UZBEKISTAN’S NEW CENTRAL ASIA POLICY

THE ECONOMIC RATIONALE AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS

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Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has embarked on a moderate reform programme that aims to achieve socio-economic growth without undoing the country’s authoritarian political system. The programme has implications beyond Uzbekistan’s borders because it has changed the way Uzbekistani foreign policy is formulated and implemented. Uzbekistan’s former isolationist stance has shifted to a foreign policy opening, which is most noticeable in the improvement of its relations with its neighbours.

This Working Paper analyzes “good neighbourliness”, the key concept of Uzbekistan’s new Central Asia policy. It details the amendment of Uzbekistan’s bilateral relations with its neighbours and points to the positive reception of Uzbekistan’s new regional policy in Russia, China, and the West. The paper argues that while “good neighbourliness” is a pragmatic strategy rooted in economic rationality, the policy’s regional implications are substantial. It is laying the necessary foundation for sustainable Central Asian co-operation from within in a way that is acceptable to the Central Asian states and big non-regional actors alike.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 4

ECONOMIC RATIONALE FOR THE GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS POLICY 5

“GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS” IN CENTRAL ASIA: FROM WORDS TO DEEDS, ON BILATERAL TERMS 6

IMPLICATIONS OF UZBEKISTAN’S GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS FOR CENTRAL ASIA 9

THE NEIGHBOURS BEYOND: UZBEKISTAN BETWEEN THE BIG NON-REGIONAL ACTORS 10

CONCLUSIONS 11

BIBLIOGRAPHY 13
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INTRODUCTION

Following the death of the long-serving President Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy has been in flux. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who followed Karimov to the presidency in a smooth succession after serving thirteen years as prime minister, has sought to change the isolationism of his predecessor to a new foreign policy opening. The changes have been particularly noticeable in Uzbekistan’s relations with its immediate neighbours in Central Asia. By advancing a pragmatic policy of “good neighbourliness”, an extension to Mirziyoyev’s wider policy agenda of authoritarian modernization, Tashkent has been able not only to simplify its everyday encounters with its neighbours, but also to improve its public image in the international arena without causing resentment among the big non-regional actors.

Uzbekistan is the Central Asian region’s most populous country, and the only one that shares borders with all others. The country has significant potential for industrial development due to its past as a technological research hub, the prominence of natural resources (primarily minerals and gas), and a large and young labour force. These structural factors make Uzbekistan’s development in the 21st century pivotal for the Central Asian region and beyond. As this Working Paper details, “good neighbourliness” has been exercised by the establishment of regular and predominately benevolent communication between Mirziyoyev and the heads of state of Uzbekistan’s five immediate neighbours, the demarcation and opening of closed and contested borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the promotion of regional trade and transport networks across the region.

Authoritarian modernization, as defined by Vladimir Gel’man and Andrey Starodubtsev and applied by Luca Anceschi in his study of Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, is “the achievement of socio-economic growth without full-scale democratization”. According to Anceschi, “good neighbourliness” was the “Aim of the Strategy” [“Celebremo po pyatii prioritetsnym napravleniyam razvitiya Respubliki Uzbekistan v 2017-2020 godakh: Action Strategy on the Five Priorities for the Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2020”, http://strategy.gov.uz/ru/ (accessed 10 October 2020)].

Theoretically, this paper positions itself in the foreign policy analysis literature that stresses the importance of domestic politics for foreign policy behaviour. Drawing on the literature on authoritarian modernization and authoritarian regionalism, it maintains that Tashkent’s policy of “good neighbourliness” has been pursued primarily in order to achieve economic growth in Uzbekistan, which is in turn instrumental in legitimizing Mirziyoyev’s rule. However, the policy can also be interpreted as the necessary first step in accelerating the endogenous regional integration within Central Asia that has been suspended ever since the Organisation of Central Asian Cooperation (TsAS) was merged with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAzES) in 2005.

