

Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy Doctrine and Its System-Building Role in Central Asia

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After being elected President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh.M. Mirziyoyev in 2016, the foreign course and regional policy of the largest state in the center of the Eurasian continent acquires a pronounced doctrinal character. Proclaiming the fundamental principles in foreign policy, openness and de-ideologization, equality and respect for territorial integrity, inviolability of borders and non-interference in internal affairs, the priority of international law, the country's new course in this area acquires the following specific features and properties.

First, Uzbekistan occupies a middle position in Central Asia, borders on all the states of the region and has a “protected” exit to Afghanistan, that is, the territory bordering on the vast macrospace of South Asia. In addition to a favorable geographical position and a large territory, the total power of the state is:

- a dynamically growing, young and educated population (45% of the approximately 75 million population of the Central Asian region, excluding Afghanistan);
- rich natural (including energy) resources;
- diversified economy, industrial and agricultural potential, developing basic infrastructure of regional importance;
- the most numerous and combat-ready armed forces in the region, as well as effective security services, thanks to which the country has served as a “buffer against Islamic fundamentalism” for many decades.

Especially in recent years, the high “quality of diplomacy and state leadership” in Uzbekistan has been generally recognized on the basis of time-tested political experience, which is estimated by the classical realist G. Morgenthau as the most important source of strength.

The attractive cultural and civilizational force of the world level determines the “national character” and “national morality” of the multinational and multi-confessional people of Uzbekistan. Moreover, internal peaceful social coexistence has a direct projection on the regional and international space around Uzbekistan, playing a key role in maintaining stability and security.

The geostrategic advantage of Uzbekistan is the absence, unlike neighboring countries, of “direct contact” with the great powers represented by Russia and China and, at the same time, relative proximity to their territories. This circumstance creates an opportunity for a productive balancing between their interests, softens the natural influence (pressure) of these poles of power and allows you to maintain the function of a stabilizer within the macroregion. Uzbekistan's potential “soft power” in the region is made up of approximately 7 million Uzbeks living in five neighboring states. The Uzbek language is spoken by about 50 million people in the world.

At the present stage, the international position of Uzbekistan is also under the influence of the following objective factors:

- remoteness from sea routes (double land-locked country), which hinders the full development of the economy and negatively affects its competitiveness;

- the growing shortage of water and land resources against the backdrop of dynamic demographic growth;
- multidimensional consequences of the ecological catastrophe of the Aral Sea and, in general, climate change towards global warming;
- permanent “geopolitical irritability” of the region, taking into account the convergence of the interests of global powers here, the long-term implications of the political, diplomatic and geo-economic “delimitation” of Russia from the West, the multi-level strategic conflict along the China-West line, the instability of the situation in Afghanistan and the long-term uncertainty around Iran with the consequences of everything this complex of threats and challenges.

Along the outer perimeter, “the Central Asian region is a unique geopolitical “node” connecting four nuclear powers – Russia, China, India and Pakistan”, which largely determines the non-bloc status of Uzbekistan and the non-nuclear status of all of Central Asia.

These dominant conditions and political reality determine the doctrinal approach of the leadership of Uzbekistan in terms of close “interconnection and complementarity of domestic and foreign policies”, and “such harmony contributes to ensuring the interests” of the state.

Initiated by President Sh.M. Mirziyoyev, the strategy of “New Uzbekistan” is aimed at the rational and peaceful use of the total power of Uzbekistan in the national interests and in recent years has become a constructive constant in international politics.

Secondly, new doctrinal approaches in the foreign policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan take into account new realities – a deep imbalance in international relations and a steady increase in global geopolitical tensions that are projected onto the Central Asian region. We are talking about the ongoing rivalry of the great powers for expanding strategic access and strengthening influence on the middle region of the Heartland (“Heartland of Heartland”), which, due to various objective and subjective factors, can be considered Central Asia and Uzbekistan.

If we take into account the numerous hotbeds of tension and the ongoing friction of various states in the conflict-prone Middle East, in the basins of the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and further in the Northeast Asia region, then a new struggle at the next historical turn for control unfolding becomes obvious over the geopolitical belt of the Eurasian Rimland (according to N. Spykman).

