

‘Multi-Vectoral’ Central Asia On the Other Side of Major Power Agendas

Emilbek Dzhuraev
OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Abstract In a period of fast-evolving international dynamics over the Central Asian region, it is important to consider the foreign policy choices and exercised agency by the governments of the five states of the region. While the projects and agendas of China, Russia, the United States and other external players over the region have understandably dominated much recent discourse, the ‘inside-out’ perspective – the Central Asian policies and stances toward international affairs and geopolitics involving them – is necessary to draw a more accurate picture of the region’s international affairs. Such a perspective would reveal the evolution and variations of the regional foreign policies of ‘multi-vectorism’ and challenges such policies face today.

Keywords Central Asia. ‘Inside-out’ perspective. Multi-vectorism. Agency. BRI.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Background: State (and making sense) of Central Asian affairs by 2019. – 3 Multi-vectorism in early post-Soviet Central Asia. – 4 Recent dynamics in Central Asian foreign policies. – 5 Challenges and Prospects Ahead. – 6 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Central Asia as a region has been in the spotlight of international expert, academic and decision-maker attention in the recent period, for the most part as the playing field where several major powers of the world have been unfolding their foreign policy agendas. What has not been sufficiently observed is the situation and perspectives of the receiving end: the role that the five Central Asian countries themselves play, the agency that they exercise. While it



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Eurasiatica 13

e-ISSN 2610-9433 | ISSN 2610-8879
ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-376-2 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-377-9

Peer review | Open access

Submitted 2019-08-08 | Accepted 2019-09-04 | Published 2019-12-16
© 2019 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License
DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-376-2/002

15

is doubtless that the intense geopolitics played out by China, Russia, the United States and a few others has been immensely determining what the Central Asian states do, any analysis would still be not quite accurate without a closer consideration of these states as agents in their own right, and specifically, a consideration of the evolving foreign policies of these states. This side of Central Asian geopolitics might be referred to as the 'inside-out' perspective, distinguishing it from the 'outside-in' perspective that focuses on external actors' effects in the region, this distinction being an adapted rendering of another work (Tadjbakhsh 2012).

The 'inside-out' perspective on Central Asian international affairs makes possible to stress several important points that would, in their turn, inform a more accurate understanding of the wider and larger-scale international dynamics played out in and across the region. One such point is that in the most recent period – within the last five years or so – there have been important changes in the foreign policies of the region's countries, necessitating a renewed consideration of where the region might be going and how these countries' relations with external (to the region) actors might be affected. A second point is to stress the significant differences as well as commonalities in the foreign policies of the five countries – more specifically, their commitment to 'multi-vector' foreign policies and the different manners in which such multi-vectorism has been enacted by different countries.¹ A third important point, already prefigured by the first two, is to consider the agency – that is, capacity to autonomously decide and make choices – of the governments of Central Asian states as governments, as opposed to viewing them as corrupt ruling elites in pursuit of narrow self-interests. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate these points by surveying the development of the region's foreign policies since independence.

In the following pages, after a brief overview of the state of affairs found in Central Asia by late 2019 and a quick glance at some of the main scholarly treatments of Central Asian international affairs, the paper proceeds to consider these countries' multi-vectoral foreign policies in three brief sections. The first section overviews the situation in foreign affairs of these countries incumbent at the time of their gaining independence, and what may have dictated their option for multi-vectorism. In the second section, the paper considers the further development and differentiation of Central Asian foreign policies under evolved international political dynamics around the region. The third section, finally, considers the present and impending foreign policy challenges to which the Central Asian variety of mul-

¹ Usage of the word is not quite settled, and this paper uses "multi-vectoral" (adjective) and "multi-vectorism" (as approach).

ti-vectoral policies needs to respond, each under its particular circumstances. The paper ends with a conclusion on the implications of Central Asian multi-vectorism for a better understanding of the affairs of the region.

2 Background: State (and Making Sense) of Central Asian affairs by 2019

In September 2013, President Xi Jinping of China came to Central Asia for a historic tour of the region. Having taken leadership of China only several months earlier, Xi introduced what would soon become his signature initiative - at that time the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (SREB) - in a September 7 speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. SREB soon morphed into 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), which in turn ceded to 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), the latter turning into an almost mandatory element of any statement on global affairs and geopolitics by nearly anyone.

Just several months after Xi's signal tour of the region, a political crisis sets in Ukraine and in its wake Russia - Central Asian states' primary ally - gets itself entangled in a complicated crisis in relations with Western countries. The crisis soon created challenges for Central Asian states' foreign policies and, specifically, their relations with Russia and other key players involved in the emergent stand-off (Dzhuraev 2015). Noteworthy, the piquancy of the situation was not only that their primary ally apparently had acted in highly worrisome ways toward a third state, but that a similar act by Russia toward the Central Asian states, too, became thinkable.

