

NEW FOREIGN POLICY COURSE IN THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Yelena IZTELEUOVA

*Ph.D. Student, Department of Regional Studies,
Faculty of International Relations, Lev Gumilyov Eurasian National University
(Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan)*

Marina LAPENKO

*Ph.D. (Hist.), Associate Professor,
Department of International Relations and Russian Foreign Policy,
Institute of History and International Relations, Saratov State University
(Saratov, Russian Federation)*

ABSTRACT

We relied on the “geopolitical codes” concept formulated by Colin Flint as “the manner in which a country orientates itself towards the world” to analyze the changes that the new President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has brought to the country’s foreign policy. Geopolitical codes include assessments of strategic importance of the neighboring states defined by the leaders of state and potential threats emanating from them. We have studied the new foreign policy priorities formulat-

ed by President Mirziyoyev and possible variants of the foreign policy course pursued by the Republic of Uzbekistan in Central Asia, the EAEU and WTO, as well as specifics of

its relationships with the leading centers of power. We have selected comparative analysis, SWOT analysis and the prognostication method as our main instruments.

KEYWORDS: Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Islam Karimov, foreign policy.

Introduction

The leaders of the Republic of Uzbekistan have invariably pointed out that they were and are pursuing an open, mutually advantageous and constructive foreign policy in full conformity with the country's national interests. Its contemporary foreign policy course takes into account the dynamically changing situation in the world and in our region, as well as the large-scale changes realized in the country.¹

This article is better described as an attempt at a complex analysis of the republic's foreign policy after power transit: new foreign policy priorities, possible variants of the relationships with the Central Asian countries, potential integration with the EAEU and the WTO and the principles on which Uzbekistan relies when dealing with the leading centers of power.

We relied on comparative and SWOT analysis and the method of prognostication. Colin Flint's *Introduction to Geopolitics*² served as the theoretical foundation of our studies.

Reforms

President Islam Karimov, a highly influential and a deeply respected political actor, remained at the helm for 26 years. His political regime was based on authoritarianism and a super-presidential form of governance and stood apart as the most rigid in the post-Soviet space. Some believe that under Karimov Uzbekistan pursued a "swinging pendulum policy," oscillating between Russia and the United States. In a certain sense, Uzbekistan had isolated itself at the regional and international levels in the last years of Karimov's rule.³ He ruled the country in the so-called transition period, which explains the above-mentioned specifics: the country was coping with the task of restoring its independent statehood, following the course of reforms and joining the world community and the system of international relations. This explains why the isolationism of his last years contradicts, to an extent, his active involvement in regional and international interaction. An analysis of post-Karimov Uzbekistan and its foreign policy requires a detailed and careful examination of the accumulated assets, successes achieved in the region and the world, and the republic's failures.

In December 2016, power was transferred to Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who won the presidential elections. He has remained president for nearly five years. The new president began a new develop-

¹ See: "Vneshniaia politika Respubliki Uzbekistan," MID RUz, available at [<https://mfa.uz/ru/pages/vneshnaya-politika>], 20 April, 2020.

² See: C. Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics*, Routledge, New York, 2011.

³ See: D. Borisov, "Vneshniaia politika Uzbekistana pri Sh. Mirziyoyeve: strategiya i praktika," *Izvestia Uralskogo federalnogo universiteta*, Vol. 14, No. 2/188, 2029, p. 131.

ment stage, a new stage of political, economic and social reforms. Five years is a fairly short period of time, yet much has already been done. As president-elect, he outlined the priorities of foreign and domestic policies. His new Strategy of Action on Five Priority Development Trends of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021, adopted in February 2017, defined Central Asia as the foreign policy priority. The process of border delimitation with the neighboring states was accelerated. Today, the republic has practically no border problems, which is a serious achievement. For a long time, border disagreements and irrigation problems weighed heavily on the republic's relationships with its neighbors and were a stumbling block on the road towards faster regional integration.

These priorities have preserved their importance. According to the summit statistics, exchanges of delegations, business and cultural forums, exchange of phone calls between presidents, interstate agreements and regional projects, Central Asia's weight in Uzbekistan's international relations is greater than that of other regions and countries.⁴ We have already pointed to good-neighborly relations and mutually advantageous cooperation with the Central Asian countries as one of Tashkent's foreign policy priorities. The same fully applies to cooperation with other countries of the near and far abroad. President Mirziyoyev informed the country that he was contemplating reforms of the legal, legislative and administrative systems within the Strategy 2017-2021, along with economic liberalization and development of the social sphere. This Strategy is realized in five stages, with the program of each stage confirmed by the president every year. The year 2017 came down in history as The Year of a Dialog with People in the Interests of Man; the year 2018 as The Year of Support of Active Entrepreneurship, Innovation Ideas and Technologies. The year 2019 was realized as The Year of Active Investments and Social Development; 2020 was The Year of the Development of Science, Education and Digital Economics; 2021 is The Year of Support of the Youth and Strengthening the Health of the Republic's Population.

