

UZBEKISTAN: A REGIONAL POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA? REALITY OR DILEMMA?

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ABSTRACT

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states became independent and tried to pursue their foreign policy free from Russian control. Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian state to pursue a proactive and independent foreign policy. Uzbekistan has higher regional power ambitions than the other Central Asian states.

So what is preventing Uzbekistan from fulfilling its dream? It has the necessary subjective and objective prerequisites for this: military potential, a large and fairly homoge-

neous population, natural resources, favorable geographic location, U.S. support of its secular state, and the willingness of the latter to recognize its regional hegemony. However, the country continues to face several limitations that hinder its leading role. Despite its capabilities, it is not engaging wholeheartedly in regional integration and is hampered by its geographic location, water shortages, structural economic constraints, political problems, and fundamentalism issues.

KEYWORDS: *Uzbekistan, regional power, Central Asia, regional cooperation.*

Introduction

Uzbekistan gained its independence at the end of 1991 with the breakup of the Soviet Union. The landlocked country is a potential Central Asian regional power by virtue of its population, the largest in the region, its substantial energy and other resources, and its location at the heart of regional trade and transport networks.¹

¹ See: J. Nichol, *Uzbekistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests*, Congressional Research Service, 21 August, 2013.

The chief objective of Uzbekistan's foreign policy since the country gained its independence has been to preserve internal stability for its super-presidential, authoritarian regime. Preventing unwelcome intervention or pressure from outside actors has been instrumental to this goal, which has been recognized for some time.² Uzbekistan, one of the leading Central Asian states, has been having a significant influence on the geopolitical processes taking place in the South since the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. It is very conditioned by the central geographic location of this country in the region, its history, and the specific political course of the Uzbek administration. This administration is trying to adhere to a special way of state development.³

Home to more than half of the population of Central Asia, Uzbekistan seeks to play a leading role in regional affairs. Foreign policy is highly dependent on presidential decision-making. A new foreign policy concept was submitted to the legislature by President Karimov and quickly approved in early August 2012. It states that the main objectives of Uzbekistan's foreign policy are strengthening the state's independence and sovereignty; ensuring a role in international affairs; joining the ranks of the democratic and developed countries; and creating security, stability, and cooperative ties with neighboring states.⁴

The Central Asian countries are trying to play a key role in the region alongside foreign powers, which is shown by Uzbekistan's foreign policy activities and its regional ambitions. It has the potential to play the role of a regional power; different factors, such as historical and cultural traits, could help it to reach this objective. If we take a look at the past, we can see that Uzbekistan had a special role to play in the eyes of the Communist Party leaders, who saw that it had particular potential for implementing the Kremlin's orders in the region. Most of Tajikistan's leaders and army commanders were appointed by Uzbek elites.

Uzbekistan regarded its potential advantages for performing the role of a regional power to be its geographic location, sizable population, Uzbek communities in the region, military power, military and security cooperation with the U.S. in countering terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the fact that Samarkand and Bukhara were cultural and religious centers and Tashkent a religious center for Muslims in the Soviet era.

Regional Power

Regional powers (also called regional leaders, major regional powers or regional/local great powers) are considered powerful in their own regions, irrespective of whether they represent regional relations of enmity or amity.⁵ In international relations, a regional power is a state that has power within a geographic region. Regional powers shape the polarity of a regional area. Typically, regional powers have capabilities that are important in the region but do not have capabilities on a global scale. There are slightly different definitions of what makes a regional power. The European Consortium for Political Research defines a regional power as "a state belonging to a geographically defined region, dominating this region in economic and military terms, able to exer-

² See: D.R. Spechler, M.C. Spechler, "The Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan: Sources, Objectives and Outcomes: 1991-2009," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, July 2010, pp. 159-170.

³ See: A. Menteshashvili, *Security and Foreign Policy in Central Asian and Caucasian Republics*, Tbilisi, 1999.

⁴ See: "Uzbekistan to Adopt Concept of Foreign Policy Activities," *UzDaily News Service*, 31 July, 2012; "Legislative Chamber Approves Concept of Foreign Political Activities," *UzDaily News Service*, 1 August, 2012; J. Lillis, "Uzbekistan: Tashkent Says No to Foreign Military Bases and Blocs," *Choihona - Eurasianet*, 3 August, 2012.