3. Anceschi, “Regime-Building through Controlled Opening.”


**ECONOMIC RATIONALE FOR THE GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS POLICY**

When Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, Uzbekistan was politically and economically isolated. The gradual transition from planned economy to state-led capitalism in the early 1990s was a relative success: Uzbekistan was the first Soviet successor state to regain its pre-independence level of GDP, maintaining high levels of economic growth throughout the 2000s because of the global resource boom. Yet, echoing the resource curse, revenue generated by cotton, minerals, and energy exports reduced the imperative to reform the economy and contributed to the government’s authoritarian resilience. For the general population, the standard of living rose insignificantly, and Uzbekistan fell behind Kazakhstan in economic development. The Uzbek economy under Karimov, based on revenue generated by capital-heavy state-owned enterprises, was underperforming but not collapsing.

Economic underperformance was not an issue per se, but what made it problematic was that it was at odds with Karimov’s Uzbekistan Vision 2030, which in 2012 set the goal of making Uzbekistan a middle-income country in less than two decades. In practice, this could only be achieved by boosting growth through the modernization of state-owned enterprises and improving the climate for private and foreign direct investment. As is typical of authoritarian regimes that derive their right to rule from the fulfillment of societal needs and desires like material well-being and personal security – dubbed “performance legitimacy” by Peter Burnell, the programme tied the Uzbek leadership’s legitimacy to its socioeconomic performance.

Mirziyoyev confirmed the regime’s commitment to socioeconomic performance in his 2016 presidential campaign by promising to double Uzbekistan’s GDP by 2030 by introducing a cross-sectional programme of modernization. Although the aspect of political liberalization is included in the list of necessary reforms, tangible development in the sphere has been limited to the pardoning of political prisoners and rolling back on information censorship and suppression of civil society. According to the OSCE’s electoral monitoring mission, the 2019 parliamentary elections “did not yet demonstrate genuine competition”, while Freedom House grants Uzbekistan just two out of 40 points in the category of political rights. Therefore, as many authors have argued by now, Mirziyoyev’s reforms should be seen as a case of authoritarian modernization that aims to achieve socio-economic growth with minimal democratization.

If authoritarian modernization is the goal of Mirziyoyev and his associates, foreign policy is the major vehicle for pursuing it. Furthermore, as this paper suggests, Central Asia has a pivotal role in Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy precisely because it is an area where relatively minor changes can yield quick economic gains: normalizing relations with one’s neighbours is essential for trading effectively with the outside world and improving Uzbekistan’s image internationally. In essence, Mirziyoyev’s policy of economic opening in general, and the “good neighbourliness” in particular, is based on an assumption that, at present, economic and political isolation is doing the country – and his rule – more harm than good. The projection of Uzbekistan as a dynamic and open country is designed to attract foreign direct investment, and the policy of “good neighbourliness” aims at (re-)establishing an interconnected and cooperative regional setting which would be turned to Tashkent’s and the entire region’s economic advantage. In November 2017, Mirziyoyev claimed that calculations conducted by UN experts

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9 Ibid.
17 Analyzing the change of Uzbek foreign policy from Karimov to Mirziyoyev illustrates the importance of agency for geopolitical explanations. Although the geopolitical potential of a strategically located region is structural, the materialization of financial potential does not happen by itself. On geopolitics, see e.g. Sören Scholvin & Mikael Wigell, “Geo-economic power politics: An introduction,” in *Geo-economics and Power Politics in the 21st Century: The Revival of Economic Statecraft*, ed. Mikael Wigell, Sören Scholvin & Mika Aaltola (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
suggested that “effective cooperation” within the region could at a minimum double Central Asia’s aggregate GDP in just ten years. 18

In fact, the rationale for a good neighbour policy that has been actively pursued by Mirziyoyev since 2016 was included in Karimov’s Foreign Policy Concept of 2012. It was then, in the aftermath of the announced US withdrawal from Afghanistan, that Central Asia was declared a foreign policy priority for Uzbekistan. 19 Until then, Aleksey Aseryan argues, the presence of US troops had ensured a level of security and predictability in the region and thus alleviated Uzbekistan’s concerns about the spread of destabilization. 20

