

Russian vector in foreign policy of Uzbekistan during the presidency of Sh. Mirziyoyev

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Abstract

In this paper, author identifies the significance of Russian vector in Uzbekistan's foreign policy during the reign of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (since 2016). Neoclassical realism was the theoretical basis of the study within which foreign policy strategy of the state is explained primarily by the influence of systemic variables and secondly by "intervening" (state level) variables. Paper consists of several parts. The introduction outlines features of Uzbekistan's geopolitical position and research goal. The following parts examine political, economic and military cooperation between Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation. Single section of the paper is devoted to the issue of Uzbekistan's possible entry into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). As result of the study, author comes to several conclusions. First conclusion is that in period from 2016 to 2021 the trade and economic cooperation with Russia was intensified. The most vivid illustration of rapprochement process between the two states is the agreement on joint construction of nuclear power plant in the territory of Uzbekistan. At the same time, there is an increase in trade with China, which has been the largest trading partner of Tashkent since 2015. This allows us to conclude that Uzbekistan's foreign economic strategy is to balance between Russia and China. Second conclusion is that in recent years, Tashkent has expanded trade relations with the EAEU. In 2019, a broad discussion has begun in the state regarding accession to the EAEU. Author considers that in the presence of certain disadvantages, membership in this Union would be useful for Uzbekistan, since it will help to avoid economic dependence on China. Third conclusion is that in 2016-2021, military cooperation between Tashkent and Moscow is intensifying: the import of Russian military equipment is increasing, joint military exercises are being held (after a twelve-year break). At the same time, Uzbekistan is trying to develop security cooperation with the United States and China, thus balancing between Moscow, Beijing and Washington.

Keywords: foreign policy, Uzbekistan, Sh. Mirziyoyev, Russia, China, military cooperation, Eurasian Economic Union.

Introduction

Shavkat Mirziyoyev became leader of Uzbekistan after reign of President Islam Karimov (1991-2016) which died on September 2, 2016. For several months Sh. Mirziyoyev was the interim president and in December, 2016 he was elected as president of Uzbekistan. Research hypothesis: China's growing influence in Central Asia could upset the balance of power in the region. In this regard, expanding political, economic and military cooperation with Russia will become one of the priority issues of Mirziyoyev's foreign policy. The aim of this research is to determine the importance of Russia in Uzbekistan's foreign policy in 2016-2021. In this paper author used neoclassical realism (NcR), which involves the use of three groups of variables: independent variables (relative power of a state; clarity of signals and

information presented by international system to states; the nature of state's strategic environment), domestic or "intervening" variables (perceptions of state leaders, country's strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions) and dependent variables (foreign policy of a state)[1]. Gideon Rose emphasizes that relative material power is the most important variable as it "establishes the basic parameters of a country's foreign policy[2]. Randall Schweller points out that "intervening" variables act like transmission belt. According to the NcR theory, "systemic pressures are filtered through domestic variables to produce foreign policy behaviors[3].

Uzbekistan is an important state in the Central Asia region with area of 447,400 km² and population over 34 million. Approximately 45.6% of Central Asia's population (74.9 million) lives in Uzbekistan. In geostrategic terms, Uzbekistan is located between two great powers – the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. The advantages of Uzbekistan are: the common border with all the countries of Central Asia; substantial reserves of natural gas, uranium, gold and copper; strong position in global cotton production; a large proportion of young people in the country's population. Tashkent also possesses the largest army in the region. The following may be considered as disadvantages of the state: lack of territorial access to the sea; high unemployment; common border with Afghanistan; relatively low gross domestic product[4] (more than 3 times lower than the GDP of Kazakhstan).

