

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan: Staying Away

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The only two states in Central Asia that have been consistently skeptical, if not hostile, towards Putin's geopolitical plans and projects have been Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Their reasons for doing so are clear, but the future success of their independent stances is not. Only time will tell whether they represent alternative models for the future of the entire region based on full-blown national self-government and coordination rather than "integration," or temporary outliers in a process that eventually embraces nearly all the former Soviet Union.

Why Consider Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan Together?

As recently as a decade ago it would have been astonishing to consider the fates of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as somehow related. After all, Uzbekistan has the region's largest population (approximately 30 million) while Turkmenistan (barely over 5 million) the smallest. Uzbekistan has the region's largest military force and Turkmenistan one of the smallest. And Uzbekistan inherited from Soviet times the largest establishment of heavy industry, while Turkmenistan began with the smallest. Related to this, while the Uzbek economy was and remains the most diversified in the region, Turkmenistan's continues to be based overwhelmingly on the export of one product, natural gas.

Past and current political history presents the same picture of contrasts. Whereas the territory of Uzbekistan hosted the three strongest regional emirates of the past half millennium, Turkmenistan in those centuries was dominated by nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. In Soviet times Uzbekistan was the political and economic hub of all Central Asia while Turkmenistan had both the weakest identity and smallest political role.

Above all, the grouping together of these two countries would have seemed astonishing because of their mutual antipathy. No sooner did the Uzbeks arrive in Central Asia in the thirteenth century than they began settling in the region's ancient cities, with their capital at Bukhara. This put them into frontal conflict with the nomadic Turkmen tribes, many of which survived by marauding urban-based caravans. This hostility continued into Soviet times, and was quick to reappear after both states became independent.

Joint participation in the construction of a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan broke this ancient pattern of enmity. Both countries suffered under Gazprom's monopolistic control over the export of their valuable natural gas. When in 1998 Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin cut off the export of gas from Turkmenistan, it became a matter of life and death for that country. Then President Saparmurad Niyazov proposed an alternative pipeline to China and Uzbekistan readily agreed to participate in the project, and for the same reasons. In a remarkable turnabout, the two countries and their leaders have maintained cordial relations since planning for the new pipeline began in 2005. Today, their relationship is the closest between any two states in the region.

This amity is based on more than good will. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan maintain the most statist economies in the region, even as their governments have worked hardest to build an ethos of national unity based on a new patriotism. This is the easier because the titular nationalities in both countries constitute the largest percentage of any countries in Central Asia. In gestures directed against what they openly call Russian colonialism, both Latinized their alphabets (the only states in the region to do so) and have marginalized the Russian language. Not surprisingly, they are the recipients of the greatest and most relentless pressure from Moscow.

Putin's Levers against Tashkent and Ashgabat

The Kremlin has a wide range of levers it can use against Tashkent and Ashgabat, and the capacity to wield them in a coordinated manner. These range from the use of public diplomacy to formidable economic weapons. On the former, it can raise charges for Uzbek or Turkmen students studying at Russian universities, and it can fill the Uzbek and Turkmen airwaves with anti-

Karimov and anti-Berdymukhamedov propaganda without fear of contradiction, since western TV is inaccessible. Moreover, it is almost certainly using the Federal Security Service (the former KGB) to take advantage of Karimov's problems with his daughter Gulnara and her troubles with Swiss law over charges of money laundering and with European law over the TeliaSonera affair.

In Turkmenistan, Moscow demonstrated the potency of its intelligence arm during the period when the late Turkmen Foreign Minister and Ambassador to Beijing, Boris Shikhmuradov, took refuge under FSB protection in Moscow. Putin in this case failed to unseat President Niyazov, but he will not hesitate to pursue the same ends with different means today.

Economic pressures against the recalcitrant Central Asian states can take many forms. Restrictions on Uzbek and Turkmen guest workers in Russia could send tens of thousands of them home, where the local economy cannot reabsorb them. It can cut back Russian investments and bilateral trade with Uzbekistan. And it can take active measures against Western investors and investments in that country. With respect to Turkmenistan, it can push Iran to seize the initiative in supplying Pakistan and India with gas; create access problems at Turkmenistan's expanded Black Sea port of Turkmenbashi; and use other methods to thwart Turkmenistan's efforts to become a key segment of the emerging Southern Corridor from Hanoi to Hamburg via India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. Parallel with these negative pressures, Moscow can also wield various tools for attracting both countries, notably favorable terms of trade, investments, and favorable treatment of guest workers.

