



Feature Article
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Uzbekistan-2.0: Continuity and Change in Foreign Policy

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Uzbekistan's foreign policy can roughly be divided into two periods, corresponding to its two Presidents, Islam Karimov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Despite Karimov's slogan "Turkistan is our common home," indicating an embrace of the wider region, territorial and water disputes in Central Asia overshadowed intra-regional affairs. Since Mirziyoyev came to power, Uzbekistan has taken dramatic steps to overcome such regional discord, instead emerging as a leader in building cooperation both on the region-wide level and through the budding alliance with Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, Tashkent's regional and international behavior has sometimes been quite cautious and hesitant, particularly as relates to great powers surrounding Central Asia. The question going forward, in particular against the background of Russia's war in Ukraine, is whether this approach verging on neutrality is sustainable, and whether Uzbekistan must emerge more assertively on the regional scene.

Uzbekistan's second President Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016 in a transition of power that was met with great expectations from the population.

Many believe that this was the essential turning point in Tashkent's domestic and foreign policy since the country's independence. Yet there is both continuity and change in Uzbekistan's foreign policy that explain the country's international behavior. Some observers describe Uzbekistan's foreign policy as a pendulum movement, others as largely continuous. The dialectics of this process is determined by domestic factors such as

the personalities of decision-makers as well as international factors related to the dynamics of the new world order.

Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy since Independence

Uzbekistan's foreign policy has evolved with the country's development throughout its period of independence, which can symbolically be divided into two stages: Uzbekistan 1.0 and Uzbekistan 2.0. The first stage is associated with the first President Islam Karimov and the so-called transition period.

Uzbekistan's first Foreign Policy Concept was adopted in 1993 and declared the following key principles of the country's foreign policy: non-participation in military-political blocks; active participation in international organizations; de-ideologization of foreign policy; non-interference in internal affairs of other states; supremacy of international law and priority of national interests. The second Foreign Policy Concept was adopted almost 20 years later.



Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Sadyr Japarov (courtesy of mfa.uz)

In practice, however, Uzbekistan's foreign policy since the 1990s has been more sophisticated and controversial than doctrinally declared. Observers who have pointed to such controversies have described it as pendulum movement and the art of clever maneuvering on the international scene. This is a partially correct evaluation. From a more dialectical point of view, the international behavior of any state can be conceived as a fluctuation between engagement and disengagement since the international arena itself is full of controversial, troublesome, and uncertain situations. This is

why retaining freedom of maneuver for different forms of engagements and disengagements in international affairs has been very characteristic of Tashkent's international stance from the very beginning.¹

Foreign policy during the transition period was relatively efficient in terms of accomplishing international objectives pertaining specifically to this period. The most disturbing challenge to Uzbekistan's security stemmed from

Afghanistan, where the civil war lasting from 1996 to 2001 subjected Tashkent to constant stress due to the risk of escalation and spillover. Karimov advanced a number of international initiatives from the UN platform to address the situation in Afghanistan, yet with mixed success.

Despite Karimov's slogan "Turkistan is our common home," indicating an embrace of the wider region, territorial and water disputes overshadowed intra-regional affairs, especially between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over the construction of the Rogun hydropower station and between

¹ Farkhod Tolipov, "Flexibility or Strategic Confusion? Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan", in *Uzbekistan Initiative*, Central Asia Program, the George Washington University, No. 2, February, 2014,

<http://origin.library.constantcontact.com/download/get/file/1110347635144-152/UI+papers+2-Farkhad+Tolipov.pdf>

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over border delimitation and the construction of the Kambarata hydropower station.

At large, however, Tashkent managed to preserve a peaceful environment in the region. In one of its most important achievements during the first period, it managed to defuse the regional ambitions of particular states and firmly determine that it would not belong to someone else's sphere of influence. It also established new political and economic connections and sought self-affirmation as a member of the international community enjoying full rights, which would in the long run enhance its role in the region.² This new regional role was manifested with Mirziyoyev's ascent to power in December 2016 and the emergence of Uzbekistan 2.0.