The geographical and cultural and civilizational proximity of our country and the entire region to South Asia and the Persian Gulf, the emerging regional self-organization in Central Asia in the areas of politics and economics, as well as the consistent actions of Uzbekistan as one of the key gravitational fields in the Eurasian space for the development of transport and communication corridors to the south make it possible to predict in the medium term the formation of a new dynamic at the junction of the Heartland and Rimland in this part of the world.

Such positive dynamics may imply further activation and enhancement of the role of the Central Asian states in the world economy and politics, more widely unlock the creative potential of the region, and significantly expand the opportunities for regional and international cooperation. Thus, undoubtedly, the most important condition for the implementation of such a scenario remains the stabilization of the situation in and around Afghanistan, the achievement of a difficult, but still generally acceptable regional consensus (or a gradual convergence of interests of nearby and global players) regarding the future system of relations in this strategically important zone.

Thus, it is possible that the Heartland, in which Uzbekistan occupies a central position, will perform an important independent geopolitical function and give a noticeable cultural and historical impetus to the development of this part of the world.

Thirdly, in the regional context, the doctrinal directives of the leadership of Uzbekistan are to ensure that the prospects for national development are aligned with general regional priorities and the search for reasonable compromises to eliminate conflict potential and address issues of a common agenda in the areas of borders, water use, transport and trade.

In the context of regionalism in Central Asia and its scientific understanding, one should agree with the organic approach of F. Tolipov. According to him, this approach is completely different from eclectic and synthetic approaches and is based on natural and harmonious substrates. This refers to the natural process of evolution of Central Asian integration, which has gone through successive stages: the Central Asian Commonwealth, the Central Asian Economic Community, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization. The process resumed in 2018. Thanks to the initiative put forward by the President of Uzbekistan and the support from the leaders of neighboring countries, a Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia was organized. Thus, “cooperation and integration in Central Asia is an organic and natural process”.

The naturalness of regional processes, which at the current stage still correspond to the category of regionalism, and not integration, is one of the fruits of the doctrinal goal of the leadership of Uzbekistan “by joint efforts to turn Central Asia into a stable, economically developed and prosperous region”. At the same time, the key “natural and harmonious substrates” are Uzbekistan’s consideration of “the integrity of Central Asia through two factors: a) through the emphasis on commonality for the countries of the Aral Sea basin region and the connectedness of all countries included in Central Asia, determined by this, by common shared water resources; b) through the factor of integration of Central Asia as a region into the global transport and communication corridors. Uzbekistan is considering this issue through the regional, not the national agenda”.

Together, Uzbekistan, through achieving synergy of national and regional interests, proposes to take “decisive steps to form a new model of economic cooperation in Central Asia” based on industrial and technological cooperation, liberalization of the trade regime, interconnected energy, environmental and food security, development of a “green” agenda. This, in turn, suggests that “the regional policy of Sh. Mirziyoyev is extremely pragmatic. It is built around economic interaction and transport interconnectedness”.

Fourth, as a result of the openness of the foreign policy doctrine of Uzbekistan, in recent years, the renewed connotation of the principle of “good neighborliness” in Central Asia has attracted attention. The traditional declarative nature of this principle is being replaced by its real practical content, as evidenced by: 1) the dynamics of growth in trade with the countries of the region (by the end of 2021, the share of Central Asian states in Uzbekistan’s foreign trade reached 15.1%, amounting to \$6.3 billion), 2) increase in investment activity and 3) intensification in recent years of human flow in the region. Of priority importance is the intensive exchange between the regions of the Central Asian countries, which makes a significant contribution to strengthening the atmosphere of mutual trust.

As a result, the geo-economic actor and integrity of Central Asia, recognized by the international community, is being strengthened.

Fifth, strengthening, in the words of the Head of Uzbekistan, the common “Central Asian home” seems difficult to achieve without *following the principles of the indivisibility of security and*

using the methods of preventive diplomacy. Indeed, the system-forming role of the republic in the region and the reality lies in the fact that “the road to Central Asian stability and prosperity increasingly runs through Tashkent”. In our opinion, Uzbekistan, sandwiched in the continental depths of Eurasia, is perhaps more interested than any power in the peaceful and sustainable development of the region, given its own vital economic and communication interests, cultural and humanitarian interconnectedness of the peoples living here. Any negative course of processes within and between the states of Central Asia can directly affect the security interests of Uzbekistan and affect its plans for dynamic development.

