

**UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER MIRZIYOYEV:
CHANGE OR CONTINUITY?**

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ABSTRACT

After Mirziyoyev came to power in December 2016, impressive developments have taken place in Uzbekistan's relations with the Central Asian republics, regional and external powers, and international institutions. These developments have led some to concur that Uzbekistan is going through remarkable or milestone/drastring changes in its foreign policy. The objective of this paper is to analyze Uzbekistan's foreign policy under Mirziyoyev, in comparison with that of his predecessor, and to reveal whether there have been changes or continuities in Uzbekistan's foreign policy under his administration. The study puts forth that Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev has continued to maintain its military neutrality and prioritize Central Asia in its foreign policy. This demonstrates that Karimov's core foreign policy strategy has been maintained under Mirziyoyev. The only difference has been his country's constructive foreign policy approach to its relations with the regional and external actors.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Foreign Policy, Mirziyoyev, Karimov, Change, Continuity.

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan has pursued an active foreign policy after Shavkat Mirziyoyev became the new president in 2016. Since then, Uzbekistan has sought to strengthen its relations with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan and restore and improve its relations with other two Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with which its relations had been strained almost for two decades. While Uzbekistan and Russia initially started to cooperate closely in economic issues by signing a package of agreements and trade contracts worth billions of dollars, two countries in the following years have taken several significant steps to cooperate in the military and defense issues, nuclear energy and education. Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's cooperation with China has also intensified, especially in economy, communication, and digital infrastructure, and China has become Uzbekistan's largest trading partner since 2018. With his official visit to Washington, Uzbekistan initiated a new era of a strategic partnership with the US, with which its relations had never achieved to this level after the cooling of relations that followed the 2005 Andijan events. To restore and normalize his country's relations with Turkey, he has taken concrete steps among which were his official visit to Ankara and the signing of a decree which reintroduced a visa-free regime for Turkish citizens. Moreover, under Mirziyoyev's rule, through more active cooperation, Tashkent has shown that it has been very eager to deepen its relations with international organizations such as the OSCE, the EU and NATO. All these developments have led some circles to come up views that remarkable or milestone/dramatic changes are taking place in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. A leading scholar on Uzbekistan argued that Uzbekistan's foreign policy is in great flux for the first time in decades (Weitz, 2018). For him, Mirziyoyev played an important role in these changes with his significant new policy initiatives which included strengthening foreign economic cooperation, ending public quarrels with neighbors, easing travel restrictions, and making Central Asian solidarity a core foreign policy goal. It was suggested by another scholar that deep foreign policy changes happened at both intra-regional and international levels and that Uzbekistan has been reinforcing its multi-vector foreign policy of openness (Poujol, 2021: 726). Others viewed Mirziyoyev's attempts to improve relations with neighbors, and in this sense, his special focus on Central Asia as a foreign policy priority as an obvious departure from the Karimov era foreign policy and believed that this policy has revived the hopes for regional integration (Dadabayev, 2018; Saud, 2018). Similarly, while some experts in their analytical articles assessed Mirziyoyev's identification of Central Asia as the main foreign policy priority, and his pursuance of the policy of regional engagement and active multilateral diplomacy as the major/fundamental foreign policy changes, others suggested these changes have not only unlocked Uzbekistan's potential but also have led this country to become a regional leader and active international player, in a manner appropriate for Central Asia's most populous country (Nurimbetov, 2021; Zakirov and Nevskaya 2017; Anceschi, 2019; Szalkai, 2021; Hug, 2020). Lastly, Mirziyoyev's instruction in April 2018 to the Institute of Strategic and Interregional Studies and relevant ministries to develop and submit a draft of the updated foreign policy concept for consideration has also led to speculations that Uzbekistan would make more significant changes in its foreign policy strategy in the near future.

The paper intends to analyze Uzbekistan's foreign policy under Mirziyoyev, in

comparison with that of his predecessor, Karimov, and to reveal whether there have been changes or continuities in Uzbekistan's foreign policy since he came to power in December 2016. The study argues that although there are some changes in the foreign policy approach of Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev, he has maintained the core foreign policy strategy established by Karimov. He has changed Karimov's foreign policy approach and pursued a constructive foreign policy in order to restore/improve his country's relations with the neighboring Central Asian republics, regional and external powers, and international institutions. However, as he has not deviated from earlier foreign policy strategy established by his predecessor, there has been continuity in the foreign policy of Uzbekistan since he took over the presidency. Accordingly, the study offers a historical and comparative perspective, which deals with the evolution of Uzbekistan's foreign policy under Karimov and Mirziyoyev in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. It relies on both primary and secondary sources. It widely uses official documents such as foreign policy concepts and military/defense doctrines to examine the country's foreign policy strategy. The study also utilizes data and insights mainly obtained from articles, scholarly books, experts' opinions and reports to address the most pressing foreign policy issues and discuss the subject of the study. The study is composed of three parts. The first part examines foreign policy developments that contributed to the construction of Uzbekistan's foreign policy strategy under Karimov's long rule. The second part analyzes Uzbekistan's foreign policy under Mirziyoyev and attempts to reveal whether Uzbekistan has so far conducted new foreign policy strategy or has followed foreign policy strategy adopted by his predecessor. The last part of the study, in the context of the research question and argument of the study, discusses Uzbekistan's relations with the Central Asian republics, regional and external powers and international institutions during the Mirziyoyev period.

