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## Geopolitical movements in Central Asia

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### Resumen:

El encuentro del presidente Xi, de gira por Asia Central, y el presidente Putin en Samarcanda (Uzbekistán) en el contexto de una cumbre organizada por la Organización de Cooperación de Shanghai (OCS) prevista para el 14 y 15 de septiembre, pone en valor a la región en el contexto de la alianza estratégica suscrita por ambos países el pasado 4 de febrero.

Asia Central es un espacio complejo y poco conocido que llama a la reflexión y el análisis. La guerra de Ucrania ha alterado los equilibrios entre China y Rusia en esta parte del espacio postsoviético, una región constituida por Estados débiles e interdependientes. Rusia ha estado perdiendo paulatinamente presencia económica y política en una región relevante desde la perspectiva geopolítica y de los recursos; los compromisos derivados de la guerra pueden haber acelerado esta tendencia. A ello se suma el vacío geopolítico en la región generado por la salida de Estados Unidos de Afganistán.

Mientras, la presencia China crece en una nueva reedición de su ascenso pacífico a escala local de una forma pronunciada. La oportunidad que se le presenta al gigante asiático es innegable, no obstante, de su éxito se derivaría el involucramiento estratégico de Rusia y, además, se crearía una relación de dependencia.

### Palabras clave:

Asia Central, China, Rusia, guerra de Ucrania, geopolítica, gas, Uzbekistán, Ruta de la Seda.

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## *Geopolitical movements in Central Asia*

### *Abstract:*

The meeting between President Xi, on a tour of Central Asia, and President Putin in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) in the context of a Summit organized by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) scheduled for September 14 and 15, highlights to the region in the context of the strategic alliance signed by both countries on February 4.

Central Asia is a complex and little-known space that calls for analysis. The war in Ukraine has altered the balance between China and Russia in Central Asia, a region made up of weak and interdependent states. Russia has been gradually losing economic and political presence in a region - part of the post-Soviet space - relevant from a geopolitical and resource perspective; War commitments may have accelerated this trend of losing leadership. Added to this is the geopolitical vacuum in the region generated by the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan.

While the Chinese presence grows in a new reissue of its peaceful rise on a local scale and in a pronounced way. The opportunity presented to the Asian giant is undeniable, however, its success would result in the strategic involvement of Russia and, in addition, a dependency relationship would be created. This accredits the conjunctural nature and limits of the relationship between the two, which would be reaching as a consequence of the tension imposed by the logic of war.

### *Keywords:*

Central Asia, China, Russia, Ukraine War, geopolitics, gas, Uzbekistan, Silk Road.

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*"When my cobbler invests in the stock market,  
I am selling all my shares.*

John D. Rockefeller

To Western eyes, Central Asia is a vast plateau of steppes and deserts covering more than 4,000,000 km<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>; an undefined, distant and unknown space<sup>2</sup>, which is not even geographically, culturally or ethno-linguistically homogenous. Close to myth, the region is associated with Alexander the Great, the Silk Road, the lost kingdom of Prester John and the Mongol hordes, shared spaces that must be traversed.

The set of countries (Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus and Central Asia) that make up the post-Soviet space ("the near abroad", as it is called in Russia) shape an arc of instability due to the confluence of a plurality of fracture lines that make it an area of miscegenation, of transition between cultures that are not sufficiently familiar to the West, including Russian, Persian, Turkish and Mongolian. Added to this is its geopolitical importance, not only because of the imperatives of geography that make it a crossroads, but also because of its oil and gas and other strategic raw material reserves.

As a first step, it is therefore important to clarify what is meant by Central Asia. It is the group of Asian countries outside the Caucasus region that emerged from the implosion of the former Soviet Union, i.e., Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turenistan. In his work *The Great World Chessboard: US supremacy and its geostrategic imperatives*, published in 1998, Brzezinski called this area "the great Eurasian black hole".

It should also include Afghanistan, thereby forming a continuous space; and clearly Iran, China and even Turkey itself are situated in this space, which certainly have an influence, a cultural presence and undoubted interests in the area. Some of these territories have Turen cultural roots, while others, such as Tajikistan, which is very much oriented towards Russia, have Persian influences. Together with Liechtenstein, Uzbekistan is the only

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<sup>1</sup> MARTÍNEZ LAÍNEZ, Fernando. "El corazón de Asia", in *Revista Española de Defensa*, July-August 2009, pp. 71-77.

<sup>2</sup> HEATHERSHAW, John and MEGORAN, Nick. "Contesting danger: a new agenda for policy and scholarship on Central Asia", in *International Affairs*, no. 87, 2011, p. 3.

country in the world that suffers from double isolation, i.e., two territories must be crossed to reach the nearest coastline of free seas. The paradigm of continentalism.



- Figure 1: Map of Central Asia<sup>3</sup> -

This area has historically mainly been populated by three primary races, namely Europeans, Mongols, Turks and Iranians, whose interbreeding is the source of the other populations. The mixing of Europeans and Mongols gave rise to Turks and Tatars; that of Iranians and Mongols to Tajiks ("crowned heads" in Persian); that of Turks and Mongols to Kazakhs and Kyrgyz (in Turkish, "wanderers" and "forty tribes" respectively); and the mixing of Turks and Iranians gave rise to Uzbeks (in Turkish, "true men")<sup>4</sup>.

Until relatively recently, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turen have been largely nomadic populations. Today, the region is predominantly rural, with four of its five countries having

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://reachbeyond.org/content/news/read/placing-christian-historyhis-storyin-a-central-asian-context>

<sup>4</sup> HIRO, Dilip. *Inside Central Asia*. Overlook Duckworth, London 2007.

306 million hectares of crops, of which cotton is of singular importance<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, in some countries, school-age children working during the cotton-picking season is provided for in the curriculum and is legally enforceable, something that is repudiated from a human rights perspective.

There are currently more than 75,000,000 Muslims from the former Soviet Union living there, mostly Sunnis belonging to the two liberal *Hanafi and Safi* schools of law (*madhabs*). However, 75% of Azeris are Shiite Duodecimans. About two thirds of these are in Central Asia and they constitute around 20% of the population of the former Soviet Union. The most pious populations have traditionally been Chechens and Dagestanis.

Closer in time, the region is linked to the British-Russian "Great Game"<sup>6</sup> or "Tournament of Shadows", in the words of Count Nesselrode, Russian representative at the *Congress of Vienna*, a rivalry that resulted in its division into three parts. China took the east, the British Empire took the south, and the northern region fell to Russia, who was eager to replace the cotton supply disrupted by the American Civil War as it moved to warmer seas.

### **CENTRAL ASIA IN THE 20TH CENTURY.**

The Central Asian countries conquered and colonised by Russia (the region's fortunes were governed from Tashkent, the present-day capital of Uzbekistan) in the second half of the 19th century were isolated from the rest of the Islamic world by being located on the other side of the Iron Curtain, which gradually sealed the borders. This fact was coupled with a whole process of Russification after the Bolshevik revolution under the pretext of creating the new *Homo sovieticus*.

In the early 1920s, in the Fergana Valley, the Basmachi rebellion (Uzbek for 'bandits'; Uzbeks make up about a third of Muslims in the former USSR) broke out, coinciding with a 62% drop in agricultural production. Operating as guerrillas from the mountains, they attacked Red Army posts and supplies<sup>7</sup>.

They were then led by General Enver Pasha, the former Turkish War Minister - who had paradoxically offered to Moscow to end it but added yet another defeat - with his pan-

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<sup>5</sup> PEYROUSE, Sébastien. "The multiple paradoxes of the agriculture issue in Central Asia", in *EU. Central Asia Monitoring*, no. 6, November 2009

<sup>6</sup> The author of the expression "Great Game" was J. W. Kay, in his book *History of the Afghan War*, but it was Rudyard Kipling who popularised it in his novel *Kim*.

<sup>7</sup> HIRO, Dilip. *Op. Cit.*

Islamic, pan-Turkish proposal. Through political measures - the return of land given to Russian settlers in the 19th century and policies of respect for local culture - and military measures, the Soviet regime finally defeated the movement once and for all. However, these facts were decisive in the arbitrary design of the borders of the new Soviet autonomous republics, as will be discussed later<sup>8</sup>.

The years of Soviet rule profoundly altered its social and economic structure and even did immense damage to the environment through a combination of development, modernisation and destruction in a single act.

By way of example, some environmentally degrading practices include the diversion of rivers for agriculture, which affected the Aral Sea; the massive use of polluting pesticides for cotton production, which resulted in the contamination of vast areas of farmland; the construction of chemical and biological facilities, not to mention their reckless abandonment after independence; and other activities such as those at the Semipalatinski nuclear test site in Kazakhstan and the use of contaminated water for human consumption.

There was, as noted above, a huge effort to alter the cultural identity of the region by Russifying even people's names and persecuting not only Islam (although its private practice was tolerated) but also the cultural model built from that religion. A sort of "official Islam", close to Sufism and the *Tarqas*, was promoted. Pilgrimages to Mecca were banned, mosques were handed over to state institutions that incited atheism, border controls were tightened to separate the country from neighbouring peoples, all in the name of strengthening the regime.

Ethnic borders were altered and large masses of people, including entire villages, were forcibly displaced, victims of the punishment following the *Second World War*, or vast processes of collectivisation as an attempt to put an end to the conflict that tended to arise in the regions where they were settled (Meskhetian Turks, Tatars, Russians, Germans, Chechens, etc.). All this led to a serious identity crisis, the source of many of the paradoxes of the current situation, and to the settlement of important nuclei of a population, then partly nomadic, outside the Soviet frontiers.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

In the administrative sphere, the five Soviet socialist republics were created along borders that had been redrawn at different times without regard to economic, ethnic or geographical rationality. These were deliberately weakened by Stalin through *gerrymandering*<sup>9</sup>, aiming to ensure that each could not constitute a threat (pan-Islamic or pan-Turkish) to the central power in the region on its own, while remaining interdependent among themselves.

Islam did not play a significant role in the destruction of the former USSR, although it is also true that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan - one of the most important command centres of which was in Taskent - exposed the shortcomings and limitations of the regime. Not only that, and precisely because of their cultural affinity, it displaced as part of the army of occupation a good many of the current citizens of these countries, who consequently waged war on nations with which they shared religion and even culture. Some of the region's historic radical leaders are former combatants in this war.

Unable to assume control over its periphery, the implosion of the USSR brought an independence - the opening of a Pandora's box - unintended by the communist nomenclature, the *apparatchik*, along with strong and authoritarian presidential regimes such as Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov's, who remained in power until his death in 2016.

