Uzbekistan’s ambiguous policies on Afghanistan

Uzbek officials have for more than 20 years defined the situation in Afghanistan as the main threat to Uzbekistan’s national security. Even so, Tashkent has deliberately limited its involvement with Afghanistan. How can this paradox be understood? By analyzing the Uzbek policy towards Afghanistan, this policy brief aims to reach stakeholders working with Afghanistan in a neighborhood perspective. Since the Uzbek regime limits access to information, analyses on Uzbekistan remain scant.

Brief Points

- Uzbekistan has explicitly stated that it wishes to deal with Afghanistan on a bilateral basis, and has in recent years kept at a distance from several multilateral regional processes.
- Uzbekistan’s policy towards Afghanistan reflects a wish to balance two major factors: (1) maintaining regime stability at home, and (2) gaining international legitimacy by being involved in processes on Afghanistan.
- Western states threatened to freeze relations with Uzbekistan in 2005, following what several international organizations claim was a violent government crackdown on protestors in the city of Andijan.
- In recent years, Uzbekistan’s key role in the NATO reverse transit route Northern Distribution Network (NDN) from Afghanistan has been the main driver for improving relations with the West.
Kabul, Afghanistan, another ADB project which resulted in Afghanistan – gained monopoly on operating the transit northern Afghanistan with the regional railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to in providing USD 5 million. The construction of the USD 165 million, the Afghan government pro­vided its main support to operate. The IMU was behind a series of bombings in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent in 1999 and in 2004. Founded in Uzbekistan in 1998, the IMU cultivated a relationship with the Taliban while they were in power in Kabul, and shifted its base to other regions. The IMU has acquired a global character both in terms of strategy and membership, but its regional dimension. The response to Islamic terrorism has been criticized for unlawfully targeting religious people and for stifling the freedom of speech in the name of security. Uzbekistan's ‘own way’ on Afghanistan

The ambiguity of Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan especially manifests itself in the country's reluctance to participate in multilateral processes on Afghanistan. The process that Afghanistan appears to engage fully with the '6+3' talks, which it has itself initiated, under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). The format has its roots from when Pres­i­dent Islam Karimov initiated the '6+2 talks' at the UN in 1999, with the aim to provide a peace­ful settlement for the war in Afghanistan. The contact group included different factions of the Afghan conflict, Afghanistan's six neighboring countries (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) in addition to Russia and the United States. Karimov sought to relaunch the '6+2' at the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008, but now as 6+3, with NATO as a new member. Most interna­tional stakeholders were sceptical of Karimov's initiative, arguing that any peace process on Afghanistan ought to be Afghan-led. Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov, reiterated the wish to relaunch the group at the UN in 2012, but once again the international reception was lukewarm. In addition to excluding Kabul, the 6+1 format fails to include Saudi Arabia and India, undeniably two players with considerable influence on the situation in Afghanistan. Taking into account that Uzbekistan's influence in Afghanistan is limited, as compared to Pakistan or Saudi Arabia for instance, the 6+1 format seems unlikely to gain any further international support.

One of the international initiatives that have received most attention in recent years is the so-called ‘Istanbul Process’ interchangeably referred to as the ‘Heart of Asia’ process. Initiated in 2011, the Istanbul Process aims to build trust between Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, not least by strengthening economic interaction, in order to contribute to peace in the country. The Gulf States, the four remaining Central Asian states, Russia, Iran and Pakistan all participate in the Istanbul Process. Uzbekistan, however, has failed to sign the 2011 declaration. At the 2012 ‘Heart of Asia’ Ministerial Conference in Kabul, Uzbekistan declared that it preferred bilateral over multilateral involvement with Afghanistan. An important element of the reconciliation mandate of the Istanbul Process as well as other regional initiatives is negotiating with the Taliban. So far, Uzbekistan's attitude towards negotiating with the Taliban remains unclear. One analyst in Tashkent stated that Uzbekistan opposes sitting at the table with the Taliban, which consequently explains the country's opposition to regional processes where dialogue with the Taliban is considered desirable.

