

CENTRAL ASIA AT THE CROSSROADS

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Abstract: *Over the course of the past three decades, the role of Central Asia has drastically changed, once more in its history. We have witnessed this region's evolution from political non-existence, to becoming an increasingly important actor on international arena again. Located at the very heart of Asia, and being a key midpoint of the Islamic World, Central Asia has become an integral part of Eurasian and global processes.*

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Until just recently, the term “Central Asia” was treated mostly as a historical and geographical definition with quite unclear borders and even more unclear political prospects. These prospects, as a rule, were considered a part of this or that version of the “Great Game”, among big powers competing with each other to gain influence over the region, while the Central Asians were left to act as passive objects in this game.

Even the very name used for the region varied drastically at different period. It was called Transoxiana by the Greeks and Romans, Western Land by ancient Chinese, Maverannahr by the medieval Arabs. Meanwhile Iran distinguished itself from Turan and subsequently the linguistic approach led to the region being called Turkestan. Sometimes it was named Inner Asia, to more broadly link it Mongolia, Western China, northern India and southern Siberia. During the Soviet period, for instance, the region was to the contrary limited to the so called Soviet Central Asia referring only for four republics: Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

It has now become evident that Central Asia is starting to reclaim its geostrategic role in the world, which it once played until the dramatic

change of the major trade routes and then the subsequent expansion of the Russian Empire kept it from playing an active role in international relations. Before that, as it was defined by Arnold Toynbee, “the Oksa-Yaksart basin was like a turning point or a center for all roads of the world to converge. Its natural conditions, - he stated, - helped to turn the region into an international crossroads.”

It was here that the vital interests of the four largest regions of Eurasia – the Middle East, the South-Asian subcontinent, the Rus, transformed in the 17th century to Russia, and China – were interlaced. In between each and every one of them, Central Asia was at the center of highly developed systems of mutual strategic interests in political, economic, cultural, and military affairs.

Mutual correlation and interdependency were so matured that the development of Central Asia often had a fundamental impact on the state of affairs in the aforementioned regions.

Today the countries of Central Asia are forming their identity and building independent policies not only with the countries of these regions, but with other parts of the world as well.

They can no longer be regarded as just an appendage of another nation's idea of statehood.

There is no reason to doubt that Central Asia will become an important element in the balance of power in the very heart of the Eurasian landscape, affecting a wide range of economic and political interests as well as global security considerations. At the same time, an unstable, disunited Central Asia could create severe problems for an increasingly interdependent world.

There is another factor that determines the unique role of Uzbekistan and the other countries of Central Asia in contemporary world. Due to the dramatic turn of history, the original Asian region, with predominantly a Muslim population, became a direct participant of the European process within the framework of OSCE and other intra-Eurasian processes. This is not only creating opportunities for these states, but a gateway of inter-civilizational dialog for the whole world as well.

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History unambiguously shows that the golden ages of Central Asia coincided with the times of its most intensive ties with the rest of the world. And to the contrary, when these ties were weakened, Central Asia was doomed to harbor backwardness, obscurantism, bloody feuds, and as a result poverty and vegetation.

At the heart of the previous CA renaissances was the emergence of a common economic, cultural, humanitarian space in a vast region. Long-distance trade played a major role in the rise and prosperity of Central Asia. The Great Silk Roads served not only as a means of trading goods, but also as an exchange of cultures, ideas, scientific discoveries, bridging distant nations and civilizations.

Approximately one hundred years ago, a prominent scholar Wilhelm Barthold, wrote a profound piece dedicated to the history of Central Asia. He analyzed the factors behind the astonishing achievements of the Central Asian civilization in medieval ages. He predicted that there would be a revival of Central Asia's role as an important region, where its distinguished position in history and culture of world civilization would be restored. According to him, Central Asia would rise from its ruins, and take on an integral role once international trade routes restarted to cross the region again.

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Hence, the foreign policy of the new Uzbekistan is aimed at cultivating multidirectional dialog and cooperation in foreign relations – with the East and West, North and South. It has started restoring its historical place in world civilization: and a decisive factor of this revival is the country's openness to the world.

Immediately after his election in 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev instigated systemic high-level regional dialogue. It enabled to create a fundamentally new political atmosphere in Central Asia.

