

REFORMS IN UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY: MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

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Annotation: The article is based on scientific works and expert opinions on the situation in Uzbekistan and in the Central Asian region. In addition, materials from the press, both Uzbek and Russian, were used.

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Uzbekistan is the historical and transport center of Central Asia. It is the third most populous country in the post-Soviet space after Russia and Ukraine (45 million people live in Ukraine in 2018 and 32 million in Uzbekistan). Taking into account the demographic situation (in 2017, the country's population grew by 3.3%) by 2050. Uzbekistan will become the second most populous country in the post-Soviet space, as, according to the "average" UN forecast, by this time the population of Ukraine will fall to 36 million, and Uzbekistan will grow to 40 million.

Numerous Uzbek Diasporas live in all Central Asian countries. The country has significant economic self-sufficiency, although it imports flour, medicines, machinery and equipment. Uzbekistan also has a powerful army. Economic self-sufficiency and strong power structures are an important foreign policy resource of the country.

It should be noted that the international research community still does not have a well-established position on the assessment of Sh. Mirziyoyev's reforms. The authors of this article had the opportunity to interview many representatives of the foreign and Russian expert community on this issue. Western researchers generally support the course of reforms. However, they Express some skepticism about the methods of their implementation and believe that the reforms do not change the nature of the political system (described by them as rigidly authoritarian). Chinese researchers, in turn, do not support this skepticism. They believe that the reforms will strengthen the opportunities for objective interaction between Uzbekistan and China within the framework of the "Belt and road «initiative. Russian

researchers are generally positive about the reforms, especially their foreign policy aspects. A small number of state-conservative experts believe that the reforms, if they go far enough, could strengthen Western influence in Uzbekistan, as well as weaken Russia's influence in Central Asia. However, most experts believe that at this stage, the reforms are absolutely in line with Russia's interests.

As sh. Mirziyoyev noted, the main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy is the Central Asian region, which is linked to the country's main national interests.⁶ In this case, there is certain continuity in relation to the traditional policy of Uzbekistan. In the Concept of Uzbekistan's foreign policy adopted under Islam Karimov, Central Asia was designated as the main priority of Tashkent's foreign policy. The priority of Central Asia was also confirmed by the fact that Mirziyoyev held his first meeting as President with the head of Kyrgyzstan A. Atambayev, and the new Uzbek President paid his first visits to neighboring States: Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. The next visits were to Moscow and Beijing.

In early February 2017, Uzbekistan approved the country's development Strategy for 2017-2021, which focuses the Republic's foreign policy activities on creating a belt of security, stability and good-neighborliness around Uzbekistan. This once again confirmed the priority role of Central Asia for Uzbekistan.

In relations with Tajikistan in 2018, there was a real breakthrough: a visa-free regime was introduced between the two countries, and a fundamental decision was made on cooperation in the water and energy sector. This breakthrough was prepared for a long time. In September 2016, at the personal invitation of sh. Mirziyoyev (at that time acting President), the Minister of foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan A. Kamilov paid an unscheduled working visit. In early October 2016, for the first time in many years, an Uzbek delegation arrived in Tajikistan. The meeting discussed possible cooperation in the areas of water use, rail and road transport, and energy.

Relations with Kyrgyzstan were linked by water and energy problems similar to Tajikistan, and a mutually beneficial solution was also found here. In December 2016, the President of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev made a working visit to Uzbekistan, where he held talks with Sh. Mirziyoyev. This was the first meeting of sh. Mirziyoyev as President with the leader of another country and the first visit of the head of Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan

in eight years. Among the issues discussed were economic cooperation and border issues in the Ferghana valley region. In the summer / fall 2017 the delimitation of the border between the countries has been agreed (only about 15% of the border length has not been agreed).

Relations between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan under the current President of Turkmenistan, G. Berdimuhamedov, have steadily improved after a very serious crisis that broke out in the last years of the rule of President S. Niyazov. As you know, after the story of the attempt on the President of Turkmenistan, the Turkmen special services broke into the territory of the Uzbek Embassy and the apartments of Uzbek diplomats under the pretext of searching for "terrorists". This was followed by a series of hostile actions by the two States against each other, including the introduction of Uzbek troops into the territory of the disputed reservoir and ethnic cleansing of Uzbeks in the border areas of Turkmenistan.

