

UZBEKISTAN'S NEW REGIONAL POLICY: POSITIVES AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS

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EUCACIS in Brief publishes opinion pieces and short articles written by fellows of the EUCACIS PhD Support Programme, alumni of the Master Programme „The European Union and Central Asia in the International System“ (EUCAIS) and other members of the wider EUCACIS network. It aims at making the debates within the network, notably during the EUCACIS conferences and PhD schools, accessible to a wider public. The papers are available on the programme website: www.eucacis.eu

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Introduction

The most dramatic changes in Uzbekistan's policies since Shavkat Mirziyoyev became leader in December 2016 are the changes in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, particularly towards its regional neighbours. A friendly Uzbekistan, willing to be a reliable partner in regional affairs, is a major change for Central Asia.

Uzbekistan is at the centre of Central Asia. The easiest way to go east or west, and often north or south, through Central Asia is through Uzbekistan. But after 1991 independence, Uzbekistan gradually tightened its borders. For most of the 21st century it has been difficult and on occasion, impossible, legally, to cross into Uzbekistan from neighbouring states. As a result, regional trade has never come close to reaching its potential, but there were other problems as well.

President Mirziyoyev has made good on one of his earliest vows as Uzbekistan's leader; a pledge to prioritize improving relations with Uzbekistan's immediate neighbours. It has led already to freer movement across borders, not only for vehicles and trains but also for people, and in this there are early signs on unforeseen consequences. There are other potential consequences further away in the future. Uzbekistan ascendant, becoming the regional power that first president Islam Karimov wanted the country to be, might be an unsettling thought to some in Central Asia, and farther away.

To understand how much Uzbekistan has changed in two years with Mirziyoyev as president, one needs to recall what happened during the 25 years when Karimov led independent Uzbekistan.

The Karimov era

Uzbekistan closed its border with Tajikistan in 1992 shortly after the Tajik civil war started. Eventually Uzbek authorities even halted use of the railway that connected Uzbekistan's section of the Ferghana Valley with Tashkent because a section of the line ran through Tajikistan's territory. There is good reason to believe Uzbekistan helped the renegade Tajik Army colonel Mahmud Khudaiberdiyev enter Tajikistan in November 1998 in an attempt to seize control in the northern part of Tajikistan.

In December 2002, less than one month after a reported assassination attempt on the Turkmen president, Turkmen security forces searched Uzbekistan's Embassy in Ashgabat, then the Turkmen government expelled the Uzbek ambassador.

During the violence in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijan in May 2005, tens of thousands of people fled across the border into Kyrgyzstan. A few of these people had sparked the violence in Andijan, prompting a heavy-handed government response that left, officially, 187 people dead, but based on witness accounts, possibly several times that number.

Uzbekistan closed the border in the wake of the Andijan unrest but control over the border gradually loosened until June 2010 when violent clashes erupted between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in and around the two largest cities in southern Kyrgyzstan, both located near the border with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan closed down the border with Kyrgyzstan again and it did not reopen until after Mirziyoyev came to power.

Movement across the Kazakh border was greatly curtailed. Movement across the Turkmen-Uzbek border was almost completely cut for years by agreement, or at times, due to animosity, between Ashgabat and Tashkent.

Many sections of Uzbekistan's borders with its neighbours remained undemarcated and during Karimov's reign every neighbour at some time accused Uzbek border guards of wandering into their territory, sometimes several kilometres deep, and trying to remark the border. Obviously, Afghanistan is an exception since the Amu-Darya, one of Central Asia's two great rivers, is the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

Mirziyoyev's relaunch

This cursory summary of Karimov's regional policy illustrates the problems Mirziyoyev, the country's prime minister from 2003 until the time of Karimov's death, inherited when he came to power. Uzbekistan's economy was stagnant, in large part due to its reluctance, sometimes refusal, to cooperate with neighbours to open up export routes.

That policy hurt the neighbours also, particularly Tajikistan located in the south eastern corner of Central Asia. Ringed by the Pamir mountains, the only easy access to the outside world lies through Uzbekistan. To a lesser extent this is true also for Kyrgyzstan which shares a roughly 1,375-kilometre border with Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan is bounded in the east by the Tien-Shan and Pamir mountains, and borders Tajikistan in the south. Inability to trade and move goods through Uzbekistan leaves Kyrgyzstan with only Kazakhstan as a reliable route to the wider world.

