

## Analysis

# Russia Lures Uzbekistan as its Strategic Satellite in Central Asia

By Alisher Ilkhamov, London

### Abstract

After a period of coolness between Russia and Uzbekistan during the 1990s, their relationship has returned to a Soviet-style pattern of patron-client relations. The rapprochement between them came into effect after the Karimov regime fell out with the West following the “color” revolutions and Andijan events. Although trade between these two countries remains at a very low level, Russia seeks to benefit politically and economically by asserting control over Uzbekistan’s gas resources and leveraging its advantageous geo-strategic location. In return, the Karimov regime, whose popularity within the country is declining, is anxious to guarantee its security. Thus, while Russia’s expectations in this case are related to its structural national interests, Uzbekistan is driven by the personal concerns of its current political leadership. Therefore, this strategic alliance is far from stable, threatened by the possibility of regime change, which could occur at any time in this Central Asian country.

### Historical context

After Tsarist Russia conquered Turkistan in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this region became an advanced post for the Russians in their dealings with the Muslim world. The Great Game began when Russia decided to withstand the expansion of the British Empire in Asia. Since then the Russians have invested extensively in the region in order to integrate it politically and economically into its imperial domain. They built extensive transportation infrastructure in the region, including a railroad and developed irrigation systems and cotton production to boost their own textile manufacturing. With the transformation of the Tsarist colonies into the national republics of the Soviet Union, this politics of integration and absorption advanced with new vigor. The Russians promoted a program of modernization and social reforms, which had a deep and contradictory impact upon the local societies. On the one hand, it boosted industrialization of the domestic economy, the education system, and the emancipation of women. On the other, the Russians sought to eradicate the local Muslim faith, establish ethno-nationalist states, impose the Cyrillic alphabet for indigenous languages, and force the local elites to speak Russian. Most of current political leaders in the region, including current Uzbek President Islam Karimov, are the product of Soviet-era efforts to cultivate local communist cadres.

Long after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan still carries the economic, social, and political birth-marks of its Soviet past. These are particularly visible in its style of governance. The Soviet legacy continues to shape the relationship between contemporary Russia and the former Soviet republics. This relationship is somewhat ambivalent: all former nation-

al republics are wary of Moscow’s neo-imperial ambitions, yet they share many socio-cultural commonalities with Russia that, along with Russia’s revitalizing economic might, prompt them to re-adopt the role of client states in respect to their former master.

This current state of affairs sharply contrasts with the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, when the centrifugal tendencies across the former Soviet Union prevailed over centripetal ones. In 1991, profiting from Moscow’s political weakness, the republican political leaders moved to declare independence from the Soviet Union. Politically and economically frail under Yeltsin’s rule, Russia pursued a sluggish foreign policy toward Central Asia in the first part of the 1990s. However, the consolidation of state and economic power under Putin and the collapse of the US-Uzbek geo-strategic alliance in 2004–2005 allowed Russia to re-instate its influence in Uzbekistan.

When the “color revolutions” started breaking out across the post-Soviet space in late 2003, the Uzbek leadership experienced a deep paranoid fear that it would be toppled by plots hatched by domestic civil society and international NGOs and rapidly reconsidered its foreign policy orientation. It methodically expelled foreign NGOs and cut off the military partnership with the United States. Simultaneously, President Karimov worked to fill the vacancy in the spot of “elder brother” by offering it to Moscow. This swing in foreign policy contrasted dramatically with the previous period of fierce anti-Russian propaganda, which was characteristic for the Uzbek regime during the 1990s.

The final landmark signifying the radical shift in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy toward embracing Russian

patronage was the Andijan events of May 2005.<sup>1</sup> While the Western states reacted critically to these events, Vladimir Putin (and the Chinese) supported Karimov without hesitation and justified his brutal crackdown on the unrest in Andijan. Understandably, President Karimov appreciated this support and consequently worked to please the Russians and strengthen strategic ties with them.

In July 2005, the United States was given six months to shut its K-2 airbase in Khanabad, which had been a source of annoyance for the Kremlin. Two months earlier, in May 2005, Uzbekistan had terminated its membership in GUUAM, an alliance bringing together Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, another irritant for Moscow. Less than a year later, in March 2006, Uzbekistan joined the Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAzEs), patronized by Moscow, and signed a new bilateral agreement in which Russia assured Uzbekistan that it would intervene if the Uzbek regime faced domestic or foreign threats. Finally, in August 2006, Uzbekistan returned to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), seven years after the suspension of its membership in this Moscow-controlled regional organization.