The main driver for the engagement of Western states with Uzbekistan following 2001 has been the international project in Afghanistan. When US troops entered Afghanistan in October 2001, the West gave Uzbekistan increased attention, both in political rhetoric and through an injection of military aid. Uzbekistan allowed the US and Germany to establish military bases in the south of the country, used to provide logistical support to US military operations in Afghanistan.

Another dimension of Uzbekistan's hesitancy to participate in regional processes may lie in the country's relationship with Kazakhstan, its main competitor for the position as Central Asia's regional hegemon. In contrast to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan has been a vocal supporter of several regional processes on Afghanistan, and hosted the third Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process in 2013. The fact that Uzbekistan opposes regional initiatives can thus be seen in the light of Kazakhstan's support for them, and is reflective of a zero-sum thinking that dominates Uzbek foreign policy.

**Balancing the West**

The war in Afghanistan, which had been on hold following the events in Andijan. This cooperation strength­ened both the capacity of the forces to maintain border security, as well as their ability to carry out counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics operations. It was a significant gesture when, in July 2015, the US State Department announced that it would give Uzbekistan more than 300 mine-Resistant-Armored-Protected (MRAP) vehicles. The State Department underlined that these vehicles shall only be used for ‘defensive’ purposes, and that the training of Uzbek officers is conducted with an emphasis on human rights education.

Finally, the unfolding crisis in Russia has giv­en former Soviet Republics such as Uzbekistan new significance to Western policy-makers. The launch of the “CS-I Contact Group” (consisting of the five Central Asian republics and the US) in September 2015 may also be interpreted in the light of the US-Russia tensions. US Secre­tary of State John Kerry followed up by paying a visit to all five ‘stans’ in October this year, where the Afghan threat remained a key topic in the consultations.

organizations claim that 100-1000 people were killed in the events. Following the US call for an independent investigation of what had occurred in Andijan, the Uzbek government asked the Americans to leave the military base in Kharchi Khanabad (K2) within 90 days. Following 2005, the international presence in Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, was lukewarm. In addition to excluding Kabul, the 6+1 format seems unlikely to gain any further international support.

The gap between rhetoric and practice

Uzbekistan continuously presents itself as an active participant in Afghanistan's recon­struction. There is a significant discrepancy, however, between its official rhetoric and the actual efforts of Uzbekistan. One example is the country's economic contributions to Afghanistan, which are limited, and tend to be channelled into projects economically benefi­cial to the Uzbek regime. Building the railway between Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan and the Uzbek border town of Termiz, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) provided funding of USD 165 million; the Afghan government pro­vided USD 5 million. The construction of the railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to inte­grate northern Afghanistan with the regional economy of Central Asia. Still, Uzbekistan – not Afghanistan – gained monopoly on operating the railway. Uzbekistan has further contributed to linking its electricity network with that of Afghan­istan, another ADB project which resulted in providing Uzbek electricity to the capital, Kabul. The contradiction between official rhetoric and actual engagement can also be seen in Uzbekistan's stance with regards to the security situation in Afghanistan. Although the official discourse places great emphasis on the threat of terrorism and extremism stemming from Afghanistan, the country does not participate in any security cooperation with the Afghan authorities. In early 2015, officer Alisher Khamdalon, speaking on behalf of the Uzbek National Security Service (SNB) claimed that militiamen from the Islamic State (IS) in Af­ghanistan were planning a series of attacks in Uzbekistan. In similar assertions, Uzbekistan has voiced concern about a spill-over of Talib­an militants across its border from northern Afghanistan. Many view this concern as a tool used to gain political and material benefits from Western countries.

This is not to say that terrorism is illusory in Uzbekistan. The country has had problems with domestic militant groups, most notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), that pledged its allegiance to IS in April 2015. The IMU was behind a series of bombings in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent in 1999 and in 2004. Founded in Uzbekistan in 1998, the IMU cultivated a relationship with the Taliban while they were in power in Kabul, and shifted its base to the border region between Afghan­istan and Pakistan after 9/11. More recently, following a clampdown by the Pakistani army, it has shifted its main base back to northern Afghanistan. The IMU has acquired a global character both in terms of strategy and member base. The Uzbek regime's response to Islamic terrorism has been criticized for unlaw­fully targeting religious people and for stifling the freedom of speech in the name of security.