The main goal is to turn Central Asia into a zone of stabile and sustainable development, to create an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect and good-neighbourliness. In recent years, Uzbekistan's trade turnover with its neighbours has drastically increased.

If a few years ago Central Asia was considered a “zone of strategic uncertainty”, today we can look at its prospects with a greater optimism.

A number of Uzbek initiatives are aimed at resolving the conflict in Afghanistan. Relations with the other CIS countries, our traditional partners, have reached a new level in all dimension. Together with China – key trade partner – Uzbekistan is an active participant in the Belt and Road initiative. A major step was taken towards building closer ties with Europe. Country attained a beneficiary status in the EU’s Generalized System of Preferences - "GSP+". This was a result of intense work and successful summits in Paris, Berlin and high-level meetings in Tashkent. Across the pond, President Mirziyoyev’s visit to Washington and the meeting at the White House marked the beginning of a new era of strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and the US. Uzbek-Turkish relations have also taken a fresh breath of air. The two states signed strategic bilateral agreements, committing to joint projects aimed at modernizing Uzbekistan’s road infrastructure as well as power and manufacturing facilities. Visits by President Mirziyoyev to Seoul and Tokyo have opened up absolutely new horizons of partnership with the Republic of Korea and with Japan. Intense dialogue with the leaderships of India and Pakistan have paved the way for the development of relations between Central and South Asia. Last July a very successful conference on Regional Connectivity took place in Tashkent where high-level representatives from more than 40 countries took part.

At the same time, the situation in our region and around the world is changing rapidly. This requires a continuous and corresponding adjustment in countries’ foreign policy.

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What are the foreign policy priorities of Uzbekistan in the years to come?

First, it is important to consolidate the existing positive trends in the region, to make the process of strengthening mutual trust and broad-based cooperation in Central Asia irreversible.

Second, it is extremely important to continue to solicit the active involvement of Afghanistan in the regional and global processes. Already two generations of Afghans have not seen peace. Long-term peace in that

country can only be achieved through national consensus, public contract, and inclusive government. It is important to keep Afghanistan in the spotlight of the international community. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the past and leave this long-suffering country to the mercy of fate. It is necessary to continue the implementation of strategic economic and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. This will not only increase the potential for the involvement of the entire region in international economic relations, but also open up new opportunities that can contribute to the peace process in Afghanistan.

Third, a top priority should be green diplomacy. Its essence lies in the promotion of international initiatives and the implementation of multilateral programs in the field of environmental protection and solving the growing environmental problems of the region and the world.

Considering the fact that Central Asia is the region which influences the formation of climate in greater Eurasia, the advancement of ideas on how to influence climate change here will have a global impact.

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So, with respect to CA's geographical crossroads' puzzle, the priorities are more or less clear. It is not a case with respect to paradigm of social development.

According to professor Bernard Lewis, Central Asia and its bordering regions in Eurasia principally can choose between four concepts for development: socialism, nationalism, Islamism or secular democracy. There are no other options, he stated.

Almost two and a half centuries ago, Adam Smith tried to explain why some nations achieve wealth and others fail. Yet, today the gap between rich and poor countries has grown even larger. Still philosophers and economists are trying to find answers to questions such as: Why are some countries developed while others are not? What is "development" all about? How do we measure social "progress"?

According to Max Weber, development is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and by "disenchantment of the world". In modern society, he wrote, an individual act based on cost-benefit analysis; there is no room for mystery, and faith, and traditions in governance.

An American economist Walt Rostow developed a conceptual model, according to which progress occurs in five basic stages: and concludes in an “Age of mass consumption”

So, are economic growth and consumption the main signs of modernization?

Of course, not. The process of modernization should not lead to spiritual impoverishment, dominance of consumerism, or, affluenzia, word composed from affluence and influenza, in other words a pandemic of unrestrained pursuit of material goods. As early as in the 14th century, a great scholar Ibn Khaldun, in his monumental work, “Muqaddimah” (or “Prolegomena”), noted that the pursuit of luxury irreversibly carried the seeds of destruction.

Economic growth is vital but not an end in itself. Revenues of society are only a means towards a larger goal. Consequently, the level and even rates of GDP growth cannot be the sole benchmark of progress.

Francis Fukuyama showed that people strive not only for their material well-being; he seeks psychological comfort. The latter is primarily associated with self-respect or recognition of the self-worth of an individual. The right to free elections, equality before the law, system of freedoms are inherent properties of social progress.

