

Our Paradise Uzbekistan

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Abstract After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states became independent and tried to pursue their foreign policy free from Russian control. Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian state to pursue a proactive and independent foreign policy. Uzbekistan has higher regional power ambitions than the other Central Asian states. So what is preventing Uzbekistan from fulfilling its dream? It has the necessary subjective and objective prerequisites for this: military potential, a large and fairly homogeneous population, natural resources, favorable geographic location, U.S. support of its secular state, and the willingness of the latter to recognize its regional hegemony. However, the country continues to face several limitations that hinder its leading role. Despite its capabilities, it is not engaging wholeheartedly in regional integration and is hampered by its geographic location, water shortages, structural economic constraints, political problems, and fundamentalism issues.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, regional power, Central Asia, regional cooperation.

Uzbekistan gained its independence at the end of 1991 with the breakup of the Soviet Union. The landlocked country is a potential Central Asian regional power by virtue of its population, the largest in the region, its substantial energy and other resources, and its location at the heart of regional trade and transport networks. The chief objective of Uzbekistan's foreign policy since the country gained its independence has been to preserve internal stability for its super-presidential, authoritarian regime. Preventing unwelcome intervention or pressure from outside actors has been instrumental to this goal, which has been recognized for some time.² Uzbekistan, one of the leading Central Asian states, has been having a significant influence on the geopolitical processes taking place in the South since the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. It is very conditioned by the central geographic location of this country in the region, its history, and the specific political course of the Uzbek administration. This administration is trying to adhere to a special way of state development.³ Home to more than half of the population of Central Asia, Uzbekistan seeks to play a leading role in regional affairs. Foreign policy is highly dependent on presidential decision-making. A new foreign policy concept was submitted to the legislature by President Karimov and quickly approved in early August 2012. It states that the main objectives of Uzbekistan's foreign policy are strengthening the state's independence and sovereignty; ensuring a role in international affairs; joining the ranks of the democratic and developed countries; and creating security, stability, and cooperative ties with neighboring states.⁴ The Central Asian countries are trying to play a key role in the region alongside foreign powers, which is shown by Uzbekistan's foreign policy activities and its regional ambitions. It has the potential to play the role of a regional power; different factors, such as historical and cultural traits, could help it to reach this objective. If we take a look at the past, we can see that Uzbekistan had a special role to play in the eyes of the Communist Party leaders, who saw that it had particular potential for implementing the Kremlin's orders in the region. Most of Tajikistan's leaders and army commanders were appointed by Uzbek elites. Uzbekistan regarded its potential advantages for performing the role of a regional power to be its geographic location, sizable population, Uzbek communities in the region, military power, military and security cooperation with the U.S. in countering terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the fact that Samarkand and Bukhara were cultural and religious centers and Tashkent a religious center for Muslims in the Soviet era. The declining prices of oil and gas have become a test of stability and security for states and regions, including Central Asia. Exporters of energy and raw materials in Central Asia have managed, with varying levels of effectiveness, to avoid an excessive negative influence of the global financial crisis on their economies; in general, stability has been maintained. Even before the crisis, Uzbekistan had started reducing dependence on commodity exports in favor of developing its industrial and manufacturing sector, and that policy paid off. Although industrial production has also experienced some decline in demand and the world market prices, Uzbekistan was able to use available mechanisms to offset the negative influences and maintain high GDP growth by adopting an emergency anti-crisis program and stimulating measures for domestic demand and consumption of

