

Eurasiatica

Quaderni di studi su Balcani, Anatolia,  
Iran, Caucaso e Asia Centrale 13

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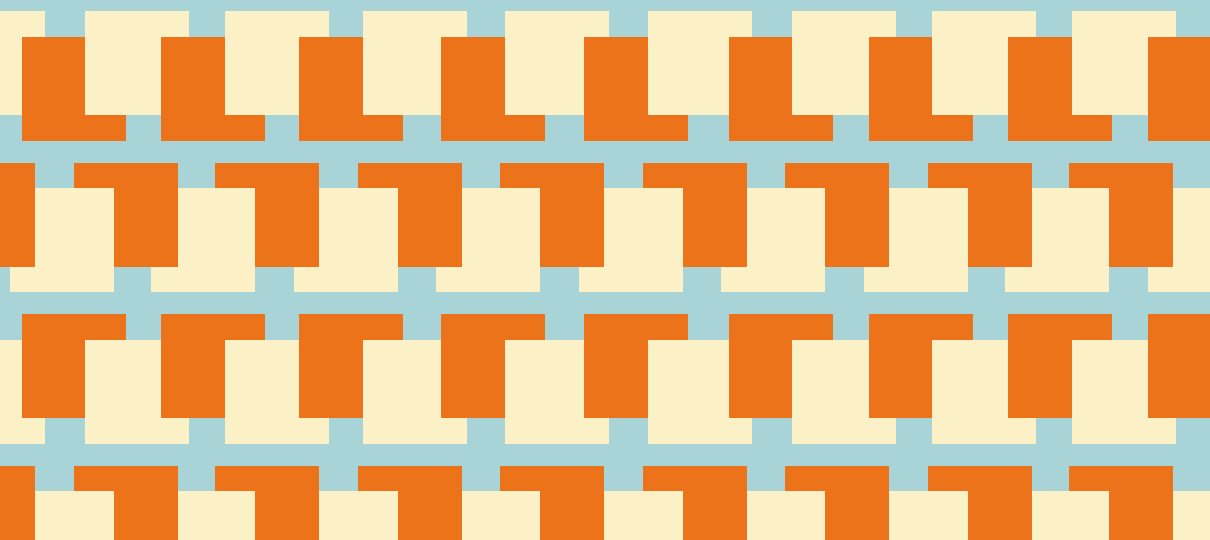
# Monitoring Central Asia and the Caspian Area

Development Policies,  
Regional Trends,  
and Italian Interests

edited by  
Carlo Frappi and Fabio Indeo



**Edizioni**  
Ca' Foscari





Monitoring Central Asia and the Caspian Area

## **Eurasiatica**

Serie diretta da  
Aldo Ferrari

13



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# **Eurasiatica**

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Carlo Frappi, Fabio Indeo (edited by)

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## **Monitoring Central Asia and the Caspian Asia**

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# Prefazione

Stefano Ravagnan

Quando arrivai in Kazakhstan, nell'agosto del 2014, alcuni elementi mi colpirono già nelle prime settimane dall'assunzione dell'incarico.

Sul piano bilaterale, il rilievo della presenza imprenditoriale italiana in settori cruciali dell'economia kazaka, risalente ai primi anni dell'indipendenza del Paese, con un dinamismo ed una capacità di scommettere su un mercato all'epoca molto incerto che ancora oggi riscuote l'apprezzamento delle Autorità del Paese; in secondo luogo, l'interesse nei confronti dell'Italia diffuso a tutti i livelli pur con motivazioni differenti, dalle persone più adulte legate alle canzoni di San Remo ai giovani alla ricerca di moda e design, fino agli imprenditori interessati al nostro modello di PMI. In negativo avevo invece osservato la limitata attenzione delle nostre strutture di ricerca ed accademiche rispetto alla regione centro-asiatica, troppo spesso letta e studiata ancora in maniera quasi inerziale attraverso la Russia, quasi continuasse ad esserne di fatto un'appendice.

Sul piano generale mi colpì l'assenza di una dimensione specificamente regionale nella politica estera del Kazakhstan, che sembrava più a suo agio nei grandi spazi della politica mondiale piuttosto che nei rapporti con i Paesi vicini nonostante le tante affinità storiche e culturali e le molte complementarità economiche. Si assisteva quindi alla messa in campo di grandi iniziative di spessore internazionale, quale la candidatura al Consiglio di Sicurezza dell'Onu, ma molto più limitata appariva l'attenzione posta al miglioramento ad esempio dei transiti frontalieri con i 'cugini' kirghisi.

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Le opinioni sono espresse a titolo personale e non sono riconducibili al Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

Nel giro di solo qualche anno la situazione è cambiata profondamente e nell'aprile del 2018, quando arrivava a conclusione il mio mandato, potevo constatare come stesse finendo l'apparente immobilismo centro-asiatico, in un contesto regionale messo in movimento innanzi tutto dal cambio al vertice nel 2016 in Uzbekistan, spinto dal nuovo Presidente ad uscire dal lungo auto-isolamento ed a proporsi invece come campione di un nuovo regionalismo centro-asiatico. A costo di affrontare i nodi strutturali lasciati irrisolti dall'epoca sovietica - delimitazione delle frontiere, gestione delle risorse idriche, tutela delle rispettive minoranze - sui quali spesso gli attori esterni hanno fatto leva per mantenere la propria influenza sull'area. Un messaggio di apertura raccolto dal Kazakhstan, pronto a superare le animosità bilaterali del periodo Karimov e - a marcare comunque la volontà di non rinunciare alla leadership regionale - ad accogliere nel marzo del 2018 un primo vertice informale dei Paesi centro-asiatici, un evento di enorme portata simbolica che proprio in questi giorni viene replicato a Tashkent.

Ma rileva anche l'accordo di principio sullo statuto legale del Mar Caspio, finalizzato nell'agosto del 2018 nel vertice dei cinque Paesi rivieraschi svoltosi nell'unico porto kazako, Aktau. E naturalmente incide molto la Nuova Via della Seta di matrice cinese, che per la componente terrestre vede l'Asia Centrale come uno degli snodi principali, spingendo gli Stati della Regione a coordinarsi fra loro e a fare massa critica per poter essere interlocutori meno deboli rispetto a Pechino.

In definitiva, dopo un quarto di secolo dall'indipendenza, la Regione sembra avviata a modificare profondamente il proprio profilo, ad uscire dalla marginalità politica ed economica cui l'aveva spinta non solo la geografia ma anche la quantità di contrasti al suo interno ed oggi può aspirare ad essere un'area meglio integrata e al contempo meglio connessa con l'esterno, con quanto di rilevante ne consegue in termini di attrattività per gli attori economici stranieri. Dinamiche non a caso seguite con crescente attenzione anche dalle sedi istituzionali italiane, come dimostra la conferenza Italia-Asia Centrale ospitata il 13 dicembre alla Farnesina, mentre in novembre si è riunito a Milano un importante Business Forum con il Turkmenistan.

Un nuovo dinamismo regionale che senza dubbio dovrà affrontare non poche difficoltà, a partire dalle vischiosità del passato testimoniate dagli ancora ricorrenti incidenti alle frontiere. Del resto nel frattempo la Regione si è divisa tra i partecipanti all'Unione Economica Euroasiatica a traino russo (Kazakhstan e Kyrgyzstan) e chi ha preferito rimanerne fuori, una situazione che incide profondamente sulle potenzialità di un futuro mercato integrato centro-asiatico, tanto che oggi anche l'Uzbekistan riflette sull'opportunità di aderire all'Unione, un'ipotesi nemmeno immaginabile solo qualche anno fa. Per non parlare dei ritardi nei processi di diversificazione econo-

mica nei Paesi ricchi di materie prime, o, sul piano politico, del perdurante rischio di instabilità proveniente dallo scacchiere afgano.

Un'enorme Regione divisa tra grandi prospettive di cambiamento e pesanti ipoteche sul suo sviluppo della quale ho continuato ad interessarmi anche dopo il rientro al Ministero pur occupandomi di altre questioni, condividendo tale interesse con esperti quali, sul lato accademico, Carlo Frappi, Fabio Indeo e Roberto De Girolamo, e su quello imprenditoriale, Eugenio Novario. Al punto che abbiamo deciso di mettere a disposizione, a titolo gratuito, tempo e passione per costituire un piccolo ma ambizioso Osservatorio sull'Asia Centrale ed il Caspio, potendo contare sul sostegno di due importanti sponsor privati (le Società Bonatti ed Expertise/Kios) e sul supporto dell'Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, che della proiezione verso Oriente ha fatto da tempo una priorità.

Ci siamo posti alcuni precisi obiettivi:

- Realizzare un network tra gli esperti italiani di Asia Centrale, ovunque prestino la propria attività. Vi sono nostri qualificati ricercatori in Università britanniche e tedesche o nella Regione stessa, e ci sembra opportuno da un lato offrire loro l'occasione di farsi meglio conoscere in Italia e dall'altro raggiungere loro tramite centri accademici particolarmente specializzati sull'Asia Centrale;
- Consolidare relazioni di collaborazione con le maggiori istituzioni di ricerca italiane e con le sedi istituzionali, a partire dal Ministero degli Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale con la rete di Ambasciate;
- Avviare rapporti di partenariato con istituzioni quali l'Accademia OSCE a Bishkek, che annovera molti qualificati ricercatori e costituisce un valido punto di osservazione per le dinamiche nell'area partendo da un Paese piccolo per dimensioni, come il Kirgizstan, ma da sempre privilegiato per la sua apertura all'esterno;
- Analizzare la politica dell'Unione Europea verso la Regione, quale da ultimo cristallizzata nella nuova Strategia per l'Asia Centrale, date le sue importanti ricadute ed i potenziali benefici anche per la nostra proiezione economica e culturale nell'area, tema cui è dedicato un workshop organizzato in questi giorni a Ca'Foscari;
- Il tutto avendo come fine ultimo quello di presentare alle imprese italiane le opportunità offerte dai piani di sviluppo dei vari Paesi - dai grandi progetti infrastrutturali alle riforme per migliorare il business climate - valorizzando in particolare la nuova dinamica di cooperazione regionale che consente di prevedere nel medio termine un mercato meglio integrato di almeno 70 milioni di persone e valorizzando altresì gli interventi delle grandi Istituzioni Finanziarie Internazionali, che nell'area

molto investono con progetti focalizzati sul sostegno alla cooperazione regionale che spesso sono di sicuro interesse per la nostra imprenditoria.

L'Osservatorio agisce all'interno dell'Associazione per lo Studio in Italia dell'Asia Centrale e del Caucaso (ASIAC), non ha alcuna affiliazione politica e persegue obiettivi di esclusivo carattere analitico e di ricerca. Inaugurato lo scorso aprile, prevede di organizzare almeno un evento annuale con la partecipazione di esperti dall'Asia Centrale e dalla comunità di esperti italiani, oltre ad assicurare il proprio apporto alle conferenze organizzate da enti terzi che abbiano profili di interesse per la Regione.

L'auspicio è quello di fare dell'Osservatorio una piattaforma di dialogo e confronto con il più ampio coinvolgimento di ricercatori italiani, europei e, specialmente, dei cinque Paesi interessati, oltre che di offrire un piccolo ma qualificato contributo al più ampio dibattito sulla dimensione euro-asiatica della politica estera italiana, un tema che sarà sempre più rilevante con riferimento alle sfide ed opportunità poste dalla Cina o al ruolo di Russia, Turchia e, appunto, Asia Centrale.

# Uno sguardo all'area centro-asiatica e caspica

## Le politiche di sviluppo, le tendenze regionali, gli interessi italiani.

### Introduzione al volume

**Carlo Frappi**

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

**Fabio Indeo**

Nato Defense College Foundation

Il presente volume della serie «Eurasiatrica. Quaderni di Studi su Balcani, Anatolia, Iran, Caucaso e Asia Centrale» è interamente dedicato all'area centro-asiatica e caspica. Raccoglie alcuni dei contributi presentati da studiosi italiani e centro-asiatici nel corso del convegno di studi intitolato *Monitoring Central Asia and the Caspian Region. Development Policies, Regional Trends, and Italian Interests*, tenutosi presso l'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia nell'aprile 2019. A questi si aggiungono analisi redatte da studiosi italiani afferenti a università estere.

Scopo del volume - e del convegno da cui ha preso spunto - è di catturare e restituire al lettore una parte delle rilevanti trasformazioni istituzionali, politiche ed economiche che stanno interessando l'area centro-asiatica. Lungi dal rivolgersi ai soli studiosi d'area, il volume muove dal presupposto che guardare all'Asia centrale aiuti a comprendere dinamiche che trascendono i confini della regione, a inquadrare cioè processi e tendenze che caratterizzano il sistema

internazionale post-bipolare e la più ampia convivenza nello spazio eurasiatico. Autoritarismo e ibridizzazione della democrazia, sviluppo post-coloniale e neo-imperialismo, regionalismo e ruolo delle piccole potenze nel sistema internazionale, sviluppo delle vie di comunicazione euro-asiatiche e cooperazione energetica sono solo alcuni dei temi oggi al centro del dibattito internazionale cui l'Asia centrale offre terreno privilegiato di analisi e che trovano riscontro nei contributi al presente volume. Intercettare e rappresentare queste dinamiche e questi temi è lo scopo del presente volume, che - sullo sfondo del crescente interesse istituzionale e imprenditoriale italiano verso l'area - mira non secondariamente a delineare gli interessi e le priorità di azione del Sistema Paese nei rapporti con gli interlocutori centro-asiatici e caspici.

Il volume è idealmente suddiviso in tre parti. Nella prima di esse, i contributi di Emilbek Dzhuraev (OSCE Academy), Filippo Costa Buranelli (University of St Andrews), Antonio Somma (Development Bank of Kazakhstan), Fabio Indeo (Osservatorio Asia Centrale e Caspio) e Aliya Tskhay (University of St Andrews) danno conto di alcune tra le più rilevanti tendenze che si dipanano a livello regionale, in termini di conduzione della politica estera, politico-istituzionale, economico-infrastrutturale ed energetici. In particolare, il contributo di Dzhuraev si concentra sulle direttrici di politica estera delle repubbliche centro-asiatiche, proponendo una visione *inside-out* della politica regionale incentrata sulle rispettive strategie di adattamento alle dinamiche della competizione regionale di potenza. In questa prospettiva, il saggio mostra l'evoluzione, le diverse declinazioni e le criticità che riguardano il corso multi-vettoriale di politica estera intrapreso dalle Repubbliche centro-asiatiche. Il contributo di Costa Buranelli offre invece un'efficace interpretazione della declinazione del concetto di sovranità in Asia centrale, 'localizzandolo' nel contesto storico, geografico, sociale e politico della regione. Per questa via, il saggio evidenzia il ruolo centrale che il carattere autoritario e la natura post-coloniale dell'area giocano nella declinazione e nella pratica della sovranità negli stati centro-asiatici. Alle dinamiche dello sviluppo economico e infrastrutturale sono infine dedicati gli articoli di Somma e Indeo: mentre il primo esamina l'attuazione degli Obiettivi di Sviluppo Sostenibile delle Nazioni Unite in Asia centrale, mettendone in luce i successi e le criticità e concentrandosi sulle opportunità derivanti dall'interazione tra settore pubblico e privato, il contributo di Indeo guarda al recente sviluppo di una cooperazione 'endogena' in Asia centrale, nel quadro del rafforzamento dell'interconnettività regionale lungo la 'moderna Via della seta' e della crescente centralità assunta dall'Uzbekistan. Al comparto energetico guarda, infine, il contributo di Aliya Tskhay, che offre una panoramica sullo sviluppo dell'energia nucleare e delle rinnovabili in Asia centrale. Il saggio mette in luce il peso determinante che le fonti

energetiche fossili - carbone, petrolio, gas naturale - continuano a rivestire nel paniere energetico degli attori regionali, nonostante l'elevato potenziale di sviluppo delle alternative fonti primarie di energia.

Nella seconda parte del volume la prospettiva d'analisi muove da un piano regionale a uno statale, attraverso contributi incentrati sulle più significative dinamiche che, in Asia centrale, vanno dipanandosi a livello nazionale. All'Uzbekistan guardano i saggi di Farhod Tolipov (Bilim Karvoni Institute), Luca Anceschi (University of Glasgow) e Tommaso Trevisani (Università di Napoli «L'Orientale»). I primi due, in particolare, si soffermano sulle dinamiche della transizione politico-istituzionale aperta dall'uscita di scena, nel 2016, dell'ex-Presidente Islom Karimov. Tolipov, da una parte, si concentra sulle ripercussioni esterne messe in moto dalla transizione, mettendo in relazione le trasformazioni avviate nella Repubblica uzbeka con l'ascesa del nuovo presidente Shavkat Mirziyoyev con l'evoluzione della cooperazione regionale, per rimarcare il ruolo di motore di integrazione regionale che Tashkent sembra assumere con il superamento della politica isolazionista perseguita nel venticinquennio karimoviano. Il saggio di Anceschi, d'altra parte, muovendo dalla teoria della modernizzazione autoritaria guarda alla dimensione interna della transizione istituzionale, mettendo in luce come il processo di cambiamento in atto nel Paese, lungi dal tradursi in una liberalizzazione del panorama politico, sembri piuttosto manifestare un approfondimento delle pratiche autoritarie. Al comparto agricolo dell'Uzbekistan guarda invece il contributo di Trevisani, che traccia i contorni di un ulteriore e rilevante piano sul quale va dipanandosi la transizione post-Karimov. Il saggio, dedicato al mutamento della struttura agraria nazionale nella fase successiva al conseguimento dell'indipendenza, delinea infatti le sfide risultanti dal processo di de-collettivizzazione e dal superamento del sistema del *kolchoz*, che hanno determinato l'emersione di nuove e multiformi tipologie di conflittualità sociale e, più in generale, di una nuova questione agraria con la quale la Presidenza Mirziyoyev è chiamata oggi a confrontarsi.

I contributi seguenti, realizzati da Nicola Contessi (Nazarbayev University) e Fabrizio Vielmini (Westminster International University) si incentrano sulla Repubblica del Kazakistan. Muovendo da una visione diacronica della politica estera kazaka e dal bilanciamento di nazionalismo, attivismo e internazionalismo, Contessi mette in luce schemi comportamentali che, nonostante la natura autoritaria del Paese, sembrano conferire al Kazakistan gli attributi propri di una media potenza nella gerarchia di potere internazionale. Il saggio di Vielmini si concentra, invece, sulle dinamiche della transizione di potere aperta dalle dimissioni di Nursultan Nazarbayev, delineando i contorni della sfida internazionale e interna che attende i decisori politici nazionali nel tentativo di salvaguardare l'eredità della politi-

ca estera multi-vettoriale sullo sfondo della necessità di rifondare la discreditata legittimità del governo.

A chiudere la seconda parte del volume è il saggio di Andrea Carati (Università di Milano), che offre una prospettiva regionale sul disimpegno internazionale dall'Afghanistan, evidenziando, a partire dalle interdipendenze tra le influenze globali e quelle locali, la finestra di opportunità che va dischiudendosi per gli attori centro-asiatici.

Nella terza e ultima parte del volume i saggi di Stefano Bonaldo (Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mare Adriatico Settentrionale) e di Paolo Sorbello (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia; University of Glasgow) focalizzano l'attenzione su due comparti prioritari che trainano tradizionalmente l'attenzione del Sistema Paese italiano verso lo spazio caspico e centro-asiatico: trasporti ed energia. Il contributo di Bonaldo affronta il tema delle vie di comunicazione marittima sull'asse tra il Mar Caspio, il Mar Nero e il Mar Adriatico, delineando le sfide e le opportunità che l'Italia fronteggia nella prospettiva di apertura di una 'via d'acqua' in un contesto caratterizzato da un'ancora incerta politica europea e da una competizione internazionale che vede il Sistema Paese interagire e confrontarsi con le strategie infrastrutturali cinesi e russe. Alla cooperazione energetica tra Italia e interlocutori centro-asiatici - e, in particolare, Kazakhstan - è dedicato il contributo di Sorbello che, oltre a tracciare le più recenti dinamiche di scambi e investimenti, si focalizza sul ruolo che la multinazionale Eni ha avuto nel formare e gestire la diplomazia energetica nella regione. In particolare, sullo sfondo delle differenti e divergenti attitudini dei paesi centro-asiatici verso gli investimenti stranieri, Eni e l'Italia sono riusciti a intavolare rapporti più stretti con il Kazakhstan, dove Eni partecipa a due dei principali progetti di estrazione di petrolio e gas. Oltre agli investimenti, l'articolo analizza anche le strategie di mercato delle aziende collegate alle attività di Eni e come queste attività si intersecano con il lavoro della diplomazia italiana.



# ‘Multi-Vectoral’ Central Asia On the Other Side of Major Power Agendas

Emilbek Dzhuraev  
OSCE Academy in Bishkek

**Abstract** In a period of fast-evolving international dynamics over the Central Asian region, it is important to consider the foreign policy choices and exercised agency by the governments of the five states of the region. While the projects and agendas of China, Russia, the United States and other external players over the region have understandably dominated much recent discourse, the ‘inside-out’ perspective – the Central Asian policies and stances toward international affairs and geopolitics involving them – is necessary to draw a more accurate picture of the region’s international affairs. Such a perspective would reveal the evolution and variations of the regional foreign policies of ‘multi-vectorism’ and challenges such policies face today.

**Keywords** Central Asia. ‘Inside-out’ perspective. Multi-vectorism. Agency. BRI.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Background: State (and making sense) of Central Asian affairs by 2019. – 3 Multi-vectorism in early post-Soviet Central Asia. – 4 Recent dynamics in Central Asian foreign policies. – 5 Challenges and Prospects Ahead. – 6 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

Central Asia as a region has been in the spotlight of international expert, academic and decision-maker attention in the recent period, for the most part as the playing field where several major powers of the world have been unfolding their foreign policy agendas. What has not been sufficiently observed is the situation and perspectives of the receiving end: the role that the five Central Asian countries themselves play, the agency that they exercise. While it



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is doubtless that the intense geopolitics played out by China, Russia, the United States and a few others has been immensely determining what the Central Asian states do, any analysis would still be not quite accurate without a closer consideration of these states as agents in their own right, and specifically, a consideration of the evolving foreign policies of these states. This side of Central Asian geopolitics might be referred to as the 'inside-out' perspective, distinguishing it from the 'outside-in' perspective that focuses on external actors' effects in the region, this distinction being an adapted rendering of another work (Tadjbakhsh 2012).

The 'inside-out' perspective on Central Asian international affairs makes possible to stress several important points that would, in their turn, inform a more accurate understanding of the wider and larger-scale international dynamics played out in and across the region. One such point is that in the most recent period – within the last five years or so – there have been important changes in the foreign policies of the region's countries, necessitating a renewed consideration of where the region might be going and how these countries' relations with external (to the region) actors might be affected. A second point is to stress the significant differences as well as commonalities in the foreign policies of the five countries – more specifically, their commitment to 'multi-vector' foreign policies and the different manners in which such multi-vectorism has been enacted by different countries.<sup>1</sup> A third important point, already prefigured by the first two, is to consider the agency – that is, capacity to autonomously decide and make choices – of the governments of Central Asian states as governments, as opposed to viewing them as corrupt ruling elites in pursuit of narrow self-interests. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate these points by surveying the development of the region's foreign policies since independence.

In the following pages, after a brief overview of the state of affairs found in Central Asia by late 2019 and a quick glance at some of the main scholarly treatments of Central Asian international affairs, the paper proceeds to consider these countries' multi-vectoral foreign policies in three brief sections. The first section overviews the situation in foreign affairs of these countries incumbent at the time of their gaining independence, and what may have dictated their option for multi-vectorism. In the second section, the paper considers the further development and differentiation of Central Asian foreign policies under evolved international political dynamics around the region. The third section, finally, considers the present and impending foreign policy challenges to which the Central Asian variety of mul-

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<sup>1</sup> Usage of the word is not quite settled, and this paper uses "multi-vectoral" (adjective) and "multi-vectorism" (as approach).

ti-vectoral policies needs to respond, each under its particular circumstances. The paper ends with a conclusion on the implications of Central Asian multi-vectorism for a better understanding of the affairs of the region.

## **2 Background: State (and Making Sense) of Central Asian affairs by 2019**

In September 2013, President Xi Jinping of China came to Central Asia for a historic tour of the region. Having taken leadership of China only several months earlier, Xi introduced what would soon become his signature initiative - at that time the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (SREB) - in a September 7 speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. SREB soon morphed into 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), which in turn ceded to 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), the latter turning into an almost mandatory element of any statement on global affairs and geopolitics by nearly anyone.

Just several months after Xi's signal tour of the region, a political crisis sets in Ukraine and in its wake Russia - Central Asian states' primary ally - gets itself entangled in a complicated crisis in relations with Western countries. The crisis soon created challenges for Central Asian states' foreign policies and, specifically, their relations with Russia and other key players involved in the emergent stand-off (Dzhuraev 2015). Noteworthy, the piquancy of the situation was not only that their primary ally apparently had acted in highly worrisome ways toward a third state, but that a similar act by Russia toward the Central Asian states, too, became thinkable.

Then, just a few months after the annexation of Crimea, the deadline struck on the presence of a long debated and controversial military airbase of the United States at the Manas airport in Kyrgyzstan. In the geopolitical game over the region, the airbase had stood as a particularly significant object. The question over the continued presence of the airbase had already emerged in 2005 - less than four years after its opening - in the final statement of that year's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. By 2012 the question had become almost the single most important question looming before the Kyrgyz government, and the freshly inaugurated President Atambayev announced he would close the base as one of his principal goals as president - much by way of a goodwill gesture toward Moscow. The early 2014 developments in the Ukraine-Russia crisis and Russia's fast-spread isolation on the international arena, made the significance of the airbase closure much greater than it might have been otherwise.

In the several years that have followed since this sequence of events that put the Central Asian states on the spotlight of international politics, now positively and now awkwardly, the competi-

tive and cooperative dynamics among the great powers around the region have gained in intensity, if only not all equally. Chinese BRI has become firmly set in the agenda of the region and of the world. Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has been, at a much more modest scale, Moscow's attempt at remaining in play in the region and its wider area. The United States' presence has been the one in apparent retreat, albeit such appearance need not be taken for granted: it has kept its presence and activity in Afghanistan, developed daring bilateral and even region-wide rapport with the Central Asian states, and is one of the most important active players in the diplomatic arena around Central Asia.

Besides the three big players, several other external actors have either stepped up their presence in Central Asia or become noted in other ways. Most important among the latter group has been Turkey, where the failed governmental turnover in 2016 got the government of President Erdogan engaged in a hunt after Gulen links in Central Asia. Countries such as India, Pakistan, Korea, Japan, and Iran, to name a few, have maintained regular engagements with Central Asian states. The European Union renewed its Central Asia focus in the process of drafting and inaugurating its new EU-Central Asia cooperation strategy (*The EU* 2019). While Brussels has explicitly reiterated its rejection of holding any geopolitical agenda for Central Asia, it has certainly been viewed – as a union and several European states individually – as politically significant in the region.

The part played by the Central Asian states in all these developments would be the natural question. However, it is scarcely studied, and much scholarship – insofar as it discussed foreign relations – has done so as part of analysis of internal political processes in the region. Among scholarship that has focused primarily on foreign relations of these countries, the work of Alexander Cooley is the most compelling. His most discussed and important work on the subject is his book *Great Games, Local Rules* (Cooley 2012). There, Cooley argues that the governments and elites of Central Asian states have actually been rather successful in getting external actors – the three major powers being the focus of the book – to recognize and play by their local rules. The local rules, alas, have been rules of corruption to benefit the ruling elites. While the Central Asian agency observed in the book was a promising start for closer understanding of regional international affairs, the book ended up relegating all the agency exercised by the region's elites in making foreign policy to informal and self-serving corrupt behavior.<sup>2</sup>

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**2** Some other contributions similarly prioritize ruling elite agency over sovereign/state agency in Central Asian foreign policies, e.g. Anceschi (2008b) on Turkmenistan and Toktomushev (2017) on Kyrgyzstan.

The latter point got an even stronger amplification in the more recent book that Cooley and John Heathershaw co-authored, *Dictators Without Borders* (Cooley 2016). The book's perspective was, as adopted in the present paper, one of "inside out" look: what the Central Asian regimes put out to the world, how they acted toward the outside realm. The highly illuminating book tells many stories of how the Central Asian regimes used the existing legal and institutional facilities of global political economy to enrich themselves and to control opposition. As eye-opening as it is on the dark side of globalization from the Central Asian vantage point, however, the book continues in the first book's tracks in focusing on the informal, suspect, sinister side of Central Asian agency, to the neglect of agency exercised by these states as sovereign states.

The more formal, legitimate, stately input of Central Asian countries to their international engagements was previously examined, however, in an earlier book that Cooley co-authored with Hendrik Spruyt, *Contracting States* (2009). While the book is not on Central Asia per se, it does mention cases from recent Central Asian international affairs, such as the foreign military bases stationed in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

*Contracting States* argues that sovereignty in international affairs is not absolute but relative and divisible. This allows sovereign states – especially younger, smaller, weaker states, we may add – to engage in what authors call 'incomplete contracts' with other states: the non-absolute and divisible nature of sovereignty allows states to transfer some of their sovereign rights and claims as part of their tools of leverage in building relations and entering contracts with others. Thus, the book argues, sovereignty is an important commodity that smaller and weaker states have in their disposal – such states use their sovereign rights and domains strategically to pursue their interests with other states.<sup>3</sup>

Partial sovereign transfers would be a significant component of how the Central Asian states have forged their multi-vectoral foreign policies, exercising agency in contexts dominated by much more capable states. The following overview attempts to show the independent and contextually shaped agency that each Central Asian state has shown, evolving over time, differentiating from each other as they matured, and gaining the capacity to capitalize on the possibility of partial sovereign transfers when necessary.

The concept of multi-vectoral foreign policy is a debated one, if not often rejected, among scholars of international affairs. Many reasons can be brought to dismiss it: a euphemism for spineless foreign poli-

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**3** The argument in its logic is reminiscent of an earlier famous argument from a very different area – that of de Soto (2000) regarding individual property rights.

cy, a desiderata that hardly ever can be actually achieved, an unprincipled hope to milk many cows, a respite of small states faced with the need to mitigate the domination of larger states. Such misgivings aside, however, numerous scholarly analyses have found multi-vectorism as a useful explanatory concept of various states, and especially, in the post-Soviet space.<sup>4</sup>

All the above 'suspicions' regarding multi-vectoral foreign policy have indeed found their confirmation at one point or another with one or more states in Central Asia since their gaining independence. But if the early post-Soviet embracing of multi-vector policies was their intuitive and somewhat speculative approach to mitigating risks and buying cushion, the multi-vectorisms of the more recent period among these states can be viewed as an evolved, tested, more specific and thus more mature foreign policy vision. Taking all these dynamics of multi-vectorism among the five countries over the course of independence, then, suggests there is more purchase to this concept than is granted by much of international relations scholarship.

### **3 Multi-vectorism in early post-Soviet Central Asia**

As soon as the five states of Central Asia became sovereign and left to care for themselves, their instinctive drive was to pursue balanced foreign relations that would not put them under domination of any single larger state. The emergent foreign policy pattern of all these states can be described as "multi-vector" foreign policies. While not all five explicitly embrace this concept - Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have done so in various documents and official statements (Hanks 2009; Sari 2012) - it is arguably applicable to all of them in some fashion or another, and indeed, the five foreign policy practices are of interests as variations of multi-vectorism.

As they entered the world of independent states, the Central Asian states - possibly more than the other post-Soviet new states<sup>5</sup> - faced the challenge of engaging with, without giving up too much to, a range of different external actors. With no foreign policy apparatuses and cadre in place, no previous experience to rest on, and thus little idea of their own place in the world, these were states moved by a primal instinct of a realist view of the world of states - insecure and hostile.

They had just come out of a union with Russia, and while Moscow was itself in deep crisis at the time, how their relations with her

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Strakes (2013), Gnedina (2015), Minasyan (2012), all considering post-Soviet cases, to name a few.

<sup>5</sup> Almost all other former Soviet states had at least a brief history of modern independent statehood before the Soviet Union.

would develop in independence was a question of much importance and risk.<sup>6</sup> Their newly found American friends, who until just before independence were known as the arch-enemy, were still objects of suspicion with their overflowing attention. There was China stretching on their eastern borders, with known revisionist claims regarding where those borders should be. Back then, it was a much poorer China that did not reveal the kinds of global ambitions as would come later, but in some ways more prone to aggressive and hand-twisting methods in dealing with neighbors.

There were several other actors showing interest in the region, prime among them being Turkey with appeal to fraternal links, with Iran in its footsteps with similar entreaties, and Japan, South Korea, India, and others. There was also the European Union with post-Maastricht union-level foreign policy thrust, with individual state inroads - Germany most active and earliest among them - in their avant-garde. No less important than some of the key states were the international institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, soon followed by the newly energized OSCE, the UN family with UNDP leadership, and ADB, EBRD and others - all offering, if not imposing, their own recipes for Central Asian economies and politics.

Then there were themselves - the rest of the states in the region that each state was uneasy about. They all had a thick network of economic and infrastructure interdependencies among each other automatically turned into vulnerabilities, mutual territorial and resources claims, and many other potential grounds of disagreement. The unfolding civil war in Tajikistan and echoes of the war in Afghanistan further south were vivid reminders of dangers lurking near the young states, dangers that could materialize by reasons of external influence, too.

Thus, it was a time of formidable puzzles, confusions and opportunities. Multi-vectoral foreign policy was an almost intuitive approach that the region's states adopted in the situation depicted above - to engage with all partners, not reject any, and not particularly prioritize any to exclusion of others. It was a conveniently inclusive narrative within which they could build sovereign relations with Russia capitalizing on the numerous ways of preexisting history but keeping this relationship only as one of several directions. They could engage with the United States, seeing that relationship as a marker of full-scale sovereign recognition and as a key to access various international funding and support facilities, but keeping boundaries in the relationship to the line where burdens may start. They could engage with Beijing from the relative safety of being good partners of both Russia and the United States. Relations with Turkey, the Euro-

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<sup>6</sup> These worries of newly independent Central Asian states are reflected broadly in an early essay by Olcott (1992), "Central Asia's Catapult to Independence".

peans, several Asian partners and with each other, also found room in that multi-vectorism, all of them at the extent that is safe, gainful but not encumbering.

#### **4 Recent dynamics in Central Asian foreign policies**

As recalled above, it was in Kazakhstan, in September 2013, that Xi Jinping announced for the first time the grand project of China that has now become known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). What has transpired since then in Central Asian states' international affairs, in linkage to BRI and besides it, can be described as these countries' unprecedented level of engagement in transregional and global processes, some of it by their own initiative and some - by being drawn in with little choice. How these states behaved in this period, considered generally, suggests an interesting, active process of consolidation of their long-touted but often vague multi-vector foreign policies. The following is a brief account of these.

##### **Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan is arguably the most active, outward-looking and increasingly internationally recognized country of the five. It is Kazakhstan's foreign policy that is the easiest to identify as multi-vectoral, and that is clearly reflected in the country's basic foreign policy document (*Kazakhstan* 2014). Territorially the largest state in the region, and the ninth of the world, Kazakhstan presents many attractions for outside players - something that Kazakhstan itself, and former president Nursultan Nazarbayev personally, perceived from the beginning as both opportunity and risk. Multi-vectorism was Nazarbayev's mechanism of mitigating the risks and realizing the opportunities.

Beijing's BRI has been notably vague, difficult to trace to specific activities. However, in any possible conception of the project, Kazakhstan is a key state through which Chinese-Western connectivity would be secured. Kazakh-Chinese bilateral relations are very active and productive, with significant Chinese investments in Kazakhstan and a significant amount of Kazakh oil exports going to China. At the same time, unlike a dozen states globally, Kazakhstan has avoided getting into burdensome debt relationship with Beijing, thus leaving it a level of freedom in this regard.

Nazarbayev was an early champion of Eurasian regional cooperation and thus stood at the beginnings of current-day Eurasian Economic Union - the economic integration project usually attributed to Russian foreign policy, and including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as member states. For long, but especially in the wake of Russia's



isolation following its role in the Ukraine crisis, it was quite evident that Nazarbayev was a trusted ally of Vladimir Putin. But instead of clearly taking Russia's side on any major occasion of dispute - from Ukraine, to the Syrian war, to disputes with Georgia, Turkey, the United States, and others - Nazarbayev consistently succeeded in maintaining positive and active engagements with the other side, while also keeping the status of a "close friend" of Putin. Astana became a frequent site of conflict mediation, hosting important meetings in both the Ukraine process and the Syrian war settlement.

While Kazakhstan has entered a leadership transition period, with a new leader elected, it is unlikely that President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev will seek to revise the country's architecture of foreign relations - something in whose building he was a close participant, as a long-time foreign minister. It is, of course, possible that some changes may be necessitated from outside, if key foreign leaders see opportunity with the 'freshman' president to change their standing with Kazakhstan.

## Uzbekistan

Central Asia's most populous country, and geographically most central - sharing borders with all four others - is Uzbekistan. Of the five countries, Uzbekistan - led by late president Islam Karimov at the time - was the most overtly revisionist of the Soviet political past and willing to take its distance from Russia from the early years of independence. For most of Karimov's presidency, which ended in September 2016 with his death, Uzbekistan's foreign policy was notable for its sharp turns, breaks and apparent caution with any overly binding commitments. Making independence the cornerstone of Uzbek national ideology, Karimov steered the country clear of any relations that might compromise the country's (and his, one should read) freedom. The country's "flip-flopping" policy was particularly notable in its sequenced friendships and break-ups with the West (primarily the United States), then Russia, then the West, and then Russia, while the steadier relations were nurtured with several Asian countries, especially South Korea, Japan and later, China.

In 2012, Uzbekistan adopted a written formal foreign policy strategy document for the first time, which was especially noted for several principal commitments - Uzbekistan committed to never join any military blocks, never host any foreign military bases, and to always be guided by its national interest first and foremost (Tolipov 2012). While the latter is an unsurprising commonplace, the first two points appeared to formalize the sorts of edgy foreign engagements from which Uzbekistan had been running at each instance of its "flip-flopping". In line with this policy of maintaining distance, Uzbekistan's

version of multi-vectoral foreign policy can be described as a policy of “equidistant” relations: that is, stressing the negative aspect, the country appears to have built its foreign relations so as not to get too close with any particular partner.

The second president of Uzbekistan, former prime minister, Shafqat Mirziyoyev, inaugurated as president at the end of 2017, led the country’s foreign policy to much greater openness, more active engagement with a wide range of partners, especially noticeably improving long-strained relations with neighbors in Central Asia (see Weitz 2018). If the description of “equidistant” sounded right for Karimov foreign policy, it clearly sounds not right about Mirziyoyev’s approach. The latter’s early approach has been more like that of Kazakhstan’s – a more open, engaging model of multi-vectorism, with Mirziyoyev’s visits with Russian, American, European and Chinese counterparts being early indications.

## Tajikistan

Possibly the biggest winner from the Uzbek foreign policy accent changes instigated by Mirziyoyev has been Tajikistan. One of the smaller three and poorer two countries of the region, and the only one to have had a civil war after independence, Tajikistan had limited choices in its foreign policy (see Nourzhanov 2018; Tajikistan 2015). Coming out of the civil war, and facing the war along the stretch of its southern border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan accepted Russia’s protection almost by fiat. The de facto Russian protection was represented by a large military presence, sizeable economic presence and support, and later on, by a large number of Tajik population working in Russia as labor migrants.

Tajikistan’s foreign policy of recent years can be generally seen as steady if slow movement toward diversification of its relations to alleviate its dependence on Russia. It nurtured relations with Iran from early years of independence, and after several years of cooling off over a dispute, began to renew that relationship by 2019. Relatively lively, mostly trade-based relations with Turkey have been kept stable. Severely strained relations with Uzbekistan under Karimov came to be replaced by a radically improved – certainly faster in declarations than in deed, but still important – cooperation since President Mirziyoyev’s arrival in office. Tajikistan has maintained active efforts at substantiating relations with India, and to lesser extent Pakistan, albeit those relations have not seen noticeable progress over years.

However, the most important change in Tajikistan’s foreign relations has been the quickly risen relationship with China. Tajikistan has entered several major investment and loan agreements with Chi-

na in the recent years that have generated enormous economic expectations while also making Tajikistan one of the most at-risk countries to what has been dubbed “predatory loan” practices by China. Indeed, Tajikistan has reportedly signed off a piece of territory on the border between the two countries, as a long-term rent, in lieu of repayment of part of its debt to China.

With the limited space for foreign policy maneuvers, Tajikistan has had the greater difficulty building multi-vectorism, but Dushanbe clearly has worked much to mitigate its one-directional dependence.

## Kyrgyzstan

Somewhat similar in its foreign policy positions with Tajikistan, but spared the civil war and ominous immediate neighborhood with war-torn Afghanistan, is Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan was one of the more vocal about multi-vectorism of the five countries early on, with President Askar Akayev at times being dubbed a “darling of the West”, while also keeping close relations with Yeltsin government in Russia. Eventually, certainly with help of relevant external factors, Akayev became distanced from the West and more closely bound with Putin’s Russia. Before his forced ouster in 2005, Akayev’s foreign policy led to the stationing of two foreign military bases – those of the Western coalition (eventually becoming solely American) and of Russia (albeit formally of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)) – in close proximity of each other in the outskirts of Bishkek.<sup>7</sup>

While considered the most open to democratization, liberalization and market economy principles of the five countries in the region, and having received the most Western support to those ends, Kyrgyzstan nonetheless grew staunchly pro-Russian in its post-color revolution foreign policy since 2005. Even President Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s fateful game between Russia and the United States over the question of closing or keeping the US base in Kyrgyzstan was not, in essence, a policy away from Russia and toward the West but rather a rent-seeking move by the president and his close circle. President Atambayev came into office at the end of 2011, following the short interim presidency of more Western-leaning Roza Otunbayeva, with promises that were mainly meant to reassure Russia. He largely delivered on his promises, taking Kyrgyzstan possibly to the highest level of alignment with Russia in its post-Soviet history, to the detriment of the multi-vectoral principle.

Within the tight space of Kyrgyzstan’s position, much like that of Tajikistan’s, President Jeenbekov – in office since 2017 – has sought a

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<sup>7</sup> The fact of hosting the military bases of two major powers, an unusual phenomenon at the least, led Eugene Huskey dub Kyrgyzstan a “military entrepot” (Huskey 2008).

somewhat more balanced foreign policy, as supported by a new foreign policy document adopted in 2019, where multi-vectorism is clearly stressed, and no country - including Russia - is mentioned by name (*Kyrgyz Republic* 2019).

## Turkmenistan

If Uzbekistan's foreign policy until 2017 could be described as one of "equidistant" relations with all major powers and concerned primarily with keeping independence, then Turkmenistan's has been a similar approach but a good step farther. The status of positive neutrality, formally cemented in 1995 with a UN General Assembly recognition, has become an essential part of Turkmenistan's formative national ideology as bequeathed by the first president of the country Saparmurat Niyazov and continued by the second, President Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov (Anceschi 2008a). The status of neutrality, conceived first as a way of relieving the country of the need to choose sides, soon became even more importantly a shield from foreign influences and interference in domestic affairs of the country - especially, in matters of freedoms and rights of citizens, democracy and rule of law. One of the most closed countries in the world, often compared to North Korea, Turkmenistan has been ruled by a political regime serving the cult of personality, of the first and then of the second presidents. Turkmen foreign relations have been restricted primarily to economic ones, heavily focused on exports of natural gas.

After independence, Turkmenistan depended on Soviet-time network of gas pipelines for delivery to markets, and Gazprom being the custodian of all those pipelines in Russia, it had a convoluted relationship with Gazprom over prices and volumes of gas. Eventually, Gazprom stopped buying any Turkmen gas in 2016 over price disagreements; the relationship renewed in 2019 for modest amounts of gas imports to Russia. While the relations with Gazprom were getting difficult, China arrived as the new big player, and from 2009 till 2014, three parallel pipelines were built that began delivering Turkmen gas to China via Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, making Beijing a de facto monopsonist for Turkmen gas. A fourth line was agreed and begun, with a route that went via Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but it has been put on an indefinite halt. By the end of 2010s, Turkmenistan began experiencing difficulties with China, as a monopsony goes, at a time of dropped gas prices and when both Russia and Iran, the other two significant buyers, were both turned off. As the country's gas export difficulties continued amid reports of severe economic crisis domestically, President Berdymuhamedov continued seeking renewal of broken relations and developing new ones, including more active engagement with Central Asian neighbors.

## A Variety of Multi-vectorisms

As the brief overviews above show, the foreign policies of the five Central Asian states have been evolving and diverging in response to specific needs, capacities and constraints of each state. All of them have held on to what can be described as multi-vectoral foreign policy – they have continually strived to build or maintain relations with a variety of states, including several major states, which are themselves not always on easy terms with each other. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have come the closest to forfeiting multi-vectorism in favor of strong alignment with Russia. But even they have clearly resisted runaway dependence on the Kremlin and consistently tried to diversify their basket. Indicatively, the status of “strategic partners”, once given by these states only to Russia, has more recently been extended to China, India and to regional neighbors (e.g. Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) as well.

While the general commitment to multi-vectoral foreign relations among all five countries is common and evident, some important differences among them have also crystallized over time. Generalizing based on the above summary descriptions, one may characterize Kazakhstan's foreign policy as fitting the most straightforward, substantive conception of multi-vectorism, wherein the country has maintained close positive relations, without losing autonomy, with all major international actors, from Russia, to China, the United States, the European Union, and many others. Kazakhstan's active engagement in multiple multilateral institutions and processes, mediating role in conflicts over Ukraine, Syria and to lesser extent in Afghanistan, have further enhanced the country's ability to keep balanced and broad-based foreign relations. Uzbekistan's foreign relations, particularly since the change of leader there, have tended in a direction similar to Kazakhstan's. While the peculiar “equidistant” multi-vectorism of late Karimov was interesting academically, it may not have served the country's interests the best. President Mirziyoyev's orientation to greater engagement has kept the balanced multi-directional scope, albeit so far Uzbekistan has not yet reached the level of Kazakhstan's enmeshment in complex international relations.

The positive and permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan, as of 1995, has given the country a somewhat automatic distance and hence autonomy from all foreign engagements. However, in its mostly bilateral and mostly economic relations, the country continually experienced difficulties of balancing its relations, at one point coming under heavy dependence on Russia vis-à-vis the unavoidable Gazprom, and at another point – still continuing – on China and its pipelines built at Turkmenistan's expense. About the time the Uzbek leadership changed, which led to changed regional dynamics, President Berdymuhamedov, too, appeared to be in more active pursuit of contacts with ‘third’ countries.

Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's multi-vectorisms could be described as the skewed ones with a prevailing Russian orientation and several actively pursued alternative partnerships. Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy has been subject to somewhat greater turbulence, including a sharp worsening and then mild improvement of relations with the United States, waves of moderate to extreme priority for Russia, and still more regular ebbs and flows in relations with regional neighbors. Tajikistan, while less prone to such ups and downs, has also led a somewhat unsteady foreign policy, with good and not so good times with Iran, occasional small-scale rebellions against domination by Russia, much advertised but still anemic relations with India, and checkered relations with regional neighbors – albeit marking a dramatically improved relationship with Uzbekistan since 2017.

## 5 Challenges and Prospects Ahead

Understanding Central Asian foreign policies in the midst of the great power projects and geopolitics over the region, to be very accurate, requires taking into account the variety of multi-vectoral policies described above, and the reasons and rationales that have stood behind each country's interest in maintaining its multi-vectorism. While the rent-seeking and corrupt interests of plutocratic regimes is probably a key part of such reasons, to be content with such an explanation would be inaccurate. To believe that the Central Asian states have too little or no agency capable of affecting their relations with outside powers, as the overview above suggests, would also be seriously misleading. So, it is worth the effort to see the affairs of Central Asia and external powers from an “inside-out” perspective. Upon a glance from such a perspective, a number of topical concerns stand out at the present as challenges for Central Asian foreign policy circles, awaiting choices and compromises.

For the first time since the early years of independence, on March 15 2018, all five Central Asian states gathered for what they carefully avoided calling a summit meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan. Four of the countries were represented by presidents and Turkmenistan – by speaker of parliament. Then-president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbaev, hosting the meeting, said at that time that such meetings would become an annual tradition taking place just before the holiday of Nooruz (vernal equinox and New Year holiday).<sup>8</sup>

Intra-regional relations, rich with disputes and lacking trust, had long been the weak aspect of Central Asia's international affairs. Of

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<sup>8</sup> The second meeting got delayed and took place on November 28, 2019 in Tashkent.

ten, for particular countries in the region the main external threat and concern was a neighbor in the region, not an outside state. It was late President Karimov of Uzbekistan who was the main barrier to improvement of regional relations, with open or muted disputes with every other country in the region. It was therefore unsurprising that with Karimov's passing, Uzbekistan's new president was quickly able to reverse that track, improve relations with all neighbors, and renew hopes for positive regional relations that led, among other things, to the March 2018 meeting in Astana.

Besides concerns over the possibility of intra-regional cooperation, and possibly regardless of it, each country had its own concerns to face, and seek solutions to, in its foreign relations.

Kazakhstan entered a leadership transition mode in March 2019, and the newly elected President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev faced the challenge of keeping the architecture of Nazarbayev's multi-vectorism and autonomy in the face of growing Chinese influence, continued Russian factor, and the more passive Western partners. The Russian influence was a primary concern from the day of independence, as Kazakhstan - home of about 40% ethnic Russian population at the time of independence - came to share with Russia the longest continuous stretch of a border in the world at nearly 7000 kilometers. While generally one of Russia's most valued partners, there were several occasions - mostly over Kazakhstani identity policies and over matters of Eurasian Economic Union - when the two sides revealed differences. Some suggestive occurrences portended such differences to be likely under the new president of Kazakhstan, too.

Kazakh-Chinese relations, as they grew, were causing resentment and concern among the general public as well as, possibly, the government. Widespread riots in 2016 in Kazakhstan over alleged law to allow Chinese immigrants to buy land was the first major sign of anti-Chinese sentiments. Later, such sentiments were fueled by reports of Chinese re-education camps, suspected to be actually massive political prisons, abusing the ethnic Kazakhs among other Muslim citizens of the Xinjiang province.

The question of Chinese "re-education camps" for Muslims made issues difficult for Kyrgyzstan, too. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the only two sovereign nation-states that have sizeable co-ethnic brethren living in China and affected by the controversial measures in Xinjiang. While both countries' governments generally distanced themselves from the issue and described it as China's internal matter, various civic groups, activists and media were more critical and demanded stronger reaction from their governments. Both countries' capacity to react adequately to such claims was restricted, among all else, by their economic ties with China. For Kazakhstan, China is one of the biggest oil buyers and a key investor. For Kyrgyzstan, even more disconcertingly, China held over 40% of the country's ex-

ternal debt by 2019 on terms that were rather restrictive, making Kyrgyzstan one of a dozen at-risk countries in that regard.

