

UZBEKISTAN’S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF MIRZIYOYEV: STRUGGLE TO SUSTAIN AUTONOMY

ÖZBEKİSTAN’IN MİRZİYOYEV ÖNDERLİĞİNDEKİ DIŞ POLİTİKASI: OTONOMİYİ SÜRDÜRME MÜCADELESİ

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Abstract

This study explores Uzbekistan’s foreign policy during the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev by focusing on its relations with the leading powers such as Russia, the United States (U.S.), China as well as the Central Asian Republics, and Turkey. The article argues that Uzbekistan, during the Mirziyoyev era continues to adhere to the multi-vectoral line in foreign policy whose main principles have been determined by the former President Islam Karimov. Yet, Mirziyoyev has also left his imprint on Uzbekistan’s foreign policy by reengaging with the Central Asian Republics through augmentation of diplomatic exchanges, organization of multilateral gatherings, resolution of border disagreements and resumption of transportation links. He also restored ties with Turkey, a significant regional power that presented new opportunities for Uzbekistan especially in the economic realm. The article also claims that the progressive decline of the U.S. impact in Central Asia in the wake of military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the growing apprehension in the region buttressed by the rapid Taliban takeover of Afghanistan may help Russia and China to play more dominant roles in Uzbekistan in security and economic domains which might undermine its endeavour to sustain autonomy in foreign policy.

Keywords: Central Asia, Uzbekistan, foreign policy, Mirziyoyev, autonomy

Öz

Bu çalışma Özbekistan’ın Şevket Mirziyoyev’in cumhurbaşkanlığı dönemindeki dış politikasını Rusya, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD), Çin gibi ileri gelen güçler ayrıca Orta Asya Cumhuriyetleri ve Türkiye ile ilişkilerine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Makale, Özbekistan’ın Mirziyoyev devrinde temel prensipleri eski cumhurbaşkanı İslam Kerimov tarafından belirlenmiş olan dış politikada çok vektörlü çizgiye bağlı kalmaya devam ettiğini savunmaktadır. Yine de Mirziyoyev de diplomatik teatillerin artırılması, çoktarafli toplantıların düzenlenmesi, sınır anlaşmazlıklarının çözülmesi ve ulaşım bağlantılarının yeniden başlatılması yoluyla Orta Asya Cumhuriyetleri ile yeniden ilişki kurarak Özbekistan’ın dış politikasına damgasını vurmuştur. Ayrıca özellikle ekonomik alanda Özbekistan’a yeni fırsatlar sunan önemli bir bölgesel güç olan Türkiye ile bağları yeniden kurmuştur. Makale ayrıca Ağustos 2021’deki askeri çekilmenin

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ardından ABD'nin Orta Asya'daki etkisinin gitgide artan bir şekilde azalmasının ve Afganistan'ın hızlı bir şekilde Taliban tarafından ele geçirilmesiyle güçlenen bölgede artan endişenin Rusya ve Çin'in Özbekistan'da güvenlik ve ekonomi alanlarında daha baskın roller oynamalarına yardım edebileceğini bunun da ülkenin dış politikada özerkliği sürdürme çabasını baltalayabileceğini iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Orta Asya, Özbekistan, dış politika, Mirziyoyev, otonomi

Introduction

The main contours of the foreign policy of Uzbekistan were determined to a large extent by the founding president of the country, Islam Karimov (1938-2016). He placed emphasis on independence, equality and non-interference in internal affairs¹. Accordingly, the foreign policy doctrines which were declared during the Karimov era highlighted non-alignment with military-political blocs and refused the deployment of foreign military bases on the territory of Uzbekistan. These doctrines also prevented the participation of Uzbekistan's military personnel in peacekeeping operations or military conflicts abroad, opted for equality and mutual benefit in international relations and rejected the mediation of any external power in the resolution of regional conflicts in Central Asia.²

Multi-vectorism turned out to be the linchpin of the Uzbek foreign policy during the Karimov period. Uzbekistan strove to build balanced relations with the major centres of power such as Russia, China and the United States (U.S.) without imperilling its independent streak. Uzbekistan joined the ranks of the Chinese and Russian led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. It joined the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) twice, in 1992 and in 2006, but withdrew eventually. In a similar vein, although Uzbekistan attended the U.S.-backed GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development in 1999, it parted ways with the organization in 2005.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev was inaugurated as the second President of Uzbekistan on December 14, 2016 following the death of Karimov on September 2. He had been serving as prime minister since 2003 prior to this post. Shortly after the designation of Mirziyoyev as the new president of Uzbekistan, it was announced via the Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov that Uzbekistan would continue to adhere to the non-aligned foreign policy.³ The military doctrine that was released on

1 Bernardo Teles Fazeiro, "Keeping Face in the Public Sphere: Recognition, Discretion and Uzbekistan's Relations with the United States and Germany, 1991-2006", *Central Asian Survey*, XXXIV/3, (2015), p. 344.

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Foreign Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan", 2021, <https://mfa.uz/en/pages/vneshnaya-politika> [Accessed: 29.08.2021]; Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy Concept: No Base, No Blocks, but National Interests First", *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 5 September 2012, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12557-analytical-articles> - [Accessed: 31.08.2021].

3 Interfax, "Uzbekistan Not to Abandon Nonalignment Policy-Foreign Minister", 8 December 2016, https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/29810/?sphrase_id=38595 [Accessed: 31.08.2021].