FOREIGN POLICY DEVELOPMENTS UNDER KARIMOV

During Karimov's long rule, Uzbekistan's foreign policy was based on strengthening its national independence and sovereignty, maximizing its national security, and preventing external actors from having interference in internal affairs. To strengthen his country's national independence and sovereignty, Karimov had been determined to pursue some form of self-reliance/*mustaqillik* policy since the early years of the independence. The rationale behind his self-reliance/*mustaqillik* policy had been to break away from the 'imperial' Soviet center, relinquish dependency and promote its own model of economic development.² This is evident in Former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Paul Bergne's memoirs in which he described Tashkent's stance right after the independence: "President Karimov's first priority was firmly to establish Uzbek independence. And clearly the first step in doing that was to create a distance between him and Moscow as the colonial power" (Pannier, 2000). This policy manifested in a variety of ways in the early years of independence; culturally, he implemented swift de-Russification by elevating Uzbek to the state language, replacing Russian signs with Uzbek-only signs and introducing the Latin script; and economically, he had sought to achieve energy independence from Russia and had attempted

² See for detailed analysis of Karimov's self-reliance/*mustaqillik* policy Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro, *Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy: The Struggle for Recognition and Self Reliance under Karimov*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018)

to make his country an export-led economy (Fumagalli, 2007). However, Uzbekistan had been supportive of economic and military alliances led by Russia until the end of the 1990s. In 1991, Tashkent joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) for purely economic reasons and due to the threat from 'Islamic fundamentalism' in the region, in 1992, it signed Collective Security Treaty (CST) which was established within the framework of CIS for security cooperation. After 1995, Tashkent had ceased to participate in multilateral CIS structures both militarily and economically, and Karimov had become openly critical of CIS efforts (Jonson, 2006). Offended by lack of Russian help following the Taliban's capture of northern Afghanistan, Uzbekistan opposed Russian attempts at closer integration within the CIS, and objected to its military presence in Tajikistan with its 25.000 troops, and eventually in 1999, announced its intention to withdraw from the CST (Pannier, 1999). Although the Russian side rejected Tashkent's accusations that Russia was seeking military domination, Uzbekistan did not renew its membership. Instead, became a member of the GUAM, which was formally founded in 1997 to strengthen the independence and sovereignty of its former Soviet Union members vis-à-vis Russia.

From the end of the 1990s until the Andijan event in mid-2005, Uzbekistan under Karimov had sought closer ties with the West, particularly the US and NATO. Before September 11, the country collaborated with the US in regional anti-terrorism efforts in order to alleviate its concerns about the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which had close ties with the Taliban then. In the aftermath of September 11, Tashkent had sought to secure closer cooperation with the West to address common threats and concerns and to maximize its national security accordingly. Uzbekistan granted its territory and airspace to the US forces in the fight against terrorism, and in 2002, two countries signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework which came about in the context of September 11 and the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Thanks to the relationship developed through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in the 1990s, Uzbekistan had also cooperated closely with NATO after it took over the command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2003.

Unfortunately, the West's attitude towards the Uzbek government's response to the events in Andijan in May 2005 had led not only to the deterioration of the US-Uzbek relations, but also Uzbekistan's relations with the West as a whole. The divergence between Uzbekistan and the West surfaced after the Uzbek government declared that the armed uprising in Andijan was a terrorist outbreak and responded with force (Gleason, 2006). The US's call on the Uzbek government to allow an international investigation of events in Andijan was openly assessed by Karimov as foreign interference in Uzbekistan's internal affairs. In response, claiming that the OEF objectives had been achieved, Uzbekistan and other neighboring Central Asian countries announced at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Astana in July 2005 that the US needs to set a timetable for the withdrawal of military bases from Central Asian countries. The Uzbek-US partnership ended on 29 July 2005 when the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the US embassy in Tashkent that the US troops had 180 days to withdraw from Khanabad (Gleason, 2006). Similarly, after NATO raised concerns over excessive and disproportionate use of force during the events, Uzbekistan sharply reduced its participation in PfP; pursued an empty seat policy at

most of the NATO meetings; and banned NATO forces from using its territory as a transit route for operations in Afghanistan from 2006 (Bagbaslioglu, 2014).