Even before the Customs Union was conceived, Russia was not shy about championing protectionism. Prime Minister Chernomyrdin did not bother to seek cover from the Customs Union when he cut off the re-transmission of Turkmen gas to Europe on the grounds that "Europe does not want your gas." Now, though, in January 2014, the Customs Union has moved against General Motors' Matiz and Nexia plant in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley. It required that all imported cars have anti-lock braking, at least one air bag, daylight headlights, etc. Neither of the GM vehicles currently being exported to Russia from Uzbekistan had these features. This means that overnight, GM lost the market for the third of its production that it exported to Kazakhstan and Russia in 2013.

It is possible that GM can sell these vehicles within Uzbekistan, but GM will have lost valuable hard currency and Uzbekistan's foreign trade will have suffered a blow.

Russia can easily invent and apply other restrictions to prevent Uzbek goods such as fruits and vegetables from entering its market. Considering that Russian-Uzbek bilateral trade reached \$7 billion in 2013, this is a very potent tool indeed. To the extent that Russia applies such restrictions through the Customs Union mechanism, it can effectively thwart trade between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as well. In the summer of 2013 Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement which they sealed with the exchange of large-scale trade delegations. Russia now has the tools to thwart such activity.

Since the opening of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline, Russia's tools for bringing a recalcitrant Turkmenistan to heel are more limited, but still potent. In 2009 it registered its displeasure with Turkmenistan's opening to the West by blowing up the main Turkmenistan-Russia gas transmission line. Russia can also close its market to Turkmenistan's emerging canned produce industry, refuse to transit Turkmen cotton to Baltic ports, and continue to threaten Ashgabat if the latter proposes to send gas westward. And it can discourage western firms in fields as diverse as farm equipment and scientific gear for hospitals from entering the Turkmen (or Uzbek) market.

Putin has yet harsher tools at hand that can be applied against both countries. In order to punish Lithuania for standing up to Moscow, he denied entrance to the Russian market for goods coming from the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda in March 2014. The EU has yet to respond seriously to this body blow to the Lithuanian economy. Similarly, Russia could wait until the U.S. has finished shipping army gear from Afghanistan over the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) and then close off this major north-south artery through Uzbekistan. Russia already supports the construction of a new railroad to Afghanistan via Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are aligned with Putin's emerging Eurasian Union. This would marginalize Uzbekistan's role in the emerging North-South trade. Considering that Uzbekistan still exports a large part of its cotton crop through Russia to the Baltic, this step could have grave consequences for Tashkent. There is no evidence that Uzbekistan cotton exporters have an effective contingency plan with which they could respond to such a devastating

measure, although the best prospect is via Turkmenistan's new port at Turkmenbashi and thence to Baku, Turkey, and the West. Turkmenistan, meanwhile, anticipating such a move by Moscow and reducing its vulnerability, has already shifted the export of a significant part of its cotton crop from Russia to Turkey.

Finally, it should be noted that Russia has already begun to play the "water and electricity card" against both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Thanks to a combination of pressure and bribes dating back half a decade, Moscow now owns the emerging Kambarata hydropower plant and effectively controls the Toktogul reservoir and power plant, both in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, it has maneuvered, unsuccessfully for now, to control Tajikistan's main power plant and reservoir as well. Thanks to this, it has the power to cripple Uzbek agriculture by cutting off its water supply during crucial phases of the growing season, and to damage Turkmen farming as well.

How Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan Have Responded to the EEU

Turkmenistan has based its refusal even to consider joining the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as the related Collective Security Treaty Organization and its military alliance, on its non-aligned posture, which is enshrined in the country's founding documents. In 1992 the United Nations recognized Turkmenistan's "permanent neutrality."

