

# Central Asia as the New Indo-Pacific Power

*The Central Asian states may finally find cohesion ... and warm water ports in the Indian Ocean.*

**T**HE STRATEGIC BALANCE IN Eurasia seemed to have been clarified meaningfully by actions taken in Tashkent on November 29, 2019, by five key Central Asian states.

It began the transformation of Central Asia into a key component of the Indo-Pacific — particularly the Indian Ocean — trading and strategic region.

Those five key states in the region — Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan — agreed to the start of a process which could evolve a new economic and geostrategic “space”, giving them significant economic and security advantages while ensuring that the dominance of Beijing and Moscow on the Continent was offset.

The fact that the actions by leaders of the five states occurred almost simultaneously with a visit by US Pres. Donald Trump to Afghanistan on November 28, 2019 — to signal a determination to achieve a path toward ending the war in that country — indicated that a path could be achieved for the Central Asian states to achieve access to the Indian Ocean trading basin via Afghanistan and Pakistan (and later, potentially, via Iran), may be a pivotal force multiplier. Added to these actions was a concurrent, ministerial-level conference (November 28-30, 2019) in the Kazakhstan capital city, Nursultan (formerly Astana), sponsored by the European Union on “Enhanced Integration for Prosperity in Central Asia”, which also anticipated the implementation in 2020 of the new EU Central Asia strategy was adopted by European Union member countries on June 17, 2019.

A key to the significance of two of these developments — the Tashkent “consultative” summit, and the Trump visit to Afghanistan — was the speed and secrecy with which they were initiated. The Tashkent Summit was publicly announced only some four days before it occurred. The Trump visit to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan was announced only after he arrived there. There was considerable care that these events, which could significantly modulate the options of Moscow and

Beijing, would not be influenced by opposing political forces in the US, Russia, or the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Pres. Trump, before meeting with US military personnel celebrating Thanksgiving at Bagram Air Base, met with Afghanistan Pres. Ashraf Ghani. Pres. Ghani, also addressing the US personnel, complimented Pres. Trump for taking out leadership of the region’s major terrorist groups, noting: “President Trump, people talked a lot about [Osama] bin Laden — but what you did to eliminate [Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi who was an organizer and not a talker — is a much greater accomplishment.” This was an important signal that the Government of Afghanistan was on board with Pres. Trump’s initiative to achieve a negotiated settlement with the opposition *Taliban*. He noted, in his meeting with Pres. Ghani: “The Taliban wants to make a deal, and we’re meeting with them. ... We’re going to stay until such time as we have a deal, or we have total victory, and they want to make a deal very badly.” Significantly, the US media, overwhelmingly committed to opposing Pres. Trump, translated the Afghanistan visit in domestic US political terms, and did not comprehend the fact that it could indicate the revival of US strategic objectives which began with the end of the Cold War to ensure permanent US access to Central Asia; a strategy essentially side-tracked and destroyed by the way in which the later US administrations of Pres. George. W. Bush and Barack Obama conducted the war in Afghanistan, abandoning and alienating potential allies in Central Asia.

So the Trump visit to Afghanistan was a bonus for the five Central Asian states, and vindicates their attempts — and particularly those of the new Uzbekistan Administration of Pres. Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyayev — to open greater investment, trade, and

tourism ties with the US and other Western states to balance the region’s economic reliance on Russia and the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Significantly, the governments of the five states recognized that they were not attempting to reduce economic and geopolitical ties with Russia or the PRC, but rather to balance them with additional linkages. Nonetheless, Moscow and Beijing could only interpret the coalescing of the new Central Asian trading region as a reduction in their duopoly. And the fact that Pres. Mirziyayev was to undertake an official visit Japan on December 17-20, 2019, highlighted how significantly Tokyo viewed the opportunity, to the point where the Japanese Government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had essentially ensured that the visit was elevated to the level of a State Visit. The Japanese Foreign Ministry noted on November 29, 2019: “During their stay in Japan, the President and Mrs Mirziyoyeva will make a State Call on His Majesty the Emperor of Japan [the newly-enthroned Emperor Naruhito], and His Majesty the Emperor will host a Court Luncheon in honor of the President and Mrs Mirziyoyeva. Her Majesty the Empress will attend these events if condition of Her Majesty permits. Mr Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan will hold a summit meeting with the President. Prime Minister and Mrs Abe will host a dinner for the President and his spouse.”

There was no ambiguity in the opening conclusion of the “Joint Statement of the Consultative meeting of the heads of states of Central Asia”, issued on November 29, 2019, in Tashkent. The five leaders recognized that they were now in an extremely fluid strategic framework. Point One of the Joint statement noted: “In the conditions of dynamic development of international processes, emergence of new threats, and at the same time, of new favorable opportunities for sustainable development of the states of Central Asia, the demand for a trustworthy dialogue, political consultations and practical inter-

actions among them increases manifold. It is necessary to fully exploit these opportunities in the interests of our countries, striving to make Central Asia a secure and prosperous region.”

One of the significant aspects of the Consultative Meeting was that the leader representing Kazakhstan was not Pres. Qasym-Jomart Toqayev, but, instead, First President and *Elbasy* (Leader of the Nation) Nursultan Äbishuly Nazarbayev, 78, who remains Chairman of the Security Council and of the governing *Nur Otan* Party.