Systemic incentives and the internal features of Uzbekistan

Three systemic factors[5] which influence both Uzbekistan and the whole of Central Asia during the presidency of Sh. Mirziyoyev should be highlighted. Firstly, this is "Russia's turn to the East" and the development of Eurasian Economic Union. The "Turn to the East" was caused by sharp deterioration in relations between Moscow and Western countries due to the Ukrainian crisis. Russia has intensified political and economic cooperation with Asian countries and has stepped up efforts to develop the Eurasian Economic Union – the most ambitious project of economic integration in post-Soviet space that includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia and two Central Asian states – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, we must take into account strengthening of Chinese positions in Central Asia. Since 2013, Beijing has been working on the implementation of the global "Belt and road initiative". Over the last decade Beijing became the largest trade partner of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In the long term, the implementation of the Chinese plans can seriously change the balance of power not only in the region, but at the global level as well. The last systemic factor is the withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan. American forces have been in the state since 2001, when US-led coalition began the war against Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. In 2010, there were 100.000 American troops in the state, but from 2012 to 2016 President Barack Obama reduced the U.S. military presence to 9.800 troops. The full withdrawal of American military contingent from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021 and Taliban's return to power pose certain risks to neighboring countries. For Uzbekistan, which has a common border with Afghanistan, military successes of Taliban pose a threat of the spread of religious extremism in its territory.

Worth noting is that international system provides clear information to Uzbekistan about possibilities and threats it faces. A number of post-Soviet countries within the EAEU are already working to create a common economic space. The same can be said about China, which creates infrastructure projects for several years under the "Belt and Road Initiative" and is gradually increasing its presence in Central Asia. The increased activity of Russia and China in the region, as well as the reduction of the American contingent in unstable Afghanistan, allows us to conclude that Uzbekistan is in restrictive strategic environment. In a restrictive environment, the international imperative is much stronger than the influence of domestic variables[6].

Considering the internal features of Uzbekistan most experts agree that modern institutions – judicial system, the Constitution, parties, parliament, mass media – play a decorative role there. Power is concentrated in the hands of the president and his inner circle[7]. Uzbekistan's elites – the Samarkand-Bukhara, the Tashkent, the Fergana and the Jizzakh clans – support Sh. Mirziyoyev[8]. Worth noting is that new president has big experience in politics, as he was a Prime Minister of Uzbekistan from 2003 to 2016. Like I. Karimov, Sh. Mirziyoyev is the representative of the Samarkand clan, which dominates in modern Uzbekistan. New leader followed the path of liberalizing Uzbekistan: most political prisoners from the Karimov's era were released from prisons; cautious criticism of the authorities became possible in the Uzbek media[9]. Such changes were completely impossible during the reign of the previous president of Uzbekistan.

It is worth noting that, according with realist paradigm of International Relations countries either balance against strong or “bandwagon” with them[10]. Tashkent has several options for its foreign policy strategy, taking into account that Uzbekistan faced more restrictive environment in 2016 than it was in the 1990s and 2000s. It can enter Russia's sphere of influence, pursue pro-Chinese policy, or try to balance between the two great powers. Another option for Uzbekistan is to establish close cooperation with the United States. The problem with this strategy is that the U.S. is reducing its presence in Central Asia and it seems unlikely that Washington will pay as much attention to the region as during the first two decades after the end of the Cold War.

Political and economic relations with Russia in 2016-2021

On September 8, 2016 during his speech at the Uzbekistan parliament Sh. Mirziyoyev spoke about further development of the state after I. Karimov's death. He also presented his vision of the foreign policy of Uzbekistan: “The main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy is the region of Central Asia. Talking about post-Soviet space Sh. Mirziyoyev stated that Tashkent is interested in “consistent development and comprehensive strengthening of friendly ties with Russian Federation”. Among other priorities of the country, the leader of Uzbekistan also mentioned “the development of comprehensive, mutually beneficial and constructive cooperation with United States of America”, “further strengthening of comprehensive strategic partnership with the People's Republic of China” and mutually beneficial relations with leading European, Asian, African and Latin American states. Sh. Mirziyoyev's speech does not give grounds to assert that Russia or any other state will play central role in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Russia, China and the United States were presented as equally important countries for Tashkent. In fact, new Uzbekistan's leader talked about the policy of balancing between Moscow, Beijing and Washington. Worth noting that in the Development Strategy of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021, adopted in the beginning of 2017, other states are hardly mentioned. According to the Program, the main foreign policy goals are the creation of a “security and stability zone around Uzbekistan” and settlement of border disputes with neighboring states[11].