In return, the Russian government worked to make President Karimov happy and to seek his favor. During his visit to Uzbekistan in June 2005, President Putin pledged to invest one billion US dollars in the Uzbek economy, mainly Gazprom's and Lukoil's deals with their Uzbek counterparts. The Russians were especially courteous with Karimov's daughter Gulnara Karimova, who is considered a likely presidential successor in Uzbekistan and a key mediator in strengthening Uzbek-Russian ties, especially in gas and oil deals. While Gulnara remains the subject of an international arrest warrant and can not visit most Western countries, following the ruling of an American court in 2001,<sup>2</sup> she has received a high-profile reception in Russia.

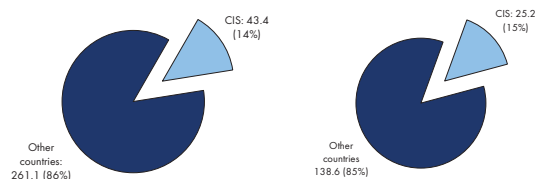
### What Are Uzbek-Russian Mutual Interests?

At first glance, Uzbekistan is not a significant trading partner for Russia. As the graphs on p. 12 show, Uz-

bekistan receives only 3 percent of Russia's exports and supplies just 6 percent of Russia's imports from the CIS countries. The importance Uzbekistan as a trade partner for Russia becomes even smaller when placing the CIS countries in the context of Russia's overall foreign trade turnover (see graphs below).

Structure of Russian exports in 2006, bln USD

Structure of Russian imports in 2006, bln USD



(Source: Russian Federal Service of State Statistics, 2007)

Nevertheless, in the last several years Russia has demonstrated an increasing interest in improving its economic and political relations with Uzbekistan. To understand the significance of Uzbekistan for Russian interests, and vice versa, one has to place this country, as well as the whole Central Asian region, on the larger map of Russian global aspirations, paying special attention to the context of Russian business with Europe. The continent represents the greatest value for Russia and its economic interests. Europe is the destination for 66 percent of Russian exports, in which gas and oil are the prime commodities. One should examine Russian attitudes toward Central Asia in general and Uzbekistan in particular from this perspective. The Central Asian region with its vast energy resources<sup>3</sup> is vital for Russian economic business in Europe, which is the main importer of Russian energy resources.

In 2004–2006 Uzbekistan produced 59–62 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually. This output is comparable to the production of Turkmenistan, but Uzbekistan exports much less gas than the Turkmen because it uses the bulk of it (up to 95 percent) for domestic consumption. Combined, gas exports from these two countries allow Russia to supply its domestic market with comparatively cheap gas, at \$100 per thousand cubic meters, while freeing up Western Siberian gas deposits as a source of high profit exports to Europe, where gas sells for \$230–250 per thousand cubic meters. Russia thereby makes a huge profit thanks to exploiting a price scissors in its cross-regional gas import-export schemes. High profits are not the only advantage Russia gains from controlling the export of Uzbek and Turkmen gas. In fact, Russia is tempted to attain a

1 After the trial of 23 local businessmen, widely perceived in Andijan as unfair and fabricated by the security agencies, a group of armed people assaulted a number of state institutions (a prison, military garrison, police station and local government). The next day a mass demonstration, largely peaceful, took place in the central square. The government troops responded by shooting indiscriminately at the crowd. Hundreds of people, including women and children, were reportedly shot dead and then buried secretly in mass graves.

2 After divorcing Mansur Maksudi, an American citizen and businessman, Gulnara secretly took their kids from the USA to Uzbekistan without the father's consent. Maksudi sought to reverse his wife's action and won custody of his two children from a New Jersey court.

3 Central Asian overall gas deposits are estimated to be as much as 22 trillion cubic meters, comprising 12 percent of world reserves.

monopoly in supplying gas to Europe and the GUAM zone (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) as a lever of political influence.