Uzbekistan from the outset noted that with a majority of the seats in the Eurasian Union's ruling institutions, Russians would dominate the new organization. This and other features convinced them that the true goal of the Eurasian Union was political, not economic, and on this basis refused to join. It joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization at its founding but suspended its membership in 1999. While Tashkent re-joined in 2006, it terminated its membership in 2013 on the grounds that the CSTO was ineffective and controlled by Moscow. An important reason for the withdrawal is that Moscow was using the CSTO as a tool for installing a military base in the Kyrgyz sector of the Ferghana valley, a move that Tashkent adamantly opposes. During the second Kyrgyz revolution in 2010, President Karimov succeeded in gaining China's

support for his stance on Putin's Ferghana base, at which Putin allowed the matter to lapse.¹

It is often said, incorrectly, that the governments of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are inward-looking, reclusive, and isolationist. There have been periods since independence when this was true. Now, however, both are reaching out to new investors and new markets. For both countries, China is at the top of the list. Both have signed major trade agreements with China. So as not to be dependent on the one existing east-west railroad line to China via Customs Union member Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan is pushing hard to build a more direct route to Chinese territory across the Tien Shan Mountains via Kyrgyzstan. Even though Kyrgyzstan is scheduled to become a member of the Customs Union and the EAU as soon as its parliament ratifies the agreement, it is assumed that China will not allow Moscow or the EAU to interdict trade along this sub-corridor. Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have welcomed major investments from Chinese industries, which come with ready access to the Chinese market.

This was met by China's economic outreach to them, which has been so effective as to pose the prospect of substituting Russian economic domination of their economies with massive interventions by China. Both countries, meanwhile, have therefore worked to expand trade and investment contacts with Europe, Turkey, and especially with South and East Asia, including India, Pakistan, Japan, Indonesia and South Korea.

Uzbekistan's and Turkmenistan's Responses: Too Little and Too Late?

For now, there is good reason to be skeptical about the long-term effectiveness of Uzbekistan's and Turkmenistan's efforts to hedge pressures from Moscow. They have been most effective in enlisting China as a partner to balance Russia's economic and political power. But China has to date been as reticent in the political and security areas as it has been eager in the field of investments and economic ties. To be sure, economic links are a form of political power, as dramatically demonstrated by the geopolitical impact of the Turkmenistan-China

¹ Stephen Blank, "A Sino-Uzbek Axis in Central Asia?," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 1, 2010, <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5395>.

gas pipeline. But China has hesitated to respond directly to Putin's growing political assertiveness in the region.

This began to change in the summer of 2013, when China issued a statement that tacitly endorsed the joint statement by President Karimov and his Kazakh counterpart, President Nazarbayev, announcing a "Strategic Partnership agreement" between them which asserted that no issues regarding the future of Central Asia could be taken without consulting them both, as the leaders of the two most powerful countries in the region. China's response was to issue a general affirmation of the importance of sovereignty and self-government in Central Asia.² While this could only be read as a rebuke to Mr. Putin, the Chinese government has as yet no institutional means of backing up its affirmation of sovereignty in Central Asia. Russia can veto anything China may propose through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and it lacks other institutional instruments through which it could take action. For now, China is well-positioned to balance Russia's pretensions in the region but lacks a ready means for transforming its economic presence in the region into political power.

With respect to Europe and America, the strategies of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan for dealing with Putin and his Eurasian Union project call for a host of quiet defensive actions rather than grand initiatives. This may be due to the fact that even though the two countries have struck useful deals with the West in what might be called the area of "soft security," they continue to be constrained by European and American perceptions of their record in the area of democratization and human rights. The fact that President Karimov had to cancel (officially described as a postponement) a planned visit to the Czech Republic in February 2014 due to these concerns speaks for itself. Turkmenistan's president Berdymukhamedov has been even more cautious in venturing abroad, preferring trips to Southeast Asia and China to travels in the West, out of fear of the same form of reprisals. Whatever the justification for Western concerns over the records of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the spheres of human rights, democratization, and religious freedom, such instances reflect the extent

² "President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 7, 2013, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh/t1076334.shtml>.

to which the foreign policies of both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are constrained by their actions domestically.

The strategic defensive actions that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have undertaken may in the end prove effective. But for the time being it appears that they stand the risk of being sufficient to arouse Putin's anger but insufficient to thwart the actions that may arise from that anger.

The U.S. Response: Singing Out of Tune in Two Keys

The United States in 2014 finds itself tugged in two directions on both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It needs the Northern Distribution Network through Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia, in order to evacuate war materiel and other equipment from Afghanistan. And it needs Turkmenistan as the western outlet for road and railroad corridor through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India that is essential for the economic viability of post-Karzai Afghanistan. Realizing that Russia could easily suspend transport along the NDN route, Washington has begun making alternative plans, even as it works actively with Tashkent and Moscow to keep the NDN open. And while the U.S. has made clear its support for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, it has yet to translate that support into effective action. As of this writing, there is hope that Chevron will sign on as the key international energy company to develop the route, but the deal has yet to be closed, let alone financed. Unless the U.S. takes a more pro-active role, which must necessarily involve the White House, it will fail.

