



Feature Article
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Uzbekistan and the Institutionalization of Greater Central Asia

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Anyone checking automobile license plates on the streets of Tashkent, Samarkand, or Namangan knows that Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbors have changed radically. A decade ago few if any foreign license plates were to be seen. Now the roads are filled with cars from all Uzbekistan's Central Asian neighbors. Some are tourists. Others belong to businessmen, entrepreneurs, sportsmen, accountants, and artists. This change, and the broader transformation of which it is a part, is one of the most important developments in Uzbekistan and all Central Asia since the fall of the USSR.



Tashkent City Skyline
Photo Credit: Solijonovm1996

The doors to neighbors that have opened wide today were closed tight after independence. This is not surprising, for the greatest fear of all newly sovereign states is that some foreign power will seek to dominate them. Thus, the United States, the world's first post-colonial sovereignty, turned in on itself after gaining independence and focused on institution building at home. With good reason Americans viewed their former colonial overlord, Great Britain, with suspicion and fear, for eventually London would try once more to conquer all North America. Uzbekistan, too, had good reason to adopt a defensive posture, as many Russians continued to dream of a Eurasian

mega-state led by Moscow, while religious extremists in Afghanistan and beyond dreamed of a new caliphate embracing all Central Asia.

Critics both abroad and at home objected to the strict controls the new Uzbek government adopted during the first post-independence decade. But the controls achieved their purpose, and led to a more secure and prosperous Uzbekistan, a country that was now prepared to open its windows to the world....and to its regional neighbors.

An important first task was to regularize Uzbekistan's borders. After his election in 2015 President Shafkat Mirziyoyev launched a major effort to resolve all outstanding problems with neighbors, a task that was ably carried out by Ambassador Ilhomjon Nematov. This initiative transformed all Central Asian relations.

Even before the recent flood of new contacts with its Central Asian neighbors, Uzbekistan was mindful of the needs and benefits of fruitful regional interactions. For example, President Karimov became an early supporter of the proposal to declare Central Asia a nuclear free zone. It took a decade of diplomacy by all five presidents before the United Nations General Assembly embraced this bold concept. This and other mutual concerns led to several meetings of President

Karimov with his four regional counterparts. These sessions were cordial but limited in scope. In particular, the five presidents were careful not to appear to be linking arms in any formal way lest its formal colonial overlords in Moscow or any other major power perceive it as a threat to their own interests.

Of course, the mutual isolation of newly independent states could not last, and did not. Growing confidence in Ashgabat, Astana, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Tashkent led all five presidents to make subtle but highly significant overtures to their regional neighbors. A landmark event in this process of mutual embrace occurred in May, 2014 when President Islam Karimov convened a major regional and international conference in Samarkand on great thinkers of the medieval East. His main point, developed with countless examples, was that the great thinkers and artists which each country reveres were in fact the product of the region as a whole, and of their deep and rich common culture and values. Amazingly, he said, this commonality existed and exists in spite of differences of ethnicity, language, and the contrast between pastoral and urbanized peoples. Significantly, the full title of Karimov's speech was "The Historical Heritage of Scientists and Thinkers of the Medieval East, Its Role and Significance for Modern Civilization." The goal, in other words, was to use the past to inform and inspire the present. These same points were

elaborated for the international public when Frederick Starr's *Lost Enlightenment* appeared in some twenty-three languages, including Uzbek.

The Samarkand conference stimulated what was already a rising tide. Even before this President Gurbaguli Berdymukhamedov of Turkmenistan had built a large park in central Ashgabat featuring imposing statues of all of Central Asia's great geniuses, among whom were Turkic and Persianate peoples, urban and nomadic folk, Sunni and Shia Muslims, as well as adherents of other faiths. When a guest pointed out that few of these great figures were Turkmen, and that they included both Turkic and Persianate peoples, nomadic and settled folk, and people of diverse faiths and traditions, he responded, "That's true. but they are all ours. They all inspire us."

Analogous initiatives occurred in the other Central Asian capitals, all of them stressing the common bonds that had linked them since antiquity. It is worth noting that this many-sided impulse gradually extended beyond the borders of the five former Soviet republics. Across the Caspian an analogous movement was already developing in Azerbaijan, and similar thoughts of regional restoration were in the air in Afghanistan after the establishment of a new government there in 2001. The reemerging Central Asian consciousness looked in every direction, not just north to

Russia or East to China. This was the message of the Georgian-Uzbek scholar, Edvard Rtveladze, who published a landmark study on *The Great India Road* across Afghanistan that linked Central Asia with India and Southeast Asia.

While all this was going on, the governments of Central Asia were being pulled simultaneously in several directions. As early as 2001 Japan initiated regular meetings at the presidential level with all five former Soviet states of Central Asia, an initiative that was soon copied by Korea and the European Union. Turkey joined the action in 2010 with the establishment of its Organization of Turkic States. Unlike other initiatives, this one was defined ethnically, and therefore excluded Tajikistan, as well as most Afghans. In 2014 Russia under Vladimir Putin promoted his Eurasian Economic Union that sought to merge Central Asian economies into a larger entity dominated by Moscow, and also a Collective Security Treaty Organization with the same purpose in the sphere of defense. Uzbekistan, aware of the dilution of sovereignty that both initiatives entailed, stood aloof. Following Putin's move and prompted by Kazakhstan, the United States in 2015 launched its own consultative group on the Japanese model, and then joined Uzbekistan in an agreement on Strategic Partnership.