January 9, 2018 which forbade joining military blocs, hosting foreign military bases and sending troops to conflicts abroad further consolidated the non-aligned position of Uzbekistan.⁴

This article argues that Uzbekistan sticks to multi-vectoral foreign policy goal of Karimov under the presidency of his successor. Yet, Mirziyoyev carried out a program change⁵ in foreign policy that encapsulated alterations in the configuration of instruments. Uzbekistan, with Mirziyoyev at the helm, pursues foreign policy goals more through diplomatic negotiation than coercive methods such as economic sanctions. Furthermore, the regional engagement policies implemented by Uzbekistan during the Mirziyoyev era have yielded more successful results compared to the previous period. Although the Foreign Policy Concept of 2012 had specified Central Asia as a region of priority, Uzbekistan under the leadership of Karimov frequently confronted the regional states over the issues of border demarcation, water management and fight against radical Islamic groups. Mirziyoyev also straightened out the kinks in Uzbekistan's relations with Turkey, a close state in terms of historical, ethnical, linguistic, religious and cultural dimensions.

Another claim of the article is that with the removal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, there is a strong probability that Washington would gradually lose interest in Uzbekistan. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and a possible instability and conflict in northern part of the country may trigger a similar situation in Fergana Valley which may create unease in Uzbekistan. Such a scenario may engender closer security ties with Russia. Another potential problem is the growing financial difficulties of the economy induced by the rising external debt, especially to China. The diminishing U.S. impact in Central Asia coupled with augmenting Russian and Chinese clout in the region may complicate the Uzbek strategy of playing off major powers to retain autonomy.

There exist few studies in International Relations literature which examine the foreign policy of Uzbekistan in the post-Cold War period.⁶ However, most of these studies concentrated on the

4 Nurbek Bekmurzaev, "What to Expect from Uzbekistan's New Concept of Foreign Policy?", *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 6 February 2019, <https://cabar.asia/en/what-to-expect-from-uzbekistan-s-new-concept-of-foreign-policy> [Accessed: 31.08.2021].

5 Charles F. Hermann, "Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy", *International Studies Quarterly*, XXXIV/1, (1990), p. 6.

6 Luca Anceschi, "Integrating Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Making: The Cases of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan", *Central Asian Survey*, XXIX/2, (2010), pp. 143-158; Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro, "Keeping Face in the Public Sphere: Recognition, Discretion and Uzbekistan's Relations with the United States and Germany, 1991-2006", *Central Asian Survey*, XXXIV/3, (2015), pp. 341-356; Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro, "Uzbekistan's Defensive Self-reliance: Karimov's Foreign Policy Legacy", *International Affairs*, XCIII/2, (2017), pp. 409-427; Matteo Fumagalli, "Alignments and Realignments in Central Asia. The Rationale and Implications of Uzbekistan's Rapprochement with Russia", *International Political Science Review*, XXVIII/3, (2007), pp. 253-271; Leila Kazemi, "Domestic Sources of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy, 1991 to the Present", *Journal of International Affairs*, LVI/2, (2003), pp. 205-216; Vadim Romashov, "Uzbekistan's Balancing Act: A Game of Chance for Independent External Policies", *The Regional Security Puzzle around Afghanistan: Bordering Practices in Central Asia and Beyond*, Helena Rytövuori-Apunen (ed.), Verlag Barbara Budrich, Leverkusen 2016, pp. 161-190; Dina Rome Spechler – Martin C. Spechler, "Uzbekistan among the Great Powers", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, XLII, (2009), pp. 353-373; Dina Rome Spechler – Martin C. Spechler, "The Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan: Sources, Objectives and Outcomes: 1991-2009", *Central*

Karimov era. The works appraising the foreign policy moves of Uzbekistan under the guidance of Mirziyoyev are quite scarce and overdue.⁷ Therefore, this study fills the gap in this domain by providing a comprehensive and up-to-date account of the Uzbek foreign policy under the presidency of Mirziyoyev.

The article is made up of six parts. The first part provides a summary of Uzbek foreign policy during the Karimov presidency. It then moves on to the Mirziyoyev period and examines Uzbekistan's relations with major powers such as Russia, China and the U.S. The fifth section analyses Uzbekistan's elevating association with the Central Asian Republics in the new era whereas the last part of the article focuses on the restoration of political and military bonds with Turkey.

The Karimov Legacy in Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan

The evolution of foreign policy of Uzbekistan under Karimov may be examined in four periods. The first phase (1992-1999) sowed the seeds of the multi-vectoral foreign policy. Tashkent retained bilateral and institutional security ties with Moscow while establishing military links with the Western organizations. Uzbekistan became one of the founding members of the Russian-led CSTO in May 1992. Tashkent also militarily intervened in the Tajik Civil War of 1992-1997 in collaboration with Moscow in order to thwart the spread of radical Islamic currents into its territory. On the other hand, Uzbekistan joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Partnership for Peace Programme in July 1994 and contributed to the U.S.-sponsored Central Asian Battalion in December 1995.⁸ Uzbekistan also took some steps to bolster regional cooperation. It founded the Central Asian Union with the participation of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in February 1994 and became part of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) that was set up by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey in 1985, along with other Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan in November 1992.

The second phase (1999-2005) witnessed the strengthening of the Western pivot in Uzbek foreign policy which came into existence with its withdrawal from the CSTO in April 1999. Two months later, Uzbekistan joined the GUAM, the regional economic cooperation organization that brought together former Soviet states of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova which enjoyed ascending ties with the West. Yet, Uzbekistan did not lay aside the Eastern dimension

Asian Survey, XXIX/2, (2010), pp. 159-170.