After a brief and controversial partnership with the US and the West as a whole, Karimov shifted to closer ties with China and Russia. In addition to the reason mentioned above, the color revolutions which took place in post-Soviet countries with the support of the West caused Uzbekistan to develop closer economic and political ties with these regional powers. During his visit to Beijing, where he paid right after the Andijan events, Chinese leadership expressed support for Tashkent's response to the events in Andijan and the sides signed a Treaty on Friendly and Cooperative Partnership. In the following years, he also sought to strengthen Uzbekistan's role in the SCO, with which Uzbekistan has been closely associated because its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure is in Tashkent. In November 2005, Tashkent signed a Treaty of Allied Relations with Moscow a move that could be considered a turnaround in Uzbekistan's foreign policy signaling a beginning of a new era in its international posture. Here, a closer look reveals that regime survival was the main reason behind Uzbekistan's secured realignment with Russia (Fumagalli, 2007). After signing an alliance treaty with Russia, Uzbekistan returned to the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2006. However, since then, its membership had remained nominal since Uzbekistan did not ratify any agreement, did not participate in joint military exercises, and did not actively participate in other non-military spheres of cooperation within the CSTO (Talipov, 2013). In June 2012, Tashkent suspended its membership in this regional military formation by accusing the organization of ignoring Uzbekistan's concerns. Some observers claimed that Karimov's suspicion of Russia's ability to provide security for the Central Asian region could be the reason for his country's suspension of its membership in the CSTO (Ziegler, 2015). Some advanced the argument that he was preparing to host a new US airbase in Uzbekistan (McDermott, 2012). However, shortly after this event, the Uzbek Senate - *Oliy Majlis* adopted a new foreign policy concept as a response to these allegations and speculations.

Under Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan's relationship with Turkey, like its relationships with Russia and the US/or the West as a whole, had experienced hardship. Actually, in the early 1990s, bilateral relations had followed a very positive course. During his visit to Turkey, Karimov expressed the support he wanted from Turkey and the value he attached to Turkey as follows; "If Turkey supports us, then nobody can take Uzbeks subjugation... Atatürk's principles are in line with what we want to do in Uzbekistan. I am an admirer of Atatürk and I hope Central Asians will succeed what he succeeded in Turkey. I support the unity of Turkic peoples (nations). This unity must be realized..." (Budulgan, 2020: 174, quoted in Aljazeera Turk, 2016). After high-level visits of the Turkish side that followed this visit, bilateral relations had started to develop swiftly in the areas of the economy, culture, education, and scientific exchange. Over time, contrary to expectations, bilateral relations entered into a tumultuous crisis "mostly due to misunderstandings and mismanagements in mutual relations" (Yalinkiliçli, 2018). Two developments, first, Ankara's refusal of the Uzbek government's request for extradition of the opposition leader Muhammed Salih in 1994, second, the fact that one of the perpetrators of the bombings, which were allegedly organized against Karimov in 1999, was a Turkish citizen had deteriorated Uzbek-Turkish relations. Turkey's signing of the UN report that criticized and

condemned the Karimov Administration due to the Andijan events completely disrupted bilateral relations. Although Turkey took concrete initiatives to restore and improve relations with Uzbekistan in the following years, full normalization came only after Karimov's death (Karluk and Gencer, 2016; Yalinkilicli, 2018).

Under Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan's intensive relations with the neighboring Central Asian states in the first half of the 1990s had resulted in the creation of regional groupings. In 1994, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan had formed the Central Asian Union (CAU) to create a common economic space (Bohr, 2004). However, this initiative economically had not achieved any of its initial objectives since Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had taken measures to prevent the flow of goods and services. Similarly, as Tashkent avoided joint efforts, the organization had not shown any serious success in the military/security area, apart from joint military training within NATO's PfP. By 1999, Tashkent had taken unilateral measures, such as tightening its border controls, constructing fences, and installing minefields at the borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to prevent infiltration of militants and protect the regime. Uzbekistan's unilateral attempts harmed its relations with these two countries. For instance, Kyrgyzstan accused Uzbekistan of corralling tens of thousands of hectares of Kyrgyz land and mining Kyrgyz territory in addition to its own. From the late 1990s to the death of Karimov, Uzbekistan had maintained less complicated ties with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, economically well-off countries with vast territories and natural resources. This demonstrates that Karimov attempted to develop relations with the Central Asian countries enjoying economic potential and sharing Tashkent's perspectives. But, Uzbekistan's relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have been struggling with economic problems for a long time and do not have much weight in the region, had never improved due to long-standing disagreements or disputes over water, border, and energy issues. Solution of these problems had hardly been a priority for Tashkent as it had been content with the status quo and was not looking for a change.

FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY UNDER MIRZIYOYEV

Adoption of the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept

In 1996, the Uzbek government adopted its first legislative act regulating the foreign policy of Uzbekistan, "The Law on the Main Principles of Foreign Political Activities of the Republic of Uzbekistan". It comprised certain principles such as building equal and mutually beneficial relations with all the states, active participation in the work of international organizations, integration into regional and international security structures, attaching prior importance to the interstate formations ensuring stability, sustainable development, and national security of the country, non-participation in military-political blocs and withdrawal from any interstate entity if it transforms into a military-political bloc, and active participation in the activities of intergovernmental and non-governmental entities to prevent and resolve conflicts in the region and beyond (National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018). However, because Tashkent pursued the strategy explained above, its subsequent foreign policy had not been fully implemented under this law. It is hard to argue that Uzbekistan's pendulum behavior - reactionary and opportunistic foreign policy - between Moscow and

Washington, its complicated and strained relations with Turkey and the neighboring states of Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and its attitude towards NATO after the Andijan events had been based on these principles. Nevertheless, Tashkent's active participation in joint exercises with NATO in the second half of the 1990s and its closer cooperation with the alliance in the post-September 11, its cooperative relationship with the SCO, -albeit limited- its cooperation with the neighboring Central Asian states in the 1990s and its withdrawal and staying aloof from the CSTO all were in line with the document's principles.

In August 2012, in light of Tashkent's earlier decision to suspend its membership in the CSTO, the Uzbek Senate - *Oliy Majlis* adopted its first comprehensive foreign policy concept entitled "The Law on the Approval of the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan". Drawing on the past experiences, the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept presented a new foreign policy strategy that Uzbekistan would follow in the near future.³ It emphasized two major points. First, Uzbekistan would embrace the policy of neutrality in security relations in the future. In this sense, it reiterated Uzbekistan's non-bloc policy and rejected the stationing of foreign military bases in Uzbekistan (Nichol, 2012). While Tashkent made it clear to interested parties that it had no plan to return to the CSTO or to join any military alliance through its non-bloc policy, it reassured Moscow that it would not host any military base in its territory with its refusal to place foreign military bases. In this sense, it can be concluded that the concept was aimed at allaying Russian concerns, as there had been much speculation in the country after Uzbekistan withdrew from the Russian-led CSTO. It was also partly aimed at setting the scene for the upcoming negotiations on the permanent basing rights for the US forces. This has two reasons. First, Tashkent had not entirely benefited from standing together with Washington in the past. Second, Kyrgyzstan, which hosted both US and Russian bases, had experienced social uprisings. Therefore, in a general sense, the document was "a timely message to the international community and geopolitical rivals in Central Asia and a response to various allegations and speculations about Uzbekistan's foreign policy" (Talipov, 2012). The new law also prohibited Uzbekistan's participation in peacekeeping operations abroad. This principle also represented a cardinal change in Uzbek foreign policy since the 1995 Military Doctrine explicitly allowed Uzbek armed forces to take part in peacekeeping missions (National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018). Here, a closer analysis demonstrates that while in past Uzbekistan had pursued an opportunistic and reactionary foreign policy which left it with the fear of falling under an exclusive zone of influence, in the post-2012 period, with its military neutrality, the country would seek to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy and thus balance great powers.

Second, the document deemed Central Asia as the main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy and hinted that the country would intensify and enhance its relations with the Central Asian countries in the future (Nichol, 2012). To this end, the concept's focus on the region was aimed at eventually resolving long-standing border disputes and preventing conflicts over them, solving the conflicts over water resources and their distribution mechanisms, and using neighbors' transportation networks to reach international markets. The concept's proclaim-

³ The 2012 Foreign Policy Concept is not present in the national legislation database. Therefore, the study uses the data obtained from other sources.

ing of Central Asia as a foreign policy priority and advocating diplomatic means to settle regional disputes literally meant that Tashkent was very keen to mend and improve relations with the neighboring Central Asian countries. Here, it can also be argued that Uzbekistan's increased focus on the region was related to the importance of its neighbors for the security and prosperity of Uzbekistan, and its long-term desire to assume a regional leadership in the region eventually. However, although Karimov saw the need to better engage with the region, due to his strained personal relationship with the region's other leaders and the reasons mentioned above, he was reluctant to restore/advance Uzbekistan's relations with the countries of the region.

With the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept, Uzbekistan showed that it prioritizes secure, long-term and sustainable socio-economic development. In this sense, the document reflected Tashkent's urgent need to diversify its trade, economy, information technology (IT), transport, and other international exchanges. The concept's policy of military neutrality and declaration of Central Asia as a foreign policy priority was also related to the economic interests of Uzbekistan. Since these policies aimed at constructing advanced and balanced relations with all the neighboring Central Asian states and regional powers, they would eventually serve for the economic development of Uzbekistan.

Change or Continuity?

After Mirziyoyev became an interim president following the sudden death of Karimov in September 2016 and after he was elected as the new president of Uzbekistan in December, some argued that Uzbekistan would move closer to Russia because of the personal relationship between him and Russian elites appeared. Yet, others suggested that the country would follow Karimov's path or fall into isolationism like Turkmenistan (Dadabayev, 2018). More importantly, the subsequent tangible steps he has taken since he took power have led some to argue that Uzbekistan is going through remarkable or drastic changes in its foreign policy. His instruction in April 2018 to the Institute of Strategic and Interregional Studies and relevant ministries to develop and submit a draft of the updated foreign policy concept for consideration has also led to such questions as 'Will Uzbekistan give up military neutrality and renew the agreement on military cooperation with the U.S?' or 'Will it join the CSTO and/or join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)?' and 'Will the country choose another region as a foreign policy priority?' (Bekmurzaev, 2019).