Because of this maze of consultative bodies, the Central Asian presidents met with each other with some frequency, but always in the company of the leaders of external powers, each of which had its own interests to pursue. In terms of Central Asia as a whole, these were all centrifugal forces, pulling and pushing the region in diverse directions, usually at the expense of common interests the countries may share.

In an effort to rectify this obvious imbalance, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev promoted face-to-face meetings among the five Central Asian presidents themselves, without outsiders. As a consequence, successful consultative meetings of regional presidents occurred on March 15, 2018 (Astana), November 29, 1919 (Tashkent), August 5, 2021 (Avaza, Turkmenistan), July 2, 2022, (Cholpan-Ata, Kyrgyzstan); September 14-15, 2022 (Dushanbe), and 9 August 2024 (Astana). These led to several further regionally-based sessions that brought together civilian experts in such fields as public health, taxation, education, and women's rights. The presidents, as they discussed common issues involving transport, trade, and commerce, came to realize that Azerbaijan had come to share nearly all of the same concerns and aspirations and that its president should henceforth be included in all their future conclaves. "Central Asia" now spanned the Caspian, thereby becoming "Greater Central Asia."

In the course of these discussions it became clear to all that the individual countries were paying a dear price for not linking arms on key issues like transport, trade, tariffs, visas, information and so forth. The whole remained less than the sum of its parts, and certainly not more. To address this lacuna, Kyrgyzstan's president Sadyr Japarov convened a further meeting of regional presidents (noted above), this time at the Issyk-Kul resort of Cholpan-Ata. There the presidents catalogued the broad range of common issues facing each of them. After the meeting they issued a list of two dozen issues that would benefit from their joint attention and coordination.

However, none of these could be advanced without some sort of coordinating structures linking the regional governments. Fortunately, there are readily at hand nearly a dozen such regional organizations worldwide, including ASEAN, Mercosur, and the Nordic Council. Specialists across the region began studying these models, identifying their relative strengths and weaknesses and assessing their appropriateness for Central Asia. The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in Washington assembled a team of emerging leaders from across the region to visit Singapore and study the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In Tashkent a new Institute of Central Asia was set up to study and advance regional institutionalization. Scholars at

academic centers in all five capitals joined in the examination of regional organizations worldwide.

In spite of these and other initiatives, several more years were to pass before the institutionalization of Central Asia began in earnest. Uzbekistan was prepared to forge ahead but its partner countries were not. All feared Moscow's opposition, and for reasons that were both legitimate and significant. At the end of the 1990s several of the Central Asian governments had formed a "Central Asia Union" or "Central Asia Economic Union." Particularly notable is the fact that this body included security in its purview. Indeed, the author of these lines recalls meeting Uzbek soldiers on the streets of Bishkek, deployed there under the Central Asia Union. So successful was this project that Russia's President Putin asked to join as an observer. Unable to refuse him, the Central Asians opened their door to Putin, who two years later demanded and received full membership for Russia in the Central Asia Union. Proceeding methodically, Putin then merged the Central Asia Union with the new Eurasian Economic Union, which he controlled and which again divided Central Asia between members and non-members. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan refused to join. "Divide and Conquer," *Divide et impera!*!! The Central Asia Union was dead.

This left Central Asia as the only world region without its own organization, coordinating institutions and common voice on common issues. This regrettable condition arose from the Central Asians' legitimate fears of possible Russian reprisals. When Putin suggested that Kazakhstan has no tradition of statehood and when Dmitri Medvedev, Russia's former president and now deputy head of its Security Council, threatened dire military consequences, everyone drew back.

But today all acknowledge that the security conditions across the Eurasian landmass have changed profoundly. Russia's brutal and hapless war against Ukraine has sapped Moscow's human and material resources and undermined its social cohesion. As a result, Russia can no longer impose its will on Central Asia, as it did successfully for more than a century. No matter how the war against Ukraine ends, Moscow will lack both the military might and political will to suppress indigenous developments across the vastness of Central Asia. It is also important that China, Japan, the European Union, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States are all ready to accept and deal with Central Asians who have organized themselves under a common institutional umbrella.

Today the institutionalization of Central Asia—including Azerbaijan—is proceeding apace. The next step will be the opening of a

secretariat or coordinating office. In setting up many of the regional organizations worldwide, the founding states often sparred over where to place the secretariat. It is encouraging that all of Greater Central Asia's three "Middle Powers" —Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan—are comfortable with the secretariat being placed in one of the other three capitals, and with the distribution of further agencies in various fields across the region to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

The Central Asians' acknowledgement of both the need for a regional organization and the possibility of creating it, the growing confidence with which they are addressing this need, and the spirit of cooperation shown by all the Central Asian states as they proceed on this task, all augur well for their success. On these issues Central Asians have long been driving with the handbrake on. Uzbekistan is now leading the drive to release that brake. Citizens of Uzbekistan and its partner countries, as well as their well-wishers abroad, can expect the

pace of development of Central Asia as a new world region to accelerate.

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