All this made the forms of government heirs to a political culture (old totalitarian formulas applied to new situations together with the will to remain in power by whatever means necessary)<sup>10</sup> which is still in place, despite the beginnings of processes of political transfer and changeover - notwithstanding the lack of an organised opposition. Islam Karimov, who had been the country's president since independence in 1991 and was formerly the leader of the Communist Party, was succeeded on his death in September 2016 by Shavkat Mirziyoev, who had been its prime minister since 2003, giving continuity to previous policies but with changes, particularly in his relationship with the environment.

Moreover, any transition from a planned economy to a market economy and the associated change in values generates great confusion, if not anomie, due to the loss of

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<sup>9</sup> A term used in political science to refer to a manipulation of the boundaries of a territory, joining, dividing or associating them to produce a certain effect.

<sup>10</sup> RAISA K. Kadirova. "Protection of power in Central Asia: using terror as a pretext? A Kyrgyz NGO's vision", p. 1.

reference points, which leads to paradoxical behaviour and promotes corruption. Consequently, the economy is still far from being a market economy<sup>11</sup>.

The so-called *Tulip Revolution* in Kyrgyzstan has been purported to be linked to the Arab Spring. Since then, there have been electoral processes, constitutional reforms and changes in the ruling elites, in processes declared fair (although not all of them) by the OSCE. The riots in October 2020 over an attempt at massive electoral fraud for the benefit of pro-government parties should be mentioned.

### **CENTRAL ASIA AS A GEOPOLITICAL ENTITY.**

After the implosion of the USSR, a kind of power vacuum was created in the region, as Brzezinski had already foreseen, which reissued the conditions of the *Great Game*. The outcome is that states that had initially grown together, interconnected and specialised, after the fracture - which itself caused an immediate impoverishment and loss of quality of life for the populations - adopted increasingly divergent courses, politically, economically and ideologically, as they sought their own benefit and intentionally exacerbated mutual divergences and controversies to set themselves apart. While Uzbekistan now emphasises Timur (Tamerlane, *Timur the Lame*), the Kyrgyz speak of Manas<sup>1213</sup>.

They are opaque states, societies that are very difficult to penetrate, both because of their culture and because of the experience of years of control and repression. As a whole they pose major problems of corruption (out of 180 countries, Tajikistan ranks 150th in the 2021 index, Kazakhstan 102nd, Kyrgyzstan 144th and Uzbekistan 140th), including nepotism, inefficiency, lack of political freedoms, drug trafficking, terrorism, environmental degradation, and more, all of which disrupts unfinished *state building* processes.

Since Mirziyoev's rise to power, Uzbekistan has experienced an improvement both in the corruption perception index and in terms of human rights, particularly freedom of

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<sup>11</sup> For example, in the most authoritarian countries in the region, the cotton harvest is paid at prices well below its market value and children are forced to take part in harvesting the crop, which has become less mechanised since the fall of the Soviet regime (PEYROUSE, Sébastien. *Op. Cit.*). 21

<sup>12</sup> Manas is a Kyrgyz poem and the name of its epic hero. The poem, which is twenty times longer than the *Odyssey*, tells the patriotic story of Manas and his descendants, who fought against the Uighurs in the 9th century. There are references to the poem dating from the 15th century, but the first written version dates from 1885.

<sup>13</sup> MARTÍNEZ LAÍNEZ, Fernando. *Op. Cit.*



expression, as *Transparency International* expressly states in its report for 2021, although there is evidently still a long way to go.

Tajikistan went through a civil war that left half a million dead (other sources speak of "more than 50,000"), but overall, the implosion of the USSR did not plunge the region into chaos, its effects effectively postponed until almost the dawn of the second millennium.

The case of Turenistan, for its part, is an expression of the geopolitics of balances and a testament to the evolution of the region. The country borders Iran (992 km), Kazakhstan (379 km) and Uzbekistan (1,621 km). Gas accounts for 90% of its imports and 40% of its revenues. It is a personalist regime (162 out of 167 in *The Economist's Democracy Index* 2020; in this country golden statues have been erected to its political leaders<sup>14</sup>) that is sustained by the clientelism of gas rents with which it ensures social peace. The country has also opted for "permanent neutrality", even though it is clearly dependent on Russia, and remains outside most international and regional organisations, taking part only as an observer or guest in some of them. "Permanent neutrality" and clientelism guarantee the stability of the state and its survival.

Until 2009, 90% of Turkmen gas was destined for Russia which, acting as a monopsony, resold it to Europe. However, a Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China gas pipeline was inaugurated the same year and was gradually extended with new branches. Also in the same year, a new pipeline came on stream with the capacity to significantly increase gas exports to Iran, thus diversifying demand.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, in the gas sector, China has been displacing Russia, although its purchases are not at the same level and are made at preferential prices. Due to financial and pricing disputes with Iran and Russia, in 2019 China once again became the sole buyer of all Turkmen gas, re-establishing the monopsony regime but with a different customer and, furthermore, with price fixing. The profits, what is more, were used to pay for all the infrastructure built by the Asian giant in the country, resulting in a serious liquidity crisis in the Turkmen treasury.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20150525/54431860713/turkmenistan-presidente-estatua-oro.html>

<sup>15</sup> VV.AA. "Country fact sheet: Turkmenistan". Diplomatic Information Office. Available at: [http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Documents/FichasPais/TURKMENISTAN\\_FICHA%20PAIS.pdf](http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Documents/FichasPais/TURKMENISTAN_FICHA%20PAIS.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> "Turkmenistan's natural gas. Diversification as an obsession". *The Asian Century*. Available at: <https://elsiglodeasia.com/2022/01/12/el-gas-natural-de-turkmenistan-la-diversificacion-como-obsesion/>

Thus, the loss of two of its three clients, the fall in prices and the debt repayment to China led Turkmenistan into a deep economic crisis, which has brought about the devaluation of its currency, high inflation, shortages of consumer goods and food insecurity, the expansion of the black market, and unemployment, among others.<sup>17</sup>

The situation is also the result of the successive failure of the pipeline projects with which it sought a connection outside of Central Asia due to the unrest in the area. These were basically two projects, the TAPI that would link the country with India, and the trans-Caspian one with Azerbaijan. These failures were initially because of successive situation reversals in Afghanistan and the de facto control of its territory; and then because of opposition from Russia and Iran. Added to this was the lack of agreement - until recently - on the delimitation of the Caspian Sea, disagreements with Azerbaijan over certain gas fields, and the financing difficulties involved in already grandiose projects. Although it has now regained Iran and Russia as clients, in addition to other Central Asian countries, the need to diversify revenue sources to preserve its independence is clear.

The axis of stability in the area is Uzbekistan. Moreover, Uzbekistan is the region's strategic pivot both in terms of population and its focal location: it borders all the other countries, but not China or Russia, which gives its decisions significant autonomy. In fact, the other countries show significantly lower levels of state-building than Uzbekistan.

The area is home to some 78,000,000 people. Uzbekistan has 35,000,000, Kazakhstan (the ninth largest country in the world in terms of land area) has 19,000,000, Tajikistan has 10,000,000 and Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan have 7,000,000 each.

President Shavkat Mirziyoev's more open stance compared to his predecessor's has led to an overall improvement in relations with other countries in the region and has opened opportunities for regional cooperation. The first summit of Central Asian leaders on regional cooperation since the 1990s took place in Astana in March 2018 and a second summit was held in Tashkent in November 2019.

The countries are diverse and ethnically pluralistic. Kyrgyzstan is slightly smaller in size than the UK; over 90% of its territory is mountainous and only 12.5% is arable<sup>18</sup>. Two thirds of the population are Kyrgyz, around 10% are Uzbeks and a further 10% are

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Uzbekistan less than 10%. Kazakhstan has 8%, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan around 6.5 % and Turkmenistan less than 5% (PEYROUSE, Sébastien: op. cit.).

Russians. Societies are very plural, while incorporating pre-state structures that weaken them (clans, hordes, etc.).

Independence brought economic decline and unemployment. Poverty rates in Central Asia range between 40% and 83%. Nearly a quarter of Uzbeks lived on less than three dollars a day in 2013<sup>19</sup>. In 2004, Tajikistan, the poorest country in the region according to UN figures, could not support one sixth of its 6,000,000 people. One third of the children born did not get enough food, which affected their level of development, and seventy-two children out of a thousand did not reach the age of five. In 2001, after five years of civil war, 83% of Tajiks were living below the poverty line<sup>20</sup>.

Relations in Central Asia are under deep stress because of disputes between administrations over anomalies in geographic and ethnic distribution. To this effect, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are geographically difficult to govern because they are divided by mountains (50% of Tajikistan is above 3,000m) that cannot be crossed at any time of the year. The southern and northern parts of these two countries are isolated from each other and some areas can only be accessed through Uzbekistan. However, Uzbekistan poses difficulties both for access to its territory and for the use of its communication routes<sup>21</sup>.

Tajikistan shares a 1,400 km border with Afghanistan. The main ethnic minority in Tajikistan is the Tajik (almost 30 % of the total population) and the country is the main entry point for heroin into Russia<sup>22</sup>.

The Uzbek-Kyrgyz border is 1,295 km long. By the end of 2004, 260 km remained to be demarcated, including the Uzbek enclave of Soj and the Kyrgyz enclave of Barak. Mirziyoyev has unblocked the situation. To this effect, in 2017, the two countries signed a *Strategic Partnership Agreement* and a delimitation treaty for 1,170 km of the 1,370 km that make up the common border. However, there is still no formal agreement on the delimitation of the remaining 15% (some 200 km).

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<sup>19</sup> VV.AA. "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)". Jane's *Terrorism and Insurgency Centre*. 21 February 2013.

<sup>20</sup> RAISA K. Kadirova. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>21</sup> KARAEV, Zainidin. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>22</sup> VV.AA. "Country fact sheet: Tajikistan". Diplomatic Information Office. Available at: [www.maec.es](http://www.maec.es)

Furthermore, the relationship with Tajikistan has been strengthened, reopening border crossings between the two countries and avenues of cooperation in the fight against terrorism, organised crime and drug trafficking.<sup>23</sup> However, there has still been no demarcation of the 970-km Tajik-Kyrgyz border, totalling 40,000 hectares, the most contested areas of which are those temporarily ceded and those from which oil is extracted or is used for industrial or agricultural purposes. The April 2013 riots in Voruj<sup>24</sup> (a Tajik enclave in Kyrgyzstan), which included hostage-taking and mistreatment of officials on both sides of the border, are a telling expression of this reality. In 2021, these conflicts arose again with some 50 dead and more than 40,000 displaced. There have also been minor incidents in 2022. However, the two countries have signed a protocol committing them to refrain from using force in cases of illegal border crossings and to establish joint border patrols.

