

## ON UZBEKISTAN'S GRAND STRATEGY

Farkhad TOLIPOV

*Ph.D. (Political Science), Independent Researcher  
(Tashkent, Uzbekistan)*

### *Introduction*

After ten years of independence, the Republic of Uzbekistan has become a strategic partner of the United States, an unprecedented geopolitical event: for the first time in its history, Central Asia, which for centuries remained on the sidelines of world politics, has found itself in the limelight of the global and regional powers.

After twenty years of independent development, the Central Asian countries are still coping

with the fundamental task of formulating adequate foreign policy strategies.

This article analyzes the strategic interests of Uzbekistan and the constantly changing regional context; there is the opinion that the Republic of Uzbekistan holds prime responsibility for the regional situation. This issue calls for a detailed analysis—here I shall take a look at some of the elements of what is known as the state's Grand Strategy.

## What is a Grand Strategy?

By the 20th century, the term strategy, the meaning of which was initially limited to military matters, gained wider interpretation. Victory in a war is the product of a skilful combination of forces and assets applied at the best time and in the best place; a good strategy is a good combination of objective and subjective factors. When applied to a wider sphere of state activities, strategy implies integrating forces and assets into a single plan of political actions designed to achieve certain aims with due account of the suitable time, place, and conditions (environment), as well as potential advantages.

A so-called grand strategy (national security strategy), the highest level of state strategy, suggests that political decisions are taken at the top level and that all the means necessary for their realization are mobilized: military might, economic potential, commercial potential, technological base, intelligence resources, diplomatic instruments, ideological means, etc., in short, all the key spheres of state activities.<sup>1</sup>

Liddell Hart wrote that a grand strategy “should not only combine various instruments, but also regulate their use in order to avoid damage to the future state of peace—for its security and prosperity.”<sup>2</sup>

What fundamental instruments can Uzbekistan employ to create a Grand Strategy of its own? I have already written that we should adequately assess the strategic and military-political situation; identify the state’s vitally important interests; set goals; formulate tasks; and assess the forces and assets necessary for their realization.

A grand strategy calls for fundamental investigation of the issues enumerated above; in this article I shall limit myself to a concise analysis of some of them.

First of all, we should identify the vitally important strategic interests related to the nation’s *physical, cultural, and political survival*. They should be protected; otherwise the country might slide into chaos, unmanageable negative processes, political and economic disintegration, etc. This category primarily includes national security interests. To protect them, the state has to maintain a fairly high level of military might and mobilization preparedness, strengthen state interests, and boost the country’s economic potential.

Strategic interests can be described as vitally important in many respects, all of them have specifics of their own. And all of them, while being independently important, serve other types of national interests.

Here is an example. Cooperation between Uzbekistan and the United States promotes the republic’s economic growth, which means that this cooperation can be placed among Uzbekistan’s, as well as the United States’, vitally important national interests. It should be said that this cooperation could develop into a strategic partnership; its absence does not mean that vitally important interests remain unprotected. What is more, by realizing its vitally important interests, a nation might acquire advantages and move into a better position in the world community. This explains why *the nation’s future international status depends on whether it succeeds in realizing its strategic interests or not*. Strategic goals, either mid- or long-term, are invariably treated as a priority.

The list of strategic interests of Uzbekistan includes building highways and railways which will connect Central Asia with Europe, China, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, as well as laying oil and gas pipelines across these countries to bring Central Asian fuel to the world markets. When real-

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<sup>1</sup> See: J.J. Kohout III, *et al.*, “Alternative Grand Strategy Options for the United States,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 14, 1995, pp. 361-420.

<sup>2</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, Faber&Faber, London, 1967, p. 322.

ized, these and other projects will help to boost economic growth in the Central Asian countries, fortify stability and order in the macroregion, eliminate the threats to the states' national security, and move them into the best possible political and economic positions in the new world order taking shape in the 21st century.

The sphere of Uzbekistan's strategic interests (which complement vitally important interests or are important in their own right) includes strategic partnership with the United States, the leading countries of the European Union, Turkey, Russia, India, Japan, China, the Central Asian neighbors, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and others. Its active involvement in the U.N., OSCE, EU, NATO, CIS, and OIC is also important.

