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Uzbekistan Maneuvers

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Uzbekistan and Russia recently signed the agreement on Strategic Partnership discussed during Uzbek President Islam Karimov's April visit to Moscow. Karimov had hoped to extract from the United States a similar document in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 when Uzbekistan de facto became America's strategic partner by providing an airbase for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. A Declaration was signed in March 2002 that placed Uzbekistan under U.S. protection in case of an external threat. At the same time it made further U.S. assistance contingent on Uzbekistan's progress in human rights, market reforms and freedom of speech — areas in which president Karimov has not been particularly successful. Indeed, he has been criticized on this account by the United States and the international community.

Even though the Bush administration wholeheartedly supports Karimov's regime for its efforts in the war on terror, critics in the Congress and in international human rights organizations have expressed concern that this relationship may undermine American efforts elsewhere in the war on terror. Karimov had hoped to receive millions of dollars from the U.S. in return for the airbase and Uzbek support for U.S. policy in Afghanistan, Iraq and even Cuba. As a result both of mounting criticism and reduced financial incentives, Karimov decided to turn toward Russia.

It is impossible to view Uzbek-Russian relations without the prism of Uzbek-U.S. affairs. Uzbek policy-makers, and specifically President Karimov, have switched spasmodically from one major power to another, whenever a current ally has failed to match Karimov's interests fully. Inevitably improved relations with the United States have meant a cooling-off vis-a-vis Russia and vice-versa. The 1995 visit to Uzbekistan by then-U.S.

Secretary of Defense William Perry, for example, was viewed as a powerful signal by Russia, at just the time when ultra-nationalist sentiments and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's neo-imperial ambitions were peaking in Russian politics. Moreover, Uzbekistan's relationship with Russia at that time was complicated by their divergent approaches to post-civil war Tajikistan.

With Putin's ascent to power late in 1999, he paid his first overseas visit as President to Uzbekistan in May 2000, just five months after his first visit as Russia's Prime Minister. In December 2000, Putin was given a high-level reception by the Uzbek President who seemed impressed by this young ex-KGB officer's energy, boldness, pragmatism and understanding of security matters, which the two discussed at length. Putin flattered Karimov by calling Uzbekistan a "strategic partner." The new friendship resulted in an important Uzbek-Russian treaty on cooperation in the military and military-technical spheres, renewable every five years. President Karimov even supported Russia's position on Chechnya.

Putin expressed his appreciation for his Uzbek counterpart's warm welcome and political support. For the first time in many years, President Karimov spoke of Russia's interests in Central Asia and of its supposed role as the guarantor of stability and security in the region, while making sure to emphasize that Russia, in return, must honor Uzbekistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Yel'tsin was out, and Karimov knew he was dealing with a new Russia and a new president:

I would say that Russia today, as it were, is a country which will unequivocally do everything to guarantee the territorial integrity, the inviolability of the frontiers and the independence and sovereignty of Uzbekistan. We, in Uzbekistan, have always recognized and unequivocally assessed the interests of Russia in the region.

Karimov's foray into a new relationship with Putin's Russia was followed by a somewhat less cordial visit with then-U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in April 2000. She was very critical of the Uzbek government's poor human rights record. To Putin's

pleasure, President Karimov also ignored the visit of then-NATO Secretary-General George Robertson in July, making his way instead to neighboring Kazakhstan to celebrate President Nursultan Nazarbaev's 60th birthday.

September 11, 2001 changed the status quo again, and the United States and Uzbekistan developed exceptional and unprecedented relations. For Karimov, this new partnership secured Uzbekistan from Taliban threats and the more direct threat coming from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which was then operating from inside Afghanistan.

Disappointed with the financial incentives he received from the United States, Karimov maintained strong support for the war on terror, but began to distance himself from the United States and move back toward the embrace of Russia.

In St. Petersburg during June 2002, Uzbekistan participated as a full member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit, generally perceived to be a Eurasian construct to deter U.S. hegemony and promote a multi-polar world. From St. Petersburg, Putin reiterated his statement that Uzbekistan constituted a priority for Russia in Central Asia, at the same time, a senior U.S. government official criticized Uzbekistan's human rights record while visiting the country.

In mid-June, Uzbekistan declined to participate in NATO's Partnership for Peace exercises in Georgia, citing "technical reasons." Within a week, then-Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov announced that Uzbekistan was suspending its membership in GUUAM, an organization of five post-Soviet states created to counter Russia's hegemony in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). (Uzbekistan soon reentered GUUAM, with American encouragement.)