The following foreign policy tasks are formulated in the Strategy:

- Achievement of firmer independence and sovereignty of the state; further consolidation of the country's place and role as an equal entity of international relations, joining the group of developed democratic states and creation of a belt of security, stability and good-neighborly relations around Uzbekistan;
- Further consolidation of the republic's international image and provision of objective information about the reforms realized in the country to the world community;
- Improvement of the normative legal framework of the Republic's domestic and foreign economic policy, as well as the contractual legal framework for international cooperation;
- Settling the problems of delimitation and demarcation of the State Border of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

In December 2020, in his address to the parliament President Mirziyoyev informed the nation that a new Foreign Policy Concept for Uzbekistan was being drafted and will likely be adopted in 2021. This information and the intention to formulate a new concept were suggested by the new foreign policy aims and tasks, while the international and regional situation had changed significantly since the adoption of the present Concept. From the conceptual point of view, the success of the Republic's new foreign policy course will depend, among other things, on the extent to which other Central Asian states will accept regional priorities and record them in relevant documents.

⁴ See: F. Tolipov, "Eklektichnost mnogovektornosti kak faktor sboia piatistoronnosti v Tsentralnoy Azii," available at [<https://caa-network.org/archives/20446>], 25 November, 2020.

The Geopolitical Codes of the Republic of Uzbekistan

In recent decades, geopolitics acquired a concept of “geopolitical codes” of countries the fullest description of which can be found in works of Colin Flint who has written in his *Introduction to Geopolitics*: “The geopolitical codes of states rest upon the maintenance of their security” and “Geopolitical codes define ways in which the sovereignty of the state must be protected or the state’s status and well-being enhanced.”⁵ This determines the position of any state in the world and its foreign policy which can be described as a sum-total of the key ideas of the state’s citizens and the political elites about their place in the world, the foreign policy strategy and national priorities. As such, geopolitical codes can be described as national myths of sorts.⁶ There is, therefore, a close interconnection between politics of national security and realization of national interests, on the one hand, and national identity which will invariably affect what people think about foreign policy trends of their countries, on the other.

A geopolitical code is more than a course declared by a state, it is guaranteed by the nation’s support. Therefore, it is this code that predetermines certain steps of the state in the international arena. However, if the geopolitical code is designated as a determinant of the state’s policy, its identification requires great strategic wisdom. As part of Uzbekistan’s geopolitical code, the republic’s Central Asian policy deserves a special mention. President Mirziyoyev is pursuing an active and pragmatic policy based on the country’s national interests. The President of Uzbekistan improved, to a great extent, the relationships with the country’s regional neighbors. The border problems with Kyrgyzstan, which remained unresolved for a long time, were finally settled; the two countries signed a strategic partnership treaty. In 2019, the Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations were raised to a new qualitatively higher level, hence the ecological movement Ala-Too ayymdary named the President of Uzbekistan Man of the Year 2019.

Closer cooperation with the Republic of Kazakhstan helps Uzbekistan address its food security problems. In March 2017, during President Mirziyoyev’s official visit to the capital of Kazakhstan, the presidents signed a Joint Declaration on Further Deepening of Strategic Partnership and Stronger Good-neighborly Relations between the Two Countries and several other important documents. In April 2019, Tashkent hosted an official meeting between two presidents, who discussed further consolidation and development of friendly relations and good-neighborly policy, cooperation in tourism, transport, trade, etc. They signed about ten bilateral documents on the development of mutually advantageous cooperation. The Year 2019 was declared the Year of Kazakhstan in Uzbekistan, while 2018 had been the Year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan, which is an obvious sign of stronger strategic partnership between the two states.

