

UZBEKISTAN-TURKMENISTAN: A POLE OF MULTIVECTORAL POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to the widespread opinion, Central Asia is not a homogenous region made up of independent countries that can easily be lumped together. It is not a monolith, but a territory crisscrossed by numerous dividing lines, some of them created by different, or even opposing, foreign policy preferences of the Central Asian republics. The author has taken two of them—Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—to demonstrate the main trends of multivectoral foreign policy pursued by the regional actors, irrespective of how relations with the external players are developing.

KEYWORDS: *Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, multivectoral foreign policy, Central Asia, the Afghan Question, the problem of water resources, energy and transport projects, Russia, the United States, CSTO, SCO.*

Introduction

Relations among the states responsible for the geopolitical makeup of Central Asia are not consistent at all. There are seats of *ethnopolitical conflicts* on the borders of at least some of them;

the countries demonstrate different approaches to urgent transborder issues, hydroelectric projects, and distribution of the region's water resources in particular.

At the same time, the Central Asian republics have been preserving regional security at a certain level by drawing on internal and external resources. The far from simple relations between some of the regional actors have not developed into armed conflicts thanks to the great and increasing attention of external forces and the fact that the region has become part of the collective security zone of the CSTO and SCO.

The balance of power inside the region is highly important. Whether the regional processes can be stabilized largely depends on Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and their policies; they can be described as two "non-aligned countries." Turkmenistan, which remains true to its neutrality status, and Uzbekistan, which suspended (once more) its CSTO membership, form a specific Central Asian pole. Their relations with the external forces interested in the region are a touchstone of regional stability.

Their foreign policies are the most multivectoral and enjoy an equal distribution of priorities, while they have also set the tone for pursuing *a complementary foreign policy course* in the region.

Cooperation between Tashkent and Ashgabad closely related to the most urgent regional issues provides a better understanding of the motivations and stimuli behind the multivectoral foreign policies of all the Central Asian countries.

Afghanistan as a Foreign Policy Stimulant

The two countries invigorated their bilateral cooperation in the security sphere and expected to acquire the largest possible dividends from their contacts with the extra-regional forces. Today, their stepped-up activity is explained by the approaching pullout of the coalition's forces from Afghanistan, which might increase tension in the border regions of both republics. In the last few months their leaders increased and deepened their foreign policy contacts in an attempt to prevent the looming threat.

Here are several episodes that illustrate their relations with Russia.

President Putin's visit to Uzbekistan on 4 June, 2012 produced a Declaration on Deeper Strategic Partnership between the two countries. A month later, the Russian president was invited to visit Ashgabad any time he liked.

The schedule of President Putin's visits to the Central Asian countries follows the traditional pattern of priority attention toward the CSTO and EurAsEC members. He started with Kazakhstan, then visited Tajikistan, and completed this round by receiving the President of Kazakhstan in Moscow.

On 5 December, 2012, Vladimir Putin paid a working visit to Turkmenistan timed to coincide with the CIS Summit in Ashgabad. Late in June 2013, Turkmenistan repeated its invitation.

On 14-15 April, 2013, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, probably concerned about the upcoming withdrawal, paid an official visit to Moscow.

He not only informed Russia (and other foreign policy partners, for that matter) about his apprehensions, but also "sounded the alarm." He spoke of the creeping expansion of Islamic radicalism toward Central Asia, described the situation in Afghanistan as unpredictable, and did not exclude a civil war in this country.

During his visit, the president, who earlier suspended Uzbekistan's CSTO membership, spoke of "wider and closer cooperation with Russia within the U.N., SCO, CIS, and other important international organizations." This means that Uzbekistan has revived its fears of possible destabilization in Central Asia associated with radical Islamic groups crossing the border from Afghanistan into the Central Asian republics.

On 4 April, 2013, during the visit of Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov to Ashgabad, the sides signed a Program of Cooperation between the Foreign Ministries of the Two Countries for 2013, which presupposed, among other things and for the first time, a regular exchange of foreign ministerial opinions on the situation in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Tashkent and Ashgabad are rightly concerned about instability in Afghanistan. Despite the optimism of some local political scientists, who expect that Uzbekistan and its armed forces are strong enough to oppose the looming threats from the south, the largest of the Central Asian republics is obviously worried.