⁵ See: M. Wright, "Power Politics," in: *Classical Theories of International Relations*, ed. by H. Bull, *et al.*, London, 1978, p. 63.

cise hegemonic influence in the region and considerable influence on a world scale, willing to make use of power resources and recognized or even accepted as the regional leader by its neighbors.”⁶ Regional powers are expected to play the role of regional peacemakers and policemen, as well as taking on the role of a moral authority. They are responsible for keeping their backyard neat and tidy, sometimes with a measure of support from the great powers. Furthermore, regional powers seem to be expected to support and promote acceptable rules and regulations for conducting regional policy and relations.⁷

Regional Power Characteristics

A regional power is a country that

- (1) Is part of a region that is geographically, economically and political-ideologically delimited;
- (2) Has a significant influence on geopolitical delimitation and the political-ideological construction of the region;
- (3) Possesses the material (military, economic, and demographic), organizational (political), and ideological resources for regional power projection;
- (4) Is economically, politically, and culturally interconnected with the region;
- (5) Has truly great influence on regional affairs (activities and results);
- (6) Exerts this influence (and increasingly so) by means of regional governance structures;
- (7) Is integrated into interregional and global forums and institutions where it articulates not only its own interests, but also acts, at least rudimentarily, as a representative of regional interests⁸;
- (8) Is appreciated as a regional power by the other powers in the region and beyond, particularly by other regional powers;
- (9) Defines the regional security agenda to a high degree;
- (10) Claims to be a regional power (thinks of itself as one).⁹

The Main Principles, Objectives, and Vectors of Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy

31 September, 1991, the day Uzbekistan’s independence was officially declared, became the starting point of the country’s full-scale integration into the world community. After gaining its sov-

⁶ “A Maturing Regional Power?” available at [www.essex.ac.uk/news/2006/nr20060314.htm].

⁷ See: D. Flandes, “Conceptualising Regional Power in International Relations: Lessons from the South African Case,” June 2007, available at [www.giga-hamburg.de/workingpapers], p.10.

⁸ See: D. Nolte, *How to Compare Regional Powers: Analytical Concepts and Research Topics*, GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, Preliminary version Paper prepared for delivery at the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, Helsinki, 7-12 May, 2007.

⁹ See: D. Nolte, “Macht und Machthierarchien in den internationalen Beziehungen. Ein Analysekonzept für die Forschung über regionale Führungsmächte,” in: *GIGA Working Paper* No. 29, GIGA, Hamburg, 2006, p. 28, available at [www.giga-hamburg.de].

ereignty, Uzbekistan also gained the opportunity to independently conduct its foreign policy. It is based on the following general principles and objectives:

1. The priority of the country's national interests and regulations of international law, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, equal cooperation, and striving to resolve all disputes in a peaceful manner.
2. Uzbekistan does not consider any country its military or political adversary.
3. State military policy is based on the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Law on Defense, the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the obligations of Uzbekistan as a member of the U.N., OSCE, CIS, NATO's Partnership for Peace, and other international organizations.
4. In the Law on Defense of 1992 Uzbekistan's military doctrine is strictly defensive, with no territorial ambitions against any other state.
5. Uzbekistan's overall military doctrine does not permit strategic or tactical nuclear weapons, as well as chemical weapons in the inventory of the Uzbek armed forces.
6. Although its armed forces are small in comparison with international standards, Uzbekistan is rated as the strongest military power among the five newly independent Central Asian nations.
7. Particular emphasis is placed on preventive diplomacy, targeted first of all toward adjusting and preventing conflicts at the international or regional level.
8. At the same time, the experience of prevention and resolution of different types of military conflict both throughout the world and in the territory of CIS countries shows that peace efforts are more efficient when based on sufficient military power and support.¹⁰

The preventive diplomacy developed under the guidance of President Islam Karimov is a distinguishing feature of Uzbek diplomacy and aimed at timely prevention of the escalation of tension and elimination of conflicts. The Republic of Uzbekistan has made timely and repeated appeals to the world community to resolve the Afghan problem, fight terrorism, extremism, and drug aggression, and create a nuclear-weapons-free-zone in Central Asia.

The enhancement and development of relations with neighboring countries is one of Uzbekistan's most important foreign policy priorities. Further intensification of regional cooperation is a vitally important condition of peace, stability, and prosperity in Central Asia. Special attention is paid to constructive cooperation within the framework of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization.

By dynamically and gradually developing its relations with the countries of the West, Asia-Pacific, South-East and South Asia, Uzbekistan is aspiring to make these relations more substantial. Based upon the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1996) between Uzbekistan and the European Union, the country is intensifying a political dialog and trade relations with the EU.¹¹

After it declared its independence, Uzbekistan gained an opportunity to establish direct contacts with the Islamic countries of Asia and the Middle East, countries that are close to Uzbekistan spiritually, culturally, and traditionally. The development of political, economic, and cultural relations with

¹⁰ See: M. Pikulina, "Uzbekistan in the Mirror of Military Security: A Historical Preface to Current Events," Conflict Studies Research Centre, Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, November 1999.

