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Uzbekistan's new Central Asia policy : The economic and political implications of good neighbourliness

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UZBEKISTAN'S NEW CENTRAL ASIA POLICY

**THE ECONOMIC RATIONALE AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS
OF GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS**

Kristiina Silvan

UZBEKISTAN’S NEW CENTRAL ASIA POLICY

THE ECONOMIC RATIONALE AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS

Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has embarked on a moderate reform programme that aims to achieve socio-economic growth without undoing the country’s authoritarian political system. The programme has implications beyond Uzbekistan’s borders because it has changed the way Uzbekistani foreign policy is formulated and implemented. Uzbekistan’s former isolationist stance has shifted to a foreign policy opening, which is most noticeable in the improvement of its relations with its neighbours.

This Working Paper analyzes “good neighbourliness”, the key concept of Uzbekistan’s new Central Asia policy. It details the amendment of Uzbekistan’s bilateral relations with its neighbours and points to the positive reception of Uzbekistan’s new regional policy in Russia, China, and the West. The paper argues that while “good neighbourliness” is a pragmatic strategy rooted in economic rationality, the policy’s regional implications are substantial. It is laying the necessary foundation for sustainable Central Asian co-operation from within in a way that is acceptable to the Central Asian states and big non-regional actors alike.



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UZBEKISTAN'S NEW CENTRAL ASIA POLICY

THE ECONOMIC RATIONALE AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS

INTRODUCTION

Following the death of the long-serving President Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been in flux. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who followed Karimov to the presidency in a smooth succession after serving thirteen years as prime minister, has sought to change the isolationism of his predecessor to a new foreign policy opening. The changes have been particularly noticeable in Uzbekistan's relations with its immediate neighbours in Central Asia. By advancing a pragmatic policy of "good neighbourliness", an extension to Mirziyoyev's wider policy agenda of authoritarian modernization, Tashkent has been able not only to simplify its everyday encounters with its neighbours, but also to improve its public image in the international arena without causing resentment among the big non-regional actors.

Uzbekistan is the Central Asian region's most populous country, and the only one that shares borders with all others. The country has significant potential for industrial development due to its past as a technological research hub, the prominence of natural resources (primarily minerals and gas), and a large and young labour force. These structural factors make Uzbekistan's development in the 21st century pivotal for the Central Asian region and beyond. As this Working Paper details, "good neighbourliness" has been exercised by the establishment of regular and predominantly benevolent communication between Mirziyoyev and the heads of state of Uzbekistan's five immediate neighbours, the demarcation and opening of closed and contested borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the promotion of regional trade and transport networks across the region.

Authoritarian modernization, as defined by Vladimir Gel'man and Andrey Starodubtsev and applied by Luca Anceschi in his study of Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, is "the achievement of socio-economic growth without

full-scale democratization".¹ Although the proclaimed aim of Mirziyoyev's reform programme is to "modernize and liberalize all spheres of life",² analysts agree that the reforms do not seek to undo the current authoritarian system of government but rather, as Anceschi puts it, to "upgrade and update" it from its current "archaic" version to the level of contemporary "sophisticated" authoritarianism.³ This Working Paper uses these discussions as a starting point for analyzing Mirziyoyev's regional policy. Specifically, it asks how Tashkent's policy of "good neighbourliness" in Central Asia is geared towards supporting Uzbekistan's socio-economic development and whether the policy has implications for the regional dynamics in Central Asia. Moreover, a brief overview of the responses of major non-regional actors – Russia, China, the US – as well as the EU takes stock of the international effect of Uzbekistan's new neighbourhood policy.

Theoretically, this paper positions itself in the foreign policy analysis literature that stresses the importance of domestic politics for foreign policy behaviour.⁴ Drawing on the literature on authoritarian modernization and authoritarian regionalism, it maintains that Tashkent's policy of "good neighbourliness" has been pursued primarily in order to achieve economic growth in Uzbekistan, which is in turn instrumental in legitimizing Mirziyoyev's rule. However, the policy can also be interpreted as the necessary first step in accelerating the endogenous regional integration within Central Asia that has been suspended ever since the Organisation of Central Asian Cooperation (TsAS) was merged with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAzES) in 2005.⁵

1 Vladimir Gel'man & Andrey Starodubtsev, "Opportunities and Constraints of Authoritarian Modernisation: Russian Policy Reforms in the 2000s," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 1, (2016); Luca Anceschi, "Regime-Building through Controlled Opening. New Authoritarianism in Post-Karimov Uzbekistan," in *Monitoring Central Asia and the Caspian Area: Development Policies, Regional Trends, and Italian Interest*, ed. Carlo Frappi & Fabio Indeo (Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2019).

2 "Tsel' strategii" ["Aim of the Strategy"], *Strategiya deistviy po pyati prioritnym napravleniyam razvitiya Respubliki Uzbekistan v 2017–2020 godakh* [Action Strategy on the Five Priorities for the Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017–2020], <http://strategy.gov.uz/ru> (accessed 16 October 2020).

3 Anceschi, "Regime-Building through Controlled Opening."

4 See e.g. Vendulka Kubalkova, "Introduction", in *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World*, ed. Vendulka Kubalkova (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).

5 Luca Anceschi, *Analysing Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy: Regime neo-Eurasianism in the Nazarbaev era* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 56–92.

