

«The closeness or closure of Uzbekistan is essentially a new false stereotype that appeared under the influence of the huge impressions of the large-scale reforms that were initiated with the coming to power of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev,» mentioned Farhod Tolipov, director of the non-state scientific institution “Caravan of Knowledge” (*Караван знаний*), in an article, written specifically for CABAR.asia.

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On the issue of new regionalism in Central Asia

Today, the ubiquitous opinion that Uzbekistan is opening has become a mantra. A lot of similar statements, terms, concepts that distort the actual state of affairs have recently accumulated in the political, media and expert lexicon. As strange and paradoxical as it may seem, I argue that Uzbekistan is not opening because it has never been closed.

The closeness or closure of Uzbekistan is, in fact, a new false stereotype that appeared under the influence of the huge impressions of the large-scale reforms that were initiated with the coming to power of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. These reforms gave rise to a really sharp contrast with the past period, however, not the contrast that lies in the dichotomy of “closeness-openness”.

Since the first years of its newly acquired independence, Uzbekistan has never been closed, but on the contrary, pursued a relatively open and non-isolationist policy to the extent it could. Rather, one can judge that Tashkent’s foreign policy was a form of maneuvering (pendulum policy), but this was partly due to the personality of the head of state, and to a greater extent to the nature of fundamental changes in the system of international relations itself.^[1] In addition, it is necessary to distinguish between the conditions of the first years of independence and the current conditions - both in the international system and within the country. There is much evidence of this.

Let us consider a few examples of the notable activism of Uzbekistan in different years. The first president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, initiated regional integration in Central Asia, literally, from the first days of independence, which was reflected in the concept “Turkestan is our common home” put forward by him in 1993. When they say that Uzbekistan alienated

Tajikistan from itself, it is worth remembering Karimov’s first state visit to Dushanbe, where he proclaimed the slogan “Tajiks and Uzbeks are one people speaking two languages.” Surely, the Uzbek-Tajik relations went through a difficult and contradictory period, but the conflict-generating factors that determined the complex relations between the two states are of a bilateral origin, not one-sided.



The writer Chingiz Aitmatov was one of the first to support the idea, the movement “Turkestan is our common home”.

Regardless of the successes and failures of regional unification (we are not talking about this now), Uzbekistan under Karimov pursued an active regional policy at all stages of the integration process - from the proclamation of the Central Asian Commonwealth (CAC) in 1991 to the creation of the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) in 1994, before the establishment of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in 2001. It is no coincidence that in those years the myth of the alleged rivalry between Kazakhstan and

Uzbekistan for leadership in the region was spread. How can a closed country conduct such a rivalry?

In the international arena, Tashkent has also not been passive or closed. Already in 1993, Karimov spoke at the 48th Session of the UN General Assembly, where he put forward a number of important initiatives aimed at strengthening stability and security in the Central Asian region. These include the initiative to establish a permanent seminar on regional security in the region, an initiative to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia. In addition, in 1999, he proposed creating an international center for the fight against terrorism at the OSCE Istanbul Summit.

Representative offices of the UN, UNDP, UNESCO, OSCE and other international organizations have been operating in Uzbekistan since the first years of independence. Since 1994, Uzbekistan has actively participated in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

In March 2002, the United States and Uzbekistan signed a strategic partnership declaration. A similar document was signed between Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation in 2004. China, Turkey, Japan, South Korea and the European Union are also among the strategic partners of Uzbekistan. Surely, not everything went smoothly and without problems in the international relations of Uzbekistan. On the contrary, turbulence in the international system caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the formation of a New World Order (NWO) has become a serious test for the young independent state, adapting to new international realities.

Karimov mentioned in 2005 that “strategic uncertainty” has developed in Central Asia, which means that “the geostrategic interests of the world's largest powers and neighboring countries are concentrated and sometimes collide here.” Strategic uncertainty did noticeably complicate the regional situation, especially the geopolitical dimension of the region's transformation, which gradually led to the transition from multilateral relations to bilateral ones, and this, in turn, led to the partial self-isolation of Uzbekistan in international and regional affairs.

In May, the well-known tragic Andijan events took place, connected with the terrorist raid and the conduct of the counter-terrorist operation. They became a shock moment that caused Tashkent's foreign policy turn: Uzbekistan joined the EurAsEC and returned to the CSTO. However, what is interesting and important for understanding the foreign policy fluctuations (which is also a special form of activism, not closure) of the state - Uzbekistan

left the EurAsEC in 2008 and CSTO in 2012.

Therefore, when talks about the closure (isolation) or opening of Uzbekistan occur, often it is not noticed that this simplifies a complex and multifaceted picture. Thus, the issue is not about the openness or closeness of the country, but at least about two factors: a) the nature and dynamics of changes in the international and regional situation; b) the emergence of fundamentally new tasks of reforming the country. This is a normal dialectical process, when the political course of the state (external or internal) is modified in a changing international, regional and internal context. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct an accurate inventory of the political assets of Uzbekistan in order to give a more objective assessment of the content and nature of its foreign and domestic policies.