According to him, “social trust” is a key feature of a developed society. It is manifested both at the individual and at the social levels: trust toward government, public institutions and the state as a whole, trust toward business and civil society. That is why, the decisive moment in the origin of a modernized world was the emergence of such institutions as private property, social contract, and a stable system of commercial law.

All developed societies are industrial (none of them is based on agriculture), urbanized (having absolute majority of population leaving in cities), educated and inclusive (where all segments of society can and are participating in political life).

Modernized societies meet five criteria: they contain inherent mechanisms that ensure constant dynamic development; democracy is a political form of their very existence; they are mobile in all terms; a person has the ability to adapt to a constantly changing environment and acts rationally, does not focus on traditional or religious ideas.

The theory of modernization assumes that there are some common tendencies around the world, patterns that allow traditional societies to turn into modern ones. But that's is not about a one-size-fits-all transformation of the East into the West.

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It is clear that modernization creates a number of serious challenges.

Actually, as the history shows, societies arise in response to challenges: there is triad of social development: challenge-response-development. By identifying and conceptualizing these, one can comprehend the notion of development.

So, what kind of major challenges can Central Asian societies face over the medium-term perspective?

1. The principles of secularism versus the growing role of religion

The role of religion in societies is increasing worldwide. And here the point is not only in the ideological vacuum to be filled in certain states. Religious fervors are one of the most fundamental characteristics of human nature.

After all, religion so far is the only way of overcoming eternal contradictions between the egocentricity of an individual and interests of the society as a whole. The main problem lies in Islam's inclination towards regulating all aspects of social life. This provides fertile ground for political Islam, which by definition hardly might be combined with the principles of secularism.

The state's rigid regulatory policy towards religion has proven to have been counterproductive. Today, the Uzbek government appeals to promote Enlightened Islam. Thus, the burning issue is: what does that mean? Does it mean that modern Islam should evolve, somehow adapt to the environment of the modern world and learn to exist in the fourth technological revolution era?

2. Hard requirements of globalization versus national interests

For millions of people, globalization is associated with hopes of a

better life, with the right to have their own choices and freedoms by means of obtaining firsthand information, with possibilities to travel freely, and with opportunities to receive better education in the best universities, to get better employment abroad with higher salaries and motivation.

At the same time, we all are perfectly aware that globalization has its cost and these are not cheap. Increasing the role of supra-state international institutions weakens national statehood, its democratic institutions. Anti-globalists are convinced that globalization contributes to such problems as global warming, environmental pollution, scattershot migration, unemployment, and the erosion of traditional values.

But globalization is a process that cannot be ignored, stopped or deferred. The choice is either you put up with the “hard jacket” of globalization or you are sidelined from current global trends, which will make you suffer the consequences.

3. *National interests versus necessity of regional integration*

In the modern world, only voluminous markets can encourage substantial and sustainable flow of investments and secure high economic growth. Moreover, it is obvious that in CA no country can capitalize its natural endowments on its own. Equally, no country is able to solve major problems such as transportation, ecology, energy, etc., by itself; all of them today need concerted multilateral efforts.

But regional integration means not only gaining but giving up as well. The governments must be ready to delegate some of their exclusive prerogatives to newly formed organizations and reduce some of their regulatory functions. It is not always easy, but there is no other way.

A vital factor of successful regional cooperation is shared principles and values. So, on the one hand, there is an understanding of absolute inevitability of regional integration and, on the other, – reluctance to share power.

4. *A conflict between the needs of political modernization and the needs of ensuring sustainable development.*

All countries of our region are undergoing systemic political and economic changes – namely, modernization. It is a highly challenging, painful process breaking the very foundations of traditional societies and

way of life. There is no other path toward for progress, but it cannot pass smoothly. There will unavoidably be resistance.

Modernized societies without exception are based on the values of democracy and open society. The question is: can we be “tolerant towards intolerance”, can we be liberal and democratic towards fatal enemies of liberalism and democracy?

How the countries of the region will handle this paradox will show their level of maturity and their real potential for modernization.

5. The challenge of sustainable development versus generational change of political elites

Generational change is inevitable. The new always replaces the old.