ECONOMIC RATIONALE FOR THE GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS POLICY

When Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, Uzbekistan was politically and economically isolated. The gradual transition from planned economy to state-led capitalism in the early 1990s was a relative success: Uzbekistan was the first Soviet successor state to regain its pre-independence level of GDP, maintaining high levels of economic growth throughout the 2000s because of the global resource boom.⁶ Yet, echoing the resource curse, revenue generated by cotton, minerals, and energy exports reduced the imperative to reform the economy and contributed to the government's authoritarian resilience.⁷ For the general population, the standard of living rose insignificantly, and Uzbekistan fell behind Kazakhstan in economic development. The Uzbek economy under Karimov, based on revenue generated by capital-heavy state-owned enterprises, was underperforming but not collapsing.⁸

Economic underperformance was not an issue per se, but what made it problematic was that it was at odds with Karimov's *Uzbekistan Vision 2030*, which in 2012 set the goal of making Uzbekistan a middle-income country in less than two decades.⁹ In practice, this could only be achieved by boosting growth through the modernization of state-owned enterprises and improving the climate for private and foreign direct investment.¹⁰ As is typical of authoritarian regimes that derive their right to rule from the fulfilment of societal needs and desires like material welfare and personal security – dubbed “performance legitimacy” by Peter Burnell,¹¹ the programme tied the Uzbek leadership's legitimacy to its socioeconomic performance.

Mirziyoyev confirmed the regime's commitment to socioeconomic performance in his 2016 presidential campaign by promising to double Uzbekistan's GDP by 2030 by introducing a cross-sectional programme of modernization.¹² Although the aspect of political

liberalization is included in the list of necessary reforms, tangible development in the sphere has been limited to the pardoning of political prisoners and rolling back on information censorship and suppression of civil society.¹³ According to the OSCE's electoral monitoring mission, the 2019 parliamentary elections “did not yet demonstrate genuine competition”,¹⁴ while Freedom House grants Uzbekistan just two out of 40 points in the category of political rights.¹⁵ Therefore, as many authors have argued by now, Mirziyoyev's reforms should be seen as a case of authoritarian modernization that aims to achieve socio-economic growth with minimal democratization.

If authoritarian modernization is the goal of Mirziyoyev and his associates, foreign policy is the major vehicle for pursuing it.¹⁶ Furthermore, as this paper suggests, Central Asia has a pivotal role in Uzbekistan's new foreign policy precisely because it is an area where relatively minor changes can yield quick economic gains: normalizing relations with one's neighbours is essential for trading effectively with the outside world and improving Uzbekistan's image internationally. In essence, Mirziyoyev's policy of economic opening in general, and the “good neighbourliness” in particular, is based on an assumption that, at present, economic and political isolation is doing the country – and his rule – more harm than good.¹⁷ The projection of Uzbekistan as a dynamic and open country is designed to attract foreign direct investment, and the policy of “good neighbourliness” aims at (re-)establishing an interconnected and cooperative regional setting which would be turned to Tashkent's and the entire region's economic advantage. In November 2017, Mirziyoyev claimed that calculations conducted by UN experts

6 Richard Pomfret, *The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century: Paving a New Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 95.

7 Richard Auty, “Conclusions: Lessons not learned by the CCA countries?” in *Energy, Wealth and Governance in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Lessons Not Learned*, ed. Richard Auty & Indra de Soysa (New York: Routledge, 2006).

8 Pomfret, *The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century*, 116.

9 Ibid.

10 U.S. Embassy in Tashkent, *2020 Investment Climate Statements: Uzbekistan*. <https://uz.usembassy.gov/2020-investment-climate-statements-uzbekistan/> (accessed 16 October 2020).

11 Peter Burnell, “From Evaluating Democracy Assistance to Appraising Democracy Promotion,” *Political Studies* 56, no. 2, 2007.

12 Catherine Putz, “What to Expect from Uzbekistan's Presidential Election,” *The Diplomat*, December 2, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/what-to-expect-from-uzbekistans-presidential-election/> (accessed 1 October 2020).

13 Edward Lemon, “As Uzbekistan Opens Up, the Goal Is Economic Modernization, not Liberalization,” *World Politics Journal*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/26585/as-uzbekistan-opens-up-the-goal-is-economic-modernization-not-liberalization> (accessed 5 October 2020); Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili & Bakhrom Mirakilov, “The Paradox of Uzbekistan's Budding Virtual Civic Space,” *The Diplomat*, 20 August, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/the-paradox-of-uzbekistans-budding-virtual-civic-space/> (accessed 2 October 2020).

14 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Election Observation Mission Final Report of the Parliamentary Elections of 22 December 2019 in the Republic of Uzbekistan*, 13 May, 2020. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/3/452170_1.pdf, 1.

15 Freedom House, “Uzbekistan,” *Freedom in the World 2020*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/freedom-world/2020> (accessed 10 October 2020).

16 Luca Anceschi, “Mirziyoyev's Foreign Policy: Globalizing Uzbekistan in the Asia Century,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.georgetownjournalofinternationalaffairs.org/online-edition/2019/4/1/mirziyoyevs-foreign-policy-globalizing-uzbekistan-in-the-asian-century> (accessed 15 October 2020).