The authenticity of Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan especially manifests itself in the country's reluctance to participate in multilateral processes on Afghanistan. The process that Afghanistan appears to engage fully with is the ‘6+3’ talks, which it has itself initiated, under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). The format has its roots from when President Islam Karimov initiated the ‘6+2 talks’ at the UN in 1999, with the aim to provide a peaceful settlement for the war in Afghanistan. The contact group included different factions of the Afghan conflict, Afghanistan’s six neighboring countries (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) in addition to Russia and the United States. Karimov sought to relaunch the ‘6+2’ at the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008, but now as 6+3, with NATO as a new member. Most international stakeholders were sceptical of Karimov’s initiative, arguing that any peace process on Afghanistan ought to be Afghan-led. Uzbekistan’s Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov, reiterated the wish to relaunch the group at the UN in 2012, but once again the international reception was lukewarm. In addition to excluding Kabul, the 6+1 format fails to include Saudi Arabia and India, undeniably two players with considerable influence on the situation in Afghanistan. Taking into account that Uzbekistan’s influence in Afghanistan is limited, as compared to Pakistan or Saudi Arabia for instance, the 6+1 format seems unlikely to gain any further international support.

One of the international initiatives that have received most attention in recent years is the so-called ‘Istanbul Process’, interchangeably referred to as the ‘Heart of Asia’ process. Initiated in 2011, the Istanbul Process aims to build trust between Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, not least by strengthening economic interaction, in order to contribute to peace in the country. The Gulf States, the four remaining Central Asian states, Russia, Iran and Pakistan all participate in the Istanbul Process. Uzbekistan, however, has failed to sign the 2011 declaration. At the 2012 ‘Heart of Asia’ Ministerial Conference in Kabul, Uzbekistan declared that it preferred bilateral over multilateral involvement with Afghanistan. An important element of the reconciliation mandate of the Istanbul Process as well as other regional initiatives is negotiating with the Taliban. So far, Uzbekistan’s attitude towards negotiating with the Taliban remains unclear. One analyst in Tashkent stated that Uzbekistan opposes sitting at the table with the Taliban, which consequently explains the country’s opposition to regional processes where dialogue with the Taliban is considered desirable.

The main driver for the engagement of Western states with Uzbekistan following 2001 has been the international project in Afghanistan. When US troops entered Afghanistan in October 2001, the West gave Uzbekistan increased attention, both in political rhetoric and through an injection of military aid. Uzbekistan allowed the US and Germany to establish military bases in the south of the country, used to provide logistical support to US military operations in Afghanistan.

Another dimension of Uzbekistan’s hesitancy to participate in regional processes may lie in the country’s relationship with Kazakhstan, its main competitor for the position as Central Asia’s regional hegemon. In contrast to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan has been a vocal supporter of several regional processes on Afghanistan, and hosted the third Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process in 2013. The fact that Uzbekistan opposes regional initiatives can thus be seen in the light of Kazakhstan’s support for them, and is reflective of a zero-sum thinking that dominates Uzbek foreign policy.

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Finally, the unfolding crisis in Russia has given former Soviet Republics such as Uzbekistan new significance to Western policy-makers. The launch of the “CS-I Contact Group” (consisting of the five Central Asian republics and the US) in September 2015 may also be interpreted in the light of the US-Russia tensions. US Secretary of State John Kerry followed up by paying a visit to all five ‘stans’ in October this year, where the Afghan threat remained a key topic in the consultations.
The contradiction between official rhetoric and the actual efforts of Uzbekistan. One example is the country’s economic contributions to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has further contributed USD 5 million. The construction of the railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to integrate Uzbekistan and Pakistan’s electricity network with that of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has further contributed USD 5 million. The construction of the railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to link its electricity network with that of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan’s capital Tashkent in 1999 and in 2004. Founded in Uzbekistan in 1998, the IMU cultivated a relationship with the Taliban while they were in power in Kabul, and established an active participant in Afghanistan’s reconstruction. There is a significant discrepancy, however, between the official rhetoric and the actual efforts of Uzbekistan. One example is the country’s economic contributions to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has further contributed USD 5 million. The construction of the railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to link its electricity network with that of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has further contributed USD 5 million. The construction of the railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to link its electricity network with that of Afghanistan.