Then, just a few months after the annexation of Crimea, the deadline struck on the presence of a long debated and controversial military airbase of the United States at the Manas airport in Kyrgyzstan. In the geopolitical game over the region, the airbase had stood as a particularly significant object. The question over the continued presence of the airbase had already emerged in 2005 - less than four years after its opening - in the final statement of that year's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. By 2012 the question had become almost the single most important question looming before the Kyrgyz government, and the freshly inaugurated President Atambayev announced he would close the base as one of his principal goals as president - much by way of a goodwill gesture toward Moscow. The early 2014 developments in the Ukraine-Russia crisis and Russia's fast-spread isolation on the international arena, made the significance of the airbase closure much greater than it might have been otherwise.

In the several years that have followed since this sequence of events that put the Central Asian states on the spotlight of international politics, now positively and now awkwardly, the competi-

tive and cooperative dynamics among the great powers around the region have gained in intensity, if only not all equally. Chinese BRI has become firmly set in the agenda of the region and of the world. Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has been, at a much more modest scale, Moscow's attempt at remaining in play in the region and its wider area. The United States' presence has been the one in apparent retreat, albeit such appearance need not be taken for granted: it has kept its presence and activity in Afghanistan, developed daring bilateral and even region-wide rapport with the Central Asian states, and is one of the most important active players in the diplomatic arena around Central Asia.

Besides the three big players, several other external actors have either stepped up their presence in Central Asia or become noted in other ways. Most important among the latter group has been Turkey, where the failed governmental turnover in 2016 got the government of President Erdogan engaged in a hunt after Gulen links in Central Asia. Countries such as India, Pakistan, Korea, Japan, and Iran, to name a few, have maintained regular engagements with Central Asian states. The European Union renewed its Central Asia focus in the process of drafting and inaugurating its new EU-Central Asia cooperation strategy (*The EU* 2019). While Brussels has explicitly reiterated its rejection of holding any geopolitical agenda for Central Asia, it has certainly been viewed – as a union and several European states individually – as politically significant in the region.

The part played by the Central Asian states in all these developments would be the natural question. However, it is scarcely studied, and much scholarship – insofar as it discussed foreign relations – has done so as part of analysis of internal political processes in the region. Among scholarship that has focused primarily on foreign relations of these countries, the work of Alexander Cooley is the most compelling. His most discussed and important work on the subject is his book *Great Games, Local Rules* (Cooley 2012). There, Cooley argues that the governments and elites of Central Asian states have actually been rather successful in getting external actors – the three major powers being the focus of the book – to recognize and play by their local rules. The local rules, alas, have been rules of corruption to benefit the ruling elites. While the Central Asian agency observed in the book was a promising start for closer understanding of regional international affairs, the book ended up relegating all the agency exercised by the region's elites in making foreign policy to informal and self-serving corrupt behavior.²

2 Some other contributions similarly prioritize ruling elite agency over sovereign/state agency in Central Asian foreign policies, e.g. Anceschi (2008b) on Turkmenistan and Toktomushev (2017) on Kyrgyzstan.

The latter point got an even stronger amplification in the more recent book that Cooley and John Heathershaw co-authored, *Dictators Without Borders* (Cooley 2016). The book's perspective was, as adopted in the present paper, one of "inside out" look: what the Central Asian regimes put out to the world, how they acted toward the outside realm. The highly illuminating book tells many stories of how the Central Asian regimes used the existing legal and institutional facilities of global political economy to enrich themselves and to control opposition. As eye-opening as it is on the dark side of globalization from the Central Asian vantage point, however, the book continues in the first book's tracks in focusing on the informal, suspect, sinister side of Central Asian agency, to the neglect of agency exercised by these states as sovereign states.

The more formal, legitimate, stately input of Central Asian countries to their international engagements was previously examined, however, in an earlier book that Cooley co-authored with Hendrik Spruyt, *Contracting States* (2009). While the book is not on Central Asia per se, it does mention cases from recent Central Asian international affairs, such as the foreign military bases stationed in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Contracting States argues that sovereignty in international affairs is not absolute but relative and divisible. This allows sovereign states – especially younger, smaller, weaker states, we may add – to engage in what authors call 'incomplete contracts' with other states: the non-absolute and divisible nature of sovereignty allows states to transfer some of their sovereign rights and claims as part of their tools of leverage in building relations and entering contracts with others. Thus, the book argues, sovereignty is an important commodity that smaller and weaker states have in their disposal – such states use their sovereign rights and domains strategically to pursue their interests with other states.³

Partial sovereign transfers would be a significant component of how the Central Asian states have forged their multi-vectoral foreign policies, exercising agency in contexts dominated by much more capable states. The following overview attempts to show the independent and contextually shaped agency that each Central Asian state has shown, evolving over time, differentiating from each other as they matured, and gaining the capacity to capitalize on the possibility of partial sovereign transfers when necessary.

