

Uzbekistan: An Important Regional and International Actor

Nigorakhon Turakhanova

As an Uzbek national I often encounter questions regarding the current situation, and regional and international significance of Uzbekistan. Precious little information and knowledge is readily available, and many people seem to confuse other regional conflicts, for example in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan or Pakistan with the current state of affairs in Uzbekistan. However, understanding the regional and international role of Uzbekistan may be interesting and significant for those seeking to advance their regional (Central Asian) political geography. This brief commentary aims to orientate readers to the growing regional and international significance of Uzbekistan and answers why Uzbekistan increasingly attracts the attention of many international actors. To fulfil this aim, it is necessary to reflect on the historical imperatives of the Uzbek state, which provides important clues for explaining the current political regime and the larger socio-economic context.

Uzbekistan is a multinational and multiethnic political entity. It contains more significant and diverse numbers of minority populations than any other Central Asian state. This sociological diversity is the result of a history defined by a combination of mass population exoduses and the geographic location of Uzbekistan which is situated inland, bordering four other Central Asian Former Soviet Republics, (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan) and Afghanistan. This location has been both a curse and a blessing for the post-Cold War development of Uzbekistan. With a population approaching 27 million, wedged in the centre of Central Asia adds clout to Uzbekistan. Changes to the political and economic structure or focus of Uzbekistan have the potential to widely affect the entire region.

A current trend in international relations is to focus on the political and economic stability and potential of developing states. As such a developing state, Uzbekistan attracts wide interest. This focus is based on several factors including, history and geography which are broken into some sub-themes such as ethno-territoriality, geo-culture and linguistic and independence movements.

Uzbek history is a prime source of information about the country and its traditions, as well as a main catalyst towards the realization of a distinct Uzbek culture and identity. History acts to metaphysically attach the people to the land and reveals socio-cultural impetuses which have a direct impact on the way Uzbeks view themselves and wish to be viewed internationally. Current political relations are also deeply reliant on historical collective memories and desires. In a land rich in history, current realities often bear the heavy burden of the past. In Uzbekistan, history combines the geo-cultural links of the people to the land, ethno-territoriality and national ideological focuses, which all have an impact on the contemporary politics of the country.

Uzbekistan and Central Asia's cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious intimacy with Southwest Asia – bordering the predominately Muslim Middle East and the South Asian subcontinent – increases and embeds international interest in this region and Uzbekistan especially because of the recognition of 21st century challenges such as radical Islamic states (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and pre-2001 Afghanistan), religious inspired terrorism (al Qaeda, Afghanistan), WMD proliferation (Iran, India and Pakistan) and energy security, (Russia, the Middle East and Iran).

Coupled with the identification of new security interests and challenges – stemming largely from areas directly adjacent to Uzbekistan – lay the self-identification of Uzbekistan, while not without internal problems, has managed a great deal of post-Soviet political stability. Independence was not trouble free; it brought many ideological, economic, political and social dilemmas. Most of these tensions can be attributed to the demise of the USSR whose power managed to subdue tensions which later emerged and posed challenges to the new-found state. Although elite-centric, the first Uzbek president (Islom Karimov) developed a successful strategy, which while lacking many democratic trappings, managed the political crises of the early post-Cold War period, bringing stability to the country and cushioning the rapid economic and social transformation away from the communist dictatorship of the USSR.

The current democratic deficit in Uzbekistan attracts the attention of the international community, including many international organizations and NGO's. Nevertheless, to assume that the lack of a democratic polity reinforced by democratic institutions is in opposition to popular political sentiment of Uzbek citizens, is to misunderstand Uzbek political culture. After 70 years of exogenous suppression (as part of the USSR) and 16 years of regional instability and conflict Uzbeks, regard the preservation of internal peace and security as more important than the struggle for democracy, which can be facilitated through gradual changes to avoid potential violence.

In a news interview for the Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (18 January 2005), Karimov, in defending the political status quo in Uzbekistan explained that

The result should be a democratic society. Actually, because this phrase is often misused, I will put it differently: this will be a government meeting the requirements of the 21st century, where there is no place to dictatorship. As it is well known, everybody is afraid of dictatorship understanding under this word tyranny in the first place. But I understand dictatorship as dictatorship of one person, one structure. This is a kind of a monopoly. That is why, the more independent the parliament is, the stronger and more independent the courts are and the more independent the government is, the more will the requirements of the new century be met ... we are only in the beginning of this process, it may take many years, although, there will surely be people trying to push us ... we need to acknowledge that today everything closes in on me and this is not accidental: we have passed quite uneasy period of development, we needed to answer uneasy challenges of the time, and I simply had to take everything on myself...¹

Although many politicians facing the public eye tend to establish a symbiotic relationship between their persona and political stability, there was much truth in Karimov's statements and they seem to reflect the sentiment of a great number of Uzbeks. It is not that democratic change is discouraged or its proponents imprisoned, rather Karimov (ostensibly) seeks the governed transition to democracy and not the chaotic 'shock treatments' which were of great popularity in the early 1990's.

Despite resistance to political 'shock treatment,' there is mounting pressure over the upcoming Presidential elections in Uzbekistan. There are some uncertainties about the end of Karimov's

¹ Interview of Islom Karimov, 18 January 2005. Interview conducted by: Victoria Panfilova of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. This interview is available in its complete form at: <http://www.pressservice.uz/en/gsection.scm?groupId=4656&contentId=6129> (viewed, 03 May 2007).

term. According to presidential conditions laid out in the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, his term should have ended on 22 January 2007. That day has come and gone and still Karimov remains convincingly in power. This has not been a major issue in Uzbekistan, although the international community has been monitoring it and increasing pressure on Karimov to step down and make way for other political personalities. With the recent political changes in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, international attention is beginning to hone in on Uzbekistan as democratic stabilisation there may be contagious and potentially lead to the democratisation of the Central Asian region as a whole.

Much is tied to the political future of Uzbekistan. Whether discussing the on-going process of democratisation, Central and South Asian development and stability, Islamic terrorism, energy security or the prevention of WMD proliferation (Iran), Uzbekistan's significance is growing. While the future is impossible to predict, knowledge of the country, people, history and identity of Uzbekistan will assist in understanding the general trends in the region and how to best cope with them.