Perhaps President Karimov viewed the SCO as compatible with his own regional security aims. He may have considered also the fact that two of the SCO's five other members are nuclear powers and three are Uzbekistan's geographic neighbors.

Possibly Karimov was swayed even more by the consideration that there was little fear of criticism on domestic issues from other SCO members—neither Russia, with its actions in Chechnya, nor China, with its poor human rights record, is likely to take him to task.

As a result of Karimov's multi-vectored policy, political dialogue between Russia and Uzbekistan has become frequent, with greater contact between Karimov and Putin; conversely the U.S. President still has not responded to President Karimov's invitations to visit Uzbekistan. In August 2003, Putin visited Uzbekistan and met with Karimov—not in Tashkent, as protocol and tradition required, but in the Uzbek President's hometown of Samarkand, Uzbekistan's second largest city, and the capital of (the Islamic conqueror) Tamerlane's vast empire. Such intriguing symbolism and high-level reception seem a clear indication of a new course in Russian-Uzbek relations. Karimov once again flattered Putin by referring to Russia's interest in Central Asia, while demanding reciprocal recognition of Uzbek predominance:

I am confident that Russia is reviving and assuming its appropriate place in the world...Uzbekistan has always recognized Russia's role and interests in Central Asia and the country's southern borders. I hope that Russia realizes the role of Uzbekistan in the region as well.

Putin supported the idea of locating the SCO's Anti-Terrorism Center in Tashkent—a signal to the Americans that they were not the only ones leading an international anti-terrorist alliance. Putin is also considering Karimov's revival of Stalin's one-time scheme to divert small portions of Siberian rivers to Central Asia to feed the drying Aral Sea and meet the region's agricultural demand for water – a possible source of serious conflict in Central Asia. Putin, in turn, expressed Russia's interest in direct import of Uzbek cotton (as opposed to the current arrangement involving a third party). An energy deal was struck that permits the (partially state-owned) Russian gas monopoly "Gazprom" to buy 87 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas from Uzbekistan in 2004-2012 and to raise the annual volume by 10 bcm in 2005. President Karimov even chose to award a new

contract to Gazprom over the private Russian gas carrier "Itera," which had been using the Uzbek pipeline to transit gas from Turkmenistan.

hing a productive relationship with Russia by focusing mainly on economic and security issues, while preserving unconditional authority over domestic policy. Meanwhile, criticisms both from the U.S. State Department and international organizations, like the International Conflict Group and Human Rights Watch, are increasing. U.S. assistance to Uzbekistan dropped almost three-fold in fiscal year 2003 from nearly \$220 million to \$86 million. Yet, as an Uzbek diplomat in Washington said, "We don't need aid. We need investments, real investments."

Despite that realization, Uzbekistan has not moved any closer toward creating the favorable business climate needed to attract foreign investments. Restrictions on currency exchanges, set in 1996, sparked the withdrawal of foreign companies. While currency convertibility was reestablished in October 2003, many unresolved infrastructure issues including reform of the taxation, banking, and judiciary systems, have made overseas investors cautious, and the deeply-rooted corruption in Uzbekistan, as elsewhere, likewise raises investment costs and risks.

Reluctance, on the Uzbek side, to work with U.S. companies, and even with European companies, may be due to the potential loss of profits derived from bribery, which is practiced widely by the Uzbek political and business elite. Political decisions to favor one or another company in large bids, or to grant company convertibility privileges, require significant kickbacks. U.S. companies are prohibited by the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) of 1977 from making graft payments to foreign officials for the purpose of obtaining or keeping business—such activities are punishable by fines of up to one million dollars and/or up to five years of incarceration. However, Russians practice business ethics similar to those of the Uzbeks. Some members of the Uzbek elite also have established personal and business relationships with influential persons in Russia and run some of their businesses there. Thus, for the Uzbek elite it often seems more convenient to work with Russians rather than Americans or Europeans.

A private family issue may also be exerting influence in the choice of international allies. The much-publicized divorce in 2001 of President Karimov's daughter, Gulnara Karimova, from her American-born Uzbek husband, Mansur Maqsudi was followed by a battle over custody of their two (American-born) children. A New Jersey court ruled in favor of Maqsudi (because of Gulnara's repeated refusal to appear before the court), and found that Karimova must return the children to Mansur and pay his legal expenses of \$3.2 million or face legal consequences if she were to appear in the United States again. The travel restrictions placed upon his daughter disappointed President Karimov, who may have expected the U.S. administration's intervention in the dispute.

