

Uzbekistan-2.0 and Central Asia-2.0

New Challenges and New Opportunities

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Abstract The current stage of post-Soviet development of Central Asian countries can symbolically be called “Central Asia-2.0”, which means that the “Central Asia-1.0” stage is over. The latter, in turn, had symbolized and designated the special so-called transition period that has lasted for about quarter of century. The former is related to objective end of the transition period in general, and to the new opening of Uzbekistan in and to the regional affairs which is designated as Uzbekistan-2.0. Both the first and second period illustrate that Uzbekistan play a crucial role in Central Asia. Tashkent’s policy is of decisive character: its self-isolationism stops integration; its activism stimulates it. Meanwhile, given the complicated and contradictory evolution of Central Asian regionalism and the interruption of integration, some experts and officials are carried away and deviated by the terminological problem reflected in a vague devolution scheme ‘integration-cooperation-connectivity’.

Keywords Uzbekistan. Central Asia. Regionalism. Integration. Geopolitics.

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1 Introduction

The current stage of post-Soviet development of Central Asian countries can symbolically be called “Central Asia-2.0”, which means that the “Central Asia-1.0” stage is over. The latter, in turn, had symbolized and designated the special so-called transition period that has lasted for about quarter of century. The first stage was related to multiple tasks newly independent post-Soviet states encountered immediately with their gaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Among those tasks were: creation of all attributes of the modern statehood; national revitalization; establishment of diplomatic links with states of the world; entering international system and conducting its own foreign policy; development of market reforms and creation of working democratic institutions, etc.

Although during this period these tasks have been accomplished with different degrees of success, they cannot be fully concentrated in a limited number of years: indeed they can and should be continued with new dynamism and new aspects. At the same time, the real process of transition was very complicated and full of controversies when the remnants and legacy of the Soviet past have been persisting. Such a development is peculiar to all countries of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan.

On the one hand, the strong authoritarian political regime, biased ideological and propaganda machine, corrupted and uncultured social relations and rent-based economic system – all that can be described as “Soviet syndrome” – remain unchanged in most of their basic traits; on the other hand, tokens of political and economic advancement out of political stagnation appeared with the death of the first President of the country Islam Karimov in September 2016.

2 Uzbekistan-2.0

Before analyzing Uzbekistan-2.0 we will briefly review Uzbekistan-1.0. The political process in Uzbekistan since independence has been complicated and contained simultaneously pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet elements with the dominance of the Soviet legacy, the phenomenon that can be called “Soviet syndrome”. This peculiarity of the Uzbek political system manifests itself in almost every sphere of the social, economic, cultural and political life, with each sphere containing basic elements of the Soviet tradition. Democracy in this context sounds like Soviet-made slogan of communism, that is, a ‘bright future’, not the meaning of existing social relations and type of governance.

Karimov’s regime in Uzbekistan had two main features: it was highly autocratic *per se*; and it was a continuation of the Soviet po-

litical system. Paradoxically, whereas Karimov constantly reiterated the irreversibility of independence, portraying the Soviet past as a murky totalitarian period and asserting that there should be no nostalgia for the Soviet Union, at the same time he did little to eradicate the customary Soviet style and tradition of governing the country.

The nation that Karimov has been ruling for a quarter of a century also has remained predominantly Soviet with its deeply rooted paternalist mentality and wallowing in an ideological shallow. The cult of personality around the head of the nation, backed by the omnipotent state machine and the widespread fear, has nurtured and assured the obedience and loyalty of Uzbekistan's citizens (Tolipov 2017).

Meanwhile, all the political life was saturated with the "spirit of reform". The words 'reform' and 'transition period' became cliché that are used to excuse 'temporary difficulties' the country is faced with after gaining independence. However, "to the citizens of Central Asia, reform has become a permanent condition of governance and more of an explanation for why things do not work than for why they do" – as Gregory Gleason writes (2004, 43).

Mirziyoev's power, in turn, seems to have three other features, slightly different of those of Karimov's: a) it is soft autocratic – shifting slowly towards democracy by spurring market reforms and activating civil society but keeping strong control over political system; and b) it is no longer a continuation of the Soviet political system and is rather genuinely post-Soviet (Karimov's regime was a replication of the Soviet one)¹; c) it is gradually reformist and a non-status-quo one (I am inclined to evaluate and interpret such a distinction of the incumbent's power from his predecessor's as a dialectical and logical shift in the overall evolution of power in Uzbekistan). At the same time, Mirziyoev now has the profoundly challenging task of finding the dialectically right way between continuity of his predecessor's course and discontinuity of that course. He cannot speed up democratization, nor can he freeze the Karimov-made status quo. On one hand, he seems to perpetuate Karimov's memory by naming streets and Tashkent airport after Karimov and erecting First President's monument, but on the other hand, Mirziyoev seems just to tribute his predecessor but goes in his own way.