One of the reasons why “good neighbourliness”, discussed in detail in the following section, has been so successful up to now (and why the country’s neighbours have welcomed it) is that it does not contradict the two core principles of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy: sovereignty and multilateralism. By opting to engage first and foremost on bilateral terms, Mirziyoyev has continued asserting Uzbekistan’s independence from the big non-regional actors. 21 Although trade relations with Russia have improved during Mirziyoyev’s tenure, Uzbekistan has thus far rejected Moscow’s calls to join the Eurasian Economic Union despite encouragement from Russia. As for Uzbekistan’s biggest trading partner – China – Mirziyoyev has been motivated to pursue closer collaboration in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while seeking to avoid a debt trap like neighbouring Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and, to an increasing extent, Kyrgyzstan. 22

In an interview shortly after his electoral victory, Mirziyoyev elaborated on his vision of “good neighbourliness” in the Central Asian context:

One of the main directions of our country’s foreign policy is to strengthen ties with our closest neighbours. This is a natural aspiration, and it proceeds from a clear understanding that the sustainable development of Uzbekistan largely depends on how correctly we can build our regional policy. We all understand that Central Asia is a single organism. [...] Issues of concern to all residents of the region, no country alone will be able to resolve, such as the issues of border delimitation and demarcation, transport, ecology, the rational and fair use of water resources. Returning to the issues of regional cooperation, I would define the current policy of Uzbekistan as follows: not to ignore thorny issues and to seek reasonable compromises. 23

The slogans have since been turned into practical deeds, with Kyrgyzstan being the first recipient of this new-found goodwill. On his second day as interim president, Mirziyoyev ordered Uzbek troops to release four Kyrgyz nationals that had been detained in Ungar–Too, a disputed hill on the Uzbek–Kyrgyz border. Moreover, the decision was soon followed by the launch of negotiations on the demarcation of the disputed parts of the Uzbek–Kyrgyz border, which resulted in the demarcation of 80% of the border by September 2020. 24

Although disputes between border communities are still taking place, high-level diplomacy has been applied to resolve conflicts more successfully than in the past. For example, in May 2020, violence over access to water broke out between villagers in the Kyrgyz settlement of Chechme and the Uzbek enclave of Sokh. The following day, Kyrgyz First Deputy Prime Minister Kubatbek Boronov and Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov arrived at the locality, held talks and pledged a joint investigation, while Presidents Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Sooronbay Jeenbekov


19 Farkhod Tolipov, “Uzbekistan’s New Foreign Policy: No Base, No Blocs, But Na-


21 The only regional organization that Uzbekistan has joined in recent years is the Turkic Council. Umida Hashimova explains the decision by noting that since the Council is founded on United Nations principles and norms, Uzbekistan’s sovereignty is not at stake. Umida Hashimova, “Uzbekistan joins the Turkic Council,” The Diplomat, 23 September, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/uzbeki-stan-joins-the-turkic-council/ (accessed 15 October 2020).


ment-loans/ (accessed 16 October 2020).


24 “Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz border dustup prompts rapid-reaction diplomacy”, Eurasianet, 1 June, 2020, https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-bor-

“GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS” IN CENTRAL ASIA:
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promised “extensive measures” to prevent such a situation in the future. 25

In economic terms, Uzbekistan’s friendly stance towards Kyrgyzstan is linked to the desire to alleviate risks related to cross-border water management, discussed below, as well as to secure the operation of the transport corridor to China. While Uzbekistan is already connected to China by rail through Kazakhstan, Uzbek officials claim that the route via Kyrgyzstan is 20% less expensive regardless of the fact that midway the cargo is still moved by trucks. 26 Meanwhile, Uzbekistan’s exports to Kyrgyzstan have jumped from $67 million in 2016 to $348 million in 2019. Although officials point to the mutual benefits of the increased bilateral trade, some have questioned the presumably even gains of the growth in cross-border trade. Zhamin Akimaliyev, a Kyrgyz former deputy and senior agricultural scientist argues that Uzbekistan takes full advantage of the open borders and supports its domestic producers’ exports to Kyrgyzstan in various ways, causing problems for Kyrgyz farmers. 27

