



US-UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS DURING THE FIRST DONALD TRUMP ERA

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Abstract

This article examines the United States' foreign policy toward Central Asia during the first term of President Donald Trump (2017–2021). It argues that the Trump administration marked a strategic shift in US global posture: moving away from the Obama-era focus on countering Russia and cooperating with China, toward a policy of confrontation with China and rapprochement with Russia. Within the context of Central Asia—a region rich in energy resources and geopolitical significance—this realignment created new opportunities and challenges for regional states. The study highlights how Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Kazakhstan under Nursultan Nazarbayev, pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, balancing relations with the US, Russia, and China. It also analyzes the growing regional integration efforts among Central Asian states, US military and economic engagement (including the closure of bases and new investment deals), and the impact of the Afghan conflict. The author concludes that while competition among global powers will persist in Central Asia, regional states are likely to continue avoiding permanent alignment with any single power, instead leveraging great-power rivalry for their own development.

Keywords: Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, US foreign policy, Donald Trump, great-power competition.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola Donald Trumpning birinchi prezidentlik davri (2017–2021) mobaynida Qo'shma Shtatlarning Markaziy Osiyoga nisbatan olib borgan tashqi siyosatini tahlil qiladi. Muallifning ta'kidlashicha, Trump ma'muriyati AQSh



global siyosatida strategik buriishni amalga oshirdi: Obama davridagi Rossiyaga qarshi turish va Xitoy bilan hamkorlik qilish siyosatidan voz kechib, Xitoy bilan qarama-qarshilik va Rossiya bilan yaqinlashish yo'lini tanladi. Energetika resurslari va geosiyosiy ahamiyatga ega bo'lgan Markaziy Osiyo mintaqasida bu o'zgarish mintaqa davlatlari uchun yangi imkoniyatlar va muammolarni keltirib chiqardi. Maqolada Markaziy Osiyo davlatlari, ayniqsa Prezident Shavkat Mirziyoyev boshchiligidagi O'zbekiston va Nursulton Nazarboyev boshchiligidagi Qozog'iston AQSh, Rossiya va Xitoy o'rtasida muvozanat saqlashga qaratilgan ko'p vektorli tashqi siyosiy yuritgani ko'rsatilgan. Shuningdek, mintaqaviy integratsiya jarayonlari, AQShning harbiy va iqtisodiy ishtiroki (harbiy bazalarning yopilishi va yangi investitsiya bitimlari) hamda Afg'oniston mojarosining ta'siri tahlil qilinadi. Xulosa qilib aytganda, global kuchlar o'rtasidagi raqobat Markaziy Osiyoda davom etsa ham, mintaqa davlatlari hech bir tomon bilan doimiy ravishda bloklanmasdan, kuchli davlatlar raqobatidan o'z rivojlanishlari uchun foydalanishga intiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: Markaziy Osiyo, O'zbekiston, Qozog'iston, AQSh tashqi siyosati, Donald Trump, buyuk davlatlar raqobati

Key Parameters of US Policy Towards Central Asia

The United States' objectives in Central Asia are based on two main strategies: Firstly, within the scope of the US's role as a global power in the international system, the US aims to weaken the influence of Russia and China in Central Asia. Secondly, it seeks easy access to the region's energy reserves. Indeed, the US's overall energy strategy is to control as many energy transmission lines as possible. All other US policies in the region are conducted within the framework of these two strategies.

The US's control over China and Russia includes regional security, and the military and commercial partnerships it establishes in the region are aligned with this. Therefore, the issue of energy security involves both linking the region to global trade and ensuring the security of that trade. For this reason, the US supports the development of a free market economy in the region. Consequently, US regional policy is shaped in line with its global objectives. Central Asia's



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energy resources hold even greater strategic importance for China due to their geographical proximity. As a rapidly growing economy, China cannot ignore such readily available energy sources, especially as it seeks them as far away as Africa to sustain its growth (1). Furthermore, the infrastructure problems of the countries in the region create a significant opportunity for China to expand its influence.

From Russia's perspective, the situation is one of preventing US influence in Central Asia, which it considers its backyard, and developing new strategies to exert influence in Asia. Russia's policy involves developing strategies to win over countries under US influence, forging military alliances with other actors in the international system and Central Asian states to keep US military power out of the region, and establishing dominance over the region's energy resources (2).

