

China's Belt and Road Gets a Central Asian Boost

Uzbekistan's transformation will fast-track the new Silk Road.

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As China reaches out to seize business opportunities, its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded to include everything from ports in the Indian Ocean to icebreakers traveling the Northern Sea Route. However, BRI is essentially an attempt to recreate the fabled Silk Road. Central Asia was the heart of the ancient Silk Road — and Uzbekistan lies at the heart of Central Asia. It is the region's most populous country, and the only one that shares borders with all of the others. Uzbekistan also has the greatest potential for industrial development, based on its past as host for Soviet technological research and its large, young labor force.

Under the cantankerous President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan was an impediment to the integration of the Central Asian states, the resuscitation of their economies, and the realization of China's BRI. For example, Tajikistan's largest company and main export earner, the aluminum smelter Talco, is dependent on the import of ore by rail via Uzbekistan, which was repeatedly blocked by Karimov. His foreign policy included meddling in the affairs of neighboring countries, shutting off their gas supplies, closing border posts and flights, and having herders who followed stray livestock across the border shot on sight.

When Karimov died in September 2016 after ruling Uzbekistan with an iron fist for 27 years, few people inside or outside the country knew what to expect. There was no heir apparent or clear mechanism for selecting a successor, and pundits had long been warning about the risk of instability following the death of Central Asia's one-man-show presidents. Karimov's once-favorite daughter, Gulnara Karimova, was already under house arrest for her involvement in large-scale corruption, and it was feared that a protracted power struggle might ensue.

However, the reins were quickly seized by Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, a figure about whom little was known in the West. Among the few available pieces of information were unsubstantiated accounts that he, in a past position as regional governor, personally beat up a math professor whose students were being used as forced labor in the cotton harvest and were not picking fast enough. Some therefore expected Mirziyoyev to be a more energetic and even more brutal version of Karimov, under whom hundreds of protesters, including women and children, were shot in the town of Andijan in 2005.

Yet Mirziyoyev now increasingly appears as an Uzbek Deng Xiaoping. He swiftly kickstarted a series of large-scale reforms, lashed out at corruption, and made unprecedented friendly overtures to all of Uzbekistan's estranged neighbors. Initiatives during his first year in power included currency conversion reform, trade liberalization, improvement of the business climate, reform of the cotton industry, simplified entry for foreign nationals, and welcoming the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development back to Uzbekistan. Along with North Korea, Uzbekistan has been one of the few countries in the world to maintain an exit visa regime for its own citizens, but in 2019 this too will be scrapped.

In the first year of his presidency, Mirziyoyev visited Kazakhstan four times, Turkmenistan three times, and Russia twice, as well as China, Kyrgyzstan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States. Noteworthy effects of this charm offensive have concerned relations with neighboring Tajikistan, which Mirziyoyev visited in March. Freight trains carrying ore for Talco's aluminum production now roll unhindered through Uzbekistan; direct passenger flights between the two countries have been permitted for the first time in 25 years; a 30-day visa-free regime has been established; and 10 of the 16 border checkpoints that had been closed have been reopened, with the remainder under discussion.

Given Uzbekistan's new foreign policy outlook, solving regional squabbles over shared water resources now appears more feasible than at any time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 2012, Karimov threatened to go to war over water issues. Above all, he was opposed to the construction of the 3,600 MW Rogun hydropower dam in Tajikistan, which the Uzbeks fear could disrupt the supply of water for their main export: cotton. But in March 2018, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov unexpectedly declared that Tajikistan could go ahead with the dam, as long as long as Uzbekistan's interests were taken into account and it is built in accordance with the relevant international conventions to which Tajikistan is party.

Uzbekistan's newfound openness will benefit China's Belt and Road Initiative both directly and indirectly. It will have a *direct* positive impact by making it easier and more secure for the Chinese and others to invest in transport infrastructure crisscrossing Central Asia. It will have an *indirect* positive impact by facilitating economic growth in Central Asia — rendering the Belt and Road less of a road to nowhere, and more economically meaningful for the Chinese.

As Central Asia's Uzbek capstone slides into place, the Chinese can look forward to reaping the fruits of all that they have quietly been sowing across the region, including investments in oil, gas, railways, roads, dry ports, agriculture and the electricity sector. The currency of Chinese soft-power investments is also likely to rise, including the 11 Confucius Institutes across Central Asia and the education of 23,000 students from the region at Chinese universities.

Of course, Karimov was not the sole obstacle to Central Asian integration. It takes five to tango, Central-Asian style, and most of the other countries in the region frequently engaged in tit-for-tats with Karimov's Uzbekistan while their Soviet-trained leaders busied themselves building national identities to set them apart from their neighbors. However, when it came to interstate relations, Karimov was the worst of the lot and his replacement by Mirziyoyev may tip the balance towards greater regional integration.

The impact on BRI of Uzbekistan's new foreign policy stance also does not hinge on the country aligning with China per se. It is not unlikely that Mirziyoyev — like Karimov before him, and like Presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow in neighboring Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan — will do everything possible to maintain the independence of his country from major outside powers. Fears of China (and especially Chinese migrants), though less palpable than in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are also evident among the Uzbek population. However, although China behaves intrusively and coercively in contexts like the

South China Sea or the Doklam Plateau, the logic of BRI in Central Asia is one of connectivity, cooperation, and large-scale investment. All China needs to make BRI work in Central Asia is open borders and receptivity to Chinese capital.

As yet, Mirziyoyev does not appear set on any major program of democratization, beyond a slight loosening of the reins on religion and civil society. Like Deng Xiaoping, his focus appears to be on the economy, security and foreign affairs. He is certainly no democratic reformer along the lines of Mikhail Gorbachev. This too should fit Chinese purposes nicely.

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