

FILIPP ZAKHAROV. MODERN STRATEGY OF "SOFT POWER" IN UZBEKISTAN // *The article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Abstract. The foreign policy of Uzbekistan has become more dynamic and the country has moved confidently along the path of its interests since Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev came to power. The new President of Uzbekistan has launched an ambitious course to get the Republic the status of a regional leader. Uzbekistan actively uses soft power as one of the tools of its foreign policy. The author analyzes and compares the activities of the previous and current leadership of Uzbekistan in implementing integration processes and extending its influence to other states of the Central Asian region. In the conclusion, the author notes the pronounced course of modern Uzbekistan in interaction not only with the countries of the region, but also with such powers as Russia, China and the United States.

Much has been written and said about the first years of Sh.M. Mirziyoyev as president, which have been identified as the Uzbek "thaw" or "spring".¹ Sh.M. Mirziyoyev undoubtedly seeks to resolve or soften at least tensions in the region. Basically, these are the constant conflicts of Uzbekistan with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Border controls, strict visa regimes and higher rates on the background of stagnation in the governmental relations – all this has turned the region into a place of relatively weak intra-

regional trade. Moreover, the international prestige of the President of Uzbekistan grew after the organization of a major summit in Tashkent in March 2018, which focused on the development of a roadmap for peace in Afghanistan.²

In addition to striving for external openness, Sh.M. Mirziyoyev also made a lot of efforts for domestic changes: launching political reforms, releasing political prisoners, freedom of speech to journalists, the National Security Service restructuring, and fighting corruption and nepotism. He also took unprecedented steps to liberalize the Uzbek currency – the soum, after the failure of I.A. Karimov in this direction in the late 1990s and early 2000s.³

In addition to internal continuity, the key priorities of foreign policy remain basically the same as before: Sh.M. Mirziyoyev acknowledged his commitment to independence in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, multilateral integration, and rejection of military blocs.⁴

Despite the fact that Sh.M. Mirziyoyev developed broader regional cooperation, it is important to keep in mind that I.A. Karimov also took similar efforts. The first president of Uzbekistan supported the idea of “Turkestan is our common home” and also participated in regional forums designed to promote economic and political integration. I.A. Karimov also sponsored the idea of settling the conflict in Afghanistan, the so-called 6 + 2 initiative.⁵ Consequently, the recent regional conference on Afghanistan, organized by Sh.M. Mirziyoyev, is not a radical departure from the policies of the previous president in the 1990s. The same can be said about Sh.M. Mirziyoyev's attempt to develop regional cooperation.

The commitment of Sh.M. Mirziyoyev's soft power is undoubtedly his new direction,⁶ as some Uzbek analysts emphasize. According to Harvard University scholar D. Nye Jr., soft power makes others want the desired results, since it co-opts people rather than forcing them.⁷ It is about building trust, promoting openness, enhancing the country's authority in the

international arena, this concept has found a receptive audience outside the U.S. It is possible to talk about liberalization, about cooperation in the economic and political spheres within the framework of soft power. The Chinese Communist Party, led by Xi Jinping, remains the main arbiter of change. The executive branch of Uzbekistan continues to be the main catalyst for reform. Sh.M. Mirziyoyev gives priority to dialogue on the need to end confrontation in the region, interstate relations and openness to membership in the World Trade Organization.⁸

Today, Uzbek officials emphasize the need for cooperation with other Central Asian countries in a more friendly tone with all their regional counterparts. Using a soft power tool, they call for joint construction of regional power plants and fair distribution of electricity, thereby reducing the possibility of regional conflicts. Sh.M. Mirziyoyev personally visited many neighboring countries, signed important socio-economic agreements, including agreements on security. Many business leaders accompanied presidential delegations. Tashkent welcomed the participation of representatives of leading international institutions and also major foreign governments in the visits. Sh.M. Mirziyoyev also visited the Russian Federation, China and the United States in order to conclude trade agreements, obtain diplomatic support and maintain a security partnership. The administration's internal reforms are aimed at presenting the country as a more attractive partner for the West, while Uzbekistan continues to deepen economic ties with Russia and China.⁹

Expansion of interaction with foreign partners and international institutions contributes to the improvement of relations between Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbors. Recent Uzbek initiatives have led to the creation of new transport infrastructure, economic deregulation to facilitate business, liberalization of control over the national currency, and other market reforms to achieve Uzbekistan's status as a regional transport and investment hub. The new tactics should help Uzbekistan make better use of its natural advantages, such as its

central geographic position in the region. In particular, Uzbekistan has the most profitable strategic position throughout Eurasia for receiving investments from China. The new foreign policy approach of the Uzbek government can also create socio-economic opportunities for its citizens, strengthen the regional capacity to prevent transnational threats, raise Uzbekistan's foreign economic authority outside Central Asia, and help preserve geographical pluralism in the heart of Eurasia, in addition to strengthening old and forming new economic ties.

On the other hand, if the global context changes again so that key international actors, such as the U.S. and the European Union, seek liberal political and economic reforms as harbingers of international participation, this could force Sh.M. Mirziyoyev to spend more material and non-material resources on illiberal executive power protection rather than identifying potential economic cooperation.¹⁰

Asserting the status of a great power in the region, whether it is China, the United States, or Russia, may also force Sh.M. Mirziyoyev to abandon openness. Moscow's attempt to achieve growing multilateral integration in the former Soviet region has raised skepticism in Uzbekistan. In contrast, China has been able to advance its major investment projects, as outlined in the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative, without necessarily contradicting the key concept of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. But even in this case Sh.M. Mirziyoyev will most likely refrain from dependence on one partner. Independence and strong commitment to sovereignty remain the cornerstone of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, and the president is unlikely to compromise on this issue, just like his predecessor.

It should be noted that other countries will also benefit from the processes taking place in the largest country of the Central Asian region. Unlike Afghanistan, which has suffered from the war, prosperous Uzbekistan will become a more reliable partner not only in ensuring regional security, but also as a

source of economic opportunities and greater openness in this closed region.

Thus, since Uzbekistan borders all four Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), has the largest population, and the second-largest GDP, Since Uzbekistan borders all four republics of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan), has the largest population and the second largest GDP, the willingness to productively interact with neighbors can both move the region forward and deprive the potential of a leader. Uzbekistan's recent initiatives could be a trigger for the renewed role of Central Asia as an independent region.

Central Asia can be not only a geographical name, but also a center of trade, tourism and culture. The goals of President Sh.M. Mirziyoyev to increase GDP by 2 times can be realized if the Central Asian region attracts external investors and political partners, and also participates in such international organizations as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), and also under the UN Sustainable Development Goals program. The expansion of Uzbekistan's bilateral relations with the countries of the region and with the major world powers is the result of the "soft power" policy implementation.

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