National and regional security, transport, electronic and pipeline infrastructure, investments and high technology, as well as the country's involvement in building a new world order, completely depend on the key international actors enumerated above.

*I have described strategic partnership as the highest level of interstate relations, cooperation within the framework of which,*

- *first, spreads to a fairly wide range of spheres (the economy, politics, the military sphere, culture, etc.);*
- *second, is geared toward the long-term perspective;*
- *third, serves the national security interests of all the sides; and,*
- *fourth, ensures unity, brings positions closer on the most consequential issues of world politics, and even correlates, to a certain extent, their foreign policy moves.*

Such cooperation speaks of the high level of mutual confidence and reliability of mutual relations.

## The Changing Regional Context

The Central Asian states' independence has transformed them into actors of international relations; this has generated geopolitical transformations in the region and paved the way toward new strategic relations.

From the systemic viewpoint, the changing regional context should be discussed as part of the budding new world order, which politicians and experts cannot reach a unanimous opinion about and are unlikely to reach in the future.

It seems that any model of the new world order based on the idea of an *N*-pole world will be vulnerable because it is *a priori* discussed within the framework of the power component of world politics, which is losing its clear outlines, while power per se is growing increasingly fuzzy.

For example, the unipolar model (America's global hegemony) has yet to offer the parameters of political existence its other components would be expected to live by; Zbigniew Brzezinski himself cannot call his country the world's last empire.<sup>3</sup> This means that domination of the United States can serve as the concept for a transition period, but not as the last stage of the "end of history" and the determinant of world order.

American might and American values can hardly be questioned, which cannot be said about American hegemony and the Pax Americana doctrine; this is a paradox, but not a dilemma. To estab-

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<sup>3</sup> See: Zb. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997.

lish a new world order, it is not enough for the world community to merely recognize America's global leadership; even by American standards this contradicts the ideas of pluralism.

A multipolar world order will probably create chaos. The poles formed by different civilizations and sociopolitical systems will inevitably compete to secure their goals (we observed this at close range during the bipolar stage of world history). As distinct from the unipolar world, the multipolar world will be turned upside down so to speak, since pluralism in this formula will be expressed by *N*, a "magical" figure.

Moreover, multipolarity is not *ipso facto* a sign of the democratic nature of international relations, no matter how hard the concept's supporters try to prove the opposite. It seems that the widely discussed *Pax Democratica* could serve as the best democratic formula of the new world order; at first glance, the idea that expanding democracy alone can determine the content and nature of the new world order looks unbeatable. Indeed, none of the world powers will object to this; the conception, however, stands on the quicksand of idealism, while the formula of the multipolar world is absolutely realistic.

Meanwhile, the idea of international democracy (easily extrapolated into the idea of regional democracy) is very important for the Central Asian countries. In this region, the national and regional democracies are mutually conditioned (the events of June 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, the local "isle of democracy," say as much).

The regional democracy conception may not only be integrating, it is also geopolitical: it is one of the most important prerequisites and a guarantee of conflict-free relations among the Central Asian countries, each pursuing a foreign policy strategy of its own.

America's presence in the region and its strategic partnership with Uzbekistan put the issue of the status of the political actors (shared and individual) on the agenda for all the Central Asian states. Against the background of the developing new world order and the changing regional context, America's presence has acquired unprecedented geopolitical importance.

This explains why *American-Uzbek partnership goes beyond its bilateral dimension to acquire, by implication, a regional dimension*. It can be regarded as an important impulse of regional integration.

The above suggests that the question of the changing regional context is closely connected with the prospects of regional integration. While the U.S.'s strategic presence in Central Asia reflects the ongoing systemic geopolitical transformation in the region, the five regional states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) are to transform it into a centripetal integration process, in which Uzbekistan will play a special role.

