



PRESIDENT MIRZIYOYEV'S PIVOT TO CENTRAL ASIAN COOPERATION: PROGRESS MADE OVER TWO YEARS

Uzbekistan, which shares common borders with all the Central Asian states and Afghanistan, has become a key trendsetter in the region during the past two years. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power after the death of the country's first president, Islam Karimov, in August 2016 and won the election in December 2016, is the driving force of Uzbekistan's pivot towards Central Asia. From the onset, he has taken decisive and concrete steps to develop mutually beneficial relations with the Central Asian neighbors and made the region the main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

President Mirziyoyev ushered the post-Karimov era initiating changes in the country's political and economic systems that includes the liberalization of the authoritarian rule and the implementation of economic reforms. In foreign policy, the government sets the goal of improving relations with the neighboring countries in order to create a friendly neighborhood. There is an understanding that Uzbekistan's sustainable development depends on its regional policy and stability in the region. As Mirziyoyev stated, "Central Asia is a single organism that has had a common geographical, economic and cultural space for centuries", emphasizing that his regional policy consists of two elements – "not to avoid but discuss the existing issues and to seek reasonable compromises".

Following this statement, in order to "normalize" relations, President Mirziyoyev made his first foreign visit to Turkmenistan in March 2017 that was followed by the visits to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan later in 2017 and to Tajikistan in 2018. During Mirziyoyev's visit to Turkmenistan, the parties signed the strategic partnership agreement, in addition to the agreement on developing railway networks and transportation infrastructure, which is expected to boost interregional and intraregional trade. Vis-a-vis Kazakhstan, the Uzbek side further strengthened existing strategic cooperation and developed an action plan to boost economic cooperation between the states. Mirziyoyev's September 2017 visit to Kyrgyzstan was historic as it was the first in the last 17 years. The major breakthrough of the visit was the signing of the agreement on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, which makes possible the delimitation and demarcation of 85% of the border, thus moving the countries closer to the end of their 26-year old border dispute. The parties also negotiated on the ways to find a compromise on Kyrgyzstan's intention to continue the construction of the Upper Naryn cascade of hydroelectric power stations, the move opposed by Uzbekistan. President Mirziyoyev's visit to Tajikistan in March 2018, the first since Karimov's visit in 2000, was another historic achievement. The parties overcame years of mutual animosity and agreed to establish the 30-day visa-free regime, ending 17 years of mutual visas, and resume flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe that had been terminated in 1992. Furthermore,

the leaders signed an agreement to reopen 10 border posts closed in 2001 and agreed to restore the rail- and motorways connecting the two countries. Of high importance was Mirziyoyev's decision to demine the Uzbek-Tajik border by the end of 2019: in the 1990s, the Uzbek side mined the mountainous parts of the border with Tajikistan. In addition, Tashkent agreed to provide Dushanbe with the previously confidential map of the mined border areas. Thus, the visit of the Uzbek leader to the Tajik soil has become a vivid confirmation of the thaw in Uzbekistan's Central Asian relations.

It is noteworthy that all the regional leaders welcomed Uzbekistan's initiatives and demonstrated interest in exploring opportunities of cooperation. Since 2017, the frequency of mutual visits of the Central Asian presidents has significantly increased, facilitating the discussion of important political and economic issues, as well as the intensification of cultural ties. Further, the heads of the Central Asian states managed to create a multilateral platform for working together, without the participation of external powers, when they gathered for their first working meeting held in Astana in March 2018, on the eve of the Nauryz holiday. Initiated by President Mirziyoyev, the meeting marked a common success on the way to forming a common regional identity, as well as the aspiration of the Central Asian leaders to resolve the regional issues on their own.

During his visits to the Central Asian capitals, in addition to resolving the political issues, Mirziyoyev managed to expand economic and commercial opportunities of cooperation with the neighboring states. For instance, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan developed a road map for economic cooperation that was further discussed in Tashkent in September 2017. The first Kazakh-Uzbek Business Council, the Joint Business Forum, as well as the Interregional Forum that were subsequently held gave an impulse to the development of bilateral trade and economic ties. The Uzbek-Turkmen relations were boosted by the agreement on the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman transit and transport corridor that will transform the status of the Central Asian states from landlocked to land-linked. Similarly, the newly established Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China automobile corridor, initiated by the Uzbek President during his visit to China in May 2017, in addition to the construction of the new Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway, will form an important pillar of the Uzbek strategy to become a transit hub that will connect the Eurasian states. As for Tajikistan, Mirziyoyev emphasized that the Uzbek side was ready to discuss the Rogun Dam project, if the interests of both sides were considered, thereby preventing the escalation of the water dispute into a real conflict. Thus, the pragmatic policy of the Uzbek leadership in the region has focused on developing connectivity and addressing chal-

lenges in order to remove obstacles to commercial, economic and cultural ties between the fraternal nations.