17 Analyzing the change of Uzbek foreign policy from Karimov to Mirziyoyev illustrates the importance of agency for geoeconomic explanations. Although the geoeconomic potential of a strategically located region is structural, the materialization of financial potential does not happen on its own. On geoeconomics, see e.g. Sören Scholvin & Mikael Wigell, “Geo-economic power politics: An introduction,” in *Geo-economics and Power Politics in the 21st Century: The Revival of Economic Statecraft*, ed. Mikael Wigell, Sören Scholvin & Mikael Aaltola (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

suggested that “effective cooperation” within the region could at a minimum double Central Asia’s aggregate GDP in just ten years.¹⁸

In fact, the rationale for a good neighbour policy that has been actively pursued by Mirziyoyev since 2016 was included in Karimov’s Foreign Policy Concept of 2012. It was then, in the aftermath of the announced US withdrawal from Afghanistan, that Central Asia was declared a foreign policy priority for Uzbekistan.¹⁹ Until then, Aleksey Aseryan argues, the presence of US troops had ensured a level of security and predictability in the region and thus alleviated Uzbekistan’s concerns about the spread of destabilization.²⁰

One of the reasons why “good neighbourliness”, discussed in detail in the following section, has been so successful up to now (and why the country’s neighbours have welcomed it) is that it does not contradict the two core principles of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy: sovereignty and multilateralism. By opting to engage first and foremost on bilateral terms, Mirziyoyev has continued asserting Uzbekistan’s independence from the big non-regional actors.²¹ Although trade relations with Russia have improved during Mirziyoyev’s tenure, Uzbekistan has thus far rejected Moscow’s calls to join the Eurasian Economic Union despite encouragement from Russia. As for Uzbekistan’s biggest trading partner – China – Mirziyoyev has been motivated to pursue closer collaboration in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while seeking to avoid a debt trap like neighbouring Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and, to an increasing extent, Kyrgyzstan.²²

“GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS” IN CENTRAL ASIA: FROM WORDS TO DEEDS, ON BILATERAL TERMS

In an interview shortly after his electoral victory, Mirziyoyev elaborated on his vision of “good neighbourliness” in the Central Asian context:

One of the main directions of our country’s foreign policy is to strengthen ties with our closest neighbours. This is a natural aspiration, and it proceeds from a clear understanding that the sustainable development of Uzbekistan largely depends on how correctly we can build our regional policy. We all understand that Central Asia is a single organism. [...] Issues of concern to all residents of the region, no country alone will be able to resolve, such as the issues of border delimitation and demarcation, transport, ecology, the rational and fair use of water resources. Returning to the issues of regional cooperation, I would define the current policy of Uzbekistan as follows: not to ignore thorny issues and to seek reasonable compromises.²³

The slogans have since been turned into practical deeds, with Kyrgyzstan being the first recipient of this new-found goodwill. On his second day as interim president, Mirziyoyev ordered Uzbek troops to release four Kyrgyz nationals that had been detained in Ungar-Too, a disputed hill on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border. Moreover, the decision was soon followed by the launch of negotiations on the demarcation of the disputed parts of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border, which resulted in the demarcation of 80% of the border by September 2020.²⁴

Although disputes between border communities are still taking place, high-level diplomacy has been applied to resolve conflicts more successfully than in the past. For example, in May 2020, violence over access to water broke out between villagers in the Kyrgyz settlement of Chechme and the Uzbek enclave of Sokh. The following day, Kyrgyz First Deputy Prime Minister Kubatbek Boronov and Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov arrived at the locality, held talks and pledged a joint investigation, while Presidents Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Sooronbay Jeenbekov

18 Shavkat Mirziyoyev, quoted in “Uzbekistan predlozhl stranam TsA razrabotat programmu razvitiya transporta” [“Uzbekistan invited Central Asian countries to draft a programme for transportation development”], *Regnum*, 10 November, 2017, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2343963.html> (accessed 16 October 2020).

19 Farkhod Tolipov, “Uzbekistan’s New Foreign Policy: No Base, No Blocs, But National Interests First,” *CACI Analyst*, 5 September, 2012, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12557-analytical-articles-> (accessed 13 October 2020).

20 Aleksey Aseryan, “New Faces, Old Patterns in Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy,” *The Diplomat*, 21 August, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/new-faces-old-patterns-in-uzbekistans-foreign-policy/> (accessed 16 October 2020).

21 The only regional organization that Uzbekistan has joined in recent years is the Turkic Council. Umida Hashimova explains the decision by noting that since the Council is founded on United Nations principles and norms, Uzbekistan’s sovereignty is not at stake. Umida Hashimova, “Uzbekistan Joins the Turkic Council,” *The Diplomat*, 23 September, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/uzbekistan-joins-the-turkic-council/> (accessed 15 October 2020).

22 Umida Hashimova, “Uzbekistan Increasingly Turns to China for Development Loans,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 118, 4 September, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-increasingly-turns-to-china-for-development-loans/> (accessed 16 October 2020).

23 Shavkat Mirziyoyev, quoted in Askar Muminov, “Pochemu i zachem Mirziyoyev priyekhal v Astanu” [“Why and for what did Mirziyoyev come to Astana?”], *Kazinform*, 22 March, 2017, <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/news/pohemy-i-zachem-Mirziyev-edet-v-Astany> (accessed 16 October 2020).