In March 2017, Mirziyoyev made his first foreign trip to Turkmenistan as the elected president of Uzbekistan in a foreign policy move that was both symbolic and practical. The result of the visit was the signing of a raft of trade and transportation agreements, including a bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement. 28 For Uzbekistan, functional relations with Ashgabat are vital because a transit corridor through Turkmenistan offers a crucial gateway to world ports and markets, primarily through Iran. A year after the completion of the road and road bridge across the Amu Darya River in Turkmenistan, the volume of cargo transportation increased significantly. 29 Turkmenistan is interest-
ed in involving Uzbekistan in the construction of the problematic TAPI project, a natural gas pipeline linking Turkmenistan’s Galkynysh field to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, but despite Mirziyoyev’s promise to “join” TAPI in 2018, the pipeline remains a “virtual” project with no chance of completion in the near future. 30

An air of reconciliation has also been observed in Uzbekistan’s relations with Tajikistan. The challenges to Uzbekistan’s relationship with Tajikistan parallel those with Kyrgyzstan. There have traditionally been problems with borders and water resources, but also ethnic minorities and radical Islam. In the early 2000s, Uzbekistan placed landmines on the undemarcated parts of its border with Tajikistan, allegedly to deter terrorists affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and to obstruct the narcotics trade. Landmining the border was accompanied by a visa regime and the destruction of the border bridge on the Syr Darya River. Farkhod Tolipov has characterized the state of Uzbek-Tajik relations in the late Karimov era as a “no war no peace” situation. 31

Another long-standing source of conflict with Tajikistan (and to a somewhat lesser degree, Kyrgyzstan) has been the water management issue. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are up-stream countries where the region’s two major rivers – the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya – originate, whereas Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are down-stream countries. For Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, developing their capacity to generate hydropower would both secure their domestic demand for energy and generate a revenue from export. However, building new hydroelectric energy facilities would require the construction of dams, which downstream countries have vehemently opposed for environmental and economic reasons, especially Uzbekistan with its irrigation-dependent cotton production. 32 In the 2000s, Uzbekistan’s opposition to the construction of the Rogun hydroelectric plant took various forms and increased hostility between the two states. Since 2010, Uzbekistan has applied de facto transportation blockade by hampering rail cargo into and out of Tajikistan. As all of Tajikistan’s railways with

32 There is an abundance of literature on the politics of Central Asian water management. See, for example, Filippo Menga, Power and Water in Central Asia (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018). On the Tajik-Uzbek issue, see Vural Makhmedov (2011) Water and energy disputes between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and their negative influence on regional co-operation (Osh: NUIP, 2012).
the outside transit Uzbekistan, the policy had devast-
ating effects on Tajikistan’s economy. In addition,
in 2012, Uzbekistan cut off all of its gas supplies to its
eighbour, leading to a plummet in bilateral trade from
$300 million in 2008 to $2.1 million in 2014. 33

It would be no exaggeration to treat the construc-
tion of the Rogun Dam, resumed by Tajikistan one
month after Karimov’s death, as the first test of Mir-
ziyoyev’s proclaimed good neighbourliness. Indeed,
at the time, analysts were expecting the acting presi-
dent to confront Tajik President Emomali Rahman in
an effort to rally support among Uzbeks prior to the
election. 34 Contrary to these concerns, Mirziyoyev did
not publicly voice opposition to the project and, a year
later, even endorsed the building of the dam. Since
then, cooperation has ensued in various spheres, with
disrupted rail and flight connections reopened, the visa
regime abolished, and the mutually beneficial energy
trade resurrected: in addition to Uzbekistan resuming
its gas exports to Tajikistan, the latter has since started
exporting electricity to Uzbekistan. Prior to his official
visit to Tajikistan in March 2018, Mirziyoyev stated that
one has to “melt the 20-year-old ice” between one’s
neighbours even if it is “not easy”. 35 Indeed, while
there has been tangible support for the praise Rahmon
and Mirziyoyev have directed towards each other for
improving the countries’ relationship, there are still
underemarcated (although already demined) parts of
the Uzbek–Tajik border as well as practical questions
regarding the Rogun project.

Resuming bilateral energy cooperation, with Tajik-
istan providing hydropower in summer and Uzbekistan
providing gas in winter, would be economically ben-
ficial for both countries. 36 Farhod Aminzhonov has ar-
gued that establishing mutual interdependence on en-
ergy trade would stabilize the countries’ relations and
propel further cooperation in the future. 37 However,
the countries’ past practice in applying economic pres-
sure for foreign policy purposes complicates trusting
one another enough to embrace such interdependency.

