

# Uzbekistan's ambiguous policies on Afghanistan

Uzbek officials have for more than 20 years defined the situation in Afghanistan as the main threat to Uzbekistan's national security. Even so, Tashkent has deliberately limited its involvement with Afghanistan. How can this paradox be understood? By analyzing the Uzbek policy towards Afghanistan, this policy brief aims to reach stakeholders working with Afghanistan in a neighborhood perspective. Since the Uzbek regime limits access to information, analyses on Uzbekistan remain scant.

## Brief Points

- Uzbekistan has explicitly stated that it wishes to deal with Afghanistan on a bilateral basis, and has in recent years kept at a distance from several multilateral regional processes.
- Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan reflects a wish to balance two major factors: (1) maintaining regime stability at home, and (2) gaining international legitimacy by being involved in processes on Afghanistan.
- Western states threatened to freeze relations with Uzbekistan in 2005, following what several international organizations claim was a violent government crackdown on protestors in the city of Andijan.
- In recent years, Uzbekistan's key role in the NATO reverse transit route Northern Distribution Network (NDN) from Afghanistan has been the main driver for improving relations with the West.

## Uzbekistan-Afghanistan relations

- Uzbekistan shares a 144 km border with Afghanistan. The border follows the Amu River, linked to the Afghan province Balkh by road via the Hairatan-Termez crossing.
- The Uzbek ethnic minority in Afghanistan consists of an estimated 2 million people (some 6–9% of the total population).
- President Karimov maintains a close relationship to Abdul Rashid Dostum, currently the vice-president of Afghanistan.
- Dostum is the leader of the party Jombesh-e Melli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan (Afghanistan's National Islamic Movement), which draws its main support from among the Uzbek population.
- Economic relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan are limited, but steadily increasing. In 2014, trade between the two countries amounted to USD 600.9 million.

## The gap between rhetoric and practice

Uzbekistan continuously presents itself as an active participant in Afghanistan's reconstruction. There is a significant discrepancy, however, between the official rhetoric and the actual efforts of Uzbekistan. One example is the country's economic contributions to Afghanistan, which are limited, and tend to be channelled into projects economically beneficial to the Uzbek regime. Building the railway between Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan and the Uzbek border town of Termez, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) provided funding of USD 165 million, the Afghan government provided USD 5 million. The construction of the railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to integrate northern Afghanistan with the regional economy of Central Asia. Still, Uzbekistan – not Afghanistan – gained monopoly on operating the railway. Uzbekistan has further contributed to linking its electricity network with that of Afghanistan, another ADB project which resulted in providing Uzbek electricity to the capital, Kabul.

The contradiction between official rhetoric and actual engagement can also be seen in Uzbekistan's stance with regards to the security situation in Afghanistan. Although the official discourse places great emphasis on the threat

of terrorism and extremism stemming from Afghanistan, the country does not participate in any form of security cooperation with the Afghan authorities. In early 2015, officer Alisher Khamdanov, speaking on behalf of the Uzbek National Security Service (SNB) claimed that militants from the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan were planning a series of attacks in Uzbekistan. In similar assertions, Uzbekistan has voiced concern about a spill-over of Taliban militants across its border from northern Afghanistan. Many view this concern as a tool used to gain political and material benefits from Western countries.

This is not to say that terrorism is illusory in Uzbekistan. The country has had problems with domestic militant groups, most notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), that pledged its allegiance to IS in April 2015. The IMU was behind a series of bombings in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent in 1999 and in 2004. Founded in Uzbekistan in 1998, the IMU cultivated a relationship with the Taliban while they were in power in Kabul, and shifted its sanctuary to the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan after 9/11. More recently, following a clampdown by the Pakistani army, it has shifted its main base back to northern Afghanistan. The IMU has acquired a global character both in terms of strategy and member base. The Uzbek regime's domestic response to Islamic terrorism has been criticized for unlawfully targeting religious people and for stifling the freedom of speech in the name of security.

