

# Uzbekistan in the Spotlight

The center of Central Asia has turned its focus to multilateral regional cooperation.

*By Catherine Putz*

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In the week before Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, died last year, Uzbek and Kyrgyz border troops were facing off on a mountain. The standoff was just the most recent flare in a 25-year-old dispute over the border and part of a larger deterioration in relations between the two Central Asian states.



A girl is silhouetted against the sun standing next to Uzbek flags in Tashkent November 5, 2005.

Image Credit: REUTERS/Shamil Zhumatov/File Photo

A year later, [thousands attended](#) the reopening of a major border crossing which coincided with the first visit of an Uzbek president to the Kyrgyz capital in 17 years. [A few weeks later](#), RFE/RL reported that Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were “poised any day to reopen all their shared overland checkpoints and simplify border-crossing procedures.”

The warming of relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is just one example of a remarkable change in Tashkent's tone, toward its neighbors most especially.

While regional watchers remain skeptical about the durability of domestic reforms, few can refute the change in tone coming out of Tashkent. There's more hope than ever before that change is possible in Uzbekistan. Further, there's hope that the heart of Central Asia can facilitate positive developments across the whole region. Repairing bilateral relationships is just one piece of this puzzle, a second is Tashkent's emerging embrace of multilateral cooperation.

As Tashkent seeks to play a more important and active role in the region it is planning to host a large high-level conference in early November, held under the auspices of the UN and in conjunction with the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy (UNRCCA) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The conference, titled “Central Asia: Shared Past and Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity” will be held in Samarkand, November 10-11.

In his recent remarks at the [United Nations General Debate](#), [President Shavkat Mirziyoyev said](#), “Uzbekistan is determined to engage in dialogue, constructive interaction and strengthening [sic] the good-neighborliness.” He went on to state,

“In a word, [an] absolutely new political atmosphere was created in the region in a short period of time” and endorse regular meetings of Central Asian heads of state.

A concept paper and draft program for the November Samarkand conference viewed by *The Diplomat* revealed an ambitious agenda aimed at highlighting several major issues regarding security and development across the Central Asian region. The conference, according to the concept paper, will provide a forum for “open exchange of views on current security and sustainable development problems in the region” as well as focus on developing solutions and identifying “specific promising areas” to strengthen inter-regional cooperation and draw in international support and investment.

Among the issues organizers hope to address with the conference are five key areas: regional security, with a heavy focus on combating terrorism and the drug trade; Afghanistan; regional cooperation in political, trade, communication, and humanitarian spheres; addressing the Aral Sea catastrophe and other regional water issues; and lastly, international assistance in helping Central Asia confront its challenges.

None of these topics are new — so what’s different about this conference?

Evan Feigenbaum, vice chairman of The University of Chicago’s Paulson Institute and a former Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs told *The Diplomat*, “In my experience, at least, you could often count on Tashkent to disrupt various regional pacts, schemes, initiatives or ideas. Was like clockwork, or the sun rising in the east and setting in the west.”

“So what’s happening now is positive, suggests the winds are shifting, and opens the possibility for greater Uzbek participation and potentially leadership from and by Tashkent on issues of collective interest,” he said when asked about the planned November conference.

UNRCCA Senior Political Officer Philipp Saprykin said in an email to *The Diplomat* that the center has been advocating for “a regular High-Level political and security format of dialogue for [Central Asian] states to be facilitated by the UN/UNRCCA, and to take place in every [Central Asian] capital on a rotational basis.”

“The foreseen conference in Samarkand represents an opportunity to materialize these efforts and pave the way for such regular platform to be established,” he said.

UNRCCA is a special UN political mission that was established in 2007 with its headquarters in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. The mission’s mandate was to promote dialogue between the states of Central Asia, but regional cooperative mechanisms have been slow to develop and previous efforts often driven or co-opted by large, adjacent powers like China or Russia. Central Asia is not bereft of an alphabet-soup collection of groupings, but most — the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU/EAEU) — are led by external giants rather than driven by regional, Central Asian directives.

Saprykin also said “The new leadership in Tashkent has clearly indicated a firm intention to promote regional cooperation through the UN.”

A draft agenda for the conference, viewed by *The Diplomat*, underscored Uzbekistan’s ambition in this regard. The agenda lists, for example, an opening keynote by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. Saprykin clarified that Guterres’ attendance has not yet been confirmed but did point out that the secretary-general recently paid a visit to Central Asia. Traveling to all five regional capitals, he “reiterated the importance of regional cooperation and preventive diplomacy to tackle the region’s most pressing issues, which, among others, include the management of transboundary water resources and counterterrorism.”

Such a diplomatic foray to Central Asia so early in his tenure is notable. Guterres took office in January 2017 and traveled to the region in June. Guterres’ predecessor, Ban Ki-Moon, made his first visit to Central Asia in 2010, three years into his tenure. Kofi Annan, who took over as secretary-general in 1997, made his first visit to Central Asia in 2002, the first UN secretary-general to do so after Uzbekistan joined the UN as an independent state in 1992.

Guterres may not ultimately speak at the conference, but Saprykin said his summertime visit, as well as the “shuttle diplomacy” of UNRCCA’s Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, Petko Draganov, “largely contributed to materializing the conference to take place in Samarkand in November.”

Promotion of regional cooperation has been a long-running paradox in Central Asia. While scholars like [Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw](#) astutely point out that Central Asia is, in fact, integrated into global systems (namely in financial and energy fields, with a distinct tilt toward the shady end of the business spectrum); connectivity — and the myriad benefits it entails — is nevertheless a routine talking point. Central Asia’s ills (its economic ills, at least), some argue, could be cured by greater regional cooperation.

Saprykin, of UNRCCA, said “Uzbekistan usually engaged bilaterally with the other Central Asian states” and that the conference “is evidence of Uzbekistan’s willingness to re-engage at the regional level with its neighbors, counting on UNRCCA’s robust preventive diplomacy mandate and convening powers as a tool for promoting regional solutions to some of the most significant challenges the region is facing.”

For a long time Uzbekistan participated just barely in regional initiatives, and at times disruptively so. One illustrative example is the country’s in-again, out-again relationship with the CSTO: a founding member, withdrew in 1999, joined again in 2006, withdrew again in 2012. Karimov’s abrasive style made him few friends and his preference for isolation — in his mind, perhaps, a defiant defense of Uzbek sovereignty — limited the Uzbek economy, preventing it from reaching its real potential as a regional hub, and curtailed the state’s ability to develop meaningful soft power in the region.

With new leadership has come a change in tone and perhaps a genuine change in perspective. Rather than just sources of risk, Tashkent is looking at its neighbors as part of the path to greater prosperity and the entire region could benefit not just from active Uzbek participation in regional affairs, but Uzbek leadership.

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