Realizing the cross-border nature of challenges and threats, Uzbekistan in recent years has consistently defended the position that “Afghanistan is an integral part of Central Asia”. Against the backdrop of the events around Ukraine, which catalyzed the further transformation of the world order, the Afghan issue is relegated to the background of global politics, but it retains a smoldering conflict potential. Tashkent sees the Afghan factor not as a long-term negative syndrome or a dangerous hotbed of terrorism and drug trafficking (if these threats persist), but “an anchor of regional cooperation, a promising bridge connecting regions and unlocking the economic potential of Central Eurasia”. Such a line, which meets common regional interests, constructs a positive international atmosphere around Afghanistan to prevent its complete and, in fact, fruitless isolation, address humanitarian needs, and also contributes to the de-radicalization of Kabul’s domestic and foreign policy.

The stabilizing significance of Uzbekistan in recent years has been manifested in the establishment of strategic partnership relations with Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, alliances with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, solving the problems of delimitation, demarcation and border crossing, relieving tension with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the entire range of relations, peacekeeping on the Afghan problem and in during the Tajik-Kyrgyz border tensions, the consolidation of international efforts to counter the pandemic, as well as to mitigate the consequences of the Aral Sea ecological catastrophe.

Against the backdrop of strengthening confidence, intra-regional political consolidation is taking place, primarily in matters of countering terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking, and thus “systemic irritants that hinder the development of regional cooperation” are removed.

Sixth, the responsibility, balance and far-sightedness of the doctrinal guidelines of the President of Uzbekistan on Central Asia are manifested in the fact that “although the formation of the region is under the active influence of Uzbekistan, we are not talking about some special position of the republic in this space of Central Asia: in the official discourse Uzbekistan practically does not use the term “regional leader” and, moreover, regional cooperation is not considered through the prism of any interstate competition”. In our opinion, Uzbekistan in the matter of its regional positioning can objectively rely on the principle of *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”), when its international behavior and internal development are fully taken into account by neighboring states and ultimately determine the political atmosphere of the region. The development strategy of our country serves as a kind of useful model for the Central Asian countries.

Seventh, within the framework of the doctrine we are considering, Uzbekistan is consistently implementing the concept of interconnectivity, which is based on:

(i) constructive and mutually beneficial interaction and maintaining a balance of interests between the great powers and developing strategic partnerships and alliances with them based on the “win-win” ideology;

(ii) strengthening the core of the Central Asian order together with the allied Nur-Sultan (the tandem of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) to promote “the idea of regional rapprochement in order to ensure peace and stability” and “achieve mutually acceptable solutions on the whole range of regional aspects by the states of Central Asia themselves on the basis of mutual respect interests of each other.

The concept of interconnectivity promoted by the President of Uzbekistan is not limited, as is commonly believed, to the development of transport communications and the opening of new markets in the South Asian direction. The multi-vector nature, the very essence and multifunctionality of the concept lie in its inclusiveness, openness, progressiveness and conflict-free nature.

The northern vector is associated with the establishment and expansion of cooperation between Uzbekistan and the EAEU, the CSTO and the CIS. The existential interests of the country are connected with this space when you consider the volume of trade and cooperation, as well as labor migration flows to Russia and Kazakhstan, the presence of common interests in the areas of security and intercultural communication.

The eastern vector is formed through integration within the SCO and participation in the Chinese “Belts and Roads” mega-project. Despite the diversification of foreign trade, China is the exclusive supplier of vital goods and technologies to the region. Its importance is growing as a transit country and importer, a guarantor of stability. The Japanese and Korean factors significantly expand the possibilities of Tashkent’s economic diplomacy in the Asian field.

The western vector, even after the withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan in 2021, will remain strategically important due to the deep involvement of Uzbekistan and the states of the region in the Western-centric liberal system through stable norms, generally accepted international regulations and influential global institutions. This direction is awaiting its further wide disclosure and requires conceptual development, taking into account the balance of interests of global powers and the full reincarnation of historical transport corridors and interconnectivity through the South Caucasus region and further with Turkey and Europe. One of the recent landmark events in this process is the adoption of the Joint Statement of the United States, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on the launch of the Central Asian Investment Partnership initiative.