The ambiguity of Uzbekistan’s policy towards Afghanistan especially manifests itself in the country’s reluctance to participate in multilateral processes on Afghanistan. The response of the Afghan government to the Taliban was determined by an understanding of the security threat stemming from Afghanistan. The country’s influence on the situation in Afghanistan is conducted with an emphasis on human rights and security cooperation. The US has been a major player in Afghanistan, and has established military bases in the country. The US has also provided military assistance to the Afghan government. The US has also been involved in counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan. However, there is no mention of Uzbekistan’s participation in multilateral initiatives such as the UN and NATO, which had been put on hold following the 2005 events in Andijan, which might have played an important role in reducing Uzbekistan’s influence on the situation in Afghanistan. "Karakalpak - Wikimedia Commons"

The contradiction between official rhetoric and the actual engagement can also be seen in Uzbekistan’s stance with regards to the security situation in Afghanistan. Although the official discourse places great emphasis on the threat of terrorism and extremism stemming from Afghanistan, the country does not participate in any security cooperation with the Afghan authorities. In early 2015, the US Air Force conducted a raid in Afghanistan that resulted in the death of several militants. The raid was conducted with an emphasis on human rights and security cooperation. The US has been a major player in Afghanistan, and has established military bases in the country. The US has also provided military assistance to the Afghan government. The US has also been involved in counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan. However, there is no mention of Uzbekistan’s participation in multilateral initiatives such as the UN and NATO, which had been put on hold following the 2005 events in Andijan, which might have played an important role in reducing Uzbekistan’s influence on the situation in Afghanistan."Karakalpak - Wikimedia Commons"

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The challenge to participate in regional processes may lie in the country’s relationship with Kazakhstan, its main competitor for the position as Central Asia’s regional hegemon. In contrast to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan has been a vocal supporter of several regional processes on Afghanistan, and hosted the third Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process in 2013. The fact that Uzbekistan opposes regional initiatives can thus be seen in the light of Kazakhstan’s support for them, and is reflective of a zero-sum thinking that dominates Uzbek foreign policy.

Balancing the West

The main driver for the engagement of Western states with Uzbekistan following 2001 has been the international project in Afghanistan. When US troops entered Afghanistan in October 2001, the West gave Uzbekistan increased attention, both in political rhetoric and through an injection of military aid. Uzbekistan allowed the US and Germany to establish military bases in the south of the country, used to provide logistical support to international military operations in Afghanistan. In their relationship to Uzbekistan, Western actors were met with the challenge of reconciling their security interests in Afghanistan with the encouragement of democratic reforms in Uzbekistan. This ‘security versus human rights’ dilemma came to the fore in 2005, when Uzbek security forces opened fire against thousands of protesters in the city of Andijan. Human rights organizations claim that 100-1000 people were killed in the events. Following the US call for an independent investigation of what had occurred in Andijan, the Uzbek government asked the Americans to leave the military base in Khazar Khanabad (K2) within 90 days. Following 2005, the international pressure on Uzbekistan diminished. Uzbek authorities asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to leave the country in 2006, and in 2011, Human Rights Watch was made to shut down its office in Tashkent.

Largely due to NATO’s need to reduce its logistical dependence on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Ground Line of Communication (GLOC), relations between Uzbekistan and Western countries have improved significantly in recent years. NATO signed a deal with Uzbekistan on reverse transit from Afghanistan in 2012, the same year that the US lifted its ban on military assistance to Tashkent.