¹¹ See: "Foreign policy of Uzbekistan," The Governmental portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan available at [www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2924.htm Uzbekistan].

these countries has a positive dynamics. Cooperation aimed at preserving regional and global peace and stability is one of the main priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy.¹²

Uzbekistan is pursuing a multivectoral foreign policy, in which disengagement from Russia is sought through:

- (1) Participating in different multilateral blocs;
- (2) Strengthening relations with the West¹³; and
- (3) Acquiring the position of a regional leader.¹⁴

In its proposals on ensuring national and regional security, Uzbekistan concentrates on the following vectors:

1. Strengthening national security, with the emphasis on building up and fortifying the national armed forces.
2. Strengthening the regional security system, with the emphasis on building trust with neighboring countries and coordinating defense activity in Central Asia on the basis of a Central Asian alliance (with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and on bilateral cooperation (with the other countries of the region and CIS, including Russia).
3. Strengthening collective security within the framework of the CIS with primary attention on efforts under the Collective Security Treaty.
4. Strengthening the security system on a Eurasian scale to ensure general tolerance of peace-keeping activity: strengthening relations with the OSCE and NATO.
5. Strengthening the global security system, with the emphasis on cooperation with the U.N.¹⁵

Uzbekistan and the Central Asian States

Tajikistan

The foreign policy of independent Uzbekistan within the borders of Central Asia has always shown a particularly high profile, the real threat to Uzbekistan's attempts to pursue a more assertive regional policy in the 1990s undoubtedly being Tajikistan.¹⁶ On 4 September, 1992, together with the Russian and Central Asian leaders, Karimov issued a warning that the conflict in Tajikistan endangered the security of the whole region. Uzbek fighters from Hissar and Kurgan Tube, as well as Kulob, were armed and trained in Uzbekistan. On 6 December, forces backed by Uzbek aircraft attacked the capital, and Rakhmonov was able to take up his post in Dushanbe 8 days later.¹⁷ It stands to

¹² See: Ibidem.

¹³ See: S. Akbarzadeh, *Uzbekistan and the United States: Authoritarianism, Islamism and Washington's Security Agenda*, Zed Books, London, 2005, pp. 65-67.

¹⁴ See: S. Horsman, "Uzbekistan's Involvement in the Tajik Civil War 1992-1997: Domestic Considerations," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 18 (1), 1999, pp. 44-45.

¹⁵ See: M. Pikulina, op. cit.

¹⁶ See: L. Ozzano, "Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy (1991-2001): A Decision-Making Analysis," *Working Papers Anno dipartimnto di studi political*, Torino, Italy, No. 4, 2004.

¹⁷ See: B.H. Rubin, "Tajikistan: From Soviet Republic to Russian-Uzbek Protectorate," in: Symposium "The International Relations of Central Asia," in: *Central Asia and the World: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan*, New York, 1994.

reason that Tashkent began supporting all the groups fighting against the regime: in the following months, relations between the two neighbors dramatically deteriorated, and Rakhmonov accused Uzbekistan of supporting the Uzbek mercenaries now fighting with the opposition,¹⁸ and even of complicity in the assassination attempt against Rakhmonov of April 1997 during his visit to Khujand.¹⁹ Tashkent was also allegedly implicated in several attempts to carry out an armed rebellion in the north of the country, which was successfully countered by Russian troops.²⁰ Tajikistan accused Uzbekistan of supporting the separatists. Tajikistan feared that ethnic Uzbeks, who represent 25% of the population of Tajikistan, could seek autonomy. Uzbekistan accused Tajikistan of harboring Uzbek and Tajik terrorists intent on overthrowing the Uzbek government.²¹ Tajikistan is highly dependent on Uzbekistan for its imports. In 2010, Uzbekistan held up railway cars for long periods at the border in order to impede dam construction work and quite possibly also to cause other shortages, thus putting pressure on the Tajik government.²² Uzbekistan began to restrict railway and road transport to and from Tajikistan in February 2010, perhaps to dissuade Tajikistan from building a dam that might limit water flow to Uzbekistan.²³

Afghanistan

When Central Asia gained its independence in 1991, the three southern republics bordering on Afghanistan had to draw up a foreign policy toward their turbulent neighbor that consisted mainly of preventing an escalation of its widespread conflict. At that time, Karimov, according to most scholars, decided to rely on the Uzbek faction of Afghanistan (led by warlord and former army general during the Soviet war in Afghanistan Dostum) to create a buffer zone of stability protecting its southern region from further Islamic influence.²⁴ For this purpose, Tashkent allegedly began providing Dostum with funds and arms (some commentators even talk about Karimov's dream of a so-called Greater Uzbekistan that would absorb Dostum's provinces).²⁵ For several years, Karimov's strategy worked well, and even after the rise of the Taliban Dostum continued to control the six northern Provinces of Afghanistan, while the Uzbek leader unsuccessfully tried to consolidate a wide anti-Taliban coalition involving Russia and Central Asia after 1994.²⁶ Recent trends in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, especially toward Afghanistan, reveal a strategic uncertainty in its own right due to Uzbekistan's recent controversial moves on the international arena. In turn, this perplexity reflects the ambiguity of the political trends throughout the entire region. Uzbekistan's foreign policy posture toward Afghanistan appears ambivalent.²⁷

¹⁸ See: J. Anderson, *The International Politics of Central Asia*, Manchester University Press, Manchester/New York, 1997, p. 183.