The southern vector is sufficiently developed through the Iranian and Middle Eastern factors, while its economic, cultural and civilizational dimension is being strengthened. At the same time, its South Asian direction, at the initiative of Uzbekistan, acquires a new sound for the whole Central Asia through three components: 1) geopolitical – through the accompanying solution of the Afghan problem; 2) geo-economic – through the creation of a single economic space for transport and trade, innovation and investment; 3) geo-civilization – through the creation of a single space of culture, spirituality, tourism, scientific research. At present, the significance of this regional part in the system of international security has increased dramatically, highlighting the indivisibility of security and showing the growing dependence on it of any plans for socio-economic development. Thus, the “Pakistani-Afghan-Tajik-Uzbek “connection” turns out to be a kind of geopolitical pivot (“hinge”) around which almost all the main plots revolve, one way or another related to regional conflicts and any other aspects of the politics and security of the states of this part of world”. In general, the launch of a cross-border railway from Central to South Asia “will create a powerful platform for achieving inclusive economic development of the countries of Central and South Asia. It will become a kind of modern version of the ancient northern trade route known as Uttarapatha, which connected the

Indo-Gangetic plain with the southern territories of the Eurasian continent through the historical cities of Taxila, Gandhara and Termez”.

The derivatives of this interregional equation related to the implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project by China and the North-South multimodal transport corridor by India, on the one hand, complicate the interregional configuration, but, on the other hand, expand the strategic horizon and spectrum selection for Uzbekistan and countries of the region. In general, “Uzbekistan’s interest in South Asia is largely to be found in the logic of the reforms carried out in recent years, which to a large extent “economize” the country’s foreign policy. South Asia is a huge sales and investment market that can act as a stimulus for industry, agriculture and services of Uzbekistan.”

Eighth, the foreign policy doctrine of the leadership of Uzbekistan, traditionally aimed at creating the most favorable international conditions for accelerated internal development, is based on the principles of multilateralism on the basis of the paradigm of rejecting “protectionism and isolationism” proclaimed as part of the “New Uzbekistan” strategy. The active participation of Uzbekistan in the formats of the UN system, CIS, SCO, OSCE, OTS, OIC, ECO, CICA, WB, IMF, ADB, IDB and many others is a manifestation of the general course towards further internationalization of key national political, economic and social systems. Against the background of the emerging fragmentation of the world order, which is also reflected in the specifics of the functioning of international institutions, Uzbekistan’s stake on multi-polarity and UN-centric multilateralism seems to be the most productive and rational. Participation in these organizations and institutions, significantly expanding the geography of external relations and their industry spectrum, allows to effectively promote the political and economic agenda of both national and regional/international significance.

Doctrinally, the international policy of the republic is an integral part of the strategy of “New Uzbekistan”, covering the tasks of the UN Sustainable Development Goals until 2030, including in the areas of strengthening regional cooperation, education and religious tolerance, inclusive social and economic growth, solving environmental problems, confronting the ideology of extremism, youth and gender policies, overcoming the consequences of pandemics.

Ninth, at the present stage, the key component of the regional and international doctrine of Uzbekistan is the humanization of foreign policy activities. There is a dialectical relationship between the internal political course of Tashkent towards the liberalization and decentralization of power, strengthening justice and the rule of law, ensuring the honor and dignity of a person on the basis of the social paradigm “individual-society-state” and, on the other hand, revealing the high humanistic qualities of our people in the external field.

The observed humanization of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy contrasts with the previous long-term focus on securitization. This aspect of the country’s foreign policy activity reflects the deep political and philosophical views of the leader of Uzbekistan and is completely devoid of any political conjuncture and calculation. The most important practical aspects of this policy were:

- involvement of compatriots abroad in the socio-political and socio-economic processes in the country;
- expanding the geography and scale of humanitarian actions that are becoming systemic in the near and far abroad (for example, to Afghans, Palestinians, Rohingyas and Ukrainians), especially during periods of a pandemic and escalation of conflicts;

- solving the problems of citizens of Uzbekistan who are abroad through access to public services;
- humanitarian measures for the return of citizens, mainly women and children, who, by the will of fate, ended up in the zone of armed conflicts;
- construction of schools and other social and cultural facilities abroad, vocational training for Afghan citizens on the territory of Uzbekistan, and many others.

