



## RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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## Russia and Azerbaijan: Navigating Geopolitical Shifts

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000661339

### Abstract

In recent years, Russian–Azerbaijani relations have undergone a significant transformation. Azerbaijan’s successful military campaign to regain control of the Karabakh region has not only reshaped territorial dynamics, but also bolstered Azerbaijan’s influence in the political landscape of the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan has deftly struck a delicate balance, maintaining ties with the West while simultaneously fostering a robust relationship with Russia. In addition, Azerbaijan’s foreign policy tactics are aimed at strengthening legitimacy at home. However, this nuanced foreign policy faces challenges amid shifting geopolitical paradigms and sharp tensions between the West and Russia in light of the Russian–Ukrainian war. Recognizing its pivotal role in relations with both geopolitical giants, Azerbaijan seeks to enhance its sovereignty and independence. This analysis examines how the leadership of Azerbaijan is maneuvering through this complicated geopolitical landscape to do what it believes is best to secure the country’s interests.

### Paradigmatic Shifts and Azerbaijan’s Sovereignty

One day before the outbreak of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev paid an official visit to Moscow to sign a declaration that massively strengthened Russian–Azerbaijani relations by turning the two countries into formal allies. This news came unexpectedly and raised eyebrows among some observers, especially considering that an analogous document—signed at the Shusha summit less than a year earlier, in June 2021—had touted Azerbaijan’s strategic alliance with Turkey. At that time, experts on Azerbaijan had assessed the latter document as protecting the country against potential outside threats by securing military backup from Turkey.

For some time, the prevailing view was that protracted conflicts were the main tool by which for Moscow to maintain and manage its influence in the South Caucasus. War events since 2020 have shown, however, that these conflicts are far from frozen and have in fact huge potential for escalation. Moreover, Russia’s regional policy has undergone a paradigmatic reassessment: whereas frozen conflicts around breakaway regions were previously perceived as offering Russia leverage, they are now seen as representing a dangerous opportunity for external powers to intrude into the post-Soviet space.

Historically, Russia’s presence in the Caucasus was based on its control over Azerbaijan’s archenemy: Armenia. Recent developments suggest that Russia might have bet on the wrong horse. The dissatisfaction voiced by Russian officials over Armenia’s démarche toward the West, coupled with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s admission of the strategic error of over-reliance on Russia after the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh

(though with several disclaimers about having a very close strategic relationship and no intention of leaving the Russian-led CSTO), points to a longstanding and enduring rift between the two countries. Pashinyan’s recent moves garnered support from European politicians, although the specifics of the resulting military aid and economic investment have yet to be clarified. Armenia, under its current government, finds itself caught between two major rivals—Russia and the West—with neither side fully committed to being its true ally. Russian officials’ dissatisfaction with and reprimands over Armenia’s closer ties with the West indicate a strained relationship, a reality that presents an opportunity for Azerbaijan to redefine its position in the region.

Until recently, Azerbaijan successfully navigated between the major external powers, putting its eggs into different baskets, which gave it great opportunities for energy trade diversification and for the regime’s own political evolution (Ashik 2016). For the most part, the West did not criticize the Azerbaijani regime on domestic issues, effectively tolerating its repressive character. However, it was extremely difficult for Azerbaijan to maintain the status of stable counterpart for both the West and Russia. Azerbaijan was also reluctant to accept the internationalization of peace talks with Armenia, prioritizing tête-à-tête negotiations without external mediators.

The Russo–Ukrainian war has been instructive for Azerbaijan, which has turned toward regional cooperation formats that prioritize the interests of local states in order to protect itself from possible immediate damages and aggressive policies (of Russia or Iran). The October 2022 military drills conducted by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps along the Araz river, the border between Iran and Azerbaijan, served as a warning signal that Tehran would be prepared to encroach on Azerbai-

jan's sovereignty if necessary, emphasizing Azerbaijan's vulnerability and the potential for regional dynamics to escalate into a full-scale conflict. Iran aspires to a role as an important regional player and—though Islamic and culturally close to Azerbaijan—sees the Zangezur path through Armenia that binds Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan and Turkey as vital to its efforts in this regard. The situation of Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan is very similar to that of Kaliningrad and Russia: another country separates a national territory from its mainland. With the opening of the Zangezur corridor demanded by Azerbaijan—which has recently made clear its intention of having no customs controls, as is the case between Russia and Kaliningrad—Azerbaijanis would no longer have to transit Iran in order to reach their territory while bypassing Armenia. Armenia, for its part, rejects the extraterritoriality of the route and wants to keep it under its sovereign control. The Iranian leadership, meanwhile, sees the diminution of its influence in the Caucasus as problematic and therefore seeks to blockade Azerbaijan's borders and the transit route via Armenia. Moreover, Zangezur is the missing link in the strategic Turkic states project to connect Azerbaijan to Turkey geographically which Iran believes is a growing threat to its national interests and sovereignty.

