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ACTORS AND FACTORS IN UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING

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Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been subject to fluctuations driven by regional, international, and geopolitical developments. These developments have posed significant challenges to the Uzbek leadership, influencing both the strategic choices and decisions in foreign policy. Overall, the policymaking process in Uzbekistan has been marked by conservatism, characterized by its closed, non-democratic, elitist, slow, and reactive nature. Despite efforts by Tashkent to assert itself as an active participant on the international stage, the overall approach to Uzbekistan's foreign policy has remained complex and highly personalized.

MAIN FACTORS SHAPING UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

A comprehensive understanding of Uzbekistan's foreign policy requires appreciating a set of characteristics illuminating Tashkent's international engagement.

Prevalence of geopolitical lenses

The modality of any foreign policy activity reflects not only the nature of the international system but also the policymakers' perceptions of that system. In Uzbekistan, the understanding of international relations is heavily influenced by concepts of "poles" or geopolitical lenses. Scholars and politicians alike construct political processes based on such notions as 'bipolar', 'unipolar', or 'multipolar' world order. They still regard international relations as an arena of great power rivalry. This is peculiar not only to Uzbekistan but to other Central Asian states as well.

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Two related concepts capture such vision in this part of the world: “the regime of geopolitics” and “the geopolitics of regimes”. The geopolitics of regimes is reflected in attempts at the “geopolitisation” of their status by the current political regimes of Central Asia. The regime of geopolitics means the ad-hoc geopolitical regional order of relationships between and among states of the region. The swift dissolution of the Soviet Union and Central Asia's advent into world politics strongly impacted geopolitical thought. These events reinforced once again geopolitical narratives and speculations after a long period of relative geopolitical stability. Thus, geopolitics became the ‘ultimate explanatory tool’ in the overall analyses of Uzbekistan's behaviour in the international arena. when its activities may affect foreign relations.

Soviet legacy

The foreign policy of Uzbekistan is a derivative of the Soviet state, institutions and policymaking traditions. Such a legacy is notable even after more than 30 years have passed since independence was gained. On the one hand, Soviet foreign policy practice left a deep trace in the former Soviet republics through their integration into the foreign policy sphere. Indeed, during the Soviet period, Uzbekistan had its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and some Uzbek diplomats were appointed as ambassadors to foreign states. On the other hand, the Soviet legacy is visible in the general perception of international relations and principles of foreign policy. This is evident in the continued relevance of the modalities of ‘cold war’ thinking in the international system, bringing more perplexities in Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

Domestic public opinion and elitism

Public opinion in Uzbekistan neither challenges nor influences foreign policy. The latter remains an elitist domain. Policymakers benefit from the conformism of the broader public and the opportunism of political elites. Civil society organizations show some activism on domestic issues, but their participation is practically absent in the domain of foreign policy. Thus, the role of the broader public in shaping foreign policy discourse remains minimal.

In their turn, political parties in Uzbekistan are opportunist organizations, and in their programs, statements, and overall activities, they never raise and discuss foreign policy matters, expressing full loyalty to the president.

The shadow of Russia

This factor is intricately linked to the ones previously discussed. The influence of pro-Russian elements within political elites, expert communities, and the general populace remains significant in shaping foreign policy discourses. This influence is evident in ongoing debates concerning topics related to Russia. Notably, these pro-Russian actors advocate vigorously for Uzbekistan's membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) despite the geopolitical risks posed by closer ties with Russia amidst its conflict with Ukraine. Interestingly, these advocates often cite the substantial number of Uzbek labour migrants in Russia—who rely on these jobs for their livelihood—as a key argument for Uzbekistan's accession to the EAEU and, at times, even for supporting Russia in its conflict with Ukraine.

A weak state complex

The ideological rhetoric in Tashkent heavily emphasizes slogans like 'peace and stability,' which have become pervasive mantras in both domestic and foreign policy discussions. These concepts are obviously central in any nation's foreign policy narratives. However, their repeated invocation in Uzbekistan's foreign policy rhetoric appears to serve as a justification for excessive neutrality and caution in sensitive international matters. Relevant illustrations include the country's voting at the U.N. General Assembly on issues like Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the presence of Russian propaganda channels in Uzbekistan, or (non)responses to joint statements on Central Asia by leaders such as Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin.



Uzbekistan's pronounced neutrality stems from the 'complex of a weak state'.

This pronounced neutrality stems from what can be described as the 'complex of a weak state.' This complex reflects *a priori* conviction among Uzbek officials that the country cannot withstand the pressures, intimidation, and coercion exerted by more powerful nations. Consequently, this mindset influences the thoughts and actions of numerous policymakers, state leaders, and experts, driving a cautious and reserved foreign policy.