By summarizing one can conclude that Karimov's regime was harshly authoritarian and suffered from Soviet syndrome, while Mirziyoev's regime is soft authoritarian, moving away from Soviet legacy toward more liberal system.

1 Actually, the term 'post-Soviet' can be used as a designation of what comes after the Soviet in two senses – as a) a continuation in many aspects of the Soviet and b) as rejection of the Soviet or as rupture it and going away from it. Karimov's regime fitted with a), Mirziyoev with b).

In terms of foreign policy and international relations, there are some differences between Uzbekistan-1.0 and Uzbekistan-2.0 as well. The foreign policy of Uzbekistan in 1990s can be evaluated as a good start. Tashkent was quite pro-active in the beginning. Throughout more than two decades, Uzbekistan has accrued important experience on the international arena. Diplomatic relations have been established with most of the state of the world and this country gained genuine international recognition. Interestingly enough, Tashkent learnt how to play games on this scene, how to play off geopolitics between great powers. At early stage the young Uzbek foreign policy was region-oriented, and President Islam Karimov proclaimed in 1995 the concept “Turkistan is our common home”. In 1990s he was a proponent of the regional integration in Central Asia. However, after 9/11 events in the United States and U.S. forces deployed in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and after the launch of the operation in Afghanistan the geopolitical processes exacerbated in the region. In 2005 Islam Karimov even had to state: “Strategic uncertainty remains in the region. Geostrategic interests of major world powers and our neighboring countries concentrate and sometime collide in this part of the world”.

With the adoption of the new Foreign Policy Concept in 2012 Uzbekistan demonstrates rather self-isolationism than active engagement in international and regional affairs. The tense relations with two neighbors – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – over water regulation issue and over border delimitation were accumulating conflict potential. Tashkent not only abandoned such organizations as the CSTO, EAEC, GUUAM, CACO but also quite isolated itself from other multilateral cooperation frameworks such as, for example, Istanbul Process on Afghanistan and SPECA project of the European Union. In general, the Uzbekistan’s foreign policy that time was neither pro-American nor pro-Russian, neither pro-active nor reactive; some sort of (temporary) stagnation could be observed. So, for a quarter of century, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy has transformed from good start and achievements of 1990s, through the period of uncertainties of the early 2000s to the isolationism problems up to 2016.

Post-Karimov Uzbekistan-2.0 is currently experiencing a new and more dynamic pace of overall reforms – from restructuring the system of governance and bureaucratic fabric of the state to reshaping public policy and spurring the stagnated political process in the country. Mirziyoev initiated a, so to speak, “reach out to people” policy within the country and a “reach out to neighbors” policy within the region. From September 2016 till 31 January 2017 – the five month period – the first fruits of his “new course” have been seen; for instance, for the first time the draft of the special and very comprehensive document was published for the public discussion, namely: Presidential Decree “On Action Strategy of further development of

the Republic of Uzbekistan” for the period of 2017-2021.

Mirziyoev proclaimed Central Asia as a priority in foreign policy of Uzbekistan. Over short period of time after being elected he managed to revitalize regional fora. One after another he made state visits to all neighboring states with which treaties “On Strategic Partnership” were signed. From now on Uzbekistan is surrounded in the region by strategic partners. The agreements with neighboring countries allowed to open dozens of checkpoints on the borders of Uzbekistan and liberalized the visa regime. Uzbekistan’s trade turnover with the states of the region increased by 20% in 2017, and by 50% - during the first six months of 2018 (Ibragimov, 2018).

President made his visits to Russia, China, US, France, Germany, South Korea, India, and multiple foreign delegates visit Uzbekistan every month. Uzbekistan’s position in many ratings, such as Doing Business and others, is being steadily improved. Uzbekistan’s international activism is also widely acknowledged. For instance, in December 2017 the UN GA adopted a special Resolution 2396 “Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance” which was initiated by Uzbekistan. President of Uzbekistan also proposed to adopt a UN Convention “On the rights of youth”. So Uzbekistan-2.0 is really re-opening the country and the people to the world.

3 Central Asia-2.0

Analogously with the previous chapter, we will briefly review “Central Asia-1.0”. The past quarter century period was controversial: it started with resolute proclamation of regional integration in 1991 but ended up with the interruption of this process in 2006 after 15 years of successful integration. That was, indeed, a successful process with the dramatic break.