24 “Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan border dustup prompts rapid-reaction diplomacy”, *Eurasianet*, 1 June, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-border-dustup-prompts-rapid-reaction-diplomacy> (accessed 16 October 2020).

promised “extensive measures” to prevent such a situation in the future.²⁵

In economic terms, Uzbekistan’s friendly stance towards Kyrgyzstan is linked to the desire to alleviate risks related to cross-border water management, discussed below, as well as to secure the operation of the transport corridor to China. While Uzbekistan is already connected to China by rail through Kazakhstan, Uzbek officials claim that the route via Kyrgyzstan is 20% less expensive regardless of the fact that midway the cargo is still moved by trucks.²⁶ Meanwhile, Uzbekistan’s exports to Kyrgyzstan have jumped from \$67 million in 2016 to \$348 million in 2019. Although officials point to the mutual benefits of the increased bilateral trade, some have questioned the presumably even gains of the growth in cross-border trade. Zhamin Akimallyev, a Kyrgyz former deputy and senior agricultural scientist argues that Uzbekistan takes full advantage of the open borders and supports its domestic producers’ exports to Kyrgyzstan in various ways, causing problems for Kyrgyz farmers.²⁷

In March 2017, Mirziyoyev made his first foreign trip to Turkmenistan as the elected president of Uzbekistan in a foreign policy move that was both symbolic and practical. The result of the visit was the signing of a raft of trade and transportation agreements, including a bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement.²⁸ For Uzbekistan, functional relations with Ashgabat are vital because a transit corridor through Turkmenistan offers a crucial gateway to world ports and markets, primarily through Iran. A year after the completion of the rail and road bridge across the Amu Darya River in Turkmenistan, the volume of cargo transportation increased significantly.²⁹ Turkmenistan is interest-

ed in involving Uzbekistan in the construction of the problematic TAPI project, a natural gas pipeline linking Turkmenistan’s Galkynysh field to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, but despite Mirziyoyev’s promise to “join” TAPI in 2018, the pipeline remains a “virtual” project with no chance of completion in the near future.³⁰

An air of reconciliation has also been observed in Uzbekistan’s relations with Tajikistan. The challenges to Uzbekistan’s relationship with Tajikistan parallel those with Kyrgyzstan. There have traditionally been problems with borders and water resources, but also ethnic minorities and radical Islam. In the early 2000s, Uzbekistan placed landmines on the undemarcated parts of its border with Tajikistan, allegedly to deter terrorists affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and to obstruct the narcotics trade. Landmining the border was accompanied by a visa regime and the destruction of the border bridge on the Syr Darya River. Farkhod Tolipov has characterized the state of Uzbek-Tajik relations in the late Karimov era as a “no war no peace” situation.³¹

Another long-standing source of conflict with Tajikistan (and to a somewhat lesser degree, Kyrgyzstan) has been the water management issue. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are up-stream countries where the region’s two major rivers – the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya – originate, whereas Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are down-stream countries. For Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, developing their capacity to generate hydropower would both secure their domestic demand for energy and generate a revenue from export. However, building new hydroelectric energy facilities would require the construction of dams, which downstream countries have vehemently opposed for environmental and economic reasons, especially Uzbekistan with its irrigation-dependent cotton production.³² In the 2000s, Uzbekistan’s opposition to the construction of the Rogun hydroelectric plant took various forms and increased hostility between the two states. Since 2010, Uzbekistan has applied a *de facto* transportation blockade by hampering rail cargo into and out of Tajikistan. As all of Tajikistan’s railways with

25 Press service of the Presidential Administration of the Kyrgyz Republic, quoted in “Sostoyalsya telefonnyy razgovor Sooronbaya Zheenbekova i Shavkata Mirziyoyeva” [“There was a telephone conversation between Sooronbay Jeenbekov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev”], *Vesti.kg*, 1 June, 2020, <https://vesti.kg/politika/item/71953-sostoyalsya-telefonnyj-razgovor-sooronbaya-zheenbekova-i-shavkata-mirziyoeva.html> (accessed 19 October 2020).

26 Mikhail Dovatov, “V Tashkente sostoyalos’ torzhestvennoye otkrytiye pilotnogo avtoprobeta ‘Kitay-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan’,” *Podrobno.uz*, 30 October, 2017, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/economic/v-tashkente-sostoyalos-torzhestvennoe-otkrytie-pilotnogo-avtoprobeta-kitay-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan/> (accessed 19 October 2020). The Kyrgyz segment of the railway is uncompleted and is likely remain so for years to come due to a lack of financing. Umida Hashimova, “The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Transport Corridor Stretches Further Into China,” *The Diplomat*, June 22, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/the-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-transport-corridor-stretches-further-into-china/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

27 Zhamin Akimallyev, quoted in Ernest Nurmatov, “Tovarooborot: Kyrgyzstan proigryvayet Uzbekistanu?” [“Trade turnover: Is Kyrgyzstan losing to Uzbekistan?”], *Radio Azattyk*, 4 February, 2019, <http://uzxalqharakati.com/ru/archives/24324> (accessed 19 October 2020).

28 Umida Hashimova, “Energy, Transportation Dominate Turkmenistan President’s Visit to Tashkent”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 66, 1 May, 2018 <https://jamestown.org/program/energy-transportation-dominate-turkmenistan-presidents-visit-to-tashkent/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

29 Zilola Karimova, “Connecting Asia: Uzbekistan Looks to Capitalize on Central Asia’s Transport Potential”, *The Diplomat*, 12 April, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/connecting-asia-uzbekistan-looks-to-capitalize-on-central-asias-transport-potential/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

30 Luca Anceschi, “Turkmenistan and the virtual politics of Eurasian energy: the case of the TAPI pipeline project,” *Central Asian Survey* 36, no. 4, (2017).

