

OPINIONS

New Regionalism in Central Asia

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In the modern world, many countries, due to the devaluation of the stabilising mechanisms of the international system, strive to pursue a pragmatic policy based primarily on their own interests. The realistic and objective perception of such interests is becoming a topical issue, as well as their correlation with history, geography, economic feasibility and reality, writes [Ulugbek Khasanov](#), Head of Regional Security & Conflicts Study Lab., University of World Economics & Diplomacy (Uzbekistan).

The primary condition for a successful foreign and domestic policy is a constructive understanding of one's place in the world and in the region, which allows for the pragmatic formulation and implementation of national development goals. In recent years, a new foreign policy strategy has been initiated in Uzbekistan, the key task of which is to create an atmosphere of trust, good-neighbourliness and cooperation in Central Asia. How this approach is being rolled out reflects the emergence of a new geopolitical reality. Strengthening cooperation and political trust between the countries of Central Asia are making it a more independent, predictable and stable region, with respect to world politics.

The rapidly changing situation in the region and throughout the world as a whole is making its own adjustments to the agenda of regional and national development. With all the diversity among states in the Central Asian region, the basic and historical principles of their state identity are based on a balance between secularism and spirituality. There, the secular state is balanced by spiritual principles, and they remain consistent in their approach. It underscores a certain continuity in the principles of state building in the region, which is very important for maintaining a constructive balance between statist, secular and traditional values. It should be understood that the countries of Central Asia have been able to mobilise internal resources to counter various manifestations of extremism and separatism, despite the prevailing opinion in the expert community that the region is located along the so-called "geostrategic fault line" of the world.

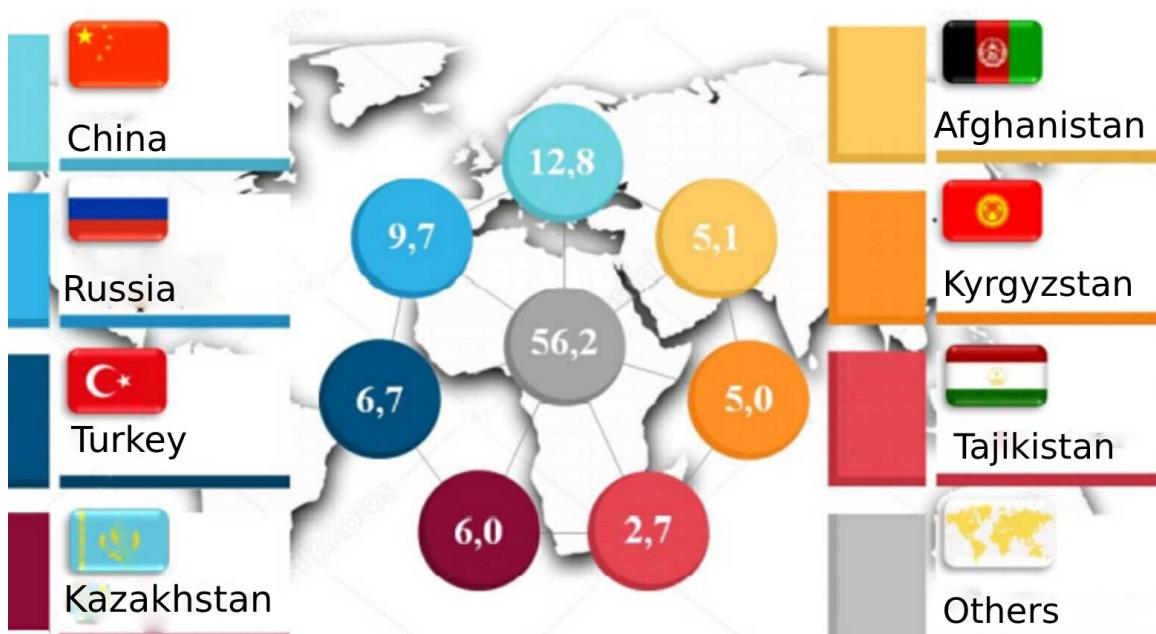
The Central Asian region is characterised by the fact that despite conditions where national states in other regions of the world would find themselves in crises, the construction of statehood and the strengthening of sovereignty continue. [According to leading foreign experts](#), state and social construction in Central Asia have their own specific features that should be considered more carefully.