Aliyev is committed to not becoming entangled in an intensifying geopolitical struggle between the West and Russia, especially considering the alarming scenarios represented by the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts. The Azerbaijani government proposes that the countries of the South Caucasus should be able to determine their own destiny while recognizing the traditional role of regional powers in the neighborhood. Accordingly, Azerbaijan advocates the 3+3 initiative; this platform (which brings together the three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia with the three outside powers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran) addresses security issues, including the unblocking of economic and transport links in the Caucasus.

The regime places significant emphasis on foreign policy tactics to bolster popularity and solidify its monopoly on power at home. This policy stems from the inherent nature of the regime: the Azerbaijani leadership engages in international relations with a view to ensuring its political survival. While some countries in Russia's immediate neighborhood (namely Belarus and the Central Asian countries) have formally rallied behind Russia, Azerbaijan seeks to preserve its strategic autonomy by avoiding official commitments to either Russian-led or Western-led integration processes. Wary of provoking Russia, Baku has chosen to hedge its bets, taking a cautious approach that allows the country to minimize its economic and political risks while increasing its strategic room for maneuver. This has enabled

Azerbaijan to keep its distance from plans for further integration with Russia. Lacking any real economic instruments to alter the balance with Azerbaijan, Moscow's political calculus is determined by the simple principles of opportunities and interests.

Similar policies are employed in dealings with the European Union, with the aims of safeguarding the nation against the promotion of democracy and avoiding antagonizing Russia. Particularly noteworthy is the regime's staunch opposition to the idea of Azerbaijan joining the EU, characterized by a clear aversion to democratic reforms. The Azerbaijani government dismisses accession to the EU as a futile endeavor: Aliyev, in a statement in December 2023, reiterated that EU membership is a door with no one on the other side waiting for Azerbaijan. This continued rejection aligns with the regime's self-interest: it aims to evade any close association with democratic nations out of fear that such affiliations might raise questions about its legitimacy.

In addition to being at loggerheads with Brussels when it comes to democracy and human rights, Azerbaijan has struggled to get Western countries to recognize its occupied territories. This has prompted Baku to accuse the West of "double standards," as the West has unequivocally condemned separatism in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (Ismayilov 2019).

As such, while the EU remains Azerbaijan's foremost trading partner and buyer of its crude oil and gas, this is the only tie between the two. Moreover, the West does not represent a united political front but is split into different national interests. Among EU members, one-third (namely Romania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Croatia, Italy, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Lithuania) maintain strategic partnership relations with Azerbaijan.

Leveraging their support and having managed to win over other EU members, and those whom Azerbaijan can mollify on its own terms, Azerbaijan signed a major gas deal with Brussels on July 18, 2023. This will double the EU's current supplies from Azerbaijan to around 20 billion m<sup>3</sup> of gas per year by 2027, helping to make up for the shortfall of Russian deliveries. According to Eurostat, Azerbaijan ranks fifth among the EU's gas suppliers, with 5.9% of the total.

Given both his historically close ties with Russia and the fact that Aliyev has spoken out against Maidan-like movements on many occasions, it was expected that he would not support Ukraine in its war with Russia. However, Azerbaijan's ongoing humanitarian aid to Ukraine suggests that Aliyev seeks to neutralize Russian influence in Azerbaijan. Indeed, even though Russian influence continues to be felt, it faces strong resistance from the public and the media, especially on the Ukraine issue.

All this being said, Azerbaijan's foreign and security policy centers around its close-knit ties with Turkey and its newfound role as a pivot to Central Asia. Azerbaijan owes its recent independent action and sovereign self-assurance to its indisputable brother nation. The focus is on deepening ties with Central Asian Turkic states, with Turkey serving as Azerbaijan's security guarantor, which bolsters its position against major powers.