Under Islam Karimov, the relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were rather unfriendly due to the construction of a big Rogun Hydropower Plant on the Vakhsh River. The president of Uzbekistan was convinced that the new hydropower plant would cut down the runoff and, therefore, affect the volume of water supplied to the republic, and this, in turn, would negatively affect the Uzbek economy. Under the new president, disagreements were either smoothed out or even settled. In March 2018, President of Uzbekistan arrived in Tajikistan with an official visit. This historic event helped President Mirziyoyev settle a number of problems inherited from the previous president: the visa regime was rescinded, aviation and land transport communication restored, an agreement on the area of the Farkhad Hydropower Station-2 achieved. Uzbekistan resumed gas supplies to Tajikistan

⁵ C. Flint, op. cit., p. 125.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 125-127.

while Tajikistan restarted electric power supplies to Uzbekistan. A decision was made to coordinate the anti-extremist and anti-terrorist struggle, a point of special importance due to the republics' proximity to Afghanistan.

The relations between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan demonstrate a positive trend. In March 2017 the newly elected President of Uzbekistan Mirziyoyev paid his first official visit to Turkmenistan. This brought the relations between the two countries to a new level of strategic partnership. In 2018, President of Turkmenistan paid an official visit to Uzbekistan. In August of the same year, President Mirziyoyev, as head of one of the founder states, took part in the sitting of the Council of Heads of States-Founders of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, held in Turkmenistan. In November 2019, President of Turkmenistan visited Uzbekistan on an invitation of its president. They discussed the most topical issues of bilateral relations and their prospects.⁷

Russia is one of the biggest investors of Uzbekistan and one of its most important trade, economic, military, political, cultural and humanitarian partners. According to the Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade of Uzbekistan, in 2019 foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan was \$42.2 billion, and Russia's share was \$6.6 billion (15.7%).⁸ Russia has a stake in furthering bilateral cooperation with Uzbekistan and wants to see it an active contributor to Eurasian integration. Throughout 2020, supporters and opponents of Eurasian integration in Uzbekistan were discussing the pros and cons of this involvement and agreed on an observer status for their country.

The two countries also cooperate in the security sphere. During the official visit of the president of Uzbekistan to Moscow in April 2017 the sides signed a package of intergovernmental agreements and investment projects and drew a joint plan of interaction for the sake of greater regional stability.

The 2016 presidential elections raised the relations between Uzbekistan and the United States to a new level. In September 2017, President Mirziyoyev came to the U.S. with an official visit to take part in the 72nd session of the U.N. General Assembly. He met the President of the United States and heads of the biggest American companies; the two countries signed contracts in the total amount of \$2.6 billion.⁹

In May 2018, the President of Uzbekistan was invited to the United States. The two leaders signed the documents on cooperation designed to promote foreign trade and discussed a roadmap for the development of digital commerce in Uzbekistan and a wider access of Uzbek businessmen to global trade platforms and electronic payment systems. In addition, the sides signed a Five-Year Plan of Military Cooperation, since the relations between states were based on anti-terrorist struggle and Afghan settlement. Uzbekistan is developing its cooperation with the United States in science, technology and economic modernization.

In February 2020, CIA Director Mike Pompeo visited Uzbekistan; he took part in a sitting of C5+1 format attended by heads of five Central Asian countries. He met the president of Uzbekistan to discuss issues of mutual interest; it was declared that the relations between the two countries had reached their highest point. The visit of the president of Uzbekistan to the U.S. and the visit of the CIA Director to Uzbekistan led to a publication of a number of articles and official statements in the Russian media and analytical circles about Tashkent's alleged turn to the West. Much was said about its drifting away from Russia, about Washington's strengthening influence in the region, etc. This could be observed during the entire period of independence, which, in fact, speaks volumes of the real

⁷ See: "UZBEKISTAN-TURKMENISTAN: novy uroven mnogovekovykh druzhestvennykh i kulturnykh svyazey," available at [<https://mfa.uz/ru/press/news/2019/11/22133/>], 20 April, 2020.

⁸ See: V. Novikov, "Minvneshtorg Uzbekistana obnarodoval itogi vneshney torgovli za 2019 god," available at [<https://nuz.uz/ekonomika-i-finansy/46076-minvneshtorg-uzbekistana-obnarodoval-itogi-vneshneytorgovli-za-2019-god.html>], 20 April, 2020.

⁹ See: "Itogi vizita Shavkata Mirziyoyeva v SShA," available at [<https://www.publika.uz/uzbekistan/politics/53741>], 25 April, 2020.

(or ascribed) geopolitical dimension of foreign policy moves of Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbors.