At-risk due to indebtedness to China is also Tajikistan, one of the handful countries around the world that has had to already settle part of its debt by ceding land to China – something that has remained oblique as to its details. Besides such indebtedness, Tajikistan, just like Kyrgyzstan, continues to also heavily depend on Russia for its economic stability provided by over a million labor migrants in many cities of Russia, for its security vis-à-vis potential militant incursion from Afghanistan and, possibly, by way of balancing the rumored military presence of China in the areas said to have been given to Beijing in lieu of debt repayment.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of dependence on China, however, it might be Turkmenistan that has felt the squeeze most acutely. Having bet its gas export fortunes since early 2010's on the buying power of China, Ashgabat soon became hostage to several limitations to its ability to make cash on it: the indefinite delay in completion of the highly anticipated high-capacity Line D of pipelines, the repayment of the cost of Lines A, B, and C – financed and built by China – by natural gas money, the reported lower-than-expected volumes of gas exports to China, and the fall in natural gas price in the world market. With exports to Iran – normally accounting for just below 10% of Turkmen gas export – halted, President Berdymuhamedov actively sought mending relations with Russia, finally achieving a new albeit small-scale export deal with Gazprom in 2019. In the meantime, Turkmenistan grew increasingly concerned for security along its border with Afghanistan in the south.

In the midst of this array of foreign relations challenges in the region, Uzbekistan has appeared in the most comfortable situation. The largest country by population in the region, holding significant economic attractions in mining, agriculture and as a market, just to name a few, Uzbekistan has been courted with attention by all major players. Such courting has been dramatically encouraged by the changes in Tashkent's foreign policy when Shafqat Mirziyoyev came to power at the end of 2016. As President Mirziyoyev continues to lead on such a positive wave, besides the task of further consolidating his power domestically, several foreign relations issues would be on his agenda: leading the region to a viable regime of positive cooperation without alienating any neighbor, contributing what is possible to stabilization of Afghanistan with which Uzbekistan shares a small stretch of border, all while nurturing profitable relations with China, Russia, the United States and Europe without falling under burdensome influence of any.

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<sup>9</sup> The latter point, while frequently rumored, has not been confirmed by credible sources.



Thus, all five countries of the region face pending challenges in their relations with the rest of the world, some more pressing than others. Leveraging these challenges will require that each country, once again just as before, tailor its multi-vectorism to fit its particular emergent circumstances. In the evolving climate of international affairs around the region, several opportunities – always involving some risk, naturally – offer themselves for such leveraging.

One is China's own much-sung Belt and Road Initiative: insofar as it is an inclusive, transregional, multilateral project of connectivity and all that comes with it, the Central Asian countries would be interested in being part of such a broad network where pressures of bilateral relations can be mitigated by the larger scope of BRI. Similarly, the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, despite fears to the contrary, is an opportunity for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to leverage their respective dependencies on Moscow by capitalizing on the multilateral, five-country membership of EAEU. The newly revamped Shanghai Cooperation Organization with accession of India and Pakistan, is another potent asset for four of the SCO-member Central Asian states, putting them in a weighty club of rising powers led by both China and Russia.

The United States, appearing to be on a recess in Central Asia, remains nonetheless a significant party, engaging the Central Asian countries bilaterally, as a region, and as neighbors of Afghanistan where American presence appeared to be stuck until normalization of politics and security. The launching of the new European Union strategy for Central Asia in July 2019 energized another vector for possible stronger relations.

The options emerging from outside – BRI, EAEU, SCO, C5+1 and EU-CA relations – to a significant extent hinge on the level and quality of cooperation among the Central Asian states themselves. Should the regional informal summits of 2018 and 2019 lead to tangible capacity for joint interest articulation and pursuit among the five, such a development could usher in a still newer and highly interesting mode of multi-vectorism.

## 6 Conclusion

Central Asia is a region of five separate countries, all hailing from the collapse of the Soviet Union, and all claiming to be in pursuit of multi-vectoral foreign policies ever since. The erstwhile impulse for multi-vectorism was likely a safeguard to the uncertain opportunities and predictable challenges of independent statehood which they acquired rather abruptly. Over time, each state developed its own particular blend of multi-vectorism – from the active, engaged multi-vec-

torism of Kazakhstan, to the Russia-leaning, tilted multi-vectorism of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, to the independence-rearing, "equidistant", albeit since recently more engaged, version of it in Uzbekistan, to the multi-vectorism of positive neutrality in Turkmenistan.

In the large-print scenery of international affairs around Central Asia – dominated by the movements and interests of China, Russia, the United States, European Union, India, Turkey and others – a casual observation can easily default to assumption of near-absent agency of the region's states themselves, and of their passive receiver-ship status vis-à-vis external partners. Such an observation would clearly be inaccurate and indiscriminate to the actual dynamics in which the five states play their parts. The parts they play, moreover, are arguably broader than in the exclusive service of rent-seeking and survival interests of the ruling elites, as some literature has argued. While such narrow interests determine much, it is misleading to consider only them as relevant and not look beyond.

In the advised broader and closer look at Central Asian foreign relations, what is both most interesting and most informative is the evolving variety of multi-vectorisms amongst them. Each state's multi-vectorism was a reflection of that state's interests, capacities and circumstances, and a reflection of the broader world as seen from that state's perspective, from inside out. As circumstances changed, multi-vectorism of each state, too, evolved. Whether, under the common challenges and possible opportunities presented by external forces and processes, the region develops a new, regionally shared multi-vectoral outlook, is a question of particular interest.

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# Il concetto di sovranità in Asia Centrale

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**Abstract** This article studies the interpretation and the practice of sovereignty in Central Asia. By relying on primary and secondary research material, the paper intends to achieve three main objectives: 1) to discuss the extent to which 'sovereignty' in Central Asia is interpreted and practiced along the lines of Western legal traditions, or rather presents indigenous traits; 2) to understand how authoritarianism impacts on the interpretation and the practice of sovereignty; 3) to assess the presence of a postcolonial narrative of sovereignty in the region, or the lack thereof. These objectives are meant to contribute to the regional agenda of the English School by exploring the polysemy of sovereignty, providing a better understanding of how authoritarianism intermingling with international society while interacting with postcolonial discourses in processes of regionalisation and interaction with global international society.

**Keywords** Central Asia. Sovereignty. Postcolonialism. Authoritarianism.

**Sommario** 1 Introduzione e obiettivi dello studio. – 2 Il concetto di sovranità. – 3 La sovranità in Asia Centrale. – 4 Postcolonialismo e autoritarismo. – 5 Conclusioni.

## 1 Introduzione e obiettivi dello studio

Nella disciplina delle Relazioni Internazionali, il concetto di 'sovranità' è spesso stato inteso come un attributo universale degli stati, specialmente dopo l'espansione della società internazionale occorsa nella seconda metà del precedente millennio. In essa, le potenze europee esportarono, spesso con coercizione e imposizione, le regole base del diritto internazionale definendo così una *zona di appartenenza* alla società internazionale, formata da nazioni sovrane e civilizzate, e una *zona di non-appartenenza*, quella della



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'barbarie' e dell'arretratezza' (Gong 1984; Bull, Watson 1984; Dunne, Reus-Smit 2017).

In seguito ai processi di decolonizzazione e le molteplici lotte di indipendenza che hanno marcato la seconda metà del secolo scorso, la sovranità è ora considerata come il requisito minimo per essere ammessi nel consesso della società internazionale. Qualsiasi gruppo politico aspirante all'indipendenza, qualora voglia partecipare al 'gioco' della politica internazionale, deve definirsi 'sovrano' ed egualmente, se non in misura più importante, *essere riconosciuto come sovrano* dagli altri stati che formano il sistema internazionale. Anche se fragili, o completamente 'falliti' in termini di *governance* interna e mantenimento di relazioni diplomatiche con l'esterno, tali stati possono ancora essere parte della società internazionale se riescono a essere riconosciuti come sovrani dai loro pari - Robert Jackson ha definito queste entità politiche 'quasi stati' (2000). Ciò implica che il concetto di sovranità ha, giuridicamente, un significato universale egualmente applicabile a tutti gli stati nel mondo, nonché che 'essere sovrano' significa lo stesso a ogni latitudine e longitudine. La sovranità, intesa come la capacità di essere *superiorem non recognoscens*, è l'attributo essenziale di ogni membro della società internazionale: o si è sovrani, o non si può essere considerati parte del club.

Tuttavia, il concetto di sovranità è stato recentemente oggetto di studio all'interno del diritto internazionale e della teoria delle relazioni internazionali. Piuttosto che presupporre che il concetto di sovranità abbia un unico significato nel tempo e nello spazio, studi recenti hanno enfatizzato il cambiamento del suo significato in differenti contesti storici e politici (Bartelson 1995; Sørensen 1999; Shadian 2010; Costa Buranelli 2015). In altre parole, ci si è accorti del bisogno di analizzare la sovranità e la sua 'localizzazione' in differenti contesti socio-storico-culturali.

Gli stati dell'Asia Centrale, in questo saggio intesi come Kazakistan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan e Uzbekistan, fecero il loro ingresso nella società internazionale nel 1991, quando divennero indipendenti dall'ormai defunta URSS e dovettero adottare il linguaggio e la pratica della sovranità con i quali i politici centrasiatrici si erano, di fatto, familiarizzati solamente nei mesi e anni di poco precedenti alla caduta dell'URSS, ad esempio nei dibattiti del Congresso dei Deputati del Popolo dell'URSS o nell'ambito dei negoziati per il nuovo Trattato sull'Unione abortito nell'agosto 1991.<sup>1</sup> Per essere più precisi - le repubbliche centrasiatriche entrarono in una

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<sup>1</sup> Ringrazio un anonimo revisore per aver sollevato questo punto. Si veda, inoltre, Lewis (2011) e Suyarkhulova (2011) per un'idea più ampia di come il concetto di sovranità non fosse del tutto alieno ai politici centrasiatrici specialmente nella seconda metà degli anni Ottanta.

società internazionale definita e regolata da principi e norme occidentali in una condizione post-coloniale.<sup>2</sup> Con questo voglio dire che questi stati hanno dovuto imparare le regole del ‘gioco’ della politica internazionale senza avere la possibilità di contribuire alla creazione delle regole stesse, provenendo da una condizione di subalterità. Inoltre, questi stati acquisirono rapidamente tratti di governo e *governance* autoritari. Questo significa, in linea con quanto detto sopra, che il supposto significato universale di sovranità e delle sue pratiche furono intesi e localizzati in un contesto post-coloniale e incrementalmente autoritario.

Questo saggio è dunque interessato a esplorare tre direzioni di ricerca che, raggruppate, mirano a fare luce su come la sovranità sia interpretata e praticata nel contesto centrasiatiano. La prima domanda è: in quale misura la sovranità in Asia Centrale è interpretata e praticata sulla linea della tradizione legale occidentale (sul modello ‘Vestfaliano’, per intendersi), piuttosto che sulla base di tratti istituzionali indigeni? La seconda domanda è: come l’autoritarismo modifica l’interpretazione e la pratica della sovranità nella regione? La terza domanda è: è possibile osservare, in Asia Centrale, la presenza di una narrazione post-coloniale riguardo la sovranità?

Per rispondere a queste domande, o per lo meno per offrire alcune riflessioni preliminari su di esse data la loro complessità, questo scritto fa uso dell’apparato concettuale e lessicale offerto dalla Scuola Inglese delle Relazioni Internazionali, secondo la quale il sistema internazionale non è un insieme di azioni e reazioni meccaniche e anomiche dove gli stati interagiscono in modo cieco e secondo mere logiche di potere, ma è meglio concettualizzato come una ‘società internazionale’ nella quale norme e regole di coesistenza sono presenti, concordate, osservate e riconosciute quando infrante o contestate. In questo framework teorico, la sovranità è considerata non tanto come un attributo o un qualcosa che si possiede, ma piuttosto come una pratica, un insieme di narrative, norme e principi, in altre parole come un’*istituzione* (Buzan 2004; Holsti 2004). Il motivo per cui la Scuola Inglese è preferita rispetto ad altre teorie delle relazioni internazionali è proprio il fatto che, in questo saggio, si vuole dar conto della poliedricità, della contestualità, e del carattere fondamentalmente storico e pragmatico (inteso come ‘basato su prati-

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**2** Nell’affermare che le repubbliche centrasiatriche sono entrate nella società internazionale in una condizione postcoloniale, mi rifaccio a quella letteratura che interpreta l’impero zarista prima e l’URSS poi come espressioni di forze politiche, economiche, sociali, e finanche epistemologiche di carattere coloniale, pur con le proprie particolarità e caratteristiche differenti da altri modelli coloniali occidentali. Si consideri, a tal proposito, i lavori di Hirsch (2005), Martin (2001), Morozov (2015), Moore (2001), Tlostanova (2012) e la tavola rotonda sul tema «Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space» tenutasi a Washington il 29 dicembre 2005 (Spivak et al. 2005).

che') della sovranità, aspetti che possono essere apprezzati solo se si considera il sistema internazionale come un ambito *sociale* e non meccanico, come vorrebbe invece la teoria neorealista (e, per molti aspetti, quella neoliberista).

Il lettore potrebbe chiedersi: perché studiare la sovranità in Asia Centrale oggi? Le risposte, a mio avviso, possono essere tre. Prima di tutto perché, come osservato prima, la sovranità è un'istituzione che cambia, che muta, che si adatta a specifici contesti socioculturali. Osservare come questa istituzione si è adattata al contesto centrasiano è importante per apprezzarne le sfaccettature e diversi significati, specie in una regione come l'Asia Centrale in cui la sovranità sembra presentare significative idiosincrasie pratiche e strutturali (Heathershaw, Schatz 2017). Secondariamente, è importante perché il continente eurasiatico ha di recente visto l'istituzione della sovranità contestata e finanche violata, specie in Ucraina e Crimea. Una riflessione dunque sul suo valore, sulla sua evoluzione, sulla sua importanza e sulla sua interpretazione in Asia centrale, una regione che è parte di una potenziale (?) sfera di influenza russa, pare doverosa e dovuta (Allison 2017). Infine, il recente riavvicinarsi dell'Unione Europea all'Asia Centrale visibile nella nuova EU-Central Asia Strategy comporta anche la considerazione della possibilità della promozione di uno specifico significato di 'sovranità', più ancorato a principi del neoliberalismo economico e dell'integrazione politica, in diretta contrapposizione con modelli più conservativi come quello propagato, ad esempio, dall'Organizzazione della Cooperazione di Shanghai (SCO), generando così un potenziale conflitto retorico e normativo riguardo a questa istituzione (Cooley 2019; Russo, Gawrich, 2017; Lewis 2012).

Un importante *caveat* è il seguente - per motivi di spazio, questo saggio non può prendere in considerazione le specifiche interpretazioni della sovranità di ogni singolo stato centrasiano. Pur riconoscendo che è evidente che ogni stato nella regione ha una sua specifica interpretazione della pratica della sovranità (cosa che, per altro, non dovrebbe sorprendere nessuno - si guardi al caso europeo in questi anni recenti), questo studio preferisce optare per una teorizzazione della sovranità in Asia Centrale preliminare e generale, focalizzandosi su quegli elementi che pertengono, seppur in diversa misura, a tutti gli stati della regione.

## 2 Il concetto di sovranità

Parlare di sovranità è come giocare col fuoco. Ci sono così tante interpretazioni, significati, utilizzi e concettualizzazioni di essa che questa parola può davvero essere considerata come una delle più polisemiche all'interno della disciplina delle relazioni internazionali (Krasner 1999). Per la maggior parte dei realisti e liberali, special-



mente nella loro variante strutturalista, la sovranità è un attributo legale dello stato, è una condizione giuridica che deve esistere per poter entrare in accordi con altri stati, è monopolio della forza su un dato territorio, una data popolazione, all'interno di confini specifici. Per i costruttivisti, la sovranità può essere vista come un insieme di pratiche durature e ricorrenti, e dunque come qualcosa che deve essere esercitato e performato nel tempo. Per la Scuola Inglese, la sovranità non è semplicemente una pratica (o un insieme di pratiche), ma è una pratica dotata di contenuto normativo. In altre parole, la sovranità è un'istituzione, se non *l'istituzione*, della società internazionale. È una pratica che deve necessariamente essere riconosciuta come valida e conforme al contesto in cui determinati attori sociali (in questo caso stati) operano e vivono.

Per capire il concetto di sovranità, necessitiamo di prestare attenzione a due fattori. Il primo - *la storia*. Mentre è sicuramente vero che 'sovranità' è quasi sempre associata a 'stati' (Thomson 1995, 220), dal momento che il concetto stesso di sovranità diventa un principio organizzativo solamente in un mondo di stati (Ruggie 1993, 1983; Ashley 1984), la storia del concetto di sovranità non è la storia degli stati, ma è la storia, appunto, di un concetto. Questo significa che, in quanto concetto, la sovranità è mutevole, cangiante, aperta a contestazione e storicizzazione. Il secondo - *il diritto internazionale*. Il concetto di sovranità è, almeno in principio, inestricabile dal diritto internazionale, dal momento che i due concetti sono in relazione di co-costituzione: uno stato è sovrano a seguito di un atto di diritto internazionale, e il diritto internazionale si applica solo a stati sovrani.

Dunque, cosa vuol dire esattamente 'essere sovrano'? In minimi termini, essere sovrano significa essere *superiorem non recognoscens* o, citando Charles Manning, «costituzionalmente insulare» (Manning 1962; Hames 1993). Questo significa che uno stato, quando è sovrano, non riceve istruzioni di politica interna ed estera da nessun altro stato. Questa è la condizione base per parlare di un sistema di stati anarchico, ossia uno in cui ogni stato, almeno giuridicamente e legalmente, gode di eguali diritti e doveri rispetto a tutti gli altri stati presenti nel sistema. Tuttavia, Cynthia Weber ci ricorda che la sovranità non è qualcosa che ha un contenuto ontologico. Piuttosto, è un'istituzione che ha una *funzione*. Nelle relazioni internazionali, la funzione della sovranità è quella di demarcare l'interno dall'esterno, il domestico dall'internazionale, cosicché queste categorie appaiano immediate, evidenti, non prodotte da complesse interazioni tra potere, conoscenza e retorica (Weber 1997; Walker 1993).

Questa funzione, così come il suo significato, non nasce dal nulla, ma proviene da una specifica interpretazione occidentale della sovranità, evolutasi nel corso dei secoli in Europa e poi esportata nel resto del mondo fino a che iniziò a essere contestata nei primi anni Novanta quando non solo insularità costituzionale, ma anche e soprattutto

diritti umani e sviluppo iniziarono a definire i criteri della 'sovranità responsabile' (Dunne 2010; Dunne, Wheeler 2004; Wheeler 2000). Come è stato detto, «i parametri tradizionali associati alla sovranità come il rispetto dei confini sono adesso affiancati da altri parametri come democrazia, mercati, e diritti umani» (Thomson 1995, 228).

Alcuni teorici sostengono addirittura che le tradizionali micro-pratiche della sovranità (conio, monopolio della violenza, bandiera, banca nazionale, ecc.) sono evolute nel corso degli ultimi vent'anni, affiancate ora da narrative e pratiche associate alla *good governance*, a standard internazionali, che definiscono la *condizionalità* del contenuto stesso della sovranità. Per dirla con Bartelson, la sovranità non è più un attributo costitutivo degli stati, o un diritto inalienabile la fonte del quale è da trovarsi all'interno dello stato stesso. La sovranità è, piuttosto, «una concessione contingente rispetto al suo esercizio responsabile in accordo con i principi del diritto internazionale sotto la supervisione di istituti di *governance* globale e attori non-governativi» (cit. in Holm, Sending 2018, 841).

Insomma, gli stati centrasiatrici diventarono sovrani in un periodo in cui il concetto stesso di sovranità era sottoposto a ridiscussioni, rinegoziazioni e reinterpretazioni all'interno della società internazionale. Questa considerazione guiderà il resto dell'analisi, di sotto presentata.

### 3 La sovranità in Asia Centrale

Nel 1991, le cinque repubbliche dell'Asia Centrale diventarono formalmente indipendenti dall'URSS. Il Kazakistan si dichiarò indipendente il 16 dicembre 1991; Kirghizistan il 31 agosto 1991; il Tagikistan, 9 settembre 1991; Turkmenistan il 27 ottobre 1991 e Uzbekistan l'1 settembre 1991. Con l'indipendenza, i confini amministrativi divennero confini statali definiti dal diritto internazionale e fu ottenuta la capacità di interagire con altri stati nella società internazionale attraverso la diplomazia e la politica estera (Tishkov 1997).<sup>3</sup>

La letteratura su come le repubbliche dell'Asia Centrale abbiano ottenuto la sovranità è più o meno suddivisa in due campi: coloro che sostengono che le repubbliche centrasiatriche non fossero in attesa della sovranità, ottenuta quasi per caso, e fossero ancora meno disposti ad averla (Olcott 1992) e coloro che hanno invece una visione più complessa, sostenendo che se la sovranità non fu rivendicata, fu comunque

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<sup>3</sup> Il cambiamento di stato giuridico dei confini - da amministrativi a internazionali - fu immediato, mentre il *processo di delimitazione e demarcazione* dei confini internazionali fu molto meno rapido, con trattative bilaterali tra gli stati centrasiatrici ancora in corso per quel che riguarda la corretta designazione dei suddetti confini. Ringrazio un anonimo revisore per avermi permesso di chiarire questo punto.

prevista e quindi 'pre-esercitata' negli uffici e nelle narrazioni dei segretari di partito a capo di quelle che erano ancora repubbliche amministrative (Suyarkulova 2011). Al di là delle diverse interpretazioni fornite, è opportuno notare come gli stati dell'Asia Centrale adottarono immediatamente i principi di *uti possidetis*, non-interferenza, non-intervento e uguaglianza sovrana in tutti i loro documenti legali (costituzionali) relativi agli atti statali interni ed esterni.

Essendo le repubbliche dell'Asia Centrale nuovi membri di una società internazionale basata su norme già consolidate, la piena familiarizzazione con la sovranità era (e ancora è) un processo di socializzazione.<sup>4</sup> Ciò è visibile, ad esempio, nei numerosi incidenti durante i primi anni di indipendenza nelle aree in cui vi era incertezza sui confini, come la Valle del Fergana (dove, per altro, la suddetta incertezza rimane), nonché durante la guerra civile in Tagikistan (1993-97), nel corso della quale truppe russe e uzbeke, affiancate da forze ONU schierate per sostenere il governo di Emomali Rahmonov, favorirono la conclusione di un accordo di pace tra le fazioni belligeranti e il consolidamento della sovranità tagika (Horsman 1999), e nell'episodio di Batken (Kirghizistan, 1999) quando truppe e aerei militari uzbeci entrarono nel territorio del Kirghizistan attraverso il Tagikistan per sedare un gruppo terroristico che rapì un gruppo di geologi giapponesi, i loro interpreti e un generale e un soldato kirghisi.<sup>5</sup>

Tutte queste istanze, che riguardano ciò che si può chiamare «diritto internazionale territoriale», sono state contrassegnate da reazioni diplomatiche e contromisure per riaffermare l'inviolabilità della sovranità, segnalando così l'esistenza di una norma e della sua legittimità. Ad esempio, nel novembre 1998, sul finire della guerra civile tagika, Rahmonov accusò il vicino Uzbekistan di addestrare ribelli tagiki e di favorire raid antigovernativi, sostenendo che ciò costituiva «un'aggressione da parte di uno stato vicino. [...] L'Uzbekistan interferisce nei nostri affari interni da ormai sei anni. Abbiamo sufficienti prove e prove per fare appello alle organizzazioni internazionali». Le autorità uzbeke negarono le accuse, dimostrando di fatto il valore normativo del principio di non-interferenza come base dell'istituto della sovranità.<sup>6</sup>

Inoltre, per quanto riguarda l'episodio di Batken, l'allora Ministro degli Esteri del Tagikistan Talbak Nazarov consegnò una no-

<sup>4</sup> Le idee di 'familiarizzazione' e 'apprendimento' erano presenti in diverse interviste con esperti, funzionari e diplomatici che ho condotto in Kazakistan, Kirghizistan, Tagikistan e Uzbekistan tra il 2013 e il 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Agence France Presse, *Four C. Asian states agree mission to free Japanese hostages*, English, 28 August 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Associated Press Worldstream, *Tajikistan accused Uzbekistan of training, aiding rebels*, 12 November 1998. Si veda anche Doc. 01-400 del 17 luglio 1997 (75N-1-2956) presso l'Archivio del Presidente ad Almaty, Kazakistan, sull'ingerenza uzbecka in Tagikistan.

ta diplomatica all'allora ambasciatore uzbeko in Tagikistan, Bakh-tiyor Erjafhev, in connessione con il raid aereo uzbeko menzionato poc'anzi. Il capo del dipartimento informazioni del Ministero degli Esteri tagiko, Igor Sattarov, parlando di «sconcerto» per un «fatto senza precedenti», affermò durante la conversazione a porte chiuse con l'ambasciatore uzbeko che la parte tagika fu sorpresa per questa azione «ingiustificata» dell'aviazione uzbeka e chiese che Tashkent adottasse misure urgenti per impedire che simili eventi si verificassero in futuro in quanto erano in contrasto con i principi e la natura delle relazioni che si erano sviluppati tra i due paesi e nella regione.<sup>7</sup> L'incidente fu poi risolto diplomaticamente.

Nel corso degli anni tali episodi sono diminuiti sempre di più, nella misura in cui la completa inviolabilità della sovranità, associata alle norme di non-interferenza e al non-intervento, è stata codificata nella carta dell'Organizzazione per la Cooperazione dell'Asia Centrale (2002-5), ed è stato incluso nel documento di fondazione della SCO (2001) per poi essere ancora ribadito nel recente incontro informale e consultivo dei capi di stato dell'Asia Centrale a Nur-Sultan (marzo 2018).<sup>8</sup> In termini territoriali, un'interpretazione consensuale, chiara e incondizionata della sovranità basata sui principi di non-interferenza e non-intervento ha di fatto contribuito a che potenziali rivendicazioni territoriali nella regione si materializzassero in conflitti e guerra aperta, come quelle sul confine tra Uzbekistan e Turkmenistan, così come quelle relative a Bukhara e Samarcanda, città che storicamente sono state abitate da tagiki ma che dopo il 1991 hanno finito per far parte del sovrano Uzbekistan, e come quelle tra il Kirghizistan del sud e l'Uzbekistan del nord-est (si vedano, in merito, i fatti di Osh nel 2010).

Questa interpretazione della sovranità in Asia Centrale, basata sull'idea di insularità costituzionale e sulla dicotomia Walkeriana 'dentro/fuori' di cui sopra, viene a volte interpretata quasi in modo strumentale, volto a contestare e rigettare un modello di sovranità post-Vestfaliano basato su principi liberali quali la protezione e promozione dei diritti umani, visti spesso come un'interferenza e un'intrusione nella sfera appunto 'sovrana' dello stato.<sup>9</sup> È piuttosto

<sup>7</sup> Interfax Russian News, *Uzbekistan responsible for bombing in Tajik border area: Tajikistan*, 16 August 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Per un'eccellente analisi sull'interazione tra norme e organizzazioni regionali, si veda il recente lavoro di Russo (2018).

<sup>9</sup> Al tempo stesso, questo sembra anche avere qualcosa a che fare con la competenza professionale di alcuni politici e burocrati nella regione, che spesso accettano strumentalmente di conformarsi, attraverso la firma e la ratifica di specifici accordi internazionali, a norme liberali per questioni di 'immagine' e *good governance* non tenendo conto delle conseguenze giuridiche di tale conformazione. Intervista con un avvocato internazionale in Asia Centrale, febbraio 2019.

famoso, ad esempio, il caso del Kirghizistan. Nel 2016, il presidente Almazbek Atambaev ha dichiarato che alcune parti della costituzione kirghisa stavano minando la sovranità del Kirghizistan e necessitavano di modifiche. Le sue osservazioni giunsero dopo che il suo assistente, Busurmankul Taabaldiev, aveva aspramente criticato un appello dell'allora Commissione delle Nazioni Unite per i Diritti Umani (UNCHR) a rivedere una sentenza della Corte Suprema del Kirghizistan contro un attivista per i diritti umani, Azimjan Askarov, al tempo detenuto. Taabaldiev sostenne che l'appello dell'UNCHR costituì un'interferenza negli affari interni del Kirghizistan, dimenticandosi però che la costituzione del Kirghizistan consente ai suoi cittadini di invitare i tribunali internazionali a proteggere i loro diritti, e richiede che le autorità kirghise si conformino alle decisioni prese da tali istituzioni.<sup>10</sup>

Una logica simile è quella seguita dal Kazakistan per quanto riguarda i processi di integrazione eurasiatica con Russia, Bielorussia, Kirghizistan e Armenia. Adottando una visione molto ristretta della sovranità come insularità costituzionale e come baluardo legale contro una potenziale ingerenza russa, l'allora presidente kazako Nursultan Nazarbayev sostenne qualche anno fa che non appena l'integrazione economica basata sull'intergovernalismo si fosse evoluta in integrazione politica basata sulla creazione di un potere decisionale sovranazionale, il Kazakistan avrebbe esercitato il diritto di ritirarsi dall'Unione eurasiatica.<sup>11</sup> Ciò, ancora una volta, segnala che la sovranità dell'Asia Centrale è qualcosa che non è divisibile, non è soggetta a compromessi e non può violare il processo decisionale politico degli stati della regione, pur permettendo la partecipazione in organizzazioni multilaterali regionali. Il defunto presidente uzbeko Islam Karimov fu ancora più categorico, chiedendo retoricamente se fosse possibile avere una sovranità politica senza sovranità economica, in un'implicita critica del Kazakistan che apriva di fatto il suo mercato alla Russia.<sup>12</sup>

Ricapitolando: in Asia Centrale, la sovranità è un'istituzione inviolabile e indiscutibile legata all'insularità costituzionale che gli stati indipendenti possiedono in virtù di un atto di diritto internazionale; non è divisibile; riguarda il potere, il controllo e l'autorità; ed è molto legata alla natura territoriale dello stato (*uti possidetis*, non-interferenza, non-intervento). Gli appelli cosmopoliti a rilassare le nozioni

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**10** «President Wants to Amend Laws Undermining Kyrgyzstan's Sovereignty». *States News Service*, May 5, 2016.

**11** «Nazarbayev Stands for Sovereignty». *Defense and Security* (Russia), September 3, 2014.

**12** «Uzbek President Slams Russia-led Economic Union». *Agence France Press*, June 7, 2014.

di sovranità in favore dei principi dell'economia di mercato, dei diritti umani, della *human security* e della *responsible governance* sono respinte a livello internazionale, intese come imposizioni unilaterali. Per capire come questa interpretazione della sovranità sia diventata così radicata in Asia Centrale, dobbiamo rivolgerci alla sua natura post-coloniale e al carattere autoritario della sua *governance* regionale.

#### 4 Postcolonialismo e autoritarismo

Come hanno recentemente sostenuto Cummings e Hinnebusch (2011), è impossibile comprendere come gli stati dell'Asia Centrale siano entrati nella società internazionale senza considerare il loro passato come parte dell'impero zarista prima e dell'URSS poi. A questo proposito, postcolonialismo e autoritarismo, definito come una forma gerarchica di ordine politico, che enfatizza la stabilità, l'ordine *top-down* e l'importanza della figura dell'esecutivo non rispettando la definizione di democrazia minima procedurale intesa come elezioni regolari, suffragio universale e garanzie effettive di libertà civili e politiche (Linz 2000) sono inestricabilmente collegati.

Continuando con la tesi principale sopra delineata, l'interpretazione della sovranità in Asia Centrale è legata ai specifici tratti autoritari della regione che, radicata nella pratica sovietica della politica dei 'quadri', rafforza una concezione territoriale e patrimoniale della sovranità - sovranità dal sovrano, attraverso il sovrano, per il sovrano. Inoltre, il legame tra la comprensione autoritaria della sovranità e la sua interpretazione territoriale è fornito da una specifica interpretazione postcoloniale della sovranità stessa, che Sørensen chiama «il gioco sovrano post-coloniale» (2016), basato sul consolidamento dello stato, il controllo della violenza all'interno del suo territorio e la resistenza alle intrusioni eccessive dalle grandi potenze.

Come affermato da Lewis, la natura della sovranità emersa nel periodo post-sovietico in Asia Centrale deve molto all'atteggiamento delle élite nazionali dell'era sovietica verso i confini amministrativi delle repubbliche sovietiche nella regione, che è emersa in parte come risultato di un profondo coinvolgimento nella politica burocratica della gestione del territorio centrasiatiano e delle sue risorse (2011, 180). Questo, a sua volta, ha contribuito all'emergere di un tipo di regime autoritario che rifletteva questa particolare interpretazione della sovranità. Inoltre, la natura dell'autoritarismo in Asia Centrale deriva in parte dalle strutture informali delle strutture sociali e dalla distribuzione delle risorse sviluppatasi nell'Asia Centrale sovietica negli anni Settanta e Ottanta (Jones Luong 2002).

In una certa misura, queste strutture sociali rispecchiavano gli sviluppi politici e sociali in altre parti dell'Unione Sovietica, ma in Asia centrale erano inquadrati in un particolare discorso etnico e

religioso (Roy 2000). Nel corso della ricerca sul campo pluriennale effettuata nella regione, ho di fatto potuto constatare come le narrative associate a un immaginario confronto «musulmano contro ortodosso», «slavo contro asiatico» e le descrizioni della regione come «bagaglio di cui ci si vuole disfare» e «periferia» siano molto presenti nelle menti di funzionari e diplomatici centrasiatrici quando si guarda indietro ai primi anni dell'Indipendenza.<sup>13</sup> Allo stesso tempo, nonostante alcuni progetti intellettuali per un'Asia Centrale unita sotto il nome di Turkestan nei primi anni Novanta, tali piani incontrarono molte resistenze da parte dei leader di stato provenienti dalla vecchia nomenclatura sovietica, sostenendo che un sistema di stati sovrani era l'unico in grado di garantire ai nuovi stati indipendenti prosperità, sviluppo e sicurezza (Costa Buranelli 2017).

Pertanto, il risultato della prevalenza di questa forma di élite (post)coloniale è un'interpretazione molto particolare della sovranità, che emerge principalmente dal funzionamento della burocrazia di partito e di stato all'interno dei confini repubblicani nel corso di molti anni. Di conseguenza, il concetto di sovranità dell'Asia Centrale post-sovietica non emerge da un progetto intellettuale o come risultato di una lotta popolare nazionalista radicata in una versione etnica e progressiva della storia. Tali progetti erano effettivamente in evidenza alla fine degli anni Ottanta e all'inizio degli anni Novanta, quando molti intellettuali centroasiatici erano motivati da visioni alternative di sovranità informate da problemi linguistici, nazionalismo etnico e irredentismo, ma furono di fatto soppressi dalle élite statali (Lewis 2011, 183).

Questa è forse la più grande differenza tra la concettualizzazione occidentale della sovranità, per lo più legata alla volontà popolare e al nazionalismo e il discorso/pratica della sovranità in Asia Centrale. Il nazionalismo di ispirazione occidentale non è riuscito a mobilitare il sostegno di massa per competere con le reti informali di potere e i loro leader. Invece, tali visioni nazionaliste furono rapidamente sconfitte dalle élite dell'era sovietica all'inizio degli anni Novanta in Uzbekistan, Kazakistan e Turkmenistan e infine in Tagikistan nel decennio successivo. A causa della necessità di continuità con il passa-

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**13** Interviste con esperti e diplomatici del Kazakistan, del Kirghizistan, dell'Uzbekistan e del Tagikistan nel periodo 2013-19. Le espressioni virgolettate sono state tradotte dal russo e dall'inglese, e costituiscono parti fondanti delle narrative dei miei interlocutori. Ancora oggi, in un contesto completamente diverso, questa reminiscenza è ancora presente. Dos Koshim, presidente del movimento nazionalista Ult Tagdyry, ha per esempio sostenuto che il Kazakistan sta perdendo la propria sovranità nel processo di integrazione eurasiatica: «Ci siamo dimenticati della cosa più importante - la psicologia delle persone. Prima eravamo una colonia della Russia, poi ci siamo separati dal paese. Vent'anni dopo la gente non vorrebbe più tornare indietro». Kazakhstan General Newswire December 7, 2011 «Eurasian integration deprives Kazakhstan of sovereignty attributes - activist» (trad. dell'Autore).

to per assicurare stabilità e ordine nel processo di transizione verso l'indipendenza, la sovranità post-sovietica non aveva bisogno di un mandato democratico; non si basava sugli impulsi populistici del nazionalismo etnico e diffidava di attrarre troppo fortemente il sentimento nazionalista di massa. Invece, la sovranità è stata istituzionalizzata sulla base di uno stile di governo autoritario proprio per contrastare i concetti alternativi di sovranità, legati all'etnia o a ideali pan-islamici e pan-turchi avanzati da avversari politici (Lewis 2011).

In una logica di 'localizzazione' delle norme (Acharya 2004), si può quindi sostenere che la norma base della sovranità intesa come insularità costituzionale, estesa dalla società internazionale all'Asia Centrale, favorì non poco gli imperativi locali, gli obiettivi e le strategie dei leader, per quanto autoritari. Una norma internazionale è stata quindi localizzata con successo per soddisfare imperativi locali politici - quelli di conseguire una transizione pacifica all'indipendenza e di mantenere il potere politico su territorio e risorse.

Il processo di localizzazione della norma di sovranità è stato poi reimmesso nella società internazionale attraverso la reiterazione dell'importanza della sovranità e della sua inviolabilità attraverso un processo di sussidiarietà della norma a livello internazionale (2011). Dal 1991 in poi, infatti, la sovranità così intesa è stata una delle norme e delle istituzioni più frequentemente sostenute dai rappresentanti dell'Asia Centrale all'Assemblea Generale delle Nazioni Unite, mostrando alti tassi di convergenza ogni volta che una risoluzione riguardante la sovranità viene votata (Costa Buranelli 2014). Soprattutto dopo l'annessione *de facto* della Crimea da parte della Russia, le repubbliche dell'Asia Centrale sono diventate più risolte, a livello locale e internazionale, nella loro insistenza sul principio di sovranità - non a caso, pochi giorni dopo la violenza scoppiata in Crimea, l'ex Ministro degli Affari Esteri del Kazakistan Erlan Idrissov volò al quartier generale delle Nazioni Unite a New York per presentare una dichiarazione ufficiale in merito all'inviolabilità della sovranità e del territorio del Kazakistan.<sup>14</sup>

Di fatto, il contesto geopolitico può aiutare a capire la logica dietro una così acuta insistenza su questa norma. L'Asia Centrale è l'unica regione al mondo circondata da potenze nucleari. Come ha recentemente sostenuto Frederick Starr,

o si crea stabilità dall'esterno, che non ha mai funzionato, o si promuove la stabilità e lo sviluppo dall'interno e questo è ciò che gli stati dell'Asia Centrale stanno cercando di fare oggi. Il motore principale per proteggere la sovranità in Asia Centrale oggi, a parte l'enfasi su questo stesso principio nelle dottrine naziona-

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<sup>14</sup> «Poroshenko Thanks Kazakhstan for Respect of Ukraine's Sovereignty». *Central Asian News Service*, October 9, 2015 (English language).



li delle politiche estere, è il regionalismo – la cooperazione all'interno della regione. Ciò che si cerca non è l'integrazione, non la condivisione della sovranità, ma il dialogo pragmatico e la cooperazione tra stati sovrani. (Baisalov 2019)<sup>15</sup>

Anche se non ambizioso nei contenuti e negli obiettivi, questo 'regionalismo discorsivo' è adatto al bisogno dei paesi dell'Asia Centrale di isolarsi dalla pressione eccessiva delle grandi potenze circostanti e delle loro politiche potenzialmente revisioniste, creando così una sorta di 'sovranità regionale' almeno a livello retorico, la cui funzione principale è quella di aumentare i costi della sua violazione (Tskhay, Costa Buranelli c.d.s).

Queste rivendicazioni costanti di una nuova sovranità acquisita rafforzano la postcolonialità dello stato dell'Asia Centrale, e viceversa. Sottolineando che la sovranità è stata ottenuta attraverso una lotta di liberazione da un regime che ha ostacolato lo sviluppo e la crescita economica, le élites locali perpetuano quasi di proposito una condizione di 'ritardo' con il resto del mondo, di fatto giustificando una *governance* autoritaria in nome della stabilità sociale e dello sviluppo economico. Allo stesso tempo, questa enfasi sulla postcolonialità rafforza la necessità della sovranità e della riaffermazione della stessa nei consessi internazionali, considerandola un baluardo contro le potenze che possono ancora esercitare potenza militare nella regione, come nel caso della Crimea (Costa Buranelli 2018).

La relazione tra sovranità e autoritarismo è ugualmente biunivoca: da un lato, l'importanza cruciale della sovranità, collegata nelle narrazioni delle élites alla stabilità politica e alla resilienza del regime, è stata usata come parte di uno 'spirito di Shanghai' sotto l'egida della SCO per legittimare un governo autoritario e respingere qualsiasi tipo di norma democratica che possa penetrare nella regione (Aris 2011; Ambrosio 2008). Simultaneamente, la legittimità che l'autoritarismo trova nella regione (almeno a livello delle élites) è molto legata alla sua presunta capacità di proteggere la sovranità dalle interferenze esterne.

Questo binomio autoritarismo-postcolonialismo mostra come l'interpretazione della sovranità in Asia Centrale non sia solo radicata in pratiche autoritarie, ma è anche tipicamente postcoloniale, secondo cui il nesso sicurezza-insicurezza è definito in relazione a vulnerabilità, sia interne che esterne, che minacciano o hanno il potenziale di abbattere o indebolire strutture statali, sia territoriali e istituziona-

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**15** La reiterazione di questa narrazione è stata oggetto di numerose osservazioni e interazioni dell'autore con esperti e diplomatici alla conferenza internazionale organizzata dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri dell'Uzbekistan, «Connettività e cooperazione in Asia centrale», a cui ho partecipato come relatore invitato (Tashkent, 19-20 febbraio 2019).

li, e regimi di governo (Ayoob 2002). Per evitare ciò, il leader diventa l'incarnazione della natura sovrana dello stato, non così dissimile dal Leviatano, e si presenta come un condottiero che ha portato il popolo all'ottenimento del dono più prezioso - la sovranità.<sup>16</sup> In quello che sembra un eccellente esempio di socializzazione regionale, il presidente tagiko Rahmon sembra essere sulla via di una personalizzazione del potere ancora più crescente (ad esempio diventando 'Leader della Nazione' nel 2015, seguendo l'esempio di 'Elbasi' in Kazakistan e 'Turkmenbashi' e 'Arkadag' in Turkmenistan, e ottenendo di conseguenza immunità permanente) all'indomani di colloqui con i suoi pari regionali su 'stabilità' e 'sicurezza' nella regione in generale e in Tagikistan in particolare, con particolare attenzione alla protezione della sovranità nella regione.<sup>17</sup> Una sovranità che spesso, nella narrazione dei leaders, non è il prodotto di processi di *path-dependency* come discusso sopra, ma è piuttosto il risultato di una lotta di liberazione (di cui il leader è di fatto il legittimo custode). Qualche anno fa Nazarbayev si riferì agli 'antenati' in lotta per l'indipendenza del Kazakistan per rispondere ad alcune provocazioni del presidente russo Vladimir Putin in merito alla fragile e quasi artificiale sovranità kazaka,<sup>18</sup> mentre l'anno scorso il presidente Sooronbai Jeenbekov affermò nel Giorno dell'Indipendenza del Kirghistan, nella piazza centrale di Ala-Too, che

Oggi è il giorno della gioia per il vostro popolo che ha realizzato il suo sogno amato e raggiunto la sovranità. In questo giorno abbiamo alzato la bandiera della nostra indipendenza e detto al mondo intero che un nuovo paese indipendente è apparso... La libertà non può essere regalata, dovrebbe essere guadagnata in una lotta continua. Molti nostri figli e figlie del nostro popolo hanno sacrificato le loro vite per questo obiettivo.<sup>19</sup>

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**16** I riferimenti al Leviatano di Hobbes sono stati effettivamente discussi nel corso di diverse interviste con esperti kazaki, kirghisi e uzbeki. Inoltre, questo paragrafo è stato scritto dopo una passeggiata intorno a Dushanbe, la capitale del Tagikistan, in cui ho potuto vedere con i miei occhi la presenza pervasiva di immagini del presidente Rahmon in quasi ogni angolo - di fronte alle montagne del Pamir, tenendo la bandiera tagika, e salutando la gente adorante.

**17** Si veda, ad esempio, URL <http://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-rahmon-life-long-immunity/27419474.html> (2019-11-25); URL <http://www.president.tj/en/node/9877> (2019-11-25); URL <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/tajikistan-votes-to-allow-authoritarian-president-emomali-rahmon-to-rule-forever-a7048011.html> (2019-11-25).

**18** URL <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/01/kazakhs-worried-after-putin-questions-history-of-countrys-independence-a38907> (2019-11-25).

**19** «People of Kyrgyzstan Made their Cherished Dream Come True and Achieved Sovereignty - jeenbekov». *Friday Central Asian News Service*, August 31, 2018 (English language, trad. dell'Autore).

## 5 Conclusioni

In questo articolo si è voluto analizzare il concetto di sovranità e la sua declinazione nella politica centrasiatica. Seguendo la teoria della Scuola Inglese, la tesi principale sostenuta è che per capire il significato e la pratica della sovranità in Asia centrale è necessario partire dal presupposto che la sovranità non è un attributo o un possesso degli stati, ma è un'istituzione della società internazionale. Una volta inteso ciò, è possibile comprendere come un'istituzione, in quanto risultato di specifiche narrazioni e pratiche normative, possa modificarsi a seconda del contesto storico, geografico, sociale e politico - in altre parole, trattare la sovranità come un'istituzione permette di osservare e analizzare differenti processi di localizzazione, adattamento e messa in pratica del suo contenuto normativo, evitandone così la sua assolutizzazione. Questo ha permesso di mettere in luce il ruolo che il carattere autoritario e la natura postcoloniale della regione hanno nel declinare e modellare la pratica della sovranità in Asia Centrale. Sovranità, autoritarismo e postcolonialismo formano un nesso concettuale e politico inestricabile, che si rafforza ogni volta che una delle tre componenti è enfatizzata dai leaders regionali. La discussione offerta in questo paper ha mostrato anche come sia fondamentale comprendere l'evoluzione storica del concetto di sovranità e il contesto sociopolitico in qui esso si trova a essere esercitato e studiato.

Questo saggio ha, da un lato, cercato di delineare un'analisi teorica preliminare di come la sovranità sia esercitata in Asia Centrale alla luce del suo passato, incoraggiando studiosi della regione ad approfondire l'approccio che gli stati centrasiatici hanno nei confronti delle norme internazionali. Dall'altro, ha cercato di mostrare le peculiarità dell'interpretazione centrasiatica dell'istituzione della sovranità per aiutare e supportare il lavoro di *policy-making* che esperti e diplomatici portano avanti quotidianamente, con la speranza che questa analisi contribuisca a una maggiore e migliore comprensione degli ostacoli che spesso intercorrono tra le diplomazie occidentali e quelle centrasiatiche ogniquale volta vi siano aspetti inerenti e concernenti la sovranità di questi paesi.

Come già ripetuto, questo studio ha voluto offrire delle riflessioni e una teorizzazione preliminare - per ragioni di spazio, la vasta complessità del tema non ha potuto essere affrontata nella sua interezza. Per esempio, ciascuno dei tre nessi identificati nell'articolo (sovranità-autoritarismo, sovranità-postcolonialismo, autoritarismo-postcolonialismo) meriterebbe un'analisi approfondita a sé. Inoltre, come affermato nell'Introduzione, studi futuri possono focalizzarsi sulla specifica interpretazione della sovranità in ciascuno stato centrasiatico. Tuttavia, la speranza è che questo articolo possa servire da spunto e da supporto per future ricerche sul tema della sovranità in Asia Centrale.

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# Government-Private Sector Relations for Sustainable Development in Central Asia

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**Abstract** The article deals with the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Central Asia, including the roles of public and private sector, the opportunities stemming from public-private relations and the expected sustainable development outcomes. Some common SDGs outcomes can be observed across Central Asia, such as the eradication of poverty and the reduction of inequalities. However, results of SDGs implementation in the region are varied. In order to stimulate cross-learning and to address regional SDG challenges, it is recommended to establish a permanent Central Asian regional platform for SDGs implementation. At regional and domestic level, governments can play a decisive role to support SDGs implementation and stimulate sustainable development. Governments can produce enabling regulations, effectively co-operate with the private sector and facilitate access to quality finance.

**Keywords** Sustainable development. SDGs. Emerging economies. Central Asia. Government. Private sector development. Public-private dialogue. Regulation. Access to finance.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Potential for SDGs Implementation in Central Asia. – 3 Role of Government-Business Partnership for Private Sector Development. – 4 Sustainable Development: Role of the Public Sector.



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## 1 Introduction

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by United Nations members in 2015 laid a common framework for advanced and emerging economies in their quest for better environment, lower inequalities, more peace and prosperity.

The SDGs framework shifted the meaning of development from a focus mainly on the needs of poor countries, to one that emphasizes well-being and sustainability in all countries. In order to implement SDG and translate them into concrete beneficial outcomes, partnerships are needed amongst all stakeholders, including governments, private sector, academia, civil society and NGOs to name a few.

This article deals with SDGs implementation in Central Asia, looking at the potential of SDGs implementation in the region, the role of a government-business partnership, and the opportunities for sustainable development.

**Table 1** SDGs Agenda's "5Ps".

People	<p><b>Goal 1.</b> End poverty in all its forms everywhere</p> <p><b>Goal 2.</b> End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture</p> <p><b>Goal 3.</b> Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages</p> <p><b>Goal 4.</b> Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all</p> <p><b>Goal 5.</b> Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls</p>
Planet	<p><b>Goal 6.</b> Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all</p> <p><b>Goal 12.</b> Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns</p> <p><b>Goal 13.</b> Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts</p> <p><b>Goal 14.</b> Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development</p> <p><b>Goal 15.</b> Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss</p>
Prosperity	<p><b>Goal 7.</b> Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all</p> <p><b>Goal 8.</b> Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</p> <p><b>Goal 9.</b> Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation</p> <p><b>Goal 10.</b> Reduce inequality within and among countries</p> <p><b>Goal 11.</b> Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable</p>
Peace	<p><b>Goal 16.</b> Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels</p>
Partnerships	<p><b>Goal 17.</b> Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development</p>



## 2 Potential for SDGs Implementation in Central Asia

Implementation of SDGs in Central Asia is a major opportunity for three reasons at least. First, the content of SDGs themselves. Second, the help that the overall SDG framework can provide for the reform programs of the countries of the region. And third, the cross-boundary impacts of SDGs. It is also an opportunity for countries of the region to come together and further strengthen their dialogue.

The SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2017 of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network shows varied implementation performances of Central Asian Countries. Kazakhstan is amongst the top performers in the region and, together with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, ranked in the first half of the 150 surveyed countries, and better than some OECD member countries.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 2** Ranking of selected Central Asian countries by SDG, out of 150 surveyed countries

COUNTRY	TOT	SDG1	SDG2	SDG3	SDG4	SDG5	SDG6	SDG7	SDG8
Afghanistan	144	135	133	144	151	155	154	113	152
Kazakhstan	46	1	96	87	53	26	39	92	46
Kyrgyzstan	66	58	49	94	62	71	68	52	135
Mongolia	90	23	93	102	55	51	108	124	49
Tajikistan	83	107	143	98	39	95	101	39	128
Turkmenistan	146	1	65	97	64	99	155	97	148
Uzbekistan	50	109	38	78	24	82	113	84	98
COUNTRY	SDG9	SDG10	SDG11	SDG12	SDG13	SDG14	SDG15	SDG16	SDG17
Afghanistan	156	15	144	11	41	n.a.	142	131	109
Kazakhstan	57	6	57	131	110	n.a.	127	78	142
Kyrgyzstan	120	7	58	72	69	n.a.	89	108	51
Mongolia	99	34	123	86	133	n.a.	78	107	102
Tajikistan	119	25	103	18	107	n.a.	84	39	53
Turkmenistan	139	87	94	58	135	n.a.	108	77	157
Uzbekistan	101	60	106	50	9	n.a.	111	23	1

Key: **B** Top 50% on overall performance

Bottom 20% performance by SDG

Top 30% performance by SDG

Source: author's analysis based on Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2017).