The first two Mirziyoyev's international trips were made to Turkmenistan (March 6-7, 2017) and Kazakhstan (March 22-23, 2017). These trips demonstrate the new leader's intention to normalize relations with Uzbekistan's neighbors, which have been deteriorated during the rule of I. Karimov. The third international visit was made to Russian Federation on April 4-5, 2017. Noteworthy is that the Uzbek side called this visit “historic[12]. During the negotiations, much attention was paid to the further development of cooperation in textile sector, trade, oil and gas industry, agriculture, transport communications, culture, tourism and improving of working conditions of Uzbek labor migrants. The two governments also agreed to create new Russian-Uzbek joint ventures in automotive and agricultural machinery[12]. As a result of this

meeting more than 50 documents worth \$16 billion have been signed. Political scientists emphasize, that significant part of the agreements were investment projects[13]. Some scholars even argue that these negotiations led to the formation of a new model of relations between Russia and Uzbekistan in which Tashkent got a special status. Moscow agreed to strengthen bilateral trade, economic and investment ties with Tashkent without insisting on Uzbekistan joining the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organization[14].

Significant contribution to strengthening Russian-Uzbek relations had the state visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Uzbekistan on October 18-19, 2018. V. Putin arrived in Tashkent at the head of large delegation, consisted of around 1.200 members. Noteworthy is that on the same days in Tashkent the First Forum of Russia-Uzbekistan Interregional Cooperation was held. During the presidential negotiations, special attention was paid to practical aspects of development of cooperation in trade, economic and investment spheres. During the visit a set of investment and trade agreements with Russian companies and banks – Gazprom, Gazprombank, LUKOIL, Rosatom, Forus and Vnesheconombank – with a total value of \$27 billion have been concluded[15]. Both sides also signed the Program of Economic Cooperation for 2019-2024, the Cooperation Program in Cultural and Humanitarian Spheres for 2019-2021, the Roadmap for creation of “Suffa” International Radio Astronomy Observatory, the Agreement on the establishment and operation of branches of leading Russian universities in Uzbekistan and the Agreement on cooperation in textile industry. The most ambitious was an \$11 billion agreement to build a nuclear power plant. The two-block, 2.4 gigawatt plant is expected to be fully completed in 2030. This project will be financed by a soft loan from Russia and realized by Russian state corporation “Rosatom”.

The visit of President V. Putin to Tashkent showed that Moscow wants to strengthen its position in Uzbekistan and counter China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”. 785 business deals concluded on 18-20 October 2018, with a total value of \$27 billion, exceeded the \$23 billion negotiated with China in 2017[16]. Researches of Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan state: “in 2017 the scope of cooperation included only the oil and gas industry, but today there is not a single area where Uzbekistan and Russia do not cooperate”[17]. Experts also emphasize that sharp intensification of Russian-Uzbek cooperation in 2017-2018, brought relations between Moscow and Tashkent to a fundamentally new level[18].

Worth noting that Mirziyoyev's plans to build the nuclear power plant in Uzbekistan have supporters and opponents. Supporters argue that the building of nuclear power plant will have a great impact on the development of energy, agriculture, science and education in the state. Eliminating electricity shortage will help to expand the industrial potential of Uzbekistan, which will lead to creation of thousands of new jobs. About 9.000 people will be involved in the construction of the facility, and after commissioning it will be serviced by 3,500 engineers and technical workers. This project will also enhance the image of Uzbekistan as the first owner of a nuclear power plant in Central Asia[19]. Critics of the project argue that the decision to build nuclear power plant is not economic, but a political one. From their point of view Moscow exerts systematic pressure on Tashkent in order to “tie it to the supranational structures initiated by the Kremlin in various ways[20]. Moreover, they pay attention to the environmental and technogenic risks of developing nuclear project. Uzbekistan is located in seismically active zone, in addition, it borders with Afghanistan, where a lot of illegal radical movements operate. The total financial losses from a possible disaster can be many times higher than the income from nuclear power plants. In any case, this project is a good example illustrating the dynamic development of bilateral Russian-Uzbek relations under the President Sh. Mirziyoyev.