Considering the success in improving bilateral rela-
tions with Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, it
is not surprising that Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan has also
managed to find a common language with Kazakhstan,
the regional heavyweight. As early as spring 2017, Ka-
zakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev pointed
out the improved economic climate that had led to a
30% increase in trade turnover that he attributed to
the openness of the new leadership in Uzbekistan. 38

Until the economic turnaround brought about by the
Covid–19 pandemic, the volume of bilateral trade be-
tween the two countries was growing steadily, accom-
panied by plans for joint connectivity projects like the
International Center for Trade and Economic Cooper-
ation on the border of the two countries. 39

Importantly, a thaw in Kazakh–Uzbek relations
seems to have passed its first test. In May 2020, a dam
at the Sardoba Reservoir, located on Uzbekistan’s
border with Kazakhstan, was destroyed, causing a
massive flood in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Al-
though some were expecting a major diplomatic row
over who was to blame for the disaster, Tashkent and
Nur–Sultan worked in unison to resolve the crisis in
an exercise that met the criteria of “friendly and co-
operative” bilateral crisis management. 40 As Anceschi
suggests, a functional economic relationship between
Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is of utmost importance
as it is a necessary precondition for Central Asia’s re-
gional integration. 41 As long as Kazakhstan and Uzbek-
istan continue perceiving themselves as beneficiaries
of enhanced economic cooperation, there is reason to
believe that the trend of increasing bilateral turnover
will continue despite economic challenges generated
by the ongoing Covid–19 pandemic.

Finally, in the south, Uzbekistan shares a 144 km-
long border with Afghanistan along the River Amu Dar-
ya. Yet it is slightly surprising that Tashkent’s policy
of “good neighbourliness” also extends to the south,

33 Edward Lemon, “Tajikistan and Uzbekistan Show More Signs of Thaw”, Eurasia-
net, 27 April, 2015, https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-uzbekistan-show-
more-signs-of-thaw (accessed 19 October 2020).
34 Edward Lemon, “Signs of improving relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan
org/publications/analytical-articles/item/34405-sings-of-improving-relations-
between-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-but-tensions-remain.html?tmpl-
component=print-1 (accessed 19 October 2020). Yet it ought to be mentioned
that Uzbek–Tajik relations showed signs of improvement even in the two years
prior to Karimov’s death. Edward Lemon, “The Transformation of the Uzbek–Ta-
19 October 2020).
35 Shakhat Mirziyoyev, quoted in “President of Uzbekistan wants to improve rela-
36 Sam Bhutia, “Could energy trade be a win-win for Tajik–Uzbek ties?” Caras-
ianer, 3 February, 2020, https://eurasianet.org/could-energy-trade-be-a-win-
win-for-tajik-uzbek-ties (accessed 19 October 2020).
37 “Tajikistan and Uzbekistan show new era in trade relations,” Times of Central
38 Catherine Pitz, “Brothers Again: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan,” The Diplomat, 24
March, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/brothers-again-uzbeki-
39 Aïgal Ibraïeva, “Kakie torgovye otnosheniya syvyyavyvat Kazakhstan i Uz-
beistan?” [“What trade relations exist between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan?”], Karavan KZ, 28 April, 2020, https://karavan.kz/news/ekonomika/2020/04/kak-
ie-torgovye-otnosheniya-svyazyvayut-kazakhstan-i-uzbekistan (accessed
19 October 2020).
40 Farkhad Talipov, “Border problems in Central Asia: dividing incidents, uniting
solution?”, Times of Central Asia, 15 July, 2020, https://www.timesca.com/in-
dex.php/news/26-opinion-headline/22723-border-problems-in-central-asia-di-
viding-incidents-uniting-solution (accessed 19 October 2020).
41 See also Luca Anceschi, “The Resurgence of Central Asian Connectivity,” The
Diplomat Magazine 37, December 2017.
considering that Central Asia typically refers exclusively to the five former Soviet republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). In fact, the explicit inclusion of Afghanistan in Uzbekistan’s Central Asia policy can be seen as one of the novelties of the Mirziyoyev-era foreign policy. In June 2020, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov called Afghanistan an inseparable part of Central Asia, confirming Asiryan’s argument according to which the attempt to “co-opt Afghanistan into Central Asia” has become a top priority for the Mirziyoyev government.42

