



## KYRGYZSTAN'S REGIONAL POLITICS UNDER JEENBEKOV

In the past two years, regional cooperation in Central Asia has been undergoing significant changes due to the transformation of the political establishment in some of the regional countries. Kyrgyzstan, with its special place in the region, the so-called "democratic island" of Central Asia, has also influenced this trend. Therefore, it is worth examining the current foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan and its impact on the regionalization process in Central Asia.

Sooronbay Jeenbekov, the fifth president of Kyrgyzstan, came to power in October 2017, when the regional leaders were already starting their efforts to bring the existing problematic issues closer toward resolution. He became the first Kyrgyz president, who came to power not as a result of a regime change. President Jeenbekov was among the founders of the Social Democratic Party, led by ex-president Almazbek Atambayev, therefore, in the beginning of his tenure, he was perceived as a protégé of Atambayev, yet Jeenbekov quickly managed to avoid an expected patronage of his former boss. His team, largely consisting of his family members with strong support from the south of the country, demonstrates a conservative approach with the elements of religiosity.

Concerning international activities of President Jeenbekov, there is a strong focus on the region as he has already visited all the Central Asian states: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in December 2017, Tajikistan in February 2018 and Turkmenistan in August 2018. In the frame of multinational cooperation, the president participated in the summit meeting of the Central Asian leaders in March 2018 in Astana, hosted the fourth meeting of the High Council for Strategic Cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and Turkey, and organized the Third World Nomad Games with the participation of high-ranking guests, including the presidents of Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Tatarstan (Russia), and the prime minister of Hungary.

President Jeenbekov's foreign policy priorities are circled around the main strategic partners of Kyrgyzstan, which are Russia, China, and Kazakhstan, whereas in his inauguration speech President Jeenbekov named Russia as the main priority, followed by the countries of Central Asia. Consequently, Russia, which accounts for more than 50% of Kyrgyzstan's external trade, was the destination of his maiden foreign visit. By this, Jeenbekov confirmed that Kyrgyzstan keeps its loyalty to Russia. It should be noted that Kyrgyzstan's economy is extremely dependent on remittances of Kyrgyz labor migrants working mainly in Russia and Kazakhstan, which constitute about 30% of the country's GDP, therefore the agreement on the application of the migration amnesty and the withdrawal of Kyrgyz citizens from the "blacklist" was scored as a practically important achievement of Jeenbekov. Relations with Russia are also strengthened

through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and Jeenbekov is very optimistic about the potential of the EAEU, being among the active supporters of the union and a possible introduction of its single currency. Notably, the EAEU membership has led to a significant increase in Russia's economic and foreign policy influence in Kyrgyzstan. Besides, during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Bishkek in March 2019, the sides have agreed to expand the territory of Russia's air base in the northern town of Kant to 60 hectares and increase its annual rent from \$4.5 million to \$4.79 million.

The Kyrgyz President's first state visit was made to China, where he took part in the Summit of the Heads of the SCO States in Qingdao in June 2018. On the sidelines of the summit, Jeenbekov managed to arrange a deal with his Chinese counterpart on the allocation of the 600 million yuan grant for the implementation of projects that should create scientific and innovative agricultural technological parks, equip veterinary and phytosanitary laboratories, develop the road network in Bishkek, and provide drinking water to the country's areas in need. Another significant project is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, the details of which are still being finalized. If completed, the \$5 billion railway should contribute to the development of Kyrgyzstan's trade and economic relations. However, Bishkek's relations with Beijing are challenged by the anti-Chinese sentiments that are growing domestically, mostly because the Chinese investments have become a large burden for the country. For instance, over 2013-2018, China's share in Kyrgyzstan's foreign debt has increased from 2% to 44%.

Meanwhile, Jeenbekov has started to repair the Central Asian direction of Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy with an important thaw in relations with Uzbekistan, with which it had long-lasting issues over the disputed borders and on the construction of the Kambarata dam. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, the project that fully meets the interests of both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, has become an important pillar of mutual cooperation. In addition, the parties have intensified negotiations on border issues and reached an agreement on the simplification of customs procedures to promote bilateral trade.