The US interest in the Central Asian region should be considered within the framework of a global security perspective that includes the Caucasus, Asia, and parts of the Middle East. In this context, for the US to achieve its objectives, it must first establish a control mechanism over Russia and China, and ensure that the countries in the region do not choose either of these two powers. For this to happen, the countries in the region need to be self-sufficient economically, politically, and militarily. In this regard, the US has important tasks to fulfill (3). Among these, the most important is the implementation of a system that will replace the Russian infrastructure and post-Soviet cadres in the region. Therefore, the US, both directly and through international civil society organizations, is taking steps to strengthen the independence and democratize the countries in the region. It has planned reforms in many areas, including the protection of human rights, transparency and rule of law in state institutions, the establishment of a market economy, and freedom of the press.

The inadequacy of Central Asian countries in terms of defense makes them helpless against the military power of China and Russia. Their membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can be seen in this context (4). Therefore, the US's military agreements with the countries in the region represent a direct stance against China and Russia. The US sometimes does not shy away from displaying this stance. For example, although NATO is not officially active in the region, the countries in the region participate in the Partnership for Peace and the Euro-Atlantic Cooperation Council. NATO's contacts in the region were important for



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providing assistance to the countries in the field of defense and supporting US operations in Afghanistan (5). In particular, the Karshi-Khanabad military base in Uzbekistan and the Manas military base in Kyrgyzstan were of great importance to the US. However, Uzbekistan closed these bases in 2005 and Kyrgyzstan in 2014 (6). The reason for Uzbekistan's closure was the US criticism of the Uzbek government regarding human rights violations in the Andijan incident in 2005 (7). Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, closed the base on the grounds that its rental income was low. These examples show that the US has failed to understand the dynamics of the region well. However, the US war in Afghanistan in 2001 was against extremist religious terrorist groups, which were also considered a threat by Central Asian regimes. In other words, the regional threat perceptions of Central Asian regimes and the US seem to coincide. However, it seems that this alone is not enough to automatically include these countries in US-referenced international defense and security organizations (8).

Today, Central Asia is a region where Russia is once again showing signs of influence through military projects such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The SCO, in particular, with its emphasis on military cooperation, has the potential to become a bloc opposing the United States (9). More importantly, Russia has direct military agreements with many of the countries in the region. For example, Russia has an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to use the Kant base until 2058 (10).

The US, however, does not want a regional defense system under Russian control to develop, nor does it want regional countries to play an active role within that system. Therefore, the plan is to modernize regional countries through US-style training and armament, thereby distancing them from Russia's security policies in the region. In this context, the US is seen to be able to involve itself in regional security policies in various ways to replace Russia and China. A past example of this was its use of military bases in the region. However, after withdrawing from Afghanistan, the US also lost the pretext of obtaining military bases in the region. For this reason, it is inevitable that the US will develop new security strategies in the region. Therefore, the US aims to establish long-term relationships by providing significant funding for military modernization in regional countries. The US undertaking of military training programs or assisting in military



modernization in regional countries are important steps in this regard. For example, Kazakhstan, which has special relations with NATO, has both established a joint intervention force in the region under the United Nations (KAZBRIG) and signed an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO. Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) has been developed (11).

Trump's Policies towards Uzbekistan

Throughout history, attacks on Russia have generally come from Europe. Looking at the present day, a democratizing Europe is no longer seeking to wage a new war against Russia, but rather to cooperate with it. The same is true for Russia, which has begun to democratize and implement liberal reforms. For Europe believes that peace and prosperity can be achieved without war. He found this formula a long time ago. Therefore, for Russia, establishing good relations with the West is essential for Russia's prosperity. and stability, even important for the future and well-being of Central Asian countries. This will make a significant contribution (12). Therefore, Central Asia should be considered not only regionally but also globally. On March 15, 2018, at the Central Asian leaders' summit held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, leaders who had not been able to meet for a long time took a historic step (13). The fact that Russia was not invited to this summit is quite striking, as this is unprecedented. Therefore, it creates the impression that Central Asian countries are gradually shifting away from Russia's axis. The increasing influence of the US and China in the region also supports this impression.

On December 19, 2017, Trump told Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the reformist leader who came to power in Uzbekistan after the death of the First Leader Islam Karimov, "With you I am looking forward to the meeting" he said, conveying his message. He invited him to the US. Trump's message continued by mentioning the US strategy in South Asia, the regional countries involvement in the conflict and stability in Afghanistan. He conveyed that he should take responsibility for finding a solution (14).

