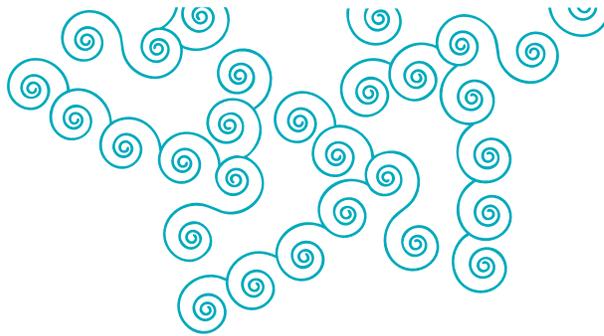


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Uzbekistan's National Security Strategy: Threat and Response

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Key Points

- With the largest population of the five Central Asian countries, and with many co-ethnics residing in neighboring countries, Uzbekistan is a very important Central Asian country from the perspective of maintaining regional stability.
- Its government has consistently pursued a strongly autonomous foreign policy that limits the country's dependence on foreign actors.
- To Moscow's irritation, Tashkent has generally stood aside in relative isolation from regional processes led by Russia such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Customs Union.
- Despite a general aversion to multilateral institutions, Uzbekistan remains actively involved in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and has hosted the SCO's Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS) since the creation in June 2004.
- The main transnational threats facing Uzbekistan include terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and other challenges related to the situation in Afghanistan as well as tensions over access to water, regional rivalries among the great powers, and the Iranian nuclear program.
- Uzbekistan is reshaping its military into a leaner counterterrorist-focused force in line with the National Security doctrine that defines the major threats to Uzbekistan as international terrorism and Islamic extremism.

Since its independence two decades ago, the government of Uzbekistan has sought to maintain its national security and autonomy by avoiding disproportionate political and military dependence on any single foreign actor. In particular, Tashkent has been careful to maintain correct bilateral relations with Moscow without allowing Russian military bases or other security ties that could compromise the country's sovereignty. The Uzbekistani government has also sought to develop good relations with the United States and more recently China to help balance

Third, from Tashkent's perspective, the United States and Europe have served as a poor external balancer, pressing the government to pursue domestic policies that Uzbekistani officials fear could weaken their country's internal stability, while limiting the West's own contributions to regional security. Yet, with the U.S. and European military drawdown in the region, Uzbekistan now has to manage a resurgent Russia either by itself or by aligning more closely with China, which might also challenge its national autonomy in coming years.

Uzbekistan's pivotal location—it is the only Central Asian country to border the other four states—means that regional economic and political integration efforts cannot succeed without Tashkent's support

Russian preeminence, but not at the expense of national autonomy or regime stability. Unlike the other Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan does not border Russia or China, which gives Tashkent a broader maneuvering room than its neighbors. Uzbekistan's current Foreign Policy Concept affirms that the country will not join politico-military blocs, and bans foreign military bases on its territory.²

Uzbekistani leaders have faced several major security challenges, which they have thus far surmounted or at least contained. First, Uzbekistan's relations with some of its neighbors have at times been strained due to diverging foreign policies, resource tensions, or anxieties regarding the country having the largest population in Central Asia, thus making it a potential aspirant for regional hegemony. Second, Russia has succeeded in developing close ties with some of its neighbors, resulting in Uzbekistan being unable to emerge as the leader of a Central Asian regional bloc but instead having to choose between either joining Moscow-led multinational institutions, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Customs Union, or standing aside in relative isolation from regional processes.³ To Moscow's irritation, Tashkent has generally followed the latter course.

Uzbekistan is perhaps the most important Central Asian country from the perspective of maintaining regional stability. It has the largest population of the five Central Asian countries, and many ethnic Uzbeks reside in neighboring countries, making it likely that any internal instability would spill across the national boundaries. Uzbekistan's pivotal location—it is the only Central Asian country to border the other four states—means that regional economic and political integration efforts cannot succeed without Tashkent's support. Uzbekistani leaders generally resist these schemes and have pursued a strongly autonomous foreign policy grounded in realist principles and a prioritization of national sovereignty almost since the country gained independence in late 1991. A frustrating early experience trying to promote cooperation within the dysfunctional Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) reinforced Tashkent's skepticism regarding the likely benefits of regional integration schemes.

Uzbekistan's Assessment of Regional Security Challenges

The main transnational threats facing Uzbekistan include terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and other challenges related to the situation in Afghanistan

as well as tensions over access to water, regional rivalries among the great powers, and the Iranian nuclear program.