The concept of multi-vectoral foreign policy is a debated one, if not often rejected, among scholars of international affairs. Many reasons can be brought to dismiss it: a euphemism for spineless foreign poli-

3 The argument in its logic is reminiscent of an earlier famous argument from a very different area – that of de Soto (2000) regarding individual property rights.

cy, a desiderata that hardly ever can be actually achieved, an unprincipled hope to milk many cows, a respite of small states faced with the need to mitigate the domination of larger states. Such misgivings aside, however, numerous scholarly analyses have found multi-vectorism as a useful explanatory concept of various states, and especially, in the post-Soviet space.⁴

All the above 'suspicions' regarding multi-vectoral foreign policy have indeed found their confirmation at one point or another with one or more states in Central Asia since their gaining independence. But if the early post-Soviet embracing of multi-vector policies was their intuitive and somewhat speculative approach to mitigating risks and buying cushion, the multi-vectorisms of the more recent period among these states can be viewed as an evolved, tested, more specific and thus more mature foreign policy vision. Taking all these dynamics of multi-vectorism among the five countries over the course of independence, then, suggests there is more purchase to this concept than is granted by much of international relations scholarship.

3 Multi-vectorism in early post-Soviet Central Asia

As soon as the five states of Central Asia became sovereign and left to care for themselves, their instinctive drive was to pursue balanced foreign relations that would not put them under domination of any single larger state. The emergent foreign policy pattern of all these states can be described as "multi-vector" foreign policies. While not all five explicitly embrace this concept - Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have done so in various documents and official statements (Hanks 2009; Sari 2012) - it is arguably applicable to all of them in some fashion or another, and indeed, the five foreign policy practices are of interests as variations of multi-vectorism.

As they entered the world of independent states, the Central Asian states - possibly more than the other post-Soviet new states⁵ - faced the challenge of engaging with, without giving up too much to, a range of different external actors. With no foreign policy apparatuses and cadre in place, no previous experience to rest on, and thus little idea of their own place in the world, these were states moved by a primal instinct of a realist view of the world of states - insecure and hostile.

They had just come out of a union with Russia, and while Moscow was itself in deep crisis at the time, how their relations with her

⁴ For example, see Strakes (2013), Gnedina (2015), Minasyan (2012), all considering post-Soviet cases, to name a few.

⁵ Almost all other former Soviet states had at least a brief history of modern independent statehood before the Soviet Union.

would develop in independence was a question of much importance and risk.⁶ Their newly found American friends, who until just before independence were known as the arch-enemy, were still objects of suspicion with their overflowing attention. There was China stretching on their eastern borders, with known revisionist claims regarding where those borders should be. Back then, it was a much poorer China that did not reveal the kinds of global ambitions as would come later, but in some ways more prone to aggressive and hand-twisting methods in dealing with neighbors.

There were several other actors showing interest in the region, prime among them being Turkey with appeal to fraternal links, with Iran in its footsteps with similar entreaties, and Japan, South Korea, India, and others. There was also the European Union with post-Maastricht union-level foreign policy thrust, with individual state inroads - Germany most active and earliest among them - in their avant-garde. No less important than some of the key states were the international institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, soon followed by the newly energized OSCE, the UN family with UNDP leadership, and ADB, EBRD and others - all offering, if not imposing, their own recipes for Central Asian economies and politics.

Then there were themselves - the rest of the states in the region that each state was uneasy about. They all had a thick network of economic and infrastructure interdependencies among each other automatically turned into vulnerabilities, mutual territorial and resources claims, and many other potential grounds of disagreement. The unfolding civil war in Tajikistan and echoes of the war in Afghanistan further south were vivid reminders of dangers lurking near the young states, dangers that could materialize by reasons of external influence, too.

Thus, it was a time of formidable puzzles, confusions and opportunities. Multi-vectoral foreign policy was an almost intuitive approach that the region's states adopted in the situation depicted above - to engage with all partners, not reject any, and not particularly prioritize any to exclusion of others. It was a conveniently inclusive narrative within which they could build sovereign relations with Russia capitalizing on the numerous ways of preexisting history but keeping this relationship only as one of several directions. They could engage with the United States, seeing that relationship as a marker of full-scale sovereign recognition and as a key to access various international funding and support facilities, but keeping boundaries in the relationship to the line where burdens may start. They could engage with Beijing from the relative safety of being good partners of both Russia and the United States. Relations with Turkey, the Euro-

⁶ These worries of newly independent Central Asian states are reflected broadly in an early essay by Olcott (1992), "Central Asia's Catapult to Independence".

peans, several Asian partners and with each other, also found room in that multi-vectorism, all of them at the extent that is safe, gainful but not encumbering.

4 Recent dynamics in Central Asian foreign policies

As recalled above, it was in Kazakhstan, in September 2013, that Xi Jinping announced for the first time the grand project of China that has now become known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). What has transpired since then in Central Asian states' international affairs, in linkage to BRI and besides it, can be described as these countries' unprecedented level of engagement in transregional and global processes, some of it by their own initiative and some - by being drawn in with little choice. How these states behaved in this period, considered generally, suggests an interesting, active process of consolidation of their long-touted but often vague multi-vector foreign policies. The following is a brief account of these.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is arguably the most active, outward-looking and increasingly internationally recognized country of the five. It is Kazakhstan's foreign policy that is the easiest to identify as multi-vectoral, and that is clearly reflected in the country's basic foreign policy document (*Kazakhstan* 2014). Territorially the largest state in the region, and the ninth of the world, Kazakhstan presents many attractions for outside players - something that Kazakhstan itself, and former president Nursultan Nazarbayev personally, perceived from the beginning as both opportunity and risk. Multi-vectorism was Nazarbayev's mechanism of mitigating the risks and realizing the opportunities.