7 Timur, Dadabaev, "The Chinese Economic Pivot in Central Asia and Its Implications for Post-Karimov Reemergence of Uzbekistan", *Asian Survey*, LVIII/4, (2018), pp. 747-769; Timur Dadabaev, "Uzbekistan as Central Asian Game Changer? Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Construction in the post-Karimov Era", *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, XX/10, (2018), pp. 1-14; Timur Dadabaev, "De-securitizing the "Silk Road": Uzbekistan's Cooperation Agenda with Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea in the Post-Karimov Era", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, XI/2, (2020), pp. 174-187; Adam Saud, "Changing Dynamics of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy under Shavkat Mirziyoyev: Prospects for Central Asian Regional Economic Integration", *Central Asia Journal*, LXXXII, (2018), pp. 1-35.

8 Matteo Fumagalli, "Alignments and Realignments in Central Asia. The Rationale and Implications of Uzbekistan's Rapprochement with Russia", p. 255.

of its foreign policy completely as proven by its membership to the SCO in June 2001. The 9/11 attacks on the U.S. and the ensuing NATO operation against the Taliban in Afghanistan however, beefed up the security bonds between Tashkent and Washington. Uzbekistan had been perceiving threat from its southern neighbour since the early 1990s in the form of drug trafficking, arms smuggling and dissemination of radical Islam. Karimov had also supported the Northern Alliance that fought against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The security risks coming from Afghanistan incited Uzbekistan to allow the U.S. utilization of Karshi-Khanabad airbase for its military operations in Afghanistan.

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan had emboldened the radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir which aimed to overthrow Karimov and establish an Islamic regime in Uzbekistan. They found a fertile ground in Fergana Valley which was divided between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and was home to many pious and unemployed young people.⁹ The incursion of IMU militants into Uzbekistan through Kyrgyz and Tajik territory elicited a significant crisis between Uzbekistan and these two states which resulted in Uzbekistan's mining of its borders and its introduction of a visa regime in 2000 that seriously upset the regional integration schemes.

The outbreak of successive colour revolutions backed up by the West in Georgia (November 2003), Ukraine (November 2004) and Kyrgyzstan (February 2005) which led to the demise of authoritarian regimes in these countries triggered unease in Uzbekistan and it quit the GUAM on May 5, 2005. Shortly after, Uzbek government's heavy-handed repression of a civil unrest in Andijan on May 13 which provoked a strong reaction from the West to the extent of a demand for international investigation prompted the third phase (2005-2012) in Uzbek foreign policy that prioritized relations with Russia and China over association with the West. Uzbekistan put an end to the U.S. use of Karshi-Khanabad airbase in June 2005 and re-joined the CSTO in August 2006.¹⁰ Uzbekistan continued to hassle with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over border delineation, Uzbek exclaves in Kyrgyzstan, Tajik exclave in Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz exclave in Uzbekistan. These disputes mostly emanated from disagreements over lands, pastures and water resources. Moreover, Tajikistan's efforts to construct the Rogun Dam drew the ire of Karimov due to the possible water shortages in Vakhsh River which might harm Uzbek cotton production. Uzbekistan's blocking of Tajik transportation vehicles, its cutting off gas supplies to Tajikistan and its prevention of Tajikistan's electricity imports from Turkmenistan further deteriorated the relationship.¹¹

The last phase (2012-2016) of the Uzbek foreign policy under Karimov came into prominence with its endeavour to strike a fine balance with the major powers. Uzbekistan withdrew from

9 Dina Rome Spechler – Martin C. Spechler, "Uzbekistan among the Great Powers", p. 361.

10 Luca Anceschi, "Integrating Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Making: The Cases of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan", p. 152.

11 Farangis Najibullah, "Don't Love Your Neighbor", *RFE/RL*, 8 October 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/Dont_Love_Your_Neighbor/2185027.html [Accessed: 31.08.2021].

the CSTO in June 2012 because of a disagreement concerning the Afghanistan policy of the organization despite sustaining sound political and economic ties with Russia. Relations with the USA were ameliorated to some extent after Uzbekistan proved to be a significant partner of the Northern Distribution Network, the logistical route used for sending supplies to Afghanistan. Political and economic relations with China demonstrated considerable ascendance and Tashkent declared its willingness to participate to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Yet, Uzbekistan's problems with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan endured. Karimov continued to oppose Tajikistan's Rogun Dam project. Uzbekistan clashed with Kyrgyzstan over the Sokh exclave and it also cut off energy supplies to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan sporadically.

Uzbekistan managed to chart an independent and balanced course in its dealings with Russia, China and the U.S. during the Karimov era despite occasional oscillations. Relations with the Central Asian Republics however, had been far from amicable. Uzbekistan stood aloof from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and became embroiled in serious disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan's relationship with Turkey was also hard hit in the mid-1990s upon Ankara's hosting of the Uzbek opposition leader Muhammad Salih. It deteriorated further when Turkey criticized the Uzbek government's attitude during the Andijan incident. The leader-driven program change in Uzbek foreign policy actualized by Mirziyoyev, while sticking to Karimov's multi-vectoral foreign policy goal, has mended Uzbekistan's beclouded association with the Central Asian states and rekindled its political and military bonds with Turkey.