The formation of a completely new system of relations in Central Asia essentially leads to the transformation of the national interests of the states of the region to new realities and their practical adaptation. The possible consolidation of approaches is only achievable on the basis of collective actions between two or more states, where action is jointly coordinated. Thanks to the new quality of bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, close regional interaction is beginning to form in the region.

The principles of mutual respect and pragmatism between the states of Central Asia, which have prevailed in recent years, contribute to the search for constructive approaches to solve emerging difficulties. The moral and ethical category of good neighbourly relations in the region is much higher, and historically reflects more deeply the level of relations between these countries and their peoples than just what's meant by the academic term "trust-building", which is popular in the West.

As the basic components of growth, fundamentally new trends in regional development are strengthening in Central Asia. The new situation has made it possible for the countries of Central Asia to significantly intensify their mutual trade and economic ties. At the end of 2017, the trade turnover of Uzbekistan with the countries of the region exceeded \$3 billion dollars, an increase of 20%. As the head of Uzbekistan [noted](#) at the summit of the heads of states of Central Asia in Astana, in the coming years the volume of mutual trade will reach 5 billion US dollars.

Shares of the seven main partners of Uzbekistan, trade and services (January-December 2020, %)



As follows from the above data of the annual Report of the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics "[Socio-economic situation of the Republic of Uzbekistan](#)" for 2020, in comparison to 2018-2019, our main partners in the export of goods and services in foreign trade turnover in January-December 2020 were China (12.8% of total exports), the Russian Federation (9.7%), Turkey (6.7%), Kazakhstan (6.0%), Afghanistan (5.1%), Kyrgyzstan (5.0%) and Tajikistan (2.7%). Their share in the total export volume reached 48.0%. These figures indicate the intensity of the republic's export-import activities with the countries of the region, where one of the key positions is that of the Russian Federation.

This is not surprising. Russia traditionally plays a major role in the trade, economy, and investment projects of the Central Asian countries. The Central Asian states and Russia are actively cooperating to enhance and unify transit systems along the East-West and North-South axes. Railways and highways running through Central Asia and Russia are an essential part of international transport corridors. In particular, the countries of Central Asia are playing an increasingly important role in the transit of goods between North and South, which significantly strengthens cooperation in the trade and economic sphere between all the countries involved. The trade turnover between the countries of Central Asia and Russia over the past 4 years has increased by \$5 billion, amounting to more than \$28 billion in 2020. More than 17,000 enterprises with Russian capital operate in the

region. In Uzbekistan alone, over the past five years, their number has increased more than seven-fold (from 312 to 2260). The accumulated Russian investments in Central Asia amount to more than \$20 billion. All this suggests that at present, the Central Asian market is becoming even more attractive from Russia's standpoint.

In the period from September 2016 to July 2021, following the results of agreements between the heads of neighbouring countries during bilateral working meetings and conversations held within the framework of international organisations, negotiations on the delimitation and demarcation of the state borders of the region [became more intensive](#), and compromises have been reached in defining the borders, including complex and rather controversial areas. Today, Uzbekistan, together with Kazakhstan, has launched the production of cars and agricultural machinery, as well as textile, medical and agricultural products. With Tajikistan, there are projects for the production of household appliances and building materials.

In order to financially support joint projects, Investment Funds have been created between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In this vein, it is worth considering the possibility of cooperation being established between the Uzbek-Kyrgyz Investment Fund and the Russian-Kyrgyz Development Fund in order to implement projects in the mining and metallurgical spheres, as well as in the textile industry, the agroindustrial complex, etc. Joint Uzbek-Kyrgyz agreements on the mutual supply of electricity with a capacity of 750 million kWh are becoming important. The same is true in Tajikistan, where construction is underway on two HPPs with a capacity of 320 MW on the Zarafshan River. Uzbekistan has expressed its readiness to take part in the projects to construct the Kamarata and Rogun hydroelectric power plants. At the same time, the countries of the region understand the need to support the transition to a "green economy" in the face of the negative impact of global climate change.