In December 1991 presidents of five former Soviet republics - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (they are often called 5 ‘stans’) - proclaimed Central Asian Commonwealth (CAC) as a response to the breakup of the Soviet Union and creation by three Slavic republics - Russia, Ukraine and Belarus - of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 1994 Common Economic Space was set up and the CAC was transformed in Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC). Finally, in December 2001 the Central Asian structure was given a name “The Central Asian Cooperation Organization” (CACO). Actually, such development of the regional structure reflected dialectical process of institutionalization of the regional integration (Tolipov 2010a).

In 2004, non-Central Asian state Russia, surprisingly, became a member of the CACO which in fact turned the CACO into asymmetrical, great power present heavy structure. When in May 2005 ter-

rorist uprising occurred in the Uzbekistan's provincial city Andijan that action was interpreted as a "color revolution" attempt instigated by the United States, and relations between Tashkent and Washington worsened significantly. In 2006 Uzbekistan decided to enter the (then existing) Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), of which three other Central Asian states were already members. Under the wrong pretext that EAEC and CACO duplicated each other, these two organizations were merged; since then independent Central Asian regional organization ceased to exist. Meanwhile, that Eurasia and Central Asia do not constitute the same region was clear from the inception of two regional organizations *per se*.

Pause in regional cooperation had lasted more than a decade. The ice began to melt in March 2018 when the leaders of five Central Asian states met in Kazakhstan's capital Astana for a so-called Consultative Meeting. Many observers termed the event a revitalization of the regional cooperation process, albeit in a new temporary format for talks, and a cautious step toward a regional approach to regional problems. This became possible due to President Mirziyoev's new course in the region.

As was said above, after coming to power in December 2016 new President Shavkat Mirziyoev proclaimed that Central Asia would be priority of the foreign policy of Uzbekistan. Tashkent's new active regional course has been consistently demonstrated, since then. This new trend gave a reason to many to argue about new regional relationships between five countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, - and caused new academic and political interest in perspectives of regional integration of these countries in which Uzbekistan is supposed to play a key role. This process can be labeled "Central Asia-2.0".

During 2017-2018 period Mirziyoev met with all presidents of Central Asian states and in the course of these meetings, among other agreements, Uzbekistan signed Treaties On Strategic Partnership with each neighboring state. On November 10 2017, the city of Samarkand hosted the International Conference on Ensuring Security and Sustainable Development in Central Asia under the auspices of the United Nations «Central Asia: Shared Past and Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity». The forum has been organized by Uzbekistan in cooperation with the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) and the UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia. High level officials of the UN, EU, OSCE, SCO, CIS, delegations of Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, USA, European states, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, Japan, South Korea and others, as well as scientists, public figures and officials took part in the conference.

In that conference Mirziyoev suggested to organize a Consultative Meeting of five leaders of Central Asian states; and the first such

meeting took place in Astana - capital of Kazakhstan - in March 2018. The last such five-lateral summit was more than 10 years ago, therefore the revitalization of regional summits will obviously have profound impact on regional affairs. The next Consultative Meeting was scheduled for March 2019 to take place in Tashkent.

4 New Regionalism Ahead

New regionalism is being shaped in Central Asia nowadays, the process that will require serious revising of some conceptual bases of the preceding transformation modalities.

First: 'No longer transition period'. Throughout quarter of century of development passed since they gained independence in 1991, Central Asian countries lived with conviction that it was a period of transition from administrative command economy to market economy, from a totalitarian political system to democracy, from national confusion to national revitalization. Now, the so-called notorious transition period is over.

Second: 'No longer post-Soviet'. After the breakup of the Soviet Union its republics used to be portrayed as post-Soviet. This notion designated specific feature of their *modus vivendi* - persistence of the Soviet legacy and traditions in political, economic, social and cultural life. Although some remnants of these Soviet traditions are still present in everyday life of people as well as in political practice, over the quarter century period most of them have been overcome due to new generation's growth and due to globalization effect.

Third: 'No longer newly independent'. After gaining independence these countries were called 'newly independent states' (NIS). Such a status by definition cannot last forever or infinite time. Throughout the entire independence period these states have completed shaping their statehood, established diplomatic relations with all countries of the world, became members of the UN and other prominent international organizations and even learnt to play geopolitical games, and thereby acquired significant experience in living and acting as full-fledged independent states. Taking into account this fact, they are no longer newly independent but rather young independent states. Such differentiation is important, since it helps understand more correctly their national interests which evolved from survival needs through transition requirements to prosperity tasks.