Russia is compelled to accept this situation (at least temporarily) because neither Turkey nor Azerbaijan poses an ideological threat to the Putin regime, nor do they jeopardize the dominance of personalist regimes in the region. In this sense, Russia also prioritizes compromising on Azerbaijan's ambitions to avoid the risk of confrontation with both Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, Azerbaijan's neutrality and reluctance to join an anti-Russian front (reflected in supporting Ukraine with energy deliveries and humanitarian aid) demonstrates its commitment to maintaining a delicate balance in relations with Russia, while Russia seems ready to adapt to the country's vagaries and accept the new realities.

### **The Karabakh Conflict as the Main Impediment to Russia–Azerbaijan Relations**

In the Azerbaijani view, the recapture of the remaining Karabakh territory marked the end of 30 years of conflict. Crucially, this was something that Azerbaijan achieved on its own, without relying on the mediation of global powers. With the recapture, Aliyev fulfilled the long-lasting dreams of Azerbaijan's population, who had suffered extreme injustice and humiliation over the preceding three decades of occupation.

Even during the most intense periods of the Karabakh conflict, major geopolitical players such as Russia, the EU, and the US demonstrated a willingness to work together and engage in consultations on the issue. This is evident not only from their continuous collaboration in the framework of the Minsk Group—which was set up in 1994 after the first Karabakh war in order to regulate the conflict and consists of the US, France, and Russia—but also from a secret meeting involving diplomats representing these three parties that took place shortly before the last major military actions in September 2023. In Azerbaijan, a widely shared view is that the co-chairmanship of the Minsk Group served as a mechanism for managing conflicting interests but not necessarily for resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In fact, the West has shown an inconsistent attitude toward the objective territorial rights of Azerbaijan. Some Western states have pinned the blame for the conflict solely on Azerbaijan, turning a blind eye to blatant violations of the basic principle of international law. They were happy for an illegal entity, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, to exist, even as the adjacent occu-

pled territories were subjected to catastrophic inhuman destruction and the ethnic Azerbaijani population was forcefully driven out. The West's biased approach stoked skepticism toward and contributed to the decay of the remnants of liberal values in Azerbaijan while strengthening the ideology of the regime, which excludes any alternative to its current domestic and foreign policy.

One can argue that this conflict was the last obstacle to Russia–Azerbaijan relations. If during the 44-Day War questions arose about Russia's passive attitude, leading some to insinuate that the operation had been agreed with Moscow ahead of time, the non-performance of Russian peacekeepers during the Azerbaijani army's anti-terror operation in September 2023 served as an eye-opener, revealing signs of Azerbaijan–Russia collaboration behind the scenes. Many see the forceful resolution as an indication of Russia's long arm. As can be discerned when listening to Azerbaijani pro-state media, this final and definitive resolution of the conflict has paved the way for more intensive cooperation between Azerbaijan and Russia. Such collaboration is important to the survival of both regimes, prompting Azerbaijan to adapt its foreign policy orientation to be more accommodating of its larger neighbor.

The continued presence in Karabakh of Russian peacekeeping forces, whose term of service is set to expire in 2025, may become a point of contention. Tensions between Baku and Moscow were present since the signing of the tripartite declaration in November 2020, but often concealed, highlighting the nuanced nature of their relationship. The verbal sparring between Russia and Azerbaijan, along with the broader geopolitical context, reflects the intricate dance of power, interests, and relationships in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In the West, Azerbaijan's actions have received mixed assessments, with some suggesting that the West was deceived by Aliyev (Bloomberg 2023). Despite deteriorating relations with the US, as evidenced by the suspension of official visits, Secretary of State Antony Blinken's call with Aliyev on November 27, 2023, underscores Azerbaijan's significance for U.S. interests in the region. This reinforces earlier U.S. statements regarding Azerbaijan's long border with Iran and future geostrategic plans involving the Azerbaijani majority in the northern part of Iran. Israel's provision of weaponry and security assistance to Azerbaijan is also driven by Azerbaijan's non-loyal policy toward Iran.