Beijing's BRI has been notably vague, difficult to trace to specific activities. However, in any possible conception of the project, Kazakhstan is a key state through which Chinese-Western connectivity would be secured. Kazakh-Chinese bilateral relations are very active and productive, with significant Chinese investments in Kazakhstan and a significant amount of Kazakh oil exports going to China. At the same time, unlike a dozen states globally, Kazakhstan has avoided getting into burdensome debt relationship with Beijing, thus leaving it a level of freedom in this regard.

Nazarbayev was an early champion of Eurasian regional cooperation and thus stood at the beginnings of current-day Eurasian Economic Union - the economic integration project usually attributed to Russian foreign policy, and including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as member states. For long, but especially in the wake of Russia's

isolation following its role in the Ukraine crisis, it was quite evident that Nazarbayev was a trusted ally of Vladimir Putin. But instead of clearly taking Russia's side on any major occasion of dispute - from Ukraine, to the Syrian war, to disputes with Georgia, Turkey, the United States, and others - Nazarbayev consistently succeeded in maintaining positive and active engagements with the other side, while also keeping the status of a "close friend" of Putin. Astana became a frequent site of conflict mediation, hosting important meetings in both the Ukraine process and the Syrian war settlement.

While Kazakhstan has entered a leadership transition period, with a new leader elected, it is unlikely that President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev will seek to revise the country's architecture of foreign relations - something in whose building he was a close participant, as a long-time foreign minister. It is, of course, possible that some changes may be necessitated from outside, if key foreign leaders see opportunity with the 'freshman' president to change their standing with Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan

Central Asia's most populous country, and geographically most central - sharing borders with all four others - is Uzbekistan. Of the five countries, Uzbekistan - led by late president Islam Karimov at the time - was the most overtly revisionist of the Soviet political past and willing to take its distance from Russia from the early years of independence. For most of Karimov's presidency, which ended in September 2016 with his death, Uzbekistan's foreign policy was notable for its sharp turns, breaks and apparent caution with any overly binding commitments. Making independence the cornerstone of Uzbek national ideology, Karimov steered the country clear of any relations that might compromise the country's (and his, one should read) freedom. The country's "flip-flopping" policy was particularly notable in its sequenced friendships and break-ups with the West (primarily the United States), then Russia, then the West, and then Russia, while the steadier relations were nurtured with several Asian countries, especially South Korea, Japan and later, China.

In 2012, Uzbekistan adopted a written formal foreign policy strategy document for the first time, which was especially noted for several principal commitments - Uzbekistan committed to never join any military blocks, never host any foreign military bases, and to always be guided by its national interest first and foremost (Tolipov 2012). While the latter is an unsurprising commonplace, the first two points appeared to formalize the sorts of edgy foreign engagements from which Uzbekistan had been running at each instance of its "flip-flopping". In line with this policy of maintaining distance, Uzbekistan's

version of multi-vectoral foreign policy can be described as a policy of “equidistant” relations: that is, stressing the negative aspect, the country appears to have built its foreign relations so as not to get too close with any particular partner.

The second president of Uzbekistan, former prime minister, Shafqat Mirziyoyev, inaugurated as president at the end of 2017, led the country’s foreign policy to much greater openness, more active engagement with a wide range of partners, especially noticeably improving long-strained relations with neighbors in Central Asia (see Weitz 2018). If the description of “equidistant” sounded right for Karimov foreign policy, it clearly sounds not right about Mirziyoyev’s approach. The latter’s early approach has been more like that of Kazakhstan’s – a more open, engaging model of multi-vectorism, with Mirziyoyev’s visits with Russian, American, European and Chinese counterparts being early indications.

Tajikistan

Possibly the biggest winner from the Uzbek foreign policy accent changes instigated by Mirziyoyev has been Tajikistan. One of the smaller three and poorer two countries of the region, and the only one to have had a civil war after independence, Tajikistan had limited choices in its foreign policy (see Nourzhanov 2018; Tajikistan 2015). Coming out of the civil war, and facing the war along the stretch of its southern border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan accepted Russia’s protection almost by fiat. The de facto Russian protection was represented by a large military presence, sizeable economic presence and support, and later on, by a large number of Tajik population working in Russia as labor migrants.

Tajikistan’s foreign policy of recent years can be generally seen as steady if slow movement toward diversification of its relations to alleviate its dependence on Russia. It nurtured relations with Iran from early years of independence, and after several years of cooling off over a dispute, began to renew that relationship by 2019. Relatively lively, mostly trade-based relations with Turkey have been kept stable. Severely strained relations with Uzbekistan under Karimov came to be replaced by a radically improved – certainly faster in declarations than in deed, but still important – cooperation since President Mirziyoyev’s arrival in office. Tajikistan has maintained active efforts at substantiating relations with India, and to lesser extent Pakistan, albeit those relations have not seen noticeable progress over years.