Fourth: 'No longer Eurasian'. Many experts ascribe Central Asians a Eurasian identity and attach them to the Eurasian region. However, this is incorrect perception for at least three reasons: a) Eurasian ideology was reincarnated after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a substitution of the Soviet Socialist ideology to serve Russian interests of reunification of the former Soviet republics against western

threats. b) Eurasianism undermines self-sufficiency and self-value of Central Asian region and just embody the asymmetric model of integration with great power domination. c) Eurasian (re-)integration is a premature concept given the priority that should be given to the more realistic Central Asian integration. In general, Eurasianism itself is an explicitly post-Soviet model with implicit geopolitical burden.

Fifth: 'No longer Great Game'. Actually, the region is exposed to a geopolitical struggle but it is a different type of game than the classical Great Game of two great powers. This notion implies that major powers of the world pursue hegemonic plans toward this region at the expense of each other's interests. Such order of things in Central Asia has changed with the states of the region acting as independent subjects of the international system - themselves capable to be the actors of geopolitics. They can play off geopolitical card vis-à-vis great powers and, interestingly, they can play smaller geopolitical game vis-à-vis each other within the region - the phenomenon that I call 'micro-geopolitics' (Tolipov 2010b). So, there is no longer a classical Great Game but the region is facing a more complicated round of geopolitical competition in which they themselves participate as actors.

Sixth: 'No longer at the periphery' (significance-insignificance conundrum). Although independence of the former Soviet republics was automatically recognized worldwide, they were perceived as peripheral countries insignificant for the world politics. They were stereotypically perceived as fragile, insecure, and doomed to depend on external assistance for their development. Subsequently, however, Central Asian region was re-discovered as an area rich in natural resources and located in strategically important part of the world between Russia and China as well as neighboring war ravaged Afghanistan. Countries of the region having mostly Muslim population play crucial role in the world of Islam. In 1997 five Central Asian states being surrounded by nuclear powers proclaimed the region Nuclear Weapon Free Zone - first and the only one in the northern hemisphere.

So as one can see, the study and comprehension of emerging new regionalism in Central Asia requires revisions of some conceptual bases of the preceding transformation modalities. Central Asian regional order is different than in the preceding period.

Paradoxically, however, side by side with optimistic expectations regarding emerging new regional order, some argue that integration shouldn't be on the regional agenda. Given the alleged failure of regional integration that experimented from 1991 till 2006, some experts began to express skepticism about very integration perspectives and doubts about relevance of this very concept. They argue that discussions just about regional cooperation would well substitute integration rhetoric because Central Asian states allegedly are not ready to create supra-national bodies and deliver them part of their sovereignty.

This situation reminds us of the competition between Euro-sceptics and Euro-optimists. The cooperation versus integration dichotomy, which is dubious as such, can distort the regional agenda from strategic goals to tactical objectives. Such speculations have just been reinforced in relation with the delayed summit which was planned for March 2019. Indeed, the planned Consultative Meeting was postponed and the situation remains unclear as of writing this article.

Nazarbaev's abdication from power in March 2019 and election of the new President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in June 2019 just added uncertainty in regional dynamics. Yet as an Interim President he made two visits – the official visit to Russia and the state visit to Uzbekistan. These two precocious visits symbolized Kazakhstan's bifurcation between Eurasia and Central Asia. Thus, the "Central Asia versus Eurasia" dilemma continues to be a source of ambiguity in Kazakhstan's approach to regional cooperation. The same bifurcation is peculiar to Kyrgyzstan which, like Kazakhstan, is the member of the Russia-led Euro-Asian Economic union (EAEU). So, two of five Central Asian countries are the EAEU members. Three others are not.

This doesn't mean that Central Asia ceased to be a single region; this only means that some countries of the region bifurcate between two geopolitical realities. In other words, the past, present and the future of regionalism of Central Asia have implicit and explicit geopolitical dimension. Yet in early 1990s. Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner rightly pointed out that one of the reasons for analyzing Central Asian developments within a geopolitical framework is that "the way in which each republic defines its own identity – separately from or in common with one more of its neighbors, or its coethnics in the neighboring countries – is likely to have significant ramifications for the geopolitics of the entire region" (Banuazizi; Weiner 1994, 11).

Many experts' confusion about integration concept and process can be explained, among other things, with reference to destructive and long lasting geopolitics which precluded the unification of Central Asian countries and peoples. The most recent example of geopolitical perplexity that Central Asians began to face is related to the China's global initiative "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR); its Central Asian segment is called "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB). In relation with OBOR/SREB a new fashionable buzzword was introduced in the international geopolitical lexicon. One analysis defines this buzzword as follows: connectivity comprises of transport, digital, energy and human networks, as well as rules, standards and institutions which govern the flows of interaction (Saari 2019).