Mirziyoyev responded positively to this invitation and visited the United States on May 16, 2018. Following the meeting, the White House released a statement titled "Beginning of a Strategic Partnership in a New Era." The statement praised



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Mirziyoyev's reforms and announced the revival of the strategic partnership declaration between the US and Uzbekistan, which was last signed in 2002. The statement also mentioned the continuation of military cooperation with Uzbekistan in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, Mirziyoyev's support for Trump's South Asia policy, and Mirziyoyev's free-market economic policies regarding economic relations. In this context, the statement noted Mirziyoyev's promise to take every step to create a favorable environment for US companies to invest in Uzbekistan. As a result, more than twenty agreements worth \$4.8 billion were signed between Uzbekistan and the US (15).

This agreement, signed after China and Russia were not invited to the Astana Central Asian Leaders Summit, which was previously convened at the initiative of Kazakh State Ministers Nursultan Nazarbayev and Mirziyoyev, and the \$7.5 billion agreement Kazakhstan signed with the US on January 2018, are indicators of the increasing US influence in the region (16). However, this is not a shift in alignment. The countries in the region are pursuing a balance of power policy by using major powers against each other. Indeed, these same countries have also signed agreements with Russia and China. The struggle for leadership among Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, also pushes these countries to make agreements with different global powers.

The reforms Mirziyoyev implemented in Uzbekistan and his policies towards Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and His visits to Kazakhstan suggest that these five countries in the region could form an organization similar to the European Union. This has created hope that it can be established. For example, in this regard, on March 9, 2018, Mirziyoyev and Tajik leader Emomoli Rahmon, during a meeting in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, the two countries agreed to abolish visa requirements for each other. It appears that citizens of the four Central Asian countries, excluding Turkmenistan, will be able to visit each other without visas (17).

Turkmenistan's leader, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, did not attend the Astana summit, instead visiting Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates in the hope of finding opportunities for cooperation with Gulf countries (18). Although this situation cast a shadow over the summit, Turkmenistan was represented at the summit. The Assembly was represented by Speaker Akça Nurberdiyeva.



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Mirziyoyev plays a significant role in the creation of regional integration in Central Asia. Indeed, Rahmon described Mirziyoyev as “the President of Uzbekistan, both in his own country and in Central Asia”. He has become so popular in other Asian republics that every politician envies him” He even said so (19).

Mirziyoyev, who plays a constructive and unifying role in the region, has also strived to strengthen relations with Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan's new President Sooronbay Jeenbekov in December During his visit to Tashkent in 2017, he was impressed by Mirziyoyev's generosity. Indeed, Uzbekistan's banks had pledged to provide Kyrgyzstan with a \$100 million loan. During the same meeting, they also agreed to accelerate the construction of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway line. Mirziyoyev, who visited Turkmenistan twice in 2017, also had relations with that country. relations have improved. The two countries have agreed that Turkmenistan's produced electro-energy will be transported to Kyrgyzstan via Uzbekistan's energy system. and they have agreed to transfer it to Kazakhstan. Therefore, the two countries have now opened a new chapter in jointly operating energy resources in the Caspian Sea (20).

Through his positive steps in foreign policy, Mirziyoyev has also improved relations with Kazakhstan, elevating them to the level of a strategic partnership. The two countries have agreed to take the lead in establishing regional integration in Central Asia. During Mirziyoyev's visit to Astana on March 14, 2018, an intergovernmental agreement was signed to increase the trade volume between the two countries to \$5 billion by 2020 (21).

With all these developments taking place, who will finance regional integration projects while excluding Russia? Of course. China. In May 2017, Mirziyoyev signed 105 bilateral agreements during his visit to China. The total cost of agreements was worth \$23 billion are linked to Uzbekistan's energy sector. This includes modernizing the oil refining, petrochemical, and agricultural sectors (22). Mirziyoyev and Xi Jinping to implement the Silk Road Project They have agreed. Because China sees this project as similar to other projects within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States. This is considered an alternative. Uzbekistan's decision to withdraw from the Eurasian Economic Union is an indication of this (23).



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Meanwhile, the US is closely monitoring the integration process in Central Asia. For example, Trump followed Mirziyoyev's visit on March 26-27. He supported the attempt to hold an international conference on Afghanistan in Tashkent and the US's stance on this matter. He stated that it is necessary to work closely with Uzbekistan. Furthermore, within the framework of the US strategy in South Asia, he invited countries in the region to take responsibility for resolving the conflict and stabilizing Afghanistan (24).