Each country in the region has a significant proportion of Tajiks and Kyrgyz outside it and Uzbeks inside it, while Uzbekistan has a significant proportion of its citizens outside its borders. Tajikistan - which in the 1920s was part of Uzbekistan - feels it has lost its most important (Tajik-speaking) cultural centres, Samarkand (where Karimov was from) and Bukhara, generating a strong sense of inferiority to the current Uzbekistan and the feeling that at its survival, or at least its ability to withstand its internal problems, is tied to this country<sup>25</sup>.

The issue is that the appearance of borders that do not consider ethnic peculiarities in an area considered integral and where there was previously freedom of movement breaks its geographical unity, and this is especially so in the valley. Borders that did not previously exist separate those who were united, families included, make activities illegal that were previously not (smuggling) and add others that have always been illegal (terrorism, drug trafficking, etc.).

Problems add up to synergies. To this effect, drug trafficking finds a stimulus in poverty and in its proximity to the Afghan production centre, contributing to the financing of

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<sup>23</sup>"Uzbekistan Report" *Compañía Española de Seguros de Crédito (CESCE)* .09.10.2018. Available at:

<https://www.cesce.es/documents/20122/352439/INFORME+UZBEKIST%C3%81N+-+9+octubre+2018.pdf/71ae6ac3-9422-3667-0e78-31c71ce815df?t=1606929572634>

<sup>24</sup> OLIMOVA, Saodat. "Bimonthly report, May 2013". Available at: [www.asiacentral.es](http://www.asiacentral.es)

<sup>25</sup> WEISBRODE, Kenneth. *Op. Cit.*

Islamist organisations with the capacity and means for production and distribution. And drug trafficking is of course associated with other criminal behaviour.

The result has been administrative restrictions on movement (such as difficulties obtaining visas)<sup>26</sup>- Uzbekistan has opened its hand in this regard since 2017 - some unnecessary, some arbitrary, imposed by authorities that locals feel are distant and uninterested in their problems. This fact is compounded by the significant contradictions in legislation, which facilitates extortion, bribery, smuggling, etc., and aggravates inter-ethnic mistrust, generating multiple conflicts, some of them violent, in which government officials have even been involved.

The most visible result of these tensions has been the destruction of border crossings on both sides of it<sup>27</sup> and the deaths of a number of third country nationals at the hands of ethnic Uzbeks when crossing illegally.

In 2000, President Karimov set out an agenda that explicitly included security as the first criterion. In a speech he said, "There is only one policy here: security, security, security". The previous year militants of the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU) had launched an attack from Tajikistan, penetrating deep into the Kyrgyz part of the Ferghana Valley, but without reaching Uzbekistan.

In response to these circumstances, Uzbekistan tightened control of its borders by adopting measures aimed at restricting movement, some of them questionable, including the mining of parts of it, leaving isolated enclaves that had previously enjoyed freedom of movement. The Tajik-Kyrgyz border is one such example, made impassable by mines dropped from the air and in an imprecise manner. In some areas, 3,000 mines per km<sup>2</sup> were dropped, with particular incidence in the 42 km of the Kyrgyz border in the Ferghana valley, and

resulting in multiple casualties, mostly Uzbek civilians living in Tajikistan. Demining processes since 2004 have reduced tensions<sup>28</sup>; however, they have been rather ineffective given the absence of accurate maps detailing where they are placed<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> VV. AA. "Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential", in *ICG Asia Report*, no. 33, 04/04/2002.

<sup>27</sup> GALINA M., Yemelianova. "The Rise of Islam in Muslim Eurasia: Internal Determinants and Potential Consequences", in *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 5, Issue 2/2007, p. 73-91.

<sup>28</sup> RAISA K. Kadirova. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>29</sup> SMITH ALBION, Adam. *Op. Cit.*

The issue of security has wiped other relevant issues off the agenda, relegating local problems in favour of other considerations. The destruction of the Karasu Bridge in 2005 is a good example. This strategic infrastructure for the area from an economic point of view, given that it allowed the transit of (Chinese) goods between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, was rebuilt by the population in clear defiance of President Karimov's regime<sup>30</sup>. Difficulties in transit (especially of dangerous goods such as gas) throughout the country are also of notable importance.

In Uzbekistan, the nationalist fear of the development of a Tajik culture linked to separatism means that it is presented in the West as a buffer against the expansionism of the Russian and Persian empires. And although relations are not particularly strained<sup>31</sup> and have even improved, the Kyrgyz believe they may end up as a protectorate of Kazakhstan as a result of Uzbek coercion; and the Tajiks believe that the Uzbeks may retake the Khanate of Bukhara and annex Khodzend and the rest of Tajikistan by handing over Gorno-Badakhistan to Afghanistan for integration into Badakhistan<sup>32</sup>.

Notably too, stemming from these fears and dating back to prior to its independence in the times of the USSR, there are the pogroms of Jews, and especially of Meskhetian Turks (who had been expelled from Georgia by Stalin) - the last one in the Fergana Valley in 1989, according to different sources. They were organised by the intelligence services of the time, who are behind the progressive departure of this group from the country.

These processes became more recurrent and extended to other groups, minorities and relatively minority groups in the context of the new societies: Uzbeks and Tajiks, to name but two. For their part, other populations in the area, including Germans, Russians and the local minorities themselves returned to their countries (the Germans returned to their country after reunification), significantly altering the demographic map.

The 2010 incidents in Kyrgyzstan, Osh and Jalalabad, and more generally across the southern region, are a good example. There, the government lost control and unrest spread practically all over the country. The outcome was several hundred people killed, mostly Uzbeks, and some 2,000 houses, mainly belonging to ethnic Kyrgyz citizens,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> JANI, Feruza. "Relations between Iran and Central Asia". Available at :<http://enews.fergananews.com/article.php?id=2520>.

<sup>32</sup> WEISBRODE, Kenneth. *Op. Cit.*

destroyed. The difference between this pogrom and the one in 1990 is that this time there were no Russian forces deployed in the area<sup>33</sup>.

Their reasons are uncertain and are linked to the poverty and ethnic hatred that creates and allows the free circulation of rumours combined with nationalist and anti-Uzbek policies. This is compounded by unfair treatment by the authorities at the local level (for example, ethnic Uzbek Kyrgyz, who are associated with separatism, have been deliberately excluded from the administration and deprived of media in their language), which has generated fear and a sense of helplessness that has in turn encouraged diaspora and even the incorporation of some into Islamist movements. There has even been past speculation that this situation could lead to intervention by the Uzbek armed forces, the largest in the region and with some projection capacity despite being outdated<sup>34</sup>.

Central Asia is a dry and arid land, but with a well-established rural tradition, which is why between the 1960s and 1970s it was transformed by the creation of an impressive irrigation system and a huge cotton plantation. However, this emphasis on agricultural production had disastrous consequences stemming from the deviation of the Amu Darya and Sir Darya rivers, the main tributaries of the Aral Sea, creating a major environmental problem<sup>35</sup>.

Agriculture accounts for 19.3% of the country's GDP (industry for 33.9% and services for the remaining 46.8%), making it particularly relevant. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan mainly export raw materials for processing. Uzbekistan alone exports more than 4,000,000 tonnes of cotton, the equivalent of 90 % of its production.

Uzbekistan's economy is heavily based on the export of its natural resources (gold - 9% of the country's GDP and more than 30% of exports, gas - 0.6% of world reserves, oil, uranium, cotton and other agricultural products), whose international prices have allowed

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<sup>33</sup> VV. AA. "The pogroms in Kyrgyzstan". *International Crisis Group Asia Report Issue 193*, 23 August 2010.

<sup>34</sup> VV. AA. "Kyrgyzstan: widening ethnic divisions in the South" in *International Crisis Group Asia Report n.222*, 29/03/2012. (VV. AA: "Great Game in Muslim Central Asia" in *Institute for National Strategic Studies. National Defense University McNair Paper 47*, January 1996).

<sup>35</sup> The constant use of flood irrigation has led to salinisation of the land, which has resulted in the 8.6 million acres having to be taken out of production. This has led to the use of chemical additives to try to improve production with a consequent increase in pollution (AHRARI, M.E.: "New Great Game in Muslim Central Asia" in *Institute for National Strategic Studies. National Defense University. McNair Paper 47*, January 1996).

for continued GDP growth in recent years. The decline in the prices of these commodities (except gold), the international economic crisis and the recession in Russia (its main trading partner) have led to a slowdown in economic growth that has affected the quality of life of its large population.<sup>36</sup> The mining sector accounts for 25% of GDP and has the capacity for more. Its recovery from the pandemic will contribute to the stabilisation of the regime.

Notably, since 2017 President Shavkat Mirziyoev has undertaken a process of economic liberalisation, including the liberalisation of the exchange rate. Its accounts resulting from the sale of raw materials and the arrival of remittances have generated an external financing capacity equivalent to 3.7% of GDP.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, following independence, the Soviet system of water distribution could not be maintained and tensions began to show. This has been compounded by population growth, the expansion of cropland, increasing degradation of irrigation systems and the non-substitution of crop types (rice and cotton, which require abundant water). All this has exacerbated a problem that is posed in the region as a zero-sum game affecting the most disadvantaged social sectors<sup>38</sup>.

In this regard, the unequal sharing of water from these rivers has led to its use by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to rebalance their relations with Uzbekistan in other areas, as Uzbekistan itself has done (gas). Kyrgyzstan has 40% of water resources and consumes only 7% of its water, leaving the rest to surrounding countries, whom they prevent from using it for energy production during the winter to be able to rely on it in the summer. There are tensions with Uzbekistan over Tajik hydroelectric projects<sup>39</sup>.

A winter release of water for energy production could damage neighbouring countries' crops and their irrigation and water reservoir system. Irrigation systems are extremely inefficient due to poor maintenance (50-90% of water does not reach its destination)<sup>40</sup>. There are few agreements on water use and those there are are not honoured, and if they are honoured, they are not properly paid for.

