

# The Re-emerging Self-Confidence of Central Asia

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Originally published by *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018

*Something is stirring in Central Asia. The past two weeks have seen a flurry of bilateral and multilateral get-togethers, starting on March 9, when Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev arrived with great fanfare in Dushanbe for the first state visit of a president of Uzbekistan to Tajikistan since 2000. Less than a week later, on March 15, the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well as the speaker of Turkmenistan's parliament gathered in Astana for the first exclusively regional "summit" in almost a decade. What do these meetings, each producing several intriguing bilateral and multilateral agreements and statements, mean for the prospects of Central Asian countries finally embarking upon a path of development through cooperation?*

**BACKGROUND:** Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's two-day official visit with his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon in Dushanbe on March 9-10 represented a landmark event in the relationship between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The two presidents signed 27 bilateral agreements, including deals worth \$140 million, an agreement to gradually open all 16 border crossings on the Tajik-Uzbek border and the introduction of visa-free regime for citizens of the two countries for visits up to 30 days. So successful was the meeting that the two presidents concluded that practically all the issues that have accumulated in the last 20 or more years had been resolved. Mirziyoyev also reiterated an informal approval regarding Tajikistan's completion of the gigantic Rogun dam. This marks a truly stunning turn-around from the long-standing and fierce Uzbek opposition to the Rogun dam, which it has feared would disrupt Uzbekistan's irrigation of its agriculture, in particular the water-hungry cotton production.

The activities continued on the multilateral level a few days later when Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev stood as host of the first exclusively regional meeting since April 2009 in the Kazakh capital Astana. Nazarbayev attributed the gathering of the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well as the speaker of Turkmenistan's parliament to the new mood taking hold in the region. In a joint statement, Central Asian leaders expressed their "desire for regional cooperation, mutual support, and joint solution of topical issues in order to ensure security, stability and sustainable development of our entire region".

In a particularly noteworthy remark, Nazarbayev put the newfound self-confidence within the region in words: "We all have two big partners – Russia and China. We will always work together with them. All agreements will remain in force. Some of our countries are in the Eurasian Union, some are in the CSTO, and some are not, but that is not important. But we ourselves must solve our own problems without involving any third party." Nazarbayev's phrasing echoed the joint Tajik-Uzbek statement on the region a few days earlier.

**IMPLICATIONS:** What is the significance of all this for the region? The gains to be reaped from closer regional cooperation have been thoroughly documented for well over a decade, including by international organizations such as UNDP, IMF and the World Bank. Cooperation could improve regional security, trade and transport, water management and energy development, while enhancing Central Asia's collective weight vis-à-vis external actors. However, to achieve closer cooperation has proved to be an arduous task. Indeed, for the better part of the first quarter of a century of independence, the regional states tended to turn inwards, protecting their own sovereignties, identities and interests, and in the process often defining themselves in opposition to their neighbors. This is neither unique nor surprising for states seeking to assert their statehood and construct independent political and economic systems.

That said, Central Asian leaders have not been ignorant of the potential of regional cooperation. Discussions on Central Asian integration did take place in the 1990s. In 1994, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a treaty creating a common economic space between the two countries, which Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan latter also joined, leading to the Central Asia Economic Forum in 1998. Four years later, in 2002, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) was officially created with the same four states as participants with the declared ambition to promote economic cooperation and coordinate foreign policy. However, by 2005 CACO had effectively ceased to exist, as the Russian-led Euro-Asian Economic Community (EurAsEC) – the predecessor to the present-day Eurasian Economic Union, absorbed it. Since then, a litany of outstanding issues – such as border disputes, conflicts over water, trade barriers, inter-ethnic tensions, diverging views on the role of Russia in Central Asia and personal animosities between leaders – have poisoned the collaborative climate in the region.

Against this backdrop, one may be forgiven for asking why things may turn out differently this time around? The truly potential game-changer is the winds of change coming from inside Uzbekistan – the core country in the region, and key to regional cooperation. Indeed, the last week's high-profiled meetings only represent the crescendo of a steady evolution towards closer coordination and collaboration emerging in the region after Mirziyoyev's ascent to power in Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev rapidly steered his foreign policy onto a proactive course, with strengthening Uzbekistan's previously torn relations with its neighbors as first priority, starting with the revival of intra-regional trade. As Mirziyoyev noted, some results are already visible. Uzbekistan's trade with the other four countries reached almost \$3 billion in 2017, representing an increase of 20 percent compared to 2016. The stated ambition over the coming years is to bring that figure up to \$5 billion.