¹⁹ See: A. Bohr, "Uzbekistan: Politics and Foreign Policy," *Central Asian and Caucasian Prospects*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1998, p. 52.

²⁰ See: *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²¹ For more on Uzbek-Tajik water issues, see e.g.: "Uzbekistan vs Tajikistan: Competition over Water Resources Intensifying," *Eurasianet*, 8 December, 2010.

²² See: "Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Agree on Border Cooperation," RFE/RL, 4 March, 2009.

²³ See: J. Nichol, *op. cit.*

²⁴ See: A. Bohr, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

²⁵ See: G. Capisani, *The Handbook of Central Asia*, Tauris, London/New York, 2000, p. 97.

²⁶ See: A. Rashid, *Talebani. Islam, petrolio e il Grande scontro in Asia centrale*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2001, p. 184.

²⁷ See: F. Tolipov, "Strategic Uncertainty in Uzbekistan's Afghanistan Policy," *CACI Analyst*, 22 July, 2011, available at [www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5583].

Kazakhstan

Uzbekistan's relations with Kazakhstan have long been regarded as rivalry over regional leadership between Karimov and Kazakh president Nazarbaev.²⁸ Since Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan became independent in 1991, their governments have signed approximately one hundred bilateral agreements. The most important include the Strategy for Economic Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for 2007-2016 and the Program of the Economic Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for 1998-2005. The two countries' interests seem to overlap most on issues of national security, particularly on countering threats from Muslim extremists. In March 2006, the Kazakh authorities allowed one of Karimov's fiercest domestic opponents, dissident Imam Obidkhon Qori Nazarov, to leave Kazakhstan for asylum in Europe a few days before Nazarbaev visited Uzbekistan rather than accede to Uzbekistan's extradition requests.²⁹ At a news conference on 9 September, 2002, the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan announced that they had resolved their differences regarding the Kazakh-Uzbek border and that they had no disputed issues left. President Nazarbaev even suggested that in the future, in light of the existing political and military blocs, Kazakhs and Uzbeks may have to unite into one country. There has been no official Uzbek response to this egregious suggestion, which should probably be considered an expression of friendship and common interest. The first step in the direction of closer cooperation might be better synchronization of the two economies.³⁰ Aware of the opportunities presented by Kazakhstan's booming economy, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan signed a new cooperation strategy in July 2007, intended to last ten years. Kazakh Prime Minister Karim Masimov called his southern neighbor a "strategic partner." Bilateral trade volumes have increased rapidly.³¹

Kyrgyzstan

Uzbekistan's relations with Kyrgyzstan have been problematic. One issue is a piece of borderland over which Uzbekistan gained usage rights under Soviet rule and which has not been restored to Kyrgyz sovereignty.³² Despite the potential for conflict over resources or territory,³³ relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan throughout the 1990s have remained essentially peaceful.³⁴ The triggering factors have been the intensification of the threat posed by Islamist militants to the ruling regime in Uzbekistan, which dramatically manifested itself in the Tashkent bombings on 16 February, 1999 and in the incursions of Islamist militants—belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—through Kyrgyzstan territory into Uzbekistan in the summer of 1999 and 2000.³⁵ Islamic fundamentalists who entered the country from Kyrgyzstan were blamed for the bombings in Tashkent in 1999.

²⁸ See: Uzbekistan page, available at [www.ncsj.org/Uzbekistan.shtml].

²⁹ See: R. Weitz, "Karimov-Nazarbayev Rivalry Pervades Bilateral Summit," *CACI Analyst*, 14 May, 2008, available at [www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4856].

³⁰ See: H. Plater-Zyberk, *Uzbekistan: Old Threats & New Allies*, Conflict Studies Research Center, Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, January 2003.

³¹ See: D.R. Spechler, M.C. Spechler, op. cit.

³² See: N. Megoran, "Bad Neighbors, Bad Fences," *Asia Times*, 15 March, 2000, available at [<http://www.atimes.com/casia/BC15Ag01.html>].

³³ See: *Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential*, Crisis Group, Report 33, 4 April, 2002.

³⁴ See: N. Megoran, *The Borders of Eternal Friendship? The Politics and Pain of Nationalism and Identity along the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Fergana Valley Boundary 1999-2000*, Cambridge, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2002.

³⁵ See: V.V. Naumkin, *Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*, Berkeley Program in Post-Soviet Studies, Spring, 2003.