31 Farkhod Tolipov, “Uzbekistan-Tajikistan Relations: The Long Way to Strategic Partnership”, *CACI Analyst*, 18 September, 2018, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13533-uzbekistan-tajikistan-relations-the-long-way-to-strategic-partnership.html> (accessed 19 October 2020).

32 There is an abundance of literature on the politics of Central Asian water management. See, for example, Filippo Menga, *Power and Water in Central Asia* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018). On the Tajik-Uzbek issue, see Yusuf Makhmedov (2011) *Water and energy disputes between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and their negative influence on regional co-operation* (Oslo: NUPI, 2012).

the outside transit Uzbekistan, the policy had devastating effects on Tajikistan's economy. In addition, in 2012, Uzbekistan cut off all of its gas supplies to its neighbour, leading to a plummet in bilateral trade from \$300 million in 2008 to \$2.1 million in 2014.³³

It would be no exaggeration to treat the construction of the Rogun Dam, resumed by Tajikistan one month after Karimov's death, as the first test of Mirziyoyev's proclaimed good neighbourliness. Indeed, at the time, analysts were expecting the acting president to confront Tajik President Emomali Rahmon in an effort to rally support among Uzbeks prior to the election.³⁴ Contrary to these concerns, Mirziyoyev did not publicly voice opposition to the project and, a year later, even endorsed the building of the dam. Since then, cooperation has ensued in various spheres, with disrupted rail and flight connections reopened, the visa regime abolished, and the mutually beneficial energy trade resurrected: in addition to Uzbekistan resuming its gas exports to Tajikistan, the latter has since started exporting electricity to Uzbekistan. Prior to his official visit to Tajikistan in March 2018, Mirziyoyev stated that one has to "melt the 20-year-old ice" between one's neighbours even if it is "not easy".³⁵ Indeed, while there has been tangible support for the praise Rahmon and Mirziyoyev have directed towards each other for improving the countries' relationship, there are still undemarcated (although already demined) parts of the Uzbek-Tajik border as well as practical questions regarding the Rogun project.

Resuming bilateral energy cooperation, with Tajikistan providing hydropower in summer and Uzbekistan providing gas in winter, would be economically beneficial for both countries.³⁶ Farhod Aminzhonov has argued that establishing mutual interdependence on energy trade would stabilize the countries' relations and propel further cooperation in the future.³⁷ However,

the countries' past practice in applying economic pressure for foreign policy purposes complicates trusting one another enough to embrace such interdependency.

Considering the success in improving bilateral relations with Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, it is not surprising that Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan has also managed to find a common language with Kazakhstan, the regional heavyweight. As early as spring 2017, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev pointed out the improved economic climate that had led to a 30% increase in trade turnover that he attributed to the openness of the new leadership in Uzbekistan.³⁸ Until the economic turnaround brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, the volume of bilateral trade between the two countries was growing steadily, accompanied by plans for joint connectivity projects like the International Center for Trade and Economic Cooperation on the border of the two countries.³⁹

Importantly, a thaw in Kazakh-Uzbek relations seems to have passed its first test. In May 2020, a dam at the Sardoba Reservoir, located on Uzbekistan's border with Kazakhstan, was destroyed, causing a massive flood in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Although some were expecting a major diplomatic row over who was to blame for the disaster, Tashkent and Nur-Sultan worked in unison to resolve the crisis in an exercise that met the criteria of "friendly and cooperative" bilateral crisis management.⁴⁰ As Anceschi suggests, a functional economic relationship between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is of utmost importance as it is a necessary precondition for Central Asia's regional integration.⁴¹ As long as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan continue perceiving themselves as beneficiaries of enhanced economic cooperation, there is reason to believe that the trend of increasing bilateral turnout will continue despite economic challenges generated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, in the south, Uzbekistan shares a 144 km-long border with Afghanistan along the River Amu Darya. Yet it is slightly surprising that Tashkent's policy of "good neighbourliness" also extends to the south,

33 Edward Lemon, "Tajikistan and Uzbekistan Show More Signs of Thaw", *Eurasianet*, 27 April, 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-and-uzbekistan-show-more-signs-of-thaw> (accessed 19 October 2020).

34 Edward Lemon, "Signs of improving relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan but tensions remain", *CACI Analyst*, 19 October, 2016, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13405-sings-of-improving-relations-between-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-but-tensions-remain.html?tmpl=component&print=1> (accessed 19 October 2020). Yet it ought to be mentioned that Uzbek-Tajik relations showed signs of improvement even in the two years prior to Karimov's death. Edward Lemon, "The Transformation of the Uzbek-Tajik Relationship," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 37, 12 March, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/transformation-uzbek-tajik-relationship/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

35 Shavkat Mirziyoyev, quoted in "President of Uzbekistan wants to improve relations with Tajikistan", *UZDaily.com*, 10 January, 2018, <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/42288> (accessed 19 October 2020).

36 Sam Bhutia, "Could energy trade be a win-win for Tajik-Uzbek ties?" *Eurasianet*, 3 February, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/could-energy-trade-be-a-win-win-for-tajik-uzbek-ties> (accessed 19 October 2020).

37 "Will there be a new era in Tajik-Uzbek relations?" *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 15 February, 2017, <https://cabar.asia/en/cabar-asia-will-there-be-a-new-era-in-tajik-uzbek-relations/#> (accessed 19 October 2020).

