

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS CONTENTS DIGEST

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We hereby present the third issue of the Russian and Persian language publication digest on regional security challenges in Central Asia. This issue is focussed upon several critical aspects of the current political situation in Central Asia, which have grabbed the attention of regional and international media, experts and commentators.

First amongst these is Uzbekistan's new foreign policy. Uzbekistan is the largest country in the region, and it is clear that its new policies will entail long-term consequences for the whole of Central Asia, both as regards regional security and as relates to integration processes. Also touched upon are the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan, and the Afghan geopolitical situation. In the next issues of our digest we will continue reviewing the above-mentioned issues, as well as other regional challenges covered by targeted foreign media. The views and opinions of the authors do not necessarily reflect the position of the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation.

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Shavkat Mirziyoyev's debut at the UN: a political success

*Igor Nikolaychuk,
Lead Analyst,
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The Russian expert considers that the debut speech of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly showed his high political potential. The central tenet of Mirziyoyev's speech, according to the expert, was that of democracy and the rule of the people. However, in Nikolaychuk's opinion, 'the rule of the people' as understood by Mirziyoyev doesn't fully tally with American and liberal democracy. Mirziyoyev hasn't clarified all the details of his plans to build the "Uzbek version of democracy", yet what seems understood is that such a concept would, on the one hand, be based on national and partly Soviet traditions, and on the other, upon principles compatible to those of the West. The central thesis of his speech corroborates the steady course he appears to be undertaking towards supporting the rule of the people. In this regard, Mirziyoyev took pains to underline that the ongoing reforms, which are changing the image of the country, are intended to make the rule of the people not nominal, but real. He further mentioned the Country Renovation Strategy that was adopted after a nationwide discussion, as well as the opening of virtual reception rooms, giving the general population a direct line to the Presidency, in order to solve their most pressing issues.

Nikolaychuk also made a note of Mirziyoyev's initiative to develop the UN international convention on the rights of young people. The expert highlighted that this idea has practical relevance, since most people who have joined terrorist groups or participated in terrorist attacks in Western countries are under the age of thirty, or even teenagers.

<http://ru.sputniknews-uz.com/columnists/20170920/6349587/Mirzieev-OON-Uzbekistan-Centralnaya-Azia.html>

Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan: Atambayev and Mirziyoyev are reformatting relations

“Kyrgyzstan News” Agency

The article parses the outcomes of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's state visit to Kyrgyzstan, held on September 5-6, 2017. The visit took place in a very friendly atmosphere, and was assessed as a diplomatic breakthrough. According to Mirziyoyev, the new strategy of Uzbekistan is focussed on rapprochement with its neighbours, and Kyrgyzstan is viewed as a strategic partner. This is particularly relevant since Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations have been at a 25 year-long low due to contradicting interests regarding Kyrgyz plans for hydropower development, and the border issue.

The parties signed 14 documents, amongst which the Agreement on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek state border, fixing the description of more than 85% of the interstate border. The real sensation was the new position of Uzbekistan on the building of the Kambar-Ata Hydro Power Plant - 1 (HPP), which was previously thought to represent a threat to the region's water security. However, Mirziyoyev said that his country was ready, together with Kyrgyzstan, to build the plant. Atambayev gave the assurance that no hydroelectric power stations will be built in Kyrgyzstan without the participation of Uzbekistan. The two presidents also discussed the prospects of developing the strategically important transport corridor from Andijan (Uzbekistan) via Osh (Kyrgyzstan) to Kashgar (China), which could significantly boost freight turnover between the three countries.

The revitalization of bilateral relations has already caused a surge in trade by a factor of 1.8 since the beginning of this year. It is projected that the Uzbek-Kyrgyz trade turnover can amount to USD200 million by the end of 2017. Both countries also plan to increase the turnover to USD500 million in the foreseeable future.

<http://knews.kg/2017/09/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-atambaev-i-mirziyoev-pereformatiruyut-otnosheniya/>

Iran can become a shortcut to the Persian Gulf and the World Ocean for Uzbek businessmen

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"Tasnim News" Agency (Iran)

"Mehr News" Agency (Iran)

Iran and Uzbekistan are currently probing new means of bilateral cooperation. This process was launched by the meeting of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on the sidelines of the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation held on September 10-11, 2017, in Kazakhstan.

