

Uzbekistan: normalisation of relations with neighbours

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On 24 December, the President of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev visited Uzbekistan. During the visit it was announced that the negotiations regarding the delimitation and demarcation of borders and cross-border cooperation in the Fergana Valley, which had already started at a lower level, would be accelerated. Three days later, the Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Rustam Azimov signed a range of agreements during his visit to Tajikistan, including one restoring direct air links between the two countries, which had been suspended since 1992.

Commentary

- Both visits are part of the ongoing process of Uzbekistan's normalisation of relations with its neighbours, which began after the death of Islam Karimov on 29 August 2016 and the rise to power of Shavkat Mirziyayev, initially as acting president, and since 14 December as president. Under Karimov Uzbekistan, as Central Asia's most populous country, aspired to hegemony in the region, while its relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were strained. The contentious issues included water management and the delineation of borders in the Fergana Valley. The high degree of mistrust between Uzbekistan and its neighbours, frequent border incidents and even aggressive moves by Tashkent, such as the threat of armed conflict and regular blockades of the rail line to Tajikistan, prevented cooperation and posed a threat to the stability of the region.
- In the bilateral dimension, the normalisation of Uzbekistan's relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan now covers fundamental issues such as resuming discussion on delineating the frontiers, preventing border incidents, increasing trade, and in the case of Tajikistan, restoring the air links and liberalising visa requirements. This is a fundamental paradigm shift in the policy of Uzbekistan towards its neighbours: guaranteeing its interests through cooperation, and not by isolation and threats. Mirziyayev's consolidation of power has not yet been fully completed, so the success of the country's normalisation of relations with its neighbours, although likely, is not certain.
- On the regional level, Mirziyayev's actions are strengthening the position of Uzbekistan, and potentially will allow it to play a stabilising role in the area. This significantly increases the attractiveness of the centrally-located Uzbekistan to external actors interested in the stability of Central Asia (especially China). The growing importance of Tashkent to Beijing, in turn, may contribute to improving Uzbekistan's position vis-a-vis other players in the region, principally Kazakhstan and Russia. This latter is important for

Mirziyayev, who so far has enjoyed Moscow's support, yet in order to further consolidate his power in the country must also secure the support of China, which will allow him greater room for political manoeuvre, both internally and regionally.