In order to prove the argument, put forward by this study; first, one has to analyze the consistency of Mirziyoyev's foreign policy strategy with the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept; second, to compare his foreign policy approach with that of his predecessor. To start with the first point, the fact that Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev has remained committed to the principles of non-membership in foreign military alliances, non-acceptance of foreign military bases on its territory, non-deployment of Uzbek troops in foreign countries shows that Mirziyoyev is determined to pursue the policy of military neutrality inherent in the 2012 concept. Although Uzbekistan-Russia rapprochement began in 2016 after Moscow agreed to sell armaments to Tashkent at domestic prices – a privilege that theretofore was accorded only to the CSTO and EEU members, Tashkent has

since then been adamant that there is no chance of Uzbekistan's returning to the CSTO; the country's Foreign Minister already in 2017 stated that "The question of renewing our CSTO membership is not on the agenda... There are no plans to discuss or review this matter in the future" (Saikal and Nourzhanov, 2021: 100). In addition to the country's official policy and statements, the defense doctrine approved in January 2018 by Mirziyoyev also consolidated Uzbekistan's military neutrality declared in the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept (National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018). Thus, with its military neutrality, Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev has been able to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, and balance external powers as envisaged in the 2012 Concept.

Uzbekistan's decision in April 2020 to become an observer in Russia-led EEU and its possible membership in the near future is also consistent with the 2012 Concept, as it does not reject the country's participation in regional economic integrations and such a decision does not violate the country's permanent neutrality. Finally, as experts asserted, if a new updated document on foreign policy is adopted, it will not introduce significant changes in the course and goals of the foreign policy. The changes will only be related to the aspects of optimization and transparency of foreign policy institutions and processes (Bekmurzayev, 2019). These appraisals show that Uzbekistan still maintains its military neutrality and manages its relations with the regional and external actors within this foreign policy framework. Therefore, it can be argued that Mirziyoyev's foreign policy strategy is similar to the foreign policy strategy adopted in 2012 by his predecessor.

The fact that Mirziyoyev continues to prioritize Central Asia in his country's foreign policy also demonstrates that he pursues the foreign policy strategy consistent with the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept. In September 2016, he declared in the *Oliy Majlis* that the improvement of relations with Central Asian neighbors was a key priority for his country. In 2017, he signed a decree in which five priority directions for the development of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021 are specified and one of them prioritizing the "creation of a security, stability and good neighborliness belt around Uzbekistan" (National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2017). Another example in this regard could be his country's hosting of an international conference with the title "Central Asia is the main priority of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy". At the conference organized by the Uzbek Foreign Ministry in 2017, to underline his country's approach towards Central Asian republics, the Uzbek Foreign Minister pointed out Uzbekistan's interest in "transforming the Central Asian region into an area of stability, sustainable development and good-neighborliness" (Ogutcu, 2017). Mirziyoyev also confirmed this priority by making his first foreign visits to the Central Asian countries. These and subsequent initiatives clearly indicate that the Mirziyoyev administration attaches great importance to the neighboring Central Asian republics. Like Karimov, Mirziyoyev is also aware that Uzbekistan must work with its neighbors, including Afghanistan, for the security and prosperity of the country. But, unlike Karimov, he has been trying to implement this in real terms since he became the new president of Uzbekistan.

The second important point that supports the argument is Mirziyoyev's foreign policy approach to Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbors and the international community. For him, Uzbekistan's patterns of interaction with the outside

world during Karimov's rule were the major obstacles to the country's economic development and security. In this sense, he saw the need to abandon Karimov's opportunistic, reactionary or isolationist foreign policy, and open up to the outside world. To this end, having stated in his first address to the parliament that Uzbekistan needs a modern foreign policy, the new president indicated that he aspires to a pragmatic and dynamic foreign policy vision. Therefore, recognizing the importance of having better ties both with the neighboring countries and the international community, he has pursued a constructive foreign policy, which includes changes in tactics besides the scope and intensity of cooperation. He has come up with new foreign policy initiatives that have differentiated his foreign policy tactics from that of Karimov. For instance, both he and other Uzbek officials have emphasized the need for cooperation with the Central Asian countries and adopted a more amicable tone with all their regional counterparts. He has expanded the scope and intensity of cooperation by frequently visiting all Central Asian countries, and signing a number of important socio-economic and security agreements during these visits. Likewise, a similar foreign policy approach, such as downplaying Russian ambitions in Eurasia, has also been applied to his country's relations with the great powers and international organizations. Here, it can be argued that while there has been continuity in the foreign policy strategy under Mirziyoyev, there are some changes in the foreign policy approach, which have facilitated the implementation of the foreign policy. Thanks to his foreign policy approach, in a very short time, Uzbekistan has been able to restore/improve the relations with all the Central Asia states, enhance political and economic cooperation with Russia, China, and the US, and restore and improve relations with Turkey (Khaydarov and Mirkasymov, 2019; Simsek and Kurt, 2021).