This led Uzbekistan to implement more restrictive border-crossing measures and to plant antipersonnel landmines in border regions. Another source of tension was Kyrgyzstan's refusal to repatriate hundreds of Uzbeks who had fled across the border after the Andijan Massacre in 2005.³⁶ In October 1999, the Uzbeks criticized the Kyrgyz for not making sufficiently dynamic attempts to destroy the Islamic militants in their territory.³⁷ Relations between Tashkent and Bishkek are improving, but in October 2002 Islam Karimov, speaking about security in the region, suggested that some states were still only talking about terrorism and "flirt too long with terrorism."³⁸

On 17 May, 2005, Karimov asserted that the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan had facilitated the flow of arms into Uzbekistan for terrorism and accused Kyrgyzstan of harboring the fleeing "terrorists."³⁹ The Kyrgyz prime minister rejected claims by Karimov in 2005 that Kyrgyzstan had provided training facilities and other support for the Andijan militants. The conflict between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 further strained relations between the two countries. Up to 100,000 ethnic Uzbeks fled the fighting in southern Kyrgyzstan to take up residence in refugee camps in Uzbekistan.⁴⁰ One year later, the clash between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz was still subject to different allegations and interpretations. It was a highly dramatic lesson for the so-called newly independent states of Central Asia, especially Kyrgyzstan and neighboring Uzbekistan. During the clash, the question of Uzbekistan's interference or non-interference in order to save the Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan was crucial for the further development of the conflict and its outcome.⁴¹

Turkmenistan

Relations between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have at times been far from friendly and tension-free since the countries gained their independence in 1991. Various factors have contributed to this situation, including border disputes, a major source of tension in the bilateral relations of all the Central Asian countries. Certain factors have worsened Turkmenistan's ties with Uzbekistan. Like just about all the other Central Asians, the Turkmen have been concerned about Uzbekistan's efforts to establish itself as the dominant power in Central Asia. However, this general concern became a specific fear in November 2002 as a result of the unsuccessful assassination attempt on President Niyazov, which the Turkmen government interpreted as part of a coup attempt.⁴² Relations between Turkmenistan, a state that has minimized contact with the outside world, and Uzbekistan have been tense, each country has ethnic minorities owing to the way the Soviets drew the boundaries. Both the Uzbek minority in Turkmenistan and the Turkmen minority in Uzbekistan have experienced discrimination in contexts of economic decline.⁴³ Since 2004, relations between the two countries have improved marginally. The President of Turkmenistan paid a visit to Uzbekistan in 2004. In October

³⁶ See: O. Olikar, "Why America Shouldn't Sever Ties with Uzbekistan," RAND, 6 September, 2005, available at [<http://www.rand.org/commentary/090605BS.html>].

³⁷ See: H. Plater-Zyberk, op. cit.

³⁸ See: Ibidem.

³⁹ See: The White House, *White House Briefing*, May 13, 2005; The State Department, *Daily Press Briefing*, May 18, 20, 24, and 26, 2005; The White House, *President's Press Conference*, 31 May, 2005.

⁴⁰ See: *Opening Statement of Assistant Secretary Schwartz*, U.S. Department of State, 29 June, 2010 (see also: "Tashkent's Response to Kyrgyz Crisis Boosts Karimov's Image," *Eurasianet*, 15 July, 2010).

⁴¹ See: F. Tolipov, "Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Relations after June 2010 Imply a Continued Lack of Regionalism," *CACI Analyst*, 3 August, 2011, available at [www.cacianalyst.org].

⁴² See: H. Peimani, *Turkmenistan Reconsiders Relations with Uzbekistan*, Johns Hopkins University, Central Asia Caucasus Institute, 4 June, 2003, available at [www.cacianalyst.org].

⁴³ See: Ibidem.

2007, President Karimov paid a state visit to Turkmenistan, now under new leadership, sparking hopes for improved bilateral relations.⁴⁴

Uzbekistan's Obstacles with Respect to the Regional Power Project

Human Rights

The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Art 13) asserts: "Democracy in the Republic of Uzbekistan shall rest on the principles common to all mankind, according to which the ultimate value is the human being, his life, freedom, honor, dignity and other inalienable rights." However, Uzbekistan has controlled press and electronic media. Even some Internet sites, such as those based in Russia, are blocked. Several well-known international news organizations and human rights watchers have been ordered to leave on flimsy justifications when it suited overall policy.⁴⁵

In May 2005, the repression of the civil unrest in the city of Andijan (eastern Uzbekistan) resulted in an international outcry. The U.S. government criticized with increasing vehemence the Karimov regime's conduct and demanded an independent investigation of the events.⁴⁶ Dozens of civilians were reportedly killed or wounded during this crackdown. Many of the deaths occurred after Uzbek troops fired on demonstrators on the main square, according to international reporters on the scene and other credible observers.⁴⁷ According to the State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009, the Uzbek government continued to commit serious human rights abuses. Human rights problems included arbitrary arrest and detention; denial of due process and fair trial; restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association; governmental control of civil society activity; and forced labor in cotton harvesting. Torture and abuse were common in prisons and detention facilities. There were allegations that some persons had died from torture while detained or imprisoned.⁴⁸ Uzbekistan is not a democracy and does not have a free press. Several political parties have been formed with government approval but have yet to show interest in advocating alternatives to government policy. The police force and the intelligence service use torture as a routine investigation technique.⁴⁹

The Political System

Opposition parties have been denied registration, their members face harassment and sometimes arrest, and there is increasing pressure on NGOs and civil society in general. Freedom of expression

⁴⁴ See: B. Pannier, "Uzbekistan: President Makes Landmark Visit to Turkmenistan," *RFE/RL*, 18 October, 2007, available at [<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/10/a3c5c120-764e-4c37-811f-75f56e39c3b3.html>].