Russia: Intensification of Multi-farious Ties

Uzbekistan adopted a more pro-Russian standing regarding the Crimean issue in the Mirziyoyev period which proved to be a sensitive matter for Moscow. Although the Foreign Minister Kamilov had declared in March 2014 that the country would stick to the position of sustaining the territorial integrity and political independence of any state¹² Uzbekistan voted against a United Nations resolution in November 2018 which stated that the seizure of Crimea by force was illegal and called on Russia to return the territory to Ukraine.¹³

Economic cooperation is another significant aspect of the bilateral association. With mutual trade amounted to six billion U.S. dollars in 2020, Russia became the second largest trading partner of Uzbekistan after China. Uzbekistan hosted over 2,000 enterprises with Russian capital and the accumulated Russian investments in the country reached to ten billion U.S. dollars in 2021.¹⁴ The

12 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "The Position of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the Situation in Ukraine and the Crimean Issue", 2014, <https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2014/the-position-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-on-the-situation-in-ukraine-and-the-crimean-issue---9029> [Accessed: 31.08.2021].

13 The Tashkent Times, "Uzbekistan Voted against UN Resolution on Crimea", 16 November 2018, <https://tashkenttimes.uz/world/3190-uzbekistan-voted-against-resolution-on-crimea-at-un> [Accessed: 31.08. 2021].

14 The Russian Government, "Mikhail Mishustin's Conversation with Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Abdulla Aripov", 2021, <http://government.ru/en/news/42088/> [Accessed: 31.08.2021].

institutional ties between Uzbekistan and Russia in the economic realm were strengthened with Uzbekistan's gaining of observer status in December 2020 in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Uzbekistan had become member of the predecessor of the EAEU, the Eurasian Economic Community in January 2006 but suspended its membership to the organization in November 2008. The full membership to the EAEU may have some benefits for Uzbekistan as most of the Uzbek exports are sent to the EAEU members such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Furthermore, integration with the Union might also regulate the status of more than one million Uzbek immigrants in Russia. However, membership may bring out some drawbacks as well. Higher quality consumer products from Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia may make things difficult for the local manufacturers. More importantly, accession to the EAEU has the potential of undermining Uzbekistan's autonomy as Russia is granted with financial concessions and the application of common external trade policy would impede Uzbekistan's ability to sign independent trade agreements.

Military-technical collaboration became another area that recorded progress during the Mirziyoyev era. Russian and Uzbek defence ministers signed the Treaty on the Development of Military-Technical Cooperation on November 29, 2016 which included Uzbekistan's purchase of discounted weapons and military equipment from Russia. Education and training cooperation was resumed as well. In October 2017, Russian and Uzbek troops came together for joint manoeuvres for the first time in 12 years. The aggravation of the security condition in Afghanistan precipitated a closer military cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia. The two states carried out joint exercises in Samarkand on July 7, 2021. Shortly after these military drills, on August 5, Uzbekistan and Russia along with Tajikistan conducted manoeuvres on the joint Afghan border with the aim of repelling terrorist threats.¹⁵

Moscow still retains the soft power advantage compared to other major powers in Tashkent. Russian newspapers, magazines and television programs are popular in Uzbekistan. Moreover, over the past two years, the number of branches of Russian universities in Uzbekistan has grown from 4 to 12. Another important aspect of the educational links between the two states is the 35,000 Uzbek students who receive higher education in Russia.¹⁶

Political, economic, military-technical and socio-cultural bonds between Uzbekistan and Russia have witnessed resurgence since Mirziyoyev's coming to power. Yet, the expansion of the Russian influence in Uzbek economy in the case of possible Uzbek accession to the EAEU in addition to the growing security cooperation between the two countries amidst the tension and uncertainty brewing in Central Asia following the Taliban capture of Afghanistan risk the undercutting of autonomy of Uzbekistan.

15 The Moscow Times, "Russia-led Drills Begin on Afghanistan Border", 5 August 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/08/05/russia-led-drills-begin-on-afghanistan-borderafp-a74707> [Accessed: 31.08.2021].

16 The Tashkent Times, "Branch of Russian Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology Opens in Tashkent", 27 May 2021, <https://tashkenttimes.uz/national/6967-branch-of-russian-mendeleev-university-of-chemical-technology-opens-in-tashkent> [Accessed: 31.08.2021].

China: Expansion of Diverse Bonds

Uzbekistan continued to back up the Chinese line regarding the treatment of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang under the presidency of Mirziyoyev which helped the smooth perpetuation of relations with China. Tashkent signed the letter which supported Beijing's handling of the Xinjiang issue along with 13 other countries on July 26, 2019. Furthermore, Mirziyoyev underlined that Xinjiang was purely internal affairs of China and added that Uzbekistan would firmly support China in safeguarding national sovereignty and security.¹⁷

Economic cooperation between China and Uzbekistan has been developing steadily for some time. China has become Uzbekistan's main trading partner by getting ahead of Russia since 2015. The bilateral trade between the two countries reached to 6.4 billion U.S. dollars in 2020.¹⁸ The number of firms with Chinese investment in Uzbekistan came at 1,652 and the total volume of the direct Chinese investments exceeded nine billion U.S. dollars in 2020.¹⁹ As part of the BRI, China also helped Uzbekistan in construction of the Kamchiq Tunnel which was significant for the improvement of the Andijan-Pap-Angren-Tashkent electrified railway.