38 Catherine Putz, "Brothers Again: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan," *The Diplomat*, 24 March, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/brothers-again-uzbekistan-and-kazakhstan/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

39 Aigul Ibrayeva, "Kakiye torgovyie otnosheniya svyazyvayut Kazakhstan i Uzbekistan?" ["What trade relations exist between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan?"], *Kursiv.kz*, 28 April, 2020, <https://kursiv.kz/news/ekonomika/2020-04/kakie-torgovyie-otnosheniya-svyazyvayut-kazakhstan-i-uzbekistan> (accessed 19 October 2020).

40 Farkhod Tolipov, "Border problems in Central Asia: dividing incidents, uniting solution", *Times of Central Asia*, 15 July, 2020, <https://www.timesca.com/index.php/news/26-opinion-head/22733-border-problems-in-central-asia-dividing-incidents-uniting-solution> (accessed 19 October 2020).

41 See also Luca Anceschi, "The Resurgence of Central Asian Connectivity," *The Diplomat Magazine* 37, December 2017.

considering that Central Asia typically refers exclusively to the five former Soviet republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). In fact, the explicit inclusion of Afghanistan in Uzbekistan's Central Asia policy can be seen as one of the novelties of the Mirziyoyev-era foreign policy. In June 2020, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov called Afghanistan an inseparable part of Central Asia, confirming Asiryani's argument according to which the attempt to "co-opt Afghanistan into Central Asia" has become a top priority for the Mirziyoyev government.⁴²

Similarly to Uzbekistan's bilateral engagements with its other neighbours, enhanced economic cooperation is the means and the aim of good neighbourliness with Afghanistan. In December 2017, President of Afghanistan Mohammad Ashraf Ghani paid an official visit to Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan. It was the first such high-level meeting in 16 years and resulted in signing agreements worth \$500 million in trade and connectivity collaboration.⁴³ In summer 2019, prospective bilateral projects ranged from car manufacturing and textile production to transit and electricity infrastructure.⁴⁴ If these projects are completed to the benefit of both parties, it will mark an important shift in Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan, which has traditionally suffered from a discrepancy between lofty promises and limited deeds.⁴⁵ However, since transportation via Afghanistan would become the shortest route from Uzbekistan to the sea, Tashkent has a vested interest in ensuring that the necessary transit infrastructure is indeed built and remains in operation.

Investing in Afghanistan creates a situation in which Uzbekistan has a stake in the country's peace process. Indeed, Uzbekistan's policy of good neighbourliness in Afghanistan comes with a persuasive offer to support peace-building in the country. Speaking in 2018, Mirziyoyev explicitly stated the rationale for Uzbekistan's involvement in the resolution of the war in Afghanistan: "A secure Afghanistan means a secure Uzbekistan; it is a guarantee of a prosperous and stable

South and Central Asia".⁴⁶ Tashkent has relentlessly pursued talks with both Ghani's government and the Taliban, and positioned itself as the reliable mediator in the process.

IMPLICATIONS OF UZBEKISTAN'S GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS FOR CENTRAL ASIA

As the previous section highlights, the contemporary Uzbek foreign policy of "good neighbourliness" is exercised in bilateral terms with all states with which Tashkent shares a border. The reliance on bilateral cooperation and connectivity projects that yield tangible economic gains for all parties marks a shift away from the earlier Central Asian multilateral initiatives. Previously, Anceschi argues, Central Asian integration projects were "pursuing chaotic connectivity agendas through vaguely defined policy steps"⁴⁷ and did not result in sustainable regional co-operation. Uzbekistan's re-establishing and strengthening bilateral relations does not automatically lead to regionalism per se, but this process is the necessary first step to any lasting collaboration in the future.

Although Mirziyoyev's foreign policy approach to his country's neighbours has been mostly bilateral, there is also one multilateral initiative that deserves a mention. In 2018, a Central Asian regional summit, attended exclusively by Central Asian leaders, was organized for the first time in a decade and attended by all but Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov. A year later, a follow-up summit was hosted by Tashkent and attended by all five presidents. Although both summits fell short of delivering any concrete results on how to resolve the region's long-standing issues, the heads of state still agreed to arrange such meetings annually.⁴⁸ Some prominent analysts heralded the 2019 summit as a genuine turning point in Central Asian regionalism, with S. Frederick Starr calling it "Central Asia's ASEAN moment"⁴⁹ and Arkadiy Dubnov seeing a breakthrough in the attending leaders' readiness to discuss thorny

42 Aleksey Aseryan, "New Faces, Old Patterns in Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy", *The Diplomat*, 21 August, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/new-faces-old-patterns-in-uzbekistans-foreign-policy/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

43 Yuriy Sarukhanyan, "Afghan Traditions of the Uzbek Foreign Policy," *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, 1 July, 2019, <https://cabar.asia/en/afghan-traditions-of-the-uzbek-foreign-policy/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

44 Umida Hashimova, "Uzbekistan Focused on Developing Trade with Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, 29 July, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/uzbekistan-focused-on-developing-trade-with-afghanistan/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

45 Joakim Brattvoll, "Uzbekistan's ambiguous policies on Afghanistan," *PRIO Policy Brief*, no. 1, (2016).

46 Shavkat Mirziyoyev, quoted in Umida Hashimova, "What is Uzbekistan's Role in the Afghan Peace Process?" *The Diplomat*, 11 March, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/what-is-uzbekistans-role-in-the-afghan-peace-process/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