## Uzbekistan's Special Responsibility for Central Asia

The parameters of Uzbekistan's might, strategic importance, and political potential indicate that *objectively it is responsible for the entire region*. It should launch integration and become its leader, which does not mean that its regional neighbors should stay away from integration efforts. The centripetal regional policy of each of them is important in its own right. Special responsibility does not spell, and even rejects, outright domination, expansion, and hegemony (potentially conducive to irresponsibility of sorts).

It should be said that as soon as the country gained its independence, analysts and politicians unanimously accepted the balance of power conception as the guiding principle of the regional and

international strategy of Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian countries. This conception obviously contradicts the special responsibility idea, which offers not so much balancing as drawing the interested sides into a dual process:

- First, involving the Central Asian countries in common regional policies through their rejection of mutual balancing;
- Second, involving extra-regional powers in the region through their rejection of “zero-sum” geopolitical games.

Recently, the need the Central Asian states feel for regional balancing has been receiving a lot of coverage. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbors should learn how to play the game of “power balancing;” today, their maneuvers look more like vacillations than anything else.

Uzbekistan, as a former buffer state and target of geopolitical squabbles, is left with only one option: it must capitalize as best as it can on cooperation with each of its geopolitical rivals, while proving to them and demonstrating that this is the most rational strategy designed to bring reconciliation and draw the sides closer. In this case, the old political wisdom, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” should be forgotten. *Positive diversification is the most relevant option for Uzbekistan.*

After developing from a target of great power politics into an actor of international relations and geopolitics, Uzbekistan can choose the only possible and correct road leading toward reconciliation of the extra-regional rivals by drawing closer to each of them. This strategy calls for balancing; it has nothing to do with what is called multivectoral foreign policy.

Its policy should acquire a regional dimension and should be tied to Uzbekistan’s future strategic partnership with the United States.

The four major aims declared by the United States for Central Asia (stronger independence; regional stability and security; market and democratic reforms; regional cooperation) depend, to different degrees, on the regional context.

Uzbekistan must strive to use its strategic partnership with the U.S. for regional integration; in this case, it will acquire a democratic dimension at the national and regional level, that is, will be in harmony with the Pax Democratica idea.

In one of his books, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov points out the following: “This integration has always been and essentially remains a shared matter for all the peoples of the region... It is necessary to note that integration of the nations of Central Asia is not a dream or a project for the future: it is a reality that needs only organizational, legal, and political forms.”<sup>4</sup>

Any other Central Asian state in Uzbekistan’s place would have opted for a similar strategy, therefore Uzbekistan should not be suspected of hegemonic ambitions, missionary designs, or the intention of assuming inadequate leadership. Its true leadership rests on Uzbekistan’s responsibility for the state of affairs in Central Asia; it stems from the form of its involvement (or non-involvement) in regional developments.

## Elements of Uzbekistan’s Grand Strategy

What was written above about the meaning of strategic partnership and the nature of the changing regional context, as well as the conception of Uzbekistan’s special responsibility, suggests the following elements of its grand strategy:

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<sup>4</sup> I. Karimov, *Uzbekistan at the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century. Challenges to Stability and Progress*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1998, p. 192.

1. *Choice of strategic partners.* The developments which ended in strategic partnership were promoted by both sides: the initiative belonged to Uzbekistan and the countries that today are regarded as the republic's strategic partners. The sides managed to push aside the earlier coldness, assess the prospects and reliability, and become friends who trust each other.

A set of agreements and numerous facts testify to the strategic nature of Uzbekistan's relations with the United States, European Union, Russia, and Japan.

In an interview with RIA Novosti, the then U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan Joseph A. Presel said: "The United States regards Uzbekistan as the most important Central Asian country, which means that we want to develop our cooperation with it in all spheres: economic, political, and military."<sup>5</sup>

Indian analyst Prof. Phunchok Stobdan agrees, on the whole, with the above. "After having de-capacitated Kazakhstan's military potentials, the U.S. is now keen to see Uzbekistan as the only candidate for a regional anchor. In fact, Uzbekistan is likely to outpace Pakistan as the key strategic partner of the U.S."<sup>6</sup>

In *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, likewise, says that the United States was very much aware of Uzbekistan's strategic importance.