China became a significant lender for the Uzbek economy. China State Development Bank provided 309 million U.S. dollars to Uzbekistan Airways for the purchase of new aircraft and the Exim Bank of China offered 65 million U.S. dollars to build new hydroelectric plants as well as renovate the existing ones.²⁰ Debt to these two Chinese financial institutions constituted 17 percent of the total state debt of Uzbekistan which made up of 40.1 percent of gross domestic product of the country in April 2021.²¹ Increasing state debt, widespread corruption and inadequate protection of property rights may shun the Western lenders from providing loans to Uzbekistan in the future. This may increase Uzbekistan's financial dependence on China which will mean backtracking from self-reliance in foreign policy.

The security collaboration between Uzbekistan and China made headway during the Mirziyoyev period. Tashkent purchased sniper rifles, surface-to-air missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles from Beijing.²² Uzbekistan's Academy of the Ministry of Interior Affairs and the People's Public Security University became official partners in May 2017 and China started to

17 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev Meets with Wang Yi", 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1892609.shtml [Accessed: 02.09.2021].

18 Eurasianet, "Despite Drop, China Maintains Edge as Uzbekistan's Top Trade Partner", 27 January 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/despite-drop-china-maintains-edge-as-uzbekistans-top-trade-partner> [Accessed: 02.09.2021].

19 Oleg Limanov, "Uzbekistan-China Relations during the Covid-19 Pandemic", *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 1 June 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/uzbekistan-china-relations-during-the-covid-19-pandemic> [Accessed: 02.09.2021].

20 Umida Hashimova, "Uzbekistan Increasingly Turns to China for Development Loans", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, XVI/118, 4 September 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-increasingly-turns-to-china-for-development-loans/> [Accessed: 02.09.2021].

21 The Tashkent Times, "Uzbekistan's Public Debt Falls to US\$ 23.2 Billion", 28 May 2021, <http://tashkenttimes.uz/finances/6975-uzbekistan-s-public-debt-fell-to-us-23-2-billion> [Accessed: 02.09.2021].

22 Raffaello Pantucci, "The Dragon's Cuddle", *Strategic Review*, 30 December 2019, <https://sr.sgpp.ac.id/post/the-dragons-cuddle> [Accessed 02.09.2021].

host Uzbek Ministry of Interior Affairs employees for security briefings on counter-terrorism and drug-trafficking.²³ The two countries were also engaged in joint exercises both within the framework of the SCO and on a bilateral basis.

China paled in comparison to Russia in terms of dissemination of socio-cultural influence. China continued to acquaint the Uzbek people with the Chinese language and culture via the Confucius institutes in Tashkent and Samarkand. Moreover, the Chinese government provided educational grants for Uzbek students to study in China. Yet, the number of students who received higher education in China which was estimated to be around 5,000 remained well below the number of Uzbek university students in Russia.²⁴

The Uzbek-Chinese association maintained its upward trend during the Mirziyoyev era. Uzbekistan's support of China's Xinjiang policy had positive impact on the political interaction. Commercial, military and socio-cultural ties were strengthened as well. China's growing weight in Uzbekistan's external debt however, if not properly managed, may portend the commencement of an asymmetric relationship which will jeopardize the country's resilient foreign policy line.

The U.S.: Maintenance of a Workable Relationship

The normalization process with the U.S. which was kicked off in the last years of the Karimov presidency continued unabated during the Mirziyoyev period. Mirziyoyev initially met the American President Donald Trump within the framework of the Arab-Muslim and the U.S. Summit gathered in Riyadh in May 2017. He was then received by Trump at the White House in May 2018 and the two presidents signed an agreement in areas of education and cultural exchange. These high-level diplomatic exchanges were followed by the U.S. Foreign Minister Mike Pompeo's visit to Uzbekistan in February 2020 and the talks that took place under the aegis of the C5+1 summits (Central Asia plus the U.S.) which brought together the U.S. and five Central Asian states.

The amelioration of Uzbek-American association might be attributed to the increasing rapport and cooperation between the two states for the maintenance of security and stability in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan was regarded as a key partner by the U.S. in Afghanistan as the country supported international efforts through provision of electricity, economic assistance, and development of Afghanistan's infrastructure.²⁵ Accordingly, Kamilov met the Special Representative of the U.S. for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad in September 2019 and discussed the course of implementation of socio-economic and infrastructure projects

23 Bradley Jardine – Edward Lemon, "In Russia's Shadow: China's Rising Security Presence in Central Asia", *Kennan Cable*, LII, (2020), p. 8.

24 Ezoza Yakvalkhodjieva, "For Coveted Spots in China, Uzbek Students 'Study Like Crazy'", *Eurasianet*, 26 April 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/for-coveted-spots-in-china-uzbek-students-study-like-crazy> [Accessed: 02.09.2021].

25 U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Uzbekistan", 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-uzbekistan/> [Accessed 04.09.2021].

initiated by Uzbekistan in Afghanistan.²⁶ Shortly after this meeting, in February 2020, Kamilov participated in the signing ceremony of the settlement between the U.S. and Taliban that was held in Doha.²⁷ Representatives of the U.S., Uzbekistan and Afghanistan also began to come together in a trilateral format in May 2020.

The economic aspect of the relationship lagged far behind Uzbekistan's trade figures with China and Russia. Bilateral trade between the two states became 514 million U.S. dollars in 2019 and the investments of the American companies in Uzbekistan exceeded one billion U.S. dollars.²⁸

Uzbekistan's military cooperation with the U.S. remained limited to the military education activities. Tashkent started to host the Office of the NATO Liaison Officer for Central Asia in 2013 but the Office was closed in 2017 due to budgetary reasons.²⁹ The U.S. Special Forces have been training hundreds of Uzbek Special Forces troops since 2015. The U.S. army also provided advisory support to the Uzbek military and assistance to the Uzbek professional military institutions.