Another example of the dynamic development of political relations between the two countries is the increase in number of consular offices of Uzbekistan in Russia. Until 2017, the Embassy of Uzbekistan (in Moscow) and one Consulate General in Novosibirsk operated in the territory of Russia. In 2017-2020 Uzbekistan opened five new Consulates General in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, Vladivostok and Rostov-on-Don. New diplomatic offices will contribute to the development of bilateral relations in trade, economic, educational, humanitarian and tourism spheres.

In 2020, Uzbek President Sh. Mirziyoyev met with V. Putin during his working visit to Moscow on June 23-24. The parties noted the growth in trade, which in 2019 amounted to \$ 6.6 billion, and emphasized that further deepening of trade relations between the two states, can increase bilateral trade to \$ 10 billion in the near future. Uzbek leader also attended celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory over Nazism. Noteworthy is that in 2020 Uzbek armed forces took part for the first time in the parade held in Moscow's Red Square. We can conclude that the leaders of Russia and Uzbekistan assess the Soviet period in the history of their countries in a similar way, which has a positive effect on bilateral relations.

Analyzing results of the official negotiations between Sh. Mirziyoyev and V. Putin from 2016 to 2021, it can be stated that both sides pay great attention to expanding bilateral trade and economic cooperation. Worth noting that in the last years of I. Karimov's rule, foreign trade with China has intensified[21], while share of the Russian Federation in Uzbekistan's trade has been significantly decreased: from 29% in 2012 to 17.3% in 2016[22]. In 2015, China has become the largest trade partner of Uzbekistan. The table below shows how the foreign trade of Uzbekistan has changed under President Mirziyoyev.

Table 1

The share of the Russian Federation and People's Republic of China in foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan in 2016-2021

State	Dynamics of economic cooperation					2021 (January-December)
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	
China	17.5% (\$ 4.25 billion)	17.9% (\$ 4.75 billion)	19% (\$ 6.42 billion)	18.1% (\$ 7.62 billion)	17.7% (\$ 6.43 billion)	17.7% (\$ 7.44 billion)
Russia	17.3% (\$ 4.19 billion)	17.8% (\$ 4.72 billion)	16.9% (\$ 5.73 billion)	15.7% (\$ 6.62 billion)	15.5% (\$ 5.64 billion)	17.9% (\$ 7.51 billion)

Note: compiled by author based on data from the following sources.

Source: The state Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. URL: <https://stat.uz/en> (accessed 09.04.2022).

The statistics shows that in the period from 2016 to 2019 Uzbekistan has significantly increased the volume of trade with Russia: from \$ 4.19 billion in 2016 to \$ 6.62 billion in 2019. The trade turnover between Uzbekistan and China also grew from \$ 4.25 billion in 2016 to \$ 7.62 billion in 2019. The share of Russia over the period under review decreased slightly due to the growth in total volume of

Uzbekistan's foreign trade turnover: from \$ 24.2 billion in 2016 to \$ 42.2 billion in 2019. In 2020, the development of world trade was hampered by the coronavirus pandemic. In general, we can conclude that under Sh. Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan expanded trade and economic cooperation both with Moscow and Beijing, thus balancing between the two great powers.

The Republic of Uzbekistan and the Eurasian Economic Union

In October 2019, after the official visit of Chairperson of the Russian Federation Council Valentina Matviyenko to Tashkent, broad discussion began in Uzbekistan about potential accession to the Eurasian Economic Union. V. Matviyenko stated at the press conference that “the President of Uzbekistan has made a decision, and now the issue of Uzbekistan’s entry into the Eurasian Economic Union is being worked out”[23]. According to official information, one of the main goals of the EAEU is “seeking the creation of a common market for goods, services, capital and labor within the Union [24]. Taking into account that Russia de facto plays a leading role in the EAEU, joining the Union will mean a strategic shift of Tashkent towards Moscow.