However, the most important change in Tajikistan’s foreign relations has been the quickly risen relationship with China. Tajikistan has entered several major investment and loan agreements with Chi-

na in the recent years that have generated enormous economic expectations while also making Tajikistan one of the most at-risk countries to what has been dubbed “predatory loan” practices by China. Indeed, Tajikistan has reportedly signed off a piece of territory on the border between the two countries, as a long-term rent, in lieu of repayment of part of its debt to China.

With the limited space for foreign policy maneuvers, Tajikistan has had the greater difficulty building multi-vectorism, but Dushanbe clearly has worked much to mitigate its one-directional dependence.

Kyrgyzstan

Somewhat similar in its foreign policy positions with Tajikistan, but spared the civil war and ominous immediate neighborhood with war-torn Afghanistan, is Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan was one of the more vocal about multi-vectorism of the five countries early on, with President Askar Akayev at times being dubbed a “darling of the West”, while also keeping close relations with Yeltsin government in Russia. Eventually, certainly with help of relevant external factors, Akayev became distanced from the West and more closely bound with Putin’s Russia. Before his forced ouster in 2005, Akayev’s foreign policy led to the stationing of two foreign military bases – those of the Western coalition (eventually becoming solely American) and of Russia (albeit formally of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)) – in close proximity of each other in the outskirts of Bishkek.⁷

While considered the most open to democratization, liberalization and market economy principles of the five countries in the region, and having received the most Western support to those ends, Kyrgyzstan nonetheless grew staunchly pro-Russian in its post-color revolution foreign policy since 2005. Even President Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s fateful game between Russia and the United States over the question of closing or keeping the US base in Kyrgyzstan was not, in essence, a policy away from Russia and toward the West but rather a rent-seeking move by the president and his close circle. President Atambayev came into office at the end of 2011, following the short interim presidency of more Western-leaning Roza Otunbayeva, with promises that were mainly meant to reassure Russia. He largely delivered on his promises, taking Kyrgyzstan possibly to the highest level of alignment with Russia in its post-Soviet history, to the detriment of the multi-vectoral principle.

Within the tight space of Kyrgyzstan’s position, much like that of Tajikistan’s, President Jeenbekov – in office since 2017 – has sought a

⁷ The fact of hosting the military bases of two major powers, an unusual phenomenon at the least, led Eugene Huskey dub Kyrgyzstan a “military entrepot” (Huskey 2008).

somewhat more balanced foreign policy, as supported by a new foreign policy document adopted in 2019, where multi-vectorism is clearly stressed, and no country - including Russia - is mentioned by name (*Kyrgyz Republic* 2019).

Turkmenistan

If Uzbekistan's foreign policy until 2017 could be described as one of "equidistant" relations with all major powers and concerned primarily with keeping independence, then Turkmenistan's has been a similar approach but a good step farther. The status of positive neutrality, formally cemented in 1995 with a UN General Assembly recognition, has become an essential part of Turkmenistan's formative national ideology as bequeathed by the first president of the country Saparmurat Niyazov and continued by the second, President Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov (Anceschi 2008a). The status of neutrality, conceived first as a way of relieving the country of the need to choose sides, soon became even more importantly a shield from foreign influences and interference in domestic affairs of the country - especially, in matters of freedoms and rights of citizens, democracy and rule of law. One of the most closed countries in the world, often compared to North Korea, Turkmenistan has been ruled by a political regime serving the cult of personality, of the first and then of the second presidents. Turkmen foreign relations have been restricted primarily to economic ones, heavily focused on exports of natural gas.

After independence, Turkmenistan depended on Soviet-time network of gas pipelines for delivery to markets, and Gazprom being the custodian of all those pipelines in Russia, it had a convoluted relationship with Gazprom over prices and volumes of gas. Eventually, Gazprom stopped buying any Turkmen gas in 2016 over price disagreements; the relationship renewed in 2019 for modest amounts of gas imports to Russia. While the relations with Gazprom were getting difficult, China arrived as the new big player, and from 2009 till 2014, three parallel pipelines were built that began delivering Turkmen gas to China via Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, making Beijing a de facto monopsonist for Turkmen gas. A fourth line was agreed and begun, with a route that went via Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but it has been put on an indefinite halt. By the end of 2010s, Turkmenistan began experiencing difficulties with China, as a monopsony goes, at a time of dropped gas prices and when both Russia and Iran, the other two significant buyers, were both turned off. As the country's gas export difficulties continued amid reports of severe economic crisis domestically, President Berdymuhamedov continued seeking renewal of broken relations and developing new ones, including more active engagement with Central Asian neighbors.

A Variety of Multi-vectorisms

As the brief overviews above show, the foreign policies of the five Central Asian states have been evolving and diverging in response to specific needs, capacities and constraints of each state. All of them have held on to what can be described as multi-vectoral foreign policy – they have continually strived to build or maintain relations with a variety of states, including several major states, which are themselves not always on easy terms with each other. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have come the closest to forfeiting multi-vectorism in favor of strong alignment with Russia. But even they have clearly resisted runaway dependence on the Kremlin and consistently tried to diversify their basket. Indicatively, the status of “strategic partners”, once given by these states only to Russia, has more recently been extended to China, India and to regional neighbors (e.g. Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) as well.