With his pursuance of a constructive foreign policy approach, Mirziyoyev has been active in the economic rebuilding of Uzbekistan and directed the foreign policy of his administration to serve this task. To this end, he has first sought to restore troubled relations with the Central Asian republics in order to stabilize and maximize the economic potential of these relations. The same approach has been applied in Uzbekistan's economic relations with non-regional actors. Therefore, the foreign policy developments under Mirziyoyev have shown that he also gives priority to the economic development of his country, which is in line with the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept. In this context, his foreign policy distinguished itself from his predecessor's era in the sense that it prioritized economic versus political issues in terms of foreign policy interactions (Dadabayev, 2019). While in past Uzbekistan's standpoint on border issues, water management, human rights, and other sensitive issues had been the most significant obstacles that had often disrupted its relations with both regional and non-regional actors, this time the country shows the signs of downgrading the importance of these political issues and prefers to pay more attention to economic issues in terms of foreign policy interactions in order to ensure economic development. Moreover, Tashkent has adopted the new developmental state model in which government promotes foreign economic activity to be pursued in priority areas. This has led to the rapid growth in Uzbekistan's economy in terms of foreign direct investment, industry, and tourism.

RELATIONS WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The Neighboring Central Asian Republics

Since he became an acting president, Mirziyoyev has clearly signaled that Uzbekistan is interested in open, good-natured, and pragmatic policy towards Central Asian neighbors. For him, breaking the mold of self-isolation, suspicion, and acrimony in dealing with other Central states has become a top priority. He is aware of the importance of resolving issues with the neighboring states, improving physical infrastructure and cooperation in the energy sector, and simplifying the visa regime in the region to achieve his country's economic development. In this sense, with the aim of restoring and improving ties with the Central Asian countries, Mirziyoyev launched hectic diplomatic parleys from his first days in the office. He made frequent visits and telephone calls to signal his Central Asian counterparts that he was genuinely interested in closer and friendlier relations and formulating a common approach. The achievements to date have been impressive. Uzbekistan's trade volume with the Central Asian countries has increased significantly; for instance, in 2017, by 32% with Kazakhstan, by 22% with Tajikistan, by 56% with Kyrgyzstan, and in the first quarter of 2018 by 55% with Turkmenistan (Saad, 2018). His focus on a problem-solving approach has removed obstacles that previously impeded the improvement of bilateral relations and the resolution of contentious issues with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the countries that he visited for the first time since 2000. Uzbekistan has made good progress in resolving seemingly intractable territorial disputes, as well as issues related to border delimitation, enclaves, and water management with Kyrgyzstan. For instance, Tashkent succeeded to agree with Bishkek on the demarcation of approximately 85% percent of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. The other achievement in this regard was the signing of an agreement on the complete transfer of the Orto Tokoi reservoir to Kyrgyzstan and the joint use of this reservoir, which had long been a source of contention between Tashkent and Bishkek (Toktogulov, 2018). Mirziyoyev's strides to repair relations with neighboring Tajikistan had resulted in the resumption of direct flights between two countries, the restoration of operations at several border checkpoints, the signing of the agreements on a 30-day visa-free travel for citizens of both countries, the delimitation of parts of the Tajik-Uzbek border and the cooperation on the construction on the Rogun Dam. Since the two countries had been bitter foes for the greater part of the post-independence period, the 'Jaihun-2018' military exercise with Tajikistan was truly historical in Uzbek-Tajik relations (Saikal and Nourzhanov, 2021).

Mirziyoyev's succession to the presidency also gave a new impetus to the movement for Central Asian regionalism. In this sense, two meetings held to hold regular consultative meetings of the regional leaders carry the potential to transform into regional cooperation in the future as these meetings were initiated by the Uzbek side lacking political will in this direction in the past. His leadership role in the fight against COVID-19 is another example in this regard. He has been particularly active in coordinating the measures to contain the spread of the virus and combat the pandemic in the region, as well as in sending his country's humanitarian aid to its Central Asian neighbors. Here, it can be concluded that his proactive policies towards Central Asia have raised hopes for stronger regional integration. However, his proactive policies clearly demonstrate Mirziyoyev's strategy of making Uzbekistan a regional leader in Central Asia.