## Uzbekistan's 'own way' on Afghanistan

The ambiguity of Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan especially manifests itself in the country's reluctance to participate in multilateral processes on Afghanistan. The only such process that Uzbekistan appears to engage fully with is the '6+3' talks, which it has itself initiated, under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). The format has its roots from when President Islam Karimov initiated the '6+2 talks' at the UN in 1999, with the aim to provide a peaceful settlement for the war in Afghanistan. The contact group included different factions of the Afghan conflict, Afghanistan's six neighboring countries (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) in addition to Russia and the United States.

Karimov sought to relaunch the '6+2' at the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008, but now as 6+3, with NATO as a new member. Most international stakeholders were sceptical of Karimov's initiative, arguing that any peace process on Afghanistan ought to be Afghan-led. Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov, reiterated the wish to relaunch the group at the UN in 2012, but once again the international reception was lukewarm. In addition to excluding Kabul, the 6+3 format fails to include Saudi Arabia and India, undeniably two players with considerable influence on the situation in Afghanistan. Taking into account that Uzbekistan's influence in Afghanistan is limited, as compared to Pakistan or Saudi Arabia for instance, the 6+3 format seems unlikely to gain any further international support.

One of the international initiatives that have received most attention in recent years is the so-called 'Istanbul Process', interchangeably referred to as the 'Heart of Asia' process. Initiated in 2011, the Istanbul Process aims to build trust between Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, not least by strengthening economic interaction, in order to contribute to peace in the country. The Gulf States, the four remaining Central Asian states, Russia, Iran and Pakistan all participate in the Istanbul Process. Uzbekistan, however, chose not to sign the 2011 declaration. At the 2012 'Heart of Asia' Ministerial Conference in Kabul, Uzbekistan declared that it preferred bilateral over multilateral involvement with Afghanistan. An important element of the reconciliation mandate of the Istanbul Process as well as other regional initiatives is negotiating with the Taliban. So far, Uzbekistan's attitude towards negotiating with the Taliban remains unclear. One analyst in Tashkent stated that Uzbekistan opposes sitting at the table with the Taliban, which consequently explains the country's opposition to regional processes where dialogue with the Taliban is considered desirable.

Tashkent's relationship to initiatives under UN auspices is also peculiar. As noted, Uzbekistan has sought to launch its 6+3 initiative through the UN. The country has supported the UN-mandated military mission – the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and has repeatedly voiced its concerns over growing instability following the 2014 withdrawal of ISAF troops. However, Uzbek diplomats have reportedly been absent at inter-



national conferences on Afghanistan. A 2015 UN Secretary General's report on the situation in Afghanistan says that the UN Special Representative to Afghanistan visited Uzbekistan in February 2015 to discuss regional security. However, there is no mention of Uzbekistan's participation in multilateral initiatives such as the Istanbul and Kabul processes observed by the UN. Moreover, Uzbekistan refused to grant access to the UN human rights procedures following the 2005 events in Andijan, which might in part explain the country's reluctance to participate in other UN-initiatives.

Another dimension of Uzbekistan's hesitancy to participate in regional processes may lie in the country's relationship with Kazakhstan, its main competitor for the position as Central Asia's regional hegemon. In contrast to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan has been a vocal supporter of several regional processes on Afghanistan, and hosted the third Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process in 2013. The fact that Uzbekistan opposes regional initiatives can thus be seen in the light of Kazakhstan's support for

them, and is reflective of a zero-sum thinking that dominates Uzbek foreign policy.

### Balancing the West

The main driver for the engagement of Western states with Uzbekistan following 2001 has been the international project in Afghanistan. When US troops entered Afghanistan in October 2001, the West gave Uzbekistan increased attention, both in political rhetoric and through an injection of military aid. Uzbekistan allowed the US and Germany to establish military bases in the south of the country, used to provide logistical support to international military operations in Afghanistan.