47 Anceschi, "The Resurgence of Central Asian Connectivity".

48 The 2020 summit was to be held in Kyrgyzstan in August but has since been postponed due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

49 R. Frederick Starr, "Is This Central Asia's ASEAN Moment?", *The Diplomat*, 5 December, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/is-this-central-asias-asean-moment/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

matters in a friendly and constructive matter.⁵⁰ In contrast, Fozil Mashrab argues that the summit format is unlikely to develop into an institutionalized regional structure, while agreeing that the summits could serve a purpose in enhancing understanding among the five Central Asian heads of state and thus boost intra-regional trade.⁵¹ It is only logical that Uzbekistan's new policy on Central Asia prioritizes bilateral and mutually beneficial trade and infrastructure projects, considering Central Asia's track record of failed regionalist initiatives as well as the mainstream assumption that successful regionalist structures are built on pre-existing trade cooperation.

While Uzbekistan has confirmed its commitment to the policy of good neighbourliness during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, attempts to design a region-wide coordinated effort in combatting the spread of the virus have fallen short. All Central Asian states in unison closed their borders with their neighbours, and the lack of coordination led to the disruption of cross-border trade.⁵² Moreover, national governments had very different views regarding the spread of the virus, ranging from the official zero cases in Turkmenistan to tens of thousands of alleged cases in Kazakhstan. In essence, a coordinated region-wide response would have been nothing short of a miracle given the lack of an institutional framework for responding to a global health crisis combined with doubts about the accuracy of official statistics.

Yet it is important to note that none of the Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, have completely shut themselves off during the crisis, and nor have there been any serious conflicts between states since the start of the pandemic. While Paul Stronski argues that Mirziyoyev has "shown leadership in coordinating his government's response to the crisis with other Central Asian leaders",⁵³ available evidence of this collaboration is limited to the frequent phone calls between the President of Uzbekistan and his fellow heads of state as well as voicing potential ways of

coordinating within the Turkic Council.⁵⁴ Utilizing the Turkic Council to promote a multilateral approach to good neighbourliness might be efficient given that Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are full members and Turkmenistan, while not a member, is still involved in the activities of the organization.

THE NEIGHBOURS BEYOND: UZBEKISTAN BETWEEN THE BIG NON-REGIONAL ACTORS

President Mirziyoyev's modest reform agenda and his efforts to foster "good neighbourliness" have been viewed favourably by the big non-regional actors. Although Uzbekistan has also demonstrated an interest in enhancing cooperation with the United States and the EU, it is the relations with the two major actors, Russia and China, that matter the most. China and Russia are Uzbekistan's biggest trade partners and sources of FDI,⁵⁵ and their role has only become more prominent since Uzbekistan's foreign policy opening. As a legacy of the Karimov-era policy of isolation, Uzbekistan is currently a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Turkic Council, but does not belong to other integration organizations.

Russia has been courting Tashkent ever since Mirziyoyev took office as it knows that the Uzbek President's reform agenda depends on successfully attracting foreign investment to support the economy.⁵⁶ Moscow would like to see Uzbekistan join the EAEU as well as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military alliance Uzbekistan left in 2012, but up to now these hopes have not materialized. Speaking in 2017, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov stated that the question of renewing Uzbekistan's CSTO membership was not on the agenda, and nor were there any plans to discuss or review this matter in the future.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the question of EAEU membership has been resolved with Tashkent opting for an observer status that comes with no expectations or

50 Arkadiy Dubnov, "Sammit bez Rossii. Smozhet li Tashkent ob'yedinit' Tsentral'nuyu Aziyu?" ["Summit without Russia. Can Uzbekistan unite Central Asia?"] *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 4 December, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80469> (accessed 19 October 2020).

51 Fozil Mashrab, "Uzbekistan Hosts Second Central Asian Consultative Summit", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 174, 13 December, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-hosts-second-central-asian-consultative-summit/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

52 "COVID-19 crisis response in Central Asia", *OECD*, 4 June, 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia-5305f172/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

53 Paul Stronski, "Coronavirus in the Caucasus and Central Asia", *Carnegie*, 8 July, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/08/coronavirus-in-caucasus-and-central-asia-pub-81898> (accessed 19 October 2020).

54 "President of Uzbekistan takes part in extraordinary summit of the Turkic Council", *PV.uz*, 10 April, 2020, <https://www.pv.uz/en/news/president-of-uzbekistan-takes-part-in-extraordinary-summit-of-the-turkic-council> (accessed 19 October 2020).

55 In addition to China and Russia, Switzerland is also an important trade partner, mainly as a market for Uzbekistan's considerable gold exports. *OECD*, "Uzbekistan's sustainable infrastructure investments", *Sustainable Infrastructure for Low-Carbon Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Hotspot Analysis and Needs Assessment* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019).

56 Paul Stronski & Michal Sokolsky, "Multipolarity in Practice: Understanding Russia's Engagement With Regional Institutions", *Carnegie*, 8 January, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/01/08/multipolarity-in-practice-understanding-russia-s-engagement-with-regional-institutions-pub-80717> (accessed 19 October 2020).

57 Abdulaziz Kamilov, quoted in "Uzbekistan says won't rejoin Russia-led security bloc", *Reuters*, 5 July, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uzbekistan-russia-bloc-idUSKBN19Q2DL> (accessed 19 October 2020).

obligations of future membership. As long as Uzbekistan remains excluded from these two Russia-led Central Asia integration projects, they will lack the strategic weight Uzbekistan's potential accession would provide, taking into account its growing importance in the region.