Parag Khanna well described the significance of such new trend in which "competitive connectivity" takes place through "infrastructure alliances: connecting physically across borders and oceans through tight supply chain partnerships. China's relentless pursuit of this strategy has elevated infrastructure to the status of a global good

on par with America's provision of security. Geopolitics in a connected world plays out less on the Risk board of territorial conquest and more in the matrix of physical and digital infrastructure" (Khanna 2016, 13).

From this viewpoint, OBOR/SREB and other initiatives and projects aiming at providing connectivity with Central Asia cannot but produce a somewhat new type of geopolitics – subtler but not less dramatic than classical geopolitics which in this region used to be known under the label "Great Game". Russia has its version of connectivity with Central Asia within the EAEU, and Moscow promotes EAEU's connectivity with SREB. US promotes its New Silk Road strategy. This European vision of connectivity also runs through the EU's new Central Asia Strategy, which was adopted on 15 May 2019. Compared with the previous Central Asia Strategy from 2007, the new Strategy places increased emphasis on encouraging economic development ('prosperity'), comprehensive security ('resilience') and intra-regional cooperation between the Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Saari 2019).

So, new regionalism ahead will not be free from geopolitics which is actually one of multiple challenges the region is going to face in the near and mid-term perspective. In order to withstand them, five states must resolve their integration puzzle which itself is a complex one. It includes principle and vital questions: Will Central Asian countries become democratic in the near perspective? How should and can they embody regional integration model and institutions? Is growing Islamization of societies in these countries posing challenge to democratic perspective – on the one hand and to stability – on the other? What assets (potential) do states possess that make them capable to withstand geopolitical pressure? What stimulus normative base, values, identities can provide for integration?

5 In Lieu of Conclusion

For the region concerned, connectivity *with* Central Asia should be supplemented by or even follow primary connectivity *for* and *within* Central Asia – the formula that I would articulate in special translation of OBOR – "Own Belt, Own Road". Much will depend on how five countries reshape their regional order. From this analysis one can note that new approaches are needed, taking lessons from previous experience. The perplexity of regional evolution which is reflected in a vague devolution scheme 'integration-cooperation-connectivity' rhetorically is being recently "processed" in an interesting but still vague notion of 'connectogratorion', which tries to reconcile the seeming contradiction between cooperation and integration through the

connectivity.² Anyhow, conceptual, political and institutional problems of Central Asian regionalism must be resolved above all. The reason for this statement is that a number of predictions regarding political, economic, social, and religious processes in the countries of the region appeared to be incorrect based on superficial perceptions and wrong assumptions.

Correction of the regional status quo will depend to a great extent on Uzbekistan. This is indeed the key country of Central Asia which can play the role of motor of regional interactions and integration. Being the centrally located in the region, having the biggest population among five countries, possessing the most developed infrastructure including roads and highways, having the strongest military forces in the region, and relatively less exposed to direct influence of the neighboring geopolitical giants, Uzbekistan is endowed with historical mission and special responsibility to become a centripetal force for the entire region.

Peculiarities of the regional stance of Uzbekistan during the First President Karimov and his successor Mirziyoev testify this thesis. At the inception of independence, Karimov started as a strong proponent of regional integration and proclaimed the slogan "Turkistan is our common home". The process of region-building proceeded successfully until 2006 when it was interrupted. Then Karimov turned into an isolationist and the process stopped without Uzbekistan. His successor Mirziyoev put an end to Uzbekistan's isolationism and regional communications is immediately resumed with new force. So Tashkent's policy is of decisive character: its isolationism stops integration; its activism stimulates it.

Regionalism in Central Asia should also be considered in the context of globalization and emerging new world order (NWO) which aggrandizes the actuality of region-building and region-securing in this part of the world. Some years ago Henry Kissinger wrote: "A struggle between regions could be even more debilitating than the struggle between nations has been. The contemporary quest for world order will require a coherent strategy to establish a concept of order *within* the various regions and to relate these regional orders to one another" (Kissinger 2014, 371).

Martha Olcott once argued that after the 9/11 events the international interest in Central Asia increased significantly in the context of war on terror and in this respect countries of the region had a second chance - new opportunity for democratic reforms with the assistance of international community. She was, however, skeptical concerning reforms and thought it is less likely that states of Cen-

² This notion appeared during the discussion in the recent international conference that the author of this article attended.

tral Asia would “understand all correctly” (Brill Olcott 2005). But the real second chance is more dialectical and broader issue, namely: it is a second chance for integration (Central Asia-2.0). Hopefully, this time, five ‘stans’ will understand all correctly.

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