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Flexibility or Strategic Confusion? Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan

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Key Points

- The foreign policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan has undergone dramatic fluctuations since gaining independence: from being pro-American to being pro-Russian and then back again.
- This seemingly erratic shift reflects its two ambivalent and interrelated stances: Tashkent's perception of the international system as an old stage of power politics—a somewhat Soviet syndrome-; and the uncertain geopolitical situation that emerged in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- The international intervention in Afghanistan further confused the doctrinal foundation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy and revealed Tashkent's lack of strategic perspective.
- As a result, the country adopted a rather isolationist stance in the region, instead of promoting a long-awaited pro-active strategy.

Observers tend to describe Uzbekistan's foreign policy in terms of fluctuation, pro- and anti-biases; furthermore, some have even evaluated it as flexible and maneuvering. However, the analysis of the Uzbek international behavior reveals more of a fundamental problem, namely a lack of strong understanding of national interests. As evidence of this, I can point to the considerable gap between the declared Uzbek policy principles and their actual implementation.

The foreign policy of Uzbekistan has been more convoluted and controversial than what is declared on the doctrinal level

The modality of any foreign policy activity is predetermined by the nature and character of the international system. At the same time, it depends to a significant degree on policy makers' perceptions of this system. Such notions as "bipolar," "unipolar," or "multipolar" world order prevails not only within Uzbekistan's foreign policy institutions, but also within global academia. The swift dissolution of the Soviet Union and Central Asia's advent into world politics has had a twofold impact on geopolitical thought: on the one hand, these events reinforced once again geopolitical narratives, contemplations, and speculations after a long period of relative geopolitical stability; so geopolitics became the "ultimate explanatory tool" in the overall analyses of the post-Soviet transformation. On the other hand, theoretical transformation is underway within the field of geopolitical studies itself. These new circumstances have created widespread confusion among political scientists dealing with Central Asia, as well as among local political regimes whose attempts to pursue their own geopolitics—micro-geopolitics of micro-heartlands—have also modified the macro-geopolitics of great powers.[1]

In this respect, the Central Asian states', especially Uzbekistan's, foreign policy doctrines are pronounced by negative and positive diversifications. *Negative diversification* revitalizes the classical balance of power in international relations and the zero-sum game between great powers at the expense of the Central Asians. *Positive diversification* avoids the zero-sum approach and is inclusive in character: it means not only the equal involvement of external powers but also, what is more important, the coordinated policy of the Central Asian states themselves. From this perspective, Tashkent's pendulum-like international behavior bears rather a trait of negative diversification.

The first concept of a Foreign Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan, adopted in 1993, declared such principles as: non-participation in any military-political bloc; active participation in international organizations; de-ideologization of foreign policy; non-interference in internal affairs of other states; supremacy of international law and priority of national interests. The second Foreign Policy Concept was adopted in September 2012 and declared, among others, 4 "no"s: *no* to deployment of foreign bases in Uzbekistan; *no* to the membership in any military bloc; *no* to the participation in international peace-keeping operations; and *no* to mediation of any external power in the resolution of regional conflicts in Central Asia. This policy affirms a "national interests first" principle, but does not make clear whether and why national interests dictate four such "no"s and what the national interests by-and-large are. One of Tashkent's recent foreign policy "innovations" is the shift to bilateralism as the key principle of its international and regional actions, which means that the country now aims to deal with major international and regional issues on a bilateral level.

On the functional level, however, the foreign policy of Uzbekistan has been more convoluted and controversial than what is declared on the doctrinal level. This policy can be delineated by three sets of characteristics: achievements, uncertainties, and problems.

Achievements

Uzbekistan's foreign policy in the 1990s can be evaluated as having had a good start: Tashkent was quite pro-active in the beginning. Over a period of more than two decades, the country has accrued vital experience on the international arena. Diplomatic relations have been established with most of the states of the world and Uzbekistan has gained genuine international recognition. At an early stage the young Uzbek foreign policy was region-oriented, and President Islam Karimov was a proponent of regional integration in Central Asia, proclaiming in 1995 the concept "Turkistan—our common home." Uzbekistan's international initiatives were quite remarkable. At the UN 48th Session of the General Assembly in 1993 Karimov called for the establishment of a permanent regional conference on regional security in Central Asia; he initiated the establishment of the Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in Central Asia; and in 1998 he launched the so-called '6+2' format of negotiations on Afghanistan.