Islamist terrorism

Uzbekistanis worry about Islamist militarism, especially the remnants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Established in the 1990s by radicalized Uzbekistanis in the Ferghana Valley with the explicit goal of overthrowing the secular

threats even while their diplomats insist that the inseparability of Central Asia from Afghanistan require greater international exertions to end the conflict in that country.

Narco-trafficking

Narcotics trafficking is another regional problem made worse by the civil war in Afghanistan. In its fall 2013 report, the Afghanistan government and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

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government, the IMU received considerable support from al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which allowed it to establish bases in Afghanistan in the 1990s. From Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, IMU guerrillas infiltrated Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries, where they conducted kidnappings and acts of terrorism. The IMU bombed and attacked a number of targets in and around Uzbekistan during the 1999-2000 period. In February 1999, six car bombs exploded in Tashkent, killing 16 people and wounding more than one hundred. Although the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 drove the original IMU from its Taliban-protected training camps, the movement's offshoots and other Central Asian terrorists have been fighting alongside the Taliban and al-Qaeda for years in Pakistan and elsewhere. IMU-affiliated terrorists attacked Tashkent in April and July 2004 and twice more in 2009.

Today the terrorists hope to exploit the NATO military drawdown to reestablish safe havens in Afghanistan in order to wage jihad against the secular regimes in Central Asia more directly. Meanwhile, Uzbekistani security experts intend to rely on their powerful army and internal security forces to keep Islamist militants from Afghanistan out of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's army is the largest in Central Asia. Western experts rate its elite special forces highly. But Uzbekistani policy makers have thus far relied primarily on their internal security forces to counter terrorist

calculated that the country's 2013 harvest would amount to 5,500 metric tons of opium, a 49 percent increase over the previous year.⁴ The Taliban assists the narcotics trade in order to earn revenue from taxing opium production and providing protection for the traffickers. Transnational criminal organizations then traffic these opiates northward through Central Asia and Russia and then into Europe as well as through Iran, Pakistan, and China. In 2011, the opiate-related trade amounted to at least 16 percent of Afghan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁵

There is also a reverse flow of weapons and other contraband into Afghanistan, though most of the profits from regional narcotics trafficking do not remain in Afghanistan. Smugglers funnel heroin and opium from Afghanistan through the "Northern Route," passing through Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to final destinations in Europe and Russia. According to the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent, narcotics have been discovered in trucks returning from delivering humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, and on trains from Tajikistan.⁶ Drug abuse and narcotics-related crime and corruption in Central Asia is extensive. Uzbekistani law enforcement agencies have increased training and resources to help combat the drug problem, but the Afghan record harvests will probably impact on Central Asia more heavily.

Afghanistan's future

The Uzbek authorities see their country as a “front-line” state regarding the war in Afghanistan. Not only does Uzbekistan share a 137 km-border with Afghanistan as a direct neighbor, but many ethnic Uzbeks reside in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has sought to help the Afghan government by providing considerable economic assistance. Uzbekistani firms have helped build Afghanistan's roads, railroads, bridges, telecommunications (including parts

of the Taliban insurgents succeed. Neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban has supported the proposal. Countries excluded from this framework with a strong interest in the Afghanistan conflict, such as India, have also objected to it.

... but also human trafficking, water and Iran's neighborhood

According to the UN, the deteriorating security

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of Afghanistan's Internet networks) and other national infrastructure. Uzbekistan also supplies electricity to Afghanistan and recently helped build Afghanistan's first national railway line. Yet, Uzbekistani experts do not anticipate that the Afghan National Security Forces will crush the Taliban insurgency, that efforts to contain the conflict within Afghanistan borders will work given its organic ties with Central Asia; or that the Taliban can conquer all of Afghanistan.

Given this likely stalemate, the Uzbekistani government still favors the “6+3 proposal” advanced by President Islam Karimov at the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest. The idea is to revive the “6+2” group established in 1999 under the UN's auspices but to add NATO to the construct. The six core members are the neighboring states of Afghanistan: China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The two additional members are Russia and the United States. Under the proposal, these nine actors including NATO would provide a supportive framework (proposing solutions and offering guarantees) to help direct negotiations between Afghanistan's government and so-called moderate members

situation in Afghanistan encourages Afghans to flee into Uzbekistan, sometimes illegally.⁷ Transnational criminal organizations exploit Central Asia's porous frontiers, corrupt border services, and illicit routes sustained by narcotics traffickers to move illegal migrants and other exploited people across national frontiers. All the five Central Asian countries have signed the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime as well as the supplemental Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. Despite their efforts to meet these commitments, the U.S. Department of State's yearly Trafficking in Persons Report regularly assesses Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries as failing to suppress all human trafficking within its borders.