<sup>1</sup> Chile, Israel, Turkey, Mexico.

Several Central Asian countries have eradicated extreme income poverty (Goal 1) and have performed well on reduction of inequality (Goal 10). Kazakhstan ranks well also on sustainable water management (Goal 6) and on gender equality (Goal 5).

Kazakhstan has emerged as the potential leader in SDGs implementation in the region. For example, the country systematically incorporates global standards in its strategy and national reform planning. In the past years, around the time of SDGs adoption by the UN membership, Kazakhstan has designed and implemented a number of structured reform plans, such as Kazakhstan 2050, 100 concrete steps to implement 5 institutional reforms,<sup>2</sup> national 2025 Strategic Development Plan and, more recently, the Five Social Initiatives.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, Kazakhstan has been one of the three countries in the world that have implemented an OECD Country Programme, designed to facilitate the adoption of OECD standards and instruments by non-member economies.

Much remains to be done to implement the SDG in Central Asia. Main challenges remain Goal 8 (promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all), Goal 9 (building resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation), and also Goal 11 (inclusive urbanization), Goal 15 (protecting ecosystems).

In several other SDG, the performance is rather uneven across the region and there is clearly scope for peer learning. Some countries of the region ranked at the top performance on individual SDGs (see table 3).


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**2** The five institutional reforms are: (1) Creation of a modern and professional civil service; (2) Ensuring the rule of law; (3) Industrialization and economic growth; (4) A unified nation for the future; (5) Transparency and accountability of the state.

**3** The Five Social Initiatives are: (1) New Opportunities for Purchasing Housing for Each Family; (2) Reducing the Tax Burden to Increase Wages of Low-paid Workers; (3) Increasing the Accessibility and Quality of Higher Education and Improving the Living Conditions of Students; (4) Expansion of Microcredit; (5) Further Gas Supply of the Country.

**Table 3** Highest Ranking of selected Central Asian countries by SDG, out of 150 surveyed countries

COUNTRY	SDG1	SDG2	SDG4	SDG5	SDG6	SDG7	SDG10	SDG12	SDG13	SDG16	SDG17
Afghanistan							15	11			
Kazakhstan	1			26	39		6				
Kyrgyzstan							7				
Mongolia	23						34				
Tajikistan			39			39	25	18		39	
Turkmenistan	1										
Uzbekistan		38	24						9	23	1

*Key:*  Top 30% performance by SDG

Source: author's analysis based on Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2017).

To address regional SDG challenges and to stimulate cross-learning on SDGs in Central Asia, the opportunity to create a permanent Central Asian SDG Platform (Hub) could be explored. SDGs are global, aspirational and inspirational by nature. They are global because when individual countries progress on them other countries are impacted by spillovers. They are aspirational because they set the same goals for all the countries and they are not a race. They are inspirational because the rankings do not mean competition, but rather they indicate which countries could be a source of inspiration for others. Central Asian countries could effectively cooperate on the implementation of SDGs: to support each country's domestic reform agenda, to share good practices with neighbors, and ultimately to further consolidate the region's position in the international arena.

### 3 Role of Government-Business Partnership for Private Sector Development

In recent years, business has been increasingly looking at governments' support to address the most pressing issues of our times, be them the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, the planet's continued habitability, or fostering stable and inclusive economic growth, to name but a few.

Government responses to this growing demand have been varied, with some governments still perceived by businesses as too bureaucratic and struggling to cope with the fast-changing business environment. Those governments that have taken action have displayed mixed success in providing institutional structures needed for the private sector to operate.

The introduction of SDGs stressed the urgent need of enhancement of government relations with the private sector and other stakeholders. In fact, one of the SDGs, Goal 17, explicitly refers to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. Moreover, the SDG framework is holistic, global and action-oriented by nature, and begs for enhanced policy and institutional coherence by identifying policy interactions, trade-offs and synergies across economic, social and environmental areas; and considering transboundary and intergenerational effects.

SDGs require a change of mindset: from silos to whole-of-government partnership, including in policy making, to stimulate networks of effects. For example, access to clean energy, safe drinking water and food (Goals 2, 6 and 7) can promote health (Goal 3). However, demand for energy, drinking water and food is also expected to increase as prosperity increases (Goals 7 to 11). While using more land for agriculture will help end hunger (Goal 2) it may undermine efforts to curb loss of biodiversity (Goal 15) and put stress on water resources, therefore adversely affect Goal 6.

Central Asian countries that perform best on individual SDGs have indeed displayed ability to leverage network effects. For example, Uzbekistan ranked 38<sup>th</sup> out of 150 surveyed countries on SDG2 (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture). It notably reduced prevalence of undernourishment to 5% of its population, prevalence of wasting<sup>4</sup> in children under 5 years of age to 4.5%, by reaching a cereal yield of 4.8 tons/hectare. Kazakhstan ranked 39<sup>th</sup> out of 150 surveyed countries on SDG6 (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all). Its performance is the result of providing access to improved sanitation facilities to 97.5% of the population, reducing freshwater withdrawal (that is, the ratio between total freshwater withdrawn by all major sectors and total renewable freshwater resources) to 18.4%, and containing imported groundwater depletion to 2.8 m<sup>3</sup>/year/capita.

In order to maximize network effects, Governments (as a whole, not only individual ministries or agencies) and business are evolving their relations from being counterparts to each other to becoming partners to help coherence across a range of policy fields – economy, investment, environment, energy, but also migration, education, development co-operation and more. In particular, relations between governments and business are evolving from consultation to public-private dialogue and increasingly to partnership.

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<sup>4</sup> Wasting is low weight for age; the indicator measures children age 5 years and under whose weight for age is two or more standard deviations below the median weight for age of a reference population. Wasting is caused by acute food shortages and/or disease, and is strongly correlated with under-5 mortality.

### 3.1 Consultation on Reform

Consultation allows developing regulations in an open and transparent fashion, with appropriate procedures for effective and timely inputs from interested national and foreign parties.

It should of course include potential domestic and foreign investors as well as affected business, trade unions, civil society, wider interest groups and other levels of government. As long as the government handles comments from interested parties, it enhances the credibility of the process and the prospects of regulatory compliance by the economic actors.

Consultation is widely used in OECD countries. For example, Ireland, in the context of its Open Government Partnership (OGP) National Action Plan of 2014, designed a “Consultation Principles & Guidance” document to help decision-makers make better decisions and improve in the quality of service provision. The document provides three principles of consultation: 1) real engagement, 2) easy accessibility, and 3) involvement of all stages of the policy process: development, implementation, evaluation, and review.

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries have or are planning institutional consultation mechanisms, involving both domestic and international private sector. Kazakhstan established a Council for Improving the Investment Climate, chaired by the Prime Minister. It is a platform for ongoing consultation with investors on reforms aimed at enhancing the country’s business climate. In Uzbekistan, following the recent wave of reforms since 2016, discussions are ongoing regarding the most appropriate setup for public consultation on reforms.

Consultation is a first important layer of interaction to ensure that involved parties understand the nature of new regulations, why it is needed and what is expected of them. Its main outcome is better quality of specific policies. It reassures current and potential investors seeking opportunities by facilitating more regulatory certainty. However, it is still silos-based.

### 3.2 Public-Private Dialogue (PPD)

PPD brings together government, private sector and relevant stakeholders to achieve shared policy objectives and play a transformational role for a particular set of issues. The scope of PPD is wide and involves multiple policy areas. They include for example, improving the investment climate, building sector competitiveness, managing natural resources, improving public service delivery.

PPD is typically a formalized structure for private sector dialogue with government, ongoing monitoring of outputs and outcomes, and

program to disseminate information. Participants in PPD include the ultimate beneficiaries of reforms, civil society organizations, labor unions to ensure a more balanced and inclusive reform process.

PPD's outcomes include better identification and analysis of roadblocks, agreement on development objectives, and assessment of the issue at stake, recommendations on policy and legislative reforms, identification of development opportunities, definition of action plans.

PPD is an established policy tool in OECD economies, used for particularly sensitive issues that involve multiple stakeholders. For example, Australia established the Regional Export and Investment Group (REICG) for the discussion of Federal and State Government interests with private sector exporters to overcome historically adverse trade terms for Australian exporters. The objectives of REICG were to encourage and facilitate existing exporters into new markets and to create export awareness and foster the development of an export culture. Participants included exporters, potential exporters, Austrade officials, State Government officials, Department of Business, local government, Chamber of Commerce, industry group representatives, academics and regional development managers. Participant reported that this PPD increased confidence in professionalism of officials, stimulated peer learning, and supported networking to serve the needs of local businesses.

Some Central Asian countries have sought to stimulate Public Private Dialogue in recent years, leveraging technology to reach a wide audience. Kazakhstan has established an online tri-lingual platform (Kazakh, Russian and English) for PPD, as part of its wider e-government program.<sup>5</sup> The platform allows citizens to express their opinion on existing and new policies. In 2015, the Government of Mongolia called a cellphone referendum in the midst of the re-negotiation of a large contract with a major mining company: (A) push ahead with more foreign investment in the mining sector, or (B) pursue an austerity program, slashing public spending.

PPD helps build trust around discussions on important reforms and provides stakeholders with capacity and credibility to help deliver quick and concrete results.

### 3.3 Partnership-Based Platforms

While PPD continues to be an effective approach to policy reforms, also owing to the use of technology, SDGs require even deeper collaboration. It shall be driven by a more open and scope-flexible interaction platform and a more proactive private sector, including in

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<sup>5</sup> See: <http://egov.kz/cms/en> (2019-11-20).

implementation of policy reforms and government plans. Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) are an example of this evolution. According to the World Bank, to meet the investment needs of the Sustainable Development Goals, the global community needs to move the discussion from “Billions” in Official Development Assistance<sup>6</sup> (ODA) to “Trillions” in investments of all kinds: public and private, national and global, in both capital and capacity. “Billions to trillions” is shorthand for the realization that achieving the SDGs will require more than money. It needs a global change of mindsets, approaches and accountabilities to reflect and transform the new reality of a developing world.

The private sector shall be given increased responsibility on growth and development, for example through specific agreements on major investment projects (the PPP) or on improving the overall business climate. For example, the OECD publishes the Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, a set of government-backed recommendations on responsible business conduct in existence today. The governments that adhere to the Guidelines aim to encourage the positive contributions MNEs can make to sustainable development and to minimize the difficulties to which their various operations may give rise.

In Central Asia, Kazakhstan has been taking the lead in PPP. The parliament approved a new Law on PPP in 2015. Its declared focus is on development of infrastructure in the public interests, implementation of socially significant projects in education, health care, transport, power industry, and housing and public utilities. According to the 2019 Public Private Partnerships Review of Kazakhstan by the OECD Working Party of Senior Budget Officials, the Kazakh law implies a broader PPP definition than OECD countries. The law's guiding principles include the possibility to implement PPPs in all sectors of the economy, a broad definition of PPPs contracts, such as service contracts, after-sales service contracts and leasing agreements. The law allows for 3 to 30 year PPP contracts. While it is early to assess the outcome of the PPP law, it is worthwhile noticing that some large projects have been signed under its framework, including logistic infrastructures related to the “One Belt One Road” initiative.

The shift from silos-based consultation to government-private sector partnership seems the set path for public-private sector relations. One question remains open: which are the metrics to assess co-operation paths between the business sector and public authorities, especially in a world that has seen decreasing trust in public and pri-

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<sup>6</sup> Currently, ODA amounts to some US\$ 135 billion. When adding other flows for development, including philanthropy, remittances, South-South flows and other official assistance, and foreign direct investment the amount is nearly US\$ 1 trillion.

vate institutions? General metrics would include maximization of the private sector company value and improvement of the overall business environment. This is the focus of the last section of this article.

## 4 Sustainable Development: Role of the Public Sector

The public sector can play two complementary roles in creating new jobs and facilitating inclusive growth: regulatory environment and financial support.

### 4.1 Regulatory Environment

Governments shall first improve overall investment climate, which in turn will unlock private resources for sustainable development. Gaps in key policy areas related to investment shall be filled - including infrastructure, small and medium-sized enterprises, public governance (including anti-corruption policy) and investment for green growth - and the regulatory framework for long-term, quality investment shall be strengthened. In this respect, the OECD Policy Framework for Investment (PFI) is a comprehensive and systematic support tool for governments,<sup>7</sup> such as investment facilitation, trade policy, access to finance, skills development.

More specific reforms focus on: gender equality, entrepreneurship, climate mitigation and adaptation to climate change, sustainable management of water and sanitation, inclusive urbanization. For example, inclusive urbanization is central to achieving SDG 11 to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. In this area, the main challenges that OECD and non-OECD economies face include curbing global carbon emissions; providing adequate water supply and sanitation; establishing efficient public transport networks; dealing with informal settlements and shanty towns; and reducing vulnerability to risks related to natural disasters.

Kazakhstan has already taken several steps in the reform of the regulatory environment. The country has already reached OECD standards on several investment climate dimensions (National treat-

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<sup>7</sup> The PFI provides the OECD standard on the following policy areas: Investment Policy, Investment Promotion and Facilitation, Trade Policy, Competition Policy, Tax Policy, Corporate Governance, Responsible Business Conduct, Human Resources for Investment, Investment for Infrastructure, Access to Finance, Public Governance, Investment for Green Growth.



ment, PFI,<sup>8</sup> Responsible Business Conduct).<sup>9</sup> It underwent two OECD Investment Policy Reviews which allowed it to become an adherent to the OECD Declaration on Investments. Results have been obtained on more specific policy areas. For example, in the 2016 Global Gender Gap report of the WEF, Kazakhstan ranks ahead of Austria and other 8 OECD members, at 51 out of 144 countries.

## 4.2 Financial Support: Facilitating Quality Finance

Quality financial supports can greatly enhance impact of public investments, development finance for green economy, and generally access to finance. In order to facilitate quality finance, the various Levels of Government can assess their public investment capacity, with the objective to identify fiscal gaps, create a climate of trust and accountability, and enhance the multi-level governance of public investment.

In Kazakhstan, the role of government-owned development finance institution National Management Company (NMC) Baiterek is pivotal in implementing the governmental policies to fund, for example, sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), healthcare (SDG 3), water management (SDG 6), sustainable energy (SDG 7), infrastructure, inclusive and sustainable industrialization and innovation (SDG 9), better housing (SDG 11).

Moreover, a specific focus should be put on resolving non-performing loans (NPLs). High levels of NPLs are being a common issue in several OECD and non-OECD economies, including several Central Asian countries. In addition to hampering credit growth, NPLs can create a serious economic disturbance. NPLs also harm the inclusive growth path, given their link to unemployment. The resolution of NPLs does not have to entail bail-in procedures. Governments may consider establishing “bad” asset management companies and/or take supervisory measures to encourage banks to resolve NPLs, including additional regulatory capital for long-standing NPLs.

Stimulating sustainable growth must include both financial and non financial aspects in order to create the proper environment. A more specific and tangible metric relates to the creation of sustainable jobs. It is also of fundamental importance for the growth of com-

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**8** Recommended additional improvements on: national treatment, national security-grounded restrictions, hiring key foreign personnel, balancing investment protection and the government’s power to regulate, balancing tax policy and investment incentives and disincentives, investment promotion and facilitation, trade policy, Infrastructure development, competition policy, corporate governance, public governance, responsible business conduct.

**9** Including liberalization, reforms of formerly restricted sectors such as telecommunications, deregulation and reducing the regulatory burden for businesses, establishing business ombudsman.

petitiveness, the sustainability of the economy in the long term, and ultimately its ability to benefit a large part of the citizens.

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# New Trends in Central Asian Connectivity

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**Abstract** The main aim of this article is to evaluate the impact of the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and of Uzbekistan's proactive regional policy to promote regional interconnectivity and to develop an "endogenous" cooperation mainly focused on the strategic interests of Central Asian countries. Within the BRI, Central Asia holds a strategic relevance, because this region is crossed by two of the six main BRI corridor projects – the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor and the Eurasian land bridge – which will contribute to improve regional cooperation and connections among these countries. For Central Asian republics, BRI represents an attractive project benefiting of Chinese huge investments aimed to boost infrastructures and to develop national economies. Under Mirziyoyev's leadership, Uzbekistan has undertaken a proactive and constructive regional diplomacy in Central Asia, based on the improvement of relations and cooperation with other Central Asian republics, which has become a key priority of Tashkent's foreign policy.

**Keywords** Central Asia. Belt and Road Initiative. Interconnectivity. Uzbekistan. Regional cooperation.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Uzbekistan: a New Approach Towards Regional Cooperation. – 3 The Belt and Road Initiative: Promoting Interconnectivity in Central Asia. – 4 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction

The approach of Central Asian republics towards regional cooperation and integration's initiatives in the economic, political or military fields has been characterized by a combination of factors, which have affected and often delayed the development of a regional interconnectivity. Since their independence, Central Asian states have showed limited interest to develop regional cooperation or to bolster economic integration, primarily because they have privileged the achievement of national interests, which were based on strengthening political sovereignty and economic independence. Central Asian states appeared not interested to promote regional cooperation: the only multilateral institution of cooperation exclusively composed by Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while Turkmenistan refused to join it because of its neutrality policy) was the Central Asian Economic Cooperation, renamed the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in 2001: however, CACO lost this peculiarity after Russia's adhesion in 2004. And the following merger with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC) in 2005 (Tolipov 2005).

Furthermore, the traditional rivalry and mistrust among Central Asian presidents was a key factor which negatively affected the development of a concrete regional cooperation in the post soviet region: as a matter of fact, the former Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Tajik President Rahmon had strained relations (due to border and energy disputes, because Uzbekistan feared the effects of the Tagikistan's hydropower project), while Karimov perceived Kazakhstan's first President Nazarbayev as a rival in order to assume regional leadership (Bohr 1998, 43-56). This attitude mainly affected transboundary relations, because the reciprocal suspicions and hostility has prevented any form of economic and energy cooperation, also undermining the attempts to achieve a definitive and complete solution of the shared border questions (border demarcation, minorities rights, political and legal status of the ethnic enclaves): moreover, also the landlocked geographic position of the region has further hindered its full integration in the economic world system.

In addition to the Central Asia's reluctance, we can also observe that all projects and initiatives based on regional cooperation have been promoted by external players: the Eurasian Economic Union (Russia), a free trade bloc within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (China), the "Modern Silk Road" project based on the development of trade and economic regional cooperation (United States). It is evident that the main rationale of these supranational projects and regional cooperation initiatives is linked to the strategic goals of the proposers rather than the political will to promote Central Asian economic and trade integration.

However, in the last years we can identify important indications that this landscape is progressively changing and the cooperation among Central Asian republics – both bilaterally and multilaterally – is increasing. Uzbekistan’s proactive regional policy and the China’s Belt and Road Initiative project – aimed to develop a growing interconnectivity in the region – can be considered the two main and significant drivers of this ongoing process.

## **2 Uzbekistan: a New Approach Towards Regional Cooperation**

Given its geographic centrality in the heart of Central Asia – sharing a border with the other four Central Asian republics and with Afghanistan – and with the largest population in the region, Uzbekistan benefits of a strategic geopolitical position which allows Tashkent to influence the economic and political development in the region as well as to contribute providing security and stability.

Since 2016 the new Uzbek President Mirziyoyev has worked to resolve disputes over water and border delimitation, also adopting several initiatives to promote and enhance regional cooperation which culminated with the summit of Central Asian leaders held in Kazakhstan in March 2018 (Cornell; Starr 2018, 36).

Under Mirziyoyev’s leadership, Uzbekistan has undertaken a proactive and constructive regional diplomacy in Central Asia, maintaining the profitable multivector strategy in foreign policy aimed to strengthen cooperation with both Russia and China – also attempting to balance their geopolitical and strategic interest on the country – as well as developing a new regional foreign policy based on the improvement of relations and cooperation with other Central Asian republics (Indeo 2017). Mirziyoyev has remained committed to the Uzbekistan’s foreign policy doctrine, which is based on four pillars: non-intervention in the internal matters of foreign countries; non-alignment with any military organizations, including non-deployment of foreign military bases on the territory of Uzbekistan; non-membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU); and the fourth recent pillar, the improvement of relations with Uzbekistan’s immediate neighbours, which has become the main priority of the Uzbekistan’s foreign policy (Weitz 2018, 9-12).

This Uzbek’s approach to forge improved regional political and economic cooperation is contributing to draw up a new scenario, within which Central Asian republics are engaged to overcome years of suspicion, mistrust, rivalries and antagonism developing mutually beneficial ties.

In strategic terms, the improvement of bilateral political relations with the other Central Asian countries, the agreements to demarcate

borders and to solve transboundary problems with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the political will to solve water disputes are aimed to promote and increase regional interconnectivity, paving the way for the realization of cross-border trade corridors which will help Uzbekistan to overcome its double-landlocked position, reaching lucrative markets in the EU, Turkey and along the Indian Ocean. In this new landscape, Uzbekistan will be able to promote its geopolitical role in the region, promoting initiatives to support this new framework of cooperation in the political, economic and security field.

The improvement of bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan clearly represents a necessary precondition in order to complete the railway connection between these countries, which will be a key component of the China-backed trans-regional railway project included in the Belt and Road Initiative (Eurasianet 2018). In September 2017 Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement to demarcate the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, which will downgrade the instability threats linked to the disputes on the shared border. Concerning the construction of hydro power projects in Kyrgyzstan (as Kambarata hydropower station) which were formerly opposed by Tashkent, now Uzbekistan is ready to cooperate and to be involved in a project which could have regional repercussions, also downgrading another source of tension and mistrust (Hashimova 2017).

Furthermore, in March 2017 Uzbekistan signed a strategic partnership with Turkmenistan which will produce significant geopolitical benefits, connecting Uzbekistan with the North-South railway from China through Turkmenistan which will enable Tashkent to open trade corridors with Caspian and Persian Gulf region. After the visit of the Uzbek President in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan agreed to allow the transit of Turkmen electricity exports to Tajikistan giving a significant contribution to the enhancement of the regional energy security, also considering that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are engaged to supply Afghanistan with electricity exports (Putz 2017).

The visit of the Uzbek President in Tajikistan in April 2018 was the last pawn of the Tashkent's strategy to promote a regional cooperation based on mutual trust: Uzbekistan has restored profitable bilateral relations with Tajikistan, eliminating temporary visa which represented a big hindrance to the transboundary relations and mainly softened its position on the Roghun hydro-power plant project after decades of fierce opposition against a project which could deprive the country of the regular water flow necessary to cultivate cotton (Tolipov 2018).

In Uzbekistan's regional policy, Afghanistan plays a strategic key role as transit country for trade corridors and as economic partner. Tashkent has adopted a new approach towards Afghanistan, expressed by Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov in his official visit to Afghanistan in January 2017: according to Uzbek authorities, relations with Afghanistan should be based not exclusive-

ly on the prism of security threats, which was the predominant approach over the last 25 years, but reshaping relations in order to promote cross-border trade, humanitarian and cultural cooperation, as well as more active participation in implementing various mutually beneficial regional energy, infrastructure and transport projects (Weitz 2018, 18-19).

Uzbekistan is Afghanistan's only neighbour with which it has a railway connection (Termez-Hairaton-Mazar I Sharif) and at present Uzbekistan exports electricity, petroleum products, materials, agricultural machinery, medicines and medical equipment which support Kabul's attempts to consolidate state-building process. Uzbek and Afghan authorities have planned to implement the Trans Afghan railway project, realizing a new connection between Mazar I Sharif and Herat to facilitate bilateral trade cooperation and to find new alternative export routes, exploiting the possibility to deliver Uzbek goods to Europe through the Lapis Lazuli trade corridor, a massive infrastructure project involving roads, railways, and maritime routes crossing Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey (Mashrab 2018).

### **3 The Belt and Road Initiative: Promoting Interconnectivity in Central Asia**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a global geopolitical strategy backed by China in order to increase interconnectivity through the realization of economic and trade corridors crossing Eurasia to link China with Europe, Middle East and South Asia.

BRI has become the centrepiece of Xi's foreign policy. This ambitious initiative is composed by a land corridor - the Silk Road Economic Belt, which runs via Central Asia, Iran, Turkey and Eastern Europe - and a maritime network, the Maritime Silk Road, which runs through Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean. On the Chinese perspective, the BRI geopolitical projects aims to achieve two strategic goals:

- the implementation of an alternative continental route for trade and energy imports reducing the dependence on maritime routes crossing Malacca and South China Sea;
- the enhancement of a security buffer zone between Xinjiang western province and Central Asia, preserving Chinese western provinces from instability threats linked to Islamist terrorism (International Crisis Group 2017, 4-5).

China's trade toward EU is mainly based on maritime routes, so the development of land-corridors crossing Russia and Central Asia have become a significant tool for Beijing in order to diversify export routes, reducing the reliance on maritime corridors. Railway corri-

dors crossing Central Asia appear a profitable option because goods can be delivered faster to the markets – 16 days of travel from China to Europe – compared to the sea transport (35 days), even if the transport of a container by rail is more expensive (7,000 US\$) than the sea transport (more than 2,000 US\$) (Duarte 2018, 13).

In the Belt and Road Initiative, Central Asia plays a relevant role because it is the key to achieve the above-mentioned BRI's strategic goals: this region is crossed by two of the six main BRI corridor projects – the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor and the Eurasian land bridge – and three of the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) share a border with Xinjiang, while the two remaining (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) share a border – together with Tajikistan – with the unstable Afghanistan.

Since 2013 – when Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the former Silk Road Economic Belt project during a speech at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan – China has invested billions of dollars to build new transport infrastructures (highways, railways, dry ports, pipelines) in Central Asia, or to upgrade existent ones, to create the basis in order to undertake this strategy aimed to increase trade, cooperation and investments (CADGAT 2019; Yiping 2016, 21). Moreover, Chinese President pointed out that “to forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand space for development in the Eurasian region, we should take an innovative approach and join hands in building an ‘economic belt along the Silk Road’. We may start with work in individual areas and link them up over time to cover the whole region” (Yiwei 2015, 93).

The involvement of Central Asian countries in the Belt and Road Initiative is evidently profitable and lucrative, ensuring them economic and political benefits: for instance, in geopolitical terms, Chinese growing presence in the region allows Central Asian countries to undertake a multi vector strategy in foreign policy, containing traditional Russian influence and balancing Moscow's pressures to join or to further develop the integration project in the economic field, namely the Eurasian Economic Union. The Chinese initiative is based on an inclusive dimension: all five Central Asian republics are involved in the BRI mainly because the support to this project does not include a rigid membership to a potential supranational organization like the adhesion to the Eurasian Economic Union (Bugajski; Assenova 2016). The convergence of massive investments to develop and upgrade national infrastructures is highly profitable for Central Asian countries, promoting interconnectivity and improving regional trade cooperation through the creation of trans-regional network of transport, also opening new markets for these economic-landlocked countries: furthermore, this modernization of the transport infrastructures allows Central Asian states to set aside the networks of pipelines, roads, and railways inherited by the Soviet era, which were



designed to serve the needs of the Russian hub of the Soviet economy (Indeo 2018, 135-8).

In the Belt and Road Initiative, Central Asia holds a strategic relevance because of its geographic centrality which is necessary for the success of the Chinese projects. As I mentioned above, Central Asia is crossed by two of the six main BRI corridor projects: the New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor is the older and involves Russia, linking China with Europe via Kazakhstan and Russia. This Northern route currently is the main artery of transport from China to the EU markets: it is composed by the three trans-Siberian corridors (all of which converge in the Urals, near Yekaterinburg, and from there the goods are transported to the EU). Among them, the corridor that runs through Kazakhstan - which starts on the Chinese-Kazakh border crossing of Alashankou/Dostyk - is the most important route, delivering the biggest number of containers: in 2016, it accounted for 68% of the entire volume of China-EU-China transit via Russia (Jakóbowski; Popławski; Kaczmarek 2018, 39-40). Between 2017 and 2018, the number of trains through this route rise by 73%, which means more than 6000 trains per year: over 2% of goods traded between EU and China are now transported by rail, up four times since 2007 (Russell 2019, 2-3).

The China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor is aimed to connect China-Kazakhstan railway to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran. We can observe that this corridor is strategically relevant in geopolitical terms, in order to downplay Moscow's influence in Central Asia mainly because it is conceived to bypass Russian territory (Cooley 2016, 6). For China this represents a strategic card to play, in order to diversify the export routes avoiding to depend on a single corridor (especially if this depends on Russian control, so balancing the relations with Russia as well as fostering a more deepen cooperation with Moscow to achieve common interests), developing an alternative route which crosses Central Asia.

The China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor also envisages additional and alternative branches, which could be also combined: the Trans-Caspian land and sea corridors running through the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and the Black Sea and the train route through Turkey, which can use or the Trans Caspian route and then the recent Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway or and the overland route connecting Central Asia to Iran (Mercator Institute for China Studies 2018). The Trans-Caspian route - which will deliver at least 60 Mt of goods annually - is characterized by an intermodal architecture of transport, combining railway and ferries: the strong cooperation between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan (and potentially Turkmenistan) will be necessary to develop and link together the Caspian Sea ports of Aktau and Kuryk (Kazakhstan), and Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) with the Baku-Alyat new international port in Azerbaijan (Jakóbowski; Popławski; Kaczmarek 2018, 50).

The realization of other infrastructural projects in the space between China-Central Asia and the EU are helping the interconnectivity's target of the BRI. Among them, the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway in 2017 has allowed China and Central Asian exporters to benefit of a new export route to reach EU markets. The BTK route aims to be integral to China's Belt and Road initiative, implementing the Trans Caspian route as a corridor bypassing Russia: BTK's current capacity is 6.5 million tons of cargo but it will be able to transport up to 17 million tons of cargo by 2023 (Shahbazov 2017b). The rail connection between Khorgos, on Kazakhstan's border with China, and the Caspian Sea port of Aktau - one of the branch of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor - is the infrastructural link connecting with the BTK. In addition to China, also Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have openly expressed interest to use this railroad. Kazakhstan together with Azerbaijan and Georgia, established the International Trans-Caspian Transport Consortium and the International Trans-Caspian Transport Association, designed to ship goods from the Khorgos dryport on the Sino-Kazakh via the Caspian Sea (through the Kazakh ports of Aktau and Kuryk in the Caspian Sea) to Turkey and Europe (Uatkhanov 2017). Kazakhstan has already started to deliver cargo train carrying containers of wheat along the BTK, exploiting a new profitable route of trade export (Azernews 2018).

The renovated Turkmenbashi Sea Port will play the role of logistical hub, according to the Turkmen authorities, following the \$1.5 billion works which have tripled Turkmenistan's cargo-handling capacity to 25-26 million tons a year (State News Agency of Turkmenistan 2018; Pannier 2018): the only logistical problem is that the Khorgos-Aktau railway corridor is already opened and on stream, while Turkmenbashi port is not connected yet with railway links from China.

Uzbekistan is also interested in joining the BTK and becoming an important link within the China-Europe overland corridor network (Trend Az News Agency 2018; Shahbazov 2017a). However, Uzbekistan's participation in the BTK project strongly depends on the completion of a railroad connecting the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) with Navoi (Uzbekistan).

We can observe that a convergence of interests between China and Central Asia is pushing ahead the improvement of a regional cooperation within the BRI framework, in order to achieve common goals on foreign policy and to increase a profitable interconnectivity which will open new market outlets for Central Asian republics. According to the Central Asia perspective, the implementation of transport corridors must be necessarily based on a condition of regional stability and security, also requiring the establishment of good relations among Central Asian neighbouring countries to develop transnational railway corridors which involve them.

Central Asian republics have attracted massive investments from China and from multilateral financial institutions to realize these infrastructural and transport projects under the BRI umbrella such as new railways, highways, and the necessary connections and links among them. According to the Central Asia Data-Gathering and Analysis Team (2019, 3), China has financed 51 rail and road connectivity projects in Central Asia (some of them labelled as BRI projects, others as bilateral projects), investing nearly \$23.5 billion: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - which share a border with China - are the main recipient of these infrastructural investments (more than \$20 billion) to increase regional interconnectivity (3). Given its position Kazakhstan is playing the role of Central Asian pivot within the BRI project, as strategic transit country crossed by the Eurasian Land Bridge corridor, by the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor as well as is the fully involved in the Khorgos-Aktau railway corridor. Astana government has already received \$14.5 billion of China's Belt investment to realize these transport infrastructures and to develop some transport hubs along the Sino-Kazakh border: among them Khorgos - opened in 2015 - is the most relevant "land bridge" which currently represents the main commercial and logistical hub in Eurasia under the BRI label (Ghiasi; Zhou 2017, 20). In December 2015, Presidents Xi and Nazarbayev announced plans to link the Belt and Road Initiative together with Kazakhstan's *Nurly Zhol* (Bright Road) economic policy, highlighting the strategic complementarity between these initiatives, which aim to create new transport infrastructures and their integration with the big international railway and roads in order to consolidate the role of Kazakhstan as political and economic bridge between east and west (Kassenova 2017, 111-12; Indeo 2018, 143-4). In order to realize this ambitious plan, Kazakhstan has plans to invest \$8.4 billion by 2020 through *Nurly Zhol* program to modernize and to build railways and highways (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the United Kingdom 2019).

The support of Central Asia to the Belt and Road Initiative is helping them to diversify their export routes and their economies, overcoming their landlocked condition and also benefiting of transit fees. Moreover, a border management policy based on reciprocal trust could facilitate the realization of these corridors. Undoubtedly, a big impulse to a wider cooperation in Central Asia has derived from the proactive foreign policy inaugurated by the Uzbek President Mirziyoyev which aims to improve relations and cooperation among Central Asian republics, putting aside previous mistrust and interstate rivalries which have hindered the realization of projects of common interests (Weitz 2018, 31-42). Uzbek Presidents paid two official visits in Turkmenistan and the strengthening of good neighbourhood and fraternal relations between these countries could accelerate the realization of the Navoi-Turkmenbashi railway link (Uzbekistan National News Agency 2017).

This Mirziyoyev's approach to promote a profitable regional cooperation has produced positive results to realize the planned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan railroad transportation corridor, which will be extended to Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey. China hopes that this corridor will be active by 2020. As a matter of fact, the recent improvement of relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan - after the tensions of the Karimov'era - has given a strong impulse to implement this project, with the joint commitment to finally realize the missing railway connection between these two countries: this corridor will connect China's western city of Kashgar to Osh (in the Kyrgyz sector of the Ferghana Valley), via the the Torugart Pass and from there it will run through Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan's eastern town of Pap, in Uzbekistan's section of the Ferghana Valley (Goble 2019). Furthermore, since February 2018 these countries are already connected through an highway from Kashgar (Chinese Xinjiang region) to the Chinese-Kyrgyz border (Irkeshtam) and then to Osh and Andijan before to reach Tashkent (KABAR 2019). In 2015 Uzbekistan inaugurated the Angren-Pap railway - an infrastructure which benefited from Chinese investments - which holds a strategic relevance for Uzbekistan connecting the whole national railway system, and also for China because the Angren-Pap is a key segment of the BRI railway project to Afghanistan.

The growing engagement of Central Asian republics in supporting these projects can be explained by the necessity to overcome their landlocked geographic position benefiting of additional and promising export routes. Since independence in 1991, for post soviet countries the Iranian ports near the Strait of Hormuz (Bandar Abbas and Chabar) have represented a concrete possibility to direct their exports to the Indian Ocean and then reaching international markets. The Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat railway - which is currently under construction - and its expected continuation to the Iranian city of Khaf are other fundamental segments which will be connected to the existent Termez-Hairaton-Mazar-I-Sharif railway allowing both Uzbekistan and China to implement this corridor and to deliver their export to the Iranian ports. The strategic role of Uzbekistan in this corridors derives from the fact that it is the only country to have a railway connection with Afghanistan (Iran Daily 2018).

Moreover, also the railway connecting Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran (inaugurated in 2014) is another segment which boost the BRI and Central Asian interconnectivity and export capacities, especially because goods are delivered from China to Iran in 14 days, instead 45 by sea (Reuters 2016).

In November 2017 officials from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey signed an agreement in Ashgabat to build the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, which must has been conceived as an additional segment of this "BRI-regional railway architecture" because

it is linked to the railroad between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan (which is a section of the wider Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway) and to the existent BTK (Kucera 2017).

In December 2018, the first cargo from Afghanistan reached Baku port through the Lapis Lazuli Route: this corridor begins at the Afghanistan's Torghundi city in Herat province, then crosses Turkmenistan and reaches Turkmenbashi International Sea Port. After crossing Caspian Sea, goods are delivered from the Baku International Sea Port through Georgia's Tbilisi city to Turkey's Ankara city with branches to Georgian Poti and Batumi, then from Ankara to Istanbul (Afghanistan Times 2018).

#### 4 Conclusions

The combination between BRI's initiatives and Uzbekistan's Central Asian policy has provided a positive impulse to enhance regional interconnectivity and to promote a broader economic and political cooperation, contributing to reshape a new geopolitical landscape in Central Asia, which will produce relevant benefits for all involved actors.

For Central Asian countries, BRI represents an attractive idea: the realization of modern infrastructures of transport which will be linked to a regional grid will boost interconnectivity also allowing landlocked Central Asia to reach international markets. As a matter of fact, in spite of their geographic condition Central Asian republics can successfully exploit their strategic centrality within the BRI project, taking advantages from Chinese investments and modern infrastructures to improve and upgrade regional connections and cooperation.

The Chinese initiative will allow Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to further maintain their multivector strategy in foreign policy. Especially Kazakhstan can really play the role of regional hub: the Khorgos-Aktau connection is the strategic key-bridge linking China and EU without crossing Russia, mainly after the realization of the BTK railway. Concerning Uzbekistan, its role of regional pivot will depend on the stabilisation process in Afghanistan, a crossroad of different railway projects, so pushing President Mirziyoyev to promote cooperation with its neighbour as a driver to build stability.

A long-term stability scenario and the real possibility for Central Asian republics to deliver their goods in these railway and highway infrastructures represent the keys to success of the interconnectivity projects in the region: at the same time, also the realization of transport links among Central Asian countries will be also productive, expanding the opportunities of cooperation as a necessary precondition to also develop a constructive political dialogue.

In spite of several progresses, the idea that this improved cooperation and enhanced interconnectivity could lead to an "endogenous"

framework of cooperation (exclusively based on the interests and orientations of Central Asian republics) appears premature and far to reach: as a matter of fact, the second consultative meeting among Central Asian presidents have been postponed, temporarily losing an important opportunity to dialogue and to interact on regional unsolved issues which still delayed a concrete cooperation.

Moreover, a realistic development of an “endogenous” regional cooperation could be achieved preserving good relations with the main regional actors (Russia and China), even because Central Asian countries are involved – albeit to a different degree – in multilateral organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Even if Russia is currently involved in BRI, Moscow is also promoting a North-South railway axis opposed to the BRI east-west route, in order to contain the geopolitical success of the Chinese initiative in Central Asia, showing the efforts to preserve its traditional influence in the region.

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# Nuclear and Alternative Energy in Central Asia

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**Abstract** This article reviews the introduction of nuclear and renewable energy in Central Asia. It delves into the motivations and challenges in this development. Although, Central Asia has a huge potential in nuclear, due to uranium resources, and wind and solar powers, due to geography, the shift to these sources will be minimal. Central Asian states will still rely on hydrocarbons and coal at least till 2050. However, the planning and the implementation of projects on “green energy” will have geopolitical and economic impact.

**Keywords** Central Asia. Energy. Nuclear. Renewables. Resources.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Nuclear Energy in Central Asia. – 3 Renewable Energy. – 4 Implications for the Region. – 5 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

Central Asian states have long been known for its role in the global energy market, mainly due to its large reserves of hydrocarbons. The influx of foreign investments and opportunities for developing the regional energy potential opened up as soon as the countries got independence in 1991. Scholarship on energy in Central Asia has focused on “Resource Curse” attributes of the hydrocarbons bonanza (Auty; Soysa 2006; Overland et al. 2010), geopolitics (Ehteshami 2004; Petersen; Barysch 2011; Yenikayeff 2011) and economic governance (Heinrich; Pleines 2015; Pleines; Wösthelrich 2016). However, Central Asian states are diversifying their energy prospects with the turn to nuclear energy and renewables.



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This article explores the development of nuclear energy in Central Asia and looks into the motivations and challenges, and prospects for the growth in renewable energy in the region. The author uses case studies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in their attempts to install nuclear power or, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, to invest in uranium mining, with the social backlash it created. The paper then proceeds to give an overview of Central Asia's path to the use of renewable energy and compliance with the Paris Agreement. It concludes with the overall assessment of the importance of nuclear and renewable energy introduction in the region.

## 2 Nuclear Energy in Central Asia

Central Asia has been attributed to experience the “renaissance” in nuclear energy and, especially, in uranium mining (Kassenova 2010, 211). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan inherited the fourth largest nuclear arsenal in the world, which it renounced in support of a global non-proliferation movement.

### 2.1 Central Asia Nuclear Free Zone

Resolving the security dilemma that existed in front of Central Asian states at the dawn of independence was an important issue not only for national security but also for ensuring the economic growth and flow of investments. There was an unwritten consensus to commit to the nuclear non-proliferation regime by all five Central Asian states. They became signatories of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and IAEA Safeguards Agreements and Additional Protocols (Kassenova 2010, 236).

Another important factor contributing to nuclear non-proliferation in the region was the establishment of the Central Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (CANWFZ). This zone created a regional vacuum in nuclear arms presence, which was a crucial geopolitical move, especially considering the proximity of neighbouring nuclear powers (Russia, China, India and Pakistan). It also stipulated the ban on the imports of nuclear waste, which is important to keep in mind, as the countries need to develop their own repositories of nuclear waste if they want to develop nuclear energy.

## 2.2 Kazakhstan

Among all Central Asian states, Kazakhstan was the first one to make significant plans on nuclear energy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and overall economic downturn, the uranium industry in Kazakhstan significantly dropped in output. In the 2000s Kazakhstan's government decided to revamp the industry (as part of the emphasis of the role of natural resources in the economic development) and established a new state-owned company Kazatomprom to do so. In 2004 at World Nuclear Association symposium Kazatomprom revealed the program "15,000t of uranium by 2010" (Kazatomprom 2019). Over the last two decades, the country not only bypassed that goal but became one of the top uranium producers in the world. In 2016 Kazakhstan produced more than Canada and Australia combined, as second and third producers (Nuclear Energy Agency, International Atomic Energy Agency 2018).

Kazakhstan has significant reserves of uranium of 14% of global (USD 130/kgU) and will be continuing to be a major player in the uranium production, despite reductions in output due to decreasing world prices (World Nuclear Association, 2019c). The country developed partnerships with Japan, China, Russia and France, to name the few in the nuclear industry (Tskhay 2012). With the expanding uranium production, Kazakhstan has started developing the idea of realisation of the full nuclear fuel cycle.

The plan for nuclear fuel pellets production plant first emerged when a joint-venture between Kazatomprom and French Areva was signed in 2010 (World Nuclear Association 2019a). In 2016 the construction of the plant has started, but in cooperation with China General Nuclear Power Corporation, however, with the use of Areva's technology (Areva 2016). This is an indication of China's growing interest in Kazakhstan's uranium and nuclear fuel pellets to supply the Chinese market.

Kazakhstan developed cooperation with Russia not only in the area of uranium mining but more importantly, in nuclear power plant construction. In 2011 Kazakhstan and Russia signed an agreement for a feasibility study of nuclear power plant construction, and in 2014 an MOU was signed between Rosatom and Kazatomprom on this issue (World Nuclear Association 2019a). However, more precise details the technical details of the plant or the location of it has not been agreed upon.

Being the nuclear testing ground during Soviet times, there is a strong civil society movement against nuclear non-proliferation. Therefore, the decision for the location of the nuclear power plant results in intensified public debates. It especially comes with discontent from the public, as some experts have shared that it could be near Almaty province (close to the largest city - Almaty) (Pannier 2019).

Thus, the plans for the nuclear power plant are still in the making and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has stated that the issue is not on the agenda (Vaal 2019).

The reason for introducing nuclear energy in Kazakhstan is to match the electricity demand in southern regions and boost economic growth. This will also diversify the coal-dependent electricity sector. In various plans and project feasibility studies, the idea of a nuclear power plant with capacity of 300-1200MWe is discussed (World Nuclear Association, 2019a). Overall, even though the plans for nuclear power plant construction have been discussed for years, Kazakhstan seems to be dragging the issue. Keeping in mind that nuclear energy would be a minor contribution to the general electricity production, the country will still be dependent on hydrocarbons and coal, at least till 2050 when the “Concept for Green Economy” should be implemented (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2013; Tskhay 2012).

### 2.3 Kyrgyzstan

Although Kyrgyzstan has not expressed its plans to construct a nuclear power plant or develop nuclear energy, yet uranium mining sparked a countrywide debate and became a point of contention. This debate is crucial to understand the mix of political and economic issues tied with the uranium mining and nuclear energy, in general, in the country.

Kyrgyzstan’s industrial output is dominated by the mining sector, which creates challenges for its economic growth and social stability (Doolot; Heathershaw 2015). The country has 566t in reserves of gold (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative 2019) and presumably 10,000t in reserves of uranium – however, this figure is difficult to confirm (Kassenova 2010, 226). The country’s low economic prosperity puts it in dire need of investments and, thus, the government is keen to develop and expand its mining potential, specifically in resource-rich Osh and Issyk-Kul regions.

In 2010 “UrAziya” company has received the licence for geological exploration in the Tash-Bulak field (Musabayeva 2019). The company has reportedly been conducting exploratory works since 2012. In April 2019, local residents in the Issyk-Kul region where Tash-Bulak field is located, protested against uranium mining, raising concerns for health and environmental safety. Similar protests also occurred in the capital Bishkek, with the calls for a ban on uranium mining throughout the country. Several political party representatives have supported this cause and also pointed at the government for failing to provide necessary safety measures. Being under pressure, the government of Kyrgyzstan has first revoked the licence of

“UrAziya” in April 2019 and then put a temporary ban on all uranium mining and exploratory works (Auyezov 2019; Sputnik.kg, 2019).

The case of the uranium mining ban in Kyrgyzstan demonstrates two important points. First, there is significant distrust of the nuclear energy sector, mostly due to the well-known harmful effects of Chernobyl and Fukushima catastrophes. The imagery and the messaging that Kyrgyz protesters used had references to both events. Therefore, there is a lack of understanding among the general public about the nuclear and uranium industry and what it entails, especially regarding risks and safety. Second is related to the previous one, in the lack of trust among the population in the government and investors. The two revolutions (2005 and 2010) and clashes between workers and mining companies are just mere examples of this. Moreover, lack of transparency and accountability on who gets the mining licences and how will the mining sector improve the economic conditions of the population in the regions supports the antagonistic feelings towards the government and extractive companies. Third, historically Kyrgyzstan has served as a nuclear waste base when, during the Soviet times, tons of radioactive materials were buried in the country's territory (Muzalevsky 2013). Almost thirty years after independence many radioactive waste sites need relocation or safety standards improvements, otherwise posing significant environmental and health hazard (Moldogazieva 2010).

The politicization of the uranium mining issue is hard to ignore, from the fast spread of protest movements from the periphery to the capital to the representation of political parties among those protests. Some analysts associate this to the upcoming Parliamentary elections in 2020. However, it is true to say that the uranium topic became a powerful one to mobilize people and put pressure on the government.

## 2.4 Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan reportedly holds 2% of global uranium reserves and accounts for 3.9% of global uranium production (Nuclear Energy Agency, International Atomic Energy Agency 2018). The uranium mining industry has been active since the Soviet times in the country, peaking in the mid-1980s. Since independence, Uzbekistan developed partnerships and joint ventures in uranium exploration and mining with China, Japan and Russia.

An important factor to consider in analyzing Uzbekistan's energy sector is its reliance on natural gas.

Gas production contributes to Uzbekistan's economy not only for export but also for domestic consumption. Currently, the gas is generating 85% of electricity, whilst hydropower and coal contribute to

the remaining 15% (Nuclear Engineering International 2019). The projected economic growth of 5.5% in 2020 will require a two-fold increase in electricity production (Mirzakhmudovis 2019). Thus, the new energy strategy for 2030 is projecting to double the production of electricity and, more importantly, to decrease the reliance on gas. Nuclear energy will play a big role in this transformation. The gas will be used in high-value-added products in the petrochemical industry.

As in Kazakhstan, the presence of uranium mining gives Uzbekistan an advantage in launching its domestic nuclear energy. An agreement on the construction of a nuclear power plant was signed between Russia by President Vladimir Putin and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Astrasheuskaya 2019). Construction is expected to begin in 2022 with the launch of a power plant in 2028. Both governments have agreed on the location of the plant one year earlier than planned, which will be in central Navoi region (Eurasianet 2019).

One should underestimate the plans for nuclear energy development in Uzbekistan, as they will generate ripples on regional cooperation. The construction of the nuclear power plant is funded through loans from Russia with an estimated budget of \$11bln (Astrsheuskaya 2019). In addition, the CANWFZ requirements forbid Uzbekistan to install uranium enrichment facilities, hence, it would need to resort to other parties for nuclear fuel. Keeping this in mind, Russia would be a viable partner for Uzbekistan to cooperate within the nuclear industry sector. Russia already expressed its willingness to enrich Uzbekistan's uranium at the International Uranium Enrichment Center in Angarsk in 2007 (World Nuclear Association 2019b). Moreover, Moscow is interested in getting more involved in the region, in general, and in Uzbekistan in particular. Combined with an agreement signed with Kazakhstan it puts Russia into a significant strategic position.

Uzbekistan's officials also cite the country's commitment to the Paris Agreement and, subsequently, the reduction of carbon emissions as the reason to switch to nuclear energy. The projects to increase the use of alternative and renewable energy is prevalent among all Central Asian states, which is discussed later in this paper.

### **3 Renewable Energy**

The first issue necessary to point out is that all Central Asian states have signed the Paris Agreement (but Kyrgyzstan has not ratified it yet). Therefore, in principle, all states have agreed to commit to the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and have started developing strategies to tackle climate change. This would include implementation of such steps as (1) to diversify the domestic energy mix, (2) to improve export of electricity, (3) to facilitate financing mechanisms and investment into green technologies and green economy.



Thus, for example, Kazakhstan ambitiously aims to achieve 50% of the energy generated from renewable or nuclear energy sources by 2050. Similarly, Uzbekistan's government plans to attract foreign investments (\$5.3bln) and spend its own money (\$81mln) to develop hydro, solar and wind power by 2025. For Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the hydropower is a focus, not only for domestic consumption but also for energy export.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are both upstream countries and control the flow of major rivers in the region, such as the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. During the Soviet period, a system of water allocation quotas and water-energy nexus in the region was established. Downstream countries received larger quotas due to their population size and vast agricultural sector, upstream countries would in return receive energy supplies during the winter season. The maintenance of water facilities and dams was paid by Moscow (Zakhirova 2013). Since this arrangement was no longer sustainable for all the parties involved after gaining independence in 1991, periodic conflicts over water resources in the region occurred (see International Crisis Group 2002; Ito et al. 2016; Petrov; Normatov 2016; Zakhirova 2013).

The construction of large hydropower plants in these countries has been a point of friction for Tashkent for decades (Ito et al. 2016; Petrov; Normatov 2010). The persistent conflict situations surround water management in Central Asia have forced states to develop alternative strategies. Thus, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are investing in expanding their hydropower potential and laying plans for hydropower plants construction. Moreover, Russia is investing in hydropower plants construction in Kyrgyzstan as an agreement signed on March 27, 2019, indicates (Putz 2019).