### **Cultural Diplomacy and Economic Cooperation**

While Azerbaijan may strive to maintain a delicate political distance from Moscow and diversify its economic relationships, Russian culture continues to have

a significant presence and influence in Azerbaijan, a reality actually promoted by Azerbaijan's elite. It is essential to consider the cultural commitment of the main representatives of the ruling elite in Azerbaijan to the Russian sphere. Although in 2018–2020 some Azerbaijani media portrayed key political figures as individuals favored by Russia or even as Russian agents, Russia is still seen mainly as the guardian of anti-democratic forces and a force for internal stability. The emergence of a new elite culturally and linguistically aligned with Russia has created a situation where Russia continues to wield influence in Azerbaijani politics, public discontent toward Russia notwithstanding. Indeed, the majority, especially in the regions, are inclined toward anti-Russian sentiment due to historical factors. Russia, for its part, has been attempting to create and craft its own soft-power institutions. As many Azerbaijani parents enroll their children in Russian-taught schools, the numbers of Russian-speaking sympathizers increases each year (Musavi 2023).

Relations with Russia are based primarily on cultural, economic and, above all, ideological factors. Although it received little attention in the Western media, the contrast in language skills between President Aliyev, who spoke fluent Russian during the war, and Pashinyan, who was less proficient, was not lost on the Russian public and media. From their perspective, Azerbaijan has emerged as a strategic ally rivaling Armenia. This reorientation toward Russia is accompanied by the adoption of anti-Western rhetoric, which may stem from Azerbaijan's continued political and ideological orientation towards Russia. Russia aims to monopolize the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict resolution process while obstructing regional democratization efforts. This strategic move is consistent with its broader ambition to revive a semblance of the Soviet Union. As Western interest in the region wanes, both the Azerbaijani and Russian regimes are seizing the opportunity to consolidate their power. They do so by fabricating a narrative that portrays external forces as destabilizing threats, a narrative that resonates strongly with populist sentiments and helps solidify their support base.

Economic partnership with Russia is crucial for Azerbaijan, which seeks to leverage its strategic geographical location to establish itself as a pivotal transportation hub. The construction of North–South train connections, previously delayed by Iran's inaction, was given

a boost in May 2023, when Russia committed \$1.5 billion to the project.

With the peace agreement with Armenia deadlocked and the opening of the Zangezur corridor—which would connect Azerbaijan with its exclave Nakhichevan via Armenian territory—delayed, Azerbaijan suddenly stated that it was no longer interested but was negotiating with Iran over the construction of two bridges that would provide Azerbaijan with access to Nakhichevan, implying an improvement of Baku's relations with Iran. The geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus is thus still very much in the making.

## Conclusion

The war in Karabakh has weakened Armenia, which was previously seen as the main security threat facing Azerbaijan, and has undeniably boosted the confidence of the Azerbaijani leadership. Azerbaijan's coercive diplomacy with regard to Armenia is further strengthened by the support of Turkey. Despite this assertive foreign policy, however, the personalist regime in Azerbaijan is facing a number of domestic issues that require careful navigation, among them slow economic growth, pervasive corruption, and a low level of rule of law.

The Azerbaijani regime's assertive foreign policy stance may jeopardize the ongoing negotiations on a new comprehensive agreement with the EU, the implementation of which has now been delayed, to the detriment of long-awaited economic and structural reforms. Thus, the regime faces a challenging trade-off between its current status, domestic challenges, and relations with global actors. For example, Azerbaijan's recent actions have put its strategic relations with the US at risk, which could be detrimental to the country's long-term national interests. Moreover, many personalist regimes tend to resist much-needed economic and political reforms, as seen in the prolonged closure of borders ostensibly justified by the pandemic.

Following the retreat of Western institutions, the region is left to regional powers and small but assertive players such as Azerbaijan, which has steadily re-oriented itself to the post-Western order. However, Azerbaijan's re-alignment with Russia and other authoritarian powers in the region threatens to degrade the country's more or less positive image in the West and jeopardize the longstanding efforts of some Azerbaijanis to democratize.

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## ANALYSIS

# Uzbekistan–Russia Relations in Light of Leadership Change and the Ukrainian War

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000661339

### Abstract

Two trends are transforming contemporary Uzbek–Russian relations: first, the leadership change following long-serving president Islam Karimov’s death and Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s election as president of Uzbekistan; and second, Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine. This short paper analyses the influence of both domestic and external changes on the two countries’ relations.