[According to S. Safoev](#), the First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "This is a huge common asset, this is the contribution of all countries. We can look to the future with optimism. This is the main, huge positive result of the foreign policy of all our states in recent years. Our common task is to impart an irreversible character to the emerging tendencies of strengthening trust between the countries of the region."

At the same time, the sustainable future and development of the Central Asian countries directly depends on the full-fledged inclusion of neighbouring Afghanistan into regional economic processes. Determining a common regional agenda is impossible without taking into account the Afghan factor. Comprehensive assistance in the integration of present-day Afghanistan into regional economic processes was recognised as one of the priority tasks.

Uzbekistan plays an active role in international efforts to strengthen the peace process in Afghanistan. The main approaches of the country on this issue were outlined by the leader of Uzbekistan at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, as well as during a number of international forums and conferences at the international level. Determining the prospects for sustainable development in Central Asia, the fact is taken into account that measures to promote socio-economic recovery and the development of neighbouring Afghanistan, which is an integral part of Central Asia, are identified as a top-priority in the regional agenda. The states of Central Asia and Afghanistan are united by a common history, religion, culture and traditions, as well as mutual interests in the field of ensuring security and developing trade. At the same time, a stable Afghanistan [can connect](#) the countries of Central Asia with the markets of Europe and China, opening the shortest path to the ports of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

The time has come to transform the standard clichés and perceptions regarding Afghanistan from a source of regional threats into a region of strategic opportunities capable of giving impetus to the development of trans-regional ties in Eurasia.

Amid the current conditions in the region, the country's leadership has repeatedly stressed the need for a direct dialogue with the Taliban, to work out specific approaches based on the principles of the peace process as a single pragmatic intra-Afghan national development. Uzbekistan, which is located in a strategically important point of the world and has friendly relations with all the countries of the region, is able to convince the leaders of other states to join the republic's efforts to maintain peace. In the current conditions. Tashkent is directly

interested in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan within the framework of the strategy for sustainable development and good-neighbourliness in Central Asia. As Abdulaziz Kamilov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, [recently noted](#), “We opened the border with this country and resumed the supply of essential goods – food, oil products and electricity. Tashkent also advocates unfreezing Afghan state assets in foreign banks, and has called on the world community to continue the implementation of social, economic and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, which is extremely necessary to prevent a humanitarian crisis, stabilise the situation and the post-conflict reconstruction of Afghanistan.” As the minister stressed, “Uzbekistan does not have any hidden or ambiguous agenda in the Afghan direction.”

It is these questions that served as a basis of the visit of the official delegation of Uzbekistan to Kabul and constructive negotiations with the leadership and members of the interim government of Afghanistan in early October this year.

Since the beginning of 2017, the volume of trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan has grown 25%, amounting to about \$600 million. Within the framework of the previously-adopted “Roadmap for the Development of Cooperation”, the annual supply of mineral fertilizers, products and components for agricultural machinery, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of various kinds of grain and other types of food to the region’s southern neighbour has not stopped. There are pending issues of deepening the geoeconomic potential and opportunities of the Termez-Mazari-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar Trans-Afghan corridor, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan road and railways, the creation of a Regional Centre for the Development of Transport and Communication Relations at the UN, regional councils on transport, and the development of joint measures to create a common energy “ring” in Central Asia.

Of course, the well-coordinated activities of the Central Asian countries in the international arena will not only strengthen the international subjectivity of the region significantly, they will also make it possible to effectively support and protect the interests of the region. Describing the regularity of such trends prevailing in the region, S. Safoev [notes](#) that today there is “... the need to create a legal and, in the future, an institutional framework for interaction, including research structures. The main factor in making the favourable environment irreversible in Central Asia is to strengthen confidence-building measures. This is not related to a declaration or general appeals, it is important to formulate principles, conceptual foundations for giving depth to confidence-building measures, which include not only state and non-state, but also business structures.”

The creation of a new political climate in the region testifies to the fact that the process of forming closer regional relations, as well as the rapprochement of the peoples and countries of Central Asia, has become an objective reality. This openness in relations between these close neighbours, which helps Central Asia maintain a healthy and friendly atmosphere, has strengthened the foundations of sustainable development throughout the region. Such initiatives are supported in many countries, throughout the world.

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