The inception of the hydropower plant project in Tajikistan started in 1976, however, was not materialised due to the collapse of the Soviet Union (Bekchanov et al. 2015). The long civil war and financial challenges have also prevented from the launch of the Rogun dam construction, notwithstanding, an attempt by the Tajik government to raise funds from selling shares in the project among the general population (Menga 2015). In 2016, the construction officially started with a projected cost of \$3.9bln and the first turbine (out of six) was unveiled in 2018 (Putz 2018). There are high hopes associated with the construction of the Rogun dam, especially due to significant seasonal shortages of electricity in Tajikistan (Menga 2015, 484). At the same time, the electricity generated from Rogun could also be used for export, especially with the launch of CASA-1000 (a project to distribute the surplus of electricity from Central Asia to South Asia). Yet, despite the potential benefits of the Rogun hydropower plant to the Tajik economy, the project is surrounded by investment challenges, the sustainability of construction plans and the intended usage of the dam (either for domestic purposes, for export of electricity, or for both) (Putz 2018).

Kazakhstan adopted a Concept for the transition to the green economy, which frames the main areas of work to be done in tackling climate change and environmental commitments in 2013 (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2013). For example, the country intends to increase efficiency in the use of energy and water resources, to improve agriculture productivity, to implement gasification of regions, to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and air pollution, and to install waste utilization and recycling, among many other steps. These steps are divided into concrete action plans to be achieved by 2020, 2030, and 2050. It is not surprising that the theme for the EXPO-2017 held in Astana was “Future Energy”, which again demonstrates the commitment of Kazakhstan’s government to these issues. The new International Centre for Green Technologies and Investment Projects was founded in 2018 to discuss and implement green technologies in Kazakhstan and to replicate them across Central Asia (Shamsharkhan 2018). Kyrgyzstan has also launched a similar institution, Climate Finance Center, which focuses on attracting investments to environmental projects (*Climate Finance Center of the Kyrgyz Republic* 2019).

Solar energy is one of the directions of the “green” investments with the construction of solar power plants. A good example of this is the opening of the largest solar plant in Central Asia in the small town of Saran in central Kazakhstan with a capacity of 100 megawatts (Konyrova 2019). Uzbekistan plans to build 25 solar power plants by 2030 (The Times of Central Asia 2019). Currently, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan generate 3% of electricity from solar power (Marques 2018).

Wind energy has also big potential in Central Asia, however, it is less developed than other sources of energy (Bahrami, et al., 2019). At the moment, only Kazakhstan has more elaborate projects (completed and ongoing) on the use of wind energy. The country launched a large-scale wind farm Yerementau, which is the biggest in Central Asia, in the northern part of the country with a \$70mln loan from the EBRD of in 2014 (Koch 2018). Other Central Asian states built small-scale wind farms in specific regions and only Uzbekistan has plans to install new ones (Eshchanov et al. 2019).

#### **4 Implications for the Region**

The presented above overview of the trends in the diversification of energy sources in Central Asia demonstrates the intended directions of the energy sector’s development in the region. I would like to draw three important issues for the region and regional cooperation, in the light of this.

First, the use of nuclear and renewable energy is viewed as an addition to conventional hydrocarbons and coal as sources of energy. As global actions to tackle climate change push for a reduction in

CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, Central Asian are also getting concerned on how to achieve it domestically. Thus, the move towards nuclear or renewable sources is not only to diversify the energy sector but mostly as another way of attracting foreign investments and boost economic development.

Second, cooperation with foreign donors and strategic partners (Russia and China) is essential for the development of the nuclear and renewable sector in the region. Russia is an important partner for the construction of nuclear power plants in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The nuclear energy sector also bears geopolitical implications on the increased links between big powers (Russia and China) and Central Asia.

Third, the use of hydropower will also depend on good relations within the region and common work on the resolution of the water usage dilemma and to avoid open conflict. This is also important in the light of the future success of the CASA-1000 project, and, hence, whether Central Asian states would be able to export energy to South Asia.

By looking at these three points, one can understand even the conception of plans for introducing nuclear and renewable energy in the region brings significant intra-regional and inter-regional implications. These infrastructure projects require huge financial contributions, multi-state cooperation and long-term planning.

## 5 Conclusion

This article presented an overview of the developments in nuclear and alternative energy industries in Central Asian states. Subsequently, several conclusions could be outlined to indicate the direction of the energy sector advancement in the region.

First, the introduction of nuclear energy in the region is still at an initial stage. Uzbekistan is ahead, due to agreements with Russia on the construction of a plant and a selected site for it. Kazakhstan, although it is planning the introduction of nuclear energy, it is still unclear when it will happen and the technical specifics of the project and its location. Kyrgyzstan has just banned uranium mining and has a strong civil resistance to issues related to nuclear waste storage and management.

The second point is the presence of outside powers is key, especially in consideration of financial and strategic issues. Russia plays an important role in cooperating with Central Asian states on nuclear energy, promoting their technology and experiences. This is especially important in adding another link between Russia and Central Asian states. China is also interested in the nuclear industry in Central Asia, especially from the perspective of nuclear fuel and urani-

um supply. Japan, South Korea and France have been also providing assistance and knowledge exchange, thus, representing a balancing option against Russia and China as partners. Such geopolitical competition between major players is also present in the renewable energy sector and will continue to have an impact on the development of the energy sector in the region as a whole (Koch 2018).

Third, renewable energy is pushed for in the region to mixed results. Hydropower development in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is controversial and comes with environmental and political concerns on the use of water from transboundary rivers in the region. Installed wind and solar plants have not yet become significant enough in the energy mix. Thus, hydrocarbon predominance will persist in the mid-term future, with major shifts in the energy mix planned for after 2050.

In general, the shift to nuclear and renewables is the desire of Central Asian states to attract investments, diversify their economy and support future electricity demand, not only domestically, but also in a wider regional perspective. Environmental concerns and commitment to the Paris Agreement are often cited for the drive towards renewable energy in the region. It is therefore important to keep an eye on as it may change the economic performance of the countries, at the same time these long-term outlooks are challenged by the feasibility of such projects (Rogun dam, for example) and political commitment.

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# **Uzbekistan-2.0 and Central Asia-2.0**

## **New Challenges and New Opportunities**

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**Abstract** The current stage of post-Soviet development of Central Asian countries can symbolically be called “Central Asia-2.0”, which means that the “Central Asia-1.0” stage is over. The latter, in turn, had symbolized and designated the special so-called transition period that has lasted for about quarter of century. The former is related to objective end of the transition period in general, and to the new opening of Uzbekistan in and to the regional affairs which is designated as Uzbekistan-2.0. Both the first and second period illustrate that Uzbekistan play a crucial role in Central Asia. Tashkent’s policy is of decisive character: its self-isolationism stops integration; its activism stimulates it. Meanwhile, given the complicated and contradictory evolution of Central Asian regionalism and the interruption of integration, some experts and officials are carried away and deviated by the terminological problem reflected in a vague devolution scheme ‘integration-cooperation-connectivity’.

**Keywords** Uzbekistan. Central Asia. Regionalism. Integration. Geopolitics.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Uzbekistan-2.0. – 3 Central Asia-2.0. – 4 New Regionalism Ahead. – 5 In Lieu of Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

The current stage of post-Soviet development of Central Asian countries can symbolically be called “Central Asia-2.0”, which means that the “Central Asia-1.0” stage is over. The latter, in turn, had symbolized and designated the special so-called transition period that has lasted for about quarter of century. The first stage was related to multiple tasks newly independent post-Soviet states encountered immediately with their gaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Among those tasks were: creation of all attributes of the modern statehood; national revitalization; establishment of diplomatic links with states of the world; entering international system and conducting its own foreign policy; development of market reforms and creation of working democratic institutions, etc.

Although during this period these tasks have been accomplished with different degrees of success, they cannot be fully concentrated in a limited number of years: indeed they can and should be continued with new dynamism and new aspects. At the same time, the real process of transition was very complicated and full of controversies when the remnants and legacy of the Soviet past have been persisting. Such a development is peculiar to all countries of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan.

On the one hand, the strong authoritarian political regime, biased ideological and propaganda machine, corrupted and uncultured social relations and rent-based economic system – all that can be described as “Soviet syndrome” – remain unchanged in most of their basic traits; on the other hand, tokens of political and economic advancement out of political stagnation appeared with the death of the first President of the country Islam Karimov in September 2016.

## 2 Uzbekistan-2.0

Before analyzing Uzbekistan-2.0 we will briefly review Uzbekistan-1.0. The political process in Uzbekistan since independence has been complicated and contained simultaneously pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet elements with the dominance of the Soviet legacy, the phenomenon that can be called “Soviet syndrome”. This peculiarity of the Uzbek political system manifests itself in almost every sphere of the social, economic, cultural and political life, with each sphere containing basic elements of the Soviet tradition. Democracy in this context sounds like Soviet-made slogan of communism, that is, a ‘bright future’, not the meaning of existing social relations and type of governance.

Karimov’s regime in Uzbekistan had two main features: it was highly autocratic *per se*; and it was a continuation of the Soviet po-

litical system. Paradoxically, whereas Karimov constantly reiterated the irreversibility of independence, portraying the Soviet past as a murky totalitarian period and asserting that there should be no nostalgia for the Soviet Union, at the same time he did little to eradicate the customary Soviet style and tradition of governing the country.

The nation that Karimov has been ruling for a quarter of a century also has remained predominantly Soviet with its deeply rooted paternalist mentality and wallowing in an ideological shallow. The cult of personality around the head of the nation, backed by the omnipotent state machine and the widespread fear, has nurtured and assured the obedience and loyalty of Uzbekistan's citizens (Tolipov 2017).

Meanwhile, all the political life was saturated with the "spirit of reform". The words 'reform' and 'transition period' became cliché that are used to excuse 'temporary difficulties' the country is faced with after gaining independence. However, "to the citizens of Central Asia, reform has become a permanent condition of governance and more of an explanation for why things do not work than for why they do" – as Gregory Gleason writes (2004, 43).

Mirziyoev's power, in turn, seems to have three other features, slightly different of those of Karimov's: a) it is soft autocratic – shifting slowly towards democracy by spurring market reforms and activating civil society but keeping strong control over political system; and b) it is no longer a continuation of the Soviet political system and is rather genuinely post-Soviet (Karimov's regime was a replication of the Soviet one)<sup>1</sup>; c) it is gradually reformist and a non-status-quo one (I am inclined to evaluate and interpret such a distinction of the incumbent's power from his predecessor's as a dialectical and logical shift in the overall evolution of power in Uzbekistan). At the same time, Mirziyoev now has the profoundly challenging task of finding the dialectically right way between continuity of his predecessor's course and discontinuity of that course. He cannot speed up democratization, nor can he freeze the Karimov-made status quo. On one hand, he seems to perpetuate Karimov's memory by naming streets and Tashkent airport after Karimov and erecting First President's monument, but on the other hand, Mirziyoev seems just to tribute his predecessor but goes in his own way.

By summarizing one can conclude that Karimov's regime was harshly authoritarian and suffered from Soviet syndrome, while Mirziyoev's regime is soft authoritarian, moving away from Soviet legacy toward more liberal system.

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**1** Actually, the term 'post-Soviet' can be used as a designation of what comes after the Soviet in two senses – as a) a continuation in many aspects of the Soviet and b) as rejection of the Soviet or as rupture it and going away from it. Karimov's regime fitted with a), Mirziyoev with b).

In terms of foreign policy and international relations, there are some differences between Uzbekistan-1.0 and Uzbekistan-2.0 as well. The foreign policy of Uzbekistan in 1990s can be evaluated as a good start. Tashkent was quite pro-active in the beginning. Throughout more than two decades, Uzbekistan has accrued important experience on the international arena. Diplomatic relations have been established with most of the state of the world and this country gained genuine international recognition. Interestingly enough, Tashkent learnt how to play games on this scene, how to play off geopolitics between great powers. At early stage the young Uzbek foreign policy was region-oriented, and President Islam Karimov proclaimed in 1995 the concept “Turkistan is our common home”. In 1990s he was a proponent of the regional integration in Central Asia. However, after 9/11 events in the United States and U.S. forces deployed in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and after the launch of the operation in Afghanistan the geopolitical processes exacerbated in the region. In 2005 Islam Karimov even had to state: “Strategic uncertainty remains in the region. Geostrategic interests of major world powers and our neighboring countries concentrate and sometime collide in this part of the world”.

With the adoption of the new Foreign Policy Concept in 2012 Uzbekistan demonstrates rather self-isolationism than active engagement in international and regional affairs. The tense relations with two neighbors - Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - over water regulation issue and over border delimitation were accumulating conflict potential. Tashkent not only abandoned such organizations as the CSTO, EAEC, GUUAM, CACO but also quite isolated itself from other multilateral cooperation frameworks such as, for example, Istanbul Process on Afghanistan and SPECA project of the European Union. In general, the Uzbekistan’s foreign policy that time was neither pro-American nor pro-Russian, neither pro-active nor reactive; some sort of (temporary) stagnation could be observed. So, for a quarter of century, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy has transformed from good start and achievements of 1990s, through the period of uncertainties of the early 2000s to the isolationism problems up to 2016.

Post-Karimov Uzbekistan-2.0 is currently experiencing a new and more dynamic pace of overall reforms - from restructuring the system of governance and bureaucratic fabric of the state to reshaping public policy and spurring the stagnated political process in the country. Mirziyoev initiated a, so to speak, “reach out to people” policy within the country and a “reach out to neighbors” policy within the region. From September 2016 till 31 January 2017 - the five month period - the first fruits of his “new course” have been seen; for instance, for the first time the draft of the special and very comprehensive document was published for the public discussion, namely: Presidential Decree “On Action Strategy of further development of

the Republic of Uzbekistan” for the period of 2017-2021.

Mirziyoyev proclaimed Central Asia as a priority in foreign policy of Uzbekistan. Over short period of time after being elected he managed to revitalize regional fora. One after another he made state visits to all neighboring states with which treaties “On Strategic Partnership” were signed. From now on Uzbekistan is surrounded in the region by strategic partners. The agreements with neighboring countries allowed to open dozens of checkpoints on the borders of Uzbekistan and liberalized the visa regime. Uzbekistan’s trade turnover with the states of the region increased by 20% in 2017, and by 50% - during the first six months of 2018 (Ibragimov, 2018).

President made his visits to Russia, China, US, France, Germany, South Korea, India, and multiple foreign delegates visit Uzbekistan every month. Uzbekistan’s position in many ratings, such as Doing Business and others, is being steadily improved. Uzbekistan’s international activism is also widely acknowledged. For instance, in December 2017 the UN GA adopted a special Resolution 2396 “Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance” which was initiated by Uzbekistan. President of Uzbekistan also proposed to adopt a UN Convention “On the rights of youth”. So Uzbekistan-2.0 is really re-opening the country and the people to the world.

### **3 Central Asia-2.0**

Analogously with the previous chapter, we will briefly review “Central Asia-1.0”. The past quarter century period was controversial: it started with resolute proclamation of regional integration in 1991 but ended up with the interruption of this process in 2006 after 15 years of successful integration. That was, indeed, a successful process with the dramatic break.

In December 1991 presidents of five former Soviet republics - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (they are often called 5 ‘stans’) - proclaimed Central Asian Commonwealth (CAC) as a response to the breakup of the Soviet Union and creation by three Slavic republics - Russia, Ukraine and Belarus - of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 1994 Common Economic Space was set up and the CAC was transformed in Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC). Finally, in December 2001 the Central Asian structure was given a name “The Central Asian Cooperation Organization” (CACO). Actually, such development of the regional structure reflected dialectical process of institutionalization of the regional integration (Tolipov 2010a).

In 2004, non-Central Asian state Russia, surprisingly, became a member of the CACO which in fact turned the CACO into asymmetrical, great power present heavy structure. When in May 2005 ter-

rorist uprising occurred in the Uzbekistan's provincial city Andijan that action was interpreted as a "color revolution" attempt instigated by the United States, and relations between Tashkent and Washington worsened significantly. In 2006 Uzbekistan decided to enter the (then existing) Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), of which three other Central Asian states were already members. Under the wrong pretext that EAEC and CACO duplicated each other, these two organizations were merged; since then independent Central Asian regional organization ceased to exist. Meanwhile, that Eurasia and Central Asia do not constitute the same region was clear from the inception of two regional organizations *per se*.

Pause in regional cooperation had lasted more than a decade. The ice began to melt in March 2018 when the leaders of five Central Asian states met in Kazakhstan's capital Astana for a so-called Consultative Meeting. Many observers termed the event a revitalization of the regional cooperation process, albeit in a new temporary format for talks, and a cautious step toward a regional approach to regional problems. This became possible due to President Mirziyoev's new course in the region.

As was said above, after coming to power in December 2016 new President Shavkat Mirziyoev proclaimed that Central Asia would be priority of the foreign policy of Uzbekistan. Tashkent's new active regional course has been consistently demonstrated, since then. This new trend gave a reason to many to argue about new regional relationships between five countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, - and caused new academic and political interest in perspectives of regional integration of these countries in which Uzbekistan is supposed to play a key role. This process can be labeled "Central Asia-2.0".

During 2017-2018 period Mirziyoev met with all presidents of Central Asian states and in the course of these meetings, among other agreements, Uzbekistan signed Treaties On Strategic Partnership with each neighboring state. On November 10 2017, the city of Samarkand hosted the International Conference on Ensuring Security and Sustainable Development in Central Asia under the auspices of the United Nations «Central Asia: Shared Past and Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity». The forum has been organized by Uzbekistan in cooperation with the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) and the UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia. High level officials of the UN, EU, OSCE, SCO, CIS, delegations of Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, USA, European states, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, Japan, South Korea and others, as well as scientists, public figures and officials took part in the conference.

In that conference Mirziyoev suggested to organize a Consultative Meeting of five leaders of Central Asian states; and the first such

meeting took place in Astana - capital of Kazakhstan - in March 2018. The last such five-lateral summit was more than 10 years ago, therefore the revitalization of regional summits will obviously have profound impact on regional affairs. The next Consultative Meeting was scheduled for March 2019 to take place in Tashkent.

#### 4 New Regionalism Ahead

New regionalism is being shaped in Central Asia nowadays, the process that will require serious revising of some conceptual bases of the preceding transformation modalities.

First: 'No longer transition period'. Throughout quarter of century of development passed since they gained independence in 1991, Central Asian countries lived with conviction that it was a period of transition from administrative command economy to market economy, from a totalitarian political system to democracy, from national confusion to national revitalization. Now, the so-called notorious transition period is over.

Second: 'No longer post-Soviet'. After the breakup of the Soviet Union its republics used to be portrayed as post-Soviet. This notion designated specific feature of their *modus vivendi* - persistence of the Soviet legacy and traditions in political, economic, social and cultural life. Although some remnants of these Soviet traditions are still present in everyday life of people as well as in political practice, over the quarter century period most of them have been overcome due to new generation's growth and due to globalization effect.

Third: 'No longer newly independent'. After gaining independence these countries were called 'newly independent states' (NIS). Such a status by definition cannot last forever or infinite time. Throughout the entire independence period these states have completed shaping their statehood, established diplomatic relations with all countries of the world, became members of the UN and other prominent international organizations and even learnt to play geopolitical games, and thereby acquired significant experience in living and acting as full-fledged independent states. Taking into account this fact, they are no longer newly independent but rather young independent states. Such differentiation is important, since it helps understand more correctly their national interests which evolved from survival needs through transition requirements to prosperity tasks.

Fourth: 'No longer Eurasian'. Many experts ascribe Central Asians a Eurasian identity and attach them to the Eurasian region. However, this is incorrect perception for at least three reasons: a) Eurasian ideology was reincarnated after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a substitution of the Soviet Socialist ideology to serve Russian interests of reunification of the former Soviet republics against western

threats. b) Eurasianism undermines self-sufficiency and self-value of Central Asian region and just embody the asymmetric model of integration with great power domination. c) Eurasian (re-)integration is a premature concept given the priority that should be given to the more realistic Central Asian integration. In general, Eurasianism itself is an explicitly post-Soviet model with implicit geopolitical burden.

Fifth: 'No longer Great Game'. Actually, the region is exposed to a geopolitical struggle but it is a different type of game than the classical Great Game of two great powers. This notion implies that major powers of the world pursue hegemonic plans toward this region at the expense of each other's interests. Such order of things in Central Asia has changed with the states of the region acting as independent subjects of the international system – themselves capable to be the actors of geopolitics. They can play off geopolitical card vis-à-vis great powers and, interestingly, they can play smaller geopolitical game vis-à-vis each other within the region – the phenomenon that I call 'micro-geopolitics' (Tolipov 2010b). So, there is no longer a classical Great Game but the region is facing a more complicated round of geopolitical competition in which they themselves participate as actors.

Sixth: 'No longer at the periphery' (significance-insignificance conundrum). Although independence of the former Soviet republics was automatically recognized worldwide, they were perceived as peripheral countries insignificant for the world politics. They were stereotypically perceived as fragile, insecure, and doomed to depend on external assistance for their development. Subsequently, however, Central Asian region was re-discovered as an area rich in natural resources and located in strategically important part of the world between Russia and China as well as neighboring war ravaged Afghanistan. Countries of the region having mostly Muslim population play crucial role in the world of Islam. In 1997 five Central Asian states being surrounded by nuclear powers proclaimed the region Nuclear Weapon Free Zone – first and the only one in the northern hemisphere.

So as one can see, the study and comprehension of emerging new regionalism in Central Asia requires revisions of some conceptual bases of the preceding transformation modalities. Central Asian regional order is different than in the preceding period.

Paradoxically, however, side by side with optimistic expectations regarding emerging new regional order, some argue that integration shouldn't be on the regional agenda. Given the alleged failure of regional integration that experimented from 1991 till 2006, some experts began to express skepticism about very integration perspectives and doubts about relevance of this very concept. They argue that discussions just about regional cooperation would well substitute integration rhetoric because Central Asian states allegedly are not ready to create supra-national bodies and deliver them part of their sovereignty.



This situation reminds us of the competition between Euro-sceptics and Euro-optimists. The cooperation versus integration dichotomy, which is dubious as such, can distort the regional agenda from strategic goals to tactical objectives. Such speculations have just been reinforced in relation with the delayed summit which was planned for March 2019. Indeed, the planned Consultative Meeting was postponed and the situation remains unclear as of writing this article.

Nazarbaev's abdication from power in March 2019 and election of the new President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in June 2019 just added uncertainty in regional dynamics. Yet as an Interim President he made two visits – the official visit to Russia and the state visit to Uzbekistan. These two precocious visits symbolized Kazakhstan's bifurcation between Eurasia and Central Asia. Thus, the "Central Asia versus Eurasia" dilemma continues to be a source of ambiguity in Kazakhstan's approach to regional cooperation. The same bifurcation is peculiar to Kyrgyzstan which, like Kazakhstan, is the member of the Russia-led Euro-Asian Economic union (EAEU). So, two of five Central Asian countries are the EAEU members. Three others are not.

This doesn't mean that Central Asia ceased to be a single region; this only means that some countries of the region bifurcate between two geopolitical realities. In other words, the past, present and the future of regionalism of Central Asia have implicit and explicit geopolitical dimension. Yet in early 1990s. Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner rightly pointed out that one of the reasons for analyzing Central Asian developments within a geopolitical framework is that "the way in which each republic defines its own identity – separately from or in common with one more of its neighbors, or its coethnics in the neighboring countries – is likely to have significant ramifications for the geopolitics of the entire region" (Banuazizi; Weiner 1994, 11).

Many experts' confusion about integration concept and process can be explained, among other things, with reference to destructive and long lasting geopolitics which precluded the unification of Central Asian countries and peoples. The most recent example of geopolitical perplexity that Central Asians began to face is related to the China's global initiative "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR); its Central Asian segment is called "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB). In relation with OBOR/SREB a new fashionable buzzword was introduced in the international geopolitical lexicon. One analysis defines this buzzword as follows: connectivity comprises of transport, digital, energy and human networks, as well as rules, standards and institutions which govern the flows of interaction (Saari 2019).

Parag Khanna well described the significance of such new trend in which "competitive connectivity" takes place through "infrastructure alliances: connecting physically across borders and oceans through tight supply chain partnerships. China's relentless pursuit of this strategy has elevated infrastructure to the status of a global good

on par with America's provision of security. Geopolitics in a connected world plays out less on the Risk board of territorial conquest and more in the matrix of physical and digital infrastructure" (Khanna 2016, 13).

From this viewpoint, OBOR/SREB and other initiatives and projects aiming at providing connectivity with Central Asia cannot but produce a somewhat new type of geopolitics – subtler but not less dramatic than classical geopolitics which in this region used to be known under the label "Great Game". Russia has its version of connectivity with Central Asia within the EAEU, and Moscow promotes EAEU's connectivity with SREB. US promotes its New Silk Road strategy. This European vision of connectivity also runs through the EU's new Central Asia Strategy, which was adopted on 15 May 2019. Compared with the previous Central Asia Strategy from 2007, the new Strategy places increased emphasis on encouraging economic development ('prosperity'), comprehensive security ('resilience') and intra-regional cooperation between the Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Saari 2019).

So, new regionalism ahead will not be free from geopolitics which is actually one of multiple challenges the region is going to face in the near and mid-term perspective. In order to withstand them, five states must resolve their integration puzzle which itself is a complex one. It includes principle and vital questions: Will Central Asian countries become democratic in the near perspective? How should and can they embody regional integration model and institutions? Is growing Islamization of societies in these countries posing challenge to democratic perspective – on the one hand and to stability – on the other? What assets (potential) do states possess that make them capable to withstand geopolitical pressure? What stimulus normative base, values, identities can provide for integration?

## 5 In Lieu of Conclusion

For the region concerned, connectivity *with* Central Asia should be supplemented by or even follow primary connectivity *for* and *within* Central Asia – the formula that I would articulate in special translation of OBOR – "Own Belt, Own Road". Much will depend on how five countries reshape their regional order. From this analysis one can note that new approaches are needed, taking lessons from previous experience. The perplexity of regional evolution which is reflected in a vague devolution scheme 'integration-cooperation-connectivity' rhetorically is being recently "processed" in an interesting but still vague notion of 'connectogratorion', which tries to reconcile the seeming contradiction between cooperation and integration through the

connectivity.<sup>2</sup> Anyhow, conceptual, political and institutional problems of Central Asian regionalism must be resolved above all. The reason for this statement is that a number of predictions regarding political, economic, social, and religious processes in the countries of the region appeared to be incorrect based on superficial perceptions and wrong assumptions.

Correction of the regional status quo will depend to a great extent on Uzbekistan. This is indeed the key country of Central Asia which can play the role of motor of regional interactions and integration. Being the centrally located in the region, having the biggest population among five countries, possessing the most developed infrastructure including roads and highways, having the strongest military forces in the region, and relatively less exposed to direct influence of the neighboring geopolitical giants, Uzbekistan is endowed with historical mission and special responsibility to become a centripetal force for the entire region.

Peculiarities of the regional stance of Uzbekistan during the First President Karimov and his successor Mirziyoev testify this thesis. At the inception of independence, Karimov started as a strong proponent of regional integration and proclaimed the slogan "Turkistan is our common home". The process of region-building proceeded successfully until 2006 when it was interrupted. Then Karimov turned into an isolationist and the process stopped without Uzbekistan. His successor Mirziyoev put an end to Uzbekistan's isolationism and regional communications is immediately resumed with new force. So Tashkent's policy is of decisive character: its isolationism stops integration; its activism stimulates it.

Regionalism in Central Asia should also be considered in the context of globalization and emerging new world order (NWO) which aggrandizes the actuality of region-building and region-securing in this part of the world. Some years ago Henry Kissinger wrote: "A struggle between regions could be even more debilitating than the struggle between nations has been. The contemporary quest for world order will require a coherent strategy to establish a concept of order *within* the various regions and to relate these regional orders to one another" (Kissinger 2014, 371).

Martha Olcott once argued that after the 9/11 events the international interest in Central Asia increased significantly in the context of war on terror and in this respect countries of the region had a second chance - new opportunity for democratic reforms with the assistance of international community. She was, however, skeptical concerning reforms and thought it is less likely that states of Cen-

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**2** This notion appeared during the discussion in the recent international conference that the author of this article attended.

tral Asia would “understand all correctly” (Brill Olcott 2005). But the real second chance is more dialectical and broader issue, namely: it is a second chance for integration (Central Asia-2.0). Hopefully, this time, five ‘stans’ will understand all correctly.

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# Regime-Building through Controlled Opening New Authoritarianism in Post-Karimov Uzbekistan

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**Abstract** This article aims to locate the version of authoritarianism developing in post-Karimov Uzbekistan to current debates on the emergence of new forms of authoritarian governance within and beyond post-Soviet Eurasia. To this end, the article re-evaluates Shavkat Mirziyoyev's policies in light of authoritarian modernisation theory, revealing how the ultimate end of the process of political change currently at play in Uzbekistan is connected with an upgrading of local authoritarian practices rather than to the liberalisation of the domestic political landscape.

**Keywords** Uzbekistan. Authoritarianism. Leadership transition.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Uzbek Spring and Its Many Frosts. – 3 Globalising Uzbek Authoritarianism. – 4 Refreshing Uzbekistan's Authoritarian Image. – 5 Concluding Remarks: What is New in Uzbek Authoritarianism?

## 1 Introduction

On 27 August 2016, the sudden death of Islam Karimov set into motion an intricate process of power transfer that culminated, on 8 September, in the interim appointment of Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev's to the helm of the Uzbek republic. Shortly after (4 December), a largely staged election converted his temporary presidency into a fully-fledged leadership. This vote formally concluded the seemingly interminable Karimov era, at the end of which Uzbek-



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istan had receded into a position of international isolation, *quasi*-total economic autarky, and political stagnation.

Much has been written about the policy innovation drive that has defined the new regime's first two years in power. Hailed as the dawn of a new era (Imamova 2018), in which structural changes are apparently revolutionising the nature of Uzbek politics (Bowyer 2018; Marszewski 2018) and presented, not without hyperbole, as one of the most significant political processes currently at play across the globe (Starr, Cornell 2018), Mirziyoyev's reformist agenda is more realistically defined as a sustained experiment in authoritarian modernisation, understood here in the terms framed by Gel'man and Starodubstev, who postulated the possibility of engaging in targeted, meaningful reforms even in persistently non-democratic *milieux* (Gel'man, Starodubstev 2016, 114).

The modernisation path followed by Mirziyoyev is to all intents and purposes adjusting Uzbekistan's non-democratic politics to specific patterns of authoritarian upgrade emerged and consolidated across the Middle East (Heydemann 2007) and Central Asia (Schatz 2008, 2009). Most immediately, this latter proposition highlights the significant work of authoritarian learning (Hall, Ambrosio 2017) that seems to be underpinning the conceptualisation of post-Karimov policies and strategies. At a wider level, the political processes instigated by Mirziyoyev and his associates point to a wider evolution in Uzbek authoritarianism.

The process of authoritarian modernisation<sup>1</sup> currently unfolding in Uzbekistan has to be seen as a regime-orchestrated passage between *old* and *new* forms of authoritarianism. As a mechanism of authoritarian *update*, the modernisation of Uzbek authoritarianism is designed to bring local non-democratic practices in line with global authoritarian trends.

It is Mirziyoyev's failure to bring to the surface even the most elementary form of political liberalisation that ultimately qualifies the nature of the transition completed in Uzbekistan across August-September 2016. As the 'interval between one political regime and another' (O'Donnell et al. 1986, 6), the post-Karimov transition constituted a performative process sanctioning the passage between different forms of authoritarianism, rather than a mechanism intending to lift the quality of Uzbek governance. This transition modified both the inner core and the outer manifestation of Uzbek authoritarianism, replacing the autarchic, isolationist postures of the Karimov era with the more dynamic, globalised form of non-democratic politics put into practice by Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his associates.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the rationale behind Uzbekistan's modernisation drive, see Anceschi 2018.

To all intents and purposes, Mirziyoyev's modernisation drive has revolved around two intersecting ends: the facilitation of the regime's efforts to gather support through the delivery of viable economic policies, and the comprehensive re-branding of Uzbekistan, its policies and its leadership. The politics of persuasion remain therefore central to both prongs inscribed in this drive. On the one hand, the regime is trying to convince ordinary Uzbeks that the delivery of economic wealth is sufficient to temporarily quieten, and ideally postpone indefinitely, their demands for enhanced social and political rights. On the other hand, Mirziyoyev's propagandistic strategies are seeking to persuade international observers and prospective foreign partners that the new Uzbek regime is substantially different from its predecessor, inasmuch as it presides over a globalising, relatively large economy that is slowly opening up to foreign collaboration.

The unrelenting pursue of economic growth is to all intents and purposes meant to compensate the legitimacy deficit intrinsic to Uzbekistan's second-generation presidency. At the same time, it is underpinned by the regime's understanding that, in Uzbekistan's immediate neighbourhood, economic autarchy unequivocally failed, as confirmed by the severe economic crisis currently experienced by Turkmenistan, Central Asia's most isolated economy. Critical to the achievement of economic growth is the attraction of foreign investment, an end pursued through a combination of actual policies and image-making strategies presenting Uzbekistan as an opening, globalising market.

This article is committed to grant equal analytical relevance to both prongs of Uzbekistan's authoritarian modernisation drive, outlining the contours of the composite authoritarian agenda underpinning Mirziyoyev's economic opening and his image-making strategies. The upgrade and update work required to modernise Uzbek authoritarianism involved the introduction of softer authoritarian strategies, accompanied by the preservation of harder power technologies that were perfected during the Karimov years. The Mirziyoyev regime protected the effectiveness of this latter range of authoritarian tools by ensuring a fundamental consistency between pre- and post-transition political practices. And it's precisely upon Mirziyoyev's scarce commitment to improve Uzbekistan's authoritarian governance that this paper centres its initial attention.

## 2 The Uzbek Spring and Its Many Frosts

A lukewarm commitment to political liberalisation saturated the speech that Sh. M. Mirziyoyev delivered at his presidential inauguration in December 2016.<sup>2</sup> The speech reproduced with some regularity – 17 times over approximately 7000 words of text – a number of intersecting tropes linked to reforms and change. The liberalisation of the Uzbek political landscape, however, was addressed directly in only one passage, namely that which acknowledged, rather paradoxically, the degree of democratisation achieved during the Karimov years. In this speech – the first milestone of his presidency – Mirziyoyev failed to articulate a vision of liberalisation centred on the pluralism gap affecting at the time the Uzbek political landscape. Rather, he equated, in thoroughly reductionist terms, the achievement of political liberalisation to the enhancement of the government’s transparency in its dealings with the population. This latter proposition has to be seen as a policy blueprint for the continuation of his presidency.

The new regime confined its political reform agenda to policy measures increasing the accountability of state institutions and regime members *vis-à-vis* the wider population. This end was pursued through the penetration of Mirziyoyev loyalists in Uzbekistan’s extensive *prokuratura* system (Ozodlik Radiosy 2018), the introduction of far-reaching purges in the security services (Putz 2017), and the launch of well-publicised anti-corruption campaigns permeated by markedly populist undertones (Najibullah, Eshanova 2018). One of the most popular slogans<sup>3</sup> of the Mirziyoyev years is purportedly calling to revert the power relations between state structures and ordinary Uzbeks, to exert in turn a tangible influence on the ‘levels and quality of life’ (UzA 2019) of the wider population.

The last two paragraphs have highlighted an important inconsistency in Mirziyoyev’s attempts to deal with the question of anteriority in Uzbek authoritarianism. For expediency reasons, the current Uzbek president is denouncing some aspects of the Karimovist system while refusing to openly condemn his predecessor. Policy discontinuity with prior practices is therefore limited to the economic realm.

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<sup>2</sup> For the full text: ‘Address by Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the joint session of the Chambers of Oliy Majlis dedicated to a Solemn Ceremony of Assuming the Post of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan’ (URL <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/address-shavkat-mirziyoyev-joint-session-chambers-oliy-majlis-dedicated-solemn-ceremony>, accessed on 2019-11-16). All direct and indirect quotes of the document made in this article are extracted from the above source.

<sup>3</sup> Не народ служит государственным органам, а государственные органы должны служить народу (It is not the people who serve the government institutions but the government institutions that should serve the people).



No new, truly independent political party has been established since Mirziyoyev's accession to power, and there is no clear roadmap to inject a modicum of fairness into the parliamentary election scheduled for December 2019, which is therefore expected to take place in the same skewed field that regulated the competition for the 2016 presidential vote.

No élite lustration is taking place in post-Karimov Uzbekistan, where there has been no systematic regime effort to denounce the violence of the past. The Mirziyoyev regime freed a limited number of political prisoners,<sup>4</sup> and readmitted a restricted range of international human rights advocates<sup>5</sup> and foreign media outlets (Voice of America Press Release 2018) to work in the country. Failure to engage with the abuses of the Karimov years has furthermore prevented any attempt at post-transitional reconciliation. The establishment of a new relationship of trust between the state and some sectors of the population is therefore not linked to post-transitional political reforms, as its fulcrum has been shifted onto the conclusion of a new social pact between the regime in Tashkent and ordinary Uzbeks. At a time at which Turkmenistan has re-written its social energy contract (Anceschi 2017a), and Kazakhstan launched a pay-out programme to quell rising social tensions (Stronsky 2019), Mirziyoyev's preoccupation for social stability represents a power technology aligning Uzbekistan to the current Central Asian praxis.

Concerted efforts to improve the social mobility prospects for ordinary Uzbeks, as remarked by Rafael Sattarov (2019), sit at the very core of this strategy: the Mirziyoyev dream is articulated through promises of economic wealth and better life prospects, as clearly remarked by the president in September 2017, during his first address to the UN General Assembly.<sup>6</sup> Reformist emphasis on the economy sets Uzbekistan on the path traced by Nursultan Nazarbaev in neighbouring Kazakhstan, where the mantra *сначала экономика, потом*

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<sup>4</sup> Between September 2016 and November 2018, the Uzbek government released more than 35 political prisoners, as reported by Human Rights Watch in: 'Uzbekistan: Release and rehabilitate political prisoners', URL <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/17/uzbekistan-release-and-rehabilitate-political-prisoners> (2019-11-18).

<sup>5</sup> In December 2018, the Uzbek government hosted the annual meeting of the Asian Human Rights Forum, which included the participation of HR advocates from across the continent and beyond. Mirziyoyev's opening speech can be consulted at URL <http://www.uzbekembassy.in/shavkat-mirziyoyev-we-will-continue-our-partnership-with-human-rights-organizations> (2019-11-18).

<sup>6</sup> This speech, which reiterated the centrality of economic liberalisation in the Uzbek reform agenda, explicitly linked prosperity with regime stability, stating that: "the richer the people are - the stronger shall be the state". For the full text, see: 'Address by H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the UNGA-72', available at URL [https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements\\_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72](https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72) (2019-11-18).

политика (economic first, politics later) underpinned the policy agenda of the local regime for much of the post-Soviet era.

The operationalisation of post-Karimov authoritarianism is therefore entrenched in the regime's substantial indifference for the design and eventual implementation of democratic norms and practices. Mirziyoyev's authoritarian modernisation path is interpreting the political monopoly established by his predecessor as a viable launching pad for a comprehensive revision of the strategies of economic management available to the regime in Tashkent. The next few paragraphs outline with greater precision the economic facet of Mirziyoyev's authoritarian agenda.

### 3 Globalising Uzbek Authoritarianism

Islam Karimov's protracted twilight grounded to a halt the Uzbek decision-making praxis, convincing the domestic population and the international community that a change of leadership represented the only vehicle to introduce much needed social, political and economic change in Uzbekistan. Noah Tucker's 'zero hour' (Tucker 2016) parallel offers therefore a telling turn of phrase to characterise the significant expectations surrounding the passing of the long-term Uzbek leader.

Mirziyoyev interpreted selectively these calls for change, focusing on the introduction of reforms pursuing the globalisation of the Uzbek economy. In this context, the regime traced two main trajectories for its plans to open Uzbekistan's economy. On the one hand, it sought the restoration of regional linkages arbitrarily interrupted in the Karimov years; on the other, it meant to transform Uzbekistan into an attractive destination for capital investment originating in both Europe and Asia.

As I have argued elsewhere (Anceschi 2017b, 2019), Mirziyoyev's Central Asia policy has to be seen as the most remarkable component in the entire reformist agenda carried out since the leadership change in Tashkent, mostly as it advanced the interest of the Uzbek élites while bringing substantial benefits to the lives of the many Central Asians residing in the Uzbek borderlands.<sup>7</sup> Uzbekistan's adoption of a positive regional posture re-launched Central Asian regionalism by re-establishing grassroots connectivity through the re-opening of border posts, the re-instatement of transport routes, and the facilita-

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<sup>7</sup> 'Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan Dream of Surge in Trade and Freer Borders', *Eurasianet*, 23 March 2017; 'Uzbekistan, Tajikistan: As the Karimov wall crumbles, families reunite', *Eurasianet*, 27 March 2018; N. Djanibekova, 'Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan shuttle trade booms, but for how long?', *Eurasianet*, 18 July 2018.

tion of people-to-people linkages across neighbouring Central Asian states. The economic impact of these measures was closely related to the kickstarting of Uzbekistan's economic collaboration with its regional neighbours, and the reconstruction of formal and informal commercial activities in border areas.

Mirziyoyev's regionalist input encapsulates at the same time the essence of the authoritarian upgrade process at play in post-Karimov Uzbekistan. The current regime has abandoned isolationist policies typifying *old* authoritarian methods, providing the wider population with tangible indicators that change is ultimately unfolding. This degree of change was however introduced while non-democratic practices persisted across Uzbekistan, as economic reforms were enforced by presidential decree, overlooking collective decision-making and minimising the input of provincial and local communities.

This latter proposition identifies a second visible idiosyncrasy underpinning Uzbekistan's passage between new and old forms of authoritarianism, one which that does bring to the fore a series of pathways leading to the medium-term re-personalisation of Uzbekistan's politics and policies.

The introduction of extensive reforms pursued specific power technologies connected with the popular legitimation of Uzbekistan's second-generation leader. These technologies responded in full to the new leadership's positionality *vis-à-vis* the personalistic power configuration of the Karimovist milieu, in which top cadres, including long-term PM Mirziyoyev, were confined to play backdrop roles to the regime leader. The central élite position that he occupied at the time of his predecessor's death provided Mirziyoyev with unencumbered access to Uzbekistan's decision-making mechanisms immediately after his accession to power. This access became indispensable to address the popularity deficit imposed on him by the power personalisation practices of the Karimov era. To this end, Mirziyoyev engaged in incessant travel and pursued an unrelenting policy drive during the very early stages of his presidency. The new leader's energetic approach was visibly juxtaposed with the immobility of his predecessor, confirming internationally that significant change was definitely underway in Uzbekistan after the passing of its first president.

The popularisation of the new leader's policies – a practice largely absent from Karimov's authoritarian playbook, which focused instead on the glorification of the president's personality (March 2002) – is another indicator pointing out to the emergence of softer forms of authoritarianism in post-transition Uzbekistan. The political imperative to popularise the new president's persona has nevertheless instigated a perverse mechanism of authoritarian re-personalisation, in which Mirziyoyev is represented – and, most notably, perceived by the élites as such – as the only force behind policy revision and implementation. The long-term implications of this mechanism unveil the

precariousness intrinsic to Uzbekistan's authoritarian update: the structural viability of personalised decision-making is inextricably linked to the leader's individual capacities and their evolving agendas, making the return of policy stagnation a potential pitfall at the onset of every new regime evolution phase.

This latter proposition suggests that Mirziyoyev's work of authoritarian upgrade and update ought not to be regarded as an irreversible process. The implementation of softer authoritarian strategies and the introduction of a combination of both *new* and *old* forms of non-democratic practices at the core of the Uzbek governance system have defined the initial stages of regime evolution, but there is no absolute certainty about their future relevance *vis-à-vis* Uzbekistan's authoritarian politics. Central Asian authoritarianism is not a static phenomenon: the regional regimes have revised their authoritarian playbooks with regularity, adding new sets of power technologies to be implemented at domestic and international level. The combination of ageing leadership and personalism, for instance, has usually led to stagnation, as demonstrated by Turkmenistan under Niyazov (2002-2006), Kazakhstan under Nazarbaev (2011-March 2019) and Uzbekistan under Karimov. If Mirziyoyev is pursuing the re-personalisation of Uzbek politics – as early indicators are indeed suggesting – then there is no significant reason to argue that, in the long-term, his regime will constitute the exception to this norm.

The embedment of Uzbekistan's economy into global financial structures and networks represents a second important chapter in Mirziyoyev's agenda of economic opening. In this context, the prior regime managed to navigate the precarious balance between the preservation of an essentially autarchic economic outlook and the insertion of the Uzbek élites in global kleptocratic networks (Cooley, Heathershaw 2017, 112-133). While there is no substantive evidence about the persistence of such opaque practices in post-Karimov Uzbekistan, the new regime has registered a certain interest in strengthening its ties with foreign oligarchic groups (Sattarov 2019), potentially instigating a peculiar version of international authoritarian sponsorship (Tansey 2016), extended in this case by Russian interest groups formed by ethnic Uzbek businessmen who are deliberately bolstering a new authoritarian leadership in Tashkent. Across the former Soviet Union, however, oligarchic modernisation has systematically failed to eventuate: Mirziyoyev's apparent closeness with Usmanov and other oligarchs is therefore likely to invite actors pursuing monopolistic agendas to play a part in Uzbekistan's economic landscape, skewing as a consequence the balance of future patterns of economic growth.

So far as wider economic choices, the Mirziyoyev regime has unequivocally abandoned the isolationism that defined Uzbekistan's foreign economic relations in the latter part of the Karimov era. In this

context, Mirziyoyev's two flagship policies have focused on the introduction of measures ensuring full convertibility of the *som* (Rapoza 2017), and the launch, in February 2019, of the first dollar bonds issued by the Uzbek central bank (Martin 2019). These practices are not intrinsically authoritarian; their introduction, however, seems to suggest that the current Uzbek regime has adopted new sets of political economy strategies to expand the spatiality of Uzbek authoritarianism (Lewis 2005), pursuing the establishment of a new, potentially illiberal, space wherein Uzbekistan's domestic markets intersect with transnational capital and financial transactions.

Whatever the scope of the new regime's economic reforms or their long-term end, the optics of Uzbekistan's present economic dynamism are however stunning, and contrast very sharply with the immobility of the last decade. The international perception of Uzbekistan, its governance and its economic appeal are matters of central concern for the new regime, which, in another departure from prior practices, is constantly preoccupied about the external representation of developments internal to Uzbekistan. Image-making - the core issue to be tackled in the paper's next segment - has in this sense surfaced as a most critical component of the new form of authoritarianism promoted by the leadership in Tashkent.

#### 4 Refreshing Uzbekistan's Authoritarian Image

While there is relatively robust evidence pointing to the increasing relevance occupied by strategies of persuasion and framing<sup>8</sup> in the Uzbek authoritarian playbook, the Mirziyoyev regime is yet to engage in a comprehensive process of nation (re-)branding.<sup>9</sup> Until the time of writing, the range of regime symbols constructed internally and communicated externally by the Uzbek propaganda has not expanded from those consolidated in the Karimov years (Marat 2009, 1131-2).

The most evident attempt at modifying the representation of regime-led initiatives has been therefore channelled through a concerted, and methodically implemented, strategy of authoritarian framing, intended here as the rendering of "events or occurrences [...] to organize experience and guide action" (Benford; Snow 2000, 614). Beyond the local population, these narratives targeted international businessmen, foreign tourists and the global political community with the ultimate view to alter their respective perceptions of the

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<sup>8</sup> This distinction is advanced in Schatz; Maltseva 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Nadia Kaneva (2011, 118) describes nation branding as a "compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms".

multifaceted processes at play in Uzbekistan since the demise of Islam Karimov.

Mirziyoyev's authoritarian framing is articulated around a linear yet powerful message: Uzbekistan is an open country, where travel is safe and business is (relatively) easy to conduct, while remaining a reliable partner for neighbouring states and more distant actors. The regime engaged in a sustained policy drive to support these narratives: the introduction of a visa-free regimen for travellers from over 70 countries (Putz 2019), the removal of legislative hurdles blocking foreign access to the Uzbek economy,<sup>10</sup> and Mirziyoyev's entanglement with regional and international leaders are clear indicators that change introduced in Uzbekistan is not cosmetic, and that there is a more substantive dimension to the articulation of the regime's authoritarian frames.

Interestingly, the rise of Uzbekistan's profile in mainstream global media relied upon analytical depictions that remain very closely aligned to the regime's preferred framing,<sup>11</sup> indicating that these new frames, ultimately, have encountered some success beyond the Uzbek borders. Internally, these narratives are instrumental to enhance the population's compliance with the new rules imposed by the regime, hence modifying in not insignificant fashion the political culture of post-Karimov Uzbekistan. Limitations imposed on Social Science field research in Uzbekistan have so far impeded any rigorous effort to assess the success encountered by these narratives; anecdotal evidence, however, seem to confirm that certain segments of the population (younger and more educated) are receptive of this specific line of authoritarian framing.

The politics of persuasion of the current Uzbek regime represents perhaps the area wherein Mirziyoyev's work of authoritarian update and upgrade emerged most visibly. While noting the leadership's unprecedented preoccupation with how Uzbekistan is perceived externally, this article identified a parabolic evolution in how softer authoritarian strategies have contributed to increase regime stability internally. The Karimov regime put a premium on establishing a composite brand for Uzbekistan, recurring to historical symbols and cultural specificities. Its more aggressive outlook limited - and altogether obliterated in the latter part of the Karimov era - the relevance of authoritarian framing, as the population compliance with

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**10** An interesting case in this context is represented by the re-invigoration of the Tashkent Stock Exchange, as indicated in: M. van Loon, "Uzbekistan's bourse is open for business", *BNE Intellinews*, 26 November 2018.

**11** See, for instance, the *Financial Times*' video feature "How Uzbekistan is opening up to foreign investment" at URL <https://www.ft.com/video/e89f7d59-c811-48f7-a47b-e722d898b72e> (2019-11-18), and the long article "Uzbekistan unbound", authored by Ben Bland for the March 2019 issue of the *Business Traveller Magazine* (pp. 24-7).

regime rules was ensured by increasingly brutal repression. Mirziyoyev and his associates did not endeavour to re-brand Uzbekistan: their focus has been fixated instead on repackaging the image of the regime ruling over the Uzbek state.

This latter proposition mirrors the analytical distinction advanced earlier on: the current leadership, at least for the time being, continues to regard the rhetorical promotion of Uzbekistan's policies as more important than the glorification of the president who formulated and implemented them. This specific process may have a constrained temporality, as it may pertain to this initial phase of regime evolution, in which the ruling élites has calculated that positive internal and external reception of its policies are indeed necessary to carry out their authoritarian agendas.

## **5 Concluding Remarks: What is New in Uzbek Authoritarianism?**

This article has suggested that there is indeed a significant work of authoritarian upgrade and update at play in post-Karimov Uzbekistan, identifying economic reform as the leadership's preferred measure to carry out an extensive process of authoritarian modernisation. From the establishment of a globalised financial sector to the entry of foreign oligarchs into the Uzbek economy, Mirziyoyev and his associates are creating new spaces in which to pursue their agenda of regime maintenance, and ultimately sustain local authoritarianism through practices operating beyond the Uzbek state.