In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian states emerged as independent entities in the realm of international relations. This newfound independence necessitated the reconstruction of their political and economic relations with the Russian Federation. Given their shared histories, as well as the distinctive geographic, geopolitical, and political realities of the region, ties with Russia have always played a crucial role in the foreign policies of the Central Asian states. Complicated but inevitable political and economic ties among these states have marked the past

three decades, with Uzbekistan’s relations with Russia under the first elected Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, being a striking example.

Uzbek–Russian relations have since the early 1990s been based on three pivotal intergovernmental agreements: the Treaty on the Foundations of Interstate Relations, Friendship and Cooperation (1992); the Treaty on Strategic Partnership (2004); and the Treaty on Allied Relations (2005), which set out the priority areas for the development of bilateral cooperation on political issues. Since Russia remains one of Uzbekistan’s top trade part-

ners in terms of both exports and imports, trade and economic ties play a crucial role in Uzbekistan–Russia relations, and economic factors are vital in shaping bilateral relations. The Program on Economic Cooperation for 2013–2017 and the intergovernmental agreement on the main directions of developing and strengthening economic partnership between countries for 2015–2019 represented a consequential step toward intensifying the ties between two states in the investment, trade, and transport spheres. Following these inter-governmental agreements, both sides agreed to increase the volume and range of Uzbek fruits and vegetables exported to Russia. However, no inter-governmental measures were taken to create favorable conditions for the growth of mutual trade until 2017. In October of that year, Uzbekistan unilaterally reduced excise taxes on groups of imported goods ranging from food to commercial vehicles.

The academic and analytical community exhibited significant interest in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy trajectory following the power transition that resulted from the death of the long-serving first president, Karimov, and the election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the new president. To my mind, two trends are transforming contemporary Uzbek–Russian relations: first, the leadership change following Karimov’s death and Mirziyoyev’s election; and second, the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine. This short paper analyzes the influence of both domestic and external changes on the two countries’ relations.

### Reorientation of Russian–Uzbek Relations under President Mirziyoyev

To start with the leadership change, the prevailing question among the academic and analytical mainstream was whether Mirziyoyev’s foreign policy would be more Russia-oriented than his predecessor’s and—as a corollary—whether his first state visit would be to Moscow. The new government’s first declaration of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy direction addressed to a domestic audience took place at a joint meeting of the Legislative Chamber and Senate of the Oliy Majlis in 2016. Mirziyoyev, then still prime minister, laid out in detail the country’s external activities and expressed his vision of building relations with other states. He declared that the main priority of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy was the Central Asian region, with which the country’s national interests were connected. Mirziyoyev underscored Uzbekistan’s dedication to maintaining an open, friendly, and pragmatic approach toward its immediate neighbors, chief among them Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Consequently, Mirziyoyev’s first state visit after being elected president was to Turkmenistan in March 2017, followed by a visit to Kazakhstan two weeks later. This marked an initial departure from Karimov’s foreign policy, which had

been characterized by bilateral relations without a specific emphasis on strengthening ties with neighbors and had even deteriorated in the final years of his presidency. Mirziyoyev’s third state visit, to the Russian Federation, came a month later, in April 2017.

Mirziyoyev’s visiting Russia in the first months of his presidency underlined that Uzbekistan was interested in advancing relations with Russia. In meetings, both sides highlighted that the strengthening of ties was mutually beneficial and discussed a wide range of issues on the bilateral agenda. The prospects of developing bilateral cooperation in the political, economic, investment, transport-communications, scientific-technical, cultural-humanitarian, and other spheres were to be thoroughly considered in the context of reinforcing the strategic partnership and alliance between Uzbekistan and Russia (President.uz 2017b). Over 50 agreements were signed during this visit (President.uz 2017a).

### New Cabinet Prioritizes Economic Relations

Even though Russia’s formerly predominant role in the region has somewhat waned and the influence of other outside powers, especially China, has grown in importance, Russia remains a crucial regional trading partner, wielding substantial political and security influence. According to Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan data from August 2023, Russia is Uzbekistan’s top trade partner, ranking first in exports at 10.5 percent of the total and second in imports of goods at 18.4 percent (Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2023). Uzbekistan mainly exports raw materials to Russia, chiefly natural gas and ferrous and non-ferrous metals, but also textiles, cotton fiber, and transport vehicles. Furthermore, Russia is a key export market for Uzbek fruits and vegetables: as Figure 1 on p. 10 shows, half of Uzbekistan’s exports of fruits and vegetable go to Russia. This is due in no small part to the “green corridor” initiative spearheaded by Mirziyoyev in 2017, which has facilitated an almost 36 percent increase in 2018 in the volume of fruit and vegetables exported from Uzbekistan to Russia (President.uz 2018).