Accordingly, the commercial relations between Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states have been witnessing a dynamic growth in the past two years. The volume of the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan mutual trade in the first nine months of 2018 was more than \$2 billion, which is 40% higher than in the same period of 2017, whereas the sides set the goal to achieve the trade turnover of \$5 billion in 2020. Uzbekistan's trade turnover with Tajikistan in January-May 2018 doubled and increased to \$94 million, while during the 11 months of 2018 the trade turnover with Kyrgyzstan reached a 55% growth, compared to the same period in 2017, and amounted to \$363 million. Consequently, it can be concluded that President Mirziyoyev's foreign policy has opened up the economic potential of the regional interaction. Uzbekistan's pivot to Central Asia has also stimulated cultural and people-to-people contacts between the brotherly nations. In particular, the introduction of the visa-free regime between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and the simplification of border crossing procedures on Uzbekistan's borders with its Central Asian neighbors have already facilitated the reciprocal movement of people and goods. Cultural ties have also been strengthened: for instance, the first exhibition of Tajikistan's culture and economic potential was held in Uzbekistan in September 2017, for the first time in 20 years. Meantime, 2018 was announced as the "Year of Uzbekistan" in Kazakhstan, followed by the organization of more than 200 cultural events to increase the interest of Kazakh people in Uzbek culture and traditions. Similarly, 2019 is proclaimed the "Year of Kazakhstan" in Uzbekistan which will also serve to promote Kazakh culture among Uzbeks. Moreover, the forthcoming introduction of the Silk Road visa that will allow tourists visiting Kazakhstan to enter Uzbekistan without difficulty and vice versa will contribute to the development of the tourism sector of both sides.

In general, two years are not sufficient time to assess the real implications and sustainability of the foreign policy strategy adopted by President Mirziyoyev. While the ongoing rapprochement between the Central Asian states shows their mutual interest in expanding cooperation, it is also understandable that integration is not on the regional agenda due to various domestic and external factors. In any case, Mirziyoyev's approach, which he announced at the UN General Assembly in September 2017, to promote a "new political atmosphere" in the region based on "good-neighborliness" is being successfully implemented. The Uzbek leader's pragmatic approach that has shifted the emphasis of Uzbekistan's regional policy from politics to economy gives an impetus to the development of both his own and other Central Asian nations.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- Following the failure of the U.S.-Russian consultations on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty held in Geneva, U.S. Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Andrea Thompson confirmed Washington's intention to begin the process of withdrawing from the treaty. The U.S. side rejected Moscow's offer to inspect the 9M729 missile system, which presumably violates the treaty, and demanded its complete destruction.
- Foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia Elmar Mammadyarov and Zohrab Mnatsakanyan held consultations hosted by the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group in Paris to discuss a wide range of issues related to the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The parties considered steps toward a possible summit between their leaders and ways to prepare their populations for peace.
- During the meeting with Turkish National Defense Minister Hulusi Akar in Minsk, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated that Belarus and Turkey had always been reliable friends and partners and pledged to remain committed to this policy. Hulusi Akar also held talks with his Belarusian counterpart Andrei Ravkov to discuss the state and prospects of bilateral military cooperation.
- The working groups of the joint Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan intergovernmental commission on delimitation and demarcation of the interstate border held their regular meeting in the Uzbek city of Karshi. During the negotiations, the parties reviewed proposals on the passage of the project demarcation line and agreed on the table detailing the distribution of demarcation activities.
- A high-ranking military delegation led by Chief of the General Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri visited Baku. During the two-day visit, Bagheri met with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and the country's Defense Minister Colonel General Zakir Hasanov to discuss the development of bilateral cooperation in the defense sector, border control and the fight against terrorism.
- President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbay Jeenbekov took part in the ceremony of handing over 125 Russian-made automotive and special vehicles to the country's State Border Service. The aid was rendered by Russia in accordance with the intergovernmental agreement on the provision of \$48.58 million worth of technical assistance to Kyrgyzstan as part of Bishkek's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union.
- Representatives of the defense agencies of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states responsible for international military cooperation held a meeting in Bishkek. During the talks, the military delegations of China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan discussed the plan of cooperation for 2020-2021 and reviewed the agenda of the upcoming meeting of the SCO defense ministers.