It should be said that the fears in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan of creeping Islamic fundamentalism are well founded. In April-May 2013, for example, Taliban and fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) clashed with local law-enforcers in the Faryab Province close to the Turkmen border, an area of strategic importance because of the water resource known as the "Turkistan Water Bank" used by Faryab and the border areas of both countries.

The fact that IMU fighters were involved suggests that their activity along the Turkmen borders will create a new context for the republic and the region as a whole. Some experts think that groups hostile to Ashgabad might spring into being under the IMU aegis and start pouring across the border as soon as the pullout is complete. This will reduce Turkmenistan's neutrality and turn it from a strong diplomatic argument into a weak link in its real politics.

It is more or less commonly believed that Turkmenistan is the least likely target of post-2014 fundamentalism: under the late President Niyazov, the republic created an informal channel of confidential cooperation with the Taliban leaders. The republic's neutral status was and remains its trump card, which allows its leaders to argue that they are equally removed from all the sides fighting in Afghanistan.

Ashgabad cannot but be concerned about the very possible post-2014 fragmentation of Afghanistan. With this possibility in view, Ashgabad is wasting no time: it is looking for new partners in the West and drawing closer to Tashkent, which is also concerned about the risks stemming from Afghanistan.

As long as there are NATO troops in Afghanistan, Ashgabad and Tashkent can feel safe from the threat of jihad. The planned pullout, however, forces all players to pay much closer attention to possible regrouping of the IMU and Islamic Jihad Union (so far operating on the border with Pakistan and in Afghanistan) in the Central Asian republics.

Tashkent has been using the relative decrease in the radical Islamic threat to its advantage: it boosted its budget and bought armaments and military hardware thanks to the counterterrorist operation and Tashkent's recent and much more pronounced orientation toward the U.S. and NATO.

Jeffrey Mankoff from Washington has offered the following interesting facts: "Collectively, the four Central Asian states that provide ground transit (i.e., excluding Turkmenistan) receive approximately \$500 million per year in transit fees." The planned reverse transit will, likewise, pump a lot of money into Uzbekistan: "Uzbekistan will charge a 50 percent markup over the normal commercial rail tariffs for this reverse transit."¹

Recently, the relations between Washington and Tashkent have acquired a new dimension: America supplies the security forces of Uzbekistan, its law-enforcers, and the army with non-lethal weapons and equipment. In March-April 2013, several American officials stated that it would be advisable to extend assistance to Uzbekistan to help it oppose the threats from Afghanistan. The White House has already agreed to supply Uzbekistan with night-vision goggles, global positioning systems (GPS) gear, and bullet-proof vests. It is discussing the supply of small surveillance drones with the Presidential Administration, the Department of State, the Defense Department, and Congress.

¹ J. Mankoff, "The United States and Central Asia after 2014," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2013.

In the face of increased IMU activity on the southern borders of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and fearing that other radical groups will find their way into their territories, Tashkent and Ashgabad have pooled forces and established much closer relations with the United States, the main external force operating in Afghanistan.

Experts and analysts have coined a new term—Afghanization—to describe possible large-scale destabilization as one of the many effects cropping up in some of the Central Asian republics. Uzbekistan is described as one of the most probable victims, a statement that can be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, in the past, the best armed republic repeatedly demonstrated its immunity to centrifugal trends and its ability to neutralize extremist outcrops.

Meanwhile, neither the Uzbek leaders nor the local experts affiliated with them have any illusions about the success scored inside the country. Some of them write that “organizations of the IMU type are sheltered by the Taliban; they will present the main threat.”²

Uzbekistan, together with Turkmenistan, is looking for the means and methods to contain the threats. Multisided cooperation of regional and external forces looks like one of the right answers. It seems that Tashkent is trying to revive its old idea of a Contact Group on Afghanistan first formulated 5 years ago.

In 2008, it suggested a 6 + 3 format consisting of the six countries bordering on Afghanistan (Pakistan, Iran, China, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and three external actors (Russia, the U.S., and NATO) coordinated by the special representative of the U.N. Secretary General for Afghanistan.

In August 2008, however, relations between Russia, on the one hand, and the U.S. and NATO, on the other, were burdened by the military escalation around South Ossetia.

It would be logical to expect that today the regional and external forces are much more willing to cooperate in the 6 + 3 format. This means that Tashkent can start brainstorming and probe for responses from Moscow and other capitals.

Water Ducts of Regional Tension and Regional Solidarity

Water distribution is the highest transborder stumbling block in Central Asia, compelling Tashkent and Ashgabad to join forces to address the problem. This makes President Karimov's visit to Turkmenistan on 1-2 October, 2012 doubly important.