Having her travel choices limited, Gulnara Karimova moved to Moscow, bought a three-story apartment (for more than a million dollars) and continued her diplomatic work as a political counselor at the Uzbek Embassy. Some analysts suspect that the 66-year-old president is ill and speculate about his daughter's ambitions; other analysts assume that she is setting herself up in business with assets secured abroad – in case the family is forced to flee.

In any case, Moscow provides her with a sense of security, and it is the security of his daughter and not of the country that may prompt the president to seek even closer relations with Russia. In a sense, Karimov's daughter is Putin's hostage and a guarantee of friendly Uzbek-Russian relations. This is reminiscent of earlier hostage practices in Eurasia in which children from royal families were "lent" by their fathers to the neighboring rulers, ensuring peace and stability. President Putin may seem to be providing Karimov with something President Bush could not.

A series of bombings in Uzbekistan, late in March and early April this year, allegedly carried out by Islamists, pushed Karimov closer towards Russia. While certain groups in the United States and the West criticized Karimov for radicalizing society through his oppressive policies, President Vladimir Putin expressed strong support for his Uzbek colleagues in their determination to fight terrorism and religious extremism.

Karimov's post-9/11 attempts to focus Uzbek-American relations on military-to-military cooperation and on security was, at least partially, rejected by Washington, which tied the Cooperation Declaration and any further aid to progress in many other areas. Additionally, the U.S. administration is bogged down in two costly wars, and is thus not in any position to offer substantial aid. Stronger ties with the American government do not provide protection from criticism either in the U.S. media or by human rights organizations. With one exception no major U.S. investments have been made in Uzbekistan, and, as mentioned, American legal practices do not allow for any "special arrangements" between U.S. companies and the Uzbek elite. The outcome of the upcoming U.S. presidential elections is unclear, and the possibility of a win by the Democratic party, traditionally perceived as placing more emphasis on human rights issues, may constitute a factor in the direction of Uzbek foreign policy.

In the last two years, the number of bilateral visits and phone calls between Karimov and Putin has increased. The interest and the level of involvement of Russian companies in the Uzbek economy has grown. With Russia's support, an anti-terrorist center of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established in Tashkent. With Gulnara Karimova's active help as a counselor at the Uzbek Embassy in Moscow, cultural exchanges between the two countries are being restored. Even the rhetoric in the Uzbek media toward Russia has softened, as has Karimov's own tone. There is a clear understanding in Tashkent that an economically-rejuvenated Russia will be a long-term partner, especially with a leader like Putin who reminds Karimov of himself, with his tight grip on the media and emphasis on security issues.

Uzbekistan's future relations with Russia will be built on the common economic and security interests of both countries. These relations may prompt Uzbekistan to loosen its military ties with the United States, and may even lead to the establishment of a Russian military base in Uzbekistan, as in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, which has played host to both U.S. and Russian airbases. Maintaining warm relations with Russia is also in the interests of the Uzbek elite, and Karimov first and foremost, should the need arise

to find refuge in Russia or benefit from its presence if the regime is undermined by extremists.

Gulnara Karimova will play an important role. Given the absence of a Karimov son, neither an Azeri, nor a Russian scenario for succession will be enacted. Karimov has two daughters, unlike late Azeri president Heydar Aliev, who succeeded in bringing his son to power right before his death. Karimov also can't bring in a non-family member to assume the presidency, as in the "Putin scenario." According to a member of his inner circle, the aging Karimov senses that the number of persons he can trust is diminishing every day. Intensive shuffling and shifting allegiances in the central government and provincial administrations in the past few months suggest that the succession struggle has already begun.

Karimov will try to ensconce his daughter in power either by having her succeed him as President (after 2007, when she reaches the constitutional minimum age for the office) or by marrying her to his putative successor as president (whose authority will be limited, in order to allow Karimova a substantial role).

In any case, stable relations with Russia will help to provide a favorable press, financial capital and the backing of the Russian security services to protect her from internal Uzbek power struggles between competing clans and mafia structures. With so many factors weighing favorably toward a Russian alliance for Karimov, the main question remaining is, at what cost to Uzbekistan itself?

End Notes

(1) Timur Abdullaev is the pseudonym of an Uzbek citizen studying in the United States.

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