Strategically, partnership with Russia is highly important for practically all the post-Soviet states: to borrow an expression from British geographer Mackinder, Russia is a Heartland. Its fabulous natural riches and the vast territory will remain a magnet for close and distant powers. It will remain a vast market for its Near Abroad in particular.

On the other hand, Central Asia's strategic importance for Russia (Central Asia being an inalienable part of the Heartland) can hardly be overestimated. According to former Prime Minister of Russia Victor Chernomyrdin, "the Near Abroad is our market and we have no other. If we push our partners away we will merely worsen Russia's position. The West does not need us; it keeps its markets closed for us."<sup>7</sup>

Uzbekistan needs strategic partnership with Turkey.

- First, all the Central Asian states (with the exception of Tajikistan) have common ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic roots with this country.
- Second, as a strategic partner of the United States, Turkey complements the strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and America; because of its geographic advantages and international weight, Turkey could help Uzbekistan to integrate into the world community.

Uzbekistan and Turkey are secular states that are very concerned about the rising wave of Islamic fundamentalism.

In the future, Uzbekistan might become a strategic partner of Japan, India, etc. Its strategic cooperation with the European Union was registered in the On Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in June 1996, under which the sides cooperate in the defense sphere, security, protection of intellectual property, JVs, free movement of investments, transport, energy, services, science, environmental protection, etc. The scope of this cooperation is best illustrated by the large-scale TRACECA international project: construction of highways and railways to connect Central Asia with Europe via the Caucasus, as well as transportation of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan via Uzbekistan.

<sup>5</sup> Interview of J.A. Presel to RIA Novosti on 25 June, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> P. Stobdan, "Central Asia in Geopolitical Transition," available at [<http://www.idsa-india.org/an-apr8-8.html>].

<sup>7</sup> *Segodnia*, 25 November, 1993.

The strategic nature of the relations among the Central Asian countries is expedient and important in its own right: these relations are determined, among other things, by their common history, which makes them natural allies and partners.

There was good reason for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (the founders of Central Asian single economic expanse) signing a trilateral agreement on Eternal Friendship in January 1997. A four-sided Treaty on Concerted Actions in Combating Terrorism, Political and Religious Extremism, Transnational Organized Crime and Other Threats to the Stability and Security of the Signatory Parties was signed in April 2000 in Tashkent within the CAEC.

The present level of the relations among the Central Asian countries can hardly be described as “strategic partnership” because the prospects of regional development are either underestimated or ignored and because some of the integration structures stopped functioning (CACO in particular), which is a mistake. The regional dimension is a missing link of the grand strategy of the Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan.

2. *Regional cooperation.* Central Asia is Uzbekistan’s home region; I have already written that the Central Asian countries can be described as strategic partners on the strength of their common past. Turkistan, in the past a single expanse, or rather ecumene, divided into five Soviet republics, started moving toward re-unification after 1991. Contrary to what was said in the West and in Russia about inevitable conflicts among the states (ethnic, territorial, etc.), the “Central Asians” (to borrow a tag from the West) moved toward regional integration when the Soviet Union left the stage and the CIS appeared. So far, this integration can be described as Uzbekistan’s most significant foreign policy achievement of the 1990s. It was a consistent (stage-by-stage) process with real and specific content at each of the stages.<sup>8</sup>

It should be said in all justice that a large number of analysts and politicians are convinced that Uzbekistan needs regional integration more than its neighbors, since this will lead to its domination in the region (the public, on the whole, tends to agree with this).

A more profound analysis refutes this opinion as erroneous.