products. According to official figures, GDP grew by 8.2 percent in the first half of 2009. It was achieved by increasing the scope of industrial production by 9.1 percent; production of consumer goods by 13.1 percent; agriculture, 4.6 percent; services, 18.5 percent; and construction, 32.5 percent. It is worth noting that measures were taken to speed up the growth of exports during the crisis. Exports grew by 6.1 percent in the first quarter of 2009 and by 13.4 percent in the first half of the year, compared with the same period in 2008. Moreover, trade surpluses increased almost eightfold, from \$207 million in the first quarter of 2009 to \$1.6 billion in the first half of 2009. According to Uzbek experts, the total amount of fiscal incentives was approximately \$1.35 billion, or nearly 4 percent of GDP. Measures on stimulating domestic demand helped, for instance, to increase sales of cars in the domestic market. Energy remains a key area for the leading producers of hydrocarbons in Central Asia. But the experience gained by Uzbekistan as a result of the crisis showed that priority for national and regional security will be given to limiting excessive economic dependence on oil and gas exports by diversifying sources of foreign currency earnings. Central Asia's admission to the group of leading manufacturers and suppliers of oil and gas generated the other part of regional security issue, the geopolitical. It would be wrong to deny the close connection between the oil and gas industry and geopolitics; look no farther than the Middle East for an illustration of their intertwined relationship. In this regard, it seems no coincidence that as the world's leading energy companies discovered Central Asia's oil and gas potential, international analytical and information circles have actively been discussing the "Great Game" theory on control of Central Asian hydrocarbons. In other words, the issue of oil and gas exports and routes of its supplies has been gradually moved by the media from the sphere of the economy to the sphere of political rivalry. Certainly, continued attempts to politicize oil and gas exports do not satisfy the exporters of Central Asia, and Uzbekistan in particular. For the security of Central Asia, it is extremely important that hydrocarbon resources have remained largely in the economic sphere. Politicization of the resources, coupled with the continuing instability in Afghanistan, could significantly raise the level of political risk, which could discourage foreign investors from involvement in the Central Asian markets. As an analysis of national energy strategies shows, Central Asia gives priority to consideration of energy in the context of economic feasibility. Take, for instance, the issue of export route diversification. After the Central Asian countries gained independence, some exporters declared a policy of creating new oil and natural gas supply routes. As the extraction of raw materials grew, the issue became more urgent for all, for obvious reasons. First, the capacity built during the Soviet period, and the pipeline system, were clearly insufficient. Moreover, some of the pipelines, such as Central Asia–Center, were forced to reduce their capacity because of deterioration. Second, the focus on traditional northern markets (Europe and the CIS countries) created an excessive dependence on consumption by them, to the exclusion of other potential markets. An example of this occurred during the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, when natural gas consumption in the European market decreased, creating significant hardship for exporters. Third, a very high level of competition exists in the European market among suppliers from Russia, Africa, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East. That factor exacerbates Central Asia's excessive dependence on such a market, because it increases the geopolitical component in the relationship between the exporter and importer. Fourth, in recent decades, consumption of oil and gas in South and Southeast Asia and the Far East has grown exponentially, caused by rapid economic progress, especially by China. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, this region formed the lion's share of global consumption growth of hydrocarbons. Considering that Central Asia shares a border with China, it would be unwise not to try to gain access to this fastest-growing energy market in the world. Thus, several economic-based factors are pushing Central Asian countries to diversify their export routes to serve a larger geographical spread of buyers for their hydrocarbon resources. There have been notable successes, among them the Caspian Pipeline Consortium and the Atasu–Alashankou pipeline; tanker deliveries of oil in Azerbaijan and Iran (under the "oil exchange" scheme); two gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to Iran; and the Turkmenistan–China gas pipeline, launched with the participation of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. These pipelines supplemented traditional oil and gas pipelines targeted to the northern markets. Obviously, geopolitical factors sometimes seriously affect the conditions and terms of realization for export projects in some areas. But the strategic goal of Central Asia is to minimize any geopolitical competition in the energy market of the region that can negatively affect regional security. To reduce the geopolitical risks, Central Asian countries also aspire, each in its own way, to establish energy market conditions that would enable the leading oil and gas companies in many countries to participate in tenders on an equal footing for the development of hydrocarbon fields and