There are two main conclusions that this paper intends to put forward to its readership. To begin with, Mirziyoyev's authoritarian modernisation does not have to be seen as a linear process of update and upgrade. Rather, it is shaping up as a calculated opening, seeking medium-term economic growth while postponing to a later date the liberalisation of Uzbek politics. A selective opening responds more directly to the logic of authoritarian preservation that has dominated Central Asian politics throughout the post-Soviet era, insofar as it softens authoritarianism in policy areas perceived to be crucial to the stability of a consolidating leadership, and ensures the continuation of more repressive methods in other sectors considered less relevant for the delivery of the (authoritarian) social contract put forward by the current regime.

As a consequence, Mirziyoyev's non-democratic politics and policies are aligning with some rapidity to the norm established by Central Asia's more sophisticated authoritarian systems, and Kazakhstan more in particular. There are many parallels between the recent evolution of Uzbek authoritarianism and the governance practices and power technologies that defined the Kazakhstani authoritarian prac-

tices of the early 2000s, when the Nazarbaev regime began to deliver some economic prosperity while simultaneously hardening many of its domestic policies. This latter proposition identifies the second main conclusion of this paper, remarking that Uzbekistan's calculated opening and the partial softening of its authoritarian practices may be temporary, connected as they are to priorities and agenda of a regime ensemble that is still trying to consolidate its control onto power. As Central Asia's authoritarianism has so far featured very specific temporalities, this period of authoritarian modernisation may be just a phase in the long-term evolution of Uzbekistan's non-democratic praxis.

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# Riforme agrarie e mutamenti sociali nell'Uzbekistan dell'era dell'Indipendenza

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**Abstract** Cotton farming in Uzbekistan has been thoroughly reshaped by protracted decollectivization aimed at recovering agriculture from the post-Soviet crisis years. Based on a review of extant literature and on data collected over a socio-anthropological research in cotton-growing Khorezm region, this paper offers an overview over the Soviet-era cotton kolkhoz, post-Soviet agricultural reforms and agropolicies, and the transformations in rural society over the second post-Soviet decade. Agriculture in Uzbekistan is now resurfacing from difficult years, but old problems are perduring and prospects and burdens are more unequally distributed among stakeholders.

**Keywords** Uzbekistan. Agriculture. Kolkhoz. Post-socialism. Cotton. Decollectivization. Rural society.

**Sommario** 1 Introduzione. – 2 Il kolchoz cotoniero durante il periodo sovietico. – 3 Le riforme post-socialiste. – 4 Gli effetti della decollettivizzazione sulla società rurale. – 5 Il futuro dell'agricoltura in Uzbekistan dopo la presidenza di Islam Karimov.

## 1 Introduzione

Questo saggio affronta il tema del mutamento della struttura agraria in Uzbekistan dopo il tracollo dell'URSS, con particolare attenzione ai cambiamenti avvenuti nella proprietà dei terreni e delle infrastrutture, nelle politiche agricole, nell'organizzazione del lavoro, nelle condizioni materiali delle comunità rurali e nelle relazioni di potere che sussistono tra coltivatori diretti, impresari privati e amministratori governativi. Il filo che collega fra lo-



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ro questi cambiamenti ha un'unica origine: la decollettivizzazione,<sup>1</sup> ovvero lo scioglimento dei kolchoz - le grandi cooperative agricole introdotte in Asia centrale a seguito della collettivizzazione -<sup>2</sup> e dei sovchoz - le grandi aziende agricole statali introdotte in epoca tardo-sovietica allo scopo di potenziare e ingrandire le aziende agricole collettive.<sup>3</sup> L'oggetto di questo articolo è quindi la fine del kolchoz (e del sovchoz) cotoniero in Uzbekistan e il mutato quadro dell'agricoltura negli anni dell'Indipendenza, con uno sguardo alla nuova fase politica recentemente apertasi con la successione alla presidenza di Islam Karimov (1989-2016).

Il saggio si basa sui dati di una ricerca socio-antropologica da me condotta negli anni 2003, 2004 e 2006 nella regione della Corasmia (*Khorezm region* in inglese, *Xorazm viloyati* in uzbeko), nella parte occidentale dell'Uzbekistan (Trevisani 2011). In particolare la ricerca verteva sul distretto pilota di Yangibozor,<sup>4</sup> nel quale la decollettivizzazione è stata messa in atto in via sperimentale già nel 2003, con cinque anni di anticipo rispetto al resto del paese. Durante la ricerca ho avuto modo di conoscere la realtà della vita contadina nelle piantagioni di cotone e di studiare in archivio i documenti (dal 1960 in poi) del periodo tardo-sovietico riguardanti i kolchoz del distretto. La partecipazione a un progetto di cooperazione e ricerca dell'UNESCO e dell'Università di Bonn mi ha permesso di osservare da vicino il processo di redistribuzione delle terre e dei beni delle ex aziende agricole collettive e di Stato, un processo caratterizzato da forte competizione, tensioni sociali e pressioni politiche.<sup>5</sup> In questo saggio rivisiterò alcune considerazioni precedentemente pubblicate (Trevisani 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2009, 2011) per ridiscuterle alla luce del nuovo contesto politico in cui si muove oggi l'agricoltura in Uzbekistan.

**1** Sulla fine dell'agricoltura collettiva socialista e le conseguenze e le problematiche a essa collegate nel contesto post-socialista si veda Verdery 2003 e il volume di Hann et al. 2003, i cui lavori hanno fornito impulsi importanti al presente studio.

**2** Sulla collettivizzazione in URSS si veda: Fitzpatrick 1994; Viola 1996. In Asia centrale: Aminova 1965; Penati 2007; Pianciola 2009; e gli articoli del volume mon tematico curato da Kassymbekova (2019).

**3** Sulla distinzione tra sovchoz e kolchoz vedi: Dumont 1964; Lubin 1984, 57; Khan, Ghai 1979; Lerman, Csaki, Feder 2004, 27; e Litvin 1987 sull'industrializzazione del settore agrario nel periodo tardo-sovietico.

**4** Trattano delle trasformazioni sociali e politiche in agricoltura nello stesso distretto anche Wall 2008 e Wegerich 2010.

**5** Desidero ringraziare lo ZEF/UNESCO Khorezm Project, finanziato dal Ministero per l'Istruzione e la Ricerca della Repubblica Federale Tedesca (BMBF), Progetto nr. 0339970A, per aver reso possibile questa ricerca.

## 2 Il kolchoz cotoniero durante il periodo sovietico

L'Uzbekistan può a tutti gli effetti dirsi una repubblica fondata sul cotone (Cucciolla 2019). Questo non solo perché il cotone continua a rivestire un ruolo centrale nell'economia del paese, quanto piuttosto perché il retaggio della politica del cotone messa in atto durante il periodo sovietico continua ancora adesso a esercitare la sua influenza su molteplici aspetti della vita del paese.

Il cotone era presente nelle oasi dell'Asia centrale già prima della conquista zarista ma la sua coltivazione aumentò enormemente sotto l'amministrazione zarista, complici anche gli interessi coloniali e l'emergente industria tessile dell'epoca (Buttino 2003, 50-3; Matley 1967; Morrison 2008, 233-4). Dopo la Rivoluzione d'Ottobre l'importanza del cotone continuò a crescere, ma fu soltanto nel dopoguerra che l'espansione delle colture iniziò a svilupparsi in misura esponenziale (Rumer 1989; Fierman 1991). Da lì a breve il cotone sarebbe diventato la coltura principale in tutte le aree irrigate dell'ex Turkistan, così come nei territori delle Repubbliche Socialiste del Turkmenistan, del Kazakistan meridionale, nelle zone pianeggianti del Tagikistan e del Kirghizistan e, soprattutto, nella Repubblica Socialista Sovietica dell'Uzbekistan (UzSSR), che divenne il maggiore produttore all'interno dell'URSS, a sua volta e per un lungo periodo il primo produttore mondiale.

Se la catastrofe del Lago d'Aral è la conseguenza oggi più nota della politica del cotone in Asia centrale,<sup>6</sup> meno nota è la sua eredità politica e culturale. In realtà, nei paesi centroasiatici ha lasciato il suo segno anche nelle odierne strutture statali, amministrative e di potere, nelle infrastrutture come nel paesaggio e nell'ambiente, nella produzione culturale e nella cultura del lavoro. In epoca sovietica, l'esperienza (diretta o indiretta) del lavoro nel settore cotoniero è stata parte integrante del vissuto quotidiano della stragrande maggioranza della società uzbeca (Zanca 2011) ed è stata vissuta come momento unificante, anche se non privo di ambiguità.

Le ragioni di questa ambiguità vanno ricercate nella natura delle politiche di modernizzazione messe in opera dal regime sovietico. Nella ripartizione dei compiti tra centro e periferia, infatti, Mosca conferì alle Repubbliche centroasiatiche il ruolo subalterno di fornitore di materie prime, pertanto l'Uzbekistan si trovò a rifornire di cotone le industrie tessili in Russia. Questa divisione dei compiti tra

<sup>6</sup> Già in epoca tardo-sovietica le drammatiche conseguenze sanitarie e ambientali della politica del cotone sono state oggetto di pubbliche discussioni e polemiche (Rumer 1989; Wheeler 2016). Il restringimento del Lago d'Aral (oggi pressoché prosciugato) è il risultato di anni di prelievo indiscriminato delle risorse idriche dei suoi immissari Amu Darya e Syr Darya, un prelievo portato a termine allo scopo di espandere la coltivazione del cotone nelle adiacenti aree desertiche (Rumer 1989; Micklin 2000).

centro e periferia comportò l'imposizione di una quasi esclusiva monocultura del cotone nelle aree agricole idonee alla sua coltivazione. Dagli anni '50 in poi, e in maniera ancora più sostenuta dalla seconda metà degli anni '60, la politica del cotone finì col relegare la regione a una posizione economicamente subordinata rispetto ai centri industriali dell'URSS e, quindi, secondo i critici, col riprodurre e perpetuare strutture di dipendenza evocatrici dei tempi pre-sovietici (Buttino 2015, 12-13; Kandiyoti 2007, 1-11). Nella formulazione di Abashin (2015), questo sviluppo si tradusse in un modello sovietico-islamico di modernizzazione parziale o 'incompiuta' della società uzbeca, caratterizzato da una combinazione di tratti moderni-industriali e rurali-tradizionali.

Infatti, se per un verso il kolchoz con la sua spinta modernizzatrice portava gli abitanti delle comunità locali ad abbandonare i modi di vita tradizionali,<sup>7</sup> per un altro finì col preservare le condizioni necessarie alla riproduzione delle società tradizionali, integrando i capi tradizionali e le logiche delle comunità rurali tradizionali nella moderna economia sovietica del cotone, e quindi anche nelle strutture e gerarchie sovietiche del kolchoz. Grazie all'importanza del cotone nel sistema sovietico e ai mezzi messi a disposizione dalle amministrazioni centrali per il suo sviluppo, i dirigenti del kolchoz - i *rais*, tipicamente di estrazione locale, nati e cresciuti nei villaggi kolchoziani - assunsero, in virtù delle loro prerogative e capacità di ridistribuire risorse, quel ruolo guida all'interno delle comunità rurali in precedenza ricoperto, nelle comunità tradizionali, dagli *aksakal*, gli anziani capi delle comunità di vicinato e di moschea (Abashin 2017). Pertanto, secondo un'interpretazione corrente, fu il kolchoz stesso che, attraverso la politica del cotone, mancò di modernizzare pienamente la società tradizionale e finì esso stesso per essere 'tribalizzato', ovvero 'colonizzato' dai modi di vita e dalle logiche delle società tradizionali (Roy 1997).

Una conseguenza di ciò fu che insieme al kolchoz cotoniero crebbe nelle comunità rurali specializzate nella coltivazione del cotone in Uzbekistan un sistema di corruzione pervasivo, successivamente emerso in tutta la sua dimensione sistemica con le rivelazioni dello 'scandalo del cotone',<sup>8</sup> praticato attraverso il clientelismo delle élite

<sup>7</sup> I kolchoz, in quanto istituzioni collettive, non fungevano soltanto da datore di lavoro ma influenzavano molti altri aspetti della vita delle comunità: assegnavano e costruivano alloggi, organizzavano servizi (punti medici, scuole, asili, biblioteche, centri culturali), ridistribuivano le eccedenze raccolte tra i membri dei collettivi, sponsorizzavano feste e cerimonie, attribuivano premi di produzione. Il kolchoz poteva svolgere funzioni di polizia e, in tutti quei casi che deviavano dalla norma e dalla routine, era la prima istituzione di riferimento (Humphrey 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Si tratta di una macroscopica truffa perpetrata dai funzionari del partito comunista uzbeko ai danni dello stato scoperta durante la prima metà degli anni '80. Per an-

rurali del kolchoz e legittimato da un ethos tradizionalista secondo cui la truffa ai danni dello Stato poteva considerarsi un 'furto giusto' laddove perpetrato a difesa degli interessi delle comunità locali. Effettivamente, finché fu possibile, questo sistema di interessi, connivenze e complicità locali proprie del kolchoz neo-tradizionale permise alle comunità rurali di beneficiare della deviazione del flusso delle risorse dal centro alla periferia.

In ultima analisi, il rapporto stabilitosi nei primi anni del kolchoz tra le comunità rurali cotoniere e i *rais* a capo dell'agricoltura sovietica, poi consolidatosi attraverso un compromesso politico e infinite negoziazioni locali nei decenni del periodo tardo-socialista, si basava su una particolare interpretazione del comunismo di stato come sistema di redistribuzione delle risorse. Questo sistema trovava la sua legittimazione nei riferimenti all'ideologia sovietica ma anche alla morale tradizionale. Si poggiava quindi su di una nozione ibrida di autorità e di leadership, condivisa anche dalle comunità rurali (Trevisani 2011, 65-94). Politicamente il sistema si fondava sugli equilibri politici che caratterizzavano l'Uzbekistan nella sua ultima fase sovietica: una costellazione nella quale le comunità rurali potettero riprendersi dagli anni delle privazioni e repressioni staliniane e vivere un periodo di relativa tranquillità e prosperità, i cui presupposti economici e sociali furono tuttavia pur sempre ancorati in un sistema altamente disfunzionale.

Con il subentrare dell'Indipendenza, le élite rurali tentarono di mantenere in vita l'ethos di questa particolare forma di 'socialismo locale' basato sul coinvolgimento e la redistribuzione delle risorse all'interno delle comunità rurali, e di adattarlo, trasponendolo, al nuovo contesto politico-economico post-socialista. Tuttavia, la crisi economica del kolchoz tardo-sovietico e la cesura dell'Indipendenza modificarono sostanzialmente gli equilibri tra i *rais* e le comunità rurali, alterando *in toto* il sistema di connivenze reciproche e il tacito consenso creatosi nel kolchoz del cotone durante il periodo brezneviano.

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ni la RSS uzbeca aveva dichiarato una sovrapproduzione inesistente e percepito trasferimenti da Mosca per cotone mai consegnato. Il sistema si fondava sulla complicità della classe politica sovietica uzbeca, sia delle campagne sia delle élite politiche uzbече di Tashkent. Lo scandalo del cotone portò al ricambio dell'intera classe politica da parte del potere russo sovietico e molti funzionari uzbeki con incarichi importanti vennero sostituiti con funzionari russi. In seguito gli stessi funzionari uzbeki furono riabilitati e celebrati come eroi nazionali dopo l'indipendenza del paese. Si veda Buttino 2015; Cucciolla 2017.

### 3 Le riforme post-socialiste

La crisi dell'URSS mise in piena luce l'insostenibilità del sistema del kolchoz cotoniero e obbligò il governo neo-indipendente a cambiamenti radicali anche se, in apparenza, per molti aspetti la continuità alla fine prevalse sulla rottura con le regole del periodo sovietico.

Tralascero i dettagli di un processo di riforme diluito nel tempo<sup>9</sup> riassumendo i punti essenziali: lo stato post-sovietico decise di mantenere l'agricoltura sotto il proprio controllo anche se non più in maniera diretta, come durante il periodo socialista, ma adottando meccanismi di controllo indiretti. L'economia centralizzata e pianificata rimase in vigore. Lo Stato mantenne la proprietà sulla terra, concedendo agli agricoltori i soli diritti d'usufrutto. La coltivazione del cotone continuò a rivestire un ruolo centrale per il budget statale, anche se in termini assoluti l'importanza del cotone diminuì. La maggior parte delle terre furono ancora coltivate a cotone, ma la quota scese a favore della coltivazione del grano, anche questa decisa dall'alto. Questa limitata diversificazione fu a suo tempo introdotta per ridurre la dipendenza dalle importazioni e per calmierare il prezzo del pane, preservando tuttavia la rilevanza strategica del cotone per l'economia nazionale. Le riforme vere e proprie si concentrarono invece sulla ristrutturazione delle ex-sovchoz e kolchoz, dapprima trasformate in cooperative (*shirkat*) e in seguito smantellate del tutto a favore di nuove aziende agricole private (*fermer*). Queste riforme portarono a cambiamenti sostanziali, con effetti considerevoli sull'economia e la società, ma non si è trattato propriamente di 'riforme di mercato' - anche se nella retorica di governo le riforme vennero presentate proprio in questo modo.

Piuttosto, la traiettoria delle riforme agrarie in Uzbekistan va interpretata nel senso di una 'economia pianificata con caratteristiche di mercato'. Le misure gradualmente adottate dal governo vanno cioè intese come un tentativo di superare i problemi che gravavano sul sistema del kolchoz senza allentare le redini del controllo sull'agricoltura. I problemi che caratterizzavano l'economia del kolchoz sono risaputi e non si limitavano al kolchoz cotoniero: sprechi di risorse, furti e danni alla proprietà collettiva, bassa produttività delle aziende collettive e di Stato, alto indebitamento.<sup>10</sup> Per far fronte a questi problemi, invece che ritirarsi in favore dei mercati come di regola avveniva nei contesti post-socialisti di transizione economica, lo Stato

<sup>9</sup> Sul processo delle riforme agrarie in Uzbekistan negli anni '90 vedi: Lerman 1998; Ilkhamov 1998; Kandiyoti 2003. Sulle riforme in agricoltura del secondo decennio post-sovietico: Trevisani 2009; Veldwisch, Bock 2011; Djanibekov et al. 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Comuni peraltro a tutti i paesi socialisti che hanno adottato agricolture collettive. Si veda su questo Lerman, Csaki, Feder 2004, 30.



uzbeco ha mantenuto la sua influenza sul settore strategico cotoniero, rimodulando le leve e le modalità del suo controllo.

Al sistema dei kolchoz è subentrato un sistema basato sulla cessione delle terre a nuovi imprenditori agricoli (i cosiddetti *fermer*) attraverso una forma di usufrutto vincolato a lungo termine (*ijara*). Ogni ex-kolchoziano può, in teoria, diventare *fermer*, ovvero fare domanda e ricevere in usufrutto le terre del kolchoz, ma l'usufrutto è condizionato dall'adempimento di un piano di produzione, ovvero al raggiungimento di una quota di produzione stabilita in base alle caratteristiche del lotto dato in usufrutto. Già durante l'epoca sovietica esistevano indicatori e norme in base alle quali venivano stabilite le quote di produzione dei kolchoz - parametri adesso riadattati per i *fermer*. In passato lo Stato riforniva i kolchoz di tutti gli input necessari alla produzione agricola. Allo stesso modo, dopo le riforme, esso fornisce i *fermer* degli input agricoli a prezzi controllati (trattori, fertilizzanti ecc.), concede i crediti necessari (che tuttavia non sono elargiti in denaro, bensì in buoni per input e servizi erogati da società controllate dal distretto), stabilisce il prezzo del cotone grezzo e ne controlla la compravendita e l'export.

Anche se l'acqua per l'irrigazione è il bene scarso per eccellenza nell'agricoltura in Uzbekistan (nonché l'elemento indispensabile per la coltivazione del cotone), la sua tassazione - garantita dallo Stato attraverso le infrastrutture che già rifornivano il kolchoz - rimane molto contenuta. Le agenzie per l'irrigazione e per il drenaggio delle acque in agricoltura sono state riformate sul modello cooperativo delle Water Users Associations, ma la trasformazione, più che altro di facciata, ha dato esiti modesti (Wegerich 2010; Zinzani 2015). Come già al tempo del kolchoz, piuttosto che avvalersi della tassazione diretta delle risorse idriche, della terra o dei raccolti, dopo lo smantellamento dell'agricoltura collettiva lo Stato ricava un importante profitto dallo scarto tra il prezzo del cotone grezzo pagato ai *fermer*, nei punti di raccolta distrettuali controllati dal governo, e quello dei mercati internazionali, spesso sconosciuto ai coltivatori locali. Come già accadeva ai tempi dell'URSS, i produttori locali non possono vendere direttamente il loro cotone all'estero.

In teoria la coltivazione del cotone è vantaggiosa per i *fermer*, perché la raccolta centralizzata implica garanzie sull'acquisto del cotone prodotto e permette ai coltivatori di usufruire degli incentivi statali. In realtà, incentivi e servizi sono inadeguati e molti *fermer* temono l'ingerenza dello Stato e considerano più vantaggioso coltivare prodotti liberamente commerciabili nei bazar. In Corasmia è il riso che attrae molti coltivatori, poiché, malgrado l'alto consumo idrico, permette di raggiungere profitti più elevati rispetto al cotone. La coltivazione di cotone (in Corasmia come altrove) è, dunque, ancora legata a una politica di monitoraggio e coercizione da parte delle autorità distrettuali che riflette l'interesse del governo. Per le auto-

rità distrettuali questa politica consiste nel controllare che i *fermer* lavorino bene, nel reprimere le proteste di quelli che si oppongono al piano di produzione imposto dallo Stato e nel fare sì che questo venga raggiunto nel territorio della propria giurisdizione. Con il passaggio delle terre dalle cooperative agricole ai *fermer* l'assegnazione e l'utilizzo delle terre è decisa dai governatori distrettuali (*hokim*) e non più, come in precedenza, al livello locale dai *rais* dei kolchoz. Questo ha comportato l'uso da parte delle autorità locali del proprio potere a favore o a svantaggio dei singoli *fermer*, con piani di produzione più o meno onerosi. Infatti, i contratti d'usufrutto - a seconda dei vincoli e delle condizioni del lotto - possono essere una fonte di ricchezza o di rovina per un *fermer*. Similmente con quanto già accadeva in passato nel kolchoz, l'assegnazione delle terre conferisce alle autorità distrettuali notevoli poteri, genera corruzione e molta incertezza per gli agricoltori.

Nonostante la retorica di mercato, in un certo senso i *fermer* sono la continuazione del sistema del kolchoz: ereditano dai kolchoz l'onere di raggiungere la quota di produzione stabilita dal governo e, come fossero piccoli direttori di kolchoz, gli imprenditori agricoli devono oggi barcamenarsi tra burocrazie agricole che li controllano, li vincolano e, spesso, li ricattano. C'è però una sostanziale differenza: se durante il periodo sovietico le aziende di Stato accumulavano ingenti deficit e i *rais* potevano redistribuire risorse, oggi i *fermer* non possono né indebitarsi né redistribuire quel (poco) che hanno e, se non raggiungono la loro quota di produzione e vanno in perdita, perdono l'usufrutto delle terre, che ritornano allo Stato e da lì a un altro *fermer*. Insieme all'azienda agricola, dunque, i *fermer* possono perdere sia il loro capitale sia gli averi personali.

È chiaro quindi come le riforme agrarie post-socialiste abbiano fornito allo Stato uno strumento per 'spremere la ricchezza dalle campagne'. L'Indipendenza ha posto fine alla sovvenzione sovietica dell'agricoltura, e il settore cotoniero - col passaggio del centro di potere da Mosca a Tashkent - si è dovuto fare carico del peso di finanziare il nuovo Stato indipendente.

#### 4 Gli effetti della decollettivizzazione sulla società rurale

Abbiamo visto come la decollettivizzazione in Uzbekistan non sia stata una vera privatizzazione delle terre bensì una riorganizzazione dei vecchi kolchoz in neo-costituite imprese agricole a conduzione familiare. Solo un'esigua minoranza degli ex kolchoziani è potuta diventare *fermer*.

Già durante il periodo sovietico l'agricoltura in Uzbekistan era caratterizzata da una struttura doppia (Ilkhamov 2000): la quota maggiore di terra era destinata alle imprese agricole collettive e di Stato

(ed era utilizzata per la coltivazione delle colture pianificate come il cotone, e oggi anche il grano) mentre una piccolissima parte era invece assegnata direttamente alle famiglie kolchoziane, che potevano disporre per la propria sussistenza. Il kolchoziano percepiva quindi un salario dalla fattoria collettiva, partecipava ai raccolti della sua brigata di lavoro, coltivava l'orto privato e allevava il proprio bestiame. Seppur modificata dopo il socialismo, questa struttura è rimasta grosso modo invariata ma, a differenza di allora, oggi nei villaggi è pressoché scomparso il lavoro salariato delle fattorie collettive, sono scomparse le brigate di lavoro e le popolazioni rurali dipendono in misura maggiore dal ricavato dei loro orticelli (i cosiddetti 'subsidiary household plots' o, in uzbeko, *qo'shimcha tomorqa*, che nonostante siano stati ingranditi risultano del tutto insufficienti a coprire i bisogni delle famiglie). Il dato più rilevante è comunque l'estromissione della stragrande maggioranza degli ex kolchoziani dalle terre collettive passate ai *fermer*, senza che vi sia stata in cambio un'adeguata compensazione.

La decollettivizzazione non ha attuato una ripartizione equa della terra per famiglia ma ha, anzi, generato uno squilibrio tra chi è riuscito a ottenere un lotto in usufrutto e chi ne è rimasto escluso. Il villaggio di Xalqobod, un tempo sede dell'omonima fattoria collettiva, illustra questo processo in modo esemplare e rappresentativo.<sup>11</sup> Qui la decollettivizzazione è stata introdotta nel 2003. Il villaggio contava allora circa 10.000 abitanti suddivisi in 1.500 famiglie. Con la decollettivizzazione circa 1.900 ettari di terre irrigate sono stati trasferiti a 134 *fermer* e alle loro famiglie; le restanti famiglie hanno invece dovuto dividersi 200 ettari. La decollettivizzazione ha creato quindi un grande divario: il 90% delle terre è andato a meno del 10% delle famiglie di agricoltori, il 90% degli ex kolchoziani si è dovuto accontentare del restante 10% (Trevisani 2011, 135-6).

Gli stessi *fermer* sono un gruppo eterogeneo e stratificato. Il carattere piramidale della distribuzione delle terre è quindi ancora più accentuato. A Xalqobod, nel 2004 il 30% delle aziende agricole dei *fermer* aveva un'estensione inferiore a 5 ettari; le aziende agricole di medie dimensioni (ovvero con 20-40 ettari di terre irrigate) erano il 60%; il 10% era costituito da aziende con lotti più grandi di 40 ettari. La fattoria più grande, di circa 100 ettari, apparteneva all'ex *rais* del kolchoz.

Durante la mia ricerca ho potuto osservare come la maggior parte dei *fermer* con aziende agricole piccole vivevano in condizioni economiche non molto dissimili a quelle degli altri ex kolchoziani, mentre le aziende grandi permettevano ai loro proprietari di avere un teno-

<sup>11</sup> Le politiche di redistribuzione della terra collettiva sono state realizzate in modo uniforme in tutto il paese, pertanto l'esempio è indicativo del processo generale.

re di vita migliore rispetto a quello dell'epoca sovietica. In pratica, le aziende grandi furono assegnate alle stesse persone che in precedenza dirigevano le aziende collettive e di Stato (quadri medi e alti della burocrazia agricola cotoniera, con un'istruzione superiore e una lunga esperienza nella coltivazione del cotone). Nel periodo successivo alla mia ricerca sul campo, questo divario si è ulteriormente ampliato dopo una politica nazionale di 'consolidamento' dei *fermer*, consistente nella chiusura e nell'accorpamento delle aziende agricole più piccole, poiché giudicate non abbastanza redditizie e quindi prive di prospettive.<sup>12</sup>

D'altra parte, l'esempio della Corasmia insegna come la decollettivizzazione abbia rafforzato i valori patriarcali nella società. Questo perché, insieme alla crescente importanza della terra come fonte di sostentamento per la società rurale, i legami di parentela sono diventati indispensabili per assicurarsi accesso alla terra e al lavoro. Nella politica di riforma del governo, il *fermer* indirettamente si è fatto esecutore di questo rafforzamento dei valori patriarcali della società, poiché l'impresa agricola, per essere competitiva e non soccombere nel contesto dell'agricoltura decollettivizzata, deve poter contare sul coinvolgimento e l'appoggio della famiglia tradizionale allargata. Il lavoro agricolo ricade oggi più che in passato sulla manodopera femminile e su quella minorile, soprattutto durante la raccolta del cotone che - contrariamente a quanto succedeva durante l'epoca sovietica - viene esclusivamente effettuata a mano.<sup>13</sup>

Data l'inadeguatezza dei mezzi di sostentamento a disposizione di coloro che sono stati esclusi dalla terra, la decollettivizzazione ha rafforzato l'esodo rurale e ha peggiorato le condizioni di chi, per scelta o necessità, è rimasto nel villaggio. Buona parte della popolazione maschile in età lavorativa ha lasciato i villaggi in cerca di lavoro nell'agricoltura e nell'edilizia in Russia (Trevisani 2011). Sempre di più, l'economia del cotone in Uzbekistan si affida allo sfruttamento del lavoro della popolazione rurale rimasta nei villaggi, e alle rimesse dei migranti, che permettono a chi è rimasto nei villaggi di sopravvivere malgrado le condizioni difficili.

Come conseguenza della decollettivizzazione, la società rurale post-kolchoziana ha visto emergere nuovi tipi di conflittualità sociale.

Un primo tipo di conflitto riguarda la disparità tra *fermer* ed ex kolchoziani. Qui le tensioni riguardano l'accesso alla terra e le condizioni di lavoro degli ex kolchoziani sotto i *fermer* (essendo diminuite le possibilità di accesso e peggiorate le condizioni rispetto ai tempi

<sup>12</sup> Sulle politiche di 'consolidamento' delle aziende agricole private si veda Djani-bekov et al. 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Nonostante gli sforzi rivolti alla meccanizzazione della raccolta, anche in tempi sovietici la maggior parte del cotone veniva raccolto a mano. Tuttavia, con l'Indipendenza, la situazione è peggiorata ulteriormente. Le condizioni nei campi di cotone in Uzbekistan sono da molto tempo oggetto di critica e monitoraggio. Si veda per esempio Cannell 2007.

del kolchoz). In generale, la possibilità di sostentarsi con l'agricoltura - un tempo aperta a tutti - oggi appartiene solo ai *fermer*. Nel linguaggio ufficiale le famiglie degli ex kolchoziani sono denominate *dehqon*, un termine che ironicamente in origine designava il latifondista centroasiatico (Lambton 2012). I *dehqon* di oggi assistono invece impotenti alla propria marginalizzazione e alle nuove forme di sfruttamento senza mezzi efficaci per contrastarle.

Un secondo tipo di conflittualità riguarda invece i *fermer* nei loro rapporti con la burocrazia agricola locale. Qui il conflitto ruota intorno a fattori che determinano la redditività delle aziende: i contratti di usufrutto (*ijara*), l'accesso agli input e ai mercati, le possibilità di evitare il controllo delle autorità distrettuali e quindi di fare profitti aggirando il piano di produzione imposto. Le aziende agricole più grandi e redditizie sono ufficiosamente controllate, spesso tramite intermediari, dalle élite distrettuali. Contrariamente a quanto accadeva nel kolchoz, queste aziende spesso non sono propriamente figlie dei villaggi decollettivizzati ma sono rappresentate da uomini politici o d'affari che abitano in città, alti funzionari della burocrazia di Stato o degli apparati di sicurezza che utilizzano il proprio 'capitale burocratico' (Trevisani 2011, 204) per assicurarsi condizioni d'usufrutto redditizie e aggirare le norme che limitano i guadagni dei *fermer* ordinari. In questo contesto si assiste a una vera e propria corsa al guadagno illegale tra i *fermer*, che costringe le autorità del distretto a intervenire drasticamente per contenere l'erosione del piano di produzione del cotone.

Il caso studio presentato illustra come in Uzbekistan la decollettivizzazione abbia causato importanti trasformazioni sociali ed economiche. Col passaggio dal sistema del cotone sovietico a quello post-sovietico si passa dalla logica della redistribuzione propria dei *kolkhoz* a una nuova forma di competizione tra élite rurali che gira intorno ai profitti dell'agricoltura. Da una parte ci sono le forze centrifughe degli imprenditori locali che cercano occasioni di profitto, dall'altra le forze centripete delle autorità locali, che invece cercano di mantenere le nuove dinamiche sotto il loro controllo.

## 5 Il futuro dell'agricoltura in Uzbekistan dopo la presidenza di Islam Karimov

Sotto la presidenza quasi trentennale di Islam Karimov il settore cotoniero sovietico, pur riformato, è rimasto sostanzialmente integro, nonostante le critiche e lo scontento causato dall'adozione di misure restrittive e nonostante i sacrifici richiesti alle popolazioni rurali nel periodo post-socialista.

Le politiche agricole del primo decennio dell'Indipendenza hanno evitato che il sistema si sfaldasse, come invece succedeva laddo-

ve si è optato per privatizzazioni più rigorose, senza che queste però si traducessero in un miglioramento della produttività complessiva o delle condizioni per le popolazioni locali.<sup>14</sup> A quasi trent'anni dalla fine dell'URSS l'eredità del kolchoz è tuttora visibile. La decollettivizzazione ha tuttavia fatto emergere una nuova questione agraria, generata dalle nuove disuguaglianze tra élite rurali, impresari agricoli (*fermer*) ed ex kolchoziani (*dehqon*), e dalla loro competizione per l'utilizzo della terra. Col passaggio dal periodo sovietico al periodo post-sovietico lo Stato e i suoi amministratori hanno cambiato il loro atteggiamento nei confronti del mondo rurale, facendo proprio un approccio più palesemente 'estrattivo'. In conseguenza di ciò élite locali e *fermer* hanno perso l'appoggio delle loro comunità, che invece possedevano in passato, data la natura redistributiva del kolchoz.

Oggi, dopo il passaggio della presidenza a Shavkat Mirziyoyev, il ruolo del settore cotoniero per l'economia nazionale sta nuovamente cambiando e l'agricoltura si trova all'inizio di una nuova stagione politica che ha il potenziale di tradursi in un netto miglioramento per le popolazioni rurali. Se infatti gli anni '90 furono caratterizzati dalla necessità di attenuare gli effetti peggiori del crollo sovietico, inducendo il mondo agricolo a sobbarcarsi i costi dell'Indipendenza (con notevoli sacrifici per l'agricoltura e la popolazione rurale), oggi l'importanza complessiva dell'agricoltura per l'economia nazionale – come anche la quota dell'agricoltura del PIL nazionale – è in diminuzione e di conseguenza anche la pressione del governo sull'agricoltura. Con ciò si intravede l'inizio di una fase in cui potrebbero diminuire le ingerenze sui produttori locali da parte delle autorità, e si potrebbe giungere sia alla fine dell'imposizione delle quote di cotone e grano sia a una maggiore diversificazione delle coltivazioni.

Anche se la portata dei cambiamenti di questa nuova fase politica è ancora incerta, vi sono segnali incoraggianti per le imprese agricole emerse dalle riforme e sopravvissute alle politiche di consolidamento. Rimane da vedere se questo clima si tradurrà anche in un miglioramento per la maggioranza della popolazione rurale che, dopo la decollettivizzazione, è rimasta in sostanza tagliata fuori dall'agricoltura ex collettivizzata. Per i *dehqon* l'accesso ai terreni agricoli è stato un rimpiazzo per il welfare venuto meno nel periodo post-sovietico. Per quanto piccoli, i loro lotti rappresentano la base del sostentamento, seppur integrata dagli introiti di attività non agricole. Se in questa nuova fase politica ottimizzare l'agricoltura significherà continuare a puntare sui *fermer* a scapito del resto della popolazione rurale 'orfana' del kolchoz, l'agricoltura rischierà di ricadere negli stessi problemi. Affinché ciò non accada, occorrerà tenere in mente, e rimediare, agli strappi causati dalla fine del kolchoz.

<sup>14</sup> Si veda, per esempio, sul cotone nell'Azerbaijan post-sovietico: Yalcin-Heckmann 2010.

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# Status Seeking in the Steppe Taking Stock of Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy, 1992-2019

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**Abstract** In its 25 years of existence as an independent state, Kazakhstan has had to invent an entire foreign policy. The process was driven by multiple objectives, for a large part aimed at ensuring the success of the broader state-building project: the preservation of national sovereignty, political stability, economic growth, and taking on international responsibilities. This strategy, shaped at once by the nature of the political regime and the constraints of the regional system, was inspired by the convergence of economic, political, and geopolitical considerations. Taking stock of Kazakhstan's external action, this article finds unexpected correspondence with the key tenets of middle power doctrine, pointing to a widely unacknowledged reading of the country's external action.

**Keywords** Foreign policy. Middle power. Status. Kazakhstan. Authoritarianism. Developing country.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 What is a Middle Power? The Basic Elements of an Elusive Status. – 3 Nationalism: Positioning on the International Scene. – 4 Activism: A Responsible Actor of the International Community. – 5 Internationalism. – 6 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

Accounts of Kazakhstan's foreign policy often highlight its energy and dynamism: whether in relations with the great powers, the internationalization of the mineral sector, multilateral diplomacy, or other areas, culminating in the election to a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Though analysts have typically considered such kind of initiatives as disjointed episodes, they appear to reveal a common thread materializing a certain vision and planning. Tellingly, the 2006 strategic document *Kazakhstan 2050* – the updated version of the 1997 *Kazakhstan 2030* – aims to position the country among the fifty most competitive countries in the world (Nazarbayev 2006).

Together with a heavier foreign policy footprint, the country has also experienced the gradual amelioration of its economic indicators prior to a pronounced slowdown between 2014 and 2016. Kazakhstan had displayed an economic vitality buoyed by hydrocarbon exports, becoming the second largest economy in the CIS thanks to a GDP of more than \$230 billion in 2013. However, the drop in oil prices clipped that figure to \$137 billion in 2016 before it climbed again in 2017 reaching \$172.941 billion in 2018. In 2015, direct investment jumped by 80% in the hydrocarbons and by 30% in the agricultural sector (Orazgaliyeva 2016). That same year, the World Bank recognized Kazakhstan as a middle-income country thanks to a per capita GDP of \$10,500 (World Bank 2016). The World Economic Forum placed it 50<sup>th</sup> out of 144 countries in their *Global Competitiveness Ranking* (Tengri 2015), and WIPO ranked it number two in Central and Southern Asia in the *Global Innovation Index* (WIPO 2015). In 2014, Astana announced a 36% increase in its military budget, namely from \$2 to \$2.7 billion by 2017 (Gorenburg 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Growing rates of (relative) economic growth and military expenditures are standard indicators used to measure power trajectories (Organski & Kugler, 1980). Thus, taking stock of this pattern in light of the asserted intentions of the Kazakh government as reported above begs the question whether Kazakhstan can be considered an emerging power in its own right.

Albeit improving, the measurements reviewed above are hardly suggestive of a great power. Thus, the trajectory conceivable for Kazakhstan would be that of an emerging *middle* power, and even in this case there is reason for scepticism. For one thing, Kazakhstan is far from the trillion-dollar-plus league that *established* middle powers subscribe to in terms of annual GDP. Moreover, since the term's

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<sup>1</sup> The names Nur-Sultan and Astana are used interchangeably in this text to refer to the recently renamed capital of Kazakhstan.

appearance in the literature, scholars have seemed to imply that the presence of a democratic political regime was a constitutive attribute of a middle power. Yet, this assumption is challenged by the return of authoritarian great powers in the contemporary era (Gat 2007) and the growing place of “counter-norms” (Cooley 2017), which create a favourable environment for the reappearance of non-democratic middle powers too (Jordaan 2003, 165).

Though the question may seem surprising and even paradoxical, it is worth entertaining, as this could help better understand what a middle power represents, particularly at a time when established ones may appear to be under strain (see David; Roussel 1996-97; 1998).

While the strong role of the executive government and their reading of the international environment in steering the country’s more assertive foreign policy is fundamental, a host of domestic factors and motivations may be filtering such a conduct. For example it has been noted that authoritarian regimes may want to build their international profile in order to deflect pressures for democratization from the international community (Jourde 2007). Moreover, Kazakhstan watchers have suggested the foreign policy regime has sometimes used as a source of legitimation and authoritarian consolidation (Schatz 2006; Marat 2009; Matveeva, 2009; Schatz and Maltseva 2012; Del Sordi and Dalmaso 2018). On the other hand, the Government of Kazakhstan has also undertaken a robust developmental mission during the period here examined, which its leadership may have determined to require a corresponding foreign policy.

Whereas attempting to answer the question whether Kazakhstan can be considered a rising power may prove futile, this article examines to what extent does its foreign policy behavior conform with the middle power style. The goal, however, is not so much to determine the sources of such conduct; rather, it is taxonomic. Due caveats notwithstanding, if authoritarianism and middle powermanship are found to coexist in foreign policy behavior, such perspective can allow analysts to paint a more comprehensive portrait of Kazakhstan’s foreign affairs, and perhaps those of countries displaying similar characteristics.

The first section reviews some of the main contributions in order to distil a broad analytical framework highlighting the key attributes of a middle power, consisting of the concurrent and balanced pursuit of nationalism, activism and internationalism. In sections two, three and four I contrast these criteria against evidence of concrete policy. I conclude by nuancing the outlook for Kazakhstan as a potential middle power.

## 2 What is a Middle Power? The Basic Elements of an Elusive Status

Although some trace back its origins to the middle ages (Holbraad 1984, 42), the term middle power made its appearance in mid-century Canada, in the course of the debate on the country's role in the postwar world order. At a time when the San Francisco conference was discussing the institutionalization of a great power club (the P5), Prime Minister Mackenzie King declared Canada a middle power, determined to preserve an influence commensurate with the role played in the war.

As with other similar constructs, its origins in the policy realm gave the term its successive ambiguity as a concept: its meaning being often conveyed with the aid of clichés such as possessing the ability to “punch above one's weight”, being a “good international citizen” or what not.

As is commonly highlighted, an underlying political choice by the national élites of the country in question is a preliminary requirement (Ravenhill 1998, 320; Ungerer 2007, 539). A choice that can have a multitude of origins: be it ideology, identity, national role conception, leaders' personality, or a given configuration of the interests of the dominant socio-economic groups (Ungerer 2007, 540; Jordaan 2003: 166). In this light, middle power comes down to a foreign policy doctrine, or a “grand construct” (Painchaud 1966, 29). In other words, it represents first and foremost a political symbol, only subsequently becoming an explanatory concept (David; Roussel 1996-7: 43).

Provided we have a valid working definition, the concept can be used to make sense of the foreign policy of an entire class of actors. Although hierarchical, behavioral, or functional definitions can be found (Chapnick 1999, 73); in practice, the three benchmarks overlap, each merely capturing a single facet of the phenomenon. The literature broadly understands that middle ranking economic, military and diplomatic capacities can predict the broad type of foreign policy behavior a country will display. Thus, a middle power denotes a “state whose *resources* are not comparable to those of the great powers, but which are able nevertheless to *exert* significant international influence”.

Just like great power status implies recognition by the international community (Larson, Paul and Wohlforth 2014), so does the status of middle power. This imposes the need for leaders to stand certain trials as they strive to connect their strategic vision to a series of tactical choices. Therefore, adequate *behavior*, whether in one or more policy areas (i.e. the *functional* aspect) or across the board, is what helps translate the *hierarchical* element of capabilities into status. In this light, it can be useful to think of the notion of middle power as a *role*. The latter term ties the part one plays to the broader script from which it acquires meaning. That script being the strategic vision of political élites and the stage, the international system. In this meta-

phor, the international community represents the audience making the final call about a country's status claims.

The literature emphasizes particular behaviors, which, exhibited in a combined, systematic and recurrent manner, denote a middle power. Such behaviors include the "adoption of policies directed to favor international system stability, a tendency toward specialization, the implementation of mediation policies... and, lastly, a pronounced engagement in multilateral institutions" (David; Roussel 1996/1997, 44). This resonates with Robert Cox's argument according to which some of the main characteristics of a middle power are: "an ability to keep a distance from major conflicts, a degree of autonomy from the major powers, a dedication to international stability, and a commitment to gradual world change" (1989, 827). In a similar vein, Holbraad (1984, 25) saw four roles of middle powers: balancers of the state system, mediators between two opposing states, bridges between rich and poor states, and promoters of international understanding across culturally different states. Conversely, Ungerer (2007, 542-3) reduced the middle power "policy style" to the adherence to just three key principles: nationalism, activism and internationalism. Because these three concepts actually subsume all of the salient behaviors found in the literature, this contribution is fruitful for building a practical analytical framework as is the one developed below.

<b>Nationalism</b>	<b>Activism</b>	<b>Internationalism</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sovereignty and Independence</li> <li>• Diversification</li> <li>• Prestige</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership and Sectoral diplomacy</li> <li>• Problem-solving &amp; Mediation</li> <li>• Dialogue and Understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multilateralism and Regionalism</li> <li>• International law</li> <li>• Status quo and Enforcement of collective security norms</li> </ul>
Summary of middle power attributes		

## Nationalism

Expressing a perspective that would later find wider support, Glazebrook (1947, 308) considered the choice to pursue middle power status as the reflection of a prior will to eschew great power control. A middle power possesses a greater capacity to attain its interests, to make autonomous decisions and to "maintain overall independence in the affairs of the state" (McInnis 1960). Such a posture implies a "rational strategic behavior" (Ungerer 2007, 540) dictating a degree of equidistance vis-à-vis the extant power poles, and the pursuit of an "all-azimuth" foreign policy in a logic of diversification (see Contessi 2015). Such attitude underscores a perspective on "the international environment as a source of opportunities for action rather than

strictly a source of constraints” (Mace; Belanger 1997, 166). This is why, from the beginning, the middle power research program developed within the realist school (Chapnik 2000).

The nationalism pillar also suggests a concern for national prestige and the cultivation of the national brand as a means to increase status.

## Activism

Middle powers pride themselves as being “good citizens of the international community” and stakeholders in the maintenance of international order, showing keenness to take responsibilities. However, they typically lack the material resources sufficient to autonomously affect the systemic trends of international politics. Nonetheless, they can often count on a competent and relatively large foreign service, allowing them to support major diplomatic initiatives. Thanks to adequate resources and initiative, they can afford to promote an activist foreign policy and “contribute” to steering and occasionally arbitrating some of those international processes. Thus, middle powers have tended to interpret their position as problem-solvers, for example as mediators, catalyzers or intermediaries (Ungerer 2007, 541), by promoting dialogue and understanding, or by seeking leadership positions within *issue-areas* or international organizations.

## Internationalism

Because they acquire their status from an international or regional system in which they are but “minority shareholders”, middle powers tend to act as backers of the status quo and its principal institutions.

First, this takes the shape of a strong diplomatic engagement within multilateral organizations. The latter offer unparalleled visibility and “voice opportunities” for a middling state (Grieco 1996), which can benefit from such a platform to protect their interests, spread their message or achieve other goals.

Second, middle powers tend to act as advocates for international law, which they regard as a guarantee of stability and predictability (Ungerer 2007, 539). The latter allows them to safeguard their interests, preserve their independence especially vis-à-vis the great powers. This propensity for multilateralism in a multitude of functional regimes often takes a regional scope and sees them as catalysts for integration projects (Wood 1988, 19).

Third, middle power internationalism can find expression in the participation in international efforts aimed at enforcing norms of collective security, which allows them to contribute to the maintenance of international order within reasonable costs.



### 3 Nationalism: Positioning on the International Scene

The first component of the nationalist pillar in Kazakhstan's foreign policy is the so-called "multivector diplomacy": a term whose coinage is attributed to Nazarbayev himself (Hanks 2009, 257). Over the years, this approach has taken the meaning at once of an "organizing principle" in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, and of a "powerful domestic political symbol" of Kazakhstan's recent national independence (Clarke 2015). But more aptly, it has come to describe an approach to statecraft driven by the search for "strategic dividends" (Aris 2010; Indeo 2010), through the "diversification" of partnerships enabling the regime in power to pursue both national interest and political survival, while eschewing great power control (Contessi 2015). This represents not only a response to the concern for preserving sovereignty and independence vis-à-vis the great powers, but also to the requirements of economic development. Hence, Kazakhstan has been able to knit equally deep and strategic relationships with all of the major power poles extracting considerable political and economic benefits. While Russia, China, the EU and Turkey are the traditional "vectors" of this policy, Asian (Contessi 2016) and Gulf (Anceschi 2014; Savicheva and Shaar 2014) countries are also increasingly represented.

Despite occasional frictions and a wish for emancipation from its former metropole, Russia remains Kazakhstan's foremost partner. The two countries have one of the deepest bilateral relationships, supported by a net of about 300 treaties and agreements (Chufrin 2008). A multitude of action plans in disparate areas completes the legal framework, such as the current Economic Cooperation Program 2012-2020. Their relationship spans aerospace - mainly around the joint use of the Baikonur spaceport - the use and protection of the Caspian Sea, electric power, hydrocarbons and their transportation, as well as nuclear industries; not to mention a very close military partnership. Kazakhstan is Russia's *de facto* number two in the Collective Security Treaty Organization and in the CIS joint air defense system, and plays a key role in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) launched in 2015, in the economic field. The two countries are also cofounders of the CIS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Kazakhstan's other major partner is China. Their relations began in 1992 when the two needed to demarcate their frontiers following the dissolution of the USSR, resulting in a border agreement two years later. Their partnership has since been broadened to include a great variety of sectors leading to China becoming Kazakhstan's largest trading partner. The agreement for a pipeline between the two countries was made in 1997. Built by China National Petroleum Corporation and KazMunayGas, the pipeline went into function in 2006,

and Chinese interests now control about 25% of Kazakh reserves. Another sector is the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, notably in the framework of the SCO. But the two have also established strong synergies in the area of economic development, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative, in which the Central Asian country plays a primary role. It was during his 2013 visit to Astana that Chinese president Xi Jinping announced his signature project.

Kazakhstan has strong relations with the European Union (EU) likewise dating to the early 1990s. Since the adoption of the 2007 EU Central Asia Strategy, relations have focused on the key sectors of trade and investment, development aid, and energy and transport – notably through initiatives like TRACECA and INOGATE respectively. Taken together, the EU is one of Kazakhstan’s main trading partners, and in 2014 was its first client, attracting 36% of its exports (93% of which in the hydrocarbon sector). At the same time, the EU is its third source of imports (19%), and the first for FDI with 50% of investments (European Union 2015). Many European companies own large stakes in Caspian oil and gas, including ENI and BP. With the adoption of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 2015 and the EU’s new Central Asia Strategy in 2019, the relationship appears destined to enter a new phase.

Turkey is another relationship Astana has developed, partly in the context of the wider rediscovery of its Turkic identity. The shared Turkic roots are its glue, and have also favored the opening in the country of several Turkish educational institutions, both secondary and post-secondary. Overall, the two countries have built a dynamic relationship in the political, cultural, economic, humanitarian and defense sectors, leading to the signing in 2009 of a Strategic Partnership Agreement, and to a succession of joint economic programs. The two countries jointly promote the Turkic Council and coordinate their reciprocal positions within multilateral bodies. Turkey supported Kazakhstan in the selection to host the 2017 Expo and in the election to the UN Security Council (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). All that being said, the common identity has not always born the expected fruits (Sasley 2012).