Both US and NATO military personnel have re-bothed their cooperation with the Uzbek military, which had been put on hold following the events in Andijan. This cooperation strengthened both in political rhetoric and through an injection of military aid. Uzbekistan allowed the US and Germany to establish military bases in the south of the country, used to provide logistical support to international military operations in Afghanistan. In their relationship to Uzbekistan, Western actors were met with the challenge of reconciling their security interests in Afghanistan with the encouragement of democratic reforms in Uzbekistan. This ‘security versus human rights’ dilemma came to the fore in 2005, when Uzbek security forces opened fire against thousands of protesters in the city of Andijan. Human rights organizations claim that 100-1000 people were killed in the events. Following the US call for an independent investigation of what had occurred in Andijan, the Uzbek government asked the Americans to leave the military base in Khazar Khanabad (K2) within 90 days. Following 2005, the international pressure on Uzbekistan diminished. Uzbek authorities asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to leave the country in 2006, and in 2011, Human Rights Watch was made to shut down its office in Tashkent.

The gap between rhetoric and practice

Uzbekistan continuously presents itself as an active participant in Afghanistan’s reconstruction. There is a significant discrepancy, however, between the official rhetoric and the actual efforts of Uzbekistan. One example is the country’s economic contributions to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has further contributed USD 5 million. The construction of the railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to link its electricity network with that of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan’s capital Tashkent in 1999 and in 2004. Founded in Uzbekistan in 1998, the IMU cultivated a relationship with the Taliban while they were in power in Kabul, and established an active participant in Afghanistan’s reconstruction. There is a significant discrepancy, however, between the official rhetoric and the actual efforts of Uzbekistan. One example is the country’s economic contributions to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has further contributed USD 5 million. The construction of the railway was completed in 2011, and aimed to link its electricity network with that of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan’s capital Tashkent in 1999 and in 2004.
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Brief Points

- Uzbekistan has explicitly stated that it wishes to deal with Afghanistan on a bilateral basis, and has in recent years kept at a distance from several multilateral regional processes.
- Uzbekistan’s policy towards Afghanistan reflects a wish to balance two major factors: (1) maintaining regime stability at home; and (2) gaining international legitimacy by being involved in processes on Afghanistan.
- Western states threatened to freeze relations with Uzbekistan in 2005, following what several international organizations claim was a violent government crackdown on protesters in the city of Andijan.
- In recent years, Uzbekistan’s key role in the NATO reverse transit route Northern Distribution Network (NDN) from Afghanistan has been the main driver for improving relations with the West.

Recommended readings


Notes


Conclusion and looking ahead

- Uzbekistan’s engagement with Afghanistan is largely driven by its need to affirm its relevance to the international community. When Uzbek officials continuously represent the country as threatened by unrest in Afghanistan, the implicit message is that the country shares an enemy with the West. Such an image of a threat is beneficial to the Uzbek government, both in its pursuit of domestic regime security and in drawing international legitimacy. Anybody pursuing a regional commitment to Afghanistan’s stability should maintain dialogue with the Uzbek authorities, yet be sensitive to how Tashkent may exploit the ‘Afghan threat’.

- There is a dire need for more knowledge on Uzbekistan’s policy towards Afghanistan, which is characterized by a fundamental insistence on unilateralism that sets it apart from other countries of the neighborhood. Effective engagement of Uzbekistan is unavoidable, but the ability to pursue a coherent policy rests on solid understanding. President Karimov is now 77 years old, and the question of who may be his possible successor has already become a topic of speculation. Most analysts suggest the head of the National Security Service, Rustam Inoyatov, as a likely candidate to succeed Karimov. All stakeholders should remain alert to the potential risks associated with a political transition.

- The special relationship between the Uzbek government and the Vice President of Afghanistan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, is also of significance for future engagement. Dostum has during the last year visited Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and has reportedly requested his northern neighbors to provide weapons and other military support. For Uzbekistan, Dostum represents a possibility for access and a chance to influence the very top of the Afghan leadership.

- The domestic situation in Uzbekistan is closely connected to the regional context, most notably in the country’s relationship with Kazakhstan and with Afghanistan. If the situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, Uzbekistan’s importance to the international community will be strengthened. On the other hand, the current crises in Syria and Iraq have placed Afghanistan in the shadow, and as a consequence diminished Uzbekistan’s significance to the international community. What remains certain is that Uzbekistan has the potential to be playing a more proactive role in Afghanistan’s future. Whether it will do so remains an open question, and will depend primarily on domestic developments.

THE AUTHOR

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The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute established in 1959 whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.