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<sup>36</sup> VV. AA. "Country fact sheet: Uzbekistan". *Op. Cit.*

<sup>37</sup> ECSC. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>38</sup> VV. AA. "Central Asia: Water and Conflict. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>39</sup> VV.AA.: "Country fact sheet: Tajikistan". *Op. Cit.*

<sup>40</sup> AHRARI, M.E. *Op. Cit.*



Unable to maintain the Soviet water-sharing system, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan resorted to cutting river flows to rebalance their relations with Uzbekistan, on whose gas they depended. Consequently, relations during the Karimov era were marked by continuous water supply cuts causing significant agricultural losses, to which Uzbekistan in turn responded with gas cuts, causing blackouts in neighbouring countries during the winter<sup>41</sup>.

The problems of disputed territories coupled with the water issue have led to inter-ethnic and border conflicts, which quickly become tinged with ethnic and nationalistic overtones and lead to violent conflicts between farmers.

The presence in the region of organisations such as the *Collective Security Treaty Organisation* (CSTO) signed in 2002, which brings together under Russian leadership many of the former members of the Soviet Union, is comparable in scope and structure to NATO and has until now been an element of stability.

The *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* is a bicephaly (Russia and China) that unites countries with larger populations and resources to join forces to fight the so-called three plagues reflecting their common concerns: extremism, separatism and terrorism. But it also serves to counterbalance the presence of other actors in the region. It has a permanent counter-terrorism structure based in Tashkent. For some analysts, China is instrumentalising the SCO to project itself as an alternative to Russia as a security provider in the area.

## THE FERGANA VALLEY AS A GEOPOLITICAL PIVOT IN THE REGION

One of the geopolitical centres of the region is undoubtedly the Fergana Valley, the birthplace of the famous King Babur, founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, which he conquered after the Uzbeks drove him out of his beloved valley, for which he famously longed all his life, even on his deathbed. It is said that he died smelling one of its famous melons. Abu Abbas Ahmadibin Muhammadibin Jatir al-Farghani, a famous mathematician of the 9th century, also came from here.

The valley straddles three countries and includes the three north-eastern provinces (oblasts) of Uzbekistan (Andijan, Fergana and Namagan), the three south-western provinces of Kyrgyzstan (Bakten, Jalalabad and Osh) and northern Tajikistan. Uzbekistan

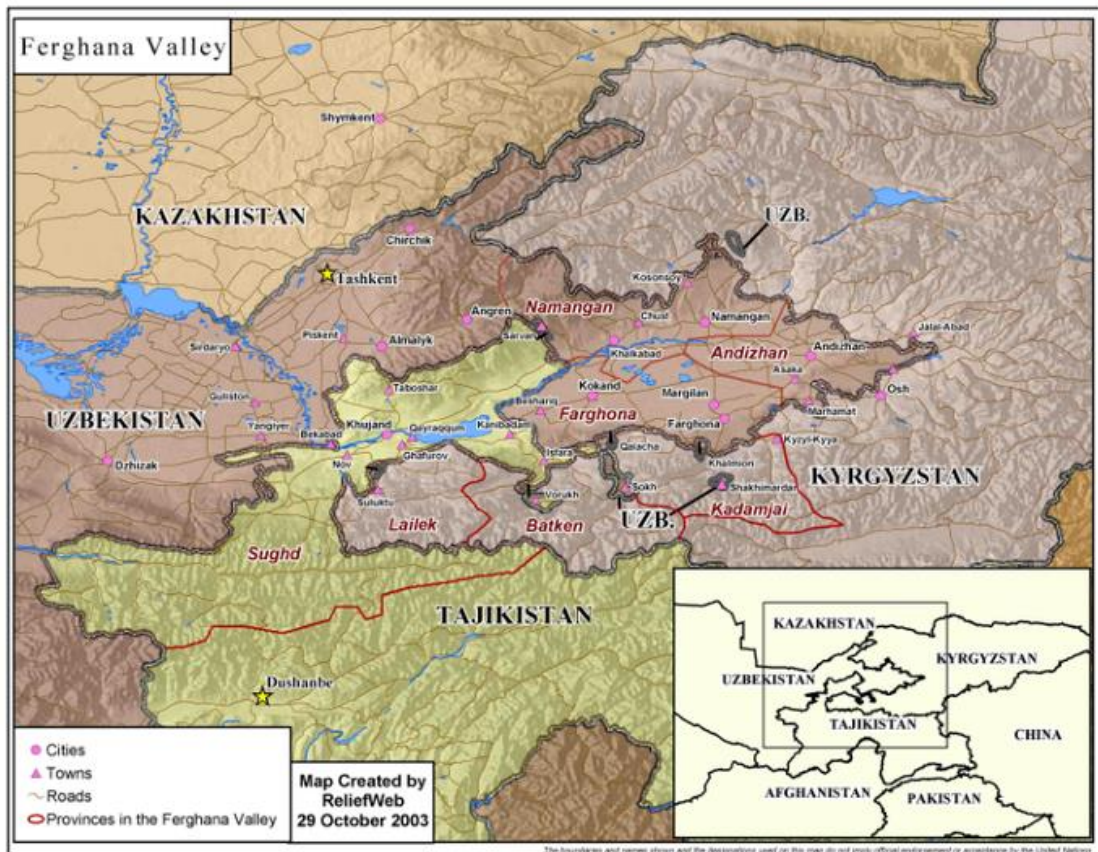
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<sup>41</sup> ECSC. *Op. Cit.*

has the lowlands, Kyrgyzstan the mountains and Tajikistan the western access with roads and trains accessing the valley<sup>42</sup>.

The boundaries of the Fergana Valley are criss-crossed from a plurality of perspectives. To give an example that will be developed further later, Uzbekistan's irrigation reservoirs were in Kyrgyzstan, while Uzbek cotton was ginned in Kyrgyzstan and the necessary transport route ran through Tajikistan<sup>43</sup>.

A single space some 170 km wide and 300 km long connecting Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the valley is surrounded on three sides by large mountain ranges that separate each national portion of the valley from the rest of the respective country and, despite its relatively small size, is an important economic centre (Figure 2).



- Figure 2: Fergana Valley<sup>44</sup> -

<sup>42</sup> SMITH ALBION, Adam. "Fergana Valley", in *Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 2007.

<sup>43</sup> KARAEV, Zainidin: "Water diplomacy in Central Asia", in *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 9, Issue 1, March 2005, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Map of the Fergana Valley. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/map/kyrgyzstan/ferghana-valley-reference-map>

It accounts for 25% of Uzbek cotton production, despite accounting for only 4.3% of its total land area, and 27% of the country's population, including five of the 10 largest cities. It also includes 75% of Tajikistan's arable land and around 65% of Tajikistan's industrial production<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, there are exchanges and leasing of territories between the republics.

The area is home to some 14,000,000 people and has a very high birth rate; more than half the population are under the age of 18, 70% Uzbeks, 20% Kyrgyz and the rest Tajiks. In the case of the Fergana Valley, population density in some places is as high as 2,300 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup><sup>46</sup>, making it the most overpopulated area in the region.<sup>47</sup>

The issue is that the populations are intermingled and there are also ethnic enclaves. Uzbeks constitute a large minority in the Tajik (31%) and Kyrgyz (27%) regions of the valley, while having different ethnic, rural and clan origins<sup>48</sup>. It thus contains a quarter of the 35,000,000 Uzbeks, a third of the 8,000,000 Tajiks and half of the 7,000,000 Kyrgyz. However, as an element of détente, there is a high level of inter-ethnic marriage and multilingualism is widespread.

In the Fergana Valley, the destruction of the Tajik civil war between 1992-97 left the area without industry and plunged Tajikistan into unemployment and poverty. According to its own statistics, in 2009 53% of the population was poor and 17% very poor. The average monthly wage is \$50. The process of deindustrialisation has taken the country from 63% rural population in the 1980s to 77% in 2009. It also has a serious deficit in electricity production<sup>49</sup>.

The Kyrgyz side depended on Soviet subsidies for agriculture and livestock. And in the Uzbek part, mismanagement of resources has led to the disaster of agriculture and associated industry. A population mostly under the age of 18 has been forced to emigrate to Russia or Kazakhstan. Unemployment is reaching levels that are difficult to comprehend. The valley has experienced profound impoverishment due to the collapse of the Soviet model and the disappearance of industry, as well as a lack of economic

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<sup>45</sup> WEISBRODE, Kenneth. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> RAISA K. Kadirova. *Op. Cit.* Figure 8.1

<sup>48</sup> AHMEDOVA, Fatimajon and LEITICH, Keith A. "Ethnic and Religious Conflict in the Ferghana Valley", in *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, vol. 6, Issue 1, autumn-winter 2001, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> MATVIVA, Anna. "Tajikistan: Revolutionary situation or a Resilient state", in *EU. Central Asia Monitoring*, No. 12, December 2009.

resources, which has led to a notable increase in unemployment (between 70% and 80% of the population)<sup>50</sup> and tensions between the different countries. In addition, Tashkent obtains the valley's produce without comparable returns.

### THE GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT.

The area is surrounded by four nuclear powers (Russia, China, India and Pakistan) and must also deal with such deeply unstable areas as Afghanistan and outbreaks of Uighur separatism.

Kipling believed that the *Great Game* would be won by whoever could build the most powerful railway network. Today, railways - the main means of freight transport in Uzbekistan - seem to have been complemented, but not entirely replaced, by pipelines<sup>51</sup>.

The region is presented as a trade corridor connecting China, the Asian giant, with European markets. This is an area of expansion spearheaded by trade, and geopolitical considerations are no less important: direct land access to Iran and the approach to the Western world through the construction of the Trans-Asian Railway.