Uzbekistan's New Course

From the very beginning of his term, Mirziyoyev proclaimed Central Asia to be the priority in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. This proclamation was a sign of Tashkent's new foreign policy course and constituted a revitalization of Karimov's proclamation that "Turkistan is our common home" from the early 1990s. Both continuity and innovation are visible in this approach. First, it should be noted that Mirziyoyev managed to unfreeze the regional format of interaction between the five Central Asian states by initiating a special mechanism, the Consultative Meetings (CMs) of

presidents. This format proved to be relevant and functional; four meetings have already taken place within the framework, which is gradually evolving towards institutionalized regional integration.

Mirziyoyev managed to elevate relations with neighboring states to the highest level by signing special Strategic Partnership agreements and enhanced its cooperation with other important players in the region, including the U.S., Russia, China, Turkey, India, the EU, and Azerbaijan.

In December 2021, an unprecedented event took place in relations between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the two states signed a Declaration on Alliance Relations. In November 2022 this document became a formal Treaty. The declaration envisaged the creation of a special institution, the Council of Heads of States, which could pave the way for a further institutionalization of the regional integration process.

Meanwhile, Mirziyoyev proclaimed a "New era of strategic partnership" during his visit to Washington in May 2018, where he confirmed Tashkent's commitment to the 2002 Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the U.S. and Uzbekistan. A new format for Strategic Partnership Dialogue was set up during the visit, accompanied with U.S. reaffirmation of its support for Uzbekistan's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu welcomed Uzbekistan's ongoing program

² Yalcin, R. *The Rebirth of Uzbekistan. Politics, Economy and Society in the Post-Soviet Era.* (UK: Ithaca Press, 2022), p.236.

of reforms aimed at liberalizing the economy, promoting respect for human rights and protecting fundamental freedoms, and developing democratic institutions and civil society, and highlighted increasing U.S. assistance to support these reforms.³ A Strategic Partnership Dialogue took place in Washington in December 2022.

Until recently, Mirziyoyev's foreign policy has been conceived as pro-Russian. In 2021, Russia was Uzbekistan's number one foreign trade partner. However, the war in Ukraine became a serious challenge for Uzbekistan, which is directly affected by the implications of this war just like other former Soviet republics. On the one hand, Uzbekistan does maintain economic cooperation and business ties with Russia, despite the risk of being targeted by secondary sanctions. Thus, while Uzbekistan understands the tragedy of Ukraine, it does not want to sacrifice its cooperation with Russia. On the other hand, Tashkent cannot ignore the international community, particularly the West, which condemns Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The UNGA voting in April 2022 on Russia's aggression (where Uzbekistan did not vote) illustrates how delicate the situation is for countries like Uzbekistan.⁴

Another complicated issue of foreign policy priorities that has preoccupied Uzbekistan's policy-makers for three years is the country's attitude towards the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Political circles, the expert community, media and the public are divided as to whether Uzbekistan should become a member of this organization. Since December 2021, Uzbekistan has an observer status in EAEU, which is an ambiguous position that can last indefinitely.

At the same time, Tashkent's seemingly ambivalent policy hides a strong formulation and articulation of national interests. According to Uzbekistan's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdulaziz Kamilov, "We are considering criticisms from the existing member countries ... We want to study their dissatisfaction,"⁵ indicating that Tashkent takes into account the experiences of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from their EAEU memberships.

Foreign Policy Perceptions and Regional Geopolitics

For Uzbekistan, Central Asia has always been the highest foreign policy priority. Since independence, Uzbekistan has unequivocally taken the position that the five states of Central Asia

³ Joint Statement between the United States and Uzbekistan Following the Inaugural Meeting of the Strategic Partnership Dialogue, <https://uz.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-between-the-united-states-and-uzbekistan-following-the-inaugural-meeting-of-the-strategic-partnership-dialogue/>

⁴ Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan Between Ukraine and Russia: The Curse of Positioning," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 31, 2022.

<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13719-uzbekistan-between-ukraine-and-russia-the-curse-of-positioning.html>.

⁵ Hashimova U. Uzbekistan still Contemplating Eurasian Economic Union Membership, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/uzbekistan-still-contemplating-eurasian-economic-union-membership/> November 15, 2021.

represents a common and integrated region. In the early 1990s, Karimov proclaimed the concept “Turkestan is our common home” and advanced the slogan “Tajiks and Uzbeks are one people speaking two languages.” This perception has persisted over more than 30 years of independence.