- First, domination requires the nation’s highest social and economic development level (which the Soviet successor-states have not yet achieved and will not achieve in the near future), otherwise all attempts at hegemony will cause painful responses and opposition from its neighbors which have not yet experienced the bitter-sweet taste of sovereignty and independence to the full.
- Second, domination requires considerable economic, military, moral-psychological, and political means; this is a burden which Uzbekistan does not need: it is powerful enough, respected enough, and is developing well enough as it is.
- Third, its neighbors, which Uzbekistan allegedly wants to dominate, are U.N. members and equal entities of international law with all the legal and political instruments at their disposal to prevent “unfair” status-quo in the region. In fact, integration is a political, legal, economic, and cultural process which defies the use of force. If any of the integrated countries betrays a bias toward domination, all the other members are free to leave to end integration. Uzbekistan should demonstrate goodwill and devotion to full-scale and equal integration for the sake of the people, and not for the sake of states and governments or the integration idea per se. This is its special responsibility.

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<sup>8</sup> F. Tolipov, “Regional Integration in Central Asia: Theory and Practice,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (14), 2002.

On 28 August, 1995, speaking in Bishkek at the fourth summit of the Turkic-speaking states, President of Uzbekistan Karimov said: "I would like to stress in this connection that the need to coordinate our countries' foreign policy moves is overripe. We should get rid of the discord, the objectionable competition of initiatives, and the never-ending organizational pluralism... We should realize, and this is important, that without integration no progress and no better life for the Central Asian nations are possible."<sup>9</sup>

3. *Positive diversification.* Those analysts and politicians who have developed the habit of thinking in dichotomies invariably put the allies of the United States and Russia on opposite sides of the barrier. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan may play the role of a lightning-rod, so to speak, in a possible confrontation Samuel Huntington described as "the clash of civilizations." After gaining its independence, Uzbekistan distanced itself from Russia to develop closer relations with the United States, which was interpreted by many as Tashkent's pro-American choice. This is wrong for the following reasons:
- First, neither Uzbekistan nor the other Soviet successor-states can move away from Russia for geographical reasons. The Central Asian countries and Russia (undoubtedly a powerful state) are bound together by common history and geopolitical ties. This means that Uzbekistan's strategic drawing closer to the United States does not move it away from Russia.
  - Second, we should never forget that, in the post-Cold War period, relations between Russia and the United States have changed radically; their strategic cooperation in the epoch of the new world order development is obvious. They are no longer two different "alternatives."
  - Finally, third, it would be strategically wrong to ignore the capabilities offered by cooperation between Uzbekistan and the United States in the sphere of regional security, the latest technologies, science, information technology, modernization, and democratization. Underestimation of these capabilities would cause a barrage of criticism from the local expert and political community and quiet irony of their Russian colleagues.

*It is becoming increasingly clear that strategic partnership with one of the two powers at the expense of or to the detriment of the other does not suit the interests of either Uzbekistan, or the United States, or Russia.* This is positive diversification as opposed to negative diversification based on the old balance of power conception. This issue should be explored further while I shall limit myself to the gains the United States and the Russian Federation are acquiring from their strategic partnership with Uzbekistan.

In the Big Game conception ("either the U.S. or Russia") as applied to Central Asia, we must recognize that Uzbekistan, and its regional neighbors for that matter, will have to choose between one of two alternatives—an impossible choice even within the much criticized balance of power approach.

Neither America nor Russia can be removed from the Central Asian geopolitical landscape because this will perpetuate their struggle over the region. The geopolitical formula "*the U.S. and Russia*" will hardly be correct if *the Central Asian countries* and the other regional powers are excluded. This is especially important for Uzbekistan, which demonstrates consistence and resoluteness when defending its sovereignty.

Wittingly or unwittingly, many analysts and politicians ignore the Central Asian states as independent participants in the new Big Game, which keeps them within the dichotomy of their approach to geopolitics *inside* the region and *in relation to* the region.

There are at least four factors which force the Central Asian newly independent states to diversify their strategic goals (as compared with strictly pro-Russian orientation):

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<sup>9</sup> "Vystuplenie Prezidenta Uzbekistana I. Karimova na vstreche glav turkoiazychnykh gosudarstv," *Narodnoe slovo*, 28 August, 1995.



- (1) independence;
- (2) the large number of countries involved in the Big Game and their different geopolitical types;
- (3) the fact that national and regional security of the Central Asian states is their absolute requirement, which is indivisible because of their mutual dependence;
- (4) large-scale tasks of modernization and sustainable development.