⁴⁵ See: D.R. Spechler, M.C. Spechler op. cit.

⁴⁶ See: S. Akbarzadeh, "Uzbekistan and the United States: Friends or Foes?," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14 (1), 2007, pp. 113-114.

⁴⁷ See: *Bullets Were Falling Like Rain*, Human Rights Watch, FBIS, 14 May, Doc. No. CEP-27134; 18 May, Doc. No. CEP-27011; and 27 May, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-115; June 2005; Xinhua News Agency, 28 May, 2005.

⁴⁸ See: *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009*, U.S. Department of State, 11 March, 2010, available at [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136096.htm].

⁴⁹ See: U.S. Department of State Background Note, March 2007, Infoplease Country Profile: Uzbekistan.

remains extremely limited.⁵⁰ Power is primarily concentrated in the hands of executives.⁵¹ President Karimov's rule became increasingly authoritarian, especially after the adoption of a new Constitution, which extended the powers of the President on 8 December, 1992.⁵² President Karimov's complete domination of Uzbek political life could produce a devastating political and social vacuum after his departure.⁵³ Between 1989 and the outbreak of the civil war in Tajikistan in May 1992, Islam Karimov endured only a small measure of democratization and allowed quite a few political opposition movements and independent religious groups to function overtly.⁵⁴ Some of the articles of the new Constitution gave excessive powers to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan⁵⁵

Fundamentalism & Terrorism

Islam as a political force and democratic element of society constituted a threat to Uzbekistan's post-Soviet elite unwilling to lose its privileged position. Aiming at eradication of opposition of any kind, religious or secular, the government actively used anti-Islamic fundamentalism and anti-opposition propaganda, accusing them of attempting to overthrow the legitimate government. In the late 1980s, alternative movements challenged the Communist party's (C.P.S.U.) power in the Soviet Union, including Central Asia.⁵⁶ The emergence of new challengers to the undisputed power of the centralized Communist party instigated a negative reaction from the Uzbek government headed by Islam Karimov, the then First Secretary of the C.C. C.P.S.U.⁵⁷ Internally, Karimov's regime was later systematically challenged by such organizations as the Islamic Revival Party of Uzbekistan (IRP), the IMU, and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).⁵⁸ The IMU was the only organization that took a military pan-Islamic approach to its endeavor to topple Islam Karimov's regime. The IMU was created in 1996 by Tahir Yuldosh, who served as the movement's political leader, and Juma Namangani, who was the IMU's military commander. The year it was founded, the IMU received critical support and training from the Taliban. It also had close links with Osama bin Laden's Arab Brigade and was financed by Osama bin Laden.⁵⁹ All forms of religious fanaticism are seen as a security threat for Central Asia. Uzbekistan is extremely wary of fundamentalist-sponsored terrorism, in any form, and is constantly on the lookout for the spread of radical politicized Islam.⁶⁰ Islamic radicalism, perceived as the main threat to the existing order, represents the main influence on Uzbekistan's foreign policy decisions.⁶¹

⁵⁰ See: *The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward for the International Community*, ICG Central Asia Report No. 76, Osh/Brussels, 11 March, 2004.

⁵¹ See: Ya. Masood, "Islamic 'Threat': The Case of Uzbekistan," available at [www.caei.com.ar].

⁵² See: N.J. Melvin, "Uzbekistan: Transition to Authoritarianism on the Silk Road," Harwood Academic, Amsterdam, 2000, p. 32.

⁵³ See: H. Plater-Zyberk, op. cit.

⁵⁴ See: *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Report on Uzbekistan*, May 2002.

⁵⁵ All the articles mentioned in this part are taken from the following web-site: [http://www.umid.uz/Main/Uzbekistan/Constitution/constitution].

⁵⁶ See: R. Yalcin, *The Rebirth of Uzbekistan. Politics, Economy and Society in the Post-Soviet Era*, Ithaca Press, 1st edition, 24 June, 2002, p. 165.

⁵⁷ See: "Uzbekistan Nations in Transit," 1998, available at [http://www.freedomhouse.org/nit98/uzbek.html].

⁵⁸ See: D.F. Eickelman, J. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, Princeton University Press, NJ, 1996, p. 139.