Strategic partnerships overkill

The prevalent geopolitical biases combined with the 'complex of a weak state' have led to what might be termed a "moneybox of strategic partnerships." By definition, strategic partnerships and alliances are reserved for a select few chosen foreign policy partners and cannot be extended to just any nation. Yet, Tashkent has managed to establish such "strategic" level agreements with a wide array of countries, including some that are geopolitical rivals to one another, such as Russia and the USA. This proliferation of strategic agreements inevitably complicates the implementation of these alliances, presenting ongoing challenges for Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

Focus on Central Asian regionalism.

Regionalism in Central Asia is arguably a central aspect of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Since gaining independence, the region has witnessed two concurrent developments: nation- and state-building on one side and region-building on the other. The commitment to regionalism was evident from the start, as the first president of Uzbekistan adopted the slogan "Turkestan is our common home." Despite promising early progress in regional integration, Uzbekistan's short-lived membership in the Eurasian Economic System (EvrAzES) from 2006 to 2008, which also led to the dissolution of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), led President Karimov to shift towards a bilateral approach, with neighbouring countries. This change resulted in increased tensions and a period of stagnant regional integration that lasted nearly a decade.

In 2017, the second president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, introduced a new initiative to rejuvenate regional interactions: the Consultative Meetings of the presidents of the five Central Asian states. The fifth such meeting occurred in Dushanbe in 2023, reinforcing the idea that regardless of leadership, Uzbekistan's foreign policy—and indeed that of its neighbours—is intrinsically tied to regional dynamics.



KEY FOREIGN POLICY ACTORS

Contrary to the longstanding principle that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been markedly isolated from its domestic affairs. This area of state activity remains a relatively closed and privileged domain, distinctly separate from both domestic policy and public influence. At the heart of this isolation is a person-centric approach to decision-making, with the president playing a pivotal role. There are a few independent think tanks capable of developing foreign policy recommendations, but the government does not work with them. For that matter, even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) rarely issues substantive statements or conducts press conferences. This pattern suggests that foreign policymaking in Uzbekistan is highly personalized and centred predominantly around the president.

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Interestingly, the foreign policy approaches of Uzbekistan's first and second presidents have shown notable differences. This divergence likely stems from the distinct challenges and objectives each faced during their respective tenures, shaping their principles, priorities, and decisions in foreign policy.

Islam Karimov, the first President of Uzbekistan, had a unique mission: to establish the institutions and attributes of the newly independent state and to build Uzbekistan's international relations "from scratch". As a realm relatively new to the country, foreign policy and diplomacy under Karimov were guided by six core principles:

- Broad consideration of mutual interests with supremacy given to national interests.
- Upholding universal values, peace, and security, resolving conflicts peacefully, maintaining a non-nuclear status, abstaining from military blocs, adhering to international human rights treaties, and rejecting the use of force.
- Ensuring mutual benefits and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states.
- Maintaining openness and de-ideologising international relations.
- Prioritising international law over national law, active membership in the United Nations, and engaging robustly in the international community.

- Developing bilateral and multilateral ties based on trust, cooperation within international organizations, and fostering friendly relations with Central Asian republics.

These principles were codified in the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "On the Basic Principles of the Foreign Policy Activity of the Republic of Uzbekistan," adopted in December 1996.^[1] Under Karimov's leadership, foreign policy was significantly shaped by the National Security Service (NSS), with the NSS chief serving as a primary advisor on foreign affairs. Such prominence of security services probably reflected the perception of the fragility of Uzbekistan as a newly independent state and the residual Soviet-time tendency towards establishing tight control over anything related to foreign. Abdulaziz Kamilov, a seasoned diplomat and also an NSS officer, led the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for many years.

During his presidency, President Karimov adeptly balanced relations with major powers while maintaining a careful distance from Russia. Uzbekistan's foreign policy during this period was distinctly focused on preserving its independence. A notable instance of this is the hosting of a U.S. military base in 2001 and its closure in 2005. The closure was a response to Tashkent's perception that the West had instigated the terrorist attacks that year. Furthermore, Uzbekistan joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAzES) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2006. However, in a demonstration of his independent stance, Karimov subsequently withdrew from EvrAzES in 2008 and from CSTO in 2012. These decisions, emblematic of Karimov's resolve and often referred to as "Karimov's feat," underscore his capability to chart an autonomous foreign policy course.

The foreign policy course of the Second President Shavkat Mirziyoyev who came to power in December 2016 slightly differs from his predecessor's.^[2] In particular, his prioritization of Central Asia in Uzbekistan's foreign policy looks like a significant departure from Karimov's preference of bilateralism. However, this not a fundamental shift in the regional policy of Uzbekistan. Karimov was a strong proponent of regional integration from the beginning of independence. Only geopolitical zigzags forced him to pass to bilateralism by 2008. This means that whoever is the leader of the Central Asian country, he/she cannot ignore and neglect the regional reality.