While the general commitment to multi-vectoral foreign relations among all five countries is common and evident, some important differences among them have also crystallized over time. Generalizing based on the above summary descriptions, one may characterize Kazakhstan's foreign policy as fitting the most straightforward, substantive conception of multi-vectorism, wherein the country has maintained close positive relations, without losing autonomy, with all major international actors, from Russia, to China, the United States, the European Union, and many others. Kazakhstan's active engagement in multiple multilateral institutions and processes, mediating role in conflicts over Ukraine, Syria and to lesser extent in Afghanistan, have further enhanced the country's ability to keep balanced and broad-based foreign relations. Uzbekistan's foreign relations, particularly since the change of leader there, have tended in a direction similar to Kazakhstan's. While the peculiar “equidistant” multi-vectorism of late Karimov was interesting academically, it may not have served the country's interests the best. President Mirziyoyev's orientation to greater engagement has kept the balanced multi-directional scope, albeit so far Uzbekistan has not yet reached the level of Kazakhstan's enmeshment in complex international relations.

The positive and permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan, as of 1995, has given the country a somewhat automatic distance and hence autonomy from all foreign engagements. However, in its mostly bilateral and mostly economic relations, the country continually experienced difficulties of balancing its relations, at one point coming under heavy dependence on Russia vis-à-vis the unavoidable Gazprom, and at another point – still continuing – on China and its pipelines built at Turkmenistan's expense. About the time the Uzbek leadership changed, which led to changed regional dynamics, President Berdymuhamedov, too, appeared to be in more active pursuit of contacts with ‘third’ countries.

Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's multi-vectorisms could be described as the skewed ones with a prevailing Russian orientation and several actively pursued alternative partnerships. Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy has been subject to somewhat greater turbulence, including a sharp worsening and then mild improvement of relations with the United States, waves of moderate to extreme priority for Russia, and still more regular ebbs and flows in relations with regional neighbors. Tajikistan, while less prone to such ups and downs, has also led a somewhat unsteady foreign policy, with good and not so good times with Iran, occasional small-scale rebellions against domination by Russia, much advertised but still anemic relations with India, and checkered relations with regional neighbors – albeit marking a dramatically improved relationship with Uzbekistan since 2017.

5 Challenges and Prospects Ahead

Understanding Central Asian foreign policies in the midst of the great power projects and geopolitics over the region, to be very accurate, requires taking into account the variety of multi-vectoral policies described above, and the reasons and rationales that have stood behind each country's interest in maintaining its multi-vectorism. While the rent-seeking and corrupt interests of plutocratic regimes is probably a key part of such reasons, to be content with such an explanation would be inaccurate. To believe that the Central Asian states have too little or no agency capable of affecting their relations with outside powers, as the overview above suggests, would also be seriously misleading. So, it is worth the effort to see the affairs of Central Asia and external powers from an “inside-out” perspective. Upon a glance from such a perspective, a number of topical concerns stand out at the present as challenges for Central Asian foreign policy circles, awaiting choices and compromises.

For the first time since the early years of independence, on March 15 2018, all five Central Asian states gathered for what they carefully avoided calling a summit meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan. Four of the countries were represented by presidents and Turkmenistan – by speaker of parliament. Then-president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbaev, hosting the meeting, said at that time that such meetings would become an annual tradition taking place just before the holiday of Nooruz (vernal equinox and New Year holiday).⁸

Intra-regional relations, rich with disputes and lacking trust, had long been the weak aspect of Central Asia's international affairs. Of

⁸ The second meeting got delayed and took place on November 28, 2019 in Tashkent.

ten, for particular countries in the region the main external threat and concern was a neighbor in the region, not an outside state. It was late President Karimov of Uzbekistan who was the main barrier to improvement of regional relations, with open or muted disputes with every other country in the region. It was therefore unsurprising that with Karimov's passing, Uzbekistan's new president was quickly able to reverse that track, improve relations with all neighbors, and renew hopes for positive regional relations that led, among other things, to the March 2018 meeting in Astana.

Besides concerns over the possibility of intra-regional cooperation, and possibly regardless of it, each country had its own concerns to face, and seek solutions to, in its foreign relations.

Kazakhstan entered a leadership transition mode in March 2019, and the newly elected President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev faced the challenge of keeping the architecture of Nazarbayev's multi-vectorism and autonomy in the face of growing Chinese influence, continued Russian factor, and the more passive Western partners. The Russian influence was a primary concern from the day of independence, as Kazakhstan - home of about 40% ethnic Russian population at the time of independence - came to share with Russia the longest continuous stretch of a border in the world at nearly 7000 kilometers. While generally one of Russia's most valued partners, there were several occasions - mostly over Kazakhstani identity policies and over matters of Eurasian Economic Union - when the two sides revealed differences. Some suggestive occurrences portended such differences to be likely under the new president of Kazakhstan, too.