Meanwhile, however, Russia has welcomed Mirziyoyev's new policy of regional opening. In the security sphere, Moscow shares Tashkent's interest in avoiding the destabilization in Afghanistan that could potentially spread in its direction, and has thus welcomed Uzbekistan's efforts to mediate peace between the Taliban and the Ghani government.⁵⁸ In addition, the thaw in Uzbek-Tajik relations alleviates Moscow's concerns related to intra-regional security given Russia's close relations with Tajikistan. Meanwhile, in order for Russia's billion dollar investments in Uzbekistan, such as the \$11 billion nuclear power plant project,⁵⁹ to be beneficial for Russia not only in political but also in economic terms, Mirziyoyev must honour promises to improve cross-border trade and infrastructure linkages to China and South Asia.

In turn, China is also welcoming towards Uzbekistan's rise to regional prominence. Uzbekistan has been among the most ardent supporters of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and due to its strategic location at the centre of Central Asia, China can reap both direct and indirect benefits from Uzbekistan's involvement with the BRI.⁶⁰ As Ikboljon Qoraboyev notes, the BRI as "a framework for realizing investments and capacity-building transfers in the sphere of infrastructure" resonates well with Uzbekistan's agenda of modernization and its foreign policy priorities.⁶¹ In Uzbekistan, public sentiments towards China are more favourable than in those Central Asian states that border China, which gives Mirziyoyev's government more leverage in developing its relations with Beijing. Finally, from China's perspective, pushing for deeper trade and infrastructure integration in Central Asia, as implied by the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and minimizing disruptions of cross-border trade, is simplified by functional relations existing between Central Asian states.

The West, for its part, has been equally positive about Mirziyoyev's reformist outlook and the policy of "good neighbourliness". Uzbekistan's balancing act between Moscow and Beijing, and its eagerness in building Central Asian regionalism on intra-regional trade while including Afghanistan in the process, pleases both Washington and Brussels, as they aspire to see Central Asia as prosperous, stable, and geopolitically autonomous from both China and Russia.⁶² Both the US and the EU envision that Afghanistan's further integration into the Central Asian region, defined in the United States' Silk Road Initiative of 2011 as "resuming traditional trading routes and reconstructing significant infrastructure links broken by decades of conflict",⁶³ will support peace and stability in the country. In the EU's new strategy for Central Asia, Afghanistan has been included in projects and programmes in the spheres of cross-border trade, education, and civil society.

The West also supports Uzbekistan's current efforts to enter the WTO. To provide tangible support for Uzbekistan's reforms, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) opened a new Resident Office in Tashkent in autumn 2018. Earlier that year, the EU and Uzbekistan launched negotiations for an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement that would presumably enable cooperation in the interests of both parties.

CONCLUSIONS

Tashkent's new policy of "good neighbourliness" has begun the process of normalizing Uzbekistan's relations with its regional neighbours. By embracing "connectivity by default",⁶⁴ Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has put an end to Uzbekistan's former isolationist policy in order to reap economic gains by capitalizing on Uzbekistan's central location at the crossroads of Eurasian trade routes. Despite its bilateral outlook, the policy of "good neighbourliness" has the potential to transform the political, economic and social dynamics within the Central Asian region.

58 Stefan Hedlund, "Uzbekistan emerging from isolation," *GIS Report*, 15 February, 2019, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/uzbekistan-emerging-from-isolation-politics,2801.html> (accessed 20 October 2020).

59 Ibid.

60 Indra Overland & Roman Vakulchuk, "China's Belt and Road Gets a Central Asian Boost," *The Diplomat*, 3 May, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/chinas-belt-and-road-gets-a-central-asian-boost/> (accessed 20 October 2020).

61 Ikboljon Qoraboyev, "The Belt and Road Initiative and Uzbekistan's New Strategy of Development: Sustainability of mutual relevance and positive dynamics," *Uzbek Journal of Legal Studies*, no. 2, 2018.

62 Charles Sullivan, "Uzbekistan and the United States: Interests and avenues for cooperation," *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 1, (2019); Georgi Gotev, "EU-sponsored Nur-Sultan conference 'happily coincides' with Central Asia summit," *Euractiv*, 20 November, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/eu-sponsored-nur-sultan-conference-happily-coincides-with-central-asia-summit/> (accessed 20 October 2020).

63 "U.S. Support for the New Silk Road," *State Department* (2015), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/index.htm> (accessed 20 October 2020).

64 Aneschi, "The Resurgence of Central Asian Connectivity".

While continuing to opt out of political regional organizations led by region outsiders, Uzbekistan is laying the groundwork for sustainable Central Asian co-operation from within in a manner that is acceptable to the Central Asian states and big non-regional actors alike.

One of the major implications of Mirziyoyev's policy of "good neighbourliness" is the improvement in Uzbekistan's reputation in the global arena, which may in part contribute to a positive assessment of Uzbekistan as a target for foreign investment. The fact that Uzbekistan was named one of the top 20 "global improvers" in the World Bank's 2020 Doing Business report, and 2019 Country of the Year by *The Economist*, is an important legitimizer of the Mirziyoyev government both at home and abroad. Combined with the array of other measures of liberalization, particularly in the sphere of business and finance, the regional thaw is enabling and consolidating Mirziyoyev's project of authoritarian modernization in Uzbekistan. /

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