Similarly to Uzbekistan’s bilateral engagements with its other neighbours, enhanced economic cooperation is the means and the aim of good neighbourliness with Afghanistan. In December 2017, President of Afghanistan Mohammad Ashraf Ghani paid an official visit to Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan. It was the first such high-level meeting in 16 years and resulted in signing agreements worth $500 million in trade and connectivity collaboration.43 In summer 2019, prospective bilateral projects ranged from car manufacturing and textile production to transit and electricity infrastructure.44 If these projects are completed to the benefit of both parties, it will mark an important shift in Uzbekistan’s policy towards Afghanistan, which has traditionally suffered from a discrepancy between lofty promises and limited deeds.45 However, since transportation via Afghanistan would become the shortest route from Uzbekistan to the sea, Tashkent has a vested interest in ensuring that the necessary transit infrastructure is indeed built and remains in operation.

Investing in Afghanistan creates a situation in which Uzbekistan has a stake in the country’s peace process. Indeed, Uzbekistan’s policy of good neighbourliness in Afghanistan comes with a persuasive offer to support peace-building in the country. Speaking in 2018, Mirziyoyev explicitly stated the rationale for Uzbekistan’s involvement in the resolution of the war in Afghanistan: “A secure Afghanistan means a secure Uzbekistan; it is a guarantee of a prosperous and stable South and Central Asia”.46 Tashkent has relentlessly pursued talks with both Ghani’s government and the Taliban, and positioned itself as the reliable mediator in the process.

**IMPLICATIONS OF UZBEKISTAN’S GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS FOR CENTRAL ASIA**

As the previous section highlights, the contemporary Uzbek foreign policy of “good neighbourliness” is exercised in bilateral terms with all states with which Tashkent shares a border. The reliance on bilateral cooperation and connectivity projects that yield tangible economic gains for all parties marks a shift away from the earlier Central Asian multilateral initiatives. Previously, Anceschi argues, Central Asian integration projects were “pursuing chaotic connectivity agendas through vaguely defined policy steps”47 and did not result in sustainable regional co-operation. Uzbekistan’s re-establishing and strengthening bilateral relations does not automatically lead to regionalism per se, but this process is the necessary first step to any lasting collaboration in the future.

Although Mirziyoyev’s foreign policy approach to his country’s neighbours has been mostly bilateral, there is also one multilateral initiative that deserves a mention. In 2018, a Central Asian regional summit, attended exclusively by Central Asian leaders, was organized for the first time in a decade and attended by all but Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. A year later, a follow-up summit was hosted by Tashkent and attended by all five presidents. Although both summits fell short of delivering any concrete results on how to resolve the region’s long-standing issues, the heads of state still agreed to arrange such meetings annually.48 Some prominent analysts heralded the 2019 summit as a genuine turning point in Central Asian regionalism, with S. Frederick Starr calling it “Central Asia’s ASEAN moment”49 and Arkadiy Dubnov seeing a breakthrough in the attending leaders’ readiness to discuss thorny

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47 Anceschi, “The Resurgence of Central Asian Connectivity”.
48 The 2020 summit was to be held in Kyrgyzstan in August but has since been postponed due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.
matters in a friendly and constructive manner.\footnote{Arkady Dubnov, “Summit bez Rossii. Smozhut li Tashkent ob’yedinit’ Tsentr na’yu’ Aziyu?” [“Summit without Russia: Can Uzbekistan unite Central Asia?”] Carnegie Moscow Center, 4 December, 2019, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80469 (accessed 19 October 2020).} In contrast, Fozil Mashrab argues that the summit format is unlikely to develop into an institutionalized regional structure, while agreeing that the summits could serve a purpose in enhancing understanding among the five Central Asian heads of state and thus boost intra-regional trade.\footnote{Fozil Mashrab, “Uzbekistan Hosts Second Central Asian Consultative Summit”, Eurasia Daily Monitor 14, no. 174, 13 December, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-hosts-second-central-asian-consultative-summit/ (accessed 19 October 2020).} It is only logical that Uzbekistan’s new policy on Central Asia prioritizes bilateral and mutually beneficial trade and infrastructure projects, considering Central Asia’s track record of failed regionalist initiatives as well as the mainstream assumption that successful regionalist structures are built on pre-existing trade cooperation.