Today the very demography of our region preordains the fact that the majority of the electoral constituency are young people. They are at the social and cultural forefront and are driving force behind massive changes. The new generation wants more openness and transparency, accountability and engagement. They are challenging key values and ideas that defined the previous status quo.

Generational change is inevitable, but it comes at a price. What worked well for one generation may fail for another. The political instincts shaped by the previous generation’s experience may ultimately be of great value to them. This is one of the major controversies that CA societies will face in the near future – how to manage generational change while ensuring continuity and consistency.

There is old wisdom that say: science without the young is a tragedy and science without the older generation is a farce.

6. Industrialization versus ecology

The reality is that most of the CA countries are falling behind the curve with respect to industrialization. History does not know any prosperous country relying primarily on agriculture. But there is again the price to pay. There cannot be industrialization without harm on ecology.

In Central Asia, the rate of global warming is twice that of the world average. The growing shortage of water resources in the region is an acute problem and it can and must be solved collectively.

What is left of the Aral Sea has become the epicentre of an ecological catastrophe. I am convinced that the problem of the Aral Sea should be classified as one of the greatest challenges to the planet.

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How is modernization going on in present-day Uzbekistan?

Uzbekistan, under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has embarked on ambitious reforms aimed at ensuring genuine political and economic modernization. No doubt, it is changing the political environment in all of Central Asia and will have an impact far beyond.

The main objective is obvious – to build a secular, democratic state based on the rule of law, open civil society and socially oriented market economy.

The main driving force behind this aspiration is a clear understanding of the following fundamental factor: in order to address the challenges of these turbulent times, political and economic reforms must be accelerated, not reversed.

As the recent developments in many regions have demonstrated, non-modernized states are weak and vulnerable.

More than ever before, there is a systemic understanding in Uzbekistan that no long-term sustainable development is possible without deep political changes and without profound modernization of the political system.

At the core of all this, lies the concept of decentralization of the state governance system. It has four main dimensions of redistributing power and functions.

1. From executive – to other branches of power.

This means overcoming one of the most prominent features of the previous system – an unlimited domination of a single political force, manifested in a monopoly of power.

Much needed actions have already been taken to ensure transparency and accountability of the authorities. The composition of Government has drastically changed. Younger, more open-minded and reform-oriented individuals, many of whom are graduates of the world's top universities, have been appointed to key positions in Government.

At the center of these renewals is the expansion of the Uzbek Parliament's influence.

2. *From the centre – to the regions.*

The task of this aspect of decentralization is to redistribute powers and functions between different levels of the power structure.

Functions of the state governance system in such areas as education, health care, environmental management, protection of cultural heritage, local transportation, and social utilities have been delegated to the local authorities. The division of fiscal responsibilities among the different levels of government has accompanied this redistribution.

3. *“From government – to business”.*

The main goal of this aspect of reforms is to limit direct state intervention into the economy through liberalization, support of entrepreneurship, improvement of investment climate.

Renunciation of using the levers of direct control over the economy is perhaps one of the most serious challenges from the point of view of governmental officials.

During the last few years, Uzbekistan's economic growth has outpaced the world average despite internal and external shocks, and current reforms will build on that strong foundation.

4. *From government – to civil society.*

Over the administrative-command system period, institutions of civil society were practically crushed by the totalitarian regime. Important resources of social progress and human development such as energy and activity of population were non-existent.

Meanwhile, the experience of developed countries has clearly demonstrated that a society's modernization demands political and economic pluralism, a developed civil society, and strong institutions of democracy.

As a matter of fact, the transformation of political and economic systems in transitional countries has undermined the ability of governments to carry out important social programs and roll-out sustainable human development projects. Obviously, a state cannot

address social issues of all varieties without the support and involvement of society. The role of non-governmental organizations should rise. They must be viewed as full-fledged partners of government.

In present-day Uzbekistan, political engagement of the population and non-governmental organizations is increasing. Mass media is becoming more active and independent. Top priority is given to the issues of culture and education. The main asset of Uzbekistan is its people – bearers of the traditions of an ancient civilization, a civilization of Creativity, Entrepreneurship, Trade and Openness. Our civilization relies on the simple presumption that trade is something that benefits all, but which in turn requires one simple thing – unrestricted flow of people, ideas, goods and services.

In the very blood of our nations there lies interest in other cultures, faiths, and languages, as well as respect for other people regardless of their ethnic or religious origin.