The second component is the promotion of the national brand. Since the creation in 2007 of a Department for International Information within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kazakhstan has undertaken plenty of initiatives aimed at presenting the country in a positive light, underscoring its identity as a crossroad of civilizations and as the “Heart of Eurasia”. Event diplomacy, for instance with the hosting of the 2011 Asian Winter Games or the 2017 Winter Universiade and International Expo, as well as other more minor events; or the fielding of professional teams competing in international sports tournaments serve the same goal. Behind the obsessive image-consciousness is not merely the concern with offering a positive interpretation

of the country for global audiences following the embarrassment perceived from the blockbuster film *Borat* (Stock 2009), but also that of promoting Kazakhstan on international markets and in foreign capitals. Moreover, the image and symbols propagated for international consumption also serve the indirect purpose of promoting the regime and especially the former president, with internal audiences, thanks to campaigns designed to explain his goals and achievements (Marat 2009; Matveeva 2009).

Sovereignty and Independence	Diversification	Prestige
“Multivector diplomacy”	“Multivector diplomacy”	Nation branding
Nationalism in Kazakhstan’s foreign policy		

In sum, the nationalist prong in Kazakhstan’s foreign policy is visible in its trademark multivector diplomacy, embodying its own approach to diversification. The latter represents a calculated choice driven by the objective of preserving equidistance from the main powers while maintaining sovereignty and independence in the Eurasian geopolitical context where the country is enmeshed, sandwiched between some of the leading contemporary great powers. The cultivation of national prestige also adheres to the nationalist component because it contributes to elevate the country’s status in the eyes of foreign leaders and improve Kazakhstan’.

#### 4 Activism: A Responsible Actor of the International Community

Kazakhstan has consistently striven to play a constructive role in an effort to affirm a reputation as a reliable partner of the international community. Rather than promoting liberal values, however, Astana has sought to do this primarily by touting the universal validity of some of its contextual experiences, for example putting forward the complex nature of its multiethnic and multi-confessional social mosaic; the country’s position at the crossroads of civilizations; or even its past as a former nuclear testing ground. Drawing on such experiences, Kazakhstan poses as honest broker in mediation and conflict resolution, as an intermediary for the dialogue between cultures and religions, and as leader in and advocate for denuclearization.

As a mediator at the service of international peace and security, Astana has played an active role in many files. For example, Astana has facilitated the reconciliation between Russia and Turkey following the downing by the Turkish air force, in November 2015, of a Russian bomber in action over the border between Turkey and Syria. The role

played by Nazarbayev in the rapprochement is amply recognized (Putz 2016; Daly 2016), with the attribution to the latter of the good offices which led to the Turkish president's August 2016 visit to Saint Petersburg. It's been reported that Nazarbayev would have himself suggested the wording for the letter Erdogan sent to Putin (Astana Times 2016).

Kazakhstan also played a part in the negotiations that led to the Iranian nuclear deal, hosting in Almaty two rounds of talks between Iran and the P5+1 (China, United States, France, United Kingdom, Russia, and Germany). Though the final accord rested on a collective endeavor, Kazakhstan was able to project an image as a mediator, facilitating the eventual adoption of the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (Fitch & Norman 2015), from which the U.S. subsequently withdrew. The latter foresaw, among other things, that, under the supervision of the P5+1, the UN and the IAEA, Kazakhstan supply the natural uranium for Iran's civilian nuclear programme. This condition served to secure Teheran's consent to the transferring its enriched uranium to Russia for it to be disposed (Astana Times 2016).

President Nazarbayev then declared his willingness to act as a mediator in the Ukraine crisis, notably thanks to its good relations both in Moscow and Kiev (RFE/RL 2014). However, little has followed from this initial overture, which some saw more as a signal of Astana's autonomy from Russia intended for Western audiences, rather than as a real desire to intercede (Malaschenko 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, Kazakhstan has hosted the peace talks on Syria in the format of the Astana Process bringing together Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

In connection with international dialogue and understanding, the city of Astana has been the stage, since 2003, of the Congress of World Religions. This forum was inaugurated by president Nazarbayev, who had a dedicated "Peace Palace" built for the purpose, as a way of promoting interreligious tolerance following 9/11. Analogous initiatives have been undertaken within multilateral organizations like the OIC and the UN. What is more, Astana militates for causes such as the Universal prohibition against the deployment of weapons of mass destruction in outer space, on the ocean floor, in high seas, and in the Arctic; for the adoption of an International instrument on the prohibition of the use of new scientific discoveries for weapons of mass destruction. The Kazakhstani élan was further displayed in the *Peace in the 21st Century Manifesto*, aimed to bring stability in the international system by eliminating the root causes of conflicts.

With regards to leadership and sectoral diplomacy, Kazakhstan has been a champion for non-proliferation since the early 1990s: a

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<sup>2</sup> One cannot discard the possibility that such a position may have been suggested by calculations linked to the bid for a non permanent seat in the Security Council that Kazakhstan was engaged in at that time.

principled position justified with reference to the utilization of the country's territory as a nuclear testing ground for the USSR.<sup>3</sup> Having inherited some 1,410 nuclear warheads, independent Kazakhstan became a de facto nuclear power. However, by acceding to the non-proliferation regime, it committed to its own gradual denuclearization. Kazakhstan played this card skillfully to accredit itself as a responsible stakeholder and to knit a strategic relationship with the United States (US) (Socor, Weitz and Witt 2016).

In 1991, Kazakhstan signed the Alma-Ata Declaration on strategic forces with his counterparts from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. The latter decided the supervision mechanism for the nuclear arsenal of the former USSR extending its obligations in the reduction of strategic offensive weapons. Then, with the adoption of the 1992 Lisbon Protocol, Kazakhstan acceded to the Non-proliferation Treaty and accepted to transfer the inherited warheads to Russia. It became, in this way, also a party to the *Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty* between the Soviet Union and the US (START).<sup>4</sup> Once completed the repatriation of its nuclear stock to Russia in April 1995, Kazakhstan acceded, in 2002, to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and to the Nuclear Suppliers Group becoming the world's largest uranium exporter by 2011. Astana then signed the Additional Protocol of the IAEA in February 2004 subsequently joining the Proliferation Security Initiative.

Astana has likewise propelled several diplomatic initiatives in this field. In March 2009, it was instrumental to the establishment of the Nuclear Weapons-free Zone in Central Asia, following the ratification of the 2006 Semipalatinsk Treaty signed with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. That treaty was complemented in 2014 by a Protocol signed by United Kingdom, US, France, China, and Russia, and committing them not to use nuclear weapons against the zone's five members. It also militates for the establishment of a Nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East.

Lastly, in 2010, Astana offered to host the IAEA Light Enriched Uranium (LEU) bank, resulting in the *Host State Agreement* eventually being signed in 2015. The facility was opened in August 2017 within the Ulba metallurgical complex in Öskemen, where it is managed by Kazakhstan according to its national rules and regulations but under IAEA supervision. The bank holds a 90 metric tons reserve

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<sup>3</sup> This refers to the eastern oblast of Semipalatinsk used between 1949 and 29 August 1991. In 2009, the UN General Assembly declared that date the international day against nuclear tests.

<sup>4</sup> The United States, United Kingdom and Russia signed the *Memorandum of Security Assurances* at the OSCE Summit in Budapest of 5 December 1994 in return for Kazakhstan's accession to the NPT as a denuclearized state. China and France subsequently also provided guarantees.

allowing it to act as a supplier of last resort that member states can access when their regular supply chains are disrupted (IAEA 2017). This mechanism introduces a further safeguard against proliferation removing the need for countries with civilian nuclear industries to develop enrichment capabilities (IAEA 2015).

<b>Problem-solving and Mediation</b>	<b>Dialogue and Understanding</b>	<b>Leadership &amp; Sectoral diplomacy</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Iranian Nuclear Deal</li> <li>• Russia-Turkey relations</li> <li>• Astana Process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congress of World Religions</li> <li>• Prohibition of Weapons of Mass Destruction</li> <li>• Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Manifesto</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denuclearization and Non proliferation</li> <li>• Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Central Asia</li> <li>• IAEA LEU Bank</li> </ul>

Activism in Kazakhstan's foreign policy

In sum, the activist prong in Kazakhstan's foreign policy is an articulated set of measures that take three further facets. In regards to problem-solving and mediation, Nur-Sultan was involved in the Iranian nuclear deal, and played a critical role in facilitating the reconciliation between Russia and Turkey, which was followed by a significant role in the Syrian peace process as the host and facilitator of the Astana Process.

In regards to the promotion of dialogue and understanding, the country is a regular advocate for such principles, as highlighted by initiatives like the Congress of World Religions, the Peace in the 21st Century Manifesto, or the backing given to a draft UNGA Resolution on the Prohibition of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Lastly, Kazakhstan has consistently exercised leadership and advocacy in a key issue area like denuclearization. This is witnessed by the country's role in the non-proliferation regime, in the establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Central Asia and the creation on its territory of a LEU Bank under the auspices of the IAEA.

## **5 Internationalism**

Nur-Sultan is not only member of numerous international organizations, but has also successfully bidden to secure leadership positions in some of these. The foreign policy concept 2014-2020 identifies multilateral diplomacy as a major priority, and Kazakhstan actively participates in regional and global organizations, and has even founded one in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA).

The country is a member of the United Nations since 1992 sitting on two of its regional commissions (UNECE and UNESCAP). Moreover, the country has sat on the executive boards of UNICEF, UNESCO, and UNWomen, and been a member of ECOSOC and the Human Rights Council. In the period 2017–2018, Astana was a member of the Security Council. In this role, it sought to contribute to efforts to reinforce regional and global security while advancing its interests through decision-making, the promotion of initiatives, and UN cooperation with regional organisations (KazISS 2016). Stressing the themes of food, water, energy, and nuclear security, the electoral campaign contributed to reinforcing the country's diplomatic muscle. New embassies were opened in Brazil, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Mexico, South Africa, and Sweden; several special envoys were appointed; and the Permanent Mission in New York was reinforced with extra personnel and the appointment as permanent representative of the person who had served as permanent representative to the OSCE before and during Kazakhstan's chairmanship: Kairat Abdrakhmanov, subsequently promoted to Minister of foreign affairs between 2016 and 2018.

This exploit followed the one Kazakhstan obtained within the OSCE, another important platform for its international policy. The country acceded the organization in 1992, becoming in 2010 the first post-soviet state to hold its rotating chairmanship. Whereas the early steps in this direction date back to 2004, Astana's efforts were only rewarded three years later. The opposition of the United Kingdom, US, France, and several NGOs, who opposed the idea of an authoritarian government heading an organization whose mandate includes human rights, caused a one-year lag in the election initially anticipated for 2009. The additional year was meant to allow the adoption of reforms in the fields of media freedom, elections and local governance.<sup>5</sup> During its term, Astana attempted, with little success, to solve the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus and put forward some other initiatives. For example, it tried to improve the organization's "incident prevention capacities" to better respond to regional conflicts (OSCE Chairmanship 2010). It also worked to develop the OSCE's engagement with Afghanistan, as well as in the 2010 Kyrgyzstan crisis. Moreover, Kazakhstan pushed to revamp the organization into a strategic forum for dialogue between euro-Atlantic and euro-Asian worlds, such as conveyed in the Astana Commemorative Declaration (Contessi 2010).

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**5** By virtue of this compromise Kazakhstan approved a series of reforms affecting media, elections, the registration of political parties, religious freedom, the representation of national minorities and human rights (Engvall; Cornell 2015). However, most of them have since been reversed.

Another example is the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which Kazakhstan joined in 1995. Though Astana only contributes 1% of the organization's budget, it played an energetic role during its 2011-12 chairmanship. The organization saw a total of 40 events, including ten ministerial meetings. As underscored in the Astana Declaration, Kazakhstan also promoted dialogue with the West and the opening of the Islamic world to modernity (Akhmet 2012),<sup>6</sup> and greater prominence for the Central Asian countries, as reflected in the adopted *Plan of Action for Cooperation with Central Asia* (Akorda 2017). Kazakhstan wrapped up its chairmanship in 2012 with the proposal for an Islamic Food Security Organization, whose charter was signed and adopted the following year by 19 countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). Its headquarters were opened in Astana in October 2018.

Kazakhstan is also active in the Turkic Council, bringing together the Turkic-speaking countries of Anatolia, the Caucasus and Central Asia,<sup>7</sup> as the umbrella organization for a family of agencies active in the spheres of culture, scholarship, parliamentary cooperation and business. While these various entities were created over the years at Turkey's initiative, the Council itself, founded with the 2009 Nakhichevan Treaty, was actually strongly wanted by the former Kazakh president. Kazakhstan, which hosts the Turkic Academy, has also lobbied to widen the scope of cooperation, with the inclusion of tourism, media and information, also advocating the creation of a common satellite channel (Engvall; Cornell 2015, 22).

But the most salient example of Kazakhstan's multilateralism is probably the CICA. This little-known organization headquartered in Astana is actually the embodiment of a personal initiative of former president Nazarbayev. His dream in 1992 was to create a dialogue and security mechanism for Asia modelled on the OSCE. However, the organization has never been very active, as demonstrated by its modest impact and low productivity in terms of concrete measures. Its first meeting was only held in 1996, when its 15 members' deputy-ministers of foreign affairs met in Almaty. Three years later, the first ministerial meeting adopted the *Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between CICA member states*. This was followed, in 2002 by the Almaty Summit - its very first - which adopted the Charter. In 2014, Nazarbayev used the fourth summit in Shanghai to call for the CICA's revamping into the Organization for Security and Development in Asia, which however has yet to see the day.

The second facet of Nur-Sultan's internationalism is support for the status quo and for the enforcement of collective security norms. On one hand, it allows it to lend support for an international system

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the organization gave itself a Special Commission on Human Rights.

<sup>7</sup> Its members are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey.



premised on international law and the letter of the UN Charter. The country's 2014-2020 foreign policy concept assigns to the United Nations a central place in the international system as the coordination node of an "equitable and democratic" international order.

On the other hand, the country has taken a role, albeit modest, in peacekeeping. In 2013, the Majilis - the country's lower house - passed a law permitting the deployment of some 20 military personnel to UN missions in Haiti, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Western Sahara. To increase its contribution, the country's Ministry of defense is studying the possibility of sending contingents of up to 150 soldiers at a time, and working with the Majilis to table a law clarifying rules of engagement in combat and peacekeeping operations.

The third facet is integration into the global economy and the world trading system. Various initiatives adhere to this goal, such as the accession to the World Trade Organization and membership in the EAEU, both in 2015. The idea for the EAEU was actually put forth by Nazarbayev himself in a speech given in Moscow in the distant 1994. EAEU is a customs union and free trade area whose other members are Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Although accession determined an initial loss of competitiveness due to the new customs duties modelled on Russia's, Kazakhstan has seen intra-bloc exports grow in successive years. Furthermore, Nur-Sultan is turning the country into a transit centre for intercontinental trade along the East-West and North-South routes. Massive investments have gone into roads and railways as well as ports and Special Economic Zones to expand intermodal connectivity (Contessi 2018). The opening of the Astana International Financial Centre in 2016 was another significant step designed to position the country as a regional hub for the global financial system and develop the national service industries (Chakabarti 2016).

<b>Multilateralism &amp; Regionalism</b>	<b>Status quo and Enforcement of collective security norms</b>	<b>Globalization</b>
UN	International Law	WTO accession
OSCE	Peacekeeping	EAEU
OIC		AIFC
Turkic Council		International connectivity
CICA		

Internationalism in Kazakhstan's foreign policy.

Lastly, Kazakhstan has been taking steps to integrate into the global economy, by joining both global (WTO) and regional (EAEU) free trade agreements and by positioning itself as a hub for global finance and logistics, respectively through the creation of the Astana International Financial Center and by joining multiple transport corridors.

In sum, the internationalist prong in Kazakhstan's foreign policy has three facets. In regards to multilateralism and regionalism, Nur-Sultan is an active member of the UN, having served on the governing bodies of several UN agencies and sitting on the Security Council for the 2017-18 term. Kazakhstan's engagement with multilateralism is mirrored at the regional level in the country's role in the OSCE, the OIC, the SCO, the Turkic Council and the CICA.

In regards to support for the status quo and enforcement of collective security norms, Nur-Sultan is a strong supporter of international law as premised in the letter of the UN Charter and other entrenched and consensual principles. Moreover, Nur-Sultan has been exploring the role of military contributor to UN peacekeeping operations to enforce collective security norms.

## 6 Conclusion

Although it is unusual to apply the middle power framework to an authoritarian developing country, the foregoing reveals the unexpected adherence of Kazakhstan's external policy to the doctrine's main tenets.

The nationalist element is perhaps the most recognizable. Kazakhstan's efforts to maintain its sovereignty and independence, primarily, through diversification is one of the country's foreign policy hallmarks. Though some analysts thought that the return of great power competition in the mid 2010's would undermine the viability of diversification (Clarke 2015; Noonan 2016; Roberts 2015; Standish 2014), this point of view excessively discounted the approach's structural roots. Since the outset of geopolitical turbulence, Kazakhstan's diversification efforts have - if anything - ticked up, resulting in rekindled and enhanced strategic partnerships with all key partners. Conversely, its branding efforts are generally well received, although the authoritarian and personal nature of the regime has been somewhat of a handicap at least with Western audiences.

As far as activism, Astana has shown the undisputed ability to find a seat at prestigious tables. However, Astana's ability to act as a mediator is limited by the means and the scope of its diplomatic network, and this notwithstanding the opening of new embassies in recent years. At most, Astana can provide a platform and facilitate dialogue, perhaps as part of efforts concerted with other partners (Tengri 2015).

As to internationalism, Astana's support for multilateralism has earned it the chairmanship of several international organizations and election to the UN Security Council. However, Astana's impact has been somewhat constrained by its ability to place items related to its priorities on the agenda. Whereas action in support of international law is harder to pin down, Kazakhstan has effectively been

able to fill a niche in the global economy as a significant player in energy, logistics, and trade. Commercial, financial and infrastructural indicators are usually positive.

Because advancing a middle power agenda requires support and cooperation from the international community, Nur-Sultan achievements denote a degree of recognition in spite of its authoritarian character. Perhaps its ability to interpret a possible dialogue between East and West has persuaded international stakeholders on both sides. Nonetheless, this does not in and of itself make of Kazakhstan a full-fledged middle power.

The country faces challenges, especially as it undergoes an engineered but slow political transition. The project was closely associated with the paternalistic figure of former president Nazarbayev and whether his successor(s) – for the time being Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – will have the skills and the vision to stay the course remains to be seen. Moreover, the state apparatus was fundamentally tributary to the former president's will and charisma, and its ability and discipline to further that project is unknown, though Nazarbayev remains behind the scenes influence even in retirement.

Second, whereas attempts to use foreign policy for domestic goals are frequent, the country's resources are limited and must often be redirected to face domestic needs. Although the look of cities like Almaty and Nur-Sultan may give it away, the recognition as a middle-income country does not entail the end of the country's socio-economic challenges. Notwithstanding the rapid development, the World Bank finds that Kazakhstan's economy remains dependent on extractive industries, and has weak agricultural, environmental and service sectors.

Third, governance remains sclerotic and bureaucratic in both the public and private sectors, sometimes posing an obstacle to the achievement of the very objectives the regime sets for itself. Evidently, its authoritarian nature both enables and restricts the country's ability to fully achieve its goals.

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# Foreign Policy Challenges for a Post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan

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**Abstract** After almost 30 years of rule by Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan is going through a sensitive phase of power transition. Since the "multi-vector" diplomacy of these years represents one of the best legacies of the first President, policy-makers would leave as untouched as possible the sphere of foreign policy. At the same time, a crisis of legitimacy following the Presidential elections together with a number of trends which are changing the social and ethno-demographic structure of the population will also put into question some traditional lines of the country's diplomacy. This will add to the challenges to which the political class will have to provide innovative responses in order to preserve the stability of the country.

**Keywords** Kazakhstan. Power transition. Nationalism. International relations. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). U.S. Policies in Central Asia.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: Overall Factors to influence Tokayev's Decision Making. – 2 Russia: Set to Remain the Main Partner on the Basis of a Common Vision but with Increasing Strain. – 3 Chinese Challenges. – 4 Kazakhstan and the "West". – 5 The "New" Uzbekistan and the Central Asian Dimension. – 6 Perspectives for Maintaining Kazakhstan's Role as a Global Mediator. – 7 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction: Overall Factors to influence Tokayev's Decision Making

The situation in the country has changed, as it has the situation around the world. We have become the object of influence of international turbulent processes. Kazakhstan, being a part of the world community, feels on itself what is happening outside its borders. We must be together to work for the future of Kazakhstan.

Message released by Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev after his election to the Presidency.<sup>1</sup>

In his much anticipated but still surprising decision to start the process of power transition from his thirty-years rule, Nursultan Nazarbayev made the choice of his successor with an eye on the implications for Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Apart from a loyal member of the establishment, Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev is known to be the best national diplomat. He knows from inside the principal international institutions and mechanisms and has been together with Nazarbayev the craftsman of Kazakhstan's successful multi-vector diplomacy. As a former Premier, Foreign Minister and Director General at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Tokayev is well known and respected in China, Russia, Europe and the United States and can accordingly reassure all the external partners that have a stake in the definition of Kazakhstan's international standing. At the core of his mission there is prolonging the **flexible posture** that has so far distinguished the country in order to continue to reap the economic benefits stemming from its extended web of relations.

At the same time, even for a specialist as Tokayev, it will be difficult to navigate through a transition that is taking place in a worsening regional background, where the mentioned powers are increasingly following mutually exclusive approaches in a climate of confrontation.

The way things went on the internal political scene in the initial phase of the transition will add complications. First, Tokayev took the quite awkward decisions to rename the capital as Nur-Sultan (after Nazarbayev's name) in honour of his predecessor. This, thwarting expectations for social and political reforms, contributed to provoke widespread protests across the country during the electoral process which brought to the formal investiture of the new President on 9 June. The unrest was exacerbated by the presence of an opposition candidate, Amirzhan Kossanov, who was widely assumed to run under a covert agreement with the establishment, according to a practice of manipulation of the oppositions which is traditional in the Kazakhstani model of "managed democracy". In addition, the way the **Akorda** (the presidential office) reacted to the protests, arresting



hundreds of manifestants, provoked strong reactions from the side of Western human rights watchdogs, including the EU Parliament.<sup>2</sup> The elections also received unusual criticism from the OSCE observers (as “tarnished by clear violations of fundamental freedoms”) while Tokayev got a score (70%) that even if dominant was well inferior to the performance of his predecessor.

As a result, the transition has revealed a number of gaps and fault lines in the system of power as it emerged over three decades of centralised rule and Tokayev will have to work in order to overcome a certain **crisis of legitimacy** of the State power. This is complicated by the unusual situation of double power that currently characterise the establishment. With the title of Elbasy, “leader of the nation”, the latter continues indeed to manage changes from behind the scenes as the lifetime chairman of the Security Council, an organ recently restructured to wield significant power in domestic affairs, notably in controlling security structures,<sup>3</sup> and head of the ruling majoritarian “party of power”, Nur Otan. This situation represents an anomaly in a system which was previously used to function on a rigid vertical line of command (Kz.expert 2019). There, Nazarbayev was able to enforce discipline over manifold groups of power formed either around influent members of its inner circle or expressing existing regional and ethnic segmentations of the vast country. Now, the existence of a double line of command, one under an aging man, the other under his successor who is known for being a restrained and prudent decision maker, may tempt the different **groups of power** to manoeuvre to increase their relative position. It is not excluded that in doing this, some of these groups will search for the support of one the external players in order to reinforce their positions vis-à-vis of rivals referring to opposite external players. The period in review presented an episode that according to some national observers could be considered in this light. In contemporary with the start of the transition, one of the most reputed and respected national experts of China, **Konstantin Syroezhkin**, was arrested on charges of espionage (Abdykadyrova 2019). The episode was shadowy since Syroezhkin, who is well known to be close to Tokayev, possibly acting as his unofficial adviser, was detained in quite unusual circumstanc-

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<sup>2</sup> See: *Human rights situation in Kazakhstan European Parliament resolution of 14 March 2019 on the human rights situation in Kazakhstan (2019/2610(RSP))*, URL [http://europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0203\\_EN.html](http://europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0203_EN.html) (2019-11-21).

<sup>3</sup> Amendments to the Constitution of Kazakhstan introduced in 2017 provided for the transformation of the National Security Council from a consultative organ into a constitutional body. The lifelong Chairman has discretionary powers to instruct and delegate the government as well as the President in all “important issues”. Within this framework the authorities of the President were also reduced and redistributed between different branches of the government.

es, literally disappearing without official explanations for weeks. The operation was conducted by the intelligence service, the National Security Committee (KNB), a structure which, traditionally, serves as a platform for close relatives of Nazarbayev, currently Elbasý's nephew Samat Abish. To be noted also that the current KNB director is another close associate of Nazarbayev, Karim Massimov, who in the given period, has been very active in diplomatic demarches apt to reassure the country external patrons (he went to the US to meet Secretary Pompeo and to China).

Another important element of the transition apt to influence foreign policy in the near future is the entrance into the political scene of the younger, post-post-Soviet generation actor of the protests. This development reflected the shifting profile of the nation and reminded how expectations of change are widespread within the country. Protest concerned mainly internal policies but they could extend to question the system of alliances, first of all the positioning of Kazakhstan on a Sino-Russian axis, considered as a powerful anchorage of conservatism and guarantee of the status quo. Mostly educated in Western universities, the new leaders intended to lobby their position making active use of existing international instruments to which Kazakhstan has subscribed over the years. As reported to this author by one of the actors of the protests (for the civic movement *Oyan, Qazaqstan*, "Wake Up, Kazakhstan"), if Tokayev will not establish with the new forces an effective dialogue on substantial reform of the electoral and political system, his legitimacy as national leader will further suffer as pressure from the side of Western partners will become more structured (Alzhanov 2019).

Apart from the new generation, another constituency that is expected to push for changes in the foreign policy's sphere is that of ethnic Kazakh nationalists. The latter since years are vocal in asking a revision in the relations of Kazakhstan with both Russia and China (Stronski 2019). One of the main issues for the future of Kazakhstan's place in the world will be the way how these forces will find a common articulation for similar demands. These processes will be difficult since they will take place against a background of reduced economic expectations which will push up popular discontent unless the ruling elite will find ways to improve social services and tackle the endemic corruption and the growing wealth gaps that are widespread in the country.

## **2 Russia: Set to Remain the Main Partner on the Basis of a Common Vision but with Increasing Strain**

As mentioned, Nazarbayev's choice of Tokayev to lead the transition of Kazakhstani power was to a large extent conceived to offer guarantees of political continuity to Moscow, symbolically, the destination of the first visit abroad the new leader.

Kazakhstan's importance for the current foreign policy of the Kremlin cannot be underestimated. First, geopolitically, the country is interconnected with a large strip of Russian territories and it serves as such as the Russian gate to Central Asia and a common neighbourhood with China. Second, the membership of Kazakhstan is the key to keep running the two main Russian sponsored integration structures for the post-Soviet space, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Of no less importance is that Nur-Sultan has provided important diplomatic support in moderating different conflict situations where the interests of Russia are at play (see final paragraph for details). From Kazakhstan's perspective, multilateral engagement represents a guarantee to be treated by Moscow as a relevant regional partner in a rules-based context which, especially after the fears raised by the situation in Ukraine, removes the basis for any scenario of separatism in the northern regions inhabited by ethnic Russians. In addition, facing the raising clout of China across their borders, both countries are eager to use the common frame of the EEU to articulate the development of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a way to contain Chinese influence in the post-Soviet space. The importance of the EEU has also been mentioned as a platform to work on the improvement of Russian relations with Europe (Perović 2019).

Given the general positive background underpinning Russian-Kazakhstani relations, at the same time, there are also a number of factors that in a context of political transition can play a negative role in the development of this crucial bilateral relationship.

Still focusing on the EEU, given economic problems caused by the Russian crisis and trade regulations which occasionally play against Kazakhstani interests, the rationale for EEU has already been the object of critics. This was evident especially in the 2014-16 period, when, on the background of the degeneration of events in Ukraine, different nationalist figures called for a "Kazakexit" from the EEU (Chebotarev 2016). This appeal did not attract too much attention at the time, as it went from mostly marginal figures, to some extent assessed to be manipulated by the top leadership in the framework of power strategies. The situation could look differently in the years to come in case of a welding between these actors and the new generation's representatives.

Related to this is the fact that, overall, the extensive coordination of the two countries' positions has been due to a large extent to the personal entente between the two presidents, Putin and Nazarbayev, who meeting frequently made plain all possible issues as they arose. Also a big part of the internal appeal of the EEU was strictly associated with the figure of Nazarbayev. Lacking this personal factor, reaching smooth solutions may become more complicated, especially since a number of issues may become in the coming month object of dispute. For instance, Russia and Kazakhstan reached recently an agreement to have a nuclear power plant built by Russia but the site, on the Lake Balkhash, is described as ecologically fragile.

Since the last two years, larger issues, which Moscow points out with apprehension as sign of evolving pro-Western evolutions of Kazakhstan, are entering in influencing the status of the bilateral relationship. One of them is the Kazakhstani plan to switch the script of the language from Cyrillic to Latin alphabet. Also, at the beginning of 2018 Nazarbayev announced that the government was going to work exclusively in Kazakh (Reuters, 2018). This year, Russian media reported with concern about the circulation of a documentary film about the famine which ravaged Kazakhstan in the 1930s. Narrated by a nationalist leader, the film presents the results of the politics of the Communist authorities as a Moscow-organized terror against ethnic Kazakhs. A secure boost for Kazakh nationalists' activism, the film is expected to trigger conflict between ethnic Kazakhs and Russians (Bogdanovich, 2019). Overall, ethnic Russians of Kazakhstan tend to live with apprehension the exit of Nazarbayev, a figure they perceived as a guarantee of their positions in society and, according to some reports (Globe 2019), are set to emigrate, thus further contributing to the observed trends toward nationalisation of the country's political outlook.

These developments are cause of particular alarm in Moscow because they tend to be associated with a rise of American influence expected to result in an increased military cooperation (see next paragraph), up to the inclusion of the neighbour into the structures of NATO, Russian *bête noire* across the whole Post-Soviet space. Russian analyst are plain on the fact that a similar development will be considered as "simply unacceptable" in force of the spatial interconnection of the territories of the two states (sharing 7.5 thousand km of border), and the importance of the Russian military infrastructure on Kazakhstani soil (Petrosyan 2019).

Current rifts are mendable since Kazakhstani-Russian relations are embedded in a solid positive perception from the side of the mass of the population, among whom no other country causes so much sympathy as Russia (Shibutov et al. 2018). Also Western conducted social polls concluded that "the US presence in Kazakhstan will receive approval only if Washington is acting in partnership with Russia, at least not in conflict with it" (Laruelle, Royce 2019). Also nota-

ble in assessing the Russian-Kazakhstani relationship and the way it will evolve is how Russian media are paramount in shaping perceptions in Kazakhstan of world affairs. In a time of power transition, the sway hold by Moscow based media to influence Kazakh public opinion will make that any emerging Kazakhstani elite will strive to get Russian favour in their bid for national political power.

### 3 Chinese Challenges

The new Kazakhstani establishment will face no less challenge in managing their relations with China. The growth of Chinese interests has been constant over the years and is set to increase further since Kazakhstan became a key trading and investment partner of the Chinese “One Belt, One Road Initiative” – or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the latter’s framework, Kazakhstan is one of the main corridors to Russia and then Europe – Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) component – Chinese financed infrastructure development has been integrated in the Kazakhstani national program “Nurly Zhol” with over \$5 billion in investment, peer to 4 percent of GDP (International Monetary Fund, 2018).

Such an economic overhaul in bilateral relations cannot pass without problems. For instance, the increased influx of Chinese firms and economic interests inside the republic resulted in a mass of requests for labour visas which authorities in Nur-Sultan are trying to limit. Overall, the growing Chinese presence tends to be perceived as negative and threatening. There is a traditional background of synophobia typical of Central Asian nomads for such feelings, but the real point is that the last two years have been marked by the introduction by Beijing of particular harsh policies to curb separatist groups in Kazakhstan’s neighbouring region of Xinjiang. Chinese reaction entailed mass arrests and a system of “re-education camps” estimated to hold hundreds of thousands, including along local Uighurs a number of ethnic Kazakhs. Alive reports from refugees about the Chinese treatment of locals are appalling (Salomatin; Burtin 2019) and will for sure have an effect in the definition not only of the relations with the neighbors but also on internal balances. There is indeed a tendency to have anti-Chinese sentiments translated into anti-government attitudes since, given the untransparent way many transactions with China are effectuated, there are widespread suspicions that the corrupt national bureaucracy is selling out national sovereignty. An example of the implications of this was visible in 2016 when a land privatisation decree, which was expected to have Chinese as the main beneficiaries, quickly engendered mass protests of vast sectors of the population forcing the authorities to backtrack on it.

Thus, the Chinese challenge of Nur-Sultan will require an attentive policy. It is likely that the entity of the task will act as another factor maintaining momentum of the EEU vector of integration, the Russian balance being identified as the only possible alternative to a predominance of the Chinese power. Being such a dread shared by Russian and Kazakh elites, balancing Chinese assertiveness with a common approach seems to be the only way to run. In a best case scenario, the EEU framework integrates both the “Nurly Zhol” and SREB infrastructure plans in a way to allow Kazakhstan to act as a bridge between China and Russia in a multidimensional network of intercontinental economic cooperation (Kukeyeva; Dyussebayev 2019).

Among the many preparatory works to attain similar results, Kazakhstan needs to develop more in-house knowledge about China. Still it lacks a think-tank devoted to the country and a school of sinologists. A Chinese-speaking President is a good sign for the future but this is offset by the mentioned arrest of the main recognised expert on China.

#### **4 Kazakhstan and the “West”**

Kazakhstani relations with the different Western actors are set to remain dynamic and subject to changes according to the posture assumed by the USA. Under the Trump Administration, Washington has tended to disengage from Central Asia, this meaning the weakening of one the pillars on which the “multi-vector” balancing act of Nur-Sultan’s diplomacy. What it results is a relationship with the USA under quite ambivalent terms. From one side the Akorda finds a better counterpart among Trump’s Republicans, as they are less concerned with democratisation issues than the Democrats. On the other hand, Trump did not (or was not in a position to) express a cut with the line of US global hegemony but, quite on the opposite, started an economic confrontation with China in addition to the military/political opposition with Russia. In such a conjuncture, Nur-Sultan, with its unique strategic position sharing extended borders with both rivals of America, is set to be object of particular attention in the latter’s grand strategy. In particular, Kazakhstan has been quite extensively involved in cooperation with NATO. Despite the anti-Russian character, of the latter, Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian nation that signed with the Alliance an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IP-AP) and then engaged in a Planning and Review Process (PARP) allowing NATO access to national Armed Forces to develop interoperability for training and operations (Mukhtorova 2018). NATO also would like to use Nur-Sultan to host a rotating Contact Point Embassy (CPE) for Alliance liaison with the region.

NATO is just one of several elements of nuisance which Washington strives to introduce in Nur-Sultan's relations with the neighbouring powers. There is also at play a quite systematic information campaign against the EEU regional integration project, intended to instil among the public a sense of threat coming from Russia.<sup>4</sup> The same with regards of China, as it was visible during the meeting of Kazakhstani National Security Committee Chairman Masimov with US Secretary of State Pompeo, when the host emphasised Chinese treatment of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang, conveying the United States' strong support for those affected.<sup>5</sup> And, of course, the US adversely impact Kazakhstan relations with Iran, whose potential in term of energy deals and infrastructure connexion is frozen by effects of the US policies against Teheran.

Accordingly, it can be expected that the USA will continue to make use of all possible leverages to influence Kazakhstani position. To assess this potential of influence one should take into account that since the start of the oil boom, the Nazarbayev regime has put consistent capitals into banks accounts controlled by the US. Since the end of the 1990s, as then visible with the so-called "Kazakhgate" affair, this may exploited by Washington.<sup>6</sup> Another reminder of US financial leverage on Kazakhstan went to the news at the end of 2017, when \$ 22 billion of the National Sovereign Fund of Kazakhstan (about 17% of the country's GDP) were blocked in the Bank of New York Mellon over a lawsuit launched by a Moldovan businessman (Alksnis 2018). Despite official denials, the common sense is that the issue was solved with the visit of Nazarbayev to Washington in January 2018 directly in talks with Donald Trump (Panfilova 2018).

Financial dependence on Western sources will likely become more relevant in influencing the future positioning of Kazakhstan since the country is expected to look for additional international investments this year: three major national companies - Kazakhtelecom, KazMu-

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**4** This is especially visible on the Russian-speaking internet resource published by the Central Command of the US Armed Forces (CENTCOM) "Karavansaray", see for instance: *Uskorennoye predstavleniye rossiyskogo grazhdanstva separatistam stalo trevozhnym signalom dlya Tsentral'noy Azii*, URL [http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2019/05/13/feature-01](http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/05/13/feature-01) (2019-11-21).

**5** URL <https://kz.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-karim-masimov-kazakhstani-national-security-committee-chairman> (2019-11-21).

**6** The case sparked around the figure of James H. Giffen, an US business consultant and CIA informant since Soviet times who was hired by the Kazakhstan government as oil negotiator with foreign companies. Giffen was said to have supervised the transfer of more than \$78 million in secret Swiss counts at the disposal of Nazarbayev and then prime minister, Nurlan Balgimbayev. In the trial indicted by the US Justice Department, Giffen asserted that he was acting with the approval of the CIA, which refused to disclose details relating to his activities. At the same time he was released without prison nor fines in 2010 (LeVine 2010).

naGas, and Air Astana – are expected to hold IPOs, while Kazatom-prom nuclear power company continues its privatization. As a diplomat and prime minister, Tokayev has frequently taken part in other efforts foreign financial presence in national business (Shatalov 2019).

Last but not least, a factor of influence is represented by the action of the main opponent of the regime, Muktar Abliazov, in exile in Europe. The French government refused the extradition of the billionaire who is thus allowed conducting a harsh political campaign aimed at de-legitimization of Tokayev and the whole country's power system. Even after having lost his previous media platforms, Abliazov seems able to steer protests up simply realising live appeals on Facebook and Youtube. This action remains as a considerable factor of irritation in the Kazakhstani-Western relations.

It is difficult to assess which kind of public sentiments towards the West will dominate in the future. US policy is regularly criticised and anti-Western sentiments are fed not only by Russian and Chinese sources but also Turkish ones since the deterioration of the latter's ties with Washington following the failed coup of 2016. On the other hand, recalling the ongoing generational change factor, it should be observed that a great part of the future Kazakhstani élite have been educated in US or British universities, a fact that provide a considerable element of soft power in Western hands.<sup>7</sup>

Kazakhstan would like to compensate US defaillances with its relations with the European Union's (EU), for which it has so far been the main Central Asian partner. Kazakhstan has enthusiastically welcomed this year the introduction of a New EU Strategy for Central Asia (Gotev 2019). "Connectivity", one of the key elements of the document, is particularly appreciated, again, as another element to balance the impact of the Chinese BRI. Although they are important economic partner for Kazakhstan, the Europeans do not have capacities to play a geopolitical role outside of NATO and other institutions shared with the US. However, as source of almost half of Kazakhstan's foreign direct investment (FDI) and an important source of technology, the EU has a potential to play in influencing the future trajectory of the country, especially if it will be able to balance the effects of US geopolitical gaming.

<sup>7</sup> The issue can be gauged observing statistics related to 9,645 young specialists who made use of the State "Bolashak" programme of scholarships over 24 years of its implementation. For instance the 1.258 currently studyresults to be thus distributed: 55% in universities of Great Britain and Ireland, 31.6%, in the USA and Canada, 6% in countries of continental Europe, 4% in the Russian Federation, 3.4% Asia and Oceania. See: *Mezhdunarodnaya stipendiya*, in «Bolashak», <https://bolashak.gov.kz/ru/o-stipendii/istoriya-razvitiya.html>.



## 5 The “New” Uzbekistan and the Central Asian Dimension

A positive element for Kazakhstani transition comes from the Central Asian theatre of its regional environment. Here, changes of great momentum are resulting from the new course of foreign policy Uzbekistan after the country's autocrat Islam Karimov passed away in 2016. Previously isolated, Tashkent is now actively engaging with its neighbors in order to create a regional environment of cooperation. Kazakhstan assisted in this effort organising in 2018 the first summit of the Central Asian countries in nine years. Tokayev signalled his will to continue in this direction visiting Uzbekistan, immediately after Russia, still in his acting capacities last April. With his colleague Shavkat Mirziyoev, Tokayev agreed an ambitious program of bilateral cooperation covering almost all aspects of the relationship and notably aiming at raising the volume of mutual trade from the current three billion dollars to five over the next two years, with the current one declared as the “Year of Kazakhstan in Uzbekistan” (Alтынbayev 2019).

The two heads of state also discussed issues of regional and international cooperation and this opens a great potential to structure a Central Asian platform putting the region in a position to balance between Russia, China and the USA.<sup>8</sup> A similar format may receive support from other regional actors as India, increasingly active in regional affairs, also in order to provide a regional contribution to the normalisation of the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

So far so good, but, already on the medium term, the process of opening of Uzbekistan may rise the profile of the country making again of it the fulcrum and the core area for the whole region in a way that may adversely impact on the interests of Kazakhstan. Notably, Uzbekistani intention to move towards an open, export-oriented economy will make the two neighbours competitors in attracting international investments towards their national economies. Such a scenario can become real in case of complications in the process of power succession in Kazakhstan, what can be expected to keep Nur-Sultan partially aside from the main regional processes for the years to come.

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<sup>8</sup> See for an internal assessment the interview with Deputy Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan, Mr. Roman Vassilenko (2019).

<sup>9</sup> *Uzbekistan i Kazakhstan obsudili situatsiyu v Afganistane*, «REGNUM», 7 April 2019, URL <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2606854.html> (2019-11-21).

## 6 Perspectives for Maintaining Kazakhstan's Role as a Global Mediator

Since the start of its independence, Kazakhstan has always presented itself as an active promoter of peace and stability not only at regional level but with the ambition to play at the global level. Indeed, under Nazarbayev, the country has been able to reap undoubtful diplomatic successes having resonance well beyond the Central Asian framework. Notable case is the **Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building measures in Asia** (CICA), an organization which was launched by Kazakhstan in 1992 to function as an Asian equivalent on the same principles of the OSCE. The CICA currently unites 27 countries, from Israel, and Iran, to Vietnam and China. It held recently its fifth congress in Dushambe, Tajikistan, still short of the overall ambitious aim to create a unified Eurasian security system where Kazakhstan will have a central position but proving vital as a conference for Heads of State - the presidents of 12 states gathered including Iran and Turkey (Imanaliev 2019).

Apart from CICA, Kazakhstan delivered on its ambition to be an actor of world politics serving as rotating chairman of the OSCE in 2010 and being in 2017-18 a member of the United Nations Security Council, where Astana managed to bring regional issues usually marginal to global agenda. As recalled recently in a national publication (Kurmashev and Akhmed'yanova, 2018, 45), apart from the mentioned formats, Kazakhstan diplomacy's steps to promote collective peace and security include:

- Mediation between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and in Tajikistan during the civil war in the 1990s.
- The practice (since 2003) to convene the Congress of Leaders world and traditional religions, which gathers authoritative representatives of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Shintoism, Hinduism and Buddhism for interfaith dialogue.
- Facilitation of negotiations on Iran's nuclear capacities - with two rounds of talks between Iran and the P5 + 1 group organised in Almaty (February and May 2013).
- Nazarbayev's role in the normalization of the Russian-Turkish relations following the November 2015 crisis between the two countries (downing of a Russian plane by Turkey).
- Contribution to the settlement of the Syrian conflicts with the creation of the Astana format for inter-Syrian negotiations including representatives of the Syrian opposition.

The country keeps on introducing visionary schemes for international relations. The latest of Nazarbayev's initiatives proposed a regional dialogue at three levels, which he called the **3D**. This comprises a first level of dialogue among the regional four big players: United

States, EU, Russia and China. Next, interaction between the CICA and the OSCE and, third, a more economy-focused dialogue on cooperation between the EU, the EEU, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and ASEAN.

Despite hesitations and difficulties unavoidable in setting up similar diplomatic exercises, national diplomats are confident that results may be reached, with the OSCE and CICA planning to meet, first at expert levels and then higher levels, to exchange best practices and to establish dialogue, hopefully this year. Indeed, similar schemes of cooperation could become the political backbone of the New Silk Road's efforts (Gotev 2019).

In such a perspective, Kazakhstan can effectively play a role in recomposing relations between Russia, the EU and the United States, also by way of its active presence in theatres relevant for the three actors as Afghanistan and Georgia, where Kazakhstani diplomats are striving their best to reduce tensions between that country and Russia.

## 7 Conclusions

Having provided a survey of the multiple challenges pending over the foreign policy of Kazakhstan, it is clear that the exercise of multi-vectoriality will become an increasingly complicated one. Tokayev will have to make the best use of his diplomatic capacities to navigate between diverging geopolitical vectors and he will find increasingly difficult to play foreign partners off each other as it was in the heyday of Nazarbayev's era.

Certainly, Kazakhstan will have to devote efforts at avoiding to irritate Russia, whose cooperation will remain vital for the country's prosperity. The northern neighbour has a vital interest in the stability of Kazakhstan and hence it can be assumed that it will not try to excessively to manipulate the Kazakhstani transition in order to avoid shocks in the energy flows, migrations and border conflicts that will immediately reverberate on Russia. At the same time, Moscow cannot tolerate insertion of foreign security actors on Kazakhstani territory and if the new elite will make concessions on this the consequences could be extremely destabilising.

To this regard, one of the greatest challenges for Kazakhstan will be in composing the complex web of the different vectors of Western influence on the government and society. In particular, the unknown quantity of Nur-Sultan diplomatic equation will remain the position of the USA which, in case of perduring confrontation with its two main neighbours, may be tempted to interfere with their interests using through it. Indeed, unrest in Kazakhstan may undermine overall Russian security posture as well as Chinese investment

and infrastructure strategy for Eurasia. The same can be true with regards of Iran through the Caspian.

Hence, it will be essential how Kazakhstan will be able to perform its balancing act to integrate Russian and Chinese vectors, receiving their security guarantees, realising some degree of integration with both systems while at the same time preserving a meaningful sovereignty and autonomy for Kazakhstan. Of paramount importance will be how Russia and Kazakhstan will update the mechanisms of their integration, in order to make of the EEU a structure benefitting the larger number of domestic economic players. The importance of the EEU will also be in its potential of reducing geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU, a direction where Kazakhstan could in fact play an intermediary role. Finding in this a synergy with the potential of the Belt and Road initiative, a new dynamic could emerge on the Eurasian continent matching economic forces along the infrastructure corridors to the benefit of all.

However, to reach such goals, which would render the best honour to the heritage of Nazarbayev, the new establishment will have to profuse no lesser efforts in work inside the country. Much will depend on the outcome of modernization and how demands coming from an evolving society will be addressed. Apart from demands for a more open and pluralist political system, a crucial issue will be the further articulation and definition of the national identity. Will this be defined in ethnic terms or a Kazakhstani civic shared identity? A lot in defining the future of Kazakhstan will depend from the answer to this question and how it will be articulated with the internal struggle of the different groups of powers when “the Leader of the Nation” will not be in a position to balance their interaction anymore (Sataev 2019). Then, the possibility of having opposition forces or some power elite playing on the nationalist card will represent a real danger for the future of the country as it will push non-Kazakh out of the country putting in jeopardy both the strategy of modernization and the balanced diplomacy underpinning it. Much will then depend on the qualities that Tokayev will show as politician and head of state. Here one can measure the scale of the risk associated with the succession to Nazarbaev and the limits of a model built around such a strict pyramid of power. Accordingly, the crucial issue for Kazakhstan and its position in the world will reside in the capacity that the establishment will prove at defining a new ‘social contract’ between the state and the society, apt to reflect the demographic, ethnical and cultural evolutions of the latter (Laruelle; Boonstra 2018). Hence, the importance of instauring now effective mechanisms of dialogue so that to involve the largest number of constituencies in such a definition as well as to make the public understand what is really at stake in the relationship with the country’s external partners.

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# La crisi in Afghanistan: l'intervento militare e il recente disimpegno internazionale in una prospettiva regionale

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**Abstract** The paper delves into the Afghanistan crisis in a regional perspective. It frames the regional and international influences in the country emphasizing the interdependence between global and regional interferences. It argues that regional actors tend to gain more freedom of action in Afghan affairs when global actors – empires or superpowers – disengage from the country. Conversely, when global powers are intervening (as during the Great Game, the Soviet occupation or the US intervention since 2001), regional actors lose their sway. Accordingly, the paper investigates the recent crisis in Afghanistan identifying three phases starting from the US mission launched in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks: the G.W. Bush approach to the military campaign in Afghanistan (2001-8); the Af-Pak Strategy implemented by the Obama administration (2009-14); the years of international withdrawal (2015-19). For each period, the analysis underlines the activism of regional actors in Afghanistan and how it becomes prominent when the global power tends to disengage.

**Keywords** Afghanistan. Enduring freedom. Nato-Isaf. Regional influences in Afghanistan.

**Sommario** 1 Introduzione. L'Afghanistan fra ingerenze internazionali e regionali. – 2 L'Afghanistan alla vigilia dell'intervento americano. – 3 Enduring Freedom (2001-8): dall'ingerenza 'globale' degli Stati Uniti al ritorno delle influenze regionali. – 4 Af-Pak Strategy (2009-14): il 'ritorno' degli Stati Uniti e la regionalizzazione del conflitto. – 5 Finale di partita (2015-19): gli anni del disimpegno fra ritiro americano e ritorno delle potenze regionali.



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## 1 Introduzione. L'Afghanistan fra ingerenze internazionali e regionali

La storia dell'Afghanistan è segnata da un paradosso. Per un verso, la morfologia del paese - l'assenza di uno sbocco al mare, la relativa scarsità di risorse prime,<sup>1</sup> l'insospitalità sotto il profilo geografico e climatico - sembra renderlo un paese di scarsa rilevanza geopolitica.

Per un altro verso, la storia ci racconta di una centralità persistente sia per le competizioni politiche regionali sia per le ripetute ingerenze globali, egemoniche e imperiali. Schiacciato fra le steppe centro-asiatiche a nord, le catene montuose dell'Himalaya a sud-est e l'altopiano iraniano a ovest, l'Afghanistan è stato fin dall'antichità attraversato da invasioni, attraversamenti di popoli, di commerci, di missionari ed esploratori (Giunchi 2007a, 19-22). Nel corso del XIX secolo il 'grande gioco', come è noto, ha reso l'Afghanistan l'epicentro della competizione in Asia meridionale fra l'Impero russo e l'Impero britannico (Hopkirk 1992). Il Novecento, soprattutto, nella sua seconda metà, ha confermato questa lunga continuità di influenze esterne: la competizione bipolare, inizialmente confinata a ingerenze politiche al fine di determinare lo schieramento internazionale del paese, si è tradotta in intervento militare aperto da parte sovietica. Infine, anche il periodo successivo alla fine della Guerra Fredda ha visto l'Afghanistan precipitare prima in una guerra civile, penetrata da diverse influenze regionali contrapposte, e successivamente diventare il teatro del più lungo intervento militare mai condotto dagli Stati Uniti.