construction of enterprises for their processing. A good example is the energy market of Uzbekistan, where companies from Russia, China, Malaysia, South Korea, and South Africa have been engaged for many years. For the security of Central Asia, the question of development and crisis-free operation of regional transport communications is of great significance. Given its location in the depths of the Eurasian continent, with no direct access to international shores, countries in the region have given priority for almost two decades to diversification of transport routes to extend access to global markets. Looking at the structure of the modern world economy from the standpoint of geography, several regions on the Eurasian continent have determined the course of global economic development. These are the European and Asian industrial, economic, and financial conglomerates. From the transport point of view, their distinguishing feature is that they have a close relationship with maritime communications, which certainly entails them to pay much attention to the development of port infrastructure. Here, especially, the efforts of Asian countries are worth noting. In 2008, all five of the world's busiest container shipping ports were based in Asia. Singapore became the leader, exceeding 29.92 million TEU (twenty-foot equivalent units); Shanghai ranked second with 28.01 million TEU; Hong Kong was third with 24.3 million TEU; Shenzhen was fourth with 21.42 million TEU; and South Korean Busan, with 13.42 million TEU, came in fifth. Meanwhile, some major European ports are rapidly expanding, including Rotterdam, Antwerp, and London; together, these ports serve as the foundation for the recent increase in trade between Europe and Asia. Central Asia's lack of direct access to the sea-lanes that carry most of today's continental and world trade does not rule out its potential as a major transport hub. In fact, its chances are not bad; it is, after all, centrally located between Asia and Europe. Looking at the issue through the prism of security, it is important that the countries of Central Asia further transform into the continental transportation hub, as this guarantees an increase in the number of actors who have economic interests in the region, and hence, in strengthening regional stability. Achievement of these strategic goals will be possible if two major tasks are resolved. The first is the need to develop efficient diversification of transport corridors. Priority should be given to economic expediency, rather than individual narrow objectives of a political nature. Creating a diversified transport system, combined with competitive rates, will enhance the attractiveness of Central Asia for international shippers and will help build transit flows. The second task is the creation of an organic mutual development system of transport communications and regional economy. This task is more complex and expensive than the first one. It assumes the transformation of Central Asia into a major center of industrial, economic, and financial activities, which serves as a bridge between European and Asian economies. The more Central Asia states approach this goal, the more they will be able to build permanent trade in both directions—Central Asia–Europe and Central Asia–Asia—which, in turn, will allow for regional transport communications to increase the volumes of cargo. Chinese ports did not become the world's leader in cargo transportation in a vacuum; it happened because of the explosive growth of the Chinese economy and increasing volumes of international trade in China. Uzbekistan has long been making significant efforts to combine its industrial and economic, and transport development components. The Navoi Free Industrial and Economic Zone project is a good example of that. Its winning attribute is an advantageous location and transport infrastructure, situated as it is in close proximity to the international airport, highway E-40, and rail routes of international importance. The result is that it has created favorable conditions for foreign investors and manufacturers. Road and rail communications allow the shortest access to the ports of Iran and Turkey, as well as to the ports of the Black and Baltic seas. Through use of the airport, Navoi achieves considerable savings in time and shipping costs. Thus, the distance between Southeast Asia and Europe via Navoi is 1,000 miles shorter than via Dubai. Time saved in the implementation of flight is 1.5 hours, and fuel savings amount to 15 tons for every airliner. Given its location, Central Asia cannot ignore geopolitical processes that could adversely affect its transport plans, and hence its security and safety. They include the continuing violence in Afghanistan, which is preventing full development of the Afghan–Pakistan southern corridor that could provide the shortest access to the ports of Karachi and Gwadar. Moreover, uncertainty surrounding Iran's nuclear program could limit Central Asian companies' access to the Iranian ports of Bandar-Abbas and Chabahar, which are pivotal in opening the sea gates that can connect Central Asia to the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. All three factors that determine the current state of security in Central Asia will remain highly relevant in the near future. Of course, for the present the most urgent is complete resolution of the Afghan crisis, which has tied up many of the issues surrounding regional security. Solution of the Afghan problem could immediately reflect on the general climate of political, ideological,

economic, energy, and transport security. For example, stabilization of Afghanistan would deprive the ideologues of various radical pseudo-religious movements of use of the country as a base of terrorism as well as any illusions about the spread of instability in regions neighboring Afghanistan. In addition, it would pave the way to more actively combating drug production and smuggling, which would deal a major blow to the sources of both terrorist financing and corruption. These factors would allow the Afghan economy could enter the international integration, because it represents a potentially promising market and because the discovery of large deposits of iron ore at Hajigak and copper at Aynak demonstrates Afghanistan's significant natural resources. The relationship between Central Asia's energy policies and its stability will also remain relevant, as will the two conflicting strategic visions: one that considers the energy sector mainly through the prism of the economy, and the other, by geopolitical radicals, who think of the energy sector in terms of the "great energy game." The main reason for this will be the gradual building of oil and gas supplies from the region to world markets. With regard to transport security, in some areas (Afghanistan, Iran, and South Caucasus in particular), it will depend on the development of various geopolitical processes in neighboring regions. In general, transport communications in Central Asia and the saturation of cargo traffic will directly depend on the economic development of the region and the intensity of the growth of continental trade, which will undoubtedly grow as the global economic crisis eases.

Conclusion: Uzbekistan is an emerging Central Asian regional power by virtue of its relatively large population, energy and other resources, and location in the heart of the region. This country occupies a key strategic position in Central Asia; Uzbekistan is a large country (about the size of France) and is strategically situated in the middle of the region, not only bordering on the other four Central Asian countries, but also on Afghanistan. Under Soviet rule, Moscow recognized Uzbekistan as a *primus inter pares* in the region. Uzbekistan was also the most represented of the five republics in the U.S.S.R.'s central institutions. All of these factors cooperated to provide the country with vital infrastructures and a political experience that proved essential to its success as an independent state. It can be said that in the problematic context of contemporary Central Asia, Uzbekistan is the only country with comparative advantages allowing it to perform a significant role at the international level too. These factors make Uzbekistan a potential regional leader. Uzbekistan also has the only viable armed forces in the region capable of defending it and carrying out combat action in the region. The ability of the Uzbek leadership to play on the security interests of major powers like the U.S., Russia, and China and its claim to be a buffer against Islamic fundamentalism have also increased Uzbekistan's image as independent force in regional affairs. However, despite its potential and favorable capabilities for playing an effective role in Central Asia, Uzbekistan faces many problems that are hampering its attempts to become a regional power. These obstacles include human rights violations and repression in the country, torture and prosecution of journalists, prohibited NGOs and political parties, political structural problems, such as Islam Karimov's dictatorship, the role of some clans in the power process, the high level of corruption, the lack of party pluralism and civic engagement, and the economic limitations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Uzbek economy faces many.

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