Both presidents noted the high prospects for cooperation in the field of transport communications and agreed that the Iranian route may become the shortest way for Uzbek businessmen to reach the Persian Gulf. Mirziyoyev, in turn, offered his Iranian counterpart the use of Uzbek transport infrastructure for exporting Iranian goods to the countries of Central Asia. The presidents also agreed on the necessity of developing cooperation in the field of energy, and between universities and scientific centres.

Rouhani highlighted the need to speed up the strengthening of interbank ties so as to raise the level of bilateral business relations. As regards security issues, Rouhani noted that extremism and international terrorism threaten all regions and declared Tehran ready to collaborate with the Central Asian states in confronting these menaces. Mirziyoyev, in his turn, assured Rouhani that Tashkent supports Iran's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and invited his Iranian counterpart to visit Uzbekistan.

The first outcome of negotiations in Astana was the visit of an Uzbek delegation, headed by Abdulaziz Kamilov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Iran in October. The delegation also included Elyor Ganiev, Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, Investments and Trade, and Alisher Sultanov, Chairman of the Executive Board of the National Holding Company "Uzbekneftegaz". According to Iranian media, during the bilateral talks the parties discussed the prospects of energy, tourism, engineering and technical, agricultural and automotive manufacturing cooperation, as well as the fight against terrorism and extremism.

After the negotiations, Iran's Oil Minister, Bijan Zanganeh, said that Tehran is, in principal, interested in exporting oil to Uzbekistan. However, since Uzbekistan has no access to the sea, oil supplies can only be carried out by road and possibly rail. According to Zanganeh, the negotiations on oil exports will continue, and Uzbekistan ought to further analyse appropriate means of importing crude from Iran.

Jahangir Karami, a Eurasian expert and professor at the University of Tehran, believes that the Iran visit of Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister is of great significance, because the country plays an important strategic and geopolitical role due to its location in the very heart of Central Asia. Said visit also serves to highlight and fulfil the economic interests of both countries.

www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/06/19/1514931/
www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/07/25/1548472/
<http://www.mehrnews.com/news/4117244/>

(Translated from Farsi)

Kyrgyzstan: Post-election landscape

*Dosym Satpayev, Kazakh political analyst,
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According to the expert Aida Alimbayeva, the Kyrgyz presidential elections, held on October 15, 2017, were transparent largely thanks to private and state media, as well as due to the cooperation of the representatives of the parliamentary majority and opposition in the Central Election Commission. However, all it didn't completely exclude the use of administrative resources. On the whole, the elections confirmed the succession of power in the country through direct democratic elections. As regards Russia's influence on the elections, Alimbayeva opines that it underwent some changes as compared to 2011. In 2011, both the Russian government and media made active attempts to influence the Kyrgyz presidential race. In 2017, however, Russia wasn't so active, because all candidates expressed their commitment to cooperation with Moscow.

The Kyrgyz expert believes that the President-elect Sooronbay Jeenbekov (regarded as a protégé of current incumbent President Almazbek Atambayev) may start his own political manoeuvring via the formation of his own team. In turn Atambayev may remain in politics and continue influencing a policy-making process, if, for instance, he is designated as Prime minister. Alimbayeva doesn't rule out the possibility of a split within the ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan on the issue of amending the Constitution concerning the expansion of prime-ministerial powers. There is a high probability that Jeenbekov will oppose the weakening of his presidential power. Currently, the president is the most powerful figure on Kyrgyzstan's political scene; law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies are both under his control.

Alimbayeva also predicts that there will be no new revolution or coup in Kyrgyzstan in the near future, since the Kyrgyz opposition lacks charismatic leaders and financial resources. Additionally, the population is disillusioned by the outcomes of the two previous revolutions, in 2005 and 2010, and therefore now looks upon revolutionary ideas with skepticism.

http://www.ratel.kz/outlook/kyrgyzstan_pejzazh_posle_vyborov

Russian language teacher's victory in Kyrgyzstan surprises the West

*Nikita Kovalenko, Michael Moshkin, Marina Boltachyeva,
Correspondents of the newspaper "Vzglyad" (Russia)*

Many Russian and Kyrgyz experts believe that the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan – the results of which surprised the West – raise a range of new questions regarding Kyrgyz political infighting and Bishkek's future interaction with Kazakhstan and Russia.