The opening of the Uzbekistan branch of the Webster University in November 2019 became the major U.S. attempt to expand its soft power in the country. Washington, with this initiative, seized the opportunity to get closer to the Uzbek youth, some of whom would be the future leaders of Uzbekistan. Getting access to high-quality education, improving English skills and building new networks would increase employment opportunities for these young people, thus would engender positive feelings for the USA. Washington also allocated funding to encourage English language instruction in Uzbekistan and sent more than 300 Uzbekistani students, teachers, and professionals to government-sponsored exchange programs in the U.S.³⁰

The preservation of the security and stability of Afghanistan has been the main axis of cooperation between Uzbekistan and the U.S. during the Mirziyoyev presidency. However, the complete military withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the suspension of its embassy in Kabul demonstrated that Washington, to a large extent, dissociated itself from that country. On top of this, the resumption of the Taliban control over most of Afghanistan has exposed the southern regions of Uzbekistan to new risks and dangers. This situation will probably expand Uzbekistan's security cooperation with Russia and China. Taking into consideration the fact that commercial and socio-cultural bonds between Tashkent and Washington have been meagre up to

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Meeting with the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation", 2019, <https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2019/meeting-with-the-us-special-representative-for-afghanistan-reconciliation---22815> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

27 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Meeting with the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation", 2020, <https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2020/meeting-with-the-us-special-representative-for-afghanistan-reconciliation---27339> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

28 U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "Secretary Pompeo's Visit to Uzbekistan", 2020, <https://uz.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeos-visit-to-uzbekistan/> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

29 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Relations with Uzbekistan", 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_22839.htm [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

30 U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "Secretary Pompeo's Visit to Uzbekistan".

now, it seems that Tashkent will be bereft of the opportunity to make use of its relationship with the U.S. as a balancing factor to stave off the encroachments of Moscow and Beijing in the future.

Central Asian Republics: Strengthening of the Regional Vector

Uzbekistan's interest in Central Asia and engagement with the regional countries has increased remarkably during the Mirziyoyev era. Uzbekistan spearheaded the institutionalization of the regional gatherings of the leaders of the Central Asian Republics by promoting the Consultative Meeting of Heads of Central Asian States initiative in 2017. Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan attended the summits that took place in Astana in March 2018, in Tashkent in November 2019 and in Avaza in August 2021. The joint statements of these convocations anticipated step-by-step development in the fields of trade and economic cooperation, transport coordination, scientific and cultural diplomacy, joint tourism development, youth policy and industrial and environmental partnerships.³¹ Uzbekistan also encouraged regional meetings at lower levels. The governor of Fergana Province received the governor of Tajikistan's Sughd Province and the governor of Kyrgyzstan's Batken Province in the city of Fergana in April 2021. The parties, all of which were accompanied by delegations from local agricultural and industrial businesses pledged to enhance commercial and cultural ties between the three provinces.³²

Uzbekistan attempted to play a low-key mediatory role in the spring of 2021 after a border conflict broke out between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on April 28. Tashkent called on both sides to calm down, deescalate the conflict and utilize diplomatic channels. Mirziyoyev got into contact with both Kyrgyz and Tajik leaders and conveyed Uzbekistan's satisfaction concerning the resolution of the conflict within a short span of time.³³ Protecting peace and stability in Central Asia deemed important for Uzbekistan not only for security but also for economic purposes. In the wake of Mirziyoyev's coming to power, Uzbekistan attached special importance to the development of commercial ties with its Central Asian neighbours. In 2020, the volume of trade between Uzbekistan and the Central Asian Republics amounted to almost five billion U.S. dollars, increasing by more than twice. Similarly, from 2016 to January 2021, the number of joint ventures with capital contribution from the Central Asian states in Uzbekistan increased more than fourfold, from 312 to 1,451.³⁴

31 Filippo Costa Buranelli, "3rd Meeting of Central Asian Leaders: A Small Step toward the Formation of a Regional Order?", *The Diplomat*, 12 August 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/3rd-meeting-of-central-asian-leaders-a-small-step-toward-the-formation-of-a-regional-order/> [Accessed: 04.09.2021]; UzDaily, "Central Asia-Priority of Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan", 15 July 2020, <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/58469> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

32 Bruce Pannier, "Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz Governors Hold Landmark Forum in Ferghana Valley", *RFE/RL*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ferghana-valley-talks-uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan/31226060.html> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

33 Umida Hashimova, "Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan's Divergent Responses to Regional Border Conflict", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, XVIII/84, 26 May 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-and-kazakhstan-divergent-responses-to-regional-border-conflict/> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

34 Belt & Road News, "Tashkent's Regional Policy under Mirziyoyev", 21 May 2021, <https://www.beltandroad.news/tashkents-regional-policy-under-mirziyoyev/> [Accessed 04.09.2021].