The process of regional integration has been complicated and affected by geopolitical deviations. In 2004, Karimov highlighted Central Asia’s strategic uncertainty due to the intersecting interests of major powers in the region, forcing the regional states to navigate a complicated geopolitical landscape.

Although geopolitical and strategic uncertainty remains a key factor in regional politics, Mirziyoyev has announced that Central Asia will be (or remain) a priority in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy. He managed to overcome misleading and counterproductive stereotypes about competition for regional leadership between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and make an example of the overall relationship between these two states for other neighbors.

Of special importance is the normative notion that Central Asian nations are fraternal peoples. Presidents and official representatives of the five regional states constantly make statements about their brotherly relationships, which have historically been shaped and nurtured. Some experts, however, question this thesis arguing that this

normative aspect has limited relevance in regional affairs, which are dominated by realist views of national interests, pointing out numerous problems including border incidents that occur from time to time, various disputes over water management as well as narrow nationalist approaches to various other regional issues. However, the fact that these incidents have never escalated into critical international crises is often overlooked in the analysis of regional developments.

Without exaggeration, Uzbekistan (especially under the current president) has manifested itself as a positive example of friendly and fraternal attitudes towards neighbors. Practically, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy in the region gives more impetus to micro-level integration alongside the macro-level processes mentioned above. Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has stimulated local level connectivity projects, creating and developing various forms of links (transport, business, cultural, sport) with provinces of neighboring countries.

There is great support in the region for these endeavors. Regional experts argue that the region has a special advantage – an ability to negotiate and to find compromise and mutually beneficial solutions, skills the countries concerned have demonstrated for many centuries.⁶ Thus, Uzbekistan’s efforts in the region are met with understanding, support and hope.

⁶ Rasul Rysmambetov, “Regional Fortress: Is Central Asia Ready to be Independent?” Turan Press, September 1, 2022.

<https://turanpress.kz/politika-i-vlast/3109-regionalnaja-krepost-gotova-li-centralnaja-azija-stat-sa-mostojatelnoi.html>

Meanwhile, Tashkent's regional and international behavior has sometimes been quite cautious and hesitant. For example, Uzbekistan demonstrated a neutral position during the UN voting against Russia for its aggression against Ukraine and later voted against Russia's exclusion from the UN Human Rights Council in April 2022. Uzbekistan's MFA stated that the Taliban is not a terrorist organization, although it is included in the international UN list of terrorist organizations. Uzbekistan maintains close ties with the Taliban, whereas Tajikistan rejects contacts with the organization and does not recognize its government. Uzbekistan does not dare to block Russian propaganda TV channels that dominate its information sphere, despite Tashkent's desire to demonstrate a neutral position towards Russia's war in Ukraine.

These and other controversies in Uzbekistan's foreign policy suggest that the country's foreign policy needs to be revised from a doctrinal point of view. Surprisingly, Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Concept is a closed document, unavailable for public access.

Prioritized Issue Areas and Countries

The central and most complicated conceptual question of Uzbekistan's foreign policy is how to define the country's national interest in the world. The manner in which political parties, governmental bodies, and the media and expert communities formulate Uzbekistan's national interests is often influenced by lobby or oligarchic groups, the self-imposed "complex of a weak state," geopolitical biases, misinterpretations of history, and subjective preferences.

Thus, Uzbekistan's national interests should be accurately defined. The country's foreign policy is now in an awkward situation and in need of reform. From a fully realist perspective, Tashkent is preoccupied with national and regional security. The perception that the country and the whole region is located in a geopolitically turbulent area has stipulated very cautious and slow steps in foreign policy.

Uzbekistan does not prioritize any state in its foreign policy and has signed strategic partnership documents with geopolitical rivals such as the U.S. and Russia. As noted above, Uzbekistan's "moneybox of strategic partnerships" includes the U.S., Russia, China, the EU, Turkey, India, Pakistan, South Korea, Japan and all Central Asian neighbors. Yet Central Asia is set to remain the main priority in Tashkent's foreign policy, a fact underpinned by the practice of Consultative Meetings.

At the same time, Uzbekistan is objectively interested in developing strategic partnerships with leading actors in the international community, while its strategic partners are interested in such cooperation with Uzbekistan. In particular, the U.S. reportedly intends to deepen its ties with

Uzbekistan, which will help Uzbekistan strengthen its security and reform process.⁷

Uzbekistan also intends to enhance its strategic partnership with the EU and was recently included in the EU's GSP+ system, signifying mutual support and interest in enhanced cooperation.

