

# Is This The Start Of Regional Cooperation In Central Asia?

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It looks like the new president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyayev, is keeping at least one of his promises.

Not long after independent Uzbekistan's founding president, Islam Karimov, died in September 2016, his successor said one of his priorities would be better relations with neighboring Central Asian states.

Mirziyayev met with Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov at the Turkmen Caspian resort area Awaza on May 19-20, and among the many agreements they reached was one on Turkmen electricity exports to Kazakhstan and to Kyrgyzstan via Uzbekistan's territory.

That doesn't sound like much, but it reverses a nearly 15-year trend of decoupling in Central Asia.

In the Soviet-era, a Central Asian unified grid was established, drawing on power sources such as oil in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, gas in Turkmenistan, hydropower from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and coal from all but Turkmenistan. All five then-Soviet republics were interconnected; so, for example, southern Kazakhstan received gas from Uzbekistan.

## **Energy Shortages**

In 2003, "neutral" Turkmenistan withdrew from the grid. In 2009, Uzbekistan withdrew, causing severe power shortages in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Some believe that this was Karimov's intention -- a response to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan very publicly forging ahead with massive hydropower plant projects on the upper reaches of rivers that flowed into Uzbekistan.

It was only one aspect of a process that saw the five countries **sever many of the road, rail, and air links** that had connected them for decades before independence, and devote significant funds to building up infrastructure that avoided neighbors' territories.

For the last several years, Turkmenistan has wanted to sell electricity to Tajikistan, the latter being habitually short of power in the winter due to a reliance on hydropower, and the former having gas-fired electrical power stations that operate throughout the year.

Berdymukhammedov and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon have agreed to such a deal, but that power would be most easily transferred using lines that cross some 200 kilometers of Uzbekistan's territory.

Uzbek President Karimov was reportedly unwilling to agree to that, so the Turkmen-Tajik deal never moved forward.

Tajikistan was not mentioned in reports about Berdymukhammedov and Mirziyaev's meeting in Awaza. But judging by the chummy pictures of Mirziyaev and Rahmon at the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh on May 21, it probably won't be difficult now to reach a deal for the Turkmen-Tajik power transmission lines.



Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyayev (right) with his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon in Riyadh on May 21.

For Kyrgyzstan, the agreement in Awaza is a welcome surprise.

Since the early days of independence, most of the stories of Uzbek-Kyrgyz energy ties were those of Uzbekistan shutting off the gas to Kyrgyzstan, sometimes in the heart of winter and usually for political reasons, though it is true that Kyrgyzstan was almost constantly in debt for Uzbek gas supplies.

Gas has not been much of a concern for Kyrgyzstan since 2014, when Russia's Gazprom purchased Kyrgyzgaz for a symbolic \$1 and pledged to spend hundreds of millions of dollars upgrading and expanding Kyrgyzstan's internal gas network.

But Kyrgyzstan is still reliant on its hydropower supplies and still short of electricity, so steady supplies from Turkmenistan during winter months would be helpful.

Kazakhstan could also use the extra electricity. It would give the Kazakh authorities extra time to bring domestic sources of power to the southern parts of the country.

Kazakhstan is still experiencing its own economic difficulties, and the government would appreciate this unexpected, if only temporary, relief on state coffers.

### **Hopeful Sign**

The process of building and rerouting energy distribution networks from northern Kazakhstan to the south has been under way for many years and was sparked originally by the Kazakh government's desire to stop having to deal with Uzbekistan for gas supplies.

So Mirziyayev's agreement on Turkmen electricity exports represents progress in regional integration, though admittedly, he might be simply removing obstacles he inherited from the previous administration.

It is not a bold new initiative for regional cooperation. But it is a hopeful sign, especially when Mirziyayev's other moves to improve ties with Central Asian neighbors might seem guided merely by self-interest.

Mirziyayev's trip to Awaza was the second trip to Turkmenistan in less than three months; his first state visit as Uzbekistan's president was to Turkmenistan on March 6-7. Mirziyayev has also visited Kazakhstan twice -- on March 22-23 and again on April 29.

While he was generally trying to improve Uzbekistan's relations with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and hopefully find new markets particularly for Uzbekistan's agricultural products, Mirziyayev was looking for supplies of oil from both countries.

Gasoline shortages have been a huge problem in Uzbekistan for many years. Uzbekistan's domestic oil production has fallen by more than 40 percent in the last 10 years, and its three operating refineries are currently functioning below capacity due to lack of oil.

Long lines at Uzbekistan's filling stations have become common and are a source of social discontent.

Mirziyaev has only been in power since September. Making gasoline consistently available at filling stations is one relatively easy way of gaining some popular support.

In March and April, Mirziyaev secured deals for oil supplies from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia (which he visited on April 4-5). The Russian and Kazakh oil will come to Uzbekistan through Kazakh pipelines and will link up with a new Uzbek pipeline, yet to be built, and be taken to a new, fourth refinery, yet to be built, in Uzbekistan's Jizzakh region. The Turkmen oil goes to the refinery in Bukhara.



Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev (right) and Shavkat Mirziyaev exchange documents during a signing ceremony following their meeting in Astana in March.

So one could say Mirziyayev's trips to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan were at least partially motivated by the desire to resolve one of Uzbekistan's urgent domestic problems.

Mirziyayev's latest trip to Turkmenistan, however, brought a note of caution, especially for people in southern Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan who might already be imagining warm and well-lit apartments throughout winter.

### **Meaningless Agreements?**

The electricity export deal was not the only energy agreement the two countries signed in Awaza.

Uzbekistan agreed to join the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural-gas pipeline project, and state company Uzbekneftegaz signed a deal to help develop one of Turkmenistan's Caspian Sea oil and gas fields.

These seem to be meaningless agreements.

TAPI is unlikely to be built anytime soon because more than 700 kilometers of the planned pipeline runs through areas of Afghanistan that are now scenes of intense fighting.

Consequently, the operating manager of the project, Turkmengaz, has not had much luck finding investors willing to pitch in some of the estimated \$10 billion the pipeline will cost to construct.

The biggest obstacle to Uzbekneftegaz and Turkmennebit developing a Caspian Sea field is also financing. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan do not currently have the large amount of money needed for such projects.

Another problem is that Uzbekneftegaz has no experience in developing an offshore field, so it is unclear what sort of role the Uzbek company could play.

Mirziyaev may well deserve credit for acting on his promise to improve ties with the neighbors. Six months into his tenure, Uzbekistan's relations with its neighboring states are already better than they were during the last 10 or 15 years under Karimov.

Most of the agreements Mirziyaev has reached with his neighbors represent efforts to address short-term political necessities; there is not much so far that suggests long-term policy changes are coming.

The Turkmen electricity exports to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are therefore something of a litmus test, because Uzbekistan does not receive much (only transit fees) for its part in this arrangement, and it promises to be a long-term deal.

Allowing this electricity agreement to go through and operate unhindered would demonstrate an interest in regional cooperation that Tashkent has not shown in a long time.

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***The views expressed in this blog post do not necessarily reflect those of RFE/RL***