Uzbekistan's relationship with Kyrgyzstan changed overnight following the announcement of Karimov's death on September 2, 2016. In late August, just before Karimov's death, Uzbek police and security forces had seized control of a mountain, Ungar-Too, with a television relay station on it and this was not the first time this had happened. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan both claimed the mountain but the station was staffed by Kyrgyz nationals. During the problem in August 2016, Kyrgyz authorities referred to these workers as "hostages."

Negotiations were going nowhere but on September 6, three days after Karimov's funeral, Kyrgyz media outlets were reporting talks had started, by September 9, the Kyrgyz employees of the station were free, and by September 18, Uzbekistan had removed all forces from Ungar-Too. By September 20, representatives of the two countries were meeting to discuss demarcation of the border and have met more than a dozen times since. Some 85 percent of the border is now demarcated.

When Mirziyoyev made his first official visit as Uzbekistan's president to Kyrgyzstan on September 5-6, 2017, posts along the two countries' border in the Ferghana Valley opened fully to pedestrians and vehicles. There was celebrating at border crossings as people crossed over for the first time in years. Local officials gave speeches, there was singing and dancing, and feasting.

The Tashkent-Andijan-Osh-Ishkeshtam-Kashgar highway opened in 2017 and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are moving forward in implementing a 20-year-old plan to link their two countries to China via a railway line.

Importantly, the two governments are making progress in resolving water issues, potentially the most incendiary problem in Central Asia. They have agreed to use key reservoirs along their border and, at least according to Kyrgyz officials, Uzbekistan has dropped any objections to construction of the massive Kambar-Ata-1 hydropower plant (capacity some 1900 MW) in Kyrgyzstan, and Tashkent has even expressed an interest in participating in the project.

Similarly, Mirziyoyev's government has dropped Uzbekistan's previous objections to construction of the Roghun hydropower plant in Tajikistan (capacity some 3600 MW). Under Karimov, Uzbekistan had done all possible to hold up work on Roghun. Uzbekistan held up railway traffic into Tajikistan, particularly shipments of building materials intended for Roghun.

Karimov said in 2012 that projects that threatened water supplies to downstream countries could be reason for "war." Many took the comment as a reference to construction of the Roghun hydropower plant.

In November 2011, there was a mysterious explosion in southern Uzbekistan along the Termez-Kulob railway, a key link for supplying Tajikistan. The 17 November 2011 explosion was almost certainly the work of Uzbek authorities. After a few days, Tashkent blamed "terrorism," but few were convinced that was true, since the usual crackdown on suspects Muslims did not follow. Uzbek authorities declined Tajikistan's offer to send workers to help restore the link, and Tashkent repeatedly refused to give an estimate as to when repairs would be completed. It was only this year, on March 1, that damaged was repaired and the line started operating again.

President Mirziyoyev has made official visits to every neighbouring Central Asian country since becoming president. His first visit as Uzbekistan's president was to Turkmenistan on March 6-7, 2017, and he followed by making an official trip to Kazakhstan on March 22-23, 2017. He has been in both countries several times since. Mirziyoyev's visit to Tajikistan on March 9-10 this year marked the first time an Uzbek president made an official visit to Tajikistan since July 2000.

All the Central Asian presidents have paid official visits to Uzbekistan since Mirziyoyev came to power. Uzbekistan's new willingness to cooperate with its neighbours paved the way for the Central Asian summit in Astana on March 15 this year, the first summit of Central Asian leaders in 19 years.

During these visits and meetings, Uzbekistan has signed new trade agreements with its neighbours. Roads and railways that Uzbekistan had blocked for years have reopened to facilitate these trade agreements. Uzbekistan has been repairing power transmission lines so that Turkmenistan can again export electricity to Tajikistan. Both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are again exporting electricity to Uzbekistan.

This new cooperation is true not only for Uzbekistan's Central Asian neighbours but for Afghanistan as well. Uzbekistan has plans to expand road and railway connections with its southern neighbour, and construct new power transmission lines to provide more electricity to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is trying to help bring stability to Afghanistan, hosting an international security conference in November 2017 in which the situation in Afghanistan was featured prominently, and hosting a conference on Afghanistan in March 2018 that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani attended.