According to the Kyrgyz political scientist Mars Sariev, President Almazbek Atamayev became a little hostile to Kazakhstan, because, in the midst of the Kyrgyz election race, Kazakh President, Nursultan

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Nazarbayev met with opposing Kyrgyz presidential candidate, Omurbek Babanov. Atambayev, meanwhile, lobbied his own candidate, Sooronbay Jeenbekov. Jeenbekov, in turn, during a pre-race, charged Babanov with loyalty to Kazakhstan (instead of Kyrgyzstan) and called him a protégé of Astana. Jeenbekov went so far as to promise to start future anti-corruption investigations with an enquiry into Babanov. Simultaneously, Atambayev used the thaw in the Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations to persuade Uzbeks residing in the Osh region to cast their votes for Jeenbekov.

Given the fact that the winning side created an enemy image of Kazakhstan during the election campaign, it will be very interesting to watch how the President-elect is going to improve relations with the northern neighbour, and to calm internal opposition. Konstantin Zatulin, a Russian politician, first deputy chairman of the committee of the State Duma for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), hopes that Jeenbekov will begin normalising relations with Kazakhstan, since Russia dislikes any perception of disagreement within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

As regards the prospects of Kyrgyz-Russian relations, experts believe that Jeenbekov may continue the on-going political bargaining regarding the status of the Russian military base in Kant. In late 2016 Atambayev promised to close the Kant airbase in 15 years time – this was a gross violation of the bilateral treaty, which provides for the functioning of the base until 2058. Another aspect to the discussion is that of the potential opening of a second Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan. According to Kyrgyz Prime minister Sapar Isakov, Moscow and Bishkek have pursued negotiations on this matter. Another important issue of future Russian-Kyrgyz talks will be the status of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, of which there are currently almost 750.000.

<https://vz.ru/politics/2017/10/16/891051.html>

Grey imports from Kyrgyzstan harm the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)

“Kapital.Kz” News Agency (Kazakhstan)

The tension between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which has been triggered by the Kyrgyz presidential elections, continues to increase. On October 10 Astana decided to introduce additional control measures at the border of the two countries, creating huge traffic congestions. Bishkek appealed to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) against Astana's actions. There is currently no resolution, and the spiral of conflict continues.

The Prime minister of Kazakhstan, Bakhit Sultanov, said, at the summit of the EEU in Erevan (Armenia), that the Union loses USD300 million per annum due to grey imports from Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz grey imports also harm EEU manufacturers and Kazakhstan's budget. According to Sultanov, this problem appeared after Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU. The customs statistics for 2016 given by Sultanov show tremendous differences between the data of the Kyrgyz and China customs offices. As per the Kyrgyz side, in 2016 the imports from China were of USD1.5 billion, whereas Chinese statistics show USD5.6 billion. The difference is

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above USD4 billion. In light of this discrepancy, Kazakhstan took the following measures: on October 1 the government launched the system "Astana 1" that is focussed on the automation of work carried out by public institutions. This system aims to improve information exchange with EEU partners, China, and other countries, with the long-term goal of reducing the size of the "shadow economy".

<https://kapital.kz/economic/63848/seryj-import-iz-kyrgyzstana-nanosit-ucsherb-eaes.html>

Changing elites may alter the future of the Eurasian Economic Union

The news portal «Total.kz»

The EEU's further development and the interplay of its member states continue to be some of the most relevant issues of the economic integration of the post-Soviet space. Kazakh political scientist Anton Morozov notes that there are three scenarios of integration within the framework of the EEU until 2030. The first scenario is based on the assumption that the respective national economies will develop to a large extent separately and independently without the emergence of new systemic integration initiatives. This scenario is projected to result in only insignificant growth of mutual trade and GDP. The second scenario is based on the coordination and development of the transport, communications and energy sectors. In this scenario, there would be integration of certain economic areas, possibly through the creation of joint industry holdings. The third scenario is aimed at a qualitative economic shift, which should launch a full integration of respective competencies. Within the framework of this type of integration the EEU countries would coordinate their efforts regarding the post-industrial economy and non-primary industries.

For Sergei Birukov, Professor at the Kemerovo State University (Russia), the main question of integration is where to find the necessary resources. According to Birukov, without resources the EEU will be barred from technological development. Sergei Domnin, the editor-in-chief of "Expert-Kazakhstan", a business magazine, believes that Russia and Kazakhstan – as the largest economies of the EEU – need to study each other so as to elaborate more realistic scenarios of economic cooperation. Eduard Poletaev, Head of the "World of Eurasia" fund, meanwhile asserts that the most realistic integration scenario for the EEU may be a varied-speed integration, since all member states have different capacities and interests.