On the other hand, the US accuses Russia of trying to bring Central Asian countries under its influence. This is because the US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Joseph Votel's report to Trump stated that "Russia is hindering cooperation and mutual activities between Central Asian states and the United States" (25). A statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry said that the US was targeting Central Asian countries. It was stated that he was trying to distance Turkey from cooperation with Russia and former Soviet countries (26). In the region in the last 10 years the statement, which also mentioned that Russia's investments are around \$ 20 billion, said: "We respect the right of our friends in Central Asia to choose their partners. But at the same time, we do not want these partners to pit us against our friends. We are against attempts to bring them here", it was stated (27).

Consequently, the balance of power in Central Asia in the near future has shifted more towards Uzbekistan, which is supported by China. It is predicted that it will be established under the leadership of Kazakhstan. For this reason, China will increase its investments in the region. Consequently, the competition between China and Russia in the region will increase, and the US will also find its place in this competition. This place, as stated at the beginning of the study, will be in a position where it is opposed to China and allied with Russia during the Trump era. However, when looking at the Central Asian region, this competition is compared with the competition in the Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East regions. It should be noted as a region with a lower potential to become a battleground for global powers (28).



CONCLUSION

The Central Asian countries, which gained independence with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, are located in the heart of Eurasia, as Mackinder stated in his Land Power Theory, and serve as a bridge connecting the West to the East. It holds considerable strategic importance. Therefore, this region is one of the arenas of competition among global powers. Two centuries ago, a conflict arose between Russia and England over this region. The competition known as the "Great Game" is currently unfolding between the United States, Russia, and China. For these three global powers, this region is of geopolitical, geostrategic, and it is of considerable importance in geo-economic terms.

Russia From this perspective, the Central Asian region is vital due to its historical sphere of influence and immediate surroundings. This is extremely important. Furthermore, millions of ethnic Russians live in their country, and the Russian language is considered an important language to learn in many countries, like English which has been a stranger in the region for a thousand years, sees its influence here as important in terms of balancing Russia. On the other hand, Asia and Europe Seeking closer ties with Central Asia through a new Silk Road it plans to establish, China is also forging contacts with countries in the region to provide energy for its growing industry. It represents a potential trading partner and a front line in combating the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan. Furthermore, the region holds a significant place in U.S. foreign policy as a key player in controlling both Russia and China through the policies it develops.

After the collapse of the USSR, US- Russia relations enjoyed a positive trajectory until the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, as Russia increased its power and rose to a position where it could compete with the US in the 2010s, relations began to cool in a manner reminiscent of the Cold War. But with Trump's presidency in 2016, Russian-American relations have been taken to a new dimension. The exchange of warm messages between Trump and Putin, and Trump's adoption of a policy of friendship with Russia and hostility towards China in the context of global competition, indicate the nature of relations in this new era.

For Central Asian countries, the development of US-Russia relations could also mean greater Russian influence in the region. This is because the US under



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Trump's presidency is increasingly targeting Russia. because it would pose less of a threat in his region It may allocate fewer resources to limiting its presence. However, this is an assumption. Because for the US, Central Asia is not only a region focused on Russia, but also a region that can contain China. For this reason, the US considers Kazakhstan, the region's greatest power, and with Uzbekistan, the rising power of the region They will want to establish better relationships.

US-Russia relations were on a positive trajectory. During the election campaign accused China of being a "currency manipulator". Trump has taken a tough stance against China. The US wants a stronger economic relationship with Central Asia. This gives an idea about the relationships it will establish. Therefore, the US wants to see China's economic influence in the region diminish. It is perceived as a threat. In this context, Trump does not view China's New Silk Road Project favorably. However, the Central Asian region could steer US-China relations in a positive direction. efficient These territories stand out as important areas. Furthermore, eliminating terrorism active in the region is in the common interest of both countries. Since separatist groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region pose a threat to China, and the Taliban and Al-Qaeda originating from Afghanistan pose a threat to the US, the two countries can act together.

The policies that Trump, who has been in power for a year and a half, will pursue in the region in the coming period are a matter of curiosity. However, if one were to make a prediction, it is clear that the region is indispensable for Russia, China, and the US. Therefore, the competition between these three states will continue in the new period. This is particularly important for the Central Asian countries. Because the states in the region, which do not want to continue their existence as satellite states tied to a single pole, will pursue multilateral policies to ensure their continuous development. In other words, they will not side with the US while excluding Russia, or side with Russia while excluding China. They will want to continue their development by pursuing a policy of balance in the competition between global powers.



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