Uzbekistan, as well as Central Asia in general, is a top priority for Russian interests not only because of its gas and oil reserves, but also for its advantageous geo-strategic location. It is positioned at the nexus of several zones of global geopolitical interest, including Russia, China, South Asia, Iran, the Caspian Region, and Transcaucasia. Uzbekistan is particularly important for global powers because it is situated exactly at the heart of Central Asia and borders all its countries. Russia's claims for control over this region could not be realized without Uzbekistan as a close ally. Uzbekistan is crucial because it is close to Afghanistan and maintains comparatively well developed infrastructure in the areas approaching the Uzbek–Afghan border.

Although Uzbekistan does not have a common border with China, it is close to this rapidly growing super-power, and within firing range for short- and medium-range ballistic missiles and aircraft. In short, neither of the other Central Asian countries possesses such a combination of geo-strategic advantages as Uzbekistan. Therefore, Russia must consider the return of Uzbekistan to the CSTO as a big gain.

When it comes to the area of security cooperation, one should make a distinction between two parties' real and rhetorical interests, as well question whether these interests have a structural or personalistic character. Both countries try to explain to the public, both domestic and international, that they ostensibly have common interests in fighting international terrorism. But surprisingly, the "international terrorists" are rarely specified by name. In most cases, "terrorists" refers to Islamists, but Russia and Uzbekistan have in mind different groups, which are only tenuously linked with each other (for instance, Chechens in Russia and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Uzbekistan). In fact, both parties have little need for each other in dealing with their domestic enemies.

For Karimov, Russia is important as a guarantor of his personal security and his hold on his office. The challenge to his rule may come from domestic mass unrest, but external threats are a less likely problem. Russia, in turn, is driven by its concern about the expansion of NATO, which is still seen by the current Russian political and military leadership with some hostility. When in 2001 Karimov invited the Americans to use the airbase in Khanabad, it made the Russians extremely nervous. So the ejection of the American military was a great relief for President Putin and his team.

### **The Looming Limits of Russian Influence**

In dealing with Uzbekistan, Russia and the West perceive each other as seeking to exert exclusive influence over this

country. As a consequence, this contest is zero sum rather than win-win for all large stakeholders involved. For the time being, the Russians are taking the lead in this game, but have achieved this position largely due to the failure of the Uzbek regime to employ a multi-vector foreign policy as, for instance, the neighboring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do much more successfully. Karimov has for a long time expressed contempt for a multi-vector foreign policy and, as a result, suddenly found himself vulnerable due to his one-sided approach.

There are some signs that the Uzbek leadership is reconsidering its policy of aligning with only one great power and is now seeking to diversify its foreign policy partnerships. First of all, the Russians have not yet been allowed by the Uzbeks to replace the Americans in leasing the Khanabad airbase, despite the Russians' undisguised desire to acquire it. Instead, Uzbekistan proposed that they use the airbase in Navoi, located much farther from the Afghan border, and only in crisis situations, i.e. without the permanent deployment of their military facilities.

Observers paid particular attention to the presentation made in March 2007 at the Moscow Carnegie Center by Rafik Saifulin, an analyst from Uzbekistan who is closely associated with the Presidential Security Council. His criticism of the Uzbek-Russian relationship reflected the intention of some circles in the Uzbek political elite to restore, to some extent, ties with the West as a counter-balance to Russia in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Current Uzbekistan Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Norov is also widely seen as a proponent for Uzbekistan's rapprochement with the West, especially with NATO and the European Union.

After officially announcing its entry into the Russian-sponsored regional organizations CSTO and EvrAzEs, Uzbekistan is evidently not rushing to join the approximately 70 EvrAzEs conventions on specific issues that would require Uzbekistan to adjust its legislation to its commitments as a member-state of these regional entities. Uzbekistan was notably absent from the SCO military exercises "Peace Mission – 2007." Another indication of President Karimov's cooling attitudes toward Russian-controlled regional entities has been the small number of reports published in the Uzbek official press, reflecting the president's mood about the last united CIS-EvrAzEs-CSTO summit in Dushanbe on October 5, 2007.

For the moment, the stumbling block preventing Uzbekistan from adopting a multi-vector foreign policy has not been the Uzbek leadership's lack of desire to keep an equal distance from the great powers, but its unwillingness to pay the price for doing that, i.e. by improving its appalling human rights record.