Political scientists have different opinions on the possible entry of Uzbekistan into the EAEU.

Membership in the EAEU can provide many benefits for the state. Firstly, joining the Union will mean further elimination of trade barriers, thus Uzbek products will expand access to Russian and other EAEU countries markets. This will contribute to the strengthening export-oriented sectors in the national economy. The lifting of trade barriers will have a positive effect on improving market mechanisms in the state and will reduce the cost of imported goods from Russia and other EAEU countries. Noteworthy is that in current Uzbekistan a huge part of economy is controlled by monopolistic blocs that advocate high import tariffs[25]. Secondly, participation in the Union will lead to an increase in foreign investment in the economy of Uzbekistan, as well as contribute to the development of industrial cooperation with other EAEU member states[26]. Thirdly, formation of common market for transport services and single transport space within EAEU will help to solve logistical problems of Uzbekistan. The application of common customs tariff of the EAEU will reduce transport costs and simplify the transit of goods through the territory of Kazakhstan and Russia[27]. Another advantage of joining the Union is the systematization and simplification of the immigration rules. Workers from Uzbekistan will not have to pay for the work authorization document known as “patent for labour migrants”. This will result in annual savings of \$ 500 per person.

On the other hand, experts underline a number of disadvantages from the possible membership of Uzbekistan in the EAEU. Accession to the EAEU entails greater openness of the internal market of Uzbekistan. Uzbek producers will compete with products from other EAEU member states, as result of which many Uzbek enterprises may suffer substantial losses. Another disadvantage is that membership in the Union does not guarantee that other EAEU states will not use non-tariff measures and protectionism to protect their producers[28]. Some experts pay attention to geopolitical risks of EAEU membership. In their opinion, the EAEU is not an economic, but a political project, the purpose of which is to “draw post-Soviet countries in Russia's geopolitical orbit” and to “turn them into client states”.

Worth noting is that according to statistical data of Uzbekistan's national statistical office, the EAEU is the largest trading partner of Tashkent. The data below shows that from 2016 to 2019, trade turnover with the EAEU countries has grown almost twice.

Table 2

The share of the Eurasian Economic Union in foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan in 2016-2021

Trade partner	Dynamics of economic cooperation					2021 (January-December)
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	
EAEU	26.3%	27.1%	28.5%	26.4%	27.1%	30.4%
	(\$ 6.37 billion)	(\$ 7.21 billion)	(\$ 9.65 billion)	(\$ 11.15 billion)	(\$ 9.82 billion)	(\$12.77 billion)

Note: compiled by author based on data from the following source.

Source: The state Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. URL: <https://stat.uz/en> (accessed 09.04.2022).

In January of 2020, during the first session of senate Sh. Mirziyoyev said that Uzbekistan will have an observer status in the EAEU, not membership. In April and May of 2020, two chambers of Uzbek Parliament voted for proposal to become an observer state in the Union. Noteworthy is that results of sociological research conducted by Uzbekistan's Center for Economic Research and Reforms in 2020 showed that 74% of citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan support the possible accession to the EAEU. Given these data, it can be assumed that the majority of Uzbek citizens do not perceive the Russian Federation as a threat to their country. If Sh. Mirziyoyev decides to join the Eurasian Union, he will not face strong opposition within the country.

