

“Flowering” Central Asia will build security and prosperity from within, expert on region says

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ASTANA – In an exclusive interview with The Astana Times, Dr. Frederick Starr, founder and former chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and currently distinguished fellow for Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Council discussed the current situation in countries of the region and provided his outlook on the Eurasian Economic Union.



How would you assess the current situation in Afghanistan, and what do you think the future holds for that country? In your opinion, what can be done to mitigate the situation there, and what is the role of the United States?

The United States has spent eight years declaring what it was not doing in Afghanistan. At the time, we published a paper entitled “Finish The Job,” which called for opening up age-old transport routes that would give Afghan producers access to markets and foreigners the ability to trade with, and over, Afghanistan. The new policy candidly acknowledges what remains to be done and the obstacles to doing so. Most importantly, it signals to Afghans and neighbours that the United States will persist and work towards a stable and viable Afghanistan. This will not be

easy. But with stable borders, vast resources, a very talented rising generation of modern men and women, and many well-wishers, notably in Central Asia, Afghanistan can and, in my judgment, eventually will, turn the corner. This will benefit everyone.

In a recent interview with Eurasia Daily you said that the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has some element of economics, but the element of politics is bigger, and that ultimately the union is unnecessary. Could you please explain your reasoning?

My continued scepticism about the EAEU arises from the blunt reality of its being comprised of one very large power and several very small powers. I agree with Ambassador-at-Large of Singapore Bilahari Kausikan that such imbalances, wherever they occur, inevitably impart a political character to the arrangements. Nothing that has been done to date neutralises this reality. As the International Monetary Fund notes, whenever a trading bloc is formed, it may reduce barriers among members but at the price of increasing them with the outside world. And we live in a big world.

How would you characterise the situation in Uzbekistan and the administration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev?

Recent developments in Uzbekistan are extremely promising not only for that country but for the region. However, it would be a mistake to think this constitutes a radical change in all areas. Note that President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev and former President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov signed a strategic partnership agreement and exchanged business delegations nearly half a decade ago, while several domestic legal reforms began as early as 2012. The pace of change is rapid, however, and focuses on the integration of Uzbekistan into world fiscal and financial practices, responsive government, the rule of law and a regional partnership comprising all the countries of Central Asia.

As for the region as a whole, what are the main challenges faced by Central Asia right now? Which ones need an immediate response, in your opinion?

President Nazarbayev pointed out at last year's gathering of the Astana Club that the re-emergence of Central Asia as a zone with common interests, common understandings and shared values is a necessary and highly desirable development. He made this statement a week before the elections in Uzbekistan. Now I am particularly heartened that President Mirziyoyev echoes President Nazarbayev's insistence that Afghanistan, too, is a part of Central Asia and not merely a neighbour. Perhaps it is time for external powers and international organisations and financial institutions to accept this fundamental reality. The main point is that the flowering of Central Asia as a multi-hubbed world region of over 100 talented and energetic million people will build security and prosperity from within, and is not against anyone. All external powers should accept and respect this truth, and practice mutual self-restraint.