- Figure 3. Silk Road Initiative in Central Asia<sup>52</sup> -

<sup>50</sup> 29 VV. AA. "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)". *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre*, 21/02/2013.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.oboreurope.com/en/beltandroad/one-belt/>

The *International North-South Transport Corridor* (INSTC) links the cities of Mumbai, Tehran, Baku, Moscow and the commercial ports of Bandar Abbas and Bandar Anzali in Iran. It includes the Bars-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, a high-speed route that crosses from east to west via Aqtau, a Kazakh port on the Caspian Sea. This is in addition to an international multimodal North-South transport corridor linking the port of Mumbai to the Iranian port of Chabahar by ship. To this must be added, if what has been agreed comes to pass, the Trans-Afghan Railway, a 573-km line between Mazar-e-Sharif and Peshawar, via Kabul, which will give Uzbekistan access to Pakistan's Gulf ports.<sup>53</sup>

Notably, the Caspian Summit took place in Turenistan in June 2022. This summit of the five neighbouring countries (Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turenistan) went ahead despite the Ukrainian war and was attended by President Putin, an indication of the interaction between the *Great Game* being played out in the Caucasus and the one in Central Asia. The participants aligned behind with the *Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea*, signed in 2018, dedicated to making the region the hub of several East-West and North-South corridors.<sup>54</sup>

The summit took place just five weeks after Russia seized Mariupol and thereby secured its full supremacy over the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait which, via the Sea of Azov, links the Black Sea to Russia's main waterways, including the Don and Volga rivers, thus ensuring maritime transit from the Black Sea to Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russia has thereby gained control of an integrated waterway system connecting the Black and Caspian Seas with the Baltic Sea and the Northern Sea Route, a 4,800 km-long sea route linking the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean via the Russian coasts of Siberia and the Far East. This is the realisation of Mackinder's *Heartland* thesis, according to which whoever controls Eastern Europe controls the *Heartland* and whoever controls the *Heartland* controls the *world island*.<sup>55</sup>

In brief, all Central Asian countries have multidirectional foreign policies that seek a balance of power. Consequently, in an apparent re-edition, other actors such as Iran,

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<sup>53</sup> "Uzbekistan an economic role model for Central Asia's Belt and road Initiative" in *Silk and Road Briefing*. 2 July 2021 Available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/07/02/uzbekistan-an-economic-role-model-for-central-asias-belt-road-initiative/>

<sup>54</sup> CACHINERO, Jorge. "Ukraine and the 'Great Game' between the West and Russia and China in Transcaucasia" *Jorge Cachinero's blog*. <https://abcblogs.abc.es/jorge-cachinero/otros-temas/ucrania-y-el-gran-juego-entre-occidente-y-rusia-y-china-en-transcaucasia.html>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

China, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United States and the European Union itself have joined in the (geopolitical and also geo-economic) game, creating a difficult strategic scenario in which global and regional actors with conflicting interests (such as the Iranian-Turkish and Iranian-Saudi rivalries, which have arisen since the Islamic Revolution in an attempt by the two countries to expand their areas of influence) are taking part<sup>56</sup>.

Whatever the case, the presence of Russia - a country with a territory equivalent to 25% of the earth's surface and a GDP slightly larger than Italy's - is, so far, the cornerstone of balance in the region. It is not in vain that it has been exercising its control for nearly 300 years, and there are many ethnic Russians living there. Furthermore, its experience and language give it the best information and knowledge of the area.

Russia is also the preferred destination for emigrants from the area (their remittances accounted for 26.7% of Tajikistan's GDP - 1,000,000 Tajiks are emigrants and over half a million work in Russia - 31.3% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and 11.6% of Uzbekistan's GDP) and it has made heavy investments, with agreements to build gas pipelines for the export of Uzbek and Turen gas and the extraction of oil and gas<sup>57</sup>. However, the Russians do not feel they have received the recognition they are due and harbour resentment. The celebrations or not of the Second World War victory and how they were carried out is indicative of this contradictory relationship.

Each country in the region has its own foreign policy but retains all types of ties with Russia: Russian is the lingua franca of all of them and the language of culture. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are seeking a balance between the actors present in the region (Russia, China and the United States), while Uzbekistan aims to be the regional leader and oscillates between moving closer to Washington - it tried to do so in 2005, but the events in Andijan, a violent repression of demonstrators that left several hundred civilians killed (with some reports saying up to 1,700), sparked international condemnation of the regime and made it impossible - and its strategic alliance with Moscow in whose orbit they are all situated. For its part, Russia has become a mediator and extreme policymaker, while the other countries are struggling to shake off its tutelage. Its network of relations and infrastructure is directed towards Moscow.

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<sup>56</sup> AHRARI, M.E. "New Great Game in Muslim Central Asia" in *Institute for National Strategic Studies. National Defense University. McNair Paper 47*, January 1996.

<sup>57</sup> MARTÍNEZ LAÍNEZ, Fernando. *Op. Cit.* 214.

Russia's military presence is concentrated in Kazakhstan, Turenistan and Uzbekistan. In Kyrgyzstan, a unique case, Russia opened a military base 40 km from Bishkek, thereby balancing the presence of the US base at Manas, then opened under its licence to operate in Afghanistan. Russia today controls the Baikonur, Sary-Shagan and Balkhash military bases in Kazakhstan, the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan, and the Dushanbe military base in Tajikistan.

It remains Uzbekistan's main trading partner and accounts for more than half of the country's inward investment. The import substitution policy pursued by Putin's government following the imposition of US and EU sanctions has had positive consequences for Uzbekistan, which in 2017 increased Uzbek exports to Russia by 17%.<sup>58</sup>

The war in Ukraine is reverberating in the region and generating contradictory feelings in countries that were once part of the Soviet space. To start with, fluctuations in the rouble have reduced the value of remittances, and moreover, a significant number of migrants have lost their jobs. The Russian narrative is the most widespread due to the penetration of the Russian media.

Politically, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan cannot openly support Russia in this conflict because of parallels with Ukraine, but neither can they oppose it because of political and economic ties. Furthermore, in addition to economic concerns, there is also the fear of new "special operations" for the protection of ethnic Russians.

Significantly, Kazakhstan and Russia share the second largest land border in the world (6,846 km) and the northern part of the country is home to a large Russian community. Kazakhstan has enough population and territory to establish itself as a regional power in Central Asia.

It is a country whose existence has already been called into question by President Putin himself, who has asserted that the Kazakh state had not existed until Nursultan Nazarbayev - the first president of independent Kazakhstan - a point that is reiterated relatively frequently in public statements by members of the Russian political community.<sup>59</sup> In this regard, we should not forget the deployment of troops from the

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<sup>58</sup> ECSC. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>59</sup>BUSTOS, Alex. "How do you see the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the former Soviet countries?" in *Diario Público*. 23.04.2022. Available at: <https://www.publico.es/internacional/ven-conflicto-rusia-ucrania-paises-exsovieticos.html>

*Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)* following the riots in January 2021 over the increase in the price of liquefied gas, which were claimed to have been an act of terrorism. The bulk of the 2,500 troops deployed were Russian, an intervention that reiterated Russia's key role as a security provider in the region.

Since independence, President Karimov has sponsored a regime if not of total isolation, then of separation from the outside world, with an obvious lack of friendly policies promoted towards neighbouring countries. To this effect, in 2008, it suspended its participation in the *Eurasian Economic Community (EEC)*. And in 2012, Uzbekistan withdrew from the CSTO and limited its participation in the *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)* in an attempt to escape Russia's orbit, while trying to rebalance its relations by seeking support from the West and China<sup>60</sup>.

However, since 2016, following the death of Islam Karimov, President Mirziyóyev has changed this policy, seeking the same balance but with greater openness and aiming for greater consultation with neighbours. To this effect, in July 2022, and in addition to the aforementioned regional cooperation summits, Tashkent hosted a summit on "Security and Economic Development in Afghanistan" following an attack from Afghan territory claimed by the Islamic State.

Uzbekistan has also joined the Russian-backed *Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)* as an observer, in a departure from Karimov's policy of withdrawing from the EEC, its predecessor.

Exports of goods and services to the EAEU during the first half of 2022 reached \$2.4 trillion and imports reached \$4.6 trillion, an increase of 32.4%. Full membership would give free trade access to Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, and would give Uzbekistan free trade access to the EU, with such an eventuality serving to rebalance China's growing push in the region.

China's interests begin at the Xinjiang border. The country is trying to integrate the territory economically and to avoid being contaminated by instability in the area which, according to some analysts, seems to have generated a kind of paranoia among the country's leaders. For these reasons, China has favoured a securitarian approach in the context of resolving border disputes between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and

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<sup>60</sup> VV. AA. "Country fact sheet: Uzbekistan". *Op. Cit.*



advancing defence cooperation with a view to protecting its interests in the region and eradicating extremist movements, such as the *East Turkestan Islamic Movement* (ETIM), by preventing them from settling in Xinjiang and upsetting its internal balances.

China is home to populations of Huis (ethnic Han Chinese Muslims, some 10,000,000), Uighurs (ethnic Turkic Muslims, 8,000,000 worldwide), and groups of Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Mongols with relatives on both sides of the border<sup>61</sup>.

China is also approaching the region in line with its general policy of access to and control of resources, and with the intention of containing or limiting the military presence of other actors in this area of interest. It is doing so with the programme known as *One Belt One Road* (OBOR). The idea of the *Silk Road Economic Belt*, which gives its name to the programme, is a concept defined in the 19th century by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen to describe the trade and traffic network that linked China with the Mediterranean. There is no place in the world more historically appropriate to talk about this than Central Asia.

This is a political, investment and infrastructure programme that is testament to China's relevance in the region. Indeed, it has become one of the region's largest trading partners, with bilateral trade exceeding \$40 billion - 20 times more than at the turn of the century - and accounting for approximately 20% of all exports and 37% of imports of the five countries in the region.<sup>62</sup> Trade is also growing. Uzbekistan alone has more than 1,500 Chinese companies within its territory. In 2018, trade between China and Uzbekistan increased by 48.4%, reaching \$6.26 billion.<sup>63</sup> However, anti-Chinese sentiment persists in the region due to many years of Soviet propaganda.

Neighbouring Russia and China share a common vision on Central Asia; both seek to maintain stability and prevent third party access to it. In addition, they also converge in the region as members of three associations: the EAEU, led by Russia, and OBOR and the *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* (SCO), led by China. Both countries have established a sort of non-exclusive "division of labour" in economic and security matters, such that while both have managed to coordinate their often conflicting strategic interests

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<sup>61</sup> AHRARI, M. E. *Op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> SIERRA, Ander. "China and Russia in Central Asia: Unlimited cooperation?" in *Deciphering War*. 04.04. 2022. Available at: <https://www.descifrandolaguerra.es/china-y-rusia-en-asia-central-cooperacion-sin-limites/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/07/02/uzbekistan-an-economic-role-model-for-central-asias-belt-road-initiative/>

in the region, they have not integrated the initiatives promoted by each other due to the underlying rivalry between them. The SCO has not entered the economic field, and the EAEU has not deepened its relationship with OBOR, without prejudice to possible overlaps.<sup>64</sup>

However, the war in Ukraine may have upset the existing balances of this cartel-like cooperation/competition relationship. Russia has been gradually losing economic and political presence in the region, and this war may have accelerated the decline, even if it maintains its military potential and cooperation with countries in the region. This is compounded by the geopolitical vacuum resulting from the exit of the US from Afghanistan, which moves the country away from the Middle East and south Central Asia and towards the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, China's economic presence grows in a new iteration of its peaceful local rise. The opportunity for China is undeniable.