Today, the European Union extends considerable assistance to Uzbekistan as part of the New Cooperation Strategy adopted in 2007, which outlined the EU's new approach to the Central Asian region.¹⁰ Brussels has positively assessed the economic, social and political reforms carried out in Uzbekistan. Under President Karimov, the relations with the EU were developing turbulently and inconsistently. Today, the leader of Uzbekistan focuses on cooperation with the EU in the spheres of primary importance: regional security, border security; struggle against drug trafficking, stability in Afghanistan and reduction of the repercussions of the Aral Sea drying-up. The EU treats the following as its priorities in the Republic of Uzbekistan: encouragement and promotion of political, juridical and economic reforms; promotion of the rule of law, human rights and the right to labor; wider trade, tourist, investment and energy contacts between the EU and Uzbekistan; promotion of regional peace and security by opposing terrorism and WMD proliferation.¹¹ In the fall of 2020, the European Union extended over €2 million in aid to Uzbekistan for the fight against COVID-19 as part of the Team Europe Program of the total amount of €36 million.

Brussels intends to support and accelerate the reforms in Uzbekistan's agrarian sector and its economic modernization to consolidate their relationships. A new initiative—the Association of Economic Cooperation Europe-Uzbekistan, a non-commercial and non-governmental organization—was launched on 12 November, 2019 in Brussels to strengthen economic ties between Uzbekistan and the EU business community. Set up with the principal purpose of supporting European business activity in Uzbekistan, it is registered in Brussels and has an office in Tashkent. It is expected to comprehensively support private businesses that are already operating or trying to find their place on the Uzbekistan market.¹²

The Association intends to support the republic's government by helping introduce the new government development strategy of the agricultural and foodstuff sector for the period in 2020-2030. The Uzbek government has recently published the latter to inquire into public opinion. It is a clear roadmap that will allow the government to offer improved and redesigned state services to the agricultural sector; support farmers and agriculture in general without infringing on their freedom, which is vital for businesses. Its realization will allow the Republic of Uzbekistan to position itself as one of the region's biggest producers and exporters of valuable agricultural products. The republic has already improved its cooperation with the EU in the education sphere. The EU is ready to help realize new trends of the reforms carried out in the republic, it supports its openness and is ready to transform all positive impulses into concrete achievements.

An analysis of geopolitical processes unfolding in Central Asia and around it and, in particular, of the geopolitical code of Uzbekistan is impossible without an analysis of China's Central Asian policy. In the 21st century, the PRC is growing increasingly global, which is especially obvious in the context of the Belt and Road initiative formulated by Xi Jinping. This is, in fact, a contemporary version of the ancient Great Silk Road. At first, as a global network of infrastructural projects (highways, hubs, pipelines, etc.), it has acquired certain soft power components related to culture, education tourism, etc. Its Central Asian segment is the spot where regional and world powers—China, Russia, the U.S., Europe, India, Turkey, Iran, etc.—resumed the Great Game, each with its own aims and interests.

In his time, Islam Karimov, the First President of Uzbekistan, supported the initiative; President Mirziyoyev, likewise, has supported it: China is Uzbekistan's biggest trade partner and investor; there are two Confucius Institutes in the country; there are thousands of students from Uzbekistan studying

¹⁰ See: A. Ospanova *et al.*, "Main Directions of Cooperation Development between the European Union and Kazakhstan in the 2010s," *Medwell Journals, The Social Sciences*, No. 11 (23), 2016, pp. 5653-5656.

¹¹ See: "EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council," European Council, 17 July, 2017, available at [<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2017/07/17/>], 28 April, 2020.

¹² See: F. Tolipov, "Tridtsat let mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy Uzbekistana: QUO VADIS?" available at [https://www.crossroads-ca.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CCAPB4_Tolipov-RUS.pdf], 28 November, 2020.

at Chinese universities. Today, the two countries are discussing the construction of a railway between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and China as an important hub of transcontinental communication between West China and Western Europe. A highway hub has already been built.

In the context of geopolitics, it should be noted that the United States, the EU and the Russian Federation have unique variants of the Silk Road. In this regard, the issue of compatibility of these options is being updated. This explains the recent term “connectivity” in the political vocabulary. Despite the fairly complicated set of problems related to the Belt and Road initiative, experts invariably point at its existential aspect: highways, transportation hubs, infrastructural projects and trade. This is not about the economy but about development as a whole: they will inevitably transform society and create new great power challenges.