Apart from the efforts to spur regional collaboration, Mirziyoyev also endeavoured to solve Uzbekistan's bilateral problems with the Central Asian Republics. In March 2018 he visited Tajikistan and signed a border treaty which opened 16 border crossings and a deal to establish a 30-day visa-free regime between the two countries. Air, road and rail traffic between the two states were resumed as well.³⁵ Uzbekistan restarted delivering natural gas to Tajikistan in April 2018 and dropped its objection to Tajikistan's Rogun Dam project. In January 2020, Uzbekistan also completed the removal of mines along the Tajik border. Furthermore, as of August 2018 the two countries have been conducting annual military exercises. They have been also carrying out anti-terrorism drills since September 2018 which have become much more critical after the spill-over of the upheaval in northern Afghanistan to Central Asia became a manifest possibility in August 2021.³⁶

Uzbekistan concluded a border agreement also with Kyrgyzstan in September 2017 during the visit of Mirziyoyev to the country. The agreement lifted the restrictions at the border points. The two sides began negotiating the delimitation and demarcation of their common border and announced in March 2021 that they had fully resolved their border issues despite the sporadic outbreak of minor skirmishes.³⁷ Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have launched an important transportation project in June 2020 as part of the BRI, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan road-rail connection which if successfully completed, will become one of the shortest routes between China and Western Europe, making Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan key transit countries for Chinese exports.³⁸

Mirziyoyev carried out his first visit to Turkmenistan in March 2017. The two countries inaugurated the Turkmenabad-Farab railway bridge and an automobile bridge across the Amu Darya River which formed part of the proposed Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman-Qatar transport corridor.³⁹ Turkmenistan commenced to export electricity to Tajikistan through Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan also agreed to renew mutual air and road traffic in August 2021.⁴⁰

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan launched the high speed rail link and the M-39 highway in the post-Karimov period.⁴¹ In January 2021, the two states along with the U.S. introduced the Central

35 Adam Saud, "Changing Dynamics of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy under Shavkat Mirziyoyev: Prospects for Central Asian Regional Economic Integration", p. 17.

36 Umida Hashimova, "Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Engage in Joint Military Exercises", *The Diplomat*, 23 March 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-engage-in-joint-military-exercises/> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

37 Umida Hashimova, "Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan's Divergent Responses to Regional Border Conflict"; RFE/RL, "Kyrgyz Officials Say Situation under Control after Minor Clashes along Uzbek Border", 14 May 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz-tajik-border-minor-clashes-sokh/31254938.html> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

38 Soso Dzumukashvili, "Future of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Remains Uncertain", *Emerging Europe*, 10 August 2021, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/future-of-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-remains-uncertain/> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

39 Fozil Mashrab, "Uzbekistan Accords Turkmenistan Status of Closest Neighbor and Partner", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, XIV/36, 16 March 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-accords-turkmenistan-status-closest-neighbor-partner/> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

40 Bruce Pannier, "Afghanistan, Coronavirus Lend Extra Weight to Central Asian Leaders' Summit", *RFE/RL*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-taliban-coronavirus/31401479.html> [Accessed 04.09.2021].

41 Adam Saud, "Changing Dynamics of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy under Shavkat Mirziyoyev: Prospects for Central Asian Regional Economic Integration", pp. 14-15.

Asia Investment Partnership to attract at least one billion U.S. dollars over five years to support projects which would advance private sector-led growth and boost economic connectivity within Central Asia.⁴² The two countries have also finalized the technical details of the Silk Visa in May 2021 which will enable holders to visit both countries. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan expressed willingness to join the initiative as well.

Mirziyoyev, shortly after assuming the post of presidency embarked on revitalization of the regional aspect of Uzbekistan's foreign policy through the convention of high-level regional gatherings, resolution of border disputes and resumption of transportation links. Invigoration of regional ties would facilitate the partaking of Uzbekistan in global infrastructure projects such as the BRI and would consolidate the country's position as a significant trade and transportation hub. Despite the presence of disagreements over some of the border points and water management matters, Uzbekistan's renewed commitment to the regional cooperation was well-received in Central Asia. Tashkent's struggle to find solutions to the bilateral problems and its commitment to the regional collaboration leave less chance for external intervention which serves the country's independent foreign policy line.

Turkey: Beginning of a New Era

Uzbekistan and Turkey opened a new chapter in their tumultuous relationship when Mirziyoyev came to Ankara on October 25, 2017 at the invitation of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It was the first official visit from Uzbekistan to Turkey after 20 years. The two presidents hammered out the Joint Statement, which aimed to facilitate the rise of cooperation between the two countries to a strategic level. More than 20 documents were signed on development of mutual relations in the fields of economy, trade, industry, banking and financial services, investment, tourism, transport and logistics, healthcare, training and defence.⁴³

Uzbekistan introduced visa free travel for Turkish citizens in February 2018 and direct flights between Istanbul and Samarkand began in March 2018. Erdoğan visited Uzbekistan in April 2018 and during his meeting with Mirziyoyev it was decided to establish the Turkey-Uzbekistan High Level Strategic Cooperation Council in order to further elevate and institutionalize the relationship.⁴⁴ Ankara and Tashkent also came together in multilateral formats such as the ECO and the Organization of Islamic Conference. Moreover, Uzbekistan ratified the Nakhichevan

42 Eldor Tulyakov – Farruh Khakimov, “Friendly Cooperation with Central Asian States-A Priority Direction of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy”, *Caspian Policy Center*, 29 March 2021, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/friendly-cooperation-with-central-asian-states-a-priority-direction-of-uzbekistans-foreign-policy/> [Accessed: 04.09.2021].

43 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “The State Visit of the President of Uzbekistan to Turkey Was Fruitful”, 2017, <https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2017/the-state-visit-of-the-president-of-uzbekistan-to-turkey-was-fruitful---14900> [Accessed 06.09.2021].

44 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Joint Statement by the President of the Republic of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev”, 2018, <https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2018/joint-statement-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-and-the-president-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-shavkat-mirziyoyev---20233> [Accessed 06.09.2021].