Uzbekistani officials and analysts consider having adequate access to fresh water another national security priority. Whereas Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan want to use Central Asian water resources for irrigation, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been constructing dams to generate electricity from controlled water flows. In particular, Uzbekistan fears that Tajikistan's construction of the Rogun Dam and other

major hydroelectric projects could threaten its fair access to regional water supplies. Karimov has warned that these projects could lead to “not just serious confrontation, but even wars.”⁸ Furthermore, while Iranian support for Tajikistan is a source of tensions with Tashkent, Karimov has called for resolving the Iranian nuclear question through negotiations given the potentially disastrous regional consequences of a war or even a limited military strike on Iran.

Uzbekistani leaders have fortified the country’s narrow border with Afghanistan. The Armed Forces can, along with the Border Guard and internal security forces, defend Uzbekistan against a conventional Taliban attack, but their ability to project power and intervene, even in a neighboring country, is limited. At the October 2013 Council of CIS meeting held in Minsk, President Karimov stated that Uzbekistan “adheres to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of

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Uzbekistan’s Response

Strengthening the Armed Forces

Uzbekistan is commonly thought to have the most powerful and capable military and internal security forces of the five Central Asian countries.⁹ The London-based IISS 2012 Military Balance estimates its military and security forces to number around 67,000 personnel, with 50,000 in the Army and 17,000 in the Air Force.¹⁰ The U.S. State Department calculates that the country has some 65,000 people in uniform out of 13 million fit for military service.¹¹ Uzbekistan has continued to reform the military, largely but not exclusively along Western lines, moving away from the dominant Soviet influence prevalent in the ground forces. The country’s military reform program has aimed to downsize the regular army while strengthening the border guards. A major priority of the government is upgrading the military’s Soviet-era equipment. Uzbekistan is also reshaping its military into a leaner counterterrorist-focused force in line with the National Security doctrine that defines the major threats to Uzbekistan as international terrorism and Islamic extremism.

Afghanistan, organization of bilateral cooperation with Afghanistan and rendering assistance and support to the government that will be elected by Afghans themselves.”¹² But were the Taliban to return to power in Kabul, the Uzbekistani authorities would likely resume their earlier strategy of re-establishing a border buffer zone by arming and supporting their former allies in the Northern Alliance, whose coalition of non-Pashtun warlords offered the main resistance to the Taliban in the 1990s.

Rebuilding security ties with the United States

Uzbekistan welcomed the increased U.S. interest in Central Asia’s security after the Soviet Union’s collapse. During the 1990s, Washington and Tashkent engaged in comprehensive consultations regarding regional threats and developments. Following the September 2001 terrorist attacks, Uzbekistan allowed the United States and its NATO allies to use its former Soviet Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base to support limited military operations related to their war in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan also deepened security cooperation with major European countries such as Germany. But Uzbekistani leaders soon came to perceive the growing Western presence in their

region as a security liability. In particular, the U.S. government's support for "colored revolutions" in the former Soviet republics deepened fears in Tashkent that U.S. democracy promotion efforts might extend to Uzbekistan. The break between Washington and Tashkent came in 2005, when the Uzbekistani government's security forces suppressed anti-regime protests in Andijon. U.S. officials urged neighboring governments to respect the asylum claims of protesters who had fled to neighboring countries, leading Tashkent to expel the Pentagon from the Karshi base.¹³

Facing a declining U.S. and European military presence in the region, Uzbekistan has been seeking to strengthen its ties with Russia, China, and its Central Asian neighbors

It took several years for relations between Uzbekistan and the United States to partly recover from this episode. At the April 2008 NATO heads-of-state summit in Bucharest, President Karimov offered the Alliance permission to transship goods through Uzbekistan to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan then assumed a leading role in the new Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which has helped Tashkent garner greater attention in Washington and other Western capitals. Senior U.S. military and political officials resumed visiting Tashkent and the U.S. Congress has allowed for the renewed provision of U.S. non-lethal defense assistance to Uzbekistan. Uzbekistani and U.S. officials are now discussing how to use Uzbekistani territory to remove NATO military equipment from Afghanistan through the NDN as well as how to address the unresolved threats of regional terrorism and narcotrafficking.