In their relationship to Uzbekistan, Western actors were met with the challenge of reconciling their security interests in Afghanistan with the encouragement of democratic reforms in Uzbekistan. This 'security versus human rights' dilemma came to the fore in 2005, when Uzbek security forces opened fire against thousands of protestors in the city of Andijan. Human rights

organizations claim that 300–1000 people were killed in the events. Following the US call for an independent investigation of what had occurred in Andijan, the Uzbek government asked the Americans to leave the military base in Kharsi Khanabad (K2) within 90 days. Following 2005, the international presence in Uzbekistan has diminished. Uzbek authorities asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to leave the country in 2006, and in 2011, Human Rights Watch was made to shut down its office in Tashkent.

Largely due to NATO's need to reduce its logistical dependence on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Ground Line of Communication (GLOC), relations between Uzbekistan and Western countries have improved significantly in recent years. NATO signed a deal with Uzbekistan on reverse transit from Afghanistan in 2012, the same year that the US lifted its ban on military assistance to Tashkent.

Both US and NATO military personnel have rebooted their cooperation with the Uzbek military, which had been put on hold following the events in Andijan. This cooperation strengthens both the capacity of the forces to maintain border security, as well as their ability to carry out counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics operations. It was a significant gesture when, in July 2015, the US State Department announced that it would give Uzbekistan more than 300 used Mine-Resistant Armor-Protected (MRAP) vehicles. The State Department underlined that these vehicles shall only be used for 'defensive' purposes, and that the training of Uzbek officers is conducted with an emphasis on human rights education.

Finally, the unfolding crisis with Russia has given former Soviet Republics such as Uzbekistan new significance to Western policy-makers. The launch of the "C5+1 Contact Group" (consisting of the five Central Asian republics and the US) in September 2015 may also be interpreted in the light of the US-Russia tensions. US Secretary of State John Kerry followed up by paying a visit to all the five '-stans' in October this year, where the Afghan threat remained a key topic in the consultations.

## Concluding and looking ahead

- Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan is largely driven by its need to affirm its relevance to the international community. When Uzbek officials continuously represent the country as threatened by unrest in Afghanistan, the implicit message is that the country shares an enemy with the West. Such an image of a threat is beneficial to the Uzbek government, both in its pursuit of domestic regime security and in drawing international legitimacy. Anybody pursuing a regional commitment to Afghanistan's stability should maintain dialogue with the Uzbek authorities, yet be sensitive to how Tashkent may exploit the 'Afghan threat'.
- There is a dire need for more knowledge on Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan, which is characterized by a fundamental insistence on unilateralism that sets it apart from other countries of the neighborhood. Effective engagement of Uzbekistan is unavoidable, but the ability to pursue a coherent policy rests on solid understanding. President Karimov is now 77 years old, and the question of who may be his possible successor has already become a topic of speculation. Most analysts suggest the head of the National Security Service, Rustam Inoyatov, as a likely candidate to succeed Karimov. All stakeholders should remain alert to the potential risks associated with a political transition.
- The special relationship between the Uzbek government and the Vice President of Afghanistan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, is also of significance for future engagement. Dostum has during the last year visited

Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and has reportedly requested his northern neighbors to provide weapons and other military support. For Uzbekistan, Dostum represents a possibility for access and a chance to influence the very top of the Afghan leadership.

- The domestic situation in Uzbekistan is closely connected to the regional context, most notably in the country's relationship with Kazakhstan and with Afghanistan. If the situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, Uzbekistan's importance to the international community will be strengthened. On the other hand, the current crises in Syria and Iraq have placed Afghanistan in the shadow, and as a consequence diminished Uzbekistan's significance to the international community. What remains certain is that Uzbekistan has the potential to be playing a more proactive role in Afghanistan's future. Whether it will do so remains an open question, and will depend primarily on domestic developments. ■

## Recommended readings

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