The Russian and Kazakh experts also pointed out that the inevitable transfer of power in the Eurasian states, occurring as elites change over, may lead to serious adjustments being made to the future of the Union, as each leader will view the positives and negatives of EEU integration differently. Regardless, however, of these potential shifts, the experts all consider that EEU member states should continue to progress towards closer cooperation so as to derive the maximum possible benefits from the Union.

https://total.kz/ru/news/vneshnyaya_politika/smena_elit_mozhet_izmenit_budushchee_eaes_date_2017_09_26_10_34_02

Pakistan's soft war against the U.S.*«Hasht - e Subh» daily (Afghanistan)*www.kas.de/zentralasien

U.S.-Pakistani relations have been deteriorating following President Trump's declaration of the new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia. Some segments of Pakistani media and political organisations appear to have initiated a soft war against the U.S.

The security services of Pakistan are the most likely to stand behind this media campaign. Pakistani media advance an idea that the Pentagon doesn't in fact seek to achieve a final victory in Afghanistan; on the contrary, its main imperative is to create controlled chaos so as to maintain U.S. long-term presence in Afghanistan, and thereby monitor Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

These Pakistani voices also stress if America continues to pursue a hardline policy towards Islamabad, then Pakistan will be forced to have dealings with the global and regional competitors of the U.S. Some authoritative religious leaders of Pakistan, such as Maulana Sami ul-Haqq, said that if the U.S. strikes at Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban will come to the country's aid. A few Pakistani extremists even suggested that Islamabad ought to close the Afghan embassy and officially recognise the Taliban as a government in exile. Further segments of Pakistan's media even suggest to cut off NATO supply routes that pass through Pakistani territory.

Washington D.C. has already come to the understanding that a policy of tolerance toward Islamabad is no longer workable, and that Pakistan should pay a price for its duplicitous policy. America seems ready to accept heavy costs for the sake of exerting pressure on Pakistan. Following this logic, Washington has decided to declare India its strategic ally in the region.

<http://8am.af/1396/06/25/pakistani-soft-war-against-america/>

(Translated from Farsi)

Will the new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan be successful?

*Abdul Hamid Bayati,
Journalist of "Mehr News" Agency (Iran)*

Iranian journalist, Bayati, analyses the strengths and weaknesses of President Trump's new strategy for Afghanistan, as well as articles of the BBC news agency concerning the changes in U.S. policy towards this country. The main question raised is of whether or not Trump's strategy will be successful. In Bayati's opinion, if Trump had decided to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, he would have faced a few fallouts. Such as the withdrawal would, for instance, inspire numerous terrorist groups worldwide to resume their attacks on the U.S. relying on safe sanctuaries to be found in Afghanistan. The strengthening of terrorists in Afghanistan would, in turn, provoke a new flood (into the hundreds of thousands) of Afghan refugees seeking asylum in the West. As a result of such policies, the U.S. and NATO might lose their credibility.

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The new strategy contains a few positive aspects for Afghanistan. For the first time in the last sixteen years, Washington satisfied one of Afghanistan's key demands regarding Pakistan: namely that the latter be named as a protector of persons with whom America is at war. Islamabad was also given a choice: either it will collaborate with the U.S. and benefit from this collaboration, or it will continue harbouring the Taliban, and face various sanctions. A military strike against Pakistan is unlikely to take place, however U.S. Special Forces operations may be possible.

The strategy's strong suit is the concrete definition of the goals of further U.S. policy in Afghanistan, which will be focussed on destroying terrorist groups and preventing the Taliban from returning to power. It will, moreover, allow the government of Afghanistan to deal with the Taliban from a position of strength, and to force the opposing party to sit down at the negotiating table.

The success of the new strategy isn't, however, fully guaranteed, and depends on many factors including the reaction of regional states. For instance, Pakistan may form an anti-Western alliance with Russia and Iran that would make the regional situation much more complicated. The West and Afghanistan should thus bear in mind that the military, diplomatic and intelligence capacities of the regional states have significantly grown over the last 15 years. The success of the new strategy will also depend on the Afghan government's ability to curb corruption, take efficient confidence-building measures, and lay the foundation for effective cooperation between all Afghan political groups.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/news/4066576/>

(Translated from Farsi)

Afghanistan asks Russia to oust Americans

*Peter Akopov, Russian journalist,
Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper "Vzglyad" (Russia)*

Peter Akopov, Russian journalist, analyses the speech given by former Afghan President Hamid Karzai at the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi, where he voiced his rather tough position regarding the continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Akopov made particular note of the fact that Hamid Karzai was sitting at the right hand of Vladimir Putin.