Kazakh-Chinese relations, as they grew, were causing resentment and concern among the general public as well as, possibly, the government. Widespread riots in 2016 in Kazakhstan over alleged law to allow Chinese immigrants to buy land was the first major sign of anti-Chinese sentiments. Later, such sentiments were fueled by reports of Chinese re-education camps, suspected to be actually massive political prisons, abusing the ethnic Kazakhs among other Muslim citizens of the Xinjiang province.

The question of Chinese "re-education camps" for Muslims made issues difficult for Kyrgyzstan, too. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the only two sovereign nation-states that have sizeable co-ethnic brethren living in China and affected by the controversial measures in Xinjiang. While both countries' governments generally distanced themselves from the issue and described it as China's internal matter, various civic groups, activists and media were more critical and demanded stronger reaction from their governments. Both countries' capacity to react adequately to such claims was restricted, among all else, by their economic ties with China. For Kazakhstan, China is one of the biggest oil buyers and a key investor. For Kyrgyzstan, even more disconcertingly, China held over 40% of the country's ex-

ternal debt by 2019 on terms that were rather restrictive, making Kyrgyzstan one of a dozen at-risk countries in that regard.

At-risk due to indebtedness to China is also Tajikistan, one of the handful countries around the world that has had to already settle part of its debt by ceding land to China – something that has remained oblique as to its details. Besides such indebtedness, Tajikistan, just like Kyrgyzstan, continues to also heavily depend on Russia for its economic stability provided by over a million labor migrants in many cities of Russia, for its security vis-à-vis potential militant incursion from Afghanistan and, possibly, by way of balancing the rumored military presence of China in the areas said to have been given to Beijing in lieu of debt repayment.⁹

In terms of dependence on China, however, it might be Turkmenistan that has felt the squeeze most acutely. Having bet its gas export fortunes since early 2010's on the buying power of China, Ashgabat soon became hostage to several limitations to its ability to make cash on it: the indefinite delay in completion of the highly anticipated high-capacity Line D of pipelines, the repayment of the cost of Lines A, B, and C – financed and built by China – by natural gas money, the reported lower-than-expected volumes of gas exports to China, and the fall in natural gas price in the world market. With exports to Iran – normally accounting for just below 10% of Turkmen gas export – halted, President Berdymuhamedov actively sought mending relations with Russia, finally achieving a new albeit small-scale export deal with Gazprom in 2019. In the meantime, Turkmenistan grew increasingly concerned for security along its border with Afghanistan in the south.

In the midst of this array of foreign relations challenges in the region, Uzbekistan has appeared in the most comfortable situation. The largest country by population in the region, holding significant economic attractions in mining, agriculture and as a market, just to name a few, Uzbekistan has been courted with attention by all major players. Such courting has been dramatically encouraged by the changes in Tashkent's foreign policy when Shafqat Mirziyoyev came to power at the end of 2016. As President Mirziyoyev continues to lead on such a positive wave, besides the task of further consolidating his power domestically, several foreign relations issues would be on his agenda: leading the region to a viable regime of positive cooperation without alienating any neighbor, contributing what is possible to stabilization of Afghanistan with which Uzbekistan shares a small stretch of border, all while nurturing profitable relations with China, Russia, the United States and Europe without falling under burdensome influence of any.

⁹ The latter point, while frequently rumored, has not been confirmed by credible sources.

Thus, all five countries of the region face pending challenges in their relations with the rest of the world, some more pressing than others. Leveraging these challenges will require that each country, once again just as before, tailor its multi-vectorism to fit its particular emergent circumstances. In the evolving climate of international affairs around the region, several opportunities – always involving some risk, naturally – offer themselves for such leveraging.

One is China's own much-sung Belt and Road Initiative: insofar as it is an inclusive, transregional, multilateral project of connectivity and all that comes with it, the Central Asian countries would be interested in being part of such a broad network where pressures of bilateral relations can be mitigated by the larger scope of BRI. Similarly, the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, despite fears to the contrary, is an opportunity for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to leverage their respective dependencies on Moscow by capitalizing on the multilateral, five-country membership of EAEU. The newly revamped Shanghai Cooperation Organization with accession of India and Pakistan, is another potent asset for four of the SCO-member Central Asian states, putting them in a weighty club of rising powers led by both China and Russia.

The United States, appearing to be on a recess in Central Asia, remains nonetheless a significant party, engaging the Central Asian countries bilaterally, as a region, and as neighbors of Afghanistan where American presence appeared to be stuck until normalization of politics and security. The launching of the new European Union strategy for Central Asia in July 2019 energized another vector for possible stronger relations.

The options emerging from outside – BRI, EAEU, SCO, C5+1 and EU-CA relations – to a significant extent hinge on the level and quality of cooperation among the Central Asian states themselves. Should the regional informal summits of 2018 and 2019 lead to tangible capacity for joint interest articulation and pursuit among the five, such a development could usher in a still newer and highly interesting mode of multi-vectorism.