At the same time, the Obama administration has proclaimed a "pivot to Asia" and taken numerous steps to reduce its longer-term involvement with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Central Asia as a whole.

With respect to both its short and long-term interests in Uzbekistan, U.S. actions are constrained by Congressional legislation on human rights, democratization, and freedom of religion. True, it has the possibility to issue waivers, which it has done frequently, most recently with respect to Uzbekistan in February 2014. This present waiver will expire on September, 30, 2015. In Turkmenistan, after years of very publicly censuring the government's actions in the fields of human rights and religious freedom, the U.S. in 2013 adopted a quieter approach, which was bearing fruit. But a recent bilateral meeting, an otherwise

highly productive session in Ashgabat in February 2014, was nearly destroyed by a sustained outburst from a representative of the State Department's Office of Religious Freedom.

In short, even with waivers and efforts by the State Department to proceed in a less public and confrontational manner, U.S. legislation on human rights, freedom of religion, and democratization—and the manner in which that legislation has been implemented by the Department of State—hangs like a sword of Damocles over Tashkent and Ashgabat and over U.S.-Uzbekistan and U.S.-Turkmenistan relations as a whole. The American dilemma is that its interests and affirmations draw it simultaneously in two directions. This is not in itself bad, if it had a serious strategy for integrating or phasing them. Such a strategy would have to begin, as the U.S. began in 1776 and as U.S. policy affirmed after the breakup of the USSR, by affirming sovereignty and by backing that affirmation with decisive and effective actions. The U.S. would have to reach a clear understanding with both countries that the pursuit of this policy will require both to make steady progress in other fields of concern to Washington, specifically human rights, religious freedom, and democratization. The only way such an understanding can be reached is if each country's progress is measured in terms of steady advances, rather than the attainment of some absolute level. If the U.S. can content itself with deliberate progress on the part of the other party, i.e., a long-term and strategic approach, rather than demanding an immediate transformation (which would be impossible), and if it is prepared to proceed through steady negotiation rather than through public abuse and confrontation, it can bring its two goals into harmony.

Such an approach is the only way it can find a willing partner in either Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. Stated differently, such an approach is the only way in which the U.S. can effectively advance its other affirmation, namely the protection of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and self-government. As of this writing, Washington lacks an approach that will harmonize its two affirmations and enable it to work effectively with either Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. The failure of the U.S. government to solve this "Rubik's Cube" leaves Washington without any real response to Putin's Eurasian Union project in either Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, or in Central Asia as a whole. For years, its ambassadors were stating that Central Asian countries, as sovereign states, were free to enter

into whatever international arrangements they wished and that the U.S. would not interfere. Now that it is slowly coming to understand the nature of Putin's grand scheme, it is having second thoughts. But these have yet to be translated into the kind of strategy Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan need, or that would justify any longer-term U.S. commitment in Central Asia.

At the present moment, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are the main bellwethers for stability and instability in Central Asia as a whole. As the two states with the greatest interest in, and capacity for, taking an independent stance *vis-à-vis* Putin's geopolitical adventure, they are carefully watched by all their regional neighbors. Like them, they value their trade with Russia, which for each country is valued at approximately \$7 billion per annum. Unlike them, they have chosen an independent path and have the strength and resources for now to pursue it.

One thing is evident: if either or both of these countries are pressured into joining the Eurasian Union, it will unleash powerful forces of instability throughout the region. However much Washington may wish to "pivot" to East Asia, it will eventually find itself drawn back to Central Asia, not as an emerging region rich with promise, but as a cultural zone at odds with its former imperial ruler and with itself. In short, the United States cannot avoid accepting its responsibilities as a major power.

At the present moment it is unclear whether Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, too, will be drawn into the Eurasian Economic Union, remain outliers constantly under pressure from Moscow, or become beacons of sovereignty, self-determination, coordination and cooperation in the region, as opposed to being pawns in a new great power game initiated by Moscow. Only the latter course will allow them to develop freely, and to advance in the areas of democratization and human rights. The outcome will be determined as much by the action, or inaction, of the United States and Europe as by their own efforts, however resolute they have been, or may be in the coming period.