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev visited India to participate in the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit-2019 held in the city of Gandhinagar, where he delivered a speech and met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Confirming their determination to actively develop full-scale mutual cooperation, the parties signed a number of documents, including the agreement on long-term supplies of Uzbek uranium to India.
- The State Investment Committee of Uzbekistan organized the Uzbek-German business forum in Berlin. At the event attended by more than 300 representatives from 234 German companies and banks, more than \$4 billion worth of contracts were signed covering projects in the oil and gas sector, petrochemistry, energy, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, food industry, and construction.
- According to Kazakhstan's Ministry of National Economy, in 2018, the country's GDP grew by 4.1% compared to 2017, while industrial production increased by the same 4.1%. In particular, production of oil amounted to 90.4 million tons (an increase of 4.8%), gasoline – 4 million tons (29.8%), gas oil – 4.7 million tons (7.4%), copper ore – 103.2 million tons (8.6%), electricity – 107.1 billion kWh (3.8%), and flour – 4 million tons (0.7%).
- Iran received the first cargo shipment sent overland from eastern China via Kazakhstan's territory. The cargo that included bicycle and industrial machinery parts, wallpaper, brake pads, among other items, was sent from the Chinese port of Ningbo on a freight train towards Khorgos, then to Aktau, where it was loaded into containers and sent to Iran's Caspian Port in the Anzali Free Zone.
- Belarus joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), meeting all the requirements of the AIIB board of governors. The country's Ministry of Finance will serve as an official liaison body for interaction with the bank. The accession to the AIIB opens new opportunities in infrastructure financing for Belarus, primarily under China's Belt and Road Initiative.
- The value of Georgia's foreign trade increased by 17% in 2018, compared to 2017, and reached \$12.5 billion. Exports of Georgian commodities grew by 22.9% and amounted to nearly \$3.4 billion, while imports rose by 14.9% exceeding \$9.1 billion. According to Georgia's Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, the geographical expansion of sales markets is one of the factors explaining the growth of the country's exports.
- The European Commission and the World Bank co-authored an Indicative trans-European Transport Network Investment Action Plan in an effort to improve connectivity and economic growth in the Eastern Partnership countries. The plan identifies priority projects in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine that will require almost €13 billion of investment to finance the construction and rehabilitation of 4,800 km of roads and railways, six ports, and 11 logistics centers.

Society and Culture

- Under the project called Modern Kazakhstani Culture in the Global World, the National Bureau of Translation non-profit foundation started the work to translate and publish anthologies of modern Kazakhstani literature into six official UN languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. Each anthology will be published with a circulation of at least 10,000 copies. The project is also aimed at familiarizing the world with contemporary Kazakh musical and visual arts, choreography, cinematography, and theater.
- According to the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, as of January 1, 2019, the country's resident population reached 33,254,100 people increasing by 597,400, or 1.8%, in 2018. In particular, the urban population is 16.8 million people (50.5% of the total population), and the rural population is 16.45 million people (49.5%).
- The delegation of Azerbaijani officials visited Uzbekistan to study the country's experience in operating the system of public services and organizing work with the population. They held meetings at the Ministry of Justice and the Agency for Public Services and became acquainted with activities of public service centers and people's reception offices of the President of Uzbekistan.
- According to the Institute of Geography of Azerbaijan's National Academy of Sciences, average losses caused by natural disasters to the country's economy annually are estimated at \$250-300 million, which equals 0.4-0.5% of the GDP. Experts suggest to stimulate the development of an appropriate insurance market to effectively compensate the population and economic entities for damage resulting from natural calamities.
- Turkmenistan's Academy of Sciences drafts a seismic risk reduction program, in partnership with the country's government agencies and with support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency. The document will outline measures for mitigating social, economic and environmental consequences associated with possible earthquakes and increasing the emergency preparedness of the population and organizations.
- An executive decision by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan removed the social security requirement for smokers seeking to quit the harmful habit. The country's Ministry of Health will provide free nicotine replacing medicines to hospitals and clinics tasked with helping smokers. Due to the government's measures against smoking, such as the smoking ban in public places and higher taxes on cigarettes, the smoking rate in Turkey declined to 31.6% in 2016.
- President Erdogan ratified the protocol to the November 2012 agreement on the mutual cancellation of the visa regime between Turkey and Moldova. The protocol, signed during Erdogan's October 2018 visit to Moldova, the first in 19 years, enables citizens of the two countries to travel visa-free using internal identification documents.