On December 11, 2020 during the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting Uzbekistan has obtained observer status at the EAEU. Noteworthy that in accordance with the Treaty on the EAEU, representatives of the observer state can "attend meetings of the bodies of the Union and gain access to non-confidential documents adopted by the Union bodies". In the same time observer status "does not give the right to participate in decision-making of the bodies of the Union[29]. Obtaining this status does not mean that country will become a member of the Union in the future. For example, Ukraine had an observer status in the Eurasian Customs Union in 2013-2014, Moldova became an EAEU observer country in 2017, but both of these states did not become members of the EAEU. However, it should be noted that the authorities of Ukraine and Moldova had no intention of joining the Eurasian Economic Union. In the case of Uzbekistan, deputies of Oliy Majlis say that observer status is the "first stage of integration process[30]. It is interesting to note that in 2021 the republic has continued to work on harmonization of technical regulation of sanitary, phytosanitary and veterinary measures with EAEU states. The possible accession of Tashkent into the Union would be a logical step on the part of Sh. Mirziyoyev, during whose rule economic cooperation with Russia and most of the EAEU members has been seriously strengthened.

Military cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia

In the last years of the reign of President I. Karimov, Tashkent distanced itself from military cooperation with Moscow. In 2012, Uzbekistan withdrew from the CSTO and established more close military ties with China. Political scientists at the Wilson Center (USA) emphasize that Uzbekistan is the only state in Central Asia that has spent more on arms imports from China than from Russia. The study took into

account military purchases from 1991 to 2018. The peak of purchases from China was in 2014-2018: during this period, Chinese military supplies exceeded by more than two times Russian supplies.

Worth noting, that after the death of I. Karimov, the attitude towards military cooperation with Russia has undergone major changes. In November 2016, the two countries signed an agreement on military-technical cooperation. The agreement lays down the rules concerning the movement of military goods from one country's territory to the other country. The signing of this document helps Tashkent to modernize its armed forces, which is one of the main priorities of the Development Strategy of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021.

Noteworthy is that, Russia plays a huge role in enhancing military cooperation between the two sides. This statement is well-illustrated by the Kremlin's decision to supply military products to Uzbekistan at domestic prices. At the present time, Uzbekistan is the only non-CSTO state that enjoys such privilege. The activity at the political level yielded practical results: in 2018-2019, Uzbekistan purchased from Russia "several dozen" armored vehicles "Tiger", an unspecified number of "Typhoon-K" armored vehicles, BTR-82A armored personnel carriers and "Sopka-2" radar systems[31]. Uzbekistan's defense companies use Russian diesel engines for modernization of T-64 tanks to T-64MV version. In 2018, Uzbekistan also sealed \$ 432 million arms deal with the Russian Federation on 12 Mi-35M attack helicopters. This is the largest arms sale to Uzbekistan since 2012. For comparison, the largest arms deal between Uzbekistan and China is estimated at \$ 103 million. According to Russian media, the Uzbek side is also planning to purchase multirole fighters SU-30 SM, which are in service with the air forces of the CSTO countries.

The dynamic development of Uzbek-Russian security relations in recent years is well demonstrated by joint military exercises. In October 2017, Uzbekistan and Russia held first military exercise since 2005. These drills were aimed at training skills to block and destroy terrorist armed formations in mountainous areas and involved around 400 troops. In 2018-2021 several joint anti-terrorist exercises were conducted between Uzbek and Russian special forces. During the drills, much attention was paid to practicing countering illegal groups that use drones for both reconnaissance and attack. Moreover, in 2019, both sides held tactical exercise for tank units with the participation of aviation and artillery. Noteworthy is that, more than 1.000 troops took part in the exercise along with around 200 pieces of military equipment.

Despite the progress made in expanding military cooperation with Russia, Uzbekistan continues develop security partnership with the United States and China. During his official visit to Washington in May 2018 Shavkat Mirziyoyev together with Donald Trump signed the Five-Year Plan of Military Cooperation that "will enhance interoperability and improve regional security[32]. Both sides held several joint military exercises. In January 2019, Uzbek special operations troops took part in exercise in Mississippi, and from February 24 to March 2, 2020, Uzbekistan National Guard and U.S. Central Command conducted exercises in Uzbekistan. Some American military analysts consider that USA needs a partner in the region, which will play a significant role in a solution of the Afghan issue. Furthermore, they perceive Uzbekistan as "the best situated country toward which to focus U.S. partnership efforts. Washington's interest in Uzbekistan can also be viewed as one of the elements of global rivalry between the United States and Russia. General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command in the statement before the U.S. Senate noted that "Russia also maintains significant influence in Central Asia... This is problematic as Russia's efforts could limit U.S. engagement options and provide Moscow additional levers of influence[33]. This statement shows, on the one hand, the United States' interest in military cooperation with the Central Asian states, and on the other hand, fears associated with the considerable influence of Russia in the region.