It is appropriate here to recall the principles of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy, which were adopted at the beginning of independence:

- openness to cooperation regardless of ideology, adherence to universal human values, maintaining peace and security;
- respect for the sovereignty of other states and recognition of the inviolability of borders; non-interference in the internal affairs of other states;
- peaceful settlement of disputes; non-use of force or threat of force;
- respect for human rights and freedoms; the advantage of generally recognized norms of international law over domestic laws and legal norms;
- the conclusion of alliances, joining the community and withdrawal from them in order to ensure the highest interests of the state, people, their welfare and security; non-alignment with aggressive military blocs and associations;
- equality and mutual interest in interstate relations, the supremacy of the national interests of the state; development of external relations on the basis of bilateral and multilateral agreements: in case of rapprochement with one state, do not move away from another.

These principles are in no way consistent with the idea of the closed nature of Uzbekistan.

For the sake of fairness, it must be admitted that in the last decade of Karimov’s rule, Uzbekistan’s transition to bilateral relations and the termination of the CACO have significantly worsened the regional political climate and increased the degree of conflict potential in the region. Some observers attribute this to Uzbekistan’s closeness and self-

isolation. But even so, one should not forget that Uzbekistan continued to participate in all SCO and CIS summits, NATO’s office was opened in Tashkent, Karimov and Nazarbayev signed a strategic partnership agreement between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2013.

Uzbekistan’s support for the status of a permanent member of the UN Security Council of India and Japan indicates that the country has more or less successfully passed the stage of adaptation to the international system and the ability to express larger international initiatives than before and to position itself as an active actor.

Finally, a strategically important component of Uzbekistan’s international activity since the first years of independence has been the policy of transport diversification in order to enter new world markets. In particular, it is worth mentioning that Islam Karimov once initiated the construction of the Tejen-Serakhs-Mashhad railway segment, which made it possible to connect to the railway network of the Gulf states. Uzbekistan’s support for the TRACECA project, Uzbekistan’s long-term participation in the reconstruction of the transport infrastructure of Afghanistan are also among such examples of diversification.

The current president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, demonstrates the continuity of the previous course in some respects, in other aspects he initiates elements of the new course. For example, the proclamation of the Central Asian region by Mirziyoyev as a priority in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy, on the one hand, reminds of Karimov’s principle “Turkestan is our common home,” and on the other, creates a new format and new dynamics of regional cooperation. Mirziyoyev’s initiatives, put forward from the UN rostrum, are not only not inferior in importance to the initiatives of the previous leadership, but in some respects surpass them. Breakthroughs in domestic politics are also obvious. They are primarily reflected in the adoption and phased implementation of the Action Strategy for five priority areas of development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021.



The current president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, demonstrates the continuity of the previous course in some respects, in other aspects he initiates elements of the new course. Photo: islamkarimov.uz

Another point that deserves attention in this context: the degree of openness of the Central Asian countries to each other and the disposition for close regional unification. It must be admitted that the decade that passed after the liquidation of the OCAS until the “opening” of Uzbekistan with the coming to power of Mirziyoyev was not just a period of alienation of one (!) state from the rest, but a period of mutual (!) alienation of Central Asian countries from each other. With all this, the leading role of Uzbekistan in regional affairs has always been obvious: its involvement or self-isolation decided the fate of integration in Central Asia in one direction or another. Back in the mid-1990s, the famous American scientist and specialist in Central Asia, Frederick Starr, noted that an independent and strong Uzbekistan is in the interests of all countries in the region, including Russia, and that Uzbekistan can be the only anchor in the region. He also stressed that despite the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan, the future role of this country will depend on major reforms.[\[2\]](#)

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So, it can be dialectically asserted that the current domestic and foreign policy of Uzbekistan is being formed in the changed internal and external conditions, requiring the solution of new reform tasks. Tashkent is not so much “opening up” (because it has never been closed), as it is objectively adjusting its foreign and domestic policy, responding to the new challenges of the 21st century.

Conclusion

With this short article, I would like to show the importance of deeper research and critical analysis of the processes in the Central Asian region. I recently wrote that in Russian expert circles they know Central Asia poorly and in their works they often use outdated concepts and draw superficial conclusions using simplified clichés.[\[3\]](#) However, this issue is also relevant for experts from the countries of the region.

The lessons of the past period of independence, among other things, lie in the fact that many experts, journalists and even politicians of the Central Asian countries themselves know little about their countries and the region as a whole.

Even if we accept the rhetoric of Uzbekistan’s openness, it is now important that neighboring states in the region should not close themselves, and do not turn away from each other. Indeed, it must be admitted that when it is said that – Uzbekistan is opening, this, on the one hand, means criticism of the recent “closeness”, which led to the freezing of regional cooperation, and on the other hand, positive assessments and expectations of the prospect of new rapprochement and active cooperation. What does this mean? First, without Uzbekistan, it is practically impossible to move the regional process forward. Second, that the countries of the region now need to support Uzbekistan’s efforts to re-activate this process. Therefore, positive assessments must be supported by deeds. The third Consultative Meeting of the Presidents of the Central Asian states expected this year should provide answers to new challenges, especially in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which, among other things, has increased the relevance and expectations of closer cooperation between the five states of the region. Now, obviously, none of them should be isolated or closed, but should open up to each other even more and go for close cooperation on a regional scale.

Photo on the cover of the article: president.uz

[1] Tolipov, F. “Flexibility or Strategic Confusion? Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan”, in Uzbekistan Initiative, Central Asia Program, the George Washington University, No. 2, February, 2014,
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[2] Starr, F. “Making Eurasia Stable”, in Foreign Affairs, Vol. 75, No.1, 1996.

[3] Tolipov F. “Do they know Central Asia in Russia?”
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