⁵⁹ See: R. Ahmed, "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's Incursion Assists the Taliban," available at [http://www.cacianalyst.org/sept-13/islamic_movement_of_uzbekistan.htm].

⁶⁰ See: "On Initiatives for Regulating the Afghan Conflict," *Narodnoye slovo*, 11 January, 1997.

⁶¹ See: L. Ozzano, op. cit., p. 90.

Being Landlocked & Shortage of Water

Landlocked countries are completely dependent on their transit neighbors' infrastructure to transport their goods to port. Landlocked countries depend on strong political relations with transit countries. If a landlocked country and its transit neighbor are in conflict, either military or diplomatic, the transit neighbor can easily block borders or adopt regulatory impediments to trade. Even when there is no direct conflict, landlocked countries are extremely vulnerable to the political vagaries of their neighbors.⁶²

The landlocked countries of the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia have been acutely affected by cross-border disputes. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the former republics were divided according to previous administrative boundaries. These boundaries have been the source of many disputes. Uzbekistan has been particularly affected by such challenges as it suffers from strained relations with four of its five neighbors: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan's other neighbor, Afghanistan, suffers from extremely weak infrastructure.⁶³

Uzbekistan's water shortage worsens each year because of the cotton fields and population growth. The shortages and waste of water should force all Central Asian states to adopt a program of water management.⁶⁴ Water issues have always been important in Uzbekistan—a landlocked state in the center of Central Asia. The problem of water shortages has been present in the country for a long time; however, in 2008 farmers estimate shortages as catastrophic. Currently, 90% of the republic's water resources are used for irrigation. Uzbekistan's famous and valuable monoculture—cotton—is also apparently bearing the consequences of massive water shortages; Uzbekistan's authorities are unable to solve the water shortage problems. The water issues in Uzbekistan could partially be solved if the state were willing to improve relations with neighboring upstream Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Perhaps the current situation with acute water shortages in Uzbekistan will prompt a reconsideration of the state's policies and initiate much-awaited cooperation.⁶⁵

Environmental Issues

Uzbekistan, contrary to its comparative advantage, became one of the largest cotton producers in the world.⁶⁶ The Aral Sea, in short, is considered to be the biggest environmental disaster of the 20th century. As the water receded, more than 33,000 sq km of former seabed has been left bare.⁶⁷

The Aral Sea, half of which is in Uzbekistan, has been severely desiccated by overuse of its tributary rivers. Enormous overdrafts on these rivers are caused by the extremely low efficiency of

⁶² See: M.L. Faye, J.W. McArthur, J.D. Sachs, Th. Snow, "The Challenges Facing Landlocked Developing Countries," *Journal of Human Development*, Vol. 5, No. 1, March 2004.

⁶³ See: N. Tavitan, "The Blockade of Armenia by Turkey: None of Your Business?" in: *Forum of Armenian Associations of Europe*, Geneva, 2001.

⁶⁴ See: H. Plater-Zyberk, op. cit.

⁶⁵ See: E. Akhmadov, "Uzbekistan Experiences Serious Water Shortage," *CACI Analyst*, 28 May, 2008, available at [www.cacianalyst.org].

⁶⁶ See: D. Lee, "Comparative Advantage," Foundation for Economic Education, 1999, available at [http://www.fee.org/Publications/the-Freeman/article.asp?aid=4962].

⁶⁷ See: R. Mnatsakanian, "Fertilizer Crop by Use in Uzbekistan: Chapter 2—Agro-Ecological Zones and Land Quality," U.N. FAO Corporate Document Registry, 2003, available at [http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/006/Y4711E/y4711e05.htm].

irrigation systems in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Without the moderating influence of the sea, winters became significantly colder and summers hotter.⁶⁸

The Economy

Soviet economic legacy has left Uzbekistan with a weakened infrastructure, over-dependency on cotton as the only crop worth exporting, and deteriorated environment. Following its independence in December 1991, the government sought to maintain a kind of command economy through subsidies and tight control on production and prices. This resulted in high inflation rates, which forced the government to introduce some reform policies in 1994.⁶⁹ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Uzbek economy had to face many problems in the following areas:

- (1) economic institutions,
- (2) privatization,
- (3) lack of infrastructure and the inability to modernize, repair and/or expand the necessary infrastructure,
- (4) insufficiently developed agricultural and industrial sectors and products,
- (5) inadequate foreign financial assistance, whether in the form of aid packages or direct investments,
- (6) increasing external debt;
- (7) high inflation rates after the independence from the Soviet Union; and
- (8) the shortage of trained human resources.⁷⁰

Since the country did not have the vital institutional infrastructure for successfully managing and resolving the first problem—weakness of economic institutions—the authorities declared the need to transfer to a liberal economy.⁷¹ Uzbekistan continues to suffer serious economic stagnation, unemployment is rising, and living standards are declining. While central Tashkent retains an air of relative prosperity, the reality for many in the capital, and even more so in the provinces, is growing poverty.⁷²

Drug Trafficking

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, newly independent states have born. “Along with the newly independent countries came new borders that had to be patrolled and new border guards who had to be trained. These new borders remained virtually transparent until new national customs services were created in 1993-1994. This was one of the reasons that international drug traffickers took a strong interest in the region.”