Mastering new challenges

These are all tangible benefits of Uzbekistan's new policies under President Mirziyoyev, but an equally important benefit for Uzbekistan's neighbours is the much friendlier tone Tashkent has struck under Mirziyoyev in relations with them.

Uzbekistan has the largest population in Central Asia, and the largest military. And under President Karimov, Uzbekistan was a bully. Uzbekistan borders all the other Central Asian states, and part of the reason Uzbekistan could trade at all through these neighbouring states was due to concern in Ashgabat, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Astana, and before in Almaty that angering Uzbekistan could prompt Karimov to unleash his army on them.

Karimov had threatened war over water use and Tashkent had a hand in the 1998 coup attempt in northern Tajikistan and the 2002

assassination attempt on the Turkmen president. When Uzbekistan shut off gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as frequently happened, there was nothing Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan could do except publicly criticize the suspensions of supplies.

Mirziyoyev's friendly Uzbekistan is therefore a relief to neighbouring leaders who had become used to Karimov telling them what to do, rather than consulting with them on issues.

But there already are unforeseen developments from Uzbekistan's new regional policies that may not be positive.

There have been reports from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan of an increase in Uzbek migrant labourers in recent months. Kazakhstan might be able to absorb the extra workers but Kyrgyzstan might find this more difficult. In Kyrgyzstan's case, these Uzbek labourers are going to Kyrgyzstan's section of the Ferghana Valley, an area that has twice since 1990 seen violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks.

The freer flow of people across Central Asia's borders could become a worry for Uzbekistan's neighbours. Uzbeks are the largest ethnic minority group in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, and are the second largest minority group in Kazakhstan. Fortunately, so far Uzbekistan has proven to be the least nationalistic of the Central Asian countries but if this changes it could cause problems throughout Central Asia.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan eased rules for crossing their common border. That allowed families separated by the frontier to again cross regularly to see relatives on the other side of the border, and there are new bus routes for Tajiks to travel to Samarkand and Bukhara, two ancient Silk Road cities in modern-day Uzbekistan that are closely connected to Tajik history.

But just weeks ago, Tajik authorities had to modify border trade policies after Uzbek merchants started crossing and selling goods, eggs in particular, for lower prices than local Tajik merchants could match. Similar problems have been reported in southern Kazakhstan.

When Uzbekistan was uncooperative, and even hostile, in Karimov's days, the other Central Asian states learned to cooperate without Uzbekistan. The alliances formed in these days are now under being strain.

In late 2017, when there were problems between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, then Kyrgyz president Almazbek Atambayev said if Kyrgyzstan were pressured by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan could turn to Uzbekistan. Atambayev could never have made such a statement when Karimov was alive.

After independence, Karimov saw Uzbekistan as becoming the regional leader but to his frustration, the other states were less keen on following Tashkent's lead. Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev is the last of the original Central Asian leaders, indeed he is the last of the original CIS leaders. Nazarbayev is regarded as the "grand old man," or "Aq Saqal"¹ of Central Asia. But Nazarbayev just turned 78 on July 6, 2018. It is likely that when Nazarbayev finally leaves office, it will leave Mirziyoyev as the dominant leader in Central Asia. Uzbekistan will not overtake Kazakhstan as the economic power in Central Asia any time soon but after Nazarbayev's departure Uzbekistan will probably emerge as the regional leader.

Mirziyoyev's and his new regional policies might achieve the goals Karimov's administration could not; a more unified Central Asia that looks to Uzbekistan for leadership. While that might be good for Uzbekistan, and possibly even for Central Asia, the Russian, Chinese, and possibly other governments might not view new solidarity in Central Asia under Uzbekistan's leadership as being a positive development. For now, seemingly all the countries with ties to, or stakes in Uzbekistan seem pleased with the new image President Mirziyoyev has given the country. Uzbekistan is a key country, and possibly the key country in Central Asia due to its location. Many countries have sought better ties with Uzbekistan for years, but relations were difficult and sometimes nearly impossible with Karimov as president. Mirziyoyev's government has rekindled possibilities that have long been on hold.

¹ "White Beard" in Turkic languages, referring to the white haired/bearded elders who ran Central Asian villages in pre-Soviet times.