The substantive Joint Statement was also considered in light of the planning among the five states to introduce a Central Asian version of the European Union’s “Schengen zone” visa, which would permit free travel within the five states (ie: without separate visas) and enable out-of-region visitors to access more easily the entire zone. Already, travel into the region by foreign nationals has been increasing dramatically. Uzbekistan noted that in 2018, foreign nationals visiting the country had increased by 230 percent (to some 5.3-million visitors) over 2017. In 2019, Uzbekistan substantially eased visa constraints on travelers from an additional 45 countries. This, essentially, represented part of the transformation of the country following the death on September 2, 2016, of Pres. Islam Karimov, and the sweeping transformation of political, social, and economic structures by the incoming Administration of Pres. Mirziyayev.

The “Consultative Meeting” was billed as the second such gathering of Central Asian leaders. The first was on March 15, 2018, in Nursultan, Kazakhstan. Earlier, on January 2, 1998, a meeting of Central Asian heads-of-state had taken place in Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan. The 2019 meeting recognized the significance of transforming the series into an ongoing dialog platform, indicating the possible development of a new formalized structure of the five states.

The Joint Statement, significantly, included reference to water issues, a source of considerable delicacy between the regional states, particularly given the results of Stalinist policies in the Soviet era, both destroying the framework of river flows to the Aral Sea, and polluting large areas of land and water resources (not merely as a result of nuclear and chemical/biological waste dumping, but also including the

salinization of large areas of formerly highly-productive arable land).

In the meantime, Uzbekistan was preparing for parliamentary elections on December 22, 2019, which were intended to showcase the growing commitment to locking in political transparency under the Mirziyayev Administration. The International Strategic Studies Association (ISSA) was asked to participate in monitoring these multi-party elections. The elections were seen as critical in confirming a stable process for foreign direct investment in, and trade with, Uzbekistan, which had, during the previous two years, been steadily building its capital markets.

The linkage between the transformation now emerging in Central Asia and a process to stabilize the security situation in Afghanistan placed a clear imperative on the US to re-develop related strategic links with Pakistan and Azerbaijan to facilitate trade access to the region, and, among other things, to bring Central Asia into the Indian Ocean trading basin. This represents a significant challenge to Washington, given its recent frictions with Turkey (bordering Azerbaijan) and Pakistan (bordering Afghanistan), and US attempts to balance relationships with both India and Pakistan. India and Iran have their own agendas in dealing with the Central Asian region, and these are constrained by current US economic sanctions on Iran. India has moved to begin development of rail linkages from the Iranian port of Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman/Arabian Sea coast, 900km northward inside Iran on its border with Afghanistan, to reach Afghan (and subsequently Central Asian) markets. [The 2011 agreement to create a Chabahar-Zahedan-Bam-Hajigaz rail link; this was followed by a May 2016 MOU under which India would finance the planned Chabahar-Zahedan section of the rail link.]

Uzbekistan, in particular, envisages the prospect of a rail link from Tashkent into Afghanistan, and, ultimately, across to Pakistan and thence linking to the rail link down to the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi. Rail linkage into Afghanistan from Iran (linking to the Indian-financed line to Chabahar) would provide another outlet to the Indian Ocean. Transport links from the Central Asian region across the Caspian to Baku, Azerbaijan, would also have the ability to then provide a direct shipping link from Central Asian states

through Turkey to the Mediterranean and Europe. How this process evolves depends on a range of factors, including whether the US would wish to jeopardize its links with India by using the Iran sanctions to constrain Indian-run trade through Chabahar, or whether the US Administration could circumvent public and Congressional constraints on Turkey to ensure smooth trade with Central Asia via Azerbaijan. Indeed, the stability or otherwise of Eastern Turkey remains a factor in the appeal of this corridor, but Central Asian trade through Azerbaijan could provide a significant boost to transit revenues as a source of earnings for economically-stressed Turkey.

And in all of this, we see the Turkey-PRC relationship again becoming confrontational as Turkey escalates its support for the Turkic Uighur population of the PRC’s Xinjiang region. Beijing, as a result, notes with caution the present alliance of opportunity between Iran and Turkey.

The developments by the Central Asian leaders, then, represent both challenge and opportunity for the PRC and Russia, and opportunity and challenge for the US and its allies. The developments also add significant texture to the southward strategic thrust of Moscow and to Beijing’s hopes of a seamless “Belt and Road Initiative” dominance through Eurasia and the Northern Tier states to link with its African supply chain operations. On the other hand, PRC engagement with the developments proposed by the Central Asian states, particularly on rectifying the Stalinist water destruction (or diversion, in some instances, to cotton production), could significantly improve the agricultural prospects of the region and help provide the food support which the PRC so desperately needs. The region, particularly Uzbekistan, cannot safely transform its water use needs away from cotton, which has become a staple for exports, so creative new thinking and large-scale projects are likely to be required. And yet the snowfall and glacial water situation on the Tien Shan mountain range — which runs along the Kyrgyz-PRC border — is now stressed, and water flow is reducing (to both the PRC and the Central Asian states).

So the challenges are as great for the region and international players as are the opportunities. But Central Asia is now strategically on the move. ★