In questa sede ci si concentra sulla crisi più recente dell'Afghanistan ripercorrendo le principali tappe dell'intervento a guida statunitense lanciato nel 2001. Periodizzando la cosiddetta *long war* americana - la quale si è articolata in fasi molto diverse in termini di impegno e di postura strategica da parte delle forze internazionali - si cercherà di mettere in luce, come anche nelle vicende più recenti sembra confermarsi, una continuità di più lungo periodo, inaugurata almeno a partire dal XIX secolo. Anche oggi in Afghanistan competono influenze regionali e influenze globali secondo una dinamica ricorrente: laddove le seconde si fanno più intense (come nel caso dell'intervento sovietico o nel recente intervento americano) le prime tendono ad arretrare; quando al contrario i grandi competitor globali (gli imperi russo e inglese, l'Unione Sovietica o gli Stati Uniti) ripiegano, le potenze regionali tornano protagoniste. In altri termini, quando le presenze imperiali o egemoniche che giocano in Afghanistan una partita dalle implicazioni globali danno segni di disimpe-

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<sup>1</sup> Solo molto recentemente sono state scoperte potenziali risorse naturali (Downs 2012; Emadi 2011).



gno o di ritiro, allora le medie potenze regionali acquistano libertà di manovra facendosi più assertive e influenti.

Infatti, l'Afghanistan non è stato solo teatro di scontro fra competizioni globali - il 'grande gioco', la Guerra Fredda, la *Global War on Terror* - ma si trova al centro di tre complessi regionali (*regional security complexes*) che riversano sul paese le loro competizioni interne. Il quadro regionale delle repubbliche centro-asiatiche, il sub-continente indiano con al centro il conflitto indo-pakistano e la regione del Golfo con al centro la rivalità Iran-Arabia Saudita, trovano in Afghanistan un terreno di competizione e di scontro (Buzan, Weaver 2003).

Queste dinamiche regionali esercitano un'influenza tanto maggiore quanto sul piano globale le grandi o superpotenze tendono al disimpegno. Secondo questa chiave di lettura è possibile individuare nel recente intervento internazionale fasi diverse nelle quali si manifesta tale dinamica competitiva fra ingerenza globale e ingerenze regionali.

Le quattro sezioni che seguono sono dedicate rispettivamente alle fasi più recenti della crisi afgana. Nella prima si traccia brevemente il quadro dello stato dell'Afghanistan prima dell'intervento internazionale del 2001, con l'intento di sottolineare l'assenza di ingerenze egemoniche globali a cui corrisponde una forte competizione fra gli attori locali e regionali. La seconda riguarda gli anni dell'amministrazione Bush e del suo impegno militare e diplomatico in Afghanistan (2001-08) e cerca di mettere in luce l'iniziale marginalizzazione delle influenze regionali alla quale segue però una nuova fase di protagonismo delle potenze regionali. La terza fase (2009-14) si concentra sugli anni della cosiddetta *Af-Pak Strategy* adottata da Obama, fase in cui, seppur con modalità e intensità diverse, si assiste a una dinamica simile: un forte rilancio dell'intervento internazionale, che riduce i margini di manovra delle potenze regionali, seguito da un disimpegno, il quale a sua volta riapre le porte alle influenze regionali. Infine, nella quarta sezione si cercherà di delineare i contorni delle dinamiche regionali più recenti a partire dagli effetti del ritiro della missione Nato-Isaf e dalle ondivaghe decisioni di Donald Trump.

## 2 L'Afghanistan alla vigilia dell'intervento americano

Il decennio che precede gli attentati dell'11 settembre 2001 e il conseguente intervento americano è un periodo di relativa assenza di influenze esterne di carattere globale. Al ritiro sovietico, completato all'inizio del 1989, si accompagna lo speculare disimpegno americano dalla regione - dove la CIA invece era stata particolarmente attiva nell'appoggiare la resistenza anti-sovietica a partire dalle sue stazioni in Pakistan (Coll 2005). Se da un lato, la smobilitazione sovietica va inquadrata nel collasso generale che investe in que-

gli anni l'Unione Sovietica, dall'altro l'abbandono repentino della regione da parte degli Stati Uniti è forse meno giustificabile e, come hanno sottolineato diversi osservatori, un errore strategico gravido di conseguenze (Rashid 2002; Coll 2005). L'Afghanistan, infatti, dopo un breve periodo di tenuta del vecchio regime comunista guidato da Najibullah, ancora ampiamente sostenuto per circa due anni da Mosca, precipita in una violenta guerra civile (Breccia 2014, 114-20; Steele 2012). Solo alla vigilia degli attentati terroristici del 2001, alla fine degli anni '90 l'Afghanistan torna a essere teatro di influenze e attenzioni internazionali. Prima con il ritorno di Osama Bin Laden nel paese a sostegno della conquista di Kabul da parte talebana, anche se poi la rete terroristica di al-Qaeda rimarrà isolata all'interno del paese e opererà in piena autonomia dai Talebani per organizzare attentati fuori dall'Afghanistan. Successivamente, con gli attentati di al-Qaeda alle ambasciate americane in Tanzania e Kenya nel 1998, l'Afghanistan tornerà a interessare le politiche di sicurezza americane, anche se un vero e proprio *re-engagement* americano nel paese avverrà solo a seguito degli attentati dell'11 settembre.

Gli anni '90, dunque, segnano un deciso arretramento in termini di ingerenze esterne in Afghanistan da parte di attori globali. Nella fattispecie la fine della Guerra Fredda si traduce in un abbandono, reciproco e speculare, della regione da parte delle due superpotenze. Il vuoto che ne segue è immediatamente compensato da un forte attivismo da parte delle potenze regionali: anzitutto il Pakistan, l'Arabia Saudita e l'Iran, che più avevano appoggiato e investito sulla componente islamista della resistenza all'occupazione sovietica e si aspettavano una rapida presa del potere da parte dei mujaheddin; ma anche le repubbliche centro-asiatiche - Uzbekistan e Tagikistan in particolare - eserciteranno un ruolo cruciale nella partita politica che si apre con la guerra civile (1992-96) e nel periodo successivo all'avvento al potere dei Talebani (1996-2001).

Il ritiro dell'Armata Rossa, infatti, coincide con una profonda frammentazione del fronte anti-sovietico e nel corso degli anni '90 riemergono con forza tutte le divisioni e i conflitti interni al composito universo dei mujaheddin: la divisione sunniti-sciiti alimentata dalla competizione e reciproca influenza dell'Iran da un lato e del Pakistan e Arabia Saudita dall'altro; la divisione etnica fra pashtun e non-pashtun che raggiunge il suo punto più emblematico e drammaticamente significativo nella corsa alla conquista di Kabul da parte di Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (allora l'uomo del Pakistan in Afghanistan) e di Ahmad Massud (carismatico comandante tagiko che più di ogni altro creò problemi all'Armata Rossa negli anni dell'occupazione sovietica) (Rubin 1995); e, non ultima, l'ascesa dei Talebani, sostenuti dal Pakistan a partire dal 1994, contro i vecchi mujaheddin e quella che andava configurandosi come un'Alleanza del nord, sostenuta dall'Iran e dalle repubbliche centro-asiatiche (Fergusson 2010; Grif-

fin 2001). In questo quadro, si aggiungeva l'influenza e il sostegno ai gruppi islamisti da parte dell'Arabia Saudita, sia coltivando contatti autonomi con i combattenti islamisti afgani (il più noto e influente è quello con Rasul Sayyaf) sia attraverso il Pakistan; un'influenza che durerà fino al 1998 - anno degli attentati alle ambasciate americane in Africa a seguito dei quali Riad cesserà il suo sostegno ai Talebani (Gohari 2000, 21-2; Rashid 2002, 176-9).

Anche con l'avvento al potere dei Talebani nel 1996 - e nonostante arrivino alla fine degli anni '90 a controllare circa il 90% del territorio nazionale - il conflitto interno all'Afghanistan non è mai del tutto finito (Rahid 2002). Nella parte settentrionale del paese l'Alleanza del nord è ancora attiva, continuando a catalizzare influenze esterne, le quali fanno spesso leva sui signori della guerra impegnati contro i Talebani: come il già citato Massud, Abdul Rashid Dostum (leader della comunità uzbeka in Afghanistan), Ismael Khan (di origini tagike ma vicino all'Iran, dove troverà rifugio nel 1995 dopo la presa di Herat da parte dei Talebani). Anche le tensioni religiose fra sciiti e sunniti rimangono alte fino alla fine degli anni '90. La repressione brutale della minoranza Hazara, sciita, da parte dei Talebani alimenta l'attivismo anti-Talebano di Teheran e, di conseguenza, le tensioni fra Iran e Pakistan. Nel 1998, l'anno più drammatico per le comunità sciite e anti-talebane in Afghanistan (in particolare per la città di Mazar-i-Sharif e nel distretto di Bamiyan) porta il confronto fra Iran e Pakistan al suo punto più critico e, a seguito dell'uccisione da parte dei Talebani di undici diplomatici iraniani nel Consolato iraniano a Mazar, l'Iran è sull'orlo di scatenare una guerra aperta contro i Talebani (Rashid 2002, 104-6).

### **3 Enduring Freedom (2001-8): dall'ingerenza 'globale' degli Stati Uniti al ritorno delle influenze regionali**

Alla vigilia dell'intervento americano del 2001, dunque, l'Afghanistan è in preda a conflitti interni su cui convergono forti ingerenze da parte di attori regionali. L'operazione *Enduring Freedom* ribalta l'equilibrio fra interferenze regionali e globali, l'iniziativa militare e diplomatica dell'amministrazione Bush riduce drasticamente i margini di manovra delle potenze regionali e riporta al centro della scena politica dell'Afghanistan una potenza globale, impegnata in una guerra 'globale' contro il terrorismo. Sul piano militare, benché la missione *Enduring Freedom* non preveda un'occupazione su vasta scala del territorio afgano e l'approccio sarà ispirato al *light footprint* (Chesterman 2002), ridurrà drasticamente i margini di manovra delle influenze regionali da parte del Pakistan, dell'Iran, dell'Arabia Saudita e delle repubbliche centro-asiatiche. La determinazione americana in questa fase non è negoziabile, le forze speciali USA

sono impegnate a determinare la destituzione dei Talebani, e, contemporaneamente, a smantellare la rete terroristica di al-Qaeda avviando una caccia all'uomo su vasta scala per catturare i responsabili degli attentati dell'11 settembre, appoggiandosi all'Alleanza del nord; ma i comandanti dello schieramento anti-Talebano rispondono esclusivamente agli americani e non alle potenze regionali di riferimento (Biddle 2006). Sul piano diplomatico l'approccio è identico: una guida ferma ma discreta del negoziato che condurrà alla conferenza di Bonn alla fine del 2001, in cui gli Stati Uniti sembrano voler giocare un ruolo equilibrato di *honest broker* esterno ma pongono dei limiti invalicabili ai giochi diplomatici delle potenze regionali (Fields, Ahmed 2011).

Le prime battute della campagna militare americana, iniziata il 7 ottobre del 2001, per quanto paradossale possa sembrare, è una guerra senza soldati. Gli USA non danno avvio a un piano di invasione dell'Afghanistan, cercheranno invece di evitare a ogni costo di dare l'impressione di voler occupare il paese. Nel settembre del 2001 il Pentagono non ha pronto alcun piano di guerra. Il comando USA *Central Command* (CENTCOM), il quale ha la responsabilità per il Medio Oriente e per l'Afghanistan - una responsabilità quest'ultima che diverrà scontata e operativa solo dopo la missione *Enduring Freedom* - ha familiarità con la pianificazione di operazioni militari nella Penisola Arabica ma non con l'Afghanistan e l'Asia Centrale. Data l'urgenza di una risposta militare agli attentati dell'11 settembre, non sorprende che l'amministrazione Bush abbia fatto affidamento sull'unica agenzia che godeva di qualche competenza sulla regione: la CIA. Il piano di guerra presentato al presidente dal direttore George Tenet, dal titolo *Going to War*, viene subito adottato e determina la fase operativa della missione *Enduring Freedom* nelle prime settimane di guerra (Coll 2018, 79-80). Una missione che coinvolge nelle inizialmente poche dozzine di unità paramilitari della CIA e delle forze speciali americane. Queste, presi i contatti con i comandanti dell'Alleanza del nord, guidano quest'ultima alla temporanea sconfitta e alla fuga dei Talebani grazie alla raccolta di informazioni sui target, i quali venivano colpiti dai caccia bombardieri americani che garantivano il supporto aereo ravvicinato grazie alle basi americane in Uzbekistan (Andres, Wills, Griffith Jr. 2006). Solo più avanti, nel 2002, con le operazioni militari a Tora Bora e con l'operazione *Anaconda*, le forze armate americane diventano protagoniste del teatro di guerra (Coll 2018).

Nonostante la presenza militare inizialmente molto leggera e nonostante il fatto che nelle prime settimane la guerra è sostanzialmente una missione della CIA, la determinazione americana nel condurre un'operazione di contro-terrorismo su vasta scala in Afghanistan provoca un ripiegamento delle influenze regionali. Per ragioni che attoniscono allo shock dell'11 settembre e alla prevedibile reazione mi-

litare americana - unite alle dichiarazioni sulla guerra 'globale' al terrorismo da parte di Bush - gli attori regionali vedono restringersi drasticamente i loro margini di ingerenza. Il Pakistan è costretto a un riallineamento, particolarmente doloroso per Islamabad, in direzione anti-talebana, che costringe il paese anzitutto alla rinuncia della sua *longa manus* negli assetti politici afgani e successivamente a una imbarazzante ambiguità diplomatica sul suo impegno contro il terrorismo nelle aree tribali, dove i Talebani e i militanti di al-Qaeda trovano rifugio (Rashid 2013). Seppur con delle conseguenze per la politica estera saudita molto minori, anche Riad è costretta a un riallineamento e alla rinuncia all'opzione di usare l'Afghanistan come strumento di pressione sull'Iran. In altre parole, nel quadro della competizione egemonica regionale fra Iran e Arabia Saudita, con l'intervento americano quest'ultima non può più immaginare di finanziare o sostenere (in linea con il Pakistan) un movimento islamico sunnita allineato con Riad, in funzione anti-iraniana. La presenza americana impediva questa dinamica e riduceva drasticamente l'influenza saudita nella regione. Teheran, a sua volta, pur accogliendo con favore la cacciata dei Talebani, prende atto che con l'intervento americano non ha molti margini di manovra per influenzare a fondo le dinamiche politiche nella transizione verso un assetto post-talebano (Dobbins 2008). Se, dunque, per l'Iran la fine del regime dei Talebani è una vittoria, perché libera il paese dalla minaccia del movimento islamista sunnita a nord e la sicurezza delle minoranze sciite in Afghanistan è finalmente garantita, nondimeno l'intervento americano inaugura un ampio programma di ricostruzione da parte della comunità internazionale (con la presenza della Nato, dell'Onu e di molte altre organizzazioni internazionali governative e non) che limiterà drasticamente le capacità di influenza iraniana sul futuro dell'Afghanistan.

Negli ultimi due mesi del 2001, a guerra ancora in corso, il fronte diplomatico mostra dinamiche del tutto simili: gli attori locali e regionali di riferimento dell'Alleanza del Nord rimangono in gran parte gli stessi ma ora fanno riferimento agli Stati Uniti e ai loro desideri. Le settimane che precedono l'accordo sugli equilibri politici del dopoguerra e sul governo ad interim - siglato poi alla conferenza di Bonn - testimoniano una contrazione della libertà di manovra degli attori regionali, su cui pesano le costrizioni imposte da Washington. James Dobbins, inviato speciale del Segretario di Stato Colin Powell, diplomatico di lunga data e con una considerevole esperienza nella gestione dello *state-building* post-conflitto in diverse aree di crisi, riesce a far convergere le richieste delle diverse fazioni su un accordo (Dobbins 2008; Krampe 2013).

La *road map* siglata a Bonn, in cui fundamentalmente è stato tracciato il percorso di ricostruzione politico-istituzionale dell'Afghanistan attuale, è frutto di un compromesso che è stato possi-

bile raggiungere solo grazie alle pressioni diplomatiche degli Stati Uniti sulle potenze regionali. Quattro schieramenti erano presenti a Bonn nei giorni della conferenza: il 'gruppo di Roma' che ruotava intorno alla figura del re Zahir Shah, in esilio in Italia dai tempi della proclamazione della repubblica in Afghanistan negli anni '70; il 'gruppo di Cipro', il meno influente, composto da un gruppo di intellettuali emigrati con forti legami con l'Iran; il 'gruppo di Peshawar', anch'esso composto principalmente da emigrati, in questo caso di etnia Pashtun; infine, il gruppo più influente, quello dell'Alleanza del Nord che, a differenza di tutti gli altri, non era composto da emigrati ma al contrario parlava a nome di coloro che avevano cacciato i Talebani sul campo di battaglia e controllavano Kabul (Dobbins 2008, 77-80). A questi si aggiungevano le delegazioni dei principali paesi della regione, fra le più influenti: la delegazione pakistana, nella peggiore posizione immaginabile in quel frangente per via dei pregressi rapporti con i Talebani; il delegato russo Zamir Kabulov, il quale mantenne un atteggiamento apertamente cooperativo; la delegazione iraniana, guidata da Javad Zarif, che diede prova di pragmatismo e collaborazione con gli americani (Dobbins 2008, 74). L'esito dei negoziati è stato inequivocabilmente il risultato della combinazione di vincoli da parte americana e di pragmatismo da parte degli attori locali e regionali. Da un lato, nelle settimane del negoziato la percezione prevalente era che la presenza militare americana sarebbe aumentata nel corso del 2002 e questo avrebbe condizionato gli equilibri politici. Dall'altro, le figure chiave dell'Alleanza del Nord (Abdullah Abdullah, Yunus Qanooni e, con qualche resistenza in più, il generale Mohammed Fahim), e le potenze regionali che la sostenevano, accettarono di non tradurre la loro vittoria militare in dominio politico e di sostenere Hamid Karzai, una figura politica a loro estranea e di etnia Pashtun.

La comprensibile inaugurazione di un'ingombrante presenza americana sui destini dell'Afghanistan dopo l'11 settembre e il conseguente ripiegamento delle potenze regionali alla fine del 2001 va incontro a una svolta repentina già nel 2002. Nella seconda metà dell'anno, infatti, i segnali del disimpegno americano sono tanto sorprendenti quanto evidenti. Il disinteresse quasi assoluto per lo *state-building* e l'implementazione della *road map* concordata a Bonn e, ancor di più, l'accelerazione nei preparativi alla guerra in Iraq mandano un segnale inequivocabile alle potenze regionali (Bird, Marshall 2011).

La percezione diffusa nel corso del 2002 e ancor di più nel 2003 è di un ritiro americano piuttosto rapido, le potenze regionali si preparano a nuove forme di ingerenza in Afghanistan e a una nuova competizione (Rashid 2013). Il Pakistan, già nel 2003, gioca una partita ambivalente: si impegna nella caccia ai terroristi di al-Qaeda ma tollera la presenza dei Talebani nelle aree di confine, non contrasta la riorganizzazione e l'insurrezione contro le truppe internazionali

e usa senza restrizioni gli aiuti americani ai fini del proprio riarmo (Bird, Marshall 2011; Coll 2018, 150-4). L'India, al contrario, avvia un *rapproachment* con il governo di Kabul in funzione anti-pakistana - il disimpegno americano lascia ampia libertà di manovra ai due avversari nel complesso regionale del sub-continente indiano per usare l'Afghanistan come terreno di scontro (Rashid 2008, 2014). L'Iran nel 2002 finisce sorprendentemente nel famigerato 'Asse del Male' - un gruppo di stati che l'amministrazione americana ritiene irrispettosi del diritto internazionale e fiancheggiatori del terrorismo - nonostante la cooperazione diplomatica mostrata a Bonn, confermata alla prima conferenza dei *donors* per finanziare la ricostruzione dell'Afghanistan a Tokyo e nonostante i progetti infrastrutturali a cui contribuisce (Dobbins 2008). Dal 2003 dunque anche l'Iran adotterà un atteggiamento più ambiguo verso l'Afghanistan, per un verso cooperando con i programmi di *state-building* e contrastando il ritorno dei Talebani ma, per un altro verso, abbandonando l'attitudine iniziale di cooperazione con gli Stati Uniti e al contrario guardando con favore alle crescenti difficoltà che questi incontrano nelle operazioni militari (Giunchi 2007b).

Fino al 2007, dunque per quasi tutta la durata dei due mandati del presidente Bush, l'Afghanistan rimane un teatro secondario rispetto all'operazione *Iraqi Freedom*. Il doppio conflitto - l'insurrezione contro l'occupazione e la guerra settaria fra sciiti e sunniti - impegna le forze americane molto più del previsto (Beccaro 2013). Proprio nel 2007 viene lanciato il *surge*, un invio massiccio di truppe in Iraq che distoglierà ancora di più energie e attenzione dal teatro afgano (Metz 2010), concedendo dunque un ampio spazio di manovra alle influenze regionali.

#### **4 Af-Pak Strategy (2009-14): il 'ritorno' degli Stati Uniti e la regionalizzazione del conflitto**

L'anno che precede l'elezione di Barack Obama è un anno drammatico per l'Afghanistan e il Pakistan. Il ruolo di quest'ultimo nel garantire la persistenza dell'insurrezione talebana è ormai inequivocabile (Gall 2014) ma a questo si aggiunge una crisi interna al Pakistan. Nelle aree tribali al confine, le quali hanno ospitato i militanti di al-Qaeda e i Talebani senza che questi incontrassero particolare resistenza da parte delle autorità pakistane, si è formato nel 2007 un gruppo autonomo di Talebani pakistani (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan), il quale è intenzionato a sovvertire l'ordine politico del Pakistan (Ahmed 2014). Dall'uccisione di Benazir Bhutto il 27 dicembre del 2007 all'ondata di proteste che attraversa il paese successivamente alle elezioni del febbraio 2008, il Pakistan attraversa un periodo di crisi politica profondissima, a cui si aggiunge una crisi economica drammatica

(Rashid 2013, 52-7). La risposta di Islamabad alla debolezza del paese nel contesto regionale (in particolare rispetto alla crescita economica indiana) è un arroccamento sul vecchio paradigma inaugurato negli anni Ottanta dal generale Zia, ossia affidare ai gruppi islamisti il compito di creare problemi al nemico più temuto, l'India, nel Kashmir e in Afghanistan (Rashid 2008, 2014).

L'amministrazione Obama si impegna dunque a porre fine a questa dinamica regionale che finisce per danneggiare in modo fin troppo evidente gli interessi americani nella regione. Nel suo primo anno alla Casa Bianca mette immediatamente in agenda il ritiro dall'Iraq e una profonda revisione strategica dell'intervento in Afghanistan. Il risultato, che va sotto il nome di *Af-Pak Strategy*, inaugura un massiccio *re-engagement* americano che ha l'effetto di contrarre di nuovo i margini di manovra degli attori regionali (Ahmad 2010). La nuova strategia per l'Afghanistan porta a una vera e propria ri-americanizzazione della guerra: l'invio di 30.000 soldati che porteranno la presenza di soldati americani a circa 100 mila e al picco di 150 mila unità complessive con i partner della Nato nella missione Isaf (Bird, Marshall 2011). La ri-militarizzazione della missione internazionale, accompagnata da una iniziativa diplomatica regionale orientata a far pressioni sul Pakistan e al riavvicinamento all'Iran, finisce per alterare di nuovo gli equilibri fra influenze globali e ingerenze regionali a favore delle prime.

Tuttavia, quello che nei primi due anni della *Af-Pak Strategy* (2009-11) sembra configurarsi come un finale di partita - confermato dalla volontà di Obama di impegnarsi sia in direzione di un considerevole sforzo militare sia limitando drasticamente l'influenza del Pakistan - si traduce invece in una parabola simile a quella del primo anno di Bush con la missione *Enduring Freedom*. L'approccio di Bush e di Obama alla questione dell'intervento in Afghanistan è molto diverso: orientato alle sole operazioni di contro-terrorismo il primo e alla contro-insurrezione il secondo; disinteressato allo *state-building* il primo e invece molto attento alla dimensione politica di ricostruzione il secondo; inoltre, laddove Bush aveva prestato poca attenzione al ruolo effettivo del Pakistan, Obama alleggerisce la dipendenza logistica delle forze americane dal porto di Karachi e dà un giro di vite ai controlli sulle voci di spesa militari; infine, anche in merito al negoziato con i Talebani, Obama mostra segnali di apertura inediti rispetto al suo predecessore. Nondimeno, guardando alle dinamiche della competizione fra influenze globali e ingerenze regionali, l'evoluzione è del tutto simile: a un primo forte impegno da parte della superpotenza globale, che riduce i margini di influenza delle potenze regionali, segue un disimpegno da parte della prima, che riporta al centro gli interessi e le interferenze delle seconde.

La *Af-Pak Strategy* marca un forte e rinnovato impegno americano in Afghanistan ma contiene in sé già tutti i segnali di un *disengagement* che finisce per mandare un messaggio fin troppo chiaro tan-



to ai Talebani quanto agli attori regionali. Il segnale diventa inequivocabile al Summit di Lisbona della Nato del 2010, nel quale Obama convince gli alleati impegnati nella missione Isaf a seguire il *surge* americano in Afghanistan ma, al medesimo tempo, formalizza il piano di ritiro entro la fine del 2014 (Nato 2010). Il piano previsto dalla cosiddetta *Transition* (il passaggio di testimone delle responsabilità per la sicurezza alle forze nazionali afgane) rappresenta forse il più significativo errore strategico della strategia Obama (Carati 2015). Il presidente americano in un colpo solo scopre tutte le carte: rende noto che la *counter-insurgency* è a tempo determinato, ossia che il ritiro non seguirà l'andamento delle condizioni di sicurezza del paese ma risponderà ai vincoli finanziari e dell'opinione pubblica americani. I Talebani mettono dunque in conto di dover resistere solo per altri tre anni e, a quel punto, sono invitati a un ritiro strategico che faccia percepire agli occupanti un miglioramento della sicurezza tale da far proseguire il disimpegno secondo le scadenze. Lo stesso per le potenze regionali: Pakistan, India, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan e Cina accelerano i propri progetti in Afghanistan proprio in vista del ritiro USA (Rashid 2013). Anche il Pakistan, l'attore regionale cruciale per il futuro del paese, ha una reazione ambivalente: da un lato soffre le forti pressioni della nuova amministrazione americana per via della guerra dei droni, condanna l'operazione di Abbottabad in cui viene ucciso Osama Bin Laden e subisce le operazioni di controterrorismo nelle aree tribali a cui gli USA li costringono dal 2009 in poi; dall'altro lato, anche a Islamabad prevale la convinzione che un impegno militare così massiccio non è sostenibile se non per un breve periodo. L'establishment militare pakistano teme addirittura un ritiro americano troppo repentino che rischia di privarlo dei finanziamenti USA e di isolarlo ulteriormente sul piano regionale - uno scenario che spingerebbe Islamabad a investire ancor di più sull'instabilità e sui gruppi islamisti in Afghanistan e nel Kashmir. A questo si aggiunge che i nuovi spazi di manovra per i competitor regionali penalizza il Pakistan. Come fa notare Ahmed Rashid:

i non pashtun che dominano il Nord e l'Occidente [dell'Afghanistan] sono entrati in contatto con gli stati vicini aprendo strade e reti commerciali, importando elettricità e gas, sviluppando l'estrazione mineraria [...]. Quelli che ne beneficiano sono l'Iran e gli stati centroasiatici di Tagikistan, Uzbekistan e Turkmenistan. L'Herat, nel Nord-ovest, ha stretto legami commerciali con l'Iran, cosa che ne ha fatto la provincia più ricca del paese. Lo stesso vale per i contatti di Mazar-i-Sharif con l'Uzbekistan. (Rashid 2013, 96).

Il biennio in cui la Nato implementa il piano previsto dalla *Transition* (2012-14) registra costantemente un peggioramento delle condizioni di sicurezza. La riduzione della presenza internazionale riduce le ca-

pacità operative delle forze di sicurezza nazionali afgane (ANSF - *Afghan National Security Force*) e la loro autonomia (mai raggiunta in realtà neanche al picco del dispiegamento di Isaf nel 2011). Quanto più le truppe internazionali abbandonano progressivamente l'Afghanistan e le ANSF rimangono isolate, tanto più i Talebani intensificano il controllo del territorio e riescono ad allargare progressivamente i distretti e le province contesi, nei quali il governo di Kabul non riesce a governare (ICG 2014). Lo scenario che si profila, dunque, torna a essere favorevole al ritorno delle ingerenze regionali e alle loro contrapposizioni.

## **5 Finale di partita (2015-19): gli anni del disimpegno fra ritiro americano e ritorno delle potenze regionali**

Il ritiro della missione Nato Isaf e l'annuncio della conclusione della missione americana *Enduring Freedom* non coincide con un ritiro completo. Nel Gennaio del 2015 entrambe vengono sostituite rispettivamente da due missioni più leggere: la missione Nato *Resolute Support* e *Freedom Sentinel*, per un totale di circa 16.000 uomini con compiti principalmente di addestramento e supporto alle ANSF (Thomas 2019). Benché si tratti di una presenza internazionale radicalmente ridotta a circa un decimo rispetto a quella del 2011-12, alcune potenze regionali (specialmente Russia e Iran) accolgono con sorpresa e disappunto l'annuncio della continuazione dell'intervento. In particolare, ciò che preoccupa è la persistenza di basi USA nella regione che, anche in assenza di una massiccia presenza militare stabile, permettono una proiezione strategica in Asia Centrale che non tutti gli attori regionali avevano messo in conto (Rashid 2013, 195).

Tuttavia, dal 2015 in poi è chiaro agli attori regionali che gli Stati Uniti non possono che ridurre progressivamente il loro impegno in Afghanistan: l'opzione del *surge* e di un nuovo rilancio della missione è stata già tentata da Obama ma è un'opzione irripetibile; quella in Afghanistan inoltre è la più lunga operazione militare mai condotta dagli Stati Uniti e l'inclinazione prevalente sia nell'opinione pubblica che nella classe politica è quella di un disimpegno; infine, nel 2016, le elezioni presidenziali hanno portato alla Casa Bianca il candidato che più di ogni altro è disinteressato all'Afghanistan. Donald Trump ha manifestato, tanto in campagna elettorale quanto da presidente, l'intenzione di invertire la rotta, ossia fermare quello che ritiene uno spreco di uomini e risorse. La strategia annunciata nell'agosto del 2017 - con l'invio di altri 3.000 uomini e regole di ingaggio più permissive per le operazioni offensive contro i Talebani - è stato un rilancio della missione solo apparente e di breve respiro, impostagli sostanzialmente dai consiglieri alla sicurezza (su tutti Herbert McMaster) e dal Segretario della Difesa James Mattis (Woodward 2018, 159-67, 324-

33). Già nel dicembre del 2018 Trump torna a manifestare una chiara determinazione per il ritiro, una determinazione che rappresenta la goccia che fa traboccare il vaso nei rapporti già tesi con Mattis, il quale presenterà le sue dimissioni e abbandonerà l'amministrazione.

Quanto più il ripiego americano e della Nato si profila ormai come definitivo (seppur i tempi rimangano incerti), tanto più l'Afghanistan sta tornando a essere un terreno di scontro fra le potenze rivali nel contesto regionale (Thomas 2019; Rashid 2013). Due dinamiche in particolare rendono oggi l'Afghanistan un teatro permissivo per le ingerenze esterne. In primo luogo, la frammentazione interna sul piano politico, etnico e religioso. La diarchia fra il presidente Ashraf Ghani e l'*executive chief* Abdullah Abdullah - frutto di un delicato compromesso in seguito alle elezioni presidenziali del 2014 - ha inaugurato una stagione di instabilità politica e di indebolimento progressivo del governo di Kabul, accompagnato a sua volta dalla crescente efficacia dei Talebani nel sottrarre il pieno controllo del territorio alle autorità nazionali. Governo fragile, frammentazione e competizione politica indeboliscono le resistenze alle influenze esterne.

In secondo luogo, la diversificazione delle partnership che l'Afghanistan ha promosso negli ultimi anni - in parte per compensare la sua debolezza interna - ha aperto le porte del paese a nuove influenze esterne. Per ragioni di politica interna, per la volontà di rafforzare il governo nazionale e per il senso di isolamento che deriva dal disimpegno americano e dei *donors* internazionali, Kabul ha inaugurato rapporti più stretti con vari attori regionali, tanto con quelli storici come Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tagikistan e India, quanto con attori che giocano una partita nuova in Asia come la Cina e la Russia (Thomas 2019; Dadabaev 2019). L'Iran ad esempio, secondo fonti americane, ha incrementato significativamente negli ultimi due anni (2017-19), i fondi per l'assistenza (umanitaria, economica e nella costruzione delle infrastrutture), dei quali hanno beneficiato le tradizionali comunità sciite, in particolare nella provincia di Herat. Ma fonti delle forze americane sul campo sospettano che si tratti anche di assistenza militare e che i beneficiari siano stati in alcuni casi alcuni gruppi di combattenti affiliati ai Talebani, in funzione di contrasto allo Stato Islamico della Provincia del Khorasan (Thomas 2019, 10).

Queste dinamiche sono state inoltre alimentate anche dalla crescente de-securitizzazione dell'Afghanistan agli occhi in particolare delle repubbliche centro-asiatiche e in parte della Cina, le quali percepiscono ora il paese non più solo come minaccia alla sicurezza ma anche come un'opportunità economico-commerciale e per nuovi investimenti (Dadabaev 2019). Se infatti dai tempi dell'invasione sovietica l'Afghanistan era tradizionalmente avvertito principalmente come una minaccia alla sicurezza, negli ultimi anni è tornata a farsi strada l'idea del paese come *natural land-bridge* di connessione fra Asia Centrale e Asia del Sud, verso paesi con sbocco nel Mar Arabico

e, più in generale, nell'Oceano Indiano. Una percezione che ha sortito un ritorno di investimenti ingenti sul piano infrastrutturale, sulle vie dell'approvvigionamento energetico e sulle rotte commerciali (Dadabaev 2019, 118-20; Katzman, Thomas 2017). In questa direzione si sono mossi alcuni paesi dell'Asia Centrale, con progetti di investimento nel settore dei trasporti e nei servizi, nella prospettiva che l'Afghanistan possa diventare un mercato di sbocco per beni e servizi prodotti nelle repubbliche centro-asiatiche (Dadabaev 2019, 115). In particolare l'Uzbekistan, con la nuova leadership del presidente Mirziyoyev (dopo la morte di Islam Karimov nel 2016) si è mostrato particolarmente attivo nell'inaugurazione di un nuovo ruolo in Afghanistan, avviando progetti di costruzione di ferrovie e reti energetiche nel nord del paese, a forte presenza uzbeka e tajika (119). Il segnale più evidente di questi sviluppi, almeno sotto il profilo cerimoniale, è stata la *Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan* tenutasi il 26-27 marzo 2018 nella capitale uzbeka, la quale ha insistito sulla cooperazione economica e connessione regionale («cooperation & regional connectivity» nel documento finale) per l'Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

Nel quadro regionale, tuttavia, l'attore più cruciale e ingombrante rimane ancora il Pakistan, il quale rimane il paese decisivo per il futuro dell'Afghanistan. Islamabad ha sfruttato a proprio vantaggio le debolezze interne e la frammentazione politica dell'Afghanistan e ha continuato a mettere in secondo piano lo sviluppo di progetti commerciali, economici e infrastrutturali. Come già sottolineato, il paradigma predominante a Islamabad rimane quello di garantirsi in Afghanistan una profondità strategica in vista di uno scontro aperto con l'India. Lo strumento è quello tradizionale: sostenere un partito Pashtun e islamista che garantisca al Pakistan un rapporto privilegiato con Kabul e, al medesimo tempo, impedisca a quest'ultimo un avvicinamento diplomatico-strategico all'India.

Più precisamente, oggi gli interessi del Pakistan in Afghanistan sono principalmente due. Anzitutto, quello di giocare un ruolo di primo piano - o almeno esercitare una forte influenza - sul negoziato in corso fra Stati Uniti e Talebani e, in prospettiva, fra Talebani e governo di Kabul. Il fine, comprensibilmente, è giungere a un equilibrio politico in Afghanistan che sia coerente con le esigenze di sicurezza pakistane. Il secondo interesse è quello di evitare due scenari opposti ma entrambi molto temibili per Islamabad: un Afghanistan estremamente debole, ossia uno stato fallito completamente abbandonato dagli americani, senza l'aiuto dei quali il Pakistan precipiterebbe

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<sup>2</sup> Si vedano la dichiarazione finale della conferenza sottoscritta dai paesi partecipanti sul sito della *Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations*. URL <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/declaration-tashkent-conference-afghanistan-peace-process-security-cooperation-regional#> (2019-11-22).

in un isolamento pericoloso; oppure un Afghanistan eccessivamente forte e stabile che, per un verso, farebbe venir meno aiuti e presenza americana nell'area e, per un'altro, garantirebbe a Kabul un'autonomia in grado di svincolarlo dall'influenza di Islamabad. In sintesi, un certo grado di instabilità in Afghanistan – tale da non far precipitare il paese nel caos dei primi anni '90 ma al medesimo tempo tale da non renderlo un attore regionale autonomo e temibile – fa parte per ora e nel prossimo futuro dell'interesse nazionale del Pakistan, l'attore regionale determinante e che nel quadro del disimpegno americano rischia di vedere accresciuta la sua influenza sull'Afghanistan.

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# Le vie d'acqua tra il mar Caspio e il mar Adriatico

## Opportunità e sfide

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**Abstract** Aim of the paper is to assess both the challenges and the opportunities that Italy faces in its drive to open a maritime communication route between the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea. In order to do so, the paper looks at the still unstable Caspian and Caucasian areas, introducing the three main trends in regional-global politics which will markedly influence its growth and development in the short-, medium- and long-term: Russian enduring pressures, European Union evolving transport policy, and China growing interest in the area.

**Keywords** Maritime connectivity. Caspian Sea. Adriatic sea. European Union. Belt and Road Initiative. Trans-European Transport Networks.

**Sommario** 1 Il contesto internazionale. Il ruolo dell'area caspica nelle dinamiche politiche e commerciali globali. – 2 La potenza regionale russa: fra ambizioni globali e limiti economici. – 3 La politica dei trasporti UE: un obiettivo politico ed economico. – 4 La nuova Via della Seta: progetto globale per una potenza globale. – 5 Russia, UE e Cina: quale ruolo per il Mediterraneo (e l'Italia). – 6 Il Mediterraneo nel contesto BRI. – 7 Il ruolo dell'Italia: quali collegamenti per quali opportunità.



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## **1 Il contesto internazionale. Il ruolo dell'area caspica nelle dinamiche politiche e commerciali globali**

Al netto dei venti 'isolazionisti' che spirano sullo scenario internazionale, l'interdipendenza economica e commerciale globale sembra essere prevalente rispetto ai proclami e alle azioni conseguenti dei decisori politici mondiali, che producono certamente effetti non trascurabili sulle dinamiche internazionali di import ed export, ma non tali da compromettere il quadro generale. Pertanto, per analizzare quali opportunità e quali sfide caratterizzino la relazione marittimo-commerciale fra il Mar Caspio e il Mar Adriatico, risulta necessario valutare il contesto internazionale in cui la stessa si inserisce.

Dopo il crollo del muro di Berlino e la conseguente disgregazione dell'Unione delle Repubbliche Socialiste Sovietiche, l'area del Mar Caspio, così come l'area caucasica, ha vissuto un periodo storico di profonda instabilità politica ed economica. Un periodo non ancora concluso ma che oggi si confronta con almeno tre fenomeni di politica regionale-globale che ne influenzeranno marcatamente la crescita e lo sviluppo nel breve, medio e lungo periodo.

Il primo è certamente la crescente pressione della Russia sugli Stati vicini. Tramontato il ruolo di potenza geo-politica mondiale che ha caratterizzato la seconda metà del secolo scorso, la Russia ha cercato di ritagliarsi un ruolo di potenza regionale; un ruolo regionale perché basato per lo più sulla capacità militare, ma non su quella finanziaria o commerciale, suscettibile pertanto di effetti immediati ma a minor raggio d'azione.

Il secondo riguarda la politica europea (in particolare relativamente ai trasporti, cardine della politica di integrazione fisica e dei mercati dell'Unione) che si presenta salda nei principi ma incapace, a ora, di incarnare la reale capacità - economica, finanziaria e commerciale - del vecchio continente, rispetto a un mondo cresciuto nella complessità e difficilmente prevedibile nella sua evoluzione.

Il terzo fenomeno da tenere in adeguata considerazione riguarda la strategia adottata dalla Cina a partire dal 2001 con l'ingresso nel WTO e sviluppata poi nella 'Nuova Via della Seta'. Una strategia tanto regionale - è chiaro l'intento di Pechino di imporsi quale unico attore asiatico in grado di condizionare l'intero Estremo Oriente a discapito dell'India - quanto globale che va declinata sotto il profilo economico, militare e finanziario.



## 2 La potenza regionale russa: fra ambizioni globali e limiti economici

Che peso dare alla Russia sul futuro dell'area del Mar Caspio e dell'Asia minore? Il punto di partenza per analizzare la strategia politica della Russia adottata negli ultimi anni (e le conseguenze che ne sono derivate e hanno determinato l'attuale situazione del Paese) è con ogni probabilità l'anno 2000. L'inizio del nuovo millennio infatti ha visto l'intensificarsi della presenza NATO ai confini orientali europei; una scelta che, *mutatis mutandis*, ha determinando da un lato l'aumento della pressione della Russia sugli stati confinanti in chiave di contenimento dell'influenza militare occidentale e, dall'altro, un'intensa attività diplomatica russa con l'avvio di serrati contatti con l'Oriente per stringere partnership, anche commerciali, con Paesi terzi quali, per lo più, Cina, India e Iran.

Una strategia pensata per riaffermarsi come potenza globale - e intrapresa a fronte del più lungo periodo di espansione economica mai registrato dalla Russia - ma interrotta bruscamente dalla crisi finanziaria del 2008 che ha travolto il Paese, 'prigioniero' della monocultura produttiva legata alle risorse petrolifere e, più in generale, all'esportazione di idrocarburi, che hanno subito una pesantissima battuta d'arresto sia in termini di volumi sia in termini di redditività.

È pur vero che il Paese ha retto l'urto in virtù di fondamentali economici che, tutt'oggi, garantiscono una relativa tranquillità circa il quadro macroeconomico; ma ciò non è stato sufficiente per garantire alla Russia il ruolo cui invece ambiva. La mancata diversificazione produttiva così come la lenta modernizzazione dei processi - nonostante il Governo abbia messo sul piatto, per arginare la crisi mondiale del 2008, ben 220 miliardi di dollari per misure a sostegno del sistema industriale e finanziario - ridimensiona la sfera di influenza russa all'ambito regionale. Perché, dopo dieci anni, oggi la Russia, al netto delle sanzioni economiche imposte a partire dal 2012 dall'Unione Europea (e dagli Stati Uniti), continua a registrare un quadro macroeconomico positivo. Il 2018 registra una crescita del PIL pari al 2,3% - il migliore risultato registrato a partire dal 2012 - e il rapporto debito/PIL è pari al 15% (uno tra i più bassi al mondo) e ciò rende il Paese più stabile (scongiurando il rischio default che invece aveva corso nel 1998). Sotto il profilo commerciale, la Russia risulta fra le maggiori potenze per volumi sia in export, con 341 miliardi di dollari di valore esportato, sia in import, il cui valore è pari a 221 miliardi, con un bilancio positivo commerciale pari a oltre 120 miliardi).

È chiaro quindi che un Paese come la Russia, per ragioni anche solo meramente demografiche e di superficie, in aggiunta a quanto su esposto, eserciterà nei prossimi anni una pressione crescente nella zona del Caucaso e del mar Caspio, da un lato per contenere l'espansione

sione (politica) della Cina e, dall'altro, per contrastare la presenza della NATO nell'area, anche al fine di preservare, in attesa di una necessaria diversificazione produttiva, il potere di 'aprire (o chiudere) i rubinetti' delle risorse energetiche all'Europa.

Risulta però evidente, analizzando i macrosettori in export - ovvero petrolio greggio, petrolio raffinato, gas, carbone e grano - che la diversificazione di cui ci sarebbe assoluto bisogno non si è verificata, tanto più che per quanto riguarda l'import di prodotti ad alta tecnologia e ad alto valore aggiunto la Russia dipende da Paesi terzi, *in primis* la Cina ma, a seguire, Germania, Bielorussia, Stati Uniti e Italia.

Va poi sottolineato che la disuguaglianza in Russia era e rimane elevata<sup>1</sup> - deprimendo così un potenziale ceto medio di dimensioni necessarie e sufficienti per stimolare adeguatamente il mercato e la produzione - cui si aggiunge un aumento della instabilità politica all'interno della federazione con spinte centrifughe che ne minano, talvolta, la stessa integrità geografica.

### 3 La politica dei trasporti UE: un obiettivo politico ed economico

L'enigma dell'Unione Europea rimane tale; un debuttante (ormai un po' attempato) di talento che non vuole entrare in campo. Perché l'Europa, pur avendo a disposizione sia i mezzi (finanziari, produttivi, commerciali) necessari e sufficienti per ambire a un ruolo di protagonista globale, sia gli strumenti per incidere profondamente sulle dinamiche internazionali, continua a presentarsi disunita, accecata com'è da visioni spesso troppo miopi - per interesse di breve perio-

<sup>1</sup> «Secondo i dati del World Inequality Database (WID), la dissoluzione dell'Urss ha generato, come in molti altri Paesi, un notevole sbilanciamento delle entrate a vantaggio delle fasce più ricche della popolazione senza che vi fosse però un'efficace redistribuzione negli anni seguenti. Anche rispetto a Paesi 'simili' per solidità come il Kazakistan (rating S&P BBB- e rapporto debito/Pil al 18%) la distribuzione del reddito in Russia mostra uno squilibrio significativo. Anche il potere d'acquisto rimane limitato: ad esempio, ripagare un mutuo per l'acquisto di un trilocale in una zona popolare di Mosca può richiedere l'equivalente di 20-30 anni di stipendio medio di una famiglia residente nella capitale (circa il doppio di quanto serve a Milano). E fuori da Mosca il panorama è peggiore, come ha portato all'attenzione dell'opinione pubblica l'esplosione di Magnitogorsk, testimoniando il contrasto tra i nuovi quartieri della capitale e gli edifici vetusti dei sobborghi industriali. Il 68% degli intervistati in un recente sondaggio del Carnegie Moscow Center ritiene che non sia possibile diventare ricchi in Russia rimanendo onesti. Nella stessa indagine è emerso che a beneficiare delle privatizzazioni degli anni Novanta siano stati rispettivamente gli 'oligarchi' e i funzionari pubblici per il 59% e il 35%. In questo senso, l'imposizione di sanzioni su specifici 'oligarchi', con effetti dannosi sull'economia nel suo insieme, potrebbe rafforzare questa avversione e incoraggiare il dissenso». (Moneta 2019)

do di tutti gli Stati membri, nessuno escluso - per cogliere, e sfruttare, le occasioni globali.

A partire da una politica comune dei trasporti che sta lentamente perdendo anche l'obiettivo posto alla sua origine: costruire il mercato unico europeo, perseguendo al contempo un obiettivo di crescita economica e uno di coesione attraverso tre ampi traguardi:

1. Garantire l'accesso al mercato dei servizi di trasporto di uno Stato membro agli operatori non residenti di altri Stati membri, attraverso la regolamentazione del mercato.
2. Conseguire la piena interoperabilità tecnica tra i diversi Stati membri, attraverso l'adozione di standard comuni e sostenendo la ricerca e lo sviluppo economico.
3. Interconnettere le reti di trasporto nazionali per favorire lo scambio di merci attraverso una politica infrastrutturale comune.

A questi peraltro oggi va aggiunto almeno un altro obiettivo, altrettanto strategico: la sostenibilità. Oltre ai vecchi obiettivi di integrazione dei mercati e di coesione, infatti, le reti infrastrutturali europee sono divenute funzionali anche per il perseguimento di nuovi obiettivi come la sostenibilità ambientale, la lotta al cambiamento climatico, la riduzione del costo dell'energia (la 'strategia 20/20/20' entro il 2020) e l'interconnessione tra il mercato interno e il mercato globale.

La contraddizione tra il ruolo delle reti transeuropee per i trasporti e la loro posizione effettiva nell'agenda delle priorità politiche europee era già emersa nel corso dei negoziati che hanno preceduto la promulgazione delle Prospettive finanziarie dell'Unione Europea per il periodo 2007-13 dove, nonostante l'appoggio del Parlamento europeo alla proposta della Commissione, vennero stanziati solo 8 miliardi di euro per gli investimenti in infrastrutture, a fronte di una richiesta di 20 miliardi.

E oggi è ancora più evidente l'incapacità dell'Unione Europea di fare delle reti TEN-T uno strumento utile in grado di rispondere alle sfide globali. Non solo e non tanto per l'esiguità delle risorse disponibili quanto per la sclerosi nella ripartizione dei fondi da destinare alle infrastrutture che più necessitano di essere implementate.

È vero infatti che per la nuova programmazione 2021-27,<sup>2</sup> la CEF 2 prevede un incremento dei contributi europei per la CEF TRANSPORT che passa dagli attuali 23,5 miliardi di euro (2014-20) a 30,6 miliardi di euro (2021-27) per le seguenti priorità:

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**2** Proposal for a «Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Connecting Europe Facility and repealing Regulations» (EU) no. 1316/2013 and (EU) no. 283/2014, Brussels 06.06.2018.

- Efficient and interconnected TEN-T
- Smart (digital), sustainable (e.g. alternative fuels), inclusive, safe and secure TEN-T
- TEN-T adapted to military mobility requirements (6,5 bn €)

E a essi si aggiungono anche 11,5 miliardi di euro dal programma InvestEU (loans) e 15 miliardi di euro dal programma *Horizon 2020 per Climate, Energy and Mobility*.

Ma è altrettanto vero che sarà necessario prestare un'adeguata attenzione per dare alla politica europea dei trasporti la necessaria proiezione da/verso il mercato globale privilegiando i punti di alimentazione del mercato europeo, ovvero, tipicamente, i porti. Già ora i fondi per escavi, canali, messa in sicurezza e altre infrastrutture portuali, prevedono da parte dell'UE contributi attualmente al 20%, che passeranno al 30% nella prossima programmazione 2021-27. Ma è necessario sostenere un ribilanciamento dei contributi europei CEF verso altri settori, in particolare il settore portuale/Autostrade del Mare, in quanto la maggior parte dei finanziamenti nella programmazione 2014-20 è andata in favore delle infrastrutture ferroviarie, e meno del 5% ai porti europei. Finora invece è stata data priorità al completamento dei collegamenti transfrontalieri (gli archi logistici e di trasporto che collegano i nodi della Rete Core TEN-T) e quindi alla dimensione 'interna' della rete. È quindi la dimensione 'internazionale' a essere, ancora oggi, il convitato di pietra nel dibattito europeo sulla interconnessione dell'Europa al mondo. Se, ad esempio, si continuerà cocciutamente a non riconoscere ciò che è una realtà fattuale - ovvero che le Autostrade del Mare sono collegamenti marittimi che rispondono agli obiettivi di sostenibilità e crescita economica alla base della politica dei trasporti europea, sia che esse tocchino due Stati membri, sia che essi tocchino uno Stato membro e uno Stato al di fuori dell'Unione Europea - e quindi si negheranno i contributi e i finanziamenti previsti per la loro implementazione, le capacità dell'Europa di governare i processi mondiali, anziché subirli, saranno talmente residuali da diventare inconsistenti. Un macigno che colpirà più pesantemente, peraltro, l'Italia; non solo perché essendo la seconda economia manifatturiera d'Europa ha una fortissima propensione all'export, ma anche perché l'inadeguatezza dei sistemi portuali e delle catene logistiche costringe il sistema produttivo nazionale a 'pagare' una tassa logistica occulta, dovendo esso riferirsi a sistemi portuali e logistici geograficamente meno prossimi - tipicamente quelli dei Paesi del Nord Europa - anziché a quelli che sarebbero i naturali nodi di collegamento da/per il mondo.

