300-kilometer long Uzbek-Kyrgyz border had at least 36 contested stretches. The most neuralgic points were the four major exclaves within Kyrgyz territories (Sokh, Shohimardan, Jani-Ayil, and Chon). The exclaves are the products of the delimitations in the Stalin era. Obviously, before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, borders between internal republics were far less significant than after the republics had gained their independence. The exclaves noted here are wedged into the Batken Province of Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, in the easternmost corner of Uzbekistan, near Andijon in the Ferghana region, there is Barak, a relatively bigger Kyrgyz exclave, while two Tajik exclaves are located in Uzbekistan (Sarvan) and Kyrgyzstan (Voruk).¹⁷

This is exemplified by the case of Sokh, the largest Uzbek exclave: the area has some seventy thousand inhabitants, mostly ethnic Tajiks living in 19 scattered settlements. The road connecting the enclave to the closest Uzbek town of Rishton is usually blocked by the Kyrgyz army. In August 2019, the road was opened, but

within six days the Kyrgyz authorities had it closed again, referring to their border control obligations as members in the Eurasian Union. The frustrations of Sokh inhabitants often lead to armed conflicts with the Kyrgyz inhabitants of neighbouring villages; most recently there were clashes in June 2020 arising out of a dispute on territorial rights. It is reported that this grave conflict may have caused injuries to as many as several hundred people. It required Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov to flee the area in order to pacify the locals.¹⁸

When paying a visit to Bishkek in October 2017, Mirziyoyev agreed with the Kyrgyz head of state Almazbek Atambayev on putting an end to their border disputes. As a result, they managed to demarcate more than 85 per cent of the border, while agreement on another 200 kilometres as well as on the future of the enclaves have still not been reached. However, following the new Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov's visit to Tashkent 25th of March, Kyrgyz and Uzbek officials announced that "Issues around the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border have been resolved 100 percent." and the two sides signed a protocol on the final delimitation and demarcation of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. Nevertheless similar work remains ahead to realize the agreement in other areas, in particular, the continued Uzbek use of reservoirs in Kyrgyzstan. For example the issue of Orto-Tokoi reservoir, has been at the centre of a heated debate for decades.¹⁹

While solutions are being proposed to overcome border disputes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, demarcating the equally problematic Uzbek-Tajik border poses similar problems. Here it is an added difficulty that the mine fields that Karimov had ordered to be laid have to be cleared (along the Kyrgyz border demining was completed by the middle of the 2000s). The actual demining work that had been first announced in 2005 and again in 2008, was started only after Karimov's death. Mirziyoyev's official visit to Dushanbe in March 2017 was reciprocated by President Emomali Rahmon in August of the same year. This was the first time in seventeen years that a Tajik head of state had visited the Uzbek capital. Following the negotiations between the two heads of state October 2018 eventually saw the start of the cleaning of the mine fields. According to the Uzbek announcement, by the end of 2019 demining had been completed. Nevertheless, several open questions have remained in the Uzbek-Tajik relations and the demarcation of borders, such as the case of the Farkhad Dam and the power station on the upper stretch of the Syr Darya (Sirdaryo) River on the Uzbek-Tajik border. The power station is operated by the Uzbek Uzbekenergo state-run company, while the dam that supplies it is located in the Tajik territory.²⁰

Talking of water works, it should be noted that relations between the Karimov and the Rahmon regimes were not without conflicts, although Karimov had offered Uzbek military support at the critical stage of the Tajik civil war in 1992-1993. Serious disagreements primarily concerning on how water should be shared overshadowed their cooperation.²¹ One example could be Rogun Dam where the tension between the two countries culminated. Construction of the dam system on the River Vakhsh some 110 kilometres off Dushanbe had started in 1976 in the Soviet period as a prestige investment (the dam was originally designed to be 335 meters tall, the then tallest in the world). Tajikistan, a country poor in energy, would need the dam and the related hydroelectric power plant in order to supply energy to the capital, as well to as the Tursunzoda aluminium smelting plant, which is also located along the River Vakhsh. Although this investment is vital for the economy of Tajikistan, its realization has been slow for both financial and technical reasons. Its construction has been repeatedly halted: last time in 2012, and only with the Chinese assistance could it be resumed in 2017. Uzbekistan was against the project because it worried that its supply of drinking and irrigation water would be affected. On several occasions, President Karimov opposed the investment vehemently, in 2012 going as far as threatening Tajikistan with war.²²

In this light, it was a genuine surprise that following the bilateral meetings between Mirziyoyev and Rahmon, the latter seemed more flexible in the issue of water sharing. Openness was advised by Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov on 5 June 2018. In his statement he made it clear that if the Tajik party was offering suitable [water sharing] guarantees, the Uzbek government would no longer oppose the investment.²³

Closer Uzbek-Tajik cooperation in future would have a wider scope in one more strategic direction: both states have a strong vested interest in peace in Afghanistan. Relative peace in Afghanistan is vital for Tajikistan, as we should remember that the Tajik civil war in the early 1990s may as well be interpreted as the spillover of the Afghan crisis to Tajik territories. The main supporters of the Tajik Islamist opposition were the Tajik mujaheddin warlords in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan also got involved in the civil war in Afghanistan, admittedly, but not as directly as Tajikistan. Even though the conflict did not spread to the Uzbek state, the Karimov regime was an active supporter of the forces of the ethnically Uzbek General Dostum, one of the main pillars of the opposition to Taliban. Beyond vitally important considerations of security policy, and for Uzbekistan's energy and transport infrastructure it would be ideal to have a more secure and more peaceful Afghanistan than





at present. Two important projects are as follows: the first is helping Afghanistan extend the railway line between the towns of Hairatan and Mazar-e-Sharif at least as far as Herat, thus establishing the shortest overland route from Uzbekistan to a sea port.²⁴ The second is the construction of the TUTAP (Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) electric power line, a long-cherished dream of heads of state in Central Asian republics, although its future is very unclear.²⁵

In view of these trends, it is hardly surprising that President Mirziyoyev is apparently trying to play a much more active role in Afghanistan than his predecessors. Over the past decades, we have witnessed Uzbek government's efforts in acting as a mediator in the conflict in Afghanistan. On his visit to Doha in March 2019, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov met not only the then internationally recognized Ghani government,

but also representatives of the Taliban. Prior to this meeting, in June 2018, Taliban diplomats had already been invited to the Afghan peace conference in Tashkent, but eventually no Talib had attended the event. However, two months later, in August 2018, they paid a visit to the Uzbek capital.²⁶ Mirziyoyev's diplomacy has been active in Afghanistan also in the context of the Corona virus pandemic. According to an Uzbek state media report Uzbekistan sent a trainload of humanitarian aid to Mazar-e-Sharif, including masks, thermometers and basic foodstuffs.²⁷

Conclusion

This paper intended to give a brief overview of the aspects of 'Mirziyoyev's opening' that seem to be most important. The foreign political implications of the opening are affecting the entire region, possibly transforming the dynamics of regional cooperation and the rivalry of superpowers. Uzbekistan is the only republic in the region that has common borders with the four other Central Asian post-Soviet states, as well as with Afghanistan. Therefore, partly due to its natural position, Uzbekistan may be the driver of regional integration if it maintains more open and friendlier relations with its neighbours. It is quite possible that global powers will also have to reckon with a more active and more dynamic Uzbekistan in the post-Soviet Central Asia.

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