

Uzbekistan's Play With Fire?

Written by Peter Plenta

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PETER PLENTA, AUG 1 2012

In June 2012, Uzbekistan once again abandoned the Collective Security Treaty Organization- CSTO (Организация Договора о коллективной безопасности- ОДКБ). This step opens up several questions about the future of the CSTO as well as Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

The collective security treaty was signed in 1992 and included the majority of post-soviet countries. Several years later some post-soviet states, including Uzbekistan, created another organisation, GUUAM, which was considered as pro-western. In 2005, after the regime's hard suppression of riots in the Uzbekistani town of Andijan, Tashkent changed its foreign policy orientation towards Russia and in 2006 joined the CSTO. This change was partially a reaction to the criticism coming from the EU and the USA after the tragic events. The Andijan massacre accelerated the breakup of the alliance between Uzbekistan and the USA, and that decision, similarly to the withdrawal in 2012, was neither sudden nor unexpected. Back in 2008, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in another Russia-led organization- Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). Moreover, it was only a formal member of CSTO and did not actively participated in the organization's activities.

Changes in foreign policy occur on a rational and pragmatic basis. The foreign policy of Uzbekistan is determined by its leader's legitimization and protection from threats, on which depends the stability of the regime. The position of Uzbekistan in international relations is influenced by the strategies of its political leader and the core of Uzbek foreign policy has always been to find an ally against internal and external enemies. The country has changed its foreign policy orientation several times since its independence and has always tried to cooperate with only one strategic partner at a time. President Karimov has been in power for more than 20 years, which credits Uzbekistan's foreign policy with success in assuring regime stability.

Uzbekistan in CSTO

Uzbekistan's foreign policy orientation towards the West or Russia has always been complicated. As Daniil Kislov (2012) wrote, "We can be friends unless you start talking about human rights and political reforms", was the key message from Tashkent to the democratic westerners. Its message to Russia and Kremlin-driven blocs was quite different though, "Give me more money but stay away with your comrade's hugs." Tashkent's CSTO membership was always problematic and rather formal because of the reserved attitude towards the deepening of cooperation. Uzbekistan has never ratified any of the CSTO international agreements and abstained from joint military exercises (Kislov, 2012). In June 2009, for instance, Uzbekistan refused to sign the document establishing the CSTO Rapid Reaction Forces and limited the cooperation with the Collective Security Treaty Organization to a minimum. (Ferhananews, 2012)

There were also contradictions between Uzbekistan and other member states about the country's position in the organisation. In 2011, Belarusian president Lukashenko proposed to exclude Uzbekistan from the CSTO. According to Farkhod Tolipov, "Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko made a highly critical statement towards Uzbekistan for the 'triple game' the country plays in its foreign policy. Such a game is incompatible with Uzbekistan's membership in the CSTO," Lukashenko said. (Tolipov, 2012) However, Russia was against this proposal because in such case, Uzbekistan would be dropped from the orbit of the security cooperation, and would seek more active cooperation with the West (Hamroboyeveva, 2011). On the CSTO summit in December 2011, Karimov confirmed that

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Uzbekistan wants to remain in the organisation. At that time two decisions were adopted, which were later interpreted as the main reasons for Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the CSTO. The first was a coordinated strategy toward Afghanistan, and the second was an agreement on coordination between all member states with regards to the deployment of military installations of non-member states on their territories (Tolipov, 2012).

Withdrawal from the CSTO

Uzbekistan was in recent years only a de-facto member of CSTO, because Tashkent did not participate neither in the heads of governments nor the ministers of defence meetings, and it did not sign any document. Therefore the withdrawal was only a de-jure step (Newsru.com, 2012). Tashkent's foreign policy orientation is very unstable, but also very pragmatic, according to Fergananeews, "Tashkent's foreign policy is zigzagging. It undergoes changes only once in 2 or 3 years. Tashkent wants to win the love of NATO that is interested in solving tasks concerning the cuts of the Uzbek contingent in Afghanistan." (Ferhananews, 2012) According to the experts, the main reasons for Tashkent's departure lie in the strained relations with its neighbours, particularly with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. According to Daniil Kislov, "The largest problem for Tashkent is of course, Dushanbe, which remains a member of the CSTO. The tension between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan reminds one of the Cold war" (Kislov, 2012). Other specialists try to find the explanation for Uzbekistan's decision in its geopolitical game and the attempts to get closer to the USA. According to Alexandros Petersen, "The snap analysis by Russian and Western observers alike is that Uzbekistan's withdrawal is a clear sign that in Tashkent's constant geopolitical vacillation, it is once again looking West" (Petersen, 2012).

Uzbekistan's official reason to suspend its membership was the dissatisfaction with the military programs of the CSTO with regards to Afghanistan, as well as with the programs aimed at strengthening military cooperation among the CSTO member states (Tert.am, 2012). But one of the most important reasons can be the perspective of taking over NATO's equipment, which will stay in the region after the organisations' departure from Afghanistan, especially that the USA declared the willingness to keep the "nonlethal equipment" in the region (Newsru.com, 2012). Of course, Uzbekistan is particularly interested in the equipment, which could be used by the Uzbek army.

Despite the fact that Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been unstable in orientation, it has so far been very pragmatic. There is always a 'plan B', which currently probably includes closer relations with the United States. Since 2002, a Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework is in force between the USA and Uzbekistan. From this partnership Uzbekistan can receive not only equipment after NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, but also some kind of security guarantees, maybe in a form of an American base. Playing with fire as such is a very pragmatic game on the part of Uzbekistan and can also prove to be beneficial for the USA, especially because of the uncertain future of the Transit centre in Manas base in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan and the USA have experience with the short-term partnership in the period between 2002-2005 that ended with the Andijan 2005 uprising; but also because of President Karimov's dissatisfaction with this alliance. That is a reason for doubts about the durability of the new potential romance between Uzbekistan and the West, especially the USA, which will most likely be very complicated. Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the CSTO will not significantly affect the activities of this organisation and does not indicate any major change in Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

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