The commentators, who are proceeding from the results of a discussion on the fairer distribution of water resources, have agreed that the relations between the two countries have reached the highest point and that Turkmenistan is Uzbekistan's closest Central Asian ally.

The two presidents were united in their opinion that the Russian capital should be excluded from the large-scale hydropower projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. President Karimov was scathingly critical of Dushanbe, which planned to complete the Rogun Hydropower Plant located in a seismically unsafe area. Several days later, Ashgabad informed that the RF and Tajikistan had not reached an agreement on Russian investments in the Rogun Hydropower Plant on the River Vakhsh.

The conflict potential among the three republics is fed by hydropower projects. Uzbekistan is dead set against the Rogun Hydropower Plant in Tajikistan and the Kambarata Hydropower Plant in Kyrgyzstan. The disagreements are old ones and will not be resolved any time soon.

² R. Sayfulin, political scientist, former advisor to the President of Uzbekistan, *Vyzovy bezopasnosti v Tsentralnoy Azii*, Collection of international conference papers, IMEMO RAS, Moscow, 2013, p. 69.

Experts have pointed to the lack of progress in this field and also predict another round of tension between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Some experts deem it necessary to warn that by 2014-2015, the Uzbek Army will acquire new armaments and accumulate more strength, in particular thanks to the equipment the United States will transfer to it after the pullout. In fact, according to Kazakh political scientists (Marat Shibutov being one of them),³ Uzbekistan is strong enough to fight on two fronts.

Strange as it may seem, Uzbekistan, with the largest population, far from steady transportation connections with the rest of the world, and a climate ill-suited for agriculture, has been resisting the hydropower projects in the neighboring republics for several years now.

The problem of water distribution came to the fore after 2012 when Tashkent left the CSTO again.

Uzbekistan is especially opposed to the Rogun Hydropower Plant; the American experts invited to assess its negative effects concluded that Uzbekistan would lose \$600 million every year; they predicted the plant's negative effect on agriculture, which would cause a 2 percent decrease in the country's GDP. Moreover, the level of the Amu Darya will drop by 18 percent in the summer and increase by 54 percent in the winter, causing droughts and floods, while large chunks of Karakalpakia and the Khwarezm and Bukhara regions might become deserts.⁴

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan object to the new hydropower plants on the transborder rivers because of a possible drop in water supply in the lower reaches.

Experts forecast that tension between Uzbekistan, on the one side, and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, on the other, will mount late in 2014 and early 2015; armed clashes are not excluded.

The United States is quite capable of extending its *high-level support to Uzbekistan* after 2014; however, compromises should rely on the country's internal resources and the stabilization resources of Russia and Kazakhstan.

The Russian president's visits to Tashkent, Bishkek, and Dushanbe between early June and early October 2012 helped to defuse the tension within the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan triangle, but did not resolve the hydropower confrontation.

It is hard to say how the problems of water and energy supply can be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Moscow wants Bishkek and Dushanbe within its foreign policy orbit and relations with Tashkent at a constructive level.

Supported by the United States, Tashkent will build up its military potential by 2014-2015, but the use of force will end in a catastrophe similar to that of the 1990s when the region came dangerously close to a total war.

Unifying Gas

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan cooperate in energy supplies to external markets, gas exports to China in particular.

The Central Asia-China gas pipeline commissioned late in 2009 gave Ashgabad and Tashkent a reliable gas export route. In fact, Turkmenistan, which left Russia far behind, has become China's main partner in extracting and exporting natural gas.

The volumes of gas exports and prospects for even larger amounts of energy resources being extracted in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan and exported to China are very impressive.

³ See: "Migrantskie voyny," *Svobodnaia pressa*, available at [<http://svpressa.ru/war21/article/70344/>], 3 July, 2013.

⁴ See: "Po zakonam Fallout. Sredney Azii predrekauiut voynu za vodnye resursy," available at [<http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/09/25/maybe/>], 25 September, 2012.

In 2012, China bought 21.3 billion cu m of gas from Turkmenistan; there is an agreement to bring the annual volumes of exported gas up to 65 billion cu m by 2016.

Uzbekistan, likewise, intends to expand its gas trade with China within the Central Asia-China project. It is expected that the third phase of the gas pipeline will bring the volumes of Uzbek gas moved to China from 25 to 30 billion cu m.