THE REGIONAL AND EXTERNAL POWERS

Russia and China

Uzbekistan's rapprochement with Russia began with Karimov's visit to Moscow in April 2016. He has maintained this rapprochement, but he has done this by downplaying Karimov's public suspicions of Russian ambitions in Eurasia (Weitz, 2018). As a result, his visit to Moscow in 2017 led to the signing of a package of agreements and trade contracts worth billions of dollars. An agreement on the orderly recruitment of Uzbekistani migrant workers for temporary employment in Russia was a huge achievement for the Uzbek side as this document ensures the protection of their legal rights. The fact that the Uzbek army officers have started studying in military institutions in Russia again, the joint military took place in Uzbekistan after a 12-year pause, and that Uzbekistan began purchasing Russian military equipment all indicate that military-technical cooperation has also become an important part of bilateral relations (Khaydarov and Mirkasymov, 2019). In addition, the latest developments such as the signing of the agreements on the construction of nuclear power plant in Tashkent and Uzbekistan's decision to become an observer in the Russia-led EEU demonstrate that Uzbekistan has become closer to and cooperated with Russia in ways not seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, by preserving its military neutrality, Mirziyoyev made it clear that he does not consider Russian dominance in his country or a radical switch to a pro-Russian stance.

For Mirziyoyev, China is a first-order strategic partner for his country as this Eurasian economic power could provide investments that help modernize and develop his country's economy. To this end, he visited Beijing after his visit to Moscow and signed more than 100 mutual agreements, raising the size of Chinese investments and loans to more than \$23 billion (Danilovich, 2020). The largest infrastructure-related agreements include the joint production of synthetic fuel, investments in Uzbekistan's oil industry, the construction of energy-generation plants and other investment projects. The majority of these projects are aimed at establishing production and infrastructure-related facilities to enable Uzbekistan to produce goods mainly for exports. In this sense, Mirziyoyev continues Karimov's economic policy that aimed at creating production facilities in Uzbekistan and exporting the goods to neighboring countries. Uzbekistan-China technology and security cooperation include the 'safe city' initiative which started in 2018 and would be expanded with a 2019 agreement under which \$1 billion would be used (Stryker, 2021). Mirziyoyev's reforms to liberalize the Uzbek economy has once again made China Uzbekistan's largest trading partner since 2018, surpassing Russia. However, it should be noted here that Tashkent pragmatically develops its relations with both Russia and China in a non-exclusive manner in order to prevent rivalry between these countries in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan under the new president is more involved in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): currently, there are approximately 50 specific BRI-related projects in Uzbekistan, most of them focusing on developing transit links for regional efforts, or local industrial-enhancement efforts. Indeed, the fact that the BRI could provide greater advantages to Uzbekistan and maximize its potential as a transportation corridor and economic partner is one of the reasons why Mirziyoyev is interested in closer and friendlier relations with neighbors.

The United States

Uzbek-US relations, which remained uneven during Karimov's era, have significantly improved since Mirziyoyev took office. His official visit to Washington in May 2018, which was the first official visit of an Uzbek president to the US since 2002 and which was hailed by Washington as a 'new era of strategic partnership between the two countries', epitomized this new rapprochement. Some experts pointed out that Mirziyoyev's meeting with Trump "brought a sudden end to the country's international isolation, opening the door to new investment opportunities and the possibility of a renewed military partnership, vital to the American war effort in Afghanistan" (Ilkhamov, 2018). Others viewed this visit would be US's acknowledgment of the reform process underway in Uzbekistan in the past two years and recognition of Uzbekistan's reputation as a country with a consistent and constructive foreign policy (Valiyev, 2018). Since his visit, parallel to these views, while Uzbek-US rapprochement has touched every area of bilateral relations, military relations have reached an unprecedented depth.

Uzbekistan's pursuance of constructive foreign policy, especially its efforts to seek a larger role in Central Asia, encourages the US and Russia to compete for domination in the region. While Russia sought to secure Uzbekistan's accession to the EEU, the US aimed to keep the country out until it became an observer in the organization in April 2020. However, improvements in interregional relationships especially due to Uzbekistan's pursuance of constructive foreign policy, have expanded the US's potential for engagement through the newly adopted 'Central Asian Strategy' framework and the 'C5+1' format, which was established in 2015 amid signs of a new Cold War-type of the relationship between Russia and the US.⁴

Turkey

For Mirziyoyev, restoration and normalization of Uzbekistan's relations with Turkey have been one of the most important foreign policy priorities that can be observed through his tangible steps taken so far. His visit to Ankara in October 2017 was a milestone in Uzbek-Turkish relations as he was the first Uzbek leader to visit the Turkish capital since 1999 and as Turkey was the first country visited outside the region. Besides his statement that described his country's genuine interest in restoring relations with Turkey and signing of a joint declaration to upgrade mutual ties to the 'comprehensive and strategic level, the agreements signed during the visit to implement about three dozen of projects in energy, construction, transportation, pharmaceuticals, and agriculture indicated that bilateral relations were once again normalized, after 18 years of frozen relations (Indeo, 2018). The latest developments in Uzbek-Turkish relations, such as Uzbekistan's reintroduction of a visa-free regime for Turkish citizens, the decision to establish 'the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council' to intensify the reopening of cooperation and communication channels, the goal of increasing mutual trade to \$5 billion, which was \$2.2 billion in 2019, and the signing of a military agreement demonstrate that there is a move toward the construction of a multidimensional strategic partnership in bilateral relations

4 "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity" was adopted in February 2020. C5+1 was established to promote dialogue and cooperation between the five Central Asian nations and the US.