This agreement with Russia is a reverse re-enactment of the Kissinger-sponsored semi- (or pseudo-) alliance with the US that began with Nixon's famous visit to the country in 1972, which at the time protected China against the US. In any case, regarding its relationship with Russia, China protects itself in the North to keep its hands free to pursue its ambitions in the South: Taiwan and the China Sea.

The two countries share a 4,000-km border and a past fraught with disagreements. Moreover, the desert-like Siberia is the natural hinterland of an overpopulated China - and even more so with global warming; China, unlike Russia, has 20% of the planet's population and 7% of its territory. This explains why this relationship is perceived as being of a conjunctural nature, but nevertheless prioritised by China.<sup>65</sup> In addition to the symbolism of such a move, a Chinese victory in this natural Russian hinterland would result in China's strategic involvement in Asia, with all that this implies, including the closure of the Arctic.

Iran, which during the Soviet period had entirely ignored the region, is undoubtedly another major player for geographic, historical, cultural and economic reasons, coupled with the presence of ethnic minorities on both sides of the border, forcing complex trade-

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<sup>64</sup> SIERRA, Ander. "China and Russia in Central Asia: Unlimited cooperation?" *Op. Cit.*

<sup>65</sup> WEISBRODE, Kenneth. "Central Eurasia: Prize or Quicksand" in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2001. Adelphi Paper, 338. 11. 12 Ibid. 215

offs with each country and with the region as a whole. The suffix "-istan", which means "place" and serves as a gentilic for the countries in the area, is of Persian origin.

This is a space linked to the sea from which it considers it can escape the encirclement of the Western powers and which it identifies as one of its backyards. For their part, these countries value Iran's strategic location and the possibility of access to the southern seas, an escape route from the Russian Empire.

Iran has been particularly active in the new millennium, taking a pragmatic approach to the region while using the advantages of geography to its advantage. It is involved in organisations such as the SCO and the EAEU and in infrastructure projects, including OBOR and the INSTC corridor. In the best diplomatic tradition, it has been able to exploit the Sino-Indian rivalry to establish itself as a key player in the economic network that the two Asian powers are seeking both separately and jointly, making Iran the gateway for Chinese and Central Asian goods via the Central Asia-Southeast Asia Corridor and also for the Indian project of the Chabahar Corridor.<sup>66</sup>



- Figure 4. Ashgabat Agreement<sup>67</sup> -

<sup>66</sup> PASTOR GÓMEZ, Juan Carlos. "El interés hacia Asia Central en la política exterior iraní" in *Revista Atalayar*. 28 September 2021. Available at: <https://atalayar.com/blog/el-inter%C3%A9s-hacia-asia-central-en-la-pol%C3%ADtica-externa-iran%C3%AD-la-geopol%C3%ADtica-del-caspio-y-los>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2021/03/05/international-north-south-transport-corridor/>

To achieve this and build confidence, it has reached agreements on the territorial distribution of the Caspian Sea which, during the Soviet era, had the status of an inland lake. With the independence of the Central Asian republics, it has accepted a change in the legal status of the sea, which is ostensibly detrimental to its interests. Iran, which used to share the seabed equally, is left with only 724 km<sup>2</sup> of maritime exploitation, with Kazakhstan benefiting the most with 2,320 km<sup>2</sup>.

For its part, Iran allows Kazakhstan to avoid Russia and reach the sea, making use of Iranian ports for the export of goods. The "Iranian road" is the fastest route for Kazakh oil and gas. Despite the pressures, it is therefore considering a poly-pipeline linking Kazakhstan, Turenistan and Iran with a daily flow of around 1,000,000 barrels.<sup>68</sup>

Tajikistan is the only former Soviet Union state that speaks a dialect of Farsi, and the population has a strong sense of Persian cultural heritage, despite being predominantly Sunni<sup>69</sup>. During the Afghan war, Iran used this territory to arm its *Northern Alliance* allies.

Iran has been present in Uzbekistan's political life by playing a peacemaking role, particularly during its civil war (1992-1997) and afterwards with a *soft power* policy aimed at filling the power vacuum. Plans for the articulation of a geopolitical and cultural axis linking Tehran with Dushanbe via Herat still appeal to Tajikistan - Karimov's Uzbekistan imposed a blockade that all but completely stifled its economy<sup>70</sup> - although cultural proximity presents a challenge, since a cross-border Persian cultural space clashes with the official historiographical narrative<sup>71</sup>. Nonetheless, projects such as the Iranian Open University host some 700,000 Tajik students.<sup>72</sup>

Relations with Uzbekistan bow to both sides' desire for regional stability. They share borders with Afghanistan and the infrastructure projects they promote that are of interest to both, which translates into political support.

Turenistan maintains land and sea borders with Iran, and while relations are stable, they are not as intense as they could be considering that Turenistan is the fourth largest gas-rich country in the world. The country is interested in opening an outlet for its gas to the international market through the Persian Gulf. The explanation for this lies in Turenistan's

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<sup>68</sup> PASTOR GÓMEZ, Juan Carlos. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>69</sup> VV. AA. "Country fact sheet: Uzbekistan". *Op. Cit.*

<sup>70</sup> AHRARI, M.E.: *op. cit.*

<sup>71</sup> DE PEDRO, Nicolás. "Central Asia and Iranian isolation", in *Opinión CIDOB*, October 2012.

<sup>72</sup> PASTOR GÓMEZ, Juan Carlos. *Op. Cit.*

Turenisation process, but also to the country's aforementioned policy of "permanent neutrality". In addition, the marginalisation of all non-Turen ethnic groups, including the Uzbek and Kyrgyz minorities, makes cordial relations between Turenistan and its neighbours impossible, hindering eventual multilateral regional solutions.<sup>73</sup>

The AKP party's rise to power in Turkey led to an overhaul of the country's foreign policy. This had already been defined by Ahmet Davutoglu in his book *Stratejik Derinlik* [Strategic Depth], published in 2001. In fact, Davutoglu has been Turkish Foreign Minister since 2002 and was Prime Minister in Erdogan's government from 2014 to 2016. His proposal is a new look towards the East, towards the ethnic Turkish territories, and towards the old empire, while avoiding problems with the neighbours. It is neo-Ottomanism, a movement that combines Turanism (pan-Turkism) and pan-Islamism with old imperial outlooks. In 2009, the *Organisation of Turkic States* was created, of which Turkey, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turenistan and Hungary (as an observer) are members.

Turkey considers Central Asia a natural sphere of political influence due to its linguistic and cultural ties. It has used *soft power* in the form of education and the media to promote cultural and political affinity. It is an important trading partner of countries in the region, particularly Turenistan and Uzbekistan. And furthermore, it has extended its cooperation to the military sphere and arms sales (drones, armoured vehicles) to countries such as Turenistan (where cooperation is limited due to the country's "permanent neutrality", although it has sold its flagship corvette), Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (with which it also carries out joint exercises) and even Tajikistan (which rivals Kyrgyzstan and has acquired Turkish drones, although Iranian ones too).<sup>74</sup>

In 2022, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan reached an agreement on energy cooperation, the roadmap of which also envisaged "cooperation in the liberated territory of Azerbaijan". This is known as the "Zangezur corridor", which envisages the use of abandoned Soviet Union railway tracks to cross the Syunik province of Armenia, and is supported by Turkey<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> "Turkey and Central Asia much more than drones". *Bluedomes*. Available at <https://bluedomes.net/2022/05/26/turquia-y-asia-central-mucho-mas-que-drones/>

<sup>75</sup> <https://israelnoticias.com/economia/uzbekistan-y-azerbaiyan-firman-un-acuerdo-energetico-historico/?nowprocket=1>

US relations with the region are also complex. Let us not forget that this country is a maritime power, and we are in the *Heartland*. Relations with Central Asian countries place it in the contradictory situation between its undoubted geostrategic interests and its global commitment to human rights, democracy and the market economy. Supporting authoritarian models is nowadays not an attractive option globally, so its strategic alliances with the countries of the region have only been able to be limited for the West.<sup>76</sup>

Uzbekistan was able to assert its importance as a transit route for military supplies to Afghanistan to the West and, in return for its cooperation, gained some "recognition" of its regime and improved relations with the EU and the US. In the aftermath of 9/11, Karimov emerged as a standard-bearer in the fight against Islamist terrorism in the region, with the legitimacy this confers. It allowed Washington to establish an air base in Hanabad to support operations in Afghanistan. However, the events in Andijan in 2005 and their international condemnation led to the severing of relations with the West.

In August 2009, Uzbekistan signed a military cooperation agreement with the United States, allowing for the transit of military supplies to Afghanistan. The prospect of withdrawal from Afghanistan, coupled with deteriorating US-Pakistan relations, prompted an even closer rapprochement between Washington and Tashkent<sup>77</sup>. However, after the expulsion of the Uzbek airbase at Karshi-Khanabad in 2005 and the Kyrgyz airbase at Manas (which once had a Spanish detachment) in 2014, the US is no longer militarily present in the area.

President Mirziyoyev has gone further, seeking to end the isolationism of the Karimov era and improve the image. Thus, it has strengthened relations with the US by visiting the White House in 2018, aiming to transform its economy and access international credits; and it has allowed the visit of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to assess the abolition of forced child labour, a requirement long demanded by the EU.<sup>78</sup>

Uzbekistan and Turenistan are in opposite territories in terms of trends, with room for improvement in this area. Uzbekistan has taken steps in this direction, according to organisations such as the EU and institutions such as *Transparency International*.

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<sup>76</sup> "Turkey and Central Asia much more than drones". *Bluedomes*. Available at <https://bluedomes.net/2022/05/26/turquia-y-asia-central-mucho-mas-que-drones/>

<sup>77</sup> BLANK, Stephen. "The US in Central Asia: Beyond Afghanistan?" ISN, 2013.

<sup>78</sup> ECSC. *Op. Cit.*

Whatever the case, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is clearly detrimental to the countries of Central Asia and is of dubious benefit to Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran should the country destabilise, however much of an opportunity this presents to them.