American political scientist Stephen Blank has written in this respect: “In pursuit of these geo-economic and geopolitical goals that would bind Asia to China ever more closely through commercial means, Beijing has recently allocated US\$40 billion for the first Silk Road alone, on top of all of its previous large-scale investments in Central Asia, [its] information systems, telecommunications, transportation, energy pipelines, and infrastructure.”¹³

Without plunging into the depths of the set of problems posed by the Belt and Road and geopolitics of other countries, we would like to point out that Central Asia has found itself once again in the epicenter of another Great Game. Today, with the experience of 30 years of independence, the Central Asian countries have learned a great deal about the game and acquired enough skills to avoid a situation in which their foreign policy moves will be imposed on them by non-regional countries. In fact, their choice will determine the course of the game with Uzbekistan playing a very special role.

The WTO vs. the EAEU: Uzbekistan at the Crossroads

From the very first days of independence, Uzbekistan has been treating economic integration as one of its foreign policy priorities. Back in 1994, Tashkent tried to integrate Central Asia within the Central Asian Economic Union of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 2002, it was transformed into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization, of which Russia was a member. It was disbanded in 2005: its members decided to join the Organization of Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). In 2008, Uzbekistan left it under the pressure of certain problems in its relationships and interregional disagreements with the Russian Federation. President Karimov was skeptical of, or even feared this and similar projects that might have weakened the country’s sovereignty. Today, sovereignty is as important as ever, even if integration models are discussed in Uzbekistan (and in all other Central Asian countries, for that matter), albeit in a different context.

According to certain media sources, the country’s leaders have been discussing membership in the EAEU for three years now. They even set up an expert commission to analyze the pros and cons of EAEU integration. The public and analysts were greatly surprised, not to say shocked, to learn that the discussion of possible membership had lasted for three years.¹⁴ Discussion of possible formats and schedule of the country’s accession to the EAEU officially started when the Concept of Comprehensive Socio-Economic Development of Uzbekistan until 2030 was officially published in 2019. In January 2020, President Mirziyoyev discussed this possibility when speaking in front of the parlia-

¹³ S. Blank, “China’s Silk Roads and Their Challenges,” *CACI Analyst*, 7 January, 2015, available at [<http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13119-chinas-silk-roads-and-their-challenges.html>].

¹⁴ See: F. Tolipov, “Hamletovskiy vopros dlia Uzbekistana v Evraziyskom ekonomicheskom soiuze,” available at [<https://caa-network.org/archives/18507>], 28 May, 2020.

ment and entrusted it with the task of formulating a well-founded suggestion to be used for a corresponding decision based on the country's national interests. "You should be aware that, from the political point of view, we will not give our independence away," said the president.¹⁵ After discussions it was decided that Uzbekistan should join as an observer.

There is an opinion in the expert community that unification with the EAEU may be highly profitable for Uzbek businesses: Uzbek producers will acquire equal access to the markets of the EAEU members. It will simplify the position of Uzbek labor migrants: there are over 2 million of them in Russia and about 200 thousand in Kazakhstan. EAEU membership will remove the barriers on the labor market, simplify legalization, make it easier to register their education diplomas and qualification documents, introduce a single tax regime, open access to social insurance and free medical services, their labor service in other EAEU countries will be taken into account when calculating pensions, etc.¹⁶ EAEU membership will make it easier to export agricultural products; increase export of textile and automobile products into other EAEU members, open access to the EAEU technological, transit transportation and investment potential, etc.

The idea of Eurasian integration raised a wave of indignation in the expert community along with another wave of obvious approval. Some experts insisted that it would be a positive rather than a negative step. One of the experts has formulated the three main reasons for possible Eurasian integration. It will remove the barriers in interstate relations that interfere in their development, many social and economic programs related to migration will be resolved, very much needed investments and technologies will be attracted.¹⁷ Others insisted that these problems could be resolved in the bilateral format; that the EAEU membership was not needed and that it was a purely (geo)political factor. They warned that this might scare major new investors away.

Experts suggested that Uzbekistan should first join the WTO to trade with the EAEU members according to the WTO rules. We are convinced that the WTO issue was resolved in 1994 when the country had applied for admission. In addition, the EU has allocated a grant of about €5 million to help the republic join the WTO. In June 2018, at a meeting between the EU and Uzbekistan that took place in Brussels, the sides achieved an agreement related to the development of certain branches of Uzbek agriculture. There is an opposite opinion: negative results will outweigh possible gains, while EAEU membership will close the doors to the WTO. American media were especially active in this respect. The republic had to choose between the two organizations, which resembled blackmail.