While Uzbekistan has confirmed its commitment to the policy of good neighbourliness during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, attempts to design a region-wide coordinated effort in combatting the spread of the virus have fallen short. All Central Asian states in unison closed their borders with their neighbours, and the lack of coordination led to the disruption of cross-border trade.\footnote{“COVID-19 crisis response in Central Asia”, OECD, 4 June, 2020, https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia-50085272/ (accessed 19 October 2020).} Moreover, national governments had very different views regarding the spread of the virus, ranging from the official zero cases in Turkmenistan to tens of thousands of alleged cases in Kazakhstan. In essence, a coordinated region-wide response would have been nothing short of a miracle given the lack of an institutional framework for responding to a global health crisis combined with doubts about the accuracy of official statistics.

Yet it is important to note that none of the Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, have completely shut themselves off during the crisis, and nor have there been any serious conflicts between states since the start of the pandemic. While Paul Stronski argues that Mirziyoyev has “shown leadership in coordinating his government’s response to the crisis with other Central Asian leaders”,\footnote{Paul Stronski, “Coronavirus in the Caucasus and Central Asia”, Carnegie, 8 July, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/08/coronavirus-in-caucasus-and-central-asia-pub-81898 (accessed 19 October 2020).} available evidence of this collaboration is limited to the frequent phone calls between the President of Uzbekistan and his fellow heads of state as well as voicing potential ways of coordinating within the Turkic Council.\footnote{“President of Uzbekistan takes part in extraordinary summit of the Turkic Council”, PV.uz, 10 April, 2020, https://www.pv.uz/en/news/president-of-uzbekistan-takes-part-in-extraordinary-summit-of-the-turkic-council (accessed 19 October 2020).} Utilizing the Turkic Council to promote a multilateral approach to good neighbourliness might be efficient given that Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are full members and Turkmenistan, while not a member, is still involved in the activities of the organization.

**THE NEIGHBOURS BEYOND: UZBEKISTAN BETWEEN THE BIG NON-REGIONAL ACTORS**

President Mirziyoyev’s modest reform agenda and his efforts to foster “good neighbourliness” have been viewed favourably by the big non-regional actors. Although Uzbekistan has also demonstrated an interest in enhancing cooperation with the United States and the EU, it is the relations with the two major actors, Russia and China, that matter the most. China and Russia are Uzbekistan’s biggest trade partners and sources of FDI,\footnote{In addition to China and Russia, Switzerland is also an important trade partner, mainly as a market for Uzbekistan’s considerable gold exports. OECD, “Uzbekistan’s sustainable infrastructure investments”, Sustainable Infrastructure for Low-Carbon Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Hotspot Analysis and Needs Assessment [Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019].} and their role has only become more prominent since Uzbekistan’s foreign policy opening. As a legacy of the Karimov-era policy of isolation, Uzbekistan is currently a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Turkic Council, but does not belong to other integration organizations.

Russia has been courting Tashkent ever since Mirziyoyev took office as it knows that the Uzbek President’s reform agenda depends on successfully attracting foreign investment to support the economy.\footnote{Paul Stronski & Michal Sokolsky, “Multipolarity in Practice: Understanding Russia’s Engagement With Regional Institutions,” Carnegie, 8 January, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/01/08/multipolarity-in-practice-understanding-russias-engagement-with-regional-institutions-pub-80717 (accessed 19 October 2020).} Moscow would like to see Uzbekistan join the EAEU as well as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military alliance Uzbekistan left in 2012, but up to now these hopes have not materialized. Speaking in 2017, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov stated that the question of renewing Uzbekistan’s CSTO membership was not on the agenda, and nor were there any plans to discuss or review this matter in the future.\footnote{Abdulaziz Kamilov, quoted in “Uzbekistan says won’t rejoin Russia-led security bloc”, Reuters, 3 July, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uzbekistan-russia-bloc-idUSKBN19Q2DL (accessed 19 October 2020).} Meanwhile, the question of EAEU membership has been resolved with Tashkent opting for an observer status that comes with no expectations or...
relations with Tajikistan. Meanwhile, in order for Russia’s close relations with its regional neighbours. By embracing “connectivity by default”, Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has put an end to Uzbekistan’s former isolationist policy in order to reap economic gains by capitalizing on Uzbekistan’s central location at the crossroads of Eurasian trade routes. Despite its bilateral outlook, the policy of “good neighbourhood” has the potential to transform the political, economic and social dynamics within the Central Asian region.