Uzbekistan has been elected to the UN Human Rights Council, which is recognition by the world community of achievements in the humanitarian dimension.

Tenth, the humanization of foreign policy is directly related to the build-up and projection of Uzbekistan's "soft power" on the regional and international prosceniums. Uzbekistan is aware of the presence of threats to national security in the military sphere, including in the form of "transfer of hostilities" to the territory of the country, possible actions of illegal armed groups, ideological and psychological actions against its sovereignty. At the same time, the hybridization of world and foreign policy in the form of real threats and challenges to security and stability at the international, regional and national levels dictate the need for innovative approaches in this area of the state and society.

The concept of "soft power", despite the growing tendency to use harsh and forceful methods in the implementation of the foreign policy of many states in the form of military threats and economic pressure, remains an effective tool in the strategic arsenal of most global and regional actors. Uzbekistan resorts to the use of "soft power" to influence the behavior of other actors, strengthen national identity, increase attractiveness and competitiveness as an international entity, achieve development and security goals. The manifestation of "smart power" is noted in the form of joint military exercises with partners and allies, as well as participation in international military competitions.

The country has a historically determined unique potential to implement its own concept of "soft power", has almost all the initial objective and subjective resources, mechanisms and tools for promoting a positive image, influencing the formation of the international agenda and defending national interests. Moreover, the consistent formation of an attractive image of Uzbekistan using the methods of "soft power" can be considered as a necessary superstructure for the development of the foreign economic basis.

Thus, the scientific thesis put forward by us about the doctrinal nature of the foreign policy of Uzbekistan is substantiated by the following:

1) possessing a higher aggregate power compared to the states of Central Asia, Uzbekistan traditionally plays the role of a stabilizer in the center of Eurasia, maintains equal proximity to the leading centers of power and follows a position of neutrality during the acute phases of the geopolitical struggle of world powers. Tashkent adheres to the doctrine of linking the prospects of national development with regional and international priorities and the search for reasonable compromises to resolve the entire range of issues on the Central Asian and global agenda. The political and economic stability of the Republic of Uzbekistan is one of the guarantees of regional and international stability.

2) on the basis of following the principles of indivisibility of security and pragmatism, using the methods of preventive diplomacy and "soft power", realizing the cross-border nature of modern challenges and threats, as well as generally taking into account the emerging new realities in the

external field and its own capabilities, Uzbekistan is the initiator and contributes a significant contribution to the practical content of good neighborly relations with the states of Central Asia. There are positive prospects for the institutionalization of Central Asian cooperation against the background of the high dynamics of relations in the tandem “Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan” as the optimal driver of regional coordination.

3) in line with the logic of ongoing fundamental reforms, Uzbekistan relies not only on the “economization” of foreign policy, but also focuses on expanding the vectors of multi-format interconnection with the spaces adjacent to Central Asia. Such a policy, meeting the common interests, contributes to the strengthening of the geopolitical and geo-economic identity and unity of Central Asia, increases the international competitiveness of the region, and contributes to the formation of intra-regional and inter-regional economic and cultural space.

4) based on the rejection of protectionism and isolationism, through the humanization and liberalization of domestic and foreign policy, Uzbekistan supports the principles of multilateralism and moves towards the internationalization of national social and economic systems to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals until 2030 and occupy a worthy place in the international community. At the same time, the paradigm of strengthening state sovereignty, independence and national identity remains an imperative for Tashkent.

Thus, relying on (a) objective prerequisites in the form of combined strength and influence and (b) internal and external political doctrinal guidelines, Uzbekistan maintains and expands the most important system-forming role in the region of Central Asia and in the center of Eurasia. External forces recognize Uzbekistan as a balanced, responsible and predictable partner, which is extremely important in a period of growing turbulence in international politics and the transformation of the world order.

It seems that the accumulated in recent years under the leadership of Sh.M. Mirziyoyev, large-scale experience and multi-layered political practices of doctrinal significance will be reflected in the new editions of the Concept of National Security and the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan being developed.