Uncertainties

However, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and U.S. forces being deployed in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, regional geopolitical processes exacerbated. In 2005 Islam Karimov even had to state that "strategic uncertainty remains in the region. Geostrategic interests of major world powers and our neighboring countries concentrate and sometime collide in this part of the world." In 2008, Tashkent initiated an updated version of its Afghanistan initiative, the '6+3' format, but the proposal failed to gain any international support. Uzbekistan re-entered the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2006 but abandoned it in 2012. It became a member of the Euro-Asian Economic Community (EAEC) in 2006, but left it in 2007. The regional structure of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), created in 2001, was disbanded and merged with the EAEC in 2006. Today, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) remains the only international/regional organization which enjoys a steady commitment on the part of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's membership of the SCO seems quite resolute, moreover the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) has been set up in Tashkent.

Uzbekistan's foreign policy has undergone deep evolutions: from a promising start and some real achievements in the 1990s, through a period of uncertainty in the early 2000s, up to isolationism and stagnation today

Problems

With the adoption of the new Foreign Policy Concept in 2012 Uzbekistan has demonstrated itself as being more isolationist than having an active engagement in international and regional affairs. The current tense relations with two neighbors—Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—over the issue of water regulation and over border delimitation are accumulating potential for further conflict. Tashkent has not only abandoned participation in such organizations as the CSTO, EAEC, and CACO, but has also quite isolated itself from other multilateral cooperation frameworks such as, for example, the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan and the SPECA project of the United Nations. Uzbekistan's foreign policy today is neither pro-American nor pro-Russian, neither pro-active nor reactive. Over a period of more than two decades, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has thus undergone deep evolutions: from a promising start and some real achievements in the 1990s, through a period of uncertainty in the early 2000s, up to isolationism and stagnation today.

The 'moneybox' of strategic partnerships

Having learnt how to play geopolitical games, Uzbekistan has shown itself to be a master of maneuver. Illustrative in this respect is Tashkent's so-called 'moneybox' of strategic partnerships. Uzbekistan has managed to sign several strategic partnership agreements and declarations with a number of great powers usually perceived as strategic rivals. For instance, the United States-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership (USUSP) Declaration was signed in March 2002, followed by the Russian Federation-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Treaty (RFUSP) being signed in June 2004. The China-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership (PRCUSP) Declaration was signed in June 2012, while the Joint Statement on India-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership (IUSP) dated from May 2011. Recently, in June 2013, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a bilateral Treaty of Strategic Partnership (KUSP).

Interestingly, Uzbekistan's strategic partnerships envisage different goals. Whilst the United States-Uzbekistan is perceived as more normative and comprehensive, the Russian Federation-Uzbekistan one is more military-driven. The China-Uzbekistan one does not imply having any mutual security commitments of the two states as it is the case with the U.S.-Uzbek and Russian-Uzbek agreements, but concentrates on the developmental dimension of the strategic partnership. The India-Uzbekistan one has a geostrategic dimension that highlights threats to regional security, such as terrorism.

The United States-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership was the first document of its kind that Uzbekistan has signed with a great power and as such has passed a certain test of time. Uzbekistan-U.S. relations subsequently declined after 2005 after the Andijon events, and Tashkent accused American organizations and the U.S. government for having been behind the alleged provocation of the 'extremist' uprising.[2] In the current context of the international forces being withdrawn from Afghanistan, it seems that both the United States and Uzbekistan could actually, intentionally or not, end up reducing the significance and meaning of a *de jure* strategic partnership to a *de facto* opportunistic one. In other words, Washington only needs the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) to be operational while its forces and technology are being withdrawn from Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan is mainly interested in taking financial advantage of the NDN and keeping the remnants of military equipment used in Afghanistan. Real strategic partners are supposed to be able to move beyond such short-term lucrative cooperation. The end of the allied operation in Afghanistan in 2014 is not only changing the regional strategic and geopolitical situation and the U.S. posture in the region, but Uzbekistan itself is expected to undergo changes in connection with the upcoming parliamentary elections in December 2014 and presidential elections in March 2015.