Jeenbekov's relations with Astana began with a diplomatic test on resolving the situation at the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border in the autumn of 2017, which had arisen even before his election as a president. The ties between the two brotherly nations worsened in September 2017 after a meeting of presidential candidate Omurbek Babanov with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. President Atambayev responded with harsh critics of Kazakhstan, which led to the problems on the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border, leading to long

queues of cargo trucks. The conflict escalated further after a series of Atambayev's critical statements that resulted in the denunciation by the Kyrgyz government of \$100 million of technical assistance offered by Kazakhstan to support Kyrgyzstan's EAEU membership. The situation was regulated only after the presidential election in Kyrgyzstan, at the CSTO meeting on November 30, 2017, when Nazarbayev and Jeenbekov signed a road map of economic cooperation. The interaction with Tajikistan that is aimed at developing economic and energy cooperation is also complicated by the border problems. The parties have started the negotiation process to reconcile their differences, but the issue is too complex. Only 504 km of the 976 km-long Kyrgyz-Tajik border have been delimited and demarcated, which remains one of the key obstacles for bilateral cooperation. Recently, on March 13-14, 2019, a conflict occurred between residents of the village of Aksai of Kyrgyzstan and the village of Mekhnabad of Tajikistan due to the construction of the Aksai-Tamdyk bypass road in the Batken region. As a result of the violent clashes, two Tajiks were killed and dozens from both sides injured. Nevertheless, it should be noted that trade relations with Tajikistan in 2018 increased by 54% compared to 2017, which is very significant as the trade with Uzbekistan only grew by 8.6% and while there was a decrease in trade with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan by 5% and 10%, respectively. In addition, both Bishkek and Dushanbe are interested in developing energy cooperation, particularly, in the launch of the CASA-1000 project, which envisages the generation of electricity in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and its subsequent resale to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan's cooperation with Turkmenistan is, probably, the least problematic as the two countries do not share borders. Both states are interested in the development of economic and trade ties and can contribute to addressing the region's water and energy issues. During Jeenbekov's visit to Turkmenistan, the parties signed the declaration on strategic partnership and a number of other documents, including an agreement on avoiding double taxation.

To sum up, Kyrgyzstan, with its weak economy and dependence on external support, strives for pursuing flexible policies towards the region. By supporting the wave of cooperation among the Central Asian states, official Bishkek is also interested in maintaining efficient cooperation with its fraternal neighbors, along with resolving the existing issues with them. Therefore, the Central Asian states, all of which, including Kyrgyzstan, have the border, water and energy issues as their key challenges to address, are moving towards overcoming these obstacles and developing pragmatic cooperation based on mutual benefits.

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## Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- Speaking at NATO's ministerial meeting in Washington, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated that Ankara would develop constructive relations both with Russia and the West. According to the minister, as an independent and sovereign country, Turkey should have good relations with all neighboring countries and doesn't have to choose between Russia and other nations.
- Acting President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev paid his first foreign visit to Russia and met with his counterpart Vladimir Putin. The leaders discussed issues of bilateral political, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation, as well as regional and international matters. They issued a joint statement pledging to strengthen traditionally friendly relations between the two countries.
- The CSTO member states held consultations on cooperation in the field of arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation in Moscow. The delegations exchanged views on the current situation in this field and prospects for its further development, coordinating their approaches to pressing issues of international security, such as the prevention of arms race in outer space.
- The CIS Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs met in Moscow to discuss current issues on the international and regional agenda, and prospects for expanding economic and humanitarian cooperation within the organization. In particular, the parties reviewed draft agreements on the coordination of interstate relations in the field of fundamental research and on cooperation in museum studies.
- The Tajik-Kyrgyz commission for delimitation and demarcation of the bilateral border held its meeting in Dushanbe. The parties signed a protocol, under which the two sides agreed to cooperate on preventing provocations along the disputable stretches of the mutual 976 km long border, of which only 504 km have so far been delimited and demarcated.
- The delegation of Uzbekistan, led by the country's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, visited Kabul to meet with President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani. The parties discussed the Afghan peace process, including a possibility of holding talks between the central government and the Taliban movement in Tashkent, regional connectivity, infrastructure projects and economic ties between the two countries.
- The security councils of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan held extended bilateral consultations in Tashkent. The parties discussed issues of regional security and sustainable development in the context of the situation in Afghanistan, as well as ways to improve the efficiency of interaction between their border services and customs authorities in the fight against smuggling and violations of customs legislation.

## Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Uzbekistan Railways implements a new project to modernize the strategically important Andijan-Sawai-Khanabad railway and organize intercity passenger traffic on this route. The project worth more than \$15 million provides for the upgrade of the 50 km railway section and the construction of a new 10.5 km segment bypassing the territory of Kyrgyzstan.
- The Uzbekistan-Tajikistan commission for trade and economic cooperation held its regular session in the Uzbek city of Termez. As a result of the talks, the parties signed a protocol confirming their interest in further expanding, through concerted measures, mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation in trade, energy, transportation, agriculture, light industry, and science.
- The Russian enterprise, the Chelyabinsk Pipe-Rolling Plant, won the tender of the Turkmen gas state concern for the supply of pipes for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. According to a deal worth \$219 million, the plant will supply pipes for the construction of the 214 km linear part of the pipeline.
- During the visit of the Russian delegation headed by Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov to Azerbaijan, the parties signed a number of agreements on economic cooperation. At the joint business forum, representatives of more than 60 Russian companies operating in various sectors of the economy, including agriculture, ICT, automotive engineering, chemical industry and other sectors, established partnerships with Azerbaijani entrepreneurs.
- The delegation of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Digital Development, Defense and Aerospace Industry paid a working visit to Azerbaijan to meet with the country's government officials. During the talks, the parties exchanged views on prospects of bilateral interaction in the Caspian Sea, as well as on transport, defense and aerospace, ICT, digitalization, military-technical cooperation and other areas of common interest.
- According to the forecast of the Asian Development Bank, Kazakhstan's economic growth will slowdown in 2019 and 2020 due to lower oil prices and reduced growth in China and Russia. The bank expects the growth of Kazakhstan's GDP to moderate to 3.5% in 2019 and 3.3% in 2020 from 4.1% achieved in 2018. Average inflation is expected to remain at 6% and moderate to 5.5% in 2020.
- According to the World Bank's report, in 2018, the amount of remittances sent home by Ukrainian labor migrants exceeded \$14 billion, up about 19% compared to 2017. Thus, Ukraine has become the largest remittance recipient among the countries of Europe and Central Asia, ahead of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia.

## Society and Culture

- First President of Kazakhstan – Leader of the Nation Nursultan Nazarbayev received President of the International Turkic Academy Darkhan Kydyrali. During the meeting, Kydyrali informed Nazarbayev of the academy's current activities and future work plans, including the progress in the implementation of the tasks set at the latest session of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States.
- According to an edict signed by President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Jeenbekov, an organizing committee was formed that will prepare and conduct activities related to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 2010 April Revolution. The committee is tasked with drafting a plan of commemorative events, while the government is recommended to solve financial and other issues for the implementation of this plan.
- The emergency ministries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan held their first joint meeting in Bishkek. Representatives of the three countries considered ways to improve cross-border cooperation, including experience sharing in responding to transboundary natural and man-made disasters. They also discussed the creation of a unified early warning system for disaster threats.
- The Expert Council on Public Health under the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly held a meeting in St. Petersburg to discuss the development of medical tourism in the CIS countries. The participants reviewed such problems of medical tourism as the increasing commercialization of health care, a wide variation in costs, underdevelopment of international medical insurance and other pressing issues.
- Kazakhstan's Lev Gumilyov Eurasian National University opened its representative office at the Modern Education and Research Institute in Brussels. The office is tasked with developing cooperation with European universities, promoting double degree programs, seeking partners for Kazakh researchers as part of EU scientific grants and attracting European students to Kazakhstan.
- The Belarusian border city of Brest, which celebrates its millennial anniversary this year, was awarded the status of the cultural capital of the CIS in 2019, the 15<sup>th</sup> city to be given this title. More than 30 major cultural events with the participation of representatives of the CIS countries are planned to be held in Brest.
- According to the Ministry of Health of Azerbaijan, the country's population officially reached 10 million. A baby girl deemed to be the 10 millionth Azerbaijani was born in Baku to a couple of internally displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh. The baby was given the name Mehriban, after Azerbaijan's first lady and first vice president, Mehriban Aliyeva.