6 Conclusion

Central Asia is a region of five separate countries, all hailing from the collapse of the Soviet Union, and all claiming to be in pursuit of multi-vectoral foreign policies ever since. The erstwhile impulse for multi-vectorism was likely a safeguard to the uncertain opportunities and predictable challenges of independent statehood which they acquired rather abruptly. Over time, each state developed its own particular blend of multi-vectorism – from the active, engaged multi-vec-

torism of Kazakhstan, to the Russia-leaning, tilted multi-vectorism of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, to the independence-rearing, "equidistant", albeit since recently more engaged, version of it in Uzbekistan, to the multi-vectorism of positive neutrality in Turkmenistan.

In the large-print scenery of international affairs around Central Asia – dominated by the movements and interests of China, Russia, the United States, European Union, India, Turkey and others – a casual observation can easily default to assumption of near-absent agency of the region's states themselves, and of their passive receiver-ship status vis-à-vis external partners. Such an observation would clearly be inaccurate and indiscriminate to the actual dynamics in which the five states play their parts. The parts they play, moreover, are arguably broader than in the exclusive service of rent-seeking and survival interests of the ruling elites, as some literature has argued. While such narrow interests determine much, it is misleading to consider only them as relevant and not look beyond.

In the advised broader and closer look at Central Asian foreign relations, what is both most interesting and most informative is the evolving variety of multi-vectorisms amongst them. Each state's multi-vectorism was a reflection of that state's interests, capacities and circumstances, and a reflection of the broader world as seen from that state's perspective, from inside out. As circumstances changed, multi-vectorism of each state, too, evolved. Whether, under the common challenges and possible opportunities presented by external forces and processes, the region develops a new, regionally shared multi-vectoral outlook, is a question of particular interest.

Bibliography

- Anceschi, Luca (2008a). "Analyzing Turkmen Foreign Policy in the Berdymuhammedov Era". *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 6(4): 35-48.
- Anceschi, Luca (2008b). *Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy – Positive Neutrality and Consolidation of the Turkmen Regime*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Cooley, Alexander (2014). *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooley, Alexander; Heathershaw, John (2017). *Dictators Without Borders: Money and Power in Central Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Cooley, Alexander; Spruyt, Hendrik (2009). *Contracting States: Sovereign Transfers in International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dzhuraev, Emilbek (2015). "Central Asian Stances on the Ukraine Crisis". *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, 14(4): 1-9.
- Gnedina, Elena (2015). "'Multi-Vector' Foreign Policies in Europe". *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67(7), 1007-29.
- Hanks, Reuel (2009). "'Multi-vector politics' and Kazakhstan's emerging role as a geo-strategic player in Central Asia". *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 11 (3), 257-67.

- Huskey, Eugene (2008). "Foreign Policy in a Vulnerable State: Kyrgyzstan as Military Entrepot Between the Great Powers". *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 6 (4), 5-18.
- Kazakhstan, *Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of, for 2014-2020* (2014). (*Kontseptsia Vneshney Politiki RK na 2014-2020 gg.*). Signed by President of Republic of Kazakhstan on January 21, 2014. Astana. URL <http://mfa.gov.kz/ru/erevan/content-view/koncepcia-vnesnej-politiki-rk-na-2014-2020-gg> (2019-12-10).
- Kyrgyz Republic, *Concept of Foreign Policy of the* (2019). (*Kontseptsia Vneshney Politiki Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki*). Signed by President of Kyrgyz Republic on March 11, 2019. URL <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/430045> (2019-12-10).
- Minasyan, Sergey (2012). "Multi-Vectorism in the Foreign Policy of Post-Soviet Eurasian States". *Demokratizatsia*, 20(3), 268-73.
- Nourzhanov, Kirill (2018). "Tajikistan's 'Multi-Vector' Foreign Policy". Marlene Laruelle (ed.). *Tajikistan on the Move*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Olcott, Martha Brill (2012). "Central Asia's Catapult to Independence". *Foreign Affairs*, 71(3): 108-130.
- Sari, Yasar (2012). "Foreign Policy of Kyrgyzstan under Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev". *Perceptions*, 17(3), 131-50.
- Strakes, Jason (2013). "Situating the 'Balanced Foreign Policy'". *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 15(1), 37-67.
- Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbano (2012). "Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia". *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO. URL <https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=375&type=publicationfile> (2019-12-10).
- Tajikistan, *Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of* (2015). (*Kontseptsia Vneshney Politiki Respubliki Tadjikistan*). Signed by President of the Republic of Tajikistan on January 27, 2015. URL <https://www.tajikemb.kg/files/2016/concept-of-the-foreign-policy-of-the-republic-of-tajikistan-ru.pdf> (2019-12-10).
- The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership* (2019). Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the EU Council. EU: Brussels. URL https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (2019-12-10).
- Toktomushev, Kemel (2017). *Kyrgyzstan – Regime Security and Foreign Policy*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Tolipov, Farhad (2012). "Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy Concept". Analytical article, *CACI Analyst*. Central Asia and Caucasus Institute. URL <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12557-analytical-articles-> (2019-12-10).
- Weitz, Richard (2018). "Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy". *Silk Road Paper, Central Asia and Caucasus Institute - Silk Road Project*. URL <https://silk-roadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/1801Weitz.pdf> (2019-12-10).