For its part, Russia supplies Uzbekistan with transport vehicles, chemical and paper products, and food products. A total of 961 Uzbek–Russian joint ventures operate in Uzbekistan and a further 595 in the Russian Federation, while 64 Russian companies have opened representative offices in Uzbekistan (President.uz 2017c). During President Putin’s reciprocal visit to Uzbekistan in 2018, the two sides signed commercial deals worth \$27 billion (EurasiaNet 2020) that has substantially increased mutual trade in 2022, an increase of more than 25% (News Central Asia 2023). That same year, Russia’s Lukoil invested more than \$7 billion in joint

projects in Uzbekistan and commissioned the Kandym gas processing complex. Agreements on scientific-technical partnerships in the energy sector have been reached with the State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom (President.uz 2021). Thus, economic and trade relations have experienced growth in the past few years, due in part to the Uzbek government's strong interest in bilateral economic cooperation with the Russian Federation.

### **Triangular Energy Cooperation: Kazakhstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan**

The extremely cold winter of 2022–2023, during which households experienced periodic disruptions of their gas supplies, prompted the government of Uzbekistan to take immediate steps to address the country's energy issues by importing fuel. Kazakhstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan made a trilateral agreement that has seen Russia supply natural gas to Uzbekistan via the territory of Kazakhstan since October 2023 (UzDaily 2023). The fulcrum of this energy cooperation is the Central Asia–Center gas pipeline system, which dates back to the Soviet era. In the future, it might enable Russia to supply gas not only to Central Asia, but also from thence to Pakistan and India.

Mirziyoyev declared that this project had allowed Uzbekistan to take a major step toward energy security by diversifying guaranteed sources of “blue fuel” supplies, providing supplementary volumes to cover seasonal instabilities in gas consumption, and delivering a reliable and uninterrupted supply of gas and electricity to the population (President.uz 2023). Significantly, this form of cooperation with Russia is purely economic; Uzbekistan has not had to accept any political conditionality in exchange for the gas. This is due in no small part to the good bargaining position in which the Central Asian countries find themselves as a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine: with Russian gas currently cut off from European markets, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have significant discretion to set their own terms for any energy deal. It is vital for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to oppose any undesired political conditions proposed by the Russia or using this energy cooperation as a political instrument to limit both countries freedom in their external political and economic and trade relations with other non-regional players.

### **Uzbekistan Regains Its Role in Russian-Led Organizations**

Regarding the Uzbek government's position on Russian-dominated organizations, a major issue has been whether Uzbekistan should join the Eurasian Economic Union, which currently includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Recently, Russian ambassador to Uzbekistan Oleg Malginov said during a broad-

cast on the “Russia-24” TV channel that some external forces opposing Uzbekistan's accession to the EAEU (Kun.uz 2024). I think Uzbekistan is not hurrying to make its decision for the following two domestic reasons rather than external factors. First, what are the political conditions for joining a total Russian-led integration union? Will it limit Uzbekistan's maneuverability in external relations with other outside powers such as China, the US, and the EU? That's why Uzbekistan is cautious and loath to risk joining any integration process that might limit its ability to conduct an independent foreign policy. Moreover, whether it will affect Uzbekistan's foreign policy tradition of self-reliance and equally distant relations with other powers. The economic factors are the second concern that should be calculated in detail and analyzed to determine whether such Eurasian integrations address Uzbekistan's domestic economic interests. For now, Uzbekistan aims to be closely associated with the Union, enjoying nearly equal rights to member states without membership. In light of these concerns, Uzbekistan has opted for the status of an observer state in the Eurasian Economic Union, a status shared by Moldova and Cuba. This position enables the country to participate actively in meetings and advocate for its interests without shouldering any additional integration burden.

Mirziyoyev has stated that Uzbekistan is interested in close trade cooperation and is consistently working to bring national legislation closer to the norms of the Eurasian Economic Union, primarily when it comes to standardization and non-tariff measures for foreign trade, as well as the harmonization of technical regulations, sanitary, phytosanitary, and veterinary requirements (UzDaily 2023). Mirziyoyev had actively participated in adopting “Road Maps” to ensure the timely and full-scale implementation of signed documents and more than 100 initiatives on economic, trade, transport, cultural and scientific cooperation put forward by the Uzbek leader in 2017–2022. The primary end of such activeness by the Uzbek leader in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was to raise the observer states' right to implement critical initiatives and programs in the Eurasian space.