Diversification of the Central Asian countries' foreign policy strategies is inevitable; therefore, the region can no longer be interpreted through the prism of Russian-American rivalry. The above definition of strategic partnership means that, within a linear approach, strategic rapprochement with one state spells strategic distancing from another.

Uzbekistan's vital interests call for a non-linear approach since it alone is applicable to the problem of ensuring national and regional security.

The idea of indivisible security is becoming increasingly popular in the contemporary world; it is doubly important for Central Asia swept by in-depth geopolitical transformations. Together with South Asia it forms, if not a single, then at least two adjacent security complexes (as formulated by Barry Buzan).<sup>10</sup> This transformation might create a new geopolitical status for the macro-region of Central Asia and South Asia; in the emerging world order it will stop being a geopolitical buffer that keeps the global powers fighting for wider spheres of exclusive domination apart. *For this reason, at least, America and Russia should move away from the "mutual exclusion" policy to strategic cooperation in Central Asia.*

During the official visit of the then U.S. President George W. Bush to Moscow in May 2002, the first signs of this new approach appeared in the Joint Statement on Counterterrorist Cooperation, which said in part: "Believing that the sovereignty, long-term stability, prosperity and further democratic development of states of Central Asia serves the strategic interests of the United States and Russia, we pledge transparency and cooperation in our relations with the states of Central Asia. An important step for ensuring their security is to eradicate terrorist activities in Afghanistan once and for all and to assist in the prevention of their recurring."<sup>11</sup>

These were promising changes in the two great powers' policy, but the Central Asians failed to reciprocate with steps that completely fit the new geopolitical reality.

Here it is appropriate to describe Uzbekistan's major foreign policy problems.

- First, while pursuing its "pendulum" policy (which cannot be described as balancing), Uzbekistan is confirming the stereotype of U.S.-Russia regional rivalry.
- Second, it is contributing to *Central Asia's de-regionalization*: it was one of the countries that liquidated the CACO; today, its relations with its neighbors are much worse than before under pressure of the aggravated water, border, ethnic, and other problems.

The country should address these two fundamental problems of its foreign policy as part of its Grand Strategy.

## *Conclusion*

Today, Uzbekistan's strategy can hardly be described as *Si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you would have peace, be ready for war). It is not quite correct to say that peace is the absence of war. Peace should

<sup>10</sup> See: B. Buzan, *People, States and Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Lynne Rienner Publisher, Boulder, Colorado, 1991, p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> [<https://hsdl.org/?view&doc=77163&coll=limited>].

not be described as a period when states are readying for war. It should be a permanent condition and the international community's highest and universal value. "If you would have peace, build it up and strengthen it" is a much more adequate formula of international relations. Let me repeat here what I have already written: a grand strategy "should not only combine various instruments, but also regulate their use in order to avoid damage to the future state of peace—for its security and prosperity."

We should recognize that political idealism and political realism are two different things. The best of grand strategies might have what Clausewitz called *friction*: war's intrinsically dangerous nature, physical efforts, and ambiguous information.

The above suggests the following questions: What are Uzbekistan's limitations? What decisions are outside its scope? Which decisions did it avoid because of wrong strategic moves?

These questions are natural; they stem from the fact that, as distinct from the global powers, Uzbekistan is not in a position to pass decisions able to affect strategic stability in the world. At the same time, it, as well as many other countries, is affected by the decisions, including those related to strategic stability, made by the global powers.

On the other hand, all sorts of strategic miscalculations, underestimations, and friction undermine the best of grand strategies. For example, Uzbekistan could have created a better regional strategy based on the conception of its special responsibility and attaching greater priority to the problems of integration and the collective security system in Central Asia.

It seems that strategic partnership with the United States, which is now being revived, is one of the strongest impulses in this direction. In the final analysis, the Declaration on Strategic Partnership the United States and Uzbekistan signed in 2002 will be a litmus paper of sorts that will bring out the truth about the global powers' attitude to the region, the nature of the new Central Asian context, and its correspondence to the Pax Democratica conception.