It should be said that membership in the international economic structures will help Uzbekistan consolidate its positions in foreign trade and promote mutually advantageous cooperation. According to American expert Mark Linscott, several countries have not yet joined the WTO, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan among them. Their WTO membership will offer guarantees to investors who enter Uzbekistan and to its trade partners. As a WTO member, Tashkent will have the right to place complaints against commercial decisions of other countries. All full-fledged WTO members have the right to participate in formulating the rules of international trade.

The above suggests that EAEU membership is not an economic but, rather, a geopolitical issue for Uzbekistan. How does it relate to Uzbekistan's geopolitical code? To which extent do the codes of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as EAEU members correlate with that of Uzbekistan? How do the geopolitical codes of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan determine their decisions? It seems that Uzbekistan's decision will become the key one in our understanding of the region's geopolitical code.

¹⁵ K. Kari, "Nakanune vizita v Moskvu Mirziyoyev vspomnil o EAES. Stanet li Uzbekistan chlenom soiuza?" available at [<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/chaikhana-uzbekistan-eeueconomy/30397416.html>], 10 February, 2020.

¹⁶ See: "Chem obernetsia prisoedinenie Uzbekistana k EAES?" October 2019, available at [<http://mirperemen.net/2019/10/chem-obernetsya-prisoedinenie-uzbekistana-k-eaes/>], 10 February, 2021.

¹⁷ See: M. Lapenko, "'VTO nelzia EAES': pochemu SShA zastavliaiut rsstavliat zapiatyte," available at [https://ia-centr.ru/experts/marina-lapenko/vto-nelzya-eaes-pochemu-ssha-zastavlyatrasstavlyatzapyatyte/?fbclid=IwAR2Hb7PzC2AiO2e_3h3rYkKL6svvfx1n_RRkHx_SFrtjyurKsL0BzbPtU/], 3 March, 2020.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude our article with an observation: starting with the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the Republic of Uzbekistan has been strategically acting as an active member of the world community with an independent, fully justified, consistent and firm foreign policy position: realization of national interests, consolidation of sovereignty, regional leadership and competitiveness on the international arena. The country raised its political status and improved its image on the world arena; it takes into account the rapidly changing political realities of the 21st century, while undertaking an active and pragmatic foreign policy course brimming with initiative and adequate responses to threats and challenges.¹⁸

Shavkat Mirziyoyev has radically changed the republic's foreign policy. This is fully confirmed by its openness, the reforms underway in the country, the new foreign policy course and good-neighborly relations with the Central Asian countries. According to the Strategy of Action on Five Priority Development Trends of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021, Central Asia is one of the republic's foreign policy priorities.

Uzbekistan remains Russia's strategic partner and ally, developing cooperation with it in trade, economic, military, political, cultural and humanitarian spheres. Interregional cooperation has received a new lease of life.

The relationship between Uzbekistan and the United States are at a high point, which is confirmed by official visits of heads of state, meetings of the U.S. president with heads of major Uzbek companies, and multi-billion agreements and official documents on the countries' cooperation.

The EU and Uzbekistan cooperate on a mutually advantageous basis, attuned with the national interests of Uzbekistan and the aims and goals of the new EU Strategy in Central Asia. Their cooperation will be developing in the bilateral and multilateral formats.

As Uzbekistan's main trade partner and investor, China will continue building up its presence in the region and will thus challenge the "traditional influence of Russia." Here is an interesting fact: Russian, European and American policies in Central Asia are relatively clear, or even predictable, which cannot be said about China. It remains to be seen whether the Chinese and non-Chinese projects will demonstrate connectivity.

As a country with no common borders with great powers, Uzbekistan is somewhat removed from their direct influence, which is not the case with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the context of Central Asian regionalism, however, it is open to geopolitical impacts, therefore its choice as the key regional state should somehow reflect its weight as an important player.

The problem of EAEU vs. WTO remains open. Despite its 1994 request and the grant provided by the European Union, Tashkent opted for a wait-and-see policy. On the whole, involvement in Eurasian integration does not contradict WTO membership: Russia and Kyrgyzstan belong to both structures. Tashkent has certain doubts about the EAEU; this means that it will move in its direction step by step, and no rash moves are to be expected. This can be largely explained by the state of affairs in Central Asia.

¹⁸ See: N. Artykova, F. Muzaffarova, "Vneshniaia politika Uzbekistana i sotsialnoe razvitiie," in: *World Science: Problems and Innovations. Collection of article of the XXXI International Scientific-Practical Conference*, in four parts, Part 4, Nauka i prosveshchenie, Penza, 2019, p. 201.