### **The Dyadic Effect of the Ukrainian War**

The current precarious political and economic situation in Eurasia as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine has prompted the leaders of Central Asian countries to be cautious regarding outside powers. In light of their interconnectedness and close cooperation with Russia, the Central Asian countries have shown restraint when discussing Russia's war against Ukraine but have been fairly outspoken in calling for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. The practical challenges confronting these



states are as follows: First of all, they must take steps to mitigate the far-reaching adverse effects of the war on their domestic economies, as Russia is a major economic and trade partner of every state in the region. Second, they must navigate the possible risk of sanctions from Western governments due to their ongoing close cooperation with Russia. Third, this unprecedented political crisis between the former Soviet states has inevitably sparked concerns about possible domino and spillover effects on Central Asia due to these states' geographic proximity to Russia.

Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin's recent public call for Russia to annex Uzbekistan provoked violent reactions and public debates among Uzbek citizens and officials. Russian Ambassador to Uzbekistan Oleg Malginov was summoned to the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tashkent, where he was told that the Uzbek side was "deeply concerned" about these "provocative" comments (Reuters 2023). In a meeting with young people, Tanzila Narbaeva, Chairperson of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of Uzbekistan, declared that Uzbekistan will not depend on anyone (Gazeta.uz 2023). Albeit that Maria Zakharova, Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, has stated that Prilepin was expressing his personal opinion, not the official position of the government (Daryo.uz 2023), his statement should send an alarming message to the Uzbek political elite. Moreover, since the massive territory of Kazakhstan lies between Russia and Uzbekistan, annexing Uzbekistan would—as Prilepin, an educated person, surely knows—require crossing Kazakhstan's border, and so his statement can also be considered an indirect threat to the Kazakh political elite. Even if they do not represent Russia's official position, Uzbek officials should not tolerate such public statements because they increase the hostility of public discourse. Especially against the background of the Russian war against Ukraine, such subversive speeches look like propaganda and might lead to a deterioration of relations between the two states.

Furthermore, the war has negatively affected the railway links between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, by which it used to be possible to export Uzbek goods to Europe via the Russian Federation. The closing borders and Western sanctions on Russia and its closest partners have limited Central Asian countries' access to European markets, resulting in decreasing the volume of trade these two regions. Consequently, the Central Asian states have been looking for other ways of entering global markets while bypassing Russia. For instance, Uzbekistan is interested in developing intra-regional transport routes that would provide it with access to the main sea trade routes. Prospective projects include the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, Uzbekistan–Turkme-

nistan–Iran–Oman, Termiz–Mazar-e-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar, and the Trans–Afghan Railway, which would connect the North–South and East–West of that country. In similar fashion, Kazakhstan is currently actively involved in developing Middle Corridor transport routes.

Nevertheless, a significant portion of Uzbekistan's cargo traffic continues to flow northward through Russia and Kazakhstan—for two reasons. First, the southern transport links were historically unpopular due to the unstable political situation in Afghanistan, while the railway lines toward China have gained significance only since the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative. Second, the existing transport links between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan were established when the latter was under Russian control, and these connections played a vital role in connecting the center with the peripheries by providing the technical support. However, during the Soviet period these transport links between Russia and Central Asia were intended by center not to increase the trade between them but to transport the raw materials to former's territory for further production of goods. Furthermore, seasonal and non-seasonal workers from Central Asia have historically made up much of the Russian labor force. Statistical data suggest that the workforce from Uzbekistan alone amounts to approximately three million individuals. Due to the war, part of these people decided to return home or lost their jobs. Following the announcement of mobilization in Russia, 318,156 of Russians have entered Uzbekistan from January to September in 2022 (Repost.uz 2022), and consequently, it has led to a surge in rental prices and housing costs, particularly in urban areas, including the capital, Tashkent. There is concern about the impact that this may have upon Central Asia's ethnic balance (Anceschi 2022).