Searching the right balance between Russia and China

The Uzbekistani government largely stood aside during the formation of the Moscow-backed CSTO in 2002 and 2003. Insisting on upholding its autonomy of action, it has strongly objected to the CSTO's deepening integration and

expanding missions and capabilities. The focus of recent Uzbekistani concern has been the creation of the 20,000-strong CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Force in 2009 and the 2010 amendments to the CSTO charter allowing military action in response to a wider range of security crises based on a majority vote rather than a consensus of the members. After years of limiting its participation in the organization, Uzbekistan eventually suspended its CSTO membership in June 2012.

Nonetheless, Uzbekistan has remained a key member of the CIS air defense system and participated in the 65th meeting of the CIS defense ministries in Kaliningrad.¹⁴ Immediately following the suspension of its CSTO membership, the country reaffirmed its commitment to joint air defense with the CIS, demonstrating its commitment to the CIS over CSTO.¹⁵ Uzbekistan also participates in the CIS Anti-terrorist Center, the CIS Military Cooperation Coordination Headquarters, and the CIS Council of Commanders of Border Troops, which develops relations among CIS countries' border troops and facilitates joint training programs and technical cooperation.¹⁶

Despite a general aversion to multilateral institutions, Uzbekistan remains actively involved in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Tashkent has hosted the SCO's Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS) since the creation in June 2004. Within its framework, the SCO members have studied Eurasian terrorist movements, exchanged information about terrorist threats, and shared mutual insights regarding counterterrorism policies. The RATS has also coordinated exercises among SCO internal security forces and organized efforts to disrupt terrorist financing and money laundering. Although sending only staff officers and observers mostly to the large-scale SCO exercises involving military forces, Uzbekistan has

participated in some of the organization's smaller-scale counterterrorist drills. Ties with other regional security organizations remain weaker.

2012-2013 recent readjustments

Recently, facing a declining U.S. and European military presence in the region, Uzbekistan has been seeking to strengthen its ties with Russia, China, and its Central Asian neighbors. In June 2012, Putin and Karimov signed a declaration on deepening the Russia-Uzbekistan strategic partnership and a memorandum strengthening economic ties. From 2011 to 2012, according to the official statistics of Uzbekistan, the commodity turnover between Russia and Uzbekistan increased by 12.6 percent, reaching \$7.6 billion.¹⁷ In November 2013, Uzbekistan affirmed that a priority in the security sphere was military and technical cooperation with Russia.¹⁸ On December 13, 2013, Tashkent ratified a free trade agreement with the CIS.¹⁹ That same day, Uzbekistan ratified a treaty of friendship and cooperation with China.²⁰ Economic, diplomatic, and security ties between Uzbekistan and China have developed strongly since Karimov visited the country in 2005. In November 2013, Uzbekistani and Chinese officials met during a business forum in Tashkent to deepen economic cooperation.²¹

Relations between Uzbekistan and some of its Central Asian neighbors have improved somewhat in recent years, though difficulties persist, especially with Tajikistan due to conflicts over water rights. The Uzbekistani authorities have affirmed their desire to see "further constructive cooperation" with Kyrgyzstan to ensure their mutual border security.²² Nonetheless, their disputed border and acts of discrimination against the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan continue to cause conflict.²³ In July 2013, two Uzbekistani servicemen died in an armed incident on the border.²⁴

Uzbekistani-Kazakhstani ties have seen a notable improvement in recent years. When they met in 2012, Karimov and President Nursultan Nazarbayev endorsed greater bilateral coordination regarding regional water access and limiting Afghanistan's civil strife. In December 2013, Uzbekistan's parliament ratified

an important strategic partnership agreement with Astana.²⁵ Yet, both countries have largely pursued diverging responses to the Afghanistan crisis. Karimov has for years supported UN-led reconciliation and reconstruction initiatives and been a strong backer of NATO's presence in Central Asia. While providing logistical assistance to NATO forces in Afghanistan through the same Northern Distribution Network as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan has relied more on bilateral and multilateral economic assistance, as well as regional diplomatic initiatives such as the Istanbul Process. Kazakhstani officials have also welcomed precisely those Russian-led economic and security initiatives that the Uzbekistani government has resisted, which has resulted in Kazakhstan's assuming a leading role in the Customs Union, the CSTO, and other regional institutions that Uzbekistan has largely shunned.

Conclusions

The future of Uzbekistani foreign policy will depend on both domestic and external developments. At home, uncertainty continues over when and how the transition to the next generation of political leaders will occur and whether the successor generation will pursue foreign policies that differ radically from those of the current leaders. Meanwhile, how the war in Afghanistan evolves along with the uncertain relationship between Russia and China in Central Asia will probably have the greatest impact on Uzbekistan's external relations in coming years.

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