Today, Gazprom of Russia buys 33 billion cu m of gas from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, 10 billion cu m of which are bought from Turkmenistan. Russia never fails to remind the Turkmen leaders, directly or indirectly, that it is willing to buy even more gas. In April 2013, Alexander Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Board of Executive Directors of Gazprom, accompanied Foreign Minister Lavrov during his visit to Ashgabad. Russia hoped to talk about wider cooperation in the gas sphere. These expectations fell through, although the talks were not entirely useless.

Moscow is not overjoyed at the gas-related cooperation between Tashkent and Ashgabad; it is even less pleased about the possibility of their joining projects that will bring Caspian and Central Asian gas to the European market and which, therefore, will undermine the interests of Gazprom.

So far, the Trans-Caspian project remains on paper, although Russia's firm opposition seems to be counterproductive. On the whole, the project for laying pipelines across the Caspian is not easy to implement for several reasons: there are disagreements between Baku and Ashgabad over certain gas fields on the Caspian shelf, while Iran is opposed to the decision to pass the pipeline along the sea bottom without a concerted agreement among the five Caspian states. It should be said that Moscow has demonstrated a lot of good sense by removing its pressure on Turkmenistan, which in the past greatly irritated the Turkmen leaders.

In December 2011, President of Turkmenistan Berdymukhammedov's visit to Russia took place in a highly emotional atmosphere created by the Russian media, which spoke of the Trans-Caspian project as a death sentence to Russia's monopoly on fuel transit from Central Asia to Europe.

Experts, on the other hand, describe the Trans-Caspian project as "failed hopes;" this was further confirmed by the decision of the consortium working on the Shah Deniz gas field development in the Azeri sector of the Caspian to concentrate on a Trans-Adriatic Pipeline project.

Gas from Turkmenistan, a direct rival of Russian gas, has not yet reached the European market. This, however, cannot be totally excluded. So far, Tashkent and Ashgabad are more interested in wider cooperation with China; they regard access to the solvent European market as a distant strategic prospect.

Access to the Sea

The two republics have their transit potential in common. The region's transit function created by the U.S.'s involvement in Afghanistan is no less important for the regional actors seeking access to external markets. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan play key roles in several transportation projects with long overland stretches. The Western capitals want to extend the railway that will connect Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan (the project of Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku) to Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) and Navoi (Uzbekistan), as well as the northern regions of Afghanistan. On 1-2 October, 2012, at a meeting in Ashgabad, the leaders of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan spoke of the railway project between the eastern provinces of Turkey and the Azeri coast of the Caspian in positive terms.

The transport corridor between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf (Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman-Qatar), in which Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are involved and the agreement on which was signed on 25 April, 2011, is one of the priorities in both capitals.

The United States, however, is not overjoyed about the future access of these republics to external markets through Iranian territory (Turkmenistan will allow Uzbekistan to reach the Gulf ports

through Sarakhs, on the Iranian border). The White House is prepared to fund alternative routes, the New Silk Road in particular, devised and developed by American analytical centers and supported by the U.S. Department of State.

This project, a transport-logistical project in official parlance or, in the words of American diplomats, an international network with transit junctions and economic hubs, should be discussed in a wider geopolitical context. Washington is prepared to extend the planned transport routes and corresponding logistics infrastructure with elements of its geopolitical presence (in the form of functioning and planned pipelines), as well as the transborder power lines. "Other initiatives seek to match energy from Central Asia with Pakistan and India—two markets with significant electricity needs. The TAPI pipeline project would bring on-shore natural gas from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to markets in Pakistan and India. Other efforts would facilitate the transmission of electricity from Central Asia to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India."⁵

Some Washington analysts write that "while direct trade between the Central Asian states and Iran tends to be small, three of these states remain dependent on transshipment through Iran for export access to ocean ports."⁶

Conclusion

The United States is exploiting the desire of the Uzbek and Turkmen leaders to develop their multivectoral foreign policy. It is also involved in the region's other urgent problems created by the Afghan threats and challenges, the problem of water distribution, trade in energy resources bypassing Russia, as well as access to external markets of commodities and services.

Washington is prepared to support the projects being implemented outside Iran and Russia. So far, this policy has not brought many dividends, even though some of the projects, not yet completed, look promising.