In launching Uzbekistan's new regional policy, Mirziyoyev's first foreign visit went to Turkmenistan in March 2017, resulting in a strategic cooperation agreement. In a subsequent working visit in May that year, the two leaders filled the partnership with joint energy and transport and transit initiatives. Of particular importance was the signing of a memorandum on transiting electricity from Turkmenistan to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan through Uzbekistan's power system. The two countries have also stated their interest in jointly developing Caspian oil and gas resources.

As for relations with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan's major trading partner in the region, these have in the past been constrained by different approaches to Russian-dominated regional arrangements and a certain rivalry over the leadership position in

the region. As part of its attempt to open up for trade and investments, economic cooperation with Kazakhstan is a priority for Tashkent. And, on this basis, a strategic partnership is emerging between the two states. The significance of the Uzbek-Kazakh rapprochement can hardly be exaggerated. It is clear that for regional harmonization, coordination and collaboration to take hold, the concerted weight of these two intra-regional powers will be key. In fact, the importance of the Kazakh-Uzbek relationship as catalyst for political and economic cooperation in Central Asian resembles the special Franco-German relationship as the “engine” of European integration.

Finally, in the past year Uzbekistan’s past assertiveness towards its smaller neighbors Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has been all but gone. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have decided to pursue mutual cooperation that ensures an integrated use of water and energy that are beneficial for both countries. The two governments have also agreed on the delineation of 85 percent of their contested border, previously the location of several armed clashes between border guards. The relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had also seen several breakthroughs even before Mirziyoyev’s visit, which essentially confirmed and expanded upon the significant progresses already made. Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan not only relaxed its position on the Rogun dam, but also reinstated direct flights between Dushanbe and Tashkent, reopened borders and signaled a strong commitment to reestablish the common electricity grid that tied the countries together in Soviet times.

Instead of ultimatums, statements from the region emphasize the need for compromises and cooperative solutions that take into consideration the interests of all states. The enthusiasm with which Uzbekistan’s regional policy have been met by its neighbors clearly demonstrates that it would only be beneficial for all countries.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Since the ongoing cooperative processes in the region is still at a highly formative stage with no clear direction let alone endpoint in sight, any conclusions must be of a preliminary nature. What can be observed, however, is that the initiatives are emerging from within the region itself, without the involvement of external forces. In this light, Russian media have duly noted the significance of Central Asian governments gathering in Astana without Russian participation. In that sense, the nascent self-confidence of the region communicates the Central Asian nations’ right, as sovereign entities, to undertake initiatives of their own, without the involvement of outside powers. How Moscow will respond to this dynamic remains to be seen.

Recent developments also suggest the important role of political leaders in promoting or thwarting regional cooperation. While the current concord among regional leaders has certainly been key to the rapidly changing cooperation climate in Central Asia, its long-term robustness is likely to depend on agreements and forms of cooperation that makes its future dynamic less reliant on personalities and possible “mood swings.” In short, sustainable and predictable cooperation will probably require some mechanisms of institutionalization. Admittedly, given Kyrgyzstan’s strong dependency on Russia and Kazakhstan’s ever-present challenge of managing the delicate relationship with its northern neighbor, intra-regional mechanisms seem challenging to find for now.

Another key question relates to the extent to which Turkmenistan is committed to region-wide initiatives. Among observers, some fuzz was made out of the absence of the president of Turkmenistan from the meeting in Astana, due to a scheduled visit to the United Arab Emirates. Without speculating on this point, it is sufficient to recall that Turkmenistan, with its internationally recognized policy of permanent neutrality, has a history of eschewing multilateral cooperation. In addition, Ashgabat has tended to view its economic and security interests as somewhat distinct from the rest of the region. But for regional cooperation to really take hold in the region, Turkmenistan is a key country. This is especially obvious for realizing Central Asian leaders' ambition to turn the region into a corridor for land-based trade between Europe and Asia and to connect the east and west of the Caspian Sea. In these projects, the strategic importance of Turkmenistan as a transit corridor is absolutely critical.

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