

# Paul Stronski on Central Asia's Big Questions

A discussion of Central Asia's hottest topics from Uzbekistan's reforms to Kazakh succession and China's Belt and Road.

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The five states of Central Asia — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — mark 27 years of independence in 2018. In an interview with *The Diplomat*, Paul Stronski, a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, fields the full gamut of questions about Central Asia, from the hottest topics — Uzbekistan's reforms and Kazakh succession — to what the world is missing in its view of the region.

**Arguably, the hottest topic in Central Asia of late has been Uzbekistan. What do you think the most important “reforms” have been? And alternatively, in what areas has Uzbekistan struggled (or not quite attempted) to make progress?**

Uzbekistan's most visible changes are to its foreign policy. Under the late President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan had a policy of self-isolation. This was due to the country's poor human rights record, its periodic desire to put distance between itself and its former colonial power Russia, and finally its reticence to work cooperatively with its neighbors. Karimov was a prickly leader and had a difficult relationship with all the other leaders of Central Asia, which impeded the ability of Central Asian states to cooperate.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's willingness to work with his Central Asian counterparts has created tremendous opportunities for Central Asia to cooperate on a myriad of long-standing problems (water, energy, transportation, trade, and regional economic development). Borders are open, which is facilitating direct country-to-country Central Asian trade. Internationally, today's Uzbekistan is courting the West; relations with Turkey are also improving. Russian President Vladimir Putin recently visited with a 1,000-strong delegation. Everyone is now interested in the new Uzbekistan. That is a big change.

The second area where there is promise is in economic modernization. Today Uzbekistan has declared itself open to the outside world. Mirziyoyev's government has liberalized the visa regime and is courting Uzbek diaspora to return to help jumpstart the country's socioeconomic development. Some are returning — a remarkable decision since many of these Uzbeks left the country for political or economic reasons years ago.

The government clearly wants to improve the investor and business climate, and attract international businesses. Economic modernization is needed because the previous economic system was not sustainable, particularly with the Uzbek youth population growing so quickly. Uzbek youths have limited job prospects at home. This has forced many Uzbeks to move abroad as economic migrants. Economic

modernization, however, will be hard. Even with diaspora returnees, Uzbekistan's biggest problem now is that it lacks the human capital needed to implement these reforms.

We need to remember, however, that reform in Uzbekistan is not full-democratic reform. I have no expectation that the country will become a democracy anytime soon. The justice sector and security services were early targets of Mirziyoyev's reforms, but those efforts were likely geared toward shoring up his political power and sidelining competitors as Mirziyoyev consolidated power during his first year in power. Other reforms have been slower and focused on narrow and localized issues. Uzbeks are now able to speak out about corruption in daily life — that's a big and positive change. If Uzbekistan truly addresses this sort of corruption, it will lead to improvements in people's everyday life. What is also interesting about domestic political reform is a greater openness to discuss formerly taboo topics and calls for localized officials to be more accountable to solving the people's problems. If it leads to improvements in socioeconomic conditions, it an important step in improving human security. If economic modernization and greater accountability lead to less corruption, better economic opportunities, and a higher quality of life, it is positive and should be encouraged.

As someone who lived in Uzbekistan for several years, I am hopeful for the country. Yet, it is too early to give these reforms a full assessment. Old habits die hard and Mirziyoyev's biggest challenge is breaking apart the old system without undermining his own legitimacy as someone who was a key participant in Karimov's regime. Mirziyoyev's government also has been lucky thus far. It has not faced any external or internal threats that would force it to react quickly. Its response to a crisis (a large protest at home or instability in a neighboring country) will likely be a significant test for whether Tashkent has turn the tide. We have not yet seen that sort of critical juncture.

**Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in his first two years in office, made regional cooperation a centerpiece of his foreign policy. How has Kazakhstan, in particular, responded to this spark of initiative and drive for regional leadership in its poorer but much more populous neighbor?**

So far, there is little competition between today's Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, although I certainly see it as a possibility. During the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras, Tashkent was the most influential city in Central Asia and Uzbekistan was seen as the regional leader. Uzbeks still see themselves as the regional leader, and this perception contributed to the difficult relationship between the Uzbek and Kazakh governments under President Karimov. The past two-and-a-half decades were lost decades for Uzbekistan, as the Kazakh economy grew and Astana became both the regional leader and an aspiring global power.

Kazakhstan now has the know-how and economy to lead the region; it is in a position to help Uzbekistan. But, Uzbekistan still has the strongest security forces and the largest population in the region. I think there is there is a lot of rationale for the two

government to work together in the future rather than to compete. Together, they are a huge market that can attract outside investors; together, they have greater leverage in their engagement with outside powers than they do each on their own.

In fact, the two countries' leaders seem to be on similar schedules in courting the West. Nazarbayev came to Washington in January of 2018 to engage President Donald Trump directly, followed just a few months later by Mirziyoyev. The Kazakh leader made a similar visit to Brussels in October 2018 with his Uzbek counterpart reportedly planning a similar visit in early 2019. Given the growing lack of Western (especially American) attention to Central Asia, these dual visits appear to be well-timed to complement each other and to signal to the West not to disengage from the region. I do not know whether Astana and Tashkent are coordinating these visits, but the close proximity of these head of state visits to Washington and Brussels is certainly notable.

**At 78, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev is Central Asia's oldest leader. Among regional watchers, speculation about succession is a favorite parlor game so I'll ask you to place your bet: Will Nazarbayev stand for election again in 2020 or do you think it more likely he'll bow out with a nod toward a chosen successor?**

I avoid answering questions like this. The only person who knows what Nazarbayev will do is Nazarbayev himself. I'm also not a betting person, so I won't speculate on who might succeed him whenever he decides to step down. We all know the names of the potential successors, but there could be wild cards too. Nobody predicted Vladimir Putin would succeed Boris Yeltsin a year before that succession took place. Few thought dentist Gurganbuly Berdymukhamedov would become president of Turkmenistan before it happened. So, I am reticent to speculate on a succession scenario in Kazakhstan.

What I do know is Kazakhstan has a tradition of calling surprise snap elections and there is buzz right now about early elections. I would not be surprised if the presidential election took place in 2019 instead of 2020. Nazarbayev recently reshuffled his government and laid out a plan to improve socioeconomic conditions, and he has been traveling extensively across the country since the summer. Early elections look likely.

**Kazakhstan was where, in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the land-based portion of what we now call the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As Chinese involvement in Central Asia has increased, has there been a rise in anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan or elsewhere in the region? If so, in what ways has that sentiment been expressed and do regional governments consider it a problem that needs addressing?**

When you talk to Central Asian government officials, China is a perennial topic of discussion. Those officials are adamant that everything is fine with China. It may be, but sometimes they are too adamant in making that case. The tremendous influx of

money from China certainly poses risks for Central Asia and China itself: growing debt burdens, the lack of transparency in many deals, economic degradation, and influx of Chinese workers in some places. Central Asian countries generally also are not looking beyond the BRI to develop more sustainable economies, which is a problem. BRI infrastructure will be great for Central Asia to become a transit region, but infrastructure construction does not create long-term jobs for Central Asians — a problem given expected population growth over the next decade.

As the Kazakh land protests of 2016 showed, China's growing economic influence risks inciting popular backlashes. The USSR cultivated anti-Chinese sentiment during the Cold War and some of that Sinophobia lingers. China has been trying to expand its soft power in the region to break through those stereotypes. It provides scholarships and fellowships to promising Central Asian students or academics, offers all-expense paid tours of China to opinion-makers in the region, and fosters the study of Chinese in Central Asia.