Uzbekistan also has certain achievements in development of security cooperation with Beijing. In 2017, both sides signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of military education between the Academy of the Armed Forces of Uzbekistan and PLA National Defense University. In 2019, the Uzbekistan National Guard and the Chinese People's Armed Police held joint anti-terrorist drills at the Forish training ground (Uzbekistan). In addition, Uzbekistan imports Chinese weapons: for example, in 2019, Tashkent purchased HQ-9 air defense systems worth more than \$ 100 million.

Worth noting is that modernization of army conducted by Uzbek authorities and big number of bilateral military exercises with other states are closely connected with protracted conflict in Afghanistan. The reduction of the American contingent in Afghanistan, begun under B. Obama, was continued under D. Trump. In the beginning of 2021, the U.S. contingent in the country has been drawn down to 2.500 troops. By 30 August 2021, Washington evacuated all its soldiers from Afghanistan thus ending the 20-year war. It is logical that the state will try to strengthen its position in the face of possible offensive actions of the Taliban and other terrorist organizations. One can assume that the withdrawal of Western troops from the conflict zone could lead to Uzbekistan's return to the CSTO or further intensification of bilateral security cooperation with Russia.

The following conclusions can be drawn in the end of this research:

1. Great powers – the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China and the United States of America – have big influence on Central Asia. Russia is increasing its presence in the region as part of the “Turn to the East”. Over the past 5 years, Moscow has achieved certain success in development of the EAEU, which allows it to expand economic cooperation with part of the former Soviet republics. China is expanding its influence in the region (and throughout Eurasia) primarily with the help of the “Belt and Road Initiative”. The United States remains an important player in Central Asia mainly due to its direct military presence in Afghanistan.

2. In 2016-2021, there was significant intensification of political and economic cooperation between Tashkent and Moscow. Two meetings between the presidents resulted in agreements worth of \$ 43 billion. Cooperation covers the fuel and energy sector, machine engineering, metallurgy, textile industry, agriculture, construction industry and tourism. Ten Russian Universities work in Uzbekistan as of 2020. Among the most ambitious joint plans, the project for the construction of nuclear power plant in Uzbekistan stands out. The implementation of such projects testifies of the high trust that has developed between Uzbekistan and Russia. At the same time, Tashkent continues to increase trade and economic cooperation with China, which has been the country's main trading partner since 2015.

3. In 2019, discussions have appeared in Uzbekistan about the possible accession to the EAEU. This suggests that Sh. Mirziyoyev (unlike I. Karimov) and most of elite do not consider the EAEU as a threat to Uzbekistan's independence. Noteworthy is that according to opinion polls, most of the country's population also supports the idea of membership in the Union. Possible membership of Uzbekistan in the EAEU will strengthen economic ties with Russia and other member states. This step will help Tashkent avoid dependence on China, which is continuing to expand its economic presence in Central Asia.

4. In recent years, Russia-Uzbekistan cooperation in the military field has increased considerably. As part of modernization of the Uzbek armed forces, Tashkent purchases mainly Russian military equipment. After the 12-year break, both sides began to conduct joint military exercises. Uzbekistan's activity in the field of security is related to withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan must consider risks connected with Taliban seizing power in Afghanistan, especially since many Uzbeks are fighting in the ranks of illegal groups. The main research results confirm the hypothesis that expansion of political, economic and military cooperation with Russia will become one of the priority issues of Uzbekistan's foreign policy

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