Mirziyoyev significantly diminished the authority and power of the previously omnipotent National Security Service (NSS). The NSS was renamed as the State Security Service (SSS). President established and brought to prominence another parallel structure, the National Guard. These changes consolidated the president's position as the sole authority in the country. Additionally, he crafted a political regime that continued the previous tradition of cultivating a cult of personality around the state leader. Gradually, he surrounded himself with highly loyal individuals. For example, he appointed Sardor Umurzakov, the son of a long-time friend, as the Chief of the Presidential Administration. Mirziyoyev's trust in Umurzakov was so profound that he accompanied the president on all foreign visits. In a move that marked further centralization in 2024, Mirziyoyev removed Umurzakov and appointed his own daughter as an aide and, de facto, the chief actor in the president's administration.

Simultaneously, there are rumours of the emergence of intra-elite clans and competition for power. This extends to the realm of foreign policy since the internal competition involves numerous political elites and government-affiliated experts with pro-Russian inclinations. The result is Tashkent's international posture displaying a notable shift towards Russia, a deviation from Karimov's policies. Additionally, there are allegations that Moscow exerts direct pressure on Mirziyoyev and his team. The dismissal of Abdulaziz Kamilov, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, reportedly occurred after the Kremlin expressed displeasure with his statements on the war in Ukraine.^[3] Furthermore, Russia appears to utilize the influence of Uzbek oligarch Alisher Usmanov over certain political and business sectors in Uzbekistan, including the president himself, as leverage to maintain the country within its geopolitical sphere.

Meanwhile, President Mirziyoyev recently made a revealing statement regarding the external pressures Uzbekistan faces, particularly in relation to the war in Ukraine. He disclosed that major powers had urged him to abandon neutrality and choose a side in the conflict. In response, in his words, he affirmed his commitment to defending Uzbekistan's national interests.

Such reference to national interests is pervasive in the official rhetoric. However, it is essential to scrutinize this question: Who actually defines these interests, and what are the genuine interests of Uzbekistan? Furthermore, the

process of formulating foreign policy at a conceptual level remains opaque. It is particularly concerning that the Foreign Policy Concept of Uzbekistan, which should clarify these issues, remains a classified document.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the factors and actors shaping Uzbekistan's foreign policy has illuminated the complex interplay of domestic and international influences that define its strategic direction.

Firstly, Uzbekistan's foreign policy is marked by a cautious balancing act, deeply influenced by its Soviet past and current geopolitical pressures. These historical legacies continue to shape policy perceptions and actions, impacting Tashkent's international engagements. Simultaneously, external pressures, notably from Russia, critically influence strategic choices, particularly evident in debates surrounding membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and interactions with major powers. This illustrates the complex geopolitical environment in which Uzbekistan operates. Tashkent's often-declared neutrality highlights a desire to maintain independence while acknowledging the country's relatively modest stature on the global stage.

Secondly, a regional focus on Central Asia remains a cornerstone of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, driven by historical ties and strategic necessities. Shifts from regional integration efforts to bilateral interactions under different administrations underscore Uzbekistan's flexible and responsive foreign policy approach. The re-engagement in regional forums under President Mirziyoyev emphasizes a renewed commitment to regionalism, albeit shaped by the overarching aim of preserving sovereignty and national security.

Lastly, the political and public institutions play a limited role in foreign policymaking, reflecting broader systemic inefficiencies. In his December 2022 address, Uzbekistan's President highlighted his frustration with the "manual control" regime dominating state governance, where individual leaders like governors or the president himself dictate policies instead of established institutions and democratic processes. This situation underscores significant barriers to reforming the policymaking system, including foreign policy.

Currently, Uzbekistan's foreign policy is characterized by a centralized leadership style with a heavy reliance on personalistic decision-making by the president. This approach significantly restricts wider institutional or public involvement in foreign policy, perpetuating an elitist-driven framework.

Combined, these insights collectively depict a foreign policy landscape in Uzbekistan as one that continually adapts to both internal leadership styles and external geopolitical shifts.

NOTES

[1] Law of The Republic of Uzbekistan On The Basic Principles Of Foreign Policy Of The Republic Of Uzbekistan, No. 336-I (1996), <https://lex.uz/docs/39322>.

[2] Catherine Putz, "Checking in on Uzbekistan's political progress in 2020: an interview with Farkhod Tolipov," *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/checking-in-on-uzbekistans-political-progress-in-2020-an-interview-with-farkhod-tolipov/>.

[3] Iliias Safarov, "Nuzhen li Uzbekistanu novyy minister inostrannykh del? Interv'yu s politologom," *Kun.uz*, April 25, 2022, <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2022/04/25/nujyen-li-uzbekistanu-novyy-ministr-inostrannyx-del-intervyu-s-politologom>. Noteworthy is the fact that Kamilov, after his dismissal, was appointed as the Deputy of the National Security Council under the President of Uzbekistan, indicating that he still holds a significant role within the state's political system.

The paper was prepared for and presented at the workshop "Central Asia's international relations: unpacking actors and factors" at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek on 28 April 2023. Series editor: Shairbek Dzhuraev, Crossroads Central Asia. For other papers of the series, go to <https://crossroads-ca.org>.