Another risk for Uzbekistan, and for the Central Asian region as a whole, is the possibility of secondary sanctions. The United States has threatened to impose sanctions on individuals and companies located outside of Russia that assist in circumventing Western restrictions imposed due to the conflict in Ukraine. The local news website kun.uz points out the high probability of Uzbek companies falling under secondary sanctions for violating Western sanctions on Russia by exporting goods to Russia and Belarus (Kun.uz 2022). However, the war has also had some positive effects on Central Asian countries' domestic economies. Russian business people's renewed focus on this region and their desire to buy properties in Central Asian cities has boosted local real estate markets. This current dyadic effect of the ongoing war challenges the governments of the Central Asian states to predict the possible far-reaching political and economic effects and prevent potential adverse consequences.

## Conclusion

There are three conclusions to be drawn about Uzbekistan's contemporary relations with Russia. First, Mirziyoyev's foreign policy is characterized by a balanced approach, not oriented toward any major power. This should enable Uzbekistan to engage in economic cooperation with other states on an equal and beneficial basis.

Second, the overall transformation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy toward economic oriented foreign policy also has been reflected in relations with Russia. Today, the Uzbek side is most interested in the economic aspects

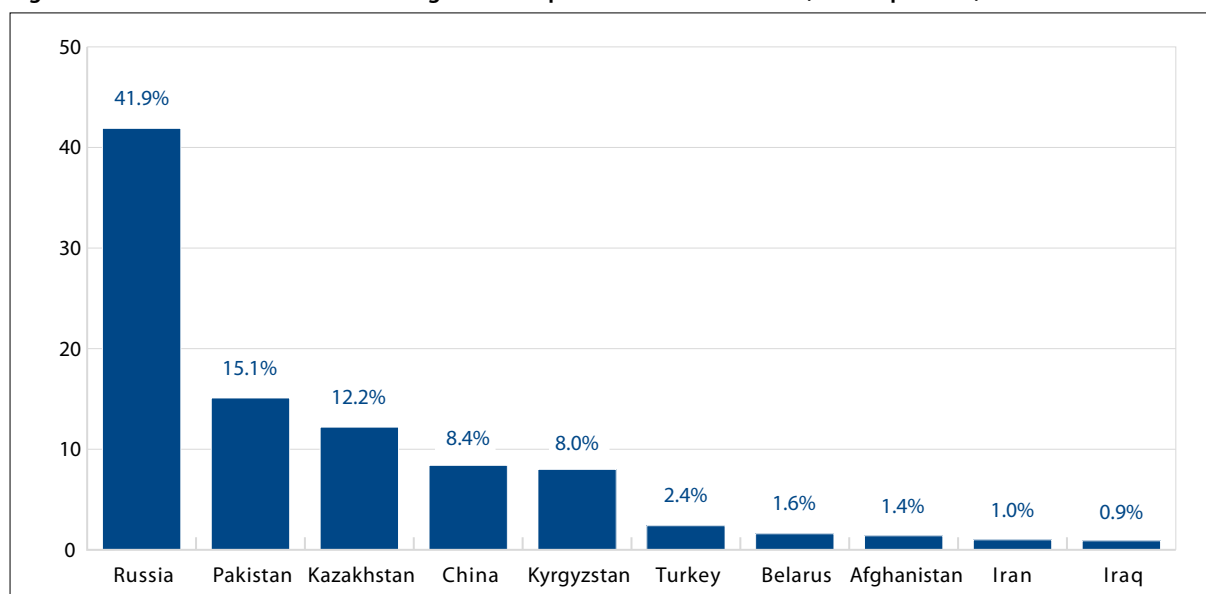
of bilateral cooperation with the Russian Federation, and the political and security cooperations have manifold significance for new Uzbek leadership.

Third, Uzbekistan has actively engaged in Russian-led regional organizations, including the EAEU, where the Uzbek leader has focused on promoting economic cooperation. Uzbekistan's status as an observer state of the EAEU provides manifold opportunities for Uzbekistan to promote its national interests within EAEU economic space without becoming subject to any political or integrational restraints.

### About the Author

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**Figure 1: Destinations of Fruit and Vegetables Exported from Uzbekistan (Jan.–Sept. 2023)**



Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Institute of Macroeconomic and Regional Research (IMRI).

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Editors: Fabian Burkhardt, Robert Ortting, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

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Responsible editor for this issue: Jeronim Perović

Language editing: Ellen Powell

Layout: Marin Dziallas, Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

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