

Russia's ostentatious return to Uzbekistan

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The Russian president Vladimir Putin visited Uzbekistan on 18–19 October; this was his first visit to the country since Shavkat Mirziyoyev took power. The Russian delegation consisted of around 1,200 members (including local politicians, businessmen and 80 university heads). It was announced during the visit that a number of economic agreements worth a total of approximately US\$27 billion would be signed, including those concerning the energy (for example, the construction of a nuclear power plant) and arms sectors, and clearing the legal status of Uzbek migrants in Russia (around 2 million people). A number of co-operation agreements in such areas as culture and science (for example, opening university branches) and the military sector (for example, plans for the joint use of airspace were agreed) were signed. The crowning point of the visit was the informal summit of the presidents of Russia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in Saryagash (Kazakhstan).

Commentary

- President Putin's spectacular visit symbolically marks the end of the period of consolidation of power in the country by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who took office in 2016. Mirziyoyev skilfully navigated the succession of power after the death of President Islam Karimov, launched limited liberal reforms, normalised the strained relations with the neighbours and is currently developing co-operation with global powers (including China and the USA, where he went on a visit). Putin's visit came as a sign of recognition from Russia, which is Uzbekistan's most important and most difficult partner (Tashkent does not participate in the integration projects led by the Russian Federation: the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Community). The scale of political and economic co-operation declared by Russia strengthens Uzbekistan's international position (regional and supra-regional) and gives it hope for a modernisation boost in the form of the influx of investments and technologies.
- As viewed by Russia, Uzbekistan is traditionally the largest challenge in Central Asia, given its central location and political and demographic potential as well as Uzbekistan's ambitions to conduct an independent domestic and international policy. The factors that decide on Uzbekistan's increasing importance include the growing concerns – shared by Moscow and Tashkent – about the region's stability, the tension in individual countries, the manner of conducting the expected succession in Kazakhstan, the development of the conflict in Afghanistan and, finally, the consequences of China's expansion in the

region. The country's greater openness in foreign policy under Mirziyoyev's rule offers the opportunity to rebuild Uzbekistan's closer bonds with Russia and forces Moscow to create a tailored offer for Tashkent.

- In the past, the generous offer of benefits presented by Russia to Uzbekistan on numerous occasions remained solely on the level of declarations. Most likely the situation will be similar in the case of part of the present projects (for example, the promise of building a nuclear power plant in Uzbekistan). The shared awareness of the challenges and limitations both countries are facing will encourage Russia and Uzbekistan to search for an effective co-operation formula. However, it should not be expected that Tashkent will give up its regional ambitions and continue its multi-vectoral policy.