Agreement on Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council) in September 2019 and participated to the Seventh Summit of the Turkic Council which was founded in October 2009 by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey to enhance political solidarity, economic cooperation and socio-cultural interaction in the Turkic world, as a full member in October 2019.⁴⁵

Turkey ranked fifth in Uzbekistan's largest trading partners coming after China, Russia, Kazakhstan and South Korea, with a bilateral trade volume amounted to two billion US dollars in 2020.⁴⁶ By February 2020, the number of firms in Uzbekistan with Turkish capital has reached to 1306.⁴⁷ The two countries also concluded a memorandum of understanding to further improve the economic relations when Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu carried out a visit to Tashkent in March 2021.

Uzbekistan and Turkey made some progress in developing military cooperation during the Mirziyoyev era as well. In July 2017, Mirziyoyev and the Turkish National Defence Minister Nurettin Canikli met in Tashkent and signed an agreement which enabled training of Uzbek military officials in Turkey starting from 2018.⁴⁸ In 2017, Turkish company Nurol Makina and Uzbekistan's UzAuto signed a memorandum on producing 100 military vehicles in Uzbekistan.⁴⁹ Turkey's National Defence Minister Hulusi Akar paid a visit to Uzbekistan in October 2020 and clinched a military cooperation agreement with his counterpart Bakhodir Kurbanov that encompassed collaboration in military training and defence industry.⁵⁰ Uzbekistan and Turkey have also commenced to conduct joint military drills since 2018.

Mirziyoyev managed to get back on the rails Uzbekistan's turbulent relations with Turkey which had gone downhill during the Karimov years. High-level diplomatic visits between the two countries became frequent occurrences and the institutional tie strengthened in the wake of Uzbekistan's being member of the Turkic Council. Economic cooperation which has always been the brightest spot in the relationship continues to develop while the recent expansion of military-technical collaboration attests to the new potential areas of association between the parties.

45 Turkic Council, "Seventh Summit of the Turkic Council", 2019, <https://www.turkkon.org/en/organizasyon-tarihcesi> [Accessed 06.09.2021].

46 Daily Sabah, "Turkey, Uzbekistan Eye \$5B in Bilateral Trade", 8 April 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkey-uzbekistan-eye-5b-in-bilateral-trade> [07.09.2021].

47 Akramjon Nematov, "The Essence and Significance of Strategic Cooperation of Uzbekistan and Turkey", *Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, 19 March 2020, <http://isrs.uz/en/maqolalar/sut-i-znachenie-strategiceskogo-sotrudnicstva-mezdu-uzbekistanom-i-turciej> [Accessed: 07.09.2021].

48 Azernews, "Uzbekistan, Turkey Sign Set of Documents in Military Sphere", 27 July 2017, <https://www.azernews.az/region/116756.html> [Accessed: 07.09.2021].

49 Arestakes Simavoryan, "Turkey's Military-technical Cooperation with the Turkic Nations", *Orbeli Center*, 18 November 2019, https://orbeli.am/en/post/316/2019-11-18/Turkey%E2%80%99s+Military-Technical+Cooperation+With+the+Turkic+Nations?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_wY1OHLO98EVGleNRLG_dJ2g2hmzWRU9jRg3jBmtDUVw-163.102.0363-0-gqNtZGzNAICjcnBszQb9 [Accessed: 07.09.2021].

50 Daily Sabah, "Turkish, Uzbek Defense Ministers Sign Military Agreement, Underline Further Defense Cooperation", 27 October 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkish-uzbek-defense-ministers-sign-military-agreement-underline-further-defense-cooperation> [Accessed: 07.09.2021].

Conclusion

Uzbekistan has striven to pursue a cautious, restrained and balanced foreign policy line since coming to the international arena as an independent state in 1991. Releasing from the foreign yoke centuries later, the founding president of the country, Karimov refused to live under the wings of another patron. He built practical yet transactional bonds with the leading actors such as Russia, China and the U.S. Relations with the Central Asian Republics on the other hand, were rife with disagreements and conflicts. Border clashes, rifts over water management and Uzbekistan's cutting off of major transportation links curtailed the regional interaction to a considerable extent. Moreover, such acts also alienated Tashkent from its neighbours.

Mirziyoyev, while adhering to the multi-vectoral foreign policy perspective of his predecessor, took heed of the regional dimension as well. He demonstrated willingness and determination to resolve bilateral problems with the Central Asian Republics, relieved tensions over border and water management matters and took the lead to organize regional convocations to strengthen communication and cooperation between the Central Asian states. He also mended Uzbekistan's knotty relationship with Turkey and boosted political, economic and military ties with this country which contributed to the consolidation of multi-vectorism in foreign policy.

The global and regional issues which had reverberations on economic and security conditions of Uzbekistan may have the potential to derail the country's efforts to sustain autonomy in foreign policy. The growing external debt to China is also a concern for the country. Furthermore, in the event of a full membership to the EAEU, Uzbekistan will be less independent to set the rules for its commercial relations with the third countries. Another possible problem is the security risks emanating from Afghanistan following the establishment of the Taliban rule in August 2021. Uzbekistan, different from the 1990s, had built direct contacts with the Taliban long before its accession to power in Afghanistan. Yet, the presence of many militant groups in northern Afghanistan, some members of which were Uzbek citizens, Afghan refugee flow to Central Asia and probable conflicts between the different ethnic groups in Northern Afghanistan may engender destabilization in Fergana Valley. Such developments may induce deeper security cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia which may limit Tashkent's manoeuvrability in foreign policy decisions.

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