It is primarily Uzbekistan and its reopening to its neighbors that the success of the region's cooperation, security, and development will ultimately depend on

In 2009, the United States and Uzbekistan set up a high-level annual bilateral consultations (ABC) mechanism and since then three ABCs have taken place in which a wide range of issues are covered such as trade and development, investments, energy, agriculture, health, parliamentary exchanges, education, science and technology, counter-narcotics, border security, counter-terrorism, religious freedom, trafficking in persons, development of civil society and human rights as well as the operation in Afghanistan. The letters ABC have a symbolic designation, implying a new beginning, and also a setting of benchmarks. The ABCs and overall reset of U.S.-Uzbekistan relations can have

long-term geopolitical and strategic implications if indeed these relations finally meet the criteria of a real strategic partnership. The March 2013 visit of Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov to Washington was obviously an important step in U.S.-Uzbekistan bilateral relations, but whether it amounted to a crucial step in terms of the strategic partnership remains to be seen.

Can two states professing two different value systems become real strategic partners? Are the strategic partnerships between Tashkent and Washington on the one hand, and Tashkent and Moscow, on the other, contradictory? A strategic partnership implies a type of relationship going far beyond the features of ordinary cooperation. It requires a high level of mutual trust along with long-term, sustainable, and comprehensive cooperation in the sphere of security interests, as well as having similar positions on major international issues. The U.S.-Uzbek sides should, for instance, cooperate more intimately on issues related to Afghanistan than what is required by NDN-driven strategies. Overall, the spirit and letter of a strategic partnership should not be obscured and should be addressed properly by both states, who are currently *de jure* but not yet *de facto* strategic partners.

A failed leader of Central Asia

The 1995 proclamation "Turkistan—our common home" announced a strategic choice for Uzbekistan and a crucial geopolitical slogan. So were other concepts such as "Towards globalism through regionalism" and "Uzbeks and Tajiks are one people speaking two languages." They told of a genuine leadership role of Uzbekistan in Central Asia. However, these strategic, region-oriented concepts have so far remained mostly on paper. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan, centrally located in the region, surrounded by all of the other Central Asian countries, with the largest population (30 million inhabitants), having the most developed transport infrastructure, possessing one of the strongest industrial potentials, and being the historical center of the whole region, has had tensions with almost all of its neighbors. This paradox can be explained by at least four interrelated reasons: Uzbekistan's obsession with sovereignty and independence; its perception of the world order through the prism of old geopolitical concepts; its preference for bilateralism as the main principle of its foreign policy; and its undemocratic and relatively closed political system.

Conclusion

Since gaining independence in 1991, the states of Central Asia have undergone profound shifts. The current "strategic uncertainty" is, in fact, an *ad hoc* geopolitical reality. Twenty-two years of independent development has given Uzbekistan unique international experiences and political lessons. The so-called "transition period" has now passed. The country is approaching a new turning-point in its post-Soviet history with forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. There is a great expectation among the population, its regional neighbors, as well as among the international community, that Uzbekistan will engage more pro-actively with the region and in the international system.

Uzbekistan has managed to frustrate neighboring countries and failed to lead the region toward integration. Nevertheless, it is primarily Uzbekistan and its reopening to its neighbors that the success of the region's cooperation, security, and development will ultimately depend on. As Frederick Starr noted as early as in 1996, a regional "arrangement, in which a sovereign and strong Uzbekistan would play a significant role, best serves the interests of all countries involved, Russia included."[3] For this to become true, Tashkent should reconsider its foreign policy doctrine in favor of multilateral engagements, and making regional affairs a priority.

Endnotes

1. Farkhad Tolipov, "Micro-Geopolitics of Central Asia: An Uzbekistan Perspective," *Strategic Analysis* 35 no. 4 (2011): 629-639.
2. Farkhad Tolipov, "Uzbekistan and Russia: Alliance against a Mythic Threat," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, January 11, 2006.
3. S. Frederick Starr, "Making Eurasia Stable," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1996, 92.