It is evident, that further struggle between Russia and the West over influence in Uzbekistan will probably focus on bargaining around such issues as energy, military bases and human rights. Europe could pay for Uzbek gas and invest much more than Russia, but the regime's human rights violations affront the European Community and restrain it from embracing such a brutal regime as a partner. Though Russia's "tolerance" toward the crackdown on civic freedoms in Uzbekistan satisfies Karimov, Russia's ultimate intention is to limit the sovereignty of its former subjects and expand control over their foreign policies.

One can fairly conclude that Russia would like to impose upon Uzbekistan, as well as the other weak

Central Asian states, a limited sovereignty akin to what Bukharan and Khivan khanates had in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Political elites in Uzbekistan definitely oppose Russian objectives and are inspired by them to find a counter-balance against Russian neo-expansionism.

Besides, the asymmetry in the expectations held by Russia and Uzbekistan makes their current strategic alliance unstable, particularly since it relies heavily on the personal fate of President Karimov and his family. After Karimov, the new elites in Uzbekistan may find that they are no longer interested in courting Russia. At that point they would find it attractive to seek a counter-balance to Russian expansion in closer relations with Europe and China.

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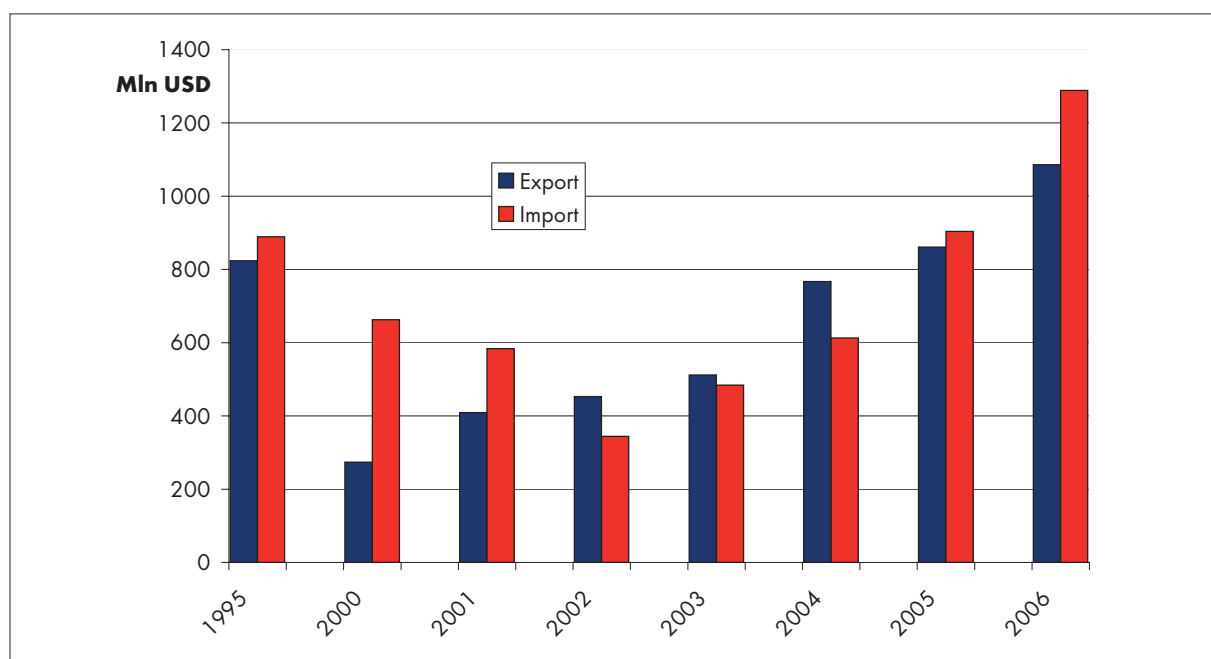
*Further reading:*

- Natural Gas in Uzbekistan in 2004, International Energy Agency, [http://www.iea.org/Textbase/stats/gasdata.asp?COUNTRY\\_CODE=UZ](http://www.iea.org/Textbase/stats/gasdata.asp?COUNTRY_CODE=UZ)
- Report on prospects for Uzbekistan seminar, held March 21, 2007 at the Moscow Carnegie Center, <http://www.carnegie.ru/ru/news/75938.htm>

## Graphs

### Russian-Uzbek Trade

Russian Trade Balance with Uzbekistan



(Source: Russian Federal Service of State Statistics, 2007)