However, China's policies in Xinjiang risk undermining Chinese soft power in the region. Central Asians follow what is going on across the border. I was just in Kazakhstan and many Kazakhs expressed concern about the plight of the Uyghurs, and want their government to be more vocal, particularly since ethnic Kazakhs in China are impacted as well. But the government in Astana is wary of discussing the issue. It puts the Kazakh government between a rock and a hard place.

**In economic terms, Kazakhstan is far and away the most economically prosperous Central Asian state, followed distantly by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and even more distantly by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. While resource wealth explains much of this disparity between Central Asian states, how much disparity is there within these states between the rich and the poor? Do you think this economic inequality could have political consequences for the states of the region?**

Kazakhstan now classifies as a middle income country, but many Kazakh citizens don't feel the benefits of this economy. Wealth is not distributed evenly and corruption has a corrosive impact on the daily lives of people. This is a problem. Nazarbayev's [October 5 address](#) to the nation lays out plans to address socioeconomic issues. It is a recognition of the fact that the wealth of Kazakhstan is not being felt by many of its citizens. There also is a huge gap between Kazakhstan's boom towns (basically Astana and Almaty) and the rest of the country.

You see similar trends in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan: big gaps between capital cities and secondary cities, an urban-rural divide, and collapsed social-welfare networks. This is forcing many Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks to migrate elsewhere (Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey). There are even reports of Kazakhs now becoming migrant laborers in South Korea, although the high numbers of Kazakh migrants in the country may be exaggerated.

Socioeconomic disenfranchisement has led to political instability in many parts of the world, and it is certainly possible this could happen in Central Asia where the gaps between elites and the economically disenfranchised is probably higher than elsewhere. Given looming succession challenges in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, this wealth gap could prove challenging to new leaders, who may lack the political legitimacy their predecessors enjoyed. I also am particularly concerned about Turkmenistan right now. The social contract between the government and people has collapsed and the Turkmen people are hurting. The country looks fragile from the outside.

**Many international conversations about Central Asia focus almost exclusively on extremism or geopolitics with regard to Russia and China — as important as those topics may be, what do you think is missing from outside conversations about Central Asia?**

Yes, there is too much focus on geopolitics in international conversations about Central Asia. Central Asian states like it that way because it is far easier for them to focus on this topic as opposed to more urgent regional social or economic problems. The focus on geopolitics also reflects a desire of the region to be relevant to outside players, particularly the West, which is not all that interested or invested in Central Asia despite its rhetoric.

What is missing from the discussion is how the region itself is changing demographically. Migration is a big issue in Central Asia. Everyone focuses on migrant laborers to Russia, but we are not discussing enough about why Central Asians are going there and what happens to them when they are there. Some are being radicalized while living abroad. This suggests that Central Asia's high unemployment and inflation rates are not just economic issues, but security ones too.

Furthermore, the region's demographic issues are not just about labor migrants to Russia, but to other countries as well (Kazakhstan and Turkey). This is even occurring across all sectors of society. The wealthier and better educated are also looking further west. In addition, urban centers are pulling Central Asian rural youth out of the countryside. This is depopulating many villages of the young generation. The rural poor come to the cities in search of economic opportunities they lack where they grew up. They often live on the outskirts of urban centers in poorly regulated and built suburbs, creating a new urban underclass.

Finally, I also think there is a skewed picture of religion in the region. We focus too much on the extremist threat, which generally gets overplayed by the media and local governments. But, we are not looking at how religion is changing in the region. The Central Asia region is becoming less secular than when I first started going there 20 years ago. This change is natural and not a problem, but the political elites generally remain highly secular, while there is greater interest in Islam among the general public. Rural to urban shifts in populations likely are impacting how religion is being practiced and understood in the cities too. It might be worth thinking more deeply

about this issue, particularly as power will move to the post-Soviet generation in the coming decade. Some academics are looking at religion, but we need to think more about how this shift may change Central Asian government behavior and our policy options.