(Aben, 2020; Daily Sabah, 2020). Uzbekistan's accession to the Turkey-led Turkic Council in September 2019 could mean that Uzbekistan has largely given up its strong suspicions about Turkey's intentions that had served in the past as the most formidable brake for restoring and constructing close relations with Turkey. As the organization promotes comprehensive cooperation among the members, this move has increased Uzbekistan's cooperation with Turkey. More importantly, the two countries' rapprochement and Uzbekistan's membership in the Turkic Council have facilitated Turkey's reintegration with the Central Asian states since Uzbekistan serves as a gateway for Turkey's return to the region.

International Institutions

Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev's rule has also deepened its relations with international institutions, which, in turn, has helped Uzbekistan implement priority areas specified in 'The Development Strategy for 2017-2021'.⁵ Although the OSCE criticized Uzbekistan's 2016 presidential election, a year later, Uzbekistan highlighted its interest in more active interaction with the OSCE, and since then the organization has continued to support this program, which has a series of comprehensive domestic reforms largely in line with OSCE commitments (OSCE, 2017: 1) In 2017, Uzbekistan and EU renewed the EU-Uzbekistan Memorandum of Understanding on energy cooperation, hold the first EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council meeting under the Mirziyoyev Administration, and Uzbekistan ratified the Textile Protocol with the EU. By regularly conducting negotiations on a draft of an EU-Uzbekistan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) and joining the EU's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP+) in 2021, Uzbekistan has already demonstrated its eagerness to take a major step towards closer relations with the EU.⁶ Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's relations with NATO have also improved leading to active cooperation on joint projects within the Individual Partnership Program (IPP). While Tashkent keeps pursuing its non-bloc policy, it prefers comprehensive and pragmatic cooperation with the alliance so that it could be able to maintain equidistance with the major powers (Aben, 2018). In its turn, the alliance has increased the level of cooperation with Uzbekistan assisting it in defense capacity building due to its essential role in ensuring stability in Afghanistan and the development of regional cooperation in Central Asia.

CONCLUSION

This study aspired to prove that Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev has followed the foreign policy strategy established by Karimov and that Mirziyoyev, recognizing the importance of having better ties both with the neighboring countries and the international community in contrast to his predecessor, has pursued a

⁵ The strategy includes five priority areas; improving the system of state and public construction, ensuring the rule of law and further reforming the judicial system, economic development and liberalization, development of the social sphere, and ensuring security, inter-ethnic harmony and religious tolerance, and implementation of balanced, mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy.

⁶ GSP+ is intended to support 'vulnerable developing countries' that have ratified a bevy of international conventions on human rights, labor rights, environmental protection and climate change, and good governance. The core benefit of GSP+ is the removal of tariffs on two-thirds of all goods present in the EU's official product list.

constructive foreign policy which in turn benefited his country. The fact that Uzbekistan has maintained its military neutrality to balance great powers, and has continued to prioritize Central Asia in its foreign policy demonstrates that Karimov's core foreign policy strategy has been maintained under Mirziyoyev. The only difference has been Mirziyoyev's constructive foreign policy approach to the relations with the Central Asian states and major and regional powers, as well as with international institutions. Changes in foreign policy are mostly related to the tactics, scale, and intensity of cooperation. Thanks to his vision of foreign policy, the system of interstate relations has transformed in Central Asia, and the understanding of a joint solution to existing problems has emerged in the region. Tashkent has been able to form a balanced partnership and cooperation with regional and global powers and international organizations and carry the relations to a fundamentally new level. His foreign policy approach, together with his internal reforms, has eventually strengthened Uzbekistan's international image and helped to improve the country's economy and welfare. As a result, Uzbekistan's position in the OECD's credit risk rating and in the World Bank's Doing Business rating improved; about 6.7 million tourists visited the country in 2019 - 3.3 times more than in 2016; in 2019, the inflow of foreign direct investment increased 3.7 times compared to 2018; the country is aggressively industrializing; and thus the country's economy grew almost 6 percent in 2018 and the IMF forecast, if not affected by the COVID-19, a faster growth as much as 8 percent was expected in the next few years (Embassy of Uzbekistan in Delhi, 2020).

The question here is: Will/Can Uzbekistan maintain its foreign policy strategy and continue following a constructive foreign policy approach?, or will/can Uzbekistan continue to develop the relations that developed today with the regional and international actors? The fact that Mirziyoyev, in contrast to Karimov, understood/realized that such a foreign policy approach is a necessity of today for the sake of his country shows that the answer to these questions: Yes. However, it should be borne in mind that although Mirziyoyev has retained Karimov's foreign policy strategy so far, developments such as the spread of Taliban control towards the borders of Central Asian countries could cause drastic changes in Uzbek foreign policy.

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