There is a serious potential for further development of Turkmen-Uzbek relations, which Sh. Mirziyoyev is trying to realize. In early March 2017, Mirziyoyev paid a state visit to Turkmenistan. It should be particularly noted that this was his first foreign trip as President of Uzbekistan, which confirmed the existing priority for Tashkent's relations with the Central Asian States.

Uzbekistan is also interested in cooperation in the gas industry, in particular in exporting its gas through pipelines running from Turkmenistan to China.

After signing documents at the level of heads of state, agreements were reached on cross-border cooperation at the level of regions and enterprises.

Mirziyoyev's key foreign policy achievement is to improve relations with Kazakhstan. In this context, it is significant that Sh. Mirziyoyev paid his second visit as President to Kazakhstan (and earlier it was even planned that this would be the first visit). During the visit, much attention was paid to economic issues, perhaps even the creation of a joint economic zone.¹¹ Due to the General crisis in the post-Soviet space, trade relations between the two neighbors were at that time in a state of decline. At the end of 2015 the trade turnover between the two countries was at the level of us \$ 3 billion, and in 2016 this figure fell to us \$ 2 billion. Other issues of bilateral cooperation were also discussed during the visit.

During the trip, a document was signed on cooperation between the defense ministries of the two countries, which will strengthen coordination in such areas as fighting the threat of international terrorism, including from the territory of Afghanistan.

In General, there are great prospects for bringing the positions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan closer in the short term. There are very few sectors where the producers of the two countries compete with each other. The countries have close trade relations. Kazakhstan has been ranked third in the list of Uzbekistan's main foreign trade partners after the PRC and the Russian Federation for many years.

Wu Hongwei, head of the Central Asia Department at the Institute of Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia at the Chinese Academy of social Sciences, noted: "The Republic has already made significant progress in the social sphere... In this regard, Uzbekistan has accumulated a lot of experience that can be useful for other States. Although China has made great progress in its development, there is still much to improve, so the Uzbek experience deserves to be studied and even borrowed from Chinese practice.

However, if relations with China continue to develop steadily for many years, then a serious breakthrough has been achieved in relations with Russia. This is significant from the point of view of Moscow's interests, since relations with Uzbekistan were periodically, to put it mildly, not the "warmest, which was one of the most important constraints of Russian "soft power" in the region.

To a certain extent, Mirziyoyev's family and other informal ties with the famous Russian oligarch A. Usmanov and some other influential representatives of the Uzbek Diaspora in Russia may contribute to strengthening ties with Russia.

It should be noted that rumors that appeared in the Russian press after President sh.Mirziyoyev came to power about the possibility of Uzbekistan joining the CSTO and the EEU were refuted in July 2017 by a statement by foreign Minister A. Kamilov. Joining the CSTO contradicts the principles of the foreign policy Concept approved in 2012, which stipulates that Uzbekistan will not enter military-political blocs and will not place foreign military bases on its territory. Joining the EEU, according to many representatives of the Uzbek elite, will lead to an increase in prices. It also contradicts the principles of national protectionist policy. In addition, after the ratification of the agreement on joining the CIS

free trade Zone (FTA), Uzbekistan already has expanded access to the markets of the EEU countries. Preferential trade with the CIS FTA countries will expire in 2019. Then Uzbekistan will have to gradually reduce protectionist tariffs and excise taxes on a number of goods and open its markets to the products of other FTA participants.

Curtailing reforms without major socio-economic changes: In a country as complex as Uzbekistan, reforms can lead to increased socio-economic instability. That is why I. Karimov, fearing the strengthening of the Islamists' positions, avoided carrying out reforms for such a long time. If total control is weakened, the positions of the radical religious opposition may become stronger.

The reforms are getting out of control. If the reforms lead to a temporary deterioration of the socio-economic situation of the masses against the background of the weakening of state control and the positions of power structures, a revolutionary explosion is possible.

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