The TAPI gas pipeline demonstrated certain progress last year; in May 2012, Ashgabad signed gas sale-purchase agreements with Pakistan and India. On 9 July, 2013, the Chairman of Turkmenistan's State Company Turkmengaz and the Chairman of Afghanistan's Gas Corporation signed a gas sale-purchase agreement (GSPA). At the same time, Washington's official statements about the strategic priority of TAPI so far remain pure declarations. Another suspension of Uzbekistan's CSTO membership, which has become a tradition, Tashkent's special position on several economic and political problems obvious in the post-Soviet space, and integration processes are bringing the republic closer to the United States. Experts confirm that Uzbekistan has an important role to play in America's plans in Central Asia and the neighboring regions and countries.

Today, this is most graphically illustrated by the fact that Uzbekistan is treated as part of the White House's Afghan policy: on 22 September, 2011, the U.S. Congress lifted the bans on military aid to Uzbekistan introduced seven years earlier.

American diplomats stationed in Uzbekistan never fail to point to a new mechanism put in place by the White House: annual political consultation. The third round took place in August 2012 when the Uzbek leaders left Russia's orbit again to try on the garb of the United States' main regional partner.

Later, Tashkent readjusted its foreign policy strategy by joining the CIS Free Trade Area; consultations with the Americans on the regional agenda remained as important as ever.

⁵ R.D. Hormats, *The United States' "New Silk Road" Strategy: What is it? Where is it Headed?* Address to the SAIS Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and CSIS Forum, 29 September, 2011.

⁶ R.M. Shelala II, N. Kasting, A.H. Cordesman, *U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: The Impact of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Central Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 June, 2013.

On 25 July, 2013, Uzbek diplomats discussed bilateral relations with General Lloyd James Austin III, Commander of United States Central Command (CENTCOM). The press service of the Foreign Ministry of Uzbekistan issued a statement that “the sides are paying particular attention to international and regional issues and the developments in Afghanistan in particular.” The general was received by President Karimov the same day.

Having reached a new level of relations with the United States, Tashkent is not ignoring regional developments: it intends to profit from economic integration in the post-Soviet expanse and does not intend to move away from China’s strategic interests in the East European markets. The latter is reciprocated by China’s interest in the republic’s fairly capacious market and its long land border with Kazakhstan.

The United States not only wants to draw Uzbekistan into Washington’s strategic project related (and unrelated) to Afghanistan; it also wants to draw Turkmenistan into its Central Asian policy. In fact, Washington is working toward a loyal southwestern flank in Central Asia to outweigh all other extra-regional players.

In Central Asia, the preferences and new configurations of relations among the Central Asian and with external forces change frequently. Today, the Uzbek-Turkmen alliance taking shape is not anti-Russian.

Both capitals are looking for the best possible mechanisms for maintaining relations with all the big external and regional actors. So far, they prefer the format of bilateral relations and strategic agreements: since the summer of 2012, Tashkent has been shaping its foreign policy accordingly. On 4 June, 2012, during President Putin’s visit to Tashkent, the sides signed a declaration on deepening strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and Russia; a year later a similar document was signed between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

It should be said that Tashkent made the visit of mid-April 2013, rather than the agreements of 4 June, 2012, the starting point of its new strategic partnership with Moscow. President Karimov’s visit to Russia on 14-15 April, 2013, which surprised many, spoke of Tashkent’s deep concerns over the possible developments in Afghanistan.

The two presidents agreed to strengthen cooperation between the special services of both countries (information about this was deliberately downplayed); however, Uzbek experts described it as President Karimov’s great achievement.

Indeed, outside the CSTO and in close contact with the political centers of the West, Uzbekistan still needs close cooperation with the Russian special services. According to local experts, Uzbekistan has neutralized the negative effects of suspended membership by means of new agreements with Russia.

Under its agreement with the Russian Federation, the threatened side can count on talks to neutralize the threat up to and including stationing Russian military in Uzbekistan.

Recently, relations between Russia and Turkmenistan moved away from the gas issue as the only priority to a gradually widening political and economic agenda.

Neutral Turkmenistan is interested in cooperation within the SCO, even though it does not belong either to it or to the CSTO. This limits the range of its involvement in multisided regional cooperation.

Deeper bilateral cooperation will make Russia even more pragmatic in dealing with Turkmenistan. Moscow should stop concentrating on gas: the two countries are gradually moving closer. Ashgabad is interested in the SCO and takes into account the CSTO: it needs to protect itself from the Afghan threats looming on the post-2014 horizon.