Karzai declared that he opposed U.S. policy because he failed to understand how America, with its vast resources and money, has nonetheless allowed the appearance of ISIS in Afghanistan. Karzai further noted that the character and context of the cooperation between the U.S. and the international society relative to Afghanistan have changed. He therefore considers that the U.S. ought to admit its failure, to start new forms of interplay with Afghans, and also to resume cooperation with China, Russia and India in Afghanistan on the basis of comprehensible and transparent objectives. With regard to this last, Akopov raises the question about Russia's readiness to assume a more active role in Afghanistan. In his opinion Moscow has long suspected that the real goal of America is to create a springboard in the heart of Eurasia, allowing Washington, if necessary, to put pressure on Iran, China and Russia through Central Asia. It is for this reason that over the last few years

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Russia has been paying more attention to the question of how to squeeze the U.S. out of Afghanistan.

For China, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is an irritating factor too, since Beijing is not keen to have American military bases in the immediate vicinity to its territory. Beijing needs to pacify the "Country of the Mountains" (Afghanistan) as soon as possible, as the Chinese have big plans for Afghan mineral resources and are keen to increase the safety of Silk Road transport corridors passing via Central Asia and Pakistan. Akopov emphasises that this year Moscow for the first time expressed the need to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, since, according to Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov, this country has already turned into a "world incubator of international terrorism".

In response Washington accuses Russia of flirting with the Taliban – and even of potentially supplying of arms to this movement. According to Akopov, however, it is generally understood that the only way to achieve stability in Afghanistan lies through a reconciliation between Kabul and the Taliban, as well as via the withdrawal of U.S. troops. It is for this reason that Hamid Karzai calls Putin to expedite these processes so as to at the very least force the U.S. to admit defeat.

<https://vz.ru/politics/2017/10/20/891813.html>

An analysis of ISIS's strengths and weaknesses in Afghanistan

*Dr. Mirwais Balkhi,
Head of Africa and Middle East desk
at the Center of Strategic Studies (Afghanistan)*

The author attempts to analyse the prospects of ISIS to further increase its clout in Afghanistan. According to him, ISIS has a whole range of strengths. For instance, by participating in drug trafficking, this Islamist movement receives large financial resources, which may then be employed to enlist youths from poor rural areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. ISIS also skilfully employs modern information technologies to successfully propagate its views based on the sharp criticism of Western policies in the Middle East and Afghanistan. As to ISIS's military strategy, it rests on a mix of symmetric and asymmetric warfare: through opening many fronts in Afghanistan, ISIS deprives the Afghan armed forces of the possibility to concentrate troops in one direction. The movement also makes liberal use of brutal violence to coerce tribal chiefs into submission.

However, ISIS's policy also contains several weaknesses that may slow or even stop its expansion in Afghanistan. In particular, the Islamic State is in conflict with other caliphate groups in the region and this undermines its legitimacy. In this way, "Al-Qaeda" considers ISIS as a military target. Moreover, many ordinary Afghans dislike ISIS's version of Islam, which differs considerably from Traditional Islam, and therefore they prefer not to deal with this terrorist group. The anti-ISIS information campaign undertaken by the Afghan government was also effective in this regard, making use of the population's fatigue from the forty-year

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war, and thereby seriously reducing the number of people willing to join radical Islamists.

Additionally, although ISIS participates in drug trafficking, it nevertheless doesn't have sufficient financial and military resources to establish control over the whole of Afghanistan. Consequently, the movement is compelled to act mainly in the Eastern boundary regions, where it already encounters the attempts of tribal leaders to eliminate it. The plans of ISIS to penetrate into Central Asia and Iran also play against it, since they lead to the effect of strengthening regional multilateral counter-terrorist cooperation. The successes of Iraqi and Syrian armies in the war against ISIS also reduce optimism amongst the proponents of its Afghan wing.

<http://8am.af/1395/07/11/analyze-the-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-the-islamic-state-of-afghanistan/>

(Translated from Farsi)