Something similar, with different nuances, has happened in the case of the European Union. In 2019, the Union updated its Central Asia Strategy. There are currently Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) covering bilateral relations, except in the case of Turenistan, with which an interim trade agreement has been drawn up. The new strengthened PCA with Kazakhstan entered into force in 2020. The strengthened PCA with Kyrgyzstan was set in motion in 2019 and negotiations with Uzbekistan are ongoing. Tajikistan has also expressed interest in a strengthened PCA.<sup>79</sup> Kyrgyzstan takes part in the *Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council*, the *Partnership for Peace* and NATO's *Planning Review Process*, and in the CSTO, the CIS, the SCO and the EAEU because of its strong ties with Moscow.

Last June, major riots took place in the Karakalpakstan region, resulting in some 20 deaths, over a proposed amendment to the current constitution which sought to overturn the region's status as a sovereign region with the right to self-determination. This is a region that occupies about 40% of the country, has its own language and is very close to that of nearby Kazakhstan, a society with which it has family ties. The EU has condemned any excesses and called for respect for human rights, while the Russian side has defined these as internal Uzbek affairs. As can be seen, there are two divergent lines of approach favouring Russia for clear operational reasons.

Spain's presence in the region is indebted to the work of His Majesty the King and their excellent relations; Ruy González de Clavijo's embassy in Samarkand in the 15th century was a milestone, although Spanish companies are still positioning themselves in the area, including Maxamam, Mango, Eptysa Nitec-Acs Energia, Acs, Talgo, Isolux-Corsan; Airbus Defence&Space, Laintex, Elecnor, Sercorbe, and Técnicas Reunidas.

Kazakhstan, for its part, is an important oil supplier (seventh largest in 2021 with 6% of the total). Spain was Kazakhstan's ninth best customer in 2019 (€2.17 billion of Kazakh exports, 95% oil) and the twelfth best customer in 2020 (€1.22 billion, again 90% oil).

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<sup>79</sup> SOUTULLO, Jorge; GAZZINA, Stefania; RINALDI Niccolò. "Facts Sheets: Central Asia". *European Parliament. Fact sheets on the European Union*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/es/sheet/178/asia-central>

However, aside from the above, trade is small in scope, lacking continuity and based on one-off operations. In 2015, Spain exported to Uzbekistan to the tune of €7.07 billion and imported to the amount of €2.4 billion.<sup>80</sup>

Uzbekistan maintains an embassy in Madrid, while Spanish affairs in the country are handled by the embassy in Moscow. In fact, its head in Spain between 2010 and 2011 was Gulnara Karimova, daughter of the then Uzbek president, who would later be imprisoned due to the scandals in which she was involved. Noteworthy because while it is anecdotal it is not irrelevant (as an expression of the way things are done) is, during Karimov's mandate, the presence of artists such as Julio Iglesias and the players and president of the Barcelona Football Club (Joan Laporta) in the country.

### **TERRORISM, RELIGION AND POLITICAL PERSECUTION.**

Central Asia is a contradictory and inhomogeneous space. To this effect, religious sentiment varies from area to area and even within the same country, with various forms of Islam stemming from the survival of a traditional religious culture within the Soviet regime itself<sup>81</sup>.

Resulting from what is a dualistic regime in practice, there is today an official Islam promoted and controlled by the government, a mild form that is heir to the Soviet era mix of communism and religion and the local Sufi tradition. And there is also another Islam, sometimes with fundamentalist overtones, which is a reflection of other problems or the way in which they are articulated. These ultramontane formulations, partly coming from outside have, in a doctrinal sense, tried to fill in the gaps and shortcomings of years of religious repression, including the lack of literature.

The prohibitions imposed in the countries in the region (such as the outlawing of missionary activity, including Christian missionary activity, and the limitation of studies abroad or even the limitation of pilgrimages), inherited from the political culture of the past, were intensified by the political movements of religious forces after independence, and above all by the civil war in Tajikistan which, after independence, pitted a post-communist government against the forces of the *United Islamic Opposition*, a group built around a diffuse form of Islamism.

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<sup>80</sup> VV. AA. "Country fact sheet: Uzbekistan". *Op. Cit.*

<sup>81</sup> VV. AA. "Is radical Islam inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for engagement" in *International Crisis Group*. Asia Report No. 72, 22/12/2003. AHRARI, M. E.: op. cit.



Islamists generally have little influence on the policies of governments in the region, especially in Uzbekistan, which is deeply secular and centralist and prohibits the organisation of parties on ethnic and religious grounds, while establishing strict controls on religious activities. In Tajikistan, the Islamists' time in power contributed to their modulation and moderation.

Nonetheless, the Islamist issue must be seen from a multidimensional and not only a religious perspective, but also in terms of structuring and protest, given that it includes local and regional elements, with the presence of "warlords", while also serving to raise other issues<sup>82</sup>. Frustration and lack of expectations make for fertile grounds, while religious calling serves as a hook and allows protest to be structured. Abject poverty and lack of expectations can make radicalism an attractive option.

To this effect, religion, chronic poverty and the persecution of dissidents (which is also part of their political culture) has created a feedback loop that makes each turn of the screw even more violent<sup>83</sup>. Some analysts, such as Ahmed Rashid<sup>84</sup>, point out that these measures may end up radicalising the moderates, placing the country under the spotlight of human rights organisations and limiting the approach of countries, including the US<sup>85</sup>. Other authors, meanwhile, say that Karimov's intransigence will put an end to the problem.

Thus, the Uzbek government is widely criticised for its intransigence on religious practice and the risk of radicalising the Muslim population. Women have often been fined for wearing the veil. Those who frequent uncontrolled mosques are regularly harassed. Under the official pretext of preventing petty theft, in February 2012 the police installed cameras in the main mosques of the Fergana region, the most conservative in the country in terms of religious practice<sup>86</sup>.

Particularly since US intervention, neighbouring countries such as Tajikistan are more tolerant, but have hardened their stance towards Islamists (for example, banning groups

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<sup>82</sup> AHRARI, M. E. *Op. cit.*

<sup>83</sup> SMITH ALBION, Adam. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>84</sup> SKINNER, Elizabeth: "Strategic Insight: Russia and Eurasia Enduring Freedom for Central Asia?". *Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC)*, 2002.

<sup>85</sup> JANE'S ISLAMIC AFFAIRS ANALYST: "Central Asia's Muslim keystone".

<sup>86</sup> VV. AA: "Country fact sheet: Uzbekistan". *Op. Cit.*

such as the *Tabligh and* not allowing questioning of the US intervention in Afghanistan)<sup>87</sup>. In this regard, the *Islamic Revival Party [Islamskaia Partiiia Vozrozhdeniia]*, which under the peace agreement was one of the opposition groups entitled to a percentage of government posts, was accused of extremism and was progressively removed. The party remained legal until banned by the Tajik government in 2015.

This chapter must include the reactions provoked by the assassination in Karasu (Kyrgyzstan) of one of the country's most important imams, Mohamadrafik Kamalov<sup>88</sup>. The latter reportedly allowed the *Hizb ut Tahrir* movement to conduct its activities on the premises of its mosque, despite the fact that it is a banned party in all Central Asian republics. The authorities themselves acknowledged that the imam's death was the result of a joint operation between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz National Security Service<sup>89</sup>.

The Fergana Valley is one of the most pious places in Central Asia; unsurprisingly, since it was here that Islam was established in the 8th century. The valley, as we have seen, resisted Soviet domination in the 1920s. Notably in this regard, Uzbekistan shares a 137-km border with Afghanistan.

Islamist movements spread throughout Central Asia in the 1980s in the context of the Cold War, coinciding with the war in Afghanistan and under the patronage of mainly Saudi Arabia which, taking advantage of their new-found independence, sent missionaries from the Middle East to the region, giving them the generic name of Wahhabis. Islam thus became an element in the backbone of the opposition to the current regime.

For the first two decades after independence, Central Asian terrorism was regional. After 9/11 the number of attacks followed a downward trend. However, the war in Syria from 2011 onwards and the rise of the Islamic State constituted a turning point for the most radicalised Central Asian Islamist organisations, which made the leap from regional terrorism to global jihad<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> MATVIVA, Anna. *Op. Cit.* ROTAR, Igor. "Kyrgyzstan: imam's killing seen as attack on independent Islam", in Forum 18.org.

<sup>88</sup> ROTAR, Igor. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>89</sup> ALONSO, Antonio. "Kyrgyzstan, 2007: Opportunities and Challenges", in *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 13, January 2007.

<sup>90</sup> GOÑI, Helena de. "Terrorism in Central Asia: An explanation of the different levels of radicalisation II" *Observatory on Terrorism (OIET)*.

<https://observatorioterrorismo.com/actividades/terrorismo-en-asia-central-una-explicacion-de-los-diferentes-niveles-de-radicalizacion-en-la-region-ii/>

The 1990s also saw the emergence of Islamist organisations such as *Hitz ut Tahrir* which, despite their rejection of violence, are treated indiscriminately as terrorists in Uzbekistan. In 2004, members of the organisation made up 4,000 of the 7,000-8,000 terrorist prisoners there<sup>91</sup>.

Also in the early 1990s, in the Fergana Valley, the *Adolat* ("justice") movement, the Uzbek branch of the *Islamic Renaissance Party*, took over the Namagan *oblast* and imposed a soft form of Islamic rule that lasted until they attacked the official clerical establishment and Karimov's legitimacy. In 1992, he replaced the governor and the repression began. In 1997, another outbreak of violence in Namagan and Andijan *oblasts* followed the beheading of a police chief, which led to further crackdowns<sup>92</sup>.

In 1998, during the Tajik civil war, following an agreement between the parties (with Russian approval) that left out the Uzbeks (mostly from the Kukhand Valley), Colonel Mahmoud Khudoiberdiev, of Lacai ethnicity, an ethnic Uzbek, invaded the valley, but was unable to consolidate his position or take the capital, so he fled to Uzbekistan<sup>93</sup>.

In 1997, members of *Adolat* (Juma Namangani and Tahir Yuldashev) in Tajikistan created the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*, whose goals were the overthrow of the then president Karimov, the creation of an emirate in Central Asia and the restoration of Islamic order. Its first base of operations was the Ferghana valley - where many of its militants come from - with a view to destabilising the three countries that are linked to it<sup>94</sup>.

During the Karimov era, Uzbekistan unauthorisedly bombed Islamist positions in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, conducting intelligence operations and even kidnappings, as well as joint operations with the Kyrgyz<sup>95</sup>.