⁶⁸ See: *Library of Congress—Federal Research Division Country Profile: Uzbekistan*, February 2007, available at [www.eurasiacritic.com/articles/drug-trafficking-Uzbekistan].

⁶⁹ See: Sh. Akiner, “Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?” Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies, 1993, p. 34.

⁷⁰ See: H. Peimani, *Failed Transition, Bleak Future?: War and Instability in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Praeger, Westport, Conn., 2002, p. 27.

⁷¹ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 30-39.

⁷² See: *Ibidem*.

“The Government of Uzbekistan and independent analysts have argued that the most significant threats that Uzbekistan currently faces are related to complex linkages between terrorism, trafficking in drugs and firearms and persons, and corruption, in particular where the proceeds of transnational organized crime are used to fund terrorism.” After gaining its independence, “the Government of Uzbekistan has repeatedly emphasized the importance of international cooperation in the fight against drugs and transnational organized crime, and has made efforts to integrate the country in the system of international cooperation.”⁷³ Despite attempts to limit drug production in Afghanistan, the warlords there regard drug production and trafficking as their main source of income. Drug trafficking is not a new phenomenon in Uzbekistan, but the Uzbek border guards and law enforcement bodies will have to face this additional challenge brought about by the sudden positive changes in Afghanistan. A long-term antidrug war is the task the Central Asian law enforcement agencies and security services will have to be ready to conduct, irrespective of their other duties.⁷⁴

The IMU’s involvement in drug trafficking is yet another problematic issue in Central Asia. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the IMU had efficient control over the Afghanistan-Kyrgyzstan (Osh) drug route.

There are several other terrorist groups operating in Central Asia and particularly Uzbekistan, most of them are connected directly with drug trade in the region. Al-Qa’eda, probably the world’s most notorious terrorist organization, correlates with narcotics trafficking.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Uzbekistan is an emerging Central Asian regional power by virtue of its relatively large population, energy and other resources, and location in the heart of the region. This country occupies a key strategic position in Central Asia; Uzbekistan is a large country (about the size of France) and is strategically situated in the middle of the region, not only bordering on the other four Central Asian countries, but also on Afghanistan. Under Soviet rule, Moscow recognized Uzbekistan as a *primus inter pares* in the region. Uzbekistan was also the most represented of the five republics in the U.S.S.R.’s central institutions. All of these factors cooperated to provide the country with vital infrastructures and a political experience that proved essential to its success as an independent state. It can be said that in the problematic context of contemporary Central Asia, Uzbekistan is the only country with comparative advantages allowing it to perform a significant role at the international level too.

These factors make Uzbekistan a potential regional leader. Uzbekistan also has the only viable armed forces in the region capable of defending it and carrying out combat action in the region. The ability of the Uzbek leadership to play on the security interests of major powers like the U.S., Russia, and China and its claim to be a buffer against Islamic fundamentalism have also increased Uzbekistan’s image as independent force in regional affairs. However, despite its potential and favorable capabilities for playing an effective role in Central Asia, Uzbekistan faces many problems that are hampering its attempts to become a regional power. These obstacles include human rights violations and repression in the country, torture and prosecution of journalists, prohibited NGOs and political parties, political structural problems, such as Islam Karimov’s dictatorship, the role of some clans in the power process, the high level of corruption, the lack of party pluralism and civic engagement, and the economic limitations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Uzbek economy faces many

⁷³ M.Ya. Tüylüoğlu, “Drug Trafficking in Uzbekistan,” May 2010, available at [www.eurasiacritic.com/articles/drug-trafficking-uzbekistan].

⁷⁴ See: H. Plater-Zyberk, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ See: M.Ya. Tüylüoğlu, *op. cit.*

problems relating to privatization, its underdeveloped infrastructure, its inability to modernize, repair and/or expand the necessary infrastructure, its insufficiently developed agricultural and industrial sectors and production, the insufficient amount of foreign financial assistance, whether in the form of aid packages or direct investments, its increasing external debt, high inflation rates, shortage of trained human resources, etc. The country also has problems relating to its geographic location—it is a landlocked state with no access to the high seas. Water shortage is another significant problem, exacerbated by the fact that it is a downstream state requiring large amounts of water for irrigating its cotton plantations and for industry, as well as for meeting the needs of its growing population. The most important environmental issue in Central Asia is the Aral Sea and its dangerous consequences for the region, especially for Uzbekistan. Fundamentalism and the activities of terrorist organizations are also growing in Central Asia and Afghanistan. The increasing number of terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan by these terrorist organizations has led to the suppression and prosecution of all Islamic groups.