China is currently Uzbekistan's main foreign trade partner. Tashkent fully supports the ambitious "Belt and Road Initiative" which China proposed in 2013. The recent SCO summit in Samarkand once again demonstrated warm and friendly relations between the two states.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy

The self-imposed "complex of a weak state" not only limits Tashkent's freedom of maneuver on the international arena; it also creates moral and normative challenges for its domestic and foreign policies. Uzbekistan recently became a target of multiple information attacks and pressure from the Russian side. Any major attempt by the Uzbek government to articulate the importance of the state language (Uzbek), national values, independence and sovereignty, and positive relations with Western states habitually causes rapid and critical reactions from Russia.

Tashkent's foreign policy suffers from an excessive insistence of neutrality which, albeit not officially proclaimed like in the case of Turkmenistan, seems to be a *de facto* foreign policy principle. However, this is a special type of neutrality because it contrasts with Tashkent's eagerness to play a leading role in Central Asia and an active role on the international arena, especially when it comes to the situation in Afghanistan or its initiatives at the UN.

Uzbekistan's purported neutrality with regard to the war in Ukraine can also create the wrong impression, since both the political establishment and the expert community understand the reality and maintain a position that can be described as "tacit disagreement" with Russia.

Notably, Moscow frequently tests the strengths and weakness of Uzbekistan's foreign policy through information attacks, to which Tashkent consistently responds with corresponding counter-messages.

However, this strategy has its limits; Russian propaganda still dominates Uzbekistan's information and media sphere, which cannot but affect public opinion and create ideologically and morally biased perceptions in society. A recent journalistic survey, for instance, revealed that a significant share of Uzbek citizens support Russia in its war with Ukraine.⁸

⁷ John C. Hulsman "America needs a strategic partnership with Uzbekistan," *The Hill*, September 09, 2022.

<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3632514->

[america-needs-a-strategic-partnership-with-uzbekistan/](https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3632514-america-needs-a-strategic-partnership-with-uzbekistan/)

⁸ "Rus propaganda mashinasi natizha beryapti. Özbekistondiklar kim tomonda?" [The Russian

The Way Forward

First, increased dynamism of Central Asian regional integration is expected and urgent and Mirziyoyev should continue his leading role as an initiator and engine in this process.

Second, a vitally important issue in the near term is diversification of foreign economic relations and transport corridors. In particular, Uzbekistan has been articulating what is currently termed Central Asia-South Asia connectivity for years. Yet the implementation of this mega-project depends on peace and stability in Afghanistan, which will hardly be achieved in the near term.

Third, it seems that Uzbekistan will in the coming years finally become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which has been a long-term foreign policy objective. Some recent signs indicate real movement in this direction.

Fourth, Uzbekistan's leadership must overcome its (irrelevant, or biased) neutrality as soon as possible, if it wants to forge an assertive, proactive, efficient and independent foreign policy. The success of foreign policy is made up of four basic factors: adequate evaluation of the nation's power; a consistent formulation of national

interests; a comprehensive foreign policy strategy (doctrine); and skilled diplomacy. These pillars of foreign policy must be strengthened and further developed.

Fifth, Tashkent should finally decide that the EAEU, which is a dubious, weak and irrelevant organization, has become even less attractive and workable in the context of the war in Ukraine and the sanctions regime imposed upon Russia, and give up any intention to become a member.

Analysts pointed out 20 years ago that “[T]he main challenge for Uzbekistan in its external relations is how to use these powers to advance its own interests without antagonizing others or succumbing to their hegemony.”⁹ One important question that can be added to this contemplation is what the country should do if the strategic partnership with a certain power objectively ceases to function in its full capacity and intent and even contradicts strategic partnerships with other powers.

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propaganda machine is paying off. Whose side are the Uzbeks on?], Rost Khabarlar, September 28, 2022. <https://rost24.uz/uz/news/1179>

⁹ Resul Yalçın, *The Rebirth of Uzbekistan. Politics, Economy and Society in the Post-Soviet Era*. (Ithaca Press, 2002), p.289.