Pressure from the regime succeeded in driving the MIU out of Uzbekistan, forcing it to settle in Tajikistan from where it operated through Kyrgyzstan. Its members were also expelled from there and moved to Afghanistan. After the US occupation of the country and the successive operations in which they managed to wipe out their leadership several times, they are thought to have settled in the tribal area of Pakistan (FATA) with their

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<sup>91</sup> VV. AA. "Uzbekistan heads towards violent regime change", in *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 2005, pp.12-19.

<sup>92</sup> WEISBRODE, Kenneth. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> VV. AA. "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)". *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre*, 21/02/2013.

<sup>95</sup> WEISBRODE, Kenneth. *Op. Cit.*

military capabilities greatly diminished, although it seems that they have now strengthened themselves in northern Afghanistan through drug trafficking and have even returned to operate in Tajikistan. It is estimated that their strength in Pakistan in 2013 was around 5,000 fighters<sup>96</sup>.

As a result of the above, MIU members have been establishing their centres of operations in the countries bordering Central Asia. The return of former fighters from Syria and Iraq, most of whom were members of this party, has sent them back to these bases on the borders of their home countries, because it is impossible for them to return because of the reprisals to which they would be subjected.

The MIU has concerted its actions with Taliban groups and Al-Qaeda, on whose side it has fought. Indeed, one group (*Islamic Jihad Union of Uzbekistan*) broke away from the MIU to join Al-Qaeda<sup>97</sup>, and then the MIU itself eventually pledged allegiance to ISIS and became part of the *Islamic State in Greater Khorasan*. From its Afghan base, it has also established contacts with other jihadist groups, especially *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP), with which it has carried out spectacular actions.

*Hitz ut Tahrir* is a pan-Islamic party banned in all three states but present in all three since 1990. It rejects violence and tries to base its political action on preaching and pedagogy, sharing in part the aims of the MIU. It also promotes a common Islamic identity on a global scale, as well as its transnational dimension. This is a cohesive factor that differentiates it from the MIU and brings it closer to populations that reject the domination of local barons and the presence of borders that condition their daily life<sup>98</sup>. Nonetheless, the community of purpose with the MIU puts violence just one leap away. Some researchers estimated that in 2007 they could have had between 30,000 and 50,000 members, a figure that would be even higher if their families are considered sympathisers.

It is a strictly clandestine organisation that acts as a populist *Catch all Party* which, without formulating concrete solutions, identifies Islam in generic terms as an answer to any problem. The space of anomie and loss of reference points left by the implosion of the USSR is an excellent framework for expansion. Hence, its base is made up of young people with a low educational level and includes 10% women<sup>99</sup>. The IRP, which is legal

<sup>96</sup> VV. AA. "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)". *Op. Cit.*

<sup>97</sup> VV. AA. "Uzbekistan heads towards violent regime change". *Op. Cit.*

<sup>98</sup> GALINA M. Yemelianova. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

in Tajikistan, is distinguished by its more moderate and pro-government positions as a result of coming to power.

*Hitz ut Tahrir* is nonetheless seen as a greater threat than other groups operating in the Ferghana Valley, albeit less organised and with less strength: Akramiya, *Uzun Socollar* ("Long Beards") or *Islam Lashkarlari* ("Islamic Army")<sup>100</sup>.

What is clear is that after the US intervention in Afghanistan and the anti-terrorism regulations, both the MIU and *Hitz ut Tahrir* were greatly weakened. However, from 2011 onwards, a slight increase in the number of attacks was observed. Kazakhstan, which had been free until then, suffered several deadly attacks. By 2015, the *Islamic State* had penetrated Central Asia and was gaining followers. In fact, Tajik Islamic State militants issued a video declaring jihad against the secular government<sup>101</sup>.

Central Asia was the third largest supplier of Islamist fighters in the Syrian and Iraqi wars, with 5,000 recruits. However, although in absolute numbers the presence of Central Asians in Syria and Iraq was high, the region shows lower rates of radicalisation than other countries. It is therefore speculated that these fighters were recruited among emigrants in Russia, rather than in their countries of origin<sup>102</sup>.

In the case of Kazakhstan, 1 in 72,000 Kazakhs went to fight in Syria. In Kyrgyzstan the figure was 1 in 56,000, in Tajikistan 1 in 40,000, and in Uzbekistan 1 in 58,000. Compare these figures to 1 in 5,300 Jordanians, 1 in 6,500 Lebanese 1 in 7,300 in Tunisians and 1 in 18,200 in Saudi Arabians<sup>103</sup>.

Following the rise of the Taliban in 2021, Afghanistan is obviously also a source of concern for the region. The three bordering countries of Tajikistan, Turenistan and Uzbekistan subsequently reinforced their military presence on the border, with Russian support. Russia has a large military base in Tajikistan and has provided logistics and training to Tajik border troops for decades. In August 2021, Russia conducted an exercise with Tajik and Uzbek troops near the Afghan border. In October of the same year, the CSTO conducted further military exercises in Tajikistan.<sup>104</sup> These events, together with

<sup>100</sup> ALONSO, Antonio. *Op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> GOÑI, Helena de. *Op.Cit.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> "Zhar Zardykhan Central Asia fears rising militancy in Afghanistan as Moscow invades Ukraine". *Globalvoices.org* 01.06.2022. <https://es.globalvoices.org/2022/06/01/asia-central-teme-aumento-de-militancia-en-afganistan-mientras-moscu-invade-ucrania/> 1 June 2022

the intervention in Kazakhstan, attest to the important role the CSTO continues to play in the region.

In October 2021, a meeting with Taliban delegates took place in the Uzbek border town of Termez to discuss trade issues and economic interaction, and to ensure border security and cooperation on energy, transport and international trade, as well as the railway project connecting Termez with the Pakistani city of Peshawar through Afghanistan.<sup>105</sup>

Tajikistan does not recognise the Taliban as they exclude ethnic Tajiks, who make up a quarter of the population, and it is also the third country in terms of the number of Afghan refugees. The Taliban accuse Tajikistan of having sheltered the Afghan opposition, so they believe they should have sheltered the Tajik opposition. In 2022, the *Islamic State in Greater Khorasan* attacked targets in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan from Afghanistan. This organisation, which as we have seen was part of the MIU, was estimated to have around 2,000 fighters in 2019.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the progress of the war, which has stirred memories in the region of the failed Afghan experience, the Taliban may have been spurred to alter the geopolitical balances in the region, what with Russia's military assets compromised by the war in Ukraine, which would deprive the countries in the region of their support. Plans, for example, to reinforce bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by the end of 2022 have been compromised, while in Afghanistan ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks are being recruited for a 'grand jihad in Central Asia'.<sup>106</sup>

We can conclude that the result of the repressive policies with which religious issues, and more generally any form of dissent or grievance, have been addressed, and which confuse traditionalism with radicalism, is that they have driven the opposition into the hands of the Islamists, however successfully their strength has been diminished. This is an important point for the future since the two terms overlap. At the same time, governments, and particularly Uzbekistan's, have used the presence of terrorism - which has posed no real risk to stability in the region - as a sort of *carte blanche* to address any problem while enlisting Western support in the endeavour to escape Russia's orbit.

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<sup>105</sup> SOUTULLO, Jorge; GAZZINA, Stefania; RINALDI Niccolò. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>106</sup> "Central Asia fears rising militancy in Afghanistan as Moscow invades Ukraine". *Op. Cit.*

## CONCLUSIONS

Polemological factors are the underlying causes of conflicts; these are not monistic phenomena, but multi-causal. The concurrence of several events makes them more likely but does not ensure them. And there is no room for determinism insofar as events that at one time and in one society have been the cause of conflicts, at another time and in the same society have not been, which does not make conflicts unique phenomena either, although they are singular and relatively predictable.

Central Asia is presented as a space that is simultaneously distant and close to myth, which is why it is not particularly attractive to Westerners, the darkness of the Iron Curtain having been added to a cultural melting pot whose components are alien to Western societies; a space simultaneously "of" and "in" transition, where a plurality of forces and the interests of regional and global actors converge.

Ferghana is the heart that links the area's three core countries (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and their problems, raising disputes with an emotional component.

Colonisation is certainly a trauma for the societies that suffer it, but so is decolonisation, and no less so. And, incidentally, any process of independence implies an amputation of part of the identity. The disintegrative dynamics that the region has suffered affect the daily lives of many of its citizens, who see how a distant power that does not represent them influences and alters their lives in a way that they understand as arbitrary. A change of political culture is needed, which seems to have already begun but has a long way to go.

The 2016 rise of President Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan has seen the consolidation of a multivectoral foreign policy in which he has so far managed to maintain an equidistant position between Russia, China and the West, and in which the restoration of relations at the regional level stands out. But although if the situation is changing, it is still clearly an authoritarian regime.

Many of the problems posed by the new states (borders, water management, population, minorities, ethnic and environmental issues, etc.) are far-reaching and require a multidimensional approach that includes political, ethological, economic and social components. Issues such as drugs, which even circulate in some areas of the region as a bargaining chip, are critical factors, especially if one considers other problems such as rampant corruption, very low public salaries and large sectors of the population below the

poverty line. Taliban groups, warlords and other terrorists, for their part, have found drugs to be an important source of funding for their activities, creating an even more worrying symbiosis. Having said that, terrorism has so far been brought under control.

And Afghanistan does not provide an appealing example for most. The departure of US troops from the country risks it becoming an additional element of destabilisation in a balkanised region.

Moreover, Central Asia may break the Russian-Chinese axis of convenience - a sort of cartel - in the sense that Russia's withdrawal due to the Ukraine war, together with the US exit from the region, may have generated an additive vacuum that is likely to be filled by China. This will be first enacted in economic terms, by replacing Russia as the first partner of the countries in the region, part of what is "the near abroad", and then in political and symbolic terms, as a re-enactment of the 'peaceful rise' at local level. China's access to energy resources affects Russia's interest in controlling the energy sector in the region. And, as if that were not enough, the success of its ambitious *One Road One Belt* programme may result in Russia's strategic envelopment that would make it even more dependent on China.

Central Asia is a major focus of the Russia-led *Eurasian Economic Union* (EAEU), as well as the China-led *New Silk Road* (OBOR) and *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* (SCO). While the two countries have managed to coordinate their often-conflicting strategic interests in the region, they have not integrated the initiatives promoted by each of them, signalling the expediency and transitory nature of their alliance.

We are in a highly complex scenario. If Chinese-American co-evolution had limits that were probably reached by 2013, Russian-Chinese co-evolution will likewise have limits, and it is likely that it will be this area, of which little is said, that will define them.

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