

South & Central Asia

# Uzbekistan Faces Choice Between Closer Ties to US, Russia

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December 01, 2019 06:01 PM



FILE - A soldier stands in front of the national flag of Uzbekistan during an Independence Day celebration in Tashkent, Aug. 31, 2012.

WASHINGTON - After two decades of disengagement from international entanglements, a newly confident Uzbekistan is seeking a larger role in its Central Asian neighborhood, prompting the United States and Russia to compete for its favor in ways that echo their long-past Cold War rivalry.

Moscow hopes to cement Uzbekistan into its regional bloc, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Doing so would preserve Russia's primacy in Central Asia.

Washington, for its part, aims to keep Uzbekistan out of that bloc while pursuing counterterrorism measures and economic cooperation and promoting Western values.

The long-term impact of the battle for influence remains uncertain, however, since it is another rising superpower -- China -- that has increased its economic presence most rapidly in Uzbekistan and the region.

Tashkent is in talks with Russia on EEU membership but insists no decision has been made yet. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's foreign policy adviser, Senator Sodiq Safayev, argues that Uzbekistan needs to consider EEU membership but insists that Tashkent does not approach economic issues through the prism of ideology or

exclusionary blocs.

“We want to be economically pragmatic in our foreign policy,” he told VOA in an exclusive interview, and “choose partners based on our needs and interests.”

Safayev adds it is not governments but businesses, which are driven by considerations of supply and demand, that dictate trade and investment decisions. Thus, “economic actors and factors drive our policy too. We look at our top partners and then aim to strengthen ties with them,” Safayev says.

He lists the key economic players affecting his country as Russia, China, Kazakhstan, South Korea, the European Union, and increasingly Turkey.

Diverse economic ties are important because double-landlocked Uzbekistan lacks direct access to ports. Geography alone means the country needs all the economic partnerships it can muster.

Indeed, Safayev insists Tashkent does not need to choose sides: “We don’t see conflict or collision with the United States or European Union even if we enter [the EEU].” After all, its “current members all have



FILE - Officials pose for a picture during the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) Council meeting, in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, Aug. 9, 2019.

economic relations and business cooperation with the West.”

Washington consistently stresses that its goal is not to compete with Russia and China in Central Asia but to be a unique partner offering unique opportunities, such as market access and best-in-class financial services.



FILE - President Donald Trump (R) speaks during a meeting with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in the Oval Office of the White House, in Washington, May 16, 2018.

larger share of Western foreign direct investment.

Safayev counters that Tashkent does not foresee such complications because all current EEU members are also WTO members which have navigated between the two.

Wilbur Ross, the U.S. commerce secretary, says that “pursuing membership in the EEU could complicate and extend the [World Trade Organization] accession process beyond the timeline set by Uzbekistan’s leaders.” Still, Ross said at a recent Uzbek-American business forum in Washington, the U.S. is committed to being a strategic partner in Uzbekistan’s growth and development through trade and investment.

Since Uzbekistan hopes to attract American investment, Ross’ warning is a signal to Tashkent that the near-term gain of EEU membership might interfere with the longer-term goal of winning a

In any event, U.S. trade with Uzbekistan is at a low base: According to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, Uzbekistan is currently America's 142nd largest goods trading partner with just \$315 million in two-way trade in 2018. Uzbekistan was America's 119th largest market for goods and its 159th largest supplier of goods in 2018.

Republican Congressman Trent Kelly, co-chair of the Uzbekistan Caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives, says that is a base upon which to build.

"I don't think [Uzbekistan] needs to be anybody's puppet ... I'm not worried about Russian influence. I'll let them worry about us ... We're not trying to take over Uzbekistan ... We want the Uzbek people to take control of Uzbekistan," [Kelly told VOA](#).

Washington promotes its own regional integration mechanism -- a grouping of the United States and five Central Asian countries known as the C5+1. Alice Wells, assistant secretary of State for South and Central Asian affairs, describes the group as effective and relevant and says Washington pushes for regional connectivity but rejects exclusionary blocs.

"A bloc sounds very formal -- and like some are excluded," [Wells told VOA](#). "I think Central Asian





countries, like all countries, have many different identities.”

FILE - Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, inaugurate the construction of a nuclear power plant, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Oct. 19, 2018.

The Trump administration views C5+1 as viable mainly because Uzbekistan has at last become more active in its region. Wells argues that it took the opening of Uzbekistan through the “good-neighbor policy” introduced by Mirziyoyev when he took office in 2016, for Central Asians to start a regional dialogue about their future.

Mirziyoyev gave economic integration “a great punch,” Wells says. “And so, we've seen tremendous progress since President Mirziyoyev brought this very fresh attitude.”

However, there are huge obstacles to overcome, despite assurances from Mirziyoyev and his fellow presidents, that they are all in sync. The countries have widely differing economic situations and resource endowments, and they continue to struggle over border and water issues as well as security challenges.