CONCLUSIONS

The West, for its part, has been equally positive about Mirziyoyev’s reformist outlook and the policy of “good neighbourliness”. Uzbekistan’s balancing act between Moscow and Beijing, and its eagerness in building Central Asian regionalism on intra-regional trade while including Afghanistan in the process, pleases both Washington and Brussels, as they aspire to see Central Asia as prosperous, stable, and geopolitically autonomous from both China and Russia. Both the US and the EU envision that Afghanistan’s further integration into the Central Asian region, defined in the United States’ Silk Road Initiative of 2011 as “resuming traditional trading routes and reconstructing significant infrastructure links broken by decades of conflict”, will support peace and stability in the country. In the EU’s new strategy for Central Asia, Afghanistan has been included in projects and programmes in the spheres of cross-border trade, education, and civil society.

The West also supports Uzbekistan’s current efforts to enter the WTO. To provide tangible support for Uzbekistan’s reforms, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) opened a new Resident Office in Tashkent in autumn 2018. Earlier that year, the EU and Uzbekistan launched negotiations for an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement that would presumably enable cooperation in the interests of both parties.

In turn, China is also welcoming towards Uzbekistan’s rise to regional prominence. Uzbekistan has been among the most ardent supporters of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and due to its strategic location at the centre of Central Asia, China can reap both direct and indirect benefits from Uzbekistan’s involvement with the BRI. As Ikboljon Qoraboyev notes, the BRI as “a framework for realizing investments and capacity-building transfers in the sphere of infrastructure” resonates well with Uzbekistan’s agenda of modernization and its foreign policy priorities. In Uzbekistan, public sentiments towards China are more favourable than in those Central Asian states that border China, which gives Mirziyoyev’s government more leverage in developing its relations with Beijing. Finally, from China’s perspective, pushing for deeper trade and infrastructure integration in Central Asia, as implied by the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and minimizing disruptions of cross-border trade, is simplified by functional relations existing between Central Asian states.

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CONCLUSIONS

Tashkent’s new policy of “good neighbourliness” has begun the process of normalizing Uzbekistan’s relations with its regional neighbours. By embracing “connectivity by default”, Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has put an end to Uzbekistan’s former isolationist policy in order to reap economic gains by capitalizing on Uzbekistan’s central location at the crossroads of Eurasian trade routes. Despite its bilateral outlook, the policy of “good neighbourliness” has the potential to transform the political, economic and social dynamics within the Central Asian region.

59 Ibid.
64 Anceschi, “The Resurgence of Central Asian Connectivity”.

Ibid.
While continuing to opt out of political regional organizations led by region outsiders, Uzbekistan is laying the groundwork for sustainable Central Asian co-operation from within in a manner that is acceptable to the Central Asian states and big non-regional actors alike.

One of the major implications of Mirziyoyev’s policy of “good neighbourliness” is the improvement in Uzbekistan’s reputation in the global arena, which may in part contribute to a positive assessment of Uzbekistan as a target for foreign investment. The fact that Uzbekistan was named one of the top 20 “global improvers” in the World Bank’s 2020 Doing Business report, and 2019 Country of the Year by The Economist, is an important legitimizer of the Mirziyoyev government both at home and abroad. Combined with the array of other measures of liberalization, particularly in the sphere of business and finance, the regional thaw is enabling and consolidating Mirziyoyev’s project of authoritarian modernization in Uzbekistan.