A oggi, invece, gli unici collegamenti riconducibili alla politica europea dei trasporti che afferiscono l'area caucasica sono le radici portuali dei corridoi ferroviari/stradali Orientale/Mediterraneo orienta-

le<sup>3</sup> e il Reno-Danubio<sup>4</sup> che terminano sul Mar Nero. Una scelta che rischia comunque di non essere efficiente dato che le economie di scala prodotte dal mezzo 'treno' sono certamente molto inferiori rispetto a quelle generate dal mezzo 'nave'; pertanto la sostenibilità economica può derivare o da grandi volumi di traffico (che l'area caucasica e del Mar Caspio non possono generare) o da sovvenzioni finanziarie che l'Europa non può permettersi - ma la Cina sì e non è un caso se gli stessi vengono utilizzati, ad esempio, per sussidiare<sup>5</sup> e quindi mantenere artatamente attivi i collegamenti ferroviari con l'Europa con l'obiettivo, più politico che economico, di controllare e garantirsi una penetrazione sul territorio su cui l'infrastruttura insiste.

#### 4 La nuova Via della Seta: progetto globale per una potenza globale

Dal settembre del 2013 ha fatto irruzione nel dibattito globale sulle reti di connettività e sulle catene logistiche un invitato che ha, prima sommessamente e poi letteralmente, monopolizzato la discussione in quasi ogni angolo del globo. Inizialmente denominata OBOR - *One Belt One Road* - e successivamente rinominata a partire dalla fine del 2017 BRI - *Belt and Road Initiative*, il grande progetto geopolitico e commerciale lanciato da Xi Jinping in Kazakistan in un giorno pre-autunnale ha rilanciato, con grande enfasi comunicativa, i fasti delle antiche rotte commerciali che univano Est e Ovest del mondo e denominate 'Vie della Seta'.

Prima di entrare nel merito di quanto si vuol discutere, si ritiene necessario un inquadramento sintetico sulle ragioni che portano alla genesi, sviluppo ed espansione della BRI, che già conta a vario titolo l'adesione di oltre 100 Paesi,<sup>6</sup> numero destinato a crescere quasi su base quotidiana. Perché la BRI è in realtà un insieme complesso di azioni economiche, finanziarie e geopolitiche, che hanno diversi obiettivi finali a seconda sia dell'area geografica di riferimento, sia

**3** Il corridoio Orientale/Mediterraneo orientale collega le interfacce marittime del Mare del Nord, Mar Baltico, Mar Nero e Mediterraneo ottimizzando l'uso dei relativi porti e delle rispettive Autostrade del Mare. Includendo l'Elba come via navigabile interna permetterà di migliorare le connessioni multimodali tra la Germania settentrionale, la Repubblica ceca, la regione della Pannonia e il sudest dell'Europa. Via mare andrà poi dalla Grecia a Cipro.

**4** Reno-Danubio, le cui arterie fluviali principali sono il Reno e il Danubio, collega le regioni centrali intorno a Strasburgo e Francoforte sul Meno attraverso la Germania meridionale a Vienna, Bratislava e Budapest per arrivare infine al Mar Nero, con una sezione importante tra Monaco di Baviera e Praga, Zilina, Kosice e il confine ucraino.

**5** Si veda, tra gli altri, Suokas 2019.

**6** Si veda <https://bit.ly/2rf7SoD> (2019-11-22).

delle finalità direttamente o indirettamente perseguite con le medesime. Peraltro la BRI è un ecosistema dinamico, nel senso che non è un pacchetto fissato e definito di azioni, bensì un contenitore 'ombrello', sotto il quale si possono facilmente inserire, o togliere, azioni e/o visioni di intervento, anche in momenti successivi e per approssimazioni progressive. In questo senso, quello che era stato inizialmente, nel biennio 2013-15, principalmente un progetto di miglioramento delle infrastrutture legate al commercio internazionale, si è evoluto in uno strumento di espansione dell'influenza cinese anche in senso culturale, di supporto a iniziative di ricerca e sviluppo, finanche di azioni legate a politiche di scambi educativi, soprattutto in Paesi emergenti (Opera 2019).

In estrema sintesi,<sup>7</sup> le ragioni principali, tutte interne, che giustificano il lancio di un intervento su scala globale di tali dimensioni da parte cinese si possono elencare come segue:

- a. La creazione, in particolare nelle aree più prossime come il Sud Est asiatico, di nuovi mercati dove poter indirizzare quote crescenti di export cinese. La stessa motivazione in parte si può utilizzare per i massicci interventi in Africa, così come per l'estensione della sfera di influenza di BRI anche verso l'America Latina.
- b. Attraverso canali rafforzati di connettività, riuscire a far assorbire la sovracapacità industriale cinese, che ha bisogno di livelli di produzione artatamente tenuti alti, al fine di mantenere e favorire i redditi della sempre più volubile e auto-consapevole classe media cinese. Senza il mantenimento di questi livelli di reddito si potrebbero manifestare elementi di instabilità sociale che avrebbero conseguenze 'nefaste' per la leadership politica cinese, che ha a cuore sopra ogni altra cosa il mantenimento del potere nelle mani del PCC.
- c. Nell'Ovest del Paese, più povero e meno sviluppato delle floride aree costiere, il necessario processo di infrastrutturazione viene favorito dagli ingenti investimenti statali in ogni sorta di opera, con particolare attenzione a quelle ferroviarie. Ecco il perché di tanta attenzione verso la creazione di linee ferroviarie merci dirette dalla Cina verso l'Eurasia. Mettere delle infrastrutture a terra significa anche poter controllare con più capillarità il relativo territorio, una delle ragioni per cui l'*hub* di partenza dei treni cinesi verso Ovest è posizionato nelle province di Shaanxi e Xinjiang, particolarmente instabili sotto il profilo politico e quindi più bisognose di 'attenzioni' particolari.

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<sup>7</sup> Per una definizione ampia e puntuale si veda Amighini 2017.

- d. Il consolidamento e l'assicurazione di stabili ed economiche linee di approvvigionamento energetico. La Cina è uno dei Paesi più energivori del mondo e per approvvigionarsi da tali fonti ha la necessità di sviluppare, costruire e definire accordi per poter acquistarle a basso costo e con una certezza quasi assoluta sull'acquisto e sui costi di trasporto. In questo senso si giustificano i vasti investimenti nelle aree degli '–Stan', in particolare in alcuni Paesi da cui dipende molta parte della fornitura di gas naturale (Putz 2018).
- e. Fornire alla moneta nazionale, il renminbi, uno status finalmente 'degno' di valuta internazionale, scambiata – all'interno della limitata autonomia consentita alla stessa dal governo centrale nel mercato dei cambi – o addirittura utilizzata come riserva. In questa direzione la creazione di complessi ecosistemi finanziari per sostenere gli investimenti BRI nel mondo garantisce la possibilità di far guadagnare peso e credibilità alla valuta, a scapito di altre ben più stimate, come il dollaro o l'euro.
- f. Un dato meno conosciuto o discusso, ma che costituisce un'altrettanta giustificazione da parte cinese dell'investimento in infrastrutture, è l'abbassamento dei costi di trasporto per la movimentazione delle merci cinesi.<sup>8</sup>
- g. Paradossalmente, forse l'aspetto meno esplorato e considerato, ma di sicuro più importante, nella prospettiva cinese, è il disegno di riequilibrio geopolitico di fondo, che serve alla Cina per proiettarsi nel XXI secolo come potenza mondiale in competizione con USA e UE, e come potenza regionale indiscussa nell'ambito Indo-Pacifico.

## 5 Russia, UE e Cina: quale ruolo per il Mediterraneo (e l'Italia)

Le rivoluzioni geopolitiche che coinvolgono l'Europa e l'Estremo Oriente hanno prodotto (e produrranno) effetti rilevanti nell'area del Mar Caspio e del Caucaso. È chiaro tuttavia che, come evidenziato nell'incipit al presente testo, la strategia della Nuova Via della Seta sembra essere il fenomeno che, più degli altri, inciderà (certamente) sullo sviluppo di breve e medio periodo oltre che (probabilmente) nel lungo periodo.

Questo perché, nell'ottica di assumere un ruolo cardine rispetto agli sviluppi del commercio globale, la Cina con il lancio del progetto

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<sup>8</sup> La Cina continentale, secondo il *Logistics Performance Index*, si posiziona al poco invidiabile ventiseiesimo posto. Si veda URL <https://lpi.worldbank.org/international/global> (2019-11-22).

OBOR salda le diverse dimensioni della logistica aprendo interessanti scenari di ibridazione tra i paradigmi geopolitici terrestri e marittimi (Valigi, Natalizia 2018). In particolare, proprio in ragione di un più ampio contesto di logistica integrata, lo snodo geopolitico compreso tra il Caucaso e l'Asia Centrale diventa parte di un sottosistema funzionale nel quale i flussi commerciali provenienti sia da Occidente sia da Oriente potranno essere distribuiti ora via terra ora via acqua nelle diverse direttrici, incluse quella russa e quella africana.

A completare questo quadro, benché si tratti di sviluppi non direttamente collegati con i due tragitti (terrestre e marittimo) di BRI, va poi segnalato quanto si è verificato al livello di infrastrutture portuali nel Caspio. Destinati ad accogliere le merci provenienti da Oriente e sviluppati soprattutto grazie ai capitali e al know-how asiatici, quegli *hub* sono destinati ad allacciarsi sulla terraferma all'imponente progetto entro il quale si colloca la ferrovia che collega Baku, Tbilisi e Kars (BTK) - ovvero una sistema integrato su rotaia che, attraverso il tunnel Marmaray che solca il Bosforo, congiungerà Europa, Caucaso e Asia, delineando la nuova frontiera della geopolitica del XXI secolo.

A questo si aggiunga che la Cina ha usato il deterioramento dei rapporti tra Russia e Unione Europea per rafforzare la propria posizione nel vecchio continente, con particolare attenzione all'Europa orientale.

In questo quadro, il Caucaso ha assunto un ruolo chiave nello sviluppo della BRI, la Nuova Via della Seta che - nelle intenzioni di Pechino - assicurerà l'accesso ai mercati europei. L'obiettivo cinese non è quello di competere con l'influenza russa nella regione ma di mettere al sicuro i propri interessi economici nell'area post-sovietica, aumentando i propri investimenti. L'ostilità americana allo sviluppo cinese impone a Pechino di aprire nuove vie per procurarsi petrolio e gas, e diversificare le rotte per il trasporto di idrocarburi. In tal senso, sono già stati siglati importanti accordi con l'Azerbaijan che prevedono la partecipazione a un comune fondo di investimenti e la costruzione della ferrovia Baku-Tbilisi-Kars.

## 6 Il Mediterraneo nel contesto BRI

In questo contesto economico-finanziario, di investimenti e geopolitico, il Mediterraneo ha riacquistato, dopo circa cinque secoli di relativo appannamento, un ruolo centrale nello sviluppo degli scambi commerciali.

Il raddoppio del Canale di Suez, fatto a tempo di record dall'Egitto, unitamente agli incrementati volumi di traffico spinti dalla Cina, ma anche dagli altri Paesi che lungo la Maritime Silk road si affacciano, hanno rimesso il *Mare Nostrum* al centro delle mappe.

L'investimento cinese sul Pireo ha principalmente questa funzione: garantire il controllo, con una posizione baricentrica, di molti dei



traffici sviluppati in chiave BRI e rivolti verso il bacino mediterraneo e l'Europa. La Grecia garantisce, geograficamente, la possibilità di governare gli scambi rivolti da e per il Mar Nero, le rotte del vicino Oriente, l'*hub* ideale di *transshipment* per i servizi oceanici porta-container, le cui dimensioni di naviglio impongono, per raggiungere l'importante dorsale alto Adriatica, un trasbordo su naviglio di dimensioni compatibili sia con le infrastrutture sia, e soprattutto, con le dinamiche economiche dei *carrier*.

Come recentemente evidenziato da un rapporto stilato da SRM, la centralità del bacino mediterraneo è sicuramente fattore di attrattività per investimenti pubblici e privati nei settori chiave di trasporti e logistica. Significativo in questo processo il riequilibrio del peso delle rotte oceaniche. Mentre nel 1995 le rotte transpacifiche valevano il 53% dei transiti globali e quelle Asia-Europa solo il 27%, il dato del 2018 le pone in sostanziale equilibrio, con una ripartizione rispettivamente del 46% e del 41% (SRM 2019).

La Cina, negli ultimi anni, ha pesantemente investito nello sviluppo delle infrastrutture portuali all'interno del Mediterraneo. Oltre al noto investimento sul Pireo, si ricordano gli interventi a Cherchell in Algeria, Port Said e Alessandria in Egitto, Ashdod e Haifa in Israele, il terminal di Kumport ad Ambarli in Turchia, senza contare gli interventi già fatti o in via di definizione nei porti italiani di Savona, Trieste, Genova e Venezia (Merics 2016).

Questo insieme composito di interventi è chiaramente proporzionale all'importanza rivestita dal mercato Europeo per gli interessi cinesi. L'Unione Europea è il maggior partner commerciale della Cina e ridurre costi e tempi di trasporto rappresenta un imperativo, considerato che al momento oltre l'80% del commercio tra le due parti si muove via mare (Ekman 2018, 15 ss).

## **7 Il ruolo dell'Italia: quali collegamenti per quali opportunità**

In questo contesto globale, vanno ovviamente considerate quali sono le opportunità e i connessi rischi che un Paese oggettivamente piccolo come l'Italia affronta. Sicuramente nella narrazione costruita dalla Cina, i rapporti storici di scambi e relazioni col nostro Paese forniscono loro il necessario substrato culturale per edificare lo *story-telling* legato al concetto di 'nuova Via della Seta'. Per parte nostra, ci pone senza particolari sforzi al centro di dinamiche più ampie e articolate di quanto avremmo potuto mai immaginare.

Ma come giocare questa partita massimizzando i vantaggi e minimizzando molti dei rischi delineati in precedenza?

Sicuramente la visita di Xi nel marzo del 2019 ha rappresentato un elemento di grande valore simbolico e la conseguente firma del Me-

morandum d'Intesa di adesione alla BRI pone il nostro Paese in una posizione di importanza relativa, rispetto ad altri giocatori regionali. Al netto però delle impressioni mediatiche, concretamente siamo ancora abbastanza distanti dall'aver fatto significativi passi in avanti nella direzione di creare valore a vantaggio della nostra struttura produttiva ed economica, all'interno del sistema BRI e non solo.

Gli annunciati interessi rispetto a investimenti potenziali di player cinesi nei porti di Genova e Trieste<sup>9</sup> si scontrano con la realtà della necessità di seguire le procedure italiane ed europee tracciate da norme imperative e cogenti, non ultime quelle contenute nel Codice degli Appalti e quelle relative alla trasparenza, pubblicità e rispetto della concorrenza. Pertanto le firme dei MoUs relativi sono di forte valenza simbolica ma di limitata portata pratica, almeno per il momento.

Volendo quindi utilizzare il tema BRI in chiave veramente utile al Paese sono necessarie due azioni che in qualche modo dovrebbero rappresentare un salto di qualità 'culturale', a partire dagli operatori istituzionali ma passando anche attraverso, e soprattutto, gli stakeholder privati quali rappresentanze di categoria del mondo imprenditoriale e produttivo.

Bisogna innanzitutto effettuare una ricognizione dell'offerta di infrastruttura e di connettività nazionale perché alla domanda se l'Italia in questo momento abbia un eccesso o una carenza di offerta di banchine, ad esempio, non vi sono dati scientifici reali che permettano al decisore, a qualunque livello esso si posizioni, di rispondere con precisione al fine di prendere decisioni basate su dati veritieri e non seguendo le 'sensibilità', spesso passeggere, dei singoli territori.

In secondo luogo serve un piano industriale e di sviluppo con un orizzonte di lungo periodo. Le infrastrutture portuali sono fornitori di servizi, ma i clienti/utilizzatori di tali servizi sono le industrie e le imprese che producono, la spina dorsale del nostro amato *Made in Italy*, fondato essenzialmente su manifattura di alto livello.

Senza una chiara visione di lungo periodo su come si svilupperanno i cluster industriali del futuro, lungo quale idea di sviluppo industriale abbiamo intenzione di indirizzare il Paese, su quali settori riterremo prioritario investire, ricercare, sviluppare, diviene di

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<sup>9</sup> Per quanto riguarda Trieste e le relative possibilità legate allo sfruttamento dell'area franca, andrebbero analizzati con più profondità e attenzione gli aspetti geopolitici legati allo status internazionale del Territorio Libero di Trieste, così come delineati dalla risoluzione S/RES/16 (1947), relativa al trattato di pace e pubblicato anche in GU 295/1947. Vi sono interessantissime trattazioni in circolazione sul tema, mentre stupisce l'assenza di qualsiasi riferimento a questi temi da parte delle istituzioni nazionali e internazionali. Tra il molto materiale a disposizione, si vedano alcuni utili articoli introduttivi: Parovel 2018 e URL <https://triestelibera.one/trattati-internazionali.html> (2019-11-22).

conseguenza impossibile ipotizzare come e dove creare nuova infrastruttura e migliorare l'utilizzo di quella esistente

Tutto ciò premesso, le opportunità di collegamento commerciale fra il Mar Caspio e l'Adriatico possono passare attraverso due principali direttrici: la prima è la direttrice che interessa il bacino economico-manifatturiero del Mar Caspio con riferimento a Azerbaijan-Federazione Russa-Kazakistan che potrebbero collegarsi, via terra (strada/ferrovia) al mar Nero e, da lì, raggiungere via nave l'Adriatico o il Pireo, autentico riferimento cinese per il traffico marittimo mediterraneo/europeo. La seconda direttrice interessa il bacino economico-manifatturiero Uzbekistan-Turkmesnistan-Iran che, attraverso il porto di Gwadar (lo scalo pakistano è il progetto di punta del China-Pakistan *Economic Corridor*, del valore di oltre 50 miliardi di dollari) potrebbe connettersi direttamente alle rotte BRI.

A queste tuttavia si aggiungono corridoi che potrebbero spostare (in parte) il baricentro, attualmente incentrato sui collegamenti marittimi intra-mediterranei, verso la soluzione 'terrestre' (e la dimensione Nordeuropea di alimentazione dei mercati UE) della Nuova Via della Seta che, il Prof Haralambides<sup>10</sup> identifica provvidenzialmente in *missing link* della strategia BRI insistenti nell'area caspica:

- il primo è un *missing link* terrestre che dovrebbe connettere l'area a nord verso Mosca (nodo già identificato e operativo nella strategia BRI) per l'alimentazione dei mercati Nord europei. È chiaro che, in questo caso, il Mediterraneo e l'Adriatico diventerebbero partner commerciali marginali per l'area del Mar Caspio.
- Il secondo è un *missing link* intermodale che vede il porto di Poti quale nodo portuale intra-mar Nero per alimentare poi i porti europei prospicienti, da Varna a Odessa. Anche in questo caso il rischio di marginalizzazione è molto alto stanti i collegamenti ferroviari previsti dalla rete TEN-T (il corridoio Orientale e il corridoio Reno-Danubio di collegamento fra Mar Nero e Nord Europa) che alimenterebbero volumi (e mercati) certamente non italiani o adriatici.
- Il terzo è un *missing link* riguardante il collegamento terrestre dell'area verso sud e che vede nel porto di Gwadar (Pakistan)

**10** «Through the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway system (BTK), running south of Caucasus, the link would connect the new port of Baku (President Aliyev's top national priority) to the Georgian ports of Batumi, or Poti, or - why not - the 2.5 billion dollar port of Anaklia, once this project materializes. As Baku is at the crossroads of the North-South (Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia) corridor (a tripartite grand project already agreed, signed and sealed by the 3 countries), the interests of Iran and Russia in the project are obvious, as are those of India who wants to use the north-south corridor for her exports to Russia and Europe. But the plan did not stop at Georgia. Navigating the Black Sea, my Missing Link would extend to Istanbul, Thessaloniki and Costanza and from there, through the Danube-Rhine fluvial system, it would end up to central and northern Europe (Rotterdam)». (Haralambides 2019)

il nodo portuale di accesso della BRI. In questo caso, ricorrendo a servizi marittimi diretti fra Adriatico e Estremo Oriente, i volumi di traffico da/per l'area caspica potrebbero aumentare sensibilmente.

Tutto ciò premesso, e considerato poi che le sfide sono principalmente politico-strategiche (l'Area infatti conserva riserve abbondanti di idrocarburi e per una realtà, quale quella europea, e più in particolare italiana, povera di risorse energetiche, il controllo della Regione caucasica diventa elemento centrale per l'approvvigionamento) che commerciali, è chiaro come il rafforzamento della *partnership* fra l'Italia (e l'Adriatico in particolare) e la regione del Mar Caspio possa contribuire alla stabilizzazione dell'area e al suo sviluppo economico e sociale.

In questo senso, nel breve e medio periodo, risulta necessario puntare su almeno due linee strategiche.

La prima, per noi più importante, si incentra sull'individuazione del Pireo quale nodo marittimo di riferimento per il mercato caspico. I volumi degli scambi commerciali fra l'Adriatico e i Paesi del Mar Caspio, per ragioni di natura demografica ed economica, possono giustificare a fatica collegamenti marittimi diretti ma possono invece 'approfittare' dei collegamenti esistenti fra il Mediterraneo e l'Estremo Oriente.

In questo caso è lecito attendersi un aumento dei traffici intra-mediterranei e sarà quindi necessario puntare sul potenziamento essenzialmente degli accordi commerciali, sulla falsa riga di quanto già siglato l'11 febbraio 2019 dal Porto di Venezia: un MoU con il Pireo che mira alla cooperazione stabile e reciproca tra i due scali, al fine di sviluppare e di supportare politiche di connettività infrastrutturale e servizi portuali atti a implementare il flusso commerciale tra i mercati dell'Europa, del Mediterraneo e dell'Estremo Oriente attraverso i due porti. Il Memorandum mira anche a migliorare lo scambio di buone pratiche e conoscenze in ambito di gestione portuale nei campi dell'*information technology*, dell'attrazione degli investimenti e della comunicazione. L'obiettivo comune finale è migliorare le prestazioni dei due scali, snodi fondamentali nei collegamenti marittimi internazionali del futuro lungo la Nuova Via della Seta.

La seconda linea strategica si incentra invece sullo sviluppo di Gwadar quale nodo marittimo di riferimento per il mercato caspico.

In questo senso il porto di Venezia ha immaginato la realizzazione del progetto 'Banchina ad alti fondali' che prevede la realizzazione di piazzali connessi al molo containers per una superficie di 5 ha, la realizzazione di piazzali per una superficie di 1,5 ha, a servizio delle chiatte che, collocate in una darsena di 5,3 ha di superficie, fungeranno da collegamento fra il terminal container alla bocca di Malamocco e i terminal di terra siti nell'area portuale di Porto Marghera. L'opera è in grado di garantire l'accosto simultaneo di 2 uni-

tà portacontainer con capacità pari a 18.000 TEU ciascuna - intercettando così i servizi diretti Europa-Estremo Oriente operanti oggi e nel medio/lungo termine - e, utilizzando chiatte dalla capacità di 384 TEU ciascuna, garantire l'alimentazione h24 dei terminal di terra in meno di 1,5 ore.

Le maggiori opportunità per l'Italia e per i porti adriatici in particolare possono venire però dall'implementazione di una politica Europea che già nel 2004 era stata per la prima volta, con molta lungimiranza, proposta. Si tratta di estendere ai paesi extra UE le reti di connessione marittima che si dipartono dai nostri porti e che, già oggi, mettono in connessione scali di paesi diversi. Nel solco tracciato dalla proposta della commissaria EU ai trasporti Violetta Bulc, che nel gennaio del 2019 ha proposto un piano di 'allungamento' delle reti TEN-T ai paesi confinanti con l'Unione Europea, e specificamente con Armenia, Bielorussia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Repubblica Moldava e Ucraina (European Commission 2019).

In questo schema l'estensione delle Autostrade del Mare verso i porti dell'area del Mar Nero permetterebbe di intercettare lì i flussi di merce che originano in quella zona e sono destinati ai mercati europei, garantendo una modalità di trasporto sostenibile ed efficiente, così da superare e migliorare il modello logistico proposto dai governi di Romania, Georgia, Azerbaijan e Turkmenistan (PortsEurope 2019) che, in un recente accordo siglato tra i quattro paesi, propongono un asse commerciale che attraversi i rispettivi territori per giungere al cuore dell'Europa continentale dopo un lungo tratto svolto in modalità terrestre, a mezzo camion, dal porto di Costanza verso le destinazioni finali dei vari paesi UE. L'imperativo della sostenibilità economica, sociale e ambientale, impone a tutti i paesi membri dell'Unione Europea e a tutti gli stakeholder impegnati nello sviluppo del modello economico, di adottare le migliori soluzioni per il trasporto efficiente dei prodotti da e verso i nostri territori, utilizzando le modalità più consone alle varie circostanze e che, in questo caso, prevedono l'utilizzo massiccio della modalità marittima per portare le merci lungo il corridoio adriatico, verso i porti, come Venezia, vicini ai mercati di destinazione finale.

Arthur Bloch chiarisce nella sua arguta 'Legge di Grossman' che «i problemi più complessi hanno soluzioni semplici, facili da comprendere e sbagliate»;<sup>11</sup> una verità assoluta, e il caso in specie non fa eccezione. Ma una visione olistica dei fenomeni globali in atto, quella che si è cercato di dare in questo articolo, può almeno darci un punto di vista utile per affrontare e vincere le sfide che ci attendono (o, quanto meno, spingerci a ipotizzarle).

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**11** Quella di Arthur Bloch, nota come legge di Grossman, è un aforisma contenuto all'interno della Legge di Murphy, di cui Bloch è autore.

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# Italian Business in Central Asia In and Around the Energy Sector

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**Abstract** While distant and little-known to the Italian public, Central Asia plays an important role for Italy. Kazakhstan is an important supplier of oil to Italy and Italy is the principal customer for Kazakhstani oil. This article concentrates on Italy-Kazakhstan relations because they represent the lion's share of Italy-Central Asia relations, while also providing a rationale to explain the diverging pathways that allowed Kazakhstan to interact more proficiently with foreign companies, rather than its close neighbours. By focusing on the energy sector, this article also highlights how trans-national companies (TNCs), such as Italy's Eni, transfer practices from their global experience in oil and gas to their destination countries in Central Asia. In particular, this article analyses the cost-cutting practices of outsourcing services and outstaffing workforce, for which Italian companies and joint ventures have become instrumental.

**Keywords** Italy. Central Asia. Oil and gas. Business. Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Italy in Central Asia's Energy Projects. – 3 The Eni World in Central Asia. – 4 Manpower and Local Content: The Example of Kazakhstan. – 5 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

Italian participation in Central Asia energy business has been rampant since 1991, when the USSR collapsed and the Union Republics became independent. Diplomatic relations were established in 1992, together with the first business expeditions. Following their experience in post-colonial contexts, Italian businesses – especially in the energy sector – penetrated the Central Asian market with the same well-oiled strategies they had implemented in Africa, Latin America, or the Middle East.



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This article tracks some of the trends involving Italian business activities in Central Asia, with a particular focus on the energy sector, because Italy-based companies became among the top explorers and producers of hydrocarbons in the region and Italy is a key market, especially for oil exports from Kazakhstan. Table 1 below, highlighting the latest figures on Italy-Central Asia trade turnover, justifies the rationale for the article, which is skewed towards Kazakhstan, Italy's largest commercial partner in the region, and in particular the oil business. Italy-Kazakhstan trade turnover represented 87% of Italy's total commercial exchanges with the region. Statistics also show that Italy-Kazakhstan relations are firmly guided by the extraction and trade of oil, which represented 80% of Italian imports from Kazakhstan 2018.

**Table 1:** Italy-Central Asia trade turnover (in millions of euros)

2018	Italian export to	Italian import from	Total turnover
Kazakhstan	1,032.4	2,038.5	3,070.9
Kyrgyzstan	22.6	1.4	24
Tajikistan	27.2	14.8	32
Turkmenistan	32.8	44.9	77.7
Uzbekistan	320.6	17	337.6

Source: Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at <http://www.infomercatiesteri.it> (2019-11-27)

In terms of energy markets, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have historically been tied to Russia, via the Moscow-centric gas pipelines inherited from the Soviet period. Recently, due to a commercial spat turned political, Russia stopped buying Turkmen gas in 2016 and resumed in 2019 (*Reuters* 2019). Since 2010, Turkmenistan directed the bulk of its gas exports to China through the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, to which Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are also tributaries. Plans for a trans-Caspian gas pipeline that would bring Turkmen gas to Azerbaijan and further to Europe have floated around policy circles in Brussels and Washington for decades, but the costs and risks could be an unsurmountable hindrance for years to come. While Kazakhstan also exports oil to China, its main export vector is oriented westwards to Europe, where its main customer is Italy.

The pathway from the Soviet command economy to post-Soviet capitalism - in its various facets - was not uniform in Central Asia, especially for what concerned the energy industry, because subsoil resources remained property of the state and privatisation was carried out through different and diverging strategies. In a similar vein to Sorbello (2018), this article highlights how the initial asymmetrical openness of each Central Asian country provoked slight adjust-



ments to the corporate policies of Western businesses, in this case Italian, throughout the first quarter-century of bilateral relations. The peculiarities of the oil and gas business, with its geographic specificities, its global impact, its significance for the state economy, and its regulatory framework, ascribe it to a paragon for transnational business strategies.

The following section delves into the ramification of Italian interest in Central Asia's energy projects. While it remains focused on oil and gas, especially in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, this article also touches upon a few tangential cooperation projects, such as the Rogun dam in Tajikistan. In the third section, the article moves closer to the main actor in Italy's penetration in Central Asia: Eni, a large oil and gas producer partially owned by the Italian government, together with a constellation of service companies, essentially represents Italy in Central Asia.

The fourth section focuses on the impact of Italian business in the labour market of Kazakhstan, where manpower agencies - often owned or operated by Italian managers - help Eni and other companies in their "optimisation" practices. In the oil and gas industry jargon, optimisation often means laying off direct employees in favour of temporary workers hired by agencies, which essentially became middlemen, sidelining both human resources departments and trade unions.

## 2 Italy in Central Asia's Energy Projects

Italian business interest towards Central Asia is essentially confined to the extractive industry, whether directly related to it, with energy companies such as Eni and Saipem, respectively extracting hydrocarbons and building infrastructure to transport it, or indirectly linked to the oil and gas business, with construction companies such as Bonatti, Sicim, and Rosetti Marino.

In terms of volume, the lion's share of Italy's FDI to Central Asia goes to Kazakhstan. Between 2013 and 2017, Italian investment to Kazakhstan represented around 90% of Italy's FDI to Central Asia, between 550 and 815 million euros annually. Kazakhstan's position as the main resource-rich country and the most investor-friendly market in Central Asia allowed early Italian participation in international oil and gas consortia. Other countries lagged behind both because of the limited market opportunities and because of their more hostile business climate.

In Kazakhstan, Italy participates in two of the largest international energy-producing consortia: Eni, part-owned by the Italian government, holds a 29.25% share in the Karachaganak gas and condensate field in the north of the country and a 16.81% share in Kashagan,

one of the most promising offshore oil fields of the past few decades. In Turkmenistan, Eni holds a 90% share in the Burun oil field it acquired in 2008. In 2014, it extended its contract to 2032 and ceded a 10% stake to the Turkmen national oil company.

Energy major Eni and several of its affiliate service companies, as well as many other specialised companies that work in the global oil and gas industry, have entered these markets thanks to their ability to explore oil and gas fields internationally. Some of the oil and gas fields in the region were either underdeveloped or developed under low-tech industrial regimes, so the arrival of Italian companies, as well as other trans-national companies (TNCs), helped develop these fields. Italian companies also operated within a framework of trust with the authorities, which they had gained already during Soviet times. The nature of trust that was established was both of a cultural and a business nature, owing to historically good relations between the Italian Communist Party and the Soviet Communist Party.

Strapped for cash, the Central Asian economies welcomed the participation of Italian as well as other international companies to help them restructure the backbone of their economy. Natural resources, and their international trade, were the key to the survival for these countries, the budgets of which were marred by the effects of the Asian and the Russian rouble crises of the mid 1990s. It was precisely at this time, when Italian companies signed two important Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) with the government of Kazakhstan, creating two consortia to develop the Karachaganak and Kashagan fields. Under these PSA, the companies would invest first and then start sharing the profits from the sale of oil and gas only after their costs were recovered. Other key fields in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were either captured by other international consortia without Italian participation or kept under the state umbrella and exploited by the national oil and gas companies owned by the government.

Historical research showed that there was the fundamental divide between a 'statist' and a 'corporate' approach to oil and gas development (Sorbello 2018). These approaches were not static in time and governments proved to be flexible in adopting one of the other according to the circumstances (Blackmon 2009). For example, after approximately a decade of corporatist approach, Kazakhstan switched to a more state-directed approach which emphasised public ownership or at least part-ownership of key oil and gas fields. The creation of NC Kazmunaigas in the early 2000s implied that the state-owned company would control at least 50% of any new project. This new legal and business configuration also changed the way that international companies approached both Kazakhstan and other countries which had taken a more state-centered approach. Once NC Kazmunaigas was created, TNCs willing to invest in oil and gas in Kazakh-

stan had to negotiate with yet another subject in the country: representing the government, NC Kazmunaigas appeared along with local administrations, ministries, and agencies in the central government. The unspoken rule, however, was that TNCs always had to seek the ultimate seal of approval in the office of the president, in Kazakhstan as elsewhere in Central Asia.

In the first decade since independence, FDI towards Turkmenistan remained marginal in volume (UNCTAD, 2003) in line with the country's neutral international policy and isolationist attitude. In the energy sector, the strategy of then-President Saparmurat Niyazov was even more evident, as Turkmenistan "[avoided] any liberalisation and [kept] its country and hydrocarbon reserves closed off to external actors" (Sorbello 2018, 112). The first major energy contract with Mobil in 1998 for the development of the Garashsyzlyk oil and gas field (Canzi 2004, 165) was only followed by another major contract in 2007 with China's CNPC, which denotes a more sluggish opening of the market.

In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev ruled for nearly 30 years before leaving his post in March 2019. In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov died in office after 27 years at the helm. In Turkmenistan, President Saparmurat Niyazov also died in office after 21 years, replaced by Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who has since ruled unopposed for over a decade. Continuity at the highest post in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was ensured by the appointment, albeit in different circumstances, of former political affiliates of the so-called First Presidents: in Uzbekistan, long-time Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev became interim president and later organised elections in which he ran virtually unopposed; in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev resigned knowing that his position would be taken, according to the Constitution, by Senate Speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who had served both in diplomatic and high-ranking government posts. Foreign investors applauded the conduct of these governments who put an emphasis on the principles of stability and continuity during their terms in power.

A stable political environment favoured the corporate interest of the TNCs, removing potentially upsetting externalities, such as violent uprisings and, after September 11, terrorist threats against their assets in the countries. Anti-terrorism and anti-extremism became part of these countries' legislation and were often used to curtail freedom of speech, association, and religion. The three energy-rich countries in Central Asia displayed various strategies, from Turkmenistan's isolation, to Uzbekistan's selective cooperation, to Kazakhstan's international prestige-seeking efforts.

In its search for prestige, Kazakhstan's government made a point to maintain favourable relations with Italy, its main partner in the oil sector. Cooperation with Kazakhstan was also easier to justify before

the Italian public, compared to potential partnerships with Turkmenistan, whose leader has been repeatedly accused of human rights violations. In 2009, for example, Eni and NC Kazmunaigas signed a key cooperation document in November 2009, during Nazarbayev's official visit to Rome (Frappi 2012, 135). In the same period, Italian officials embarrassingly tried to cover up the visit of Berdymukhamedov, Turkmenistan's president (Anceschi 2010, 107).

Energy is always on the agenda when officials from Italy and Kazakhstan meet. In June 2014, during Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's official visit to Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev said: "Italy is a strategic economic partner of Kazakhstan in Europe. Italy accounts for 13 percent of Kazakhstan's foreign trade [...] Moreover, Italy is the largest consumer of Kazakhstan's oil". Renzi answered with ceremonious gratitude: "I am grateful to Kazakhstan for the support you provide to our companies here [...] our country is in need of partners such as Kazakhstan, where there is always stability and prosperity" (Orazgaliyeva 2014). Renzi and Nazarbayev also met the following year on the occasion of the World Expo in Milan in 2015, further cementing Italy-Kazakhstan relations. In an interview with *The Astana Times* (2014), then-ambassador of Italy to Kazakhstan Stefano Ravagnan said that "Kazakhstan [is] quite an important part of our energy consumption". In fact, together with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan is the fastest-growing supplier of crude oil and refinery feedstocks to Italy (IEA 2016, 157).

Interestingly, while energy relations between Italy and Kazakhstan seem thriving, periods of friction have mushroomed. During tense political relations, energy became a crucial platform for dialogue between Italy and Kazakhstan. In May 2011, labour activists called a general strike in the oil-rich Mangystau province, with the goal of improving salaries and working conditions for local employees at oil producing and service companies. Along with state-controlled companies, a substantial participation to the strike was registered among Ersai workers. Ersai, a joint venture between Italian service company Saipem and the Lancaster Group, a holding owned by a group of wealthy businessmen in Kazakhstan, is among the key contractors for foreign and local companies in the oil extraction and infrastructure business. Strikers were laid off en masse and the company, along with other companies involved in the labour dispute, ignored their requests. The tension continued for eight months until special police forces clashed with unarmed oil workers in the main square of Zhanaozen, a wind-swept oil town, killing at least 17 in December 2011 (Satpayev, Umbetaliyeva 2015). While the incident is still regarded as a dark page in Kazakhstan's history book, the labour dispute had a marginal effect on working conditions. Instead, the deaths were used as political currency to crack down on independent trade unions, a measure welcomed by foreign investors.

Another incident that shook Italy-Kazakhstan relations was the extraordinary rendition of Alma Shalabayeva, the wife of ex-banker-turned-opposition-leader Mukhtar Ablyazov. Shalabayeva lived in Rome until she was sent back to Kazakhstan in May 2013 with a special operation organised by the Italian intelligence. Clouded by mystery, the case had resonance in Italy, where journalistic and legal investigations alleged potential ties between the two governments and Eni in the operation (Mondani 2013). Eni denied any involvement (*La Repubblica* 2013), but the incident had a negative resonance on the various actors involved, prompting a subsequent buck-passing and lack of transparency (Vanuzzo 2013).

In both instances, relations were restored rapidly by the governments, whose choice for *Realpolitik* and cooperation trumped the potential grievances (Indeo 2013). As energy investments and trade are a large part of Italy-Kazakhstan relations, these disputes were likely resolved through the mediation of the sides' interests in the oil and gas sphere.

In other Central Asian countries, Italy's presence is marginal. In July 2016, however, the Tajik government unexpectedly inked a 3.9 billion US dollars contract with Italy's Salini Impregilo for the construction of a dam and hydroelectric power plant at the site of Rogun, on the Vakhsh river, that would double Tajikistan's current power production. Observers have noted that "it is not clear where the government will get the money" to pay for the contracted amount, given its macroeconomic outlook and the government's dependence on migrant workers' remittances to sustain its GDP (Menga 2018, 83). Nevertheless, it represents one of the largest business partnerships outside of the oil and gas business in Central Asia.

### 3 The Eni World in Central Asia

Eni is among the world's largest oil and gas companies in terms of market capitalisation. Based in Rome and Milan, it operates in oil and gas fields across the world, through several subsidiaries. In Central Asia, Eni controls shares in three projects, two in Kazakhstan and one in Turkmenistan (see above). Eni also owns shares in international pipelines designed to bring Central Asian oil to Europe. It controls a 2% equity in the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), running from the oil fields of Kazakhstan's Atyrau region to Novorossiisk in Russia's Black Sea coast. The Italian giant also owns a 5% stake in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), a pipeline designed to bring oil from Azerbaijan to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Over the years, albeit intermittently, Kazakhstan has sold oil to BTC through the Aktau-Baku vector across the Caspian Sea. Since 2015, supplies have dried out in a decision to favour CPC (*The Conway Bulletin* 2015).

Central Asia is a key market for Eni. In terms of both investment and revenue, Kazakhstan is of particular significance: 10% of Eni's global oil output in 2018 was produced in Kazakhstan.<sup>1</sup> Operations in Turkmenistan are smaller in scale, as the Burun field produces only around 300,000 tons of oil annually.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside Eni, a myriad of service companies, directly or indirectly related to the Rome-based company, operate in Central Asia. The majority of them, unsurprisingly, are located in Kazakhstan, where they generally form joint ventures with local businesses. Such is the case of Ersai, KCOI, KKS-Sicim, Renco AK, SITEK Caspian. These companies float around the main production consortia of which Eni is part, bidding to win service contracts for specific tasks. The fact that these companies are separate entities from Eni allows the transnational conglomerate to operate with flexibility: capital expenditure, supplies of materials, manpower, and even catering and cleaning can be outsourced to other entities, which work on a temporary, almost seasonal basis. This reduces costs for Eni, which is listed in the stock exchanges in New York and Milan and offloads the risks onto the contractors.

Notably, service companies to the oil and gas industry generally display a high degree of specialisation, which can be crucial at different stages of the exploitation of a hydrocarbons field. This establishes ties between the main producing company and specific service companies, which earn the trust of the principal client and become likely winners of subsequent tenders. In addition, low-tech service companies sometimes maintain a close personal link to the management of the main company, especially if it is one predisposed to informal links.<sup>3</sup> Most contractors work with the same company, winning the same tenders, and supplying the same services for decades. Hydrocarbon extraction and mining are industries that typically display this dynamic: "In theory, contractors are independent companies that offer their services on the market, but de facto many contractors specializing in low-paid maintenance and repair have been created for and are quasi-internal to the main company, their sole client" (Trevisani 2018, 87). A business consultant in Atyrau said the unspoken dynamic between operating companies was already evident after Shell became the operator of the NCOC consortium, develop-

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<sup>1</sup> Eni (2018), *Annual Report*. URL [https://www.eni.com/docs/en\\_IT/enicom/publications-archive/publications/reports/reports-2018/Annual-Report-2018.pdf](https://www.eni.com/docs/en_IT/enicom/publications-archive/publications/reports/reports-2018/Annual-Report-2018.pdf) (2019-10-10).

<sup>2</sup> Burun's *annual* production is thus comparable to Kazakhstan's total *daily* production.

<sup>3</sup> While in this article, reference to corruption, bribery, and other illegal practices is made without direct reference to specific cases, field interviews in Kazakhstan's oil regions carried out in 2018 have often highlighted the endemic nature of graft in both business-to-government relations and in business-to-business deals.

ing the Kashagan oil field: “With Shell taking over operatorship from Eni, the number of small and medium service enterprises from Italy fell and the number of those from Britain is growing”.<sup>4</sup>

According to ICE,<sup>5</sup> the Italian Trade Agency, in 2009, the revenue of companies with Italian participation in Central Asia amounted to 11.7 billion euros, two-thirds of which came from extractive industries. In 2015, ICE reported that revenue fell to 8.3 billion euros, a 30% drop, with a significant decrease in the contribution of extractive industries, which earned only 2.7 billion euros, a 65% drop. Despite the fluctuations, the oil and gas sector remains a key interest for Italian businesses. In the words of ICE’s director in Almaty: “Our country shines in excellence for what concerns the oil services industry. We produce some of the best parts and engineering tools for the oil sector”.<sup>6</sup>

This short survey of the constellation of service companies tied to Eni in Central Asia is beneficial to understand the depth of the ramifications of Italian business in Central Asia. Notably, it is the modular nature of the global oil and gas business that becomes conducive to such kinds of structural, seemingly inextricable relationships between companies and creates room for foreign companies to create joint ventures in oil-rich countries (Appel 2012). By splitting tasks and contracts between companies, however, the risks and costs are continuously shifted. One prime example of this practice can be found in the management of human resources, the topic of the next section.

#### **4 Manpower and Local Content: The Example of Kazakhstan**

The temporary, unpredictable nature of the oil business created room for manpower agencies which work with both oil producing consortium and service companies to provide manpower on a short- or a long-term basis. These manpower agencies often hire specialists from the country in which a TNC is located in order to minimise cultural and industrial culture barriers. This practice, however, creates strong imbalances in employment conditions and salaries, with a vast army of local workers earning a fraction of the fewer expatriate workers. Still, salaries in the oil business are generally higher than the national average, which increases competition, especially among low-skilled workers. The host country, in general, puts in place measures to smooth imbalances and to ensure that its oil and gas industry be-

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, 12 September 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Data available at the ICE website: URL [www.ice.it](http://www.ice.it) (2019-10-10).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the author, 10 August 2017.

comes 'populated' with local workers, rather than foreigners.

In an effort to force foreign investors to keep employment rates high in the oil industry, Kazakhstan's government adopted a series of legislative measures aimed to set quotas for foreign hires. While varied across cases, regions, and specific sector, foreign companies in general must hire a higher proportion of local workers in order to obtain a certain number of work permits for their expatriate specialists. In the industry jargon, locally-sourced labour and services are called "local content". A TNC must therefore negotiate a proportion of local content in its workforce and materials with the authorities. The practice is considered inconsistent with rules on competition set by the World Trade Organisation, to which Kazakhstan was admitted in 2015. Furthermore, TNCs regard the local content limitations as a vexatious, but necessary cost for their business in the country. High profitability margins in the extraction and sale of hydrocarbon allow TNCs to sustain the cost, especially during times of high oil prices.

Oil price volatility, however, has a direct effect on the companies' bottom line and payroll is generally one of the first lines on the balance sheet to suffer a cut. During periods of lower oil prices, TNC prefer to use manpower agencies to hire their workers, making their contracts temporary and easier to terminate. This is a standard practice that companies apply globally and Kazakhstan is no exception.

Kazakhstan's labour environment was also impacted by the country's transition to a market economy. "The switch from Soviet to capitalist employment regime has opened up a division between securely employed, unionized, more skilled and better paid regular company workers and the poorly paid, less protected, unskilled, and non-organized contract laborers" (Trevisani 2018, 86). As elsewhere, the industry grew a preference for both "outsourcing" (hiring project workers for specific tasks) and "outstaffing" (replacing direct hires with contracted workers). Manpower agencies have become key players in the implementation of both outsourcing and outstaffing.

There are several Italian companies that work in the manpower business in Kazakhstan as well as several Italian nationals hired in these agencies. Regionally, most of these agencies are concentrated in Atyrau, where the country's two largest oil fields, Tengiz and Kashagan, are located. Italian companies are therefore often seeking work permits and they are faced with regulatory restrictions which generally set quotas for the amount of foreign workers that a company can hire. While these requirements vary between different local administrations and companies of different size, they remain an obstacle to doing business according to several sources.

At the three largest oil consortia in Kazakhstan, manpower planning is a joint effort between the between Human Resources and Industrial Relations departments. The company outlines a five-year plan according to production and sale targets. Given volatility in oil



prices, regulatory frameworks, and investment options, the company has an incentive to use 'easy-to-terminate' contracts for the employees it hires directly and make extensive use of manpower agencies. Large consortia, boast local content ratios of employment above 90%, while contextually outsourcing specialists through manpower agencies. Smaller companies, resort to opaque practices in order to comply with the regulations.

At a conference of the oil service industry in Atyrau in March 2019, Murat Zhurebekov, chairman of the governmental agency in charge of managing the PSAs with the largest consortia, shared a widespread view that inequality between expat workers and local content continued to be significant: "Local workers are exploited through contract dumping by the employers. It makes no sense that a driver working for a consortium now can earn the same as a taxi driver in the city. The disproportion between expats and locals continues to be impressive, especially when we look at the workers fulfilling similar tasks" (Sorbello 2019).

Directly or indirectly, expat service workers are hired by the principal production companies at daily rates above \$1,000/day. One typical scenario, described by a manager at an Italian service company, would entail a task-oriented contract between the service and the principal company of \$25,000/month plus VAT per specialist. The service company would then hire the specialist for \$7,000/month, pay taxes, and send back around \$15,000 to the mother company abroad.<sup>7</sup> This type of direct hiring in the service industry could become indirect should a manpower agency be involved in the head-hunting. In case of indirect hiring, the manpower agency either seeks "freelancer specialists" or contracts them out. Hires through manpower agencies are known as "expendables" because of their precarious work conditions.

The changing practices in employment policies could explain the wider tendencies of outsourcing and outstaffing through manpower agencies in Central Asia. ICE, the Italian Trade Agency, reported that for the whole Central Asian region, the total number of companies with Italian participation grew significantly (40%) from 654 to 922 between 2009 and 2015. Notably, the number of workers these companies employed grew only marginally by 6.7% with a significant reduction (-40%) in the extractive industries.<sup>8</sup> While these statistics apply to the whole Central Asian region, Kazakhstan is effectively the driving force behind the numbers.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author, Western Kazakhstan, 20 July 2017 (location redacted for anonymity).

<sup>8</sup> Data available at the ICE website: [www.ice.it](http://www.ice.it) (2019-10-10).

## 5 Conclusion

This article outlined Italian participation in Central Asia's economy, particularly in the energy sector. Hydrocarbon extraction and its service sector represent in fact the principal interest for Italian businesses in the region. Eni, Italy's energy company, is among the most active TNCs in Central Asia, with projects in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The bulk of Italian FDI, however, is directed towards Kazakhstan, which was also the principal focus of this article.

The background (section 2) described the diverging pathways followed by Central Asian governments after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The article argues that FDI flocked in towards the most open commodity markets, as testified by the differences between foreign investment in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. This section also highlighted the specifics of Italy's diplomatic relationship with Central Asia, with particular reference to Kazakhstan. The article argued that business interests in the energy sector shaped the relationship between Italy and Kazakhstan, as shown through the swift resolution of two potentially-upsetting issues, the 2011 oil strikes and the 2013 operation to send family members of an opposition figure back to Kazakhstan.

Section 3 described the business environment around Eni in Kazakhstan. Service companies with direct or indirect Italian participation are instrumental to the operations of the main production company, which works in major oil and gas fields in the west of the country. Albeit separate entities, these companies often supply continuous services to the main operator, essentially becoming dependent from the periodic tenders. The inextricable link between Eni and the constellation of service companies around it allows Eni to enjoy the flexibility of offering tailored contracts, while service companies bear the risks related to volatile commissions and employment.

The effect of oil volatility - intended both in terms of prices and project phases - has a specific effect on employment, analysed in section 4. Companies working in the oil sector, especially TNCs, make extensive use of manpower agencies for the employment of their workforce, because this scheme reduces costs and risks. By not being directly employed, workers have fewer opportunities to discuss their conditions and demand improvement where needed. Companies consider workers as a mere cog in the machine, a modular mechanism built to ensure the continuous flow of crude out of the ground into the processing facilities (Mitchell 2012). Oil is a traded commodity, which makes it subject to financial and geopolitical volatility, as opposed to industrial products, generally strictly subject to demand-of-fer market dynamics. It is therefore crucial for companies to ensure the flow of oil: uninterrupted operations keep shareholders satisfied. Against this backdrop, much like building and production materials,

workers have to be “expendable” and easy to substitute. Manpower agencies ensure this, in Kazakhstan as in other countries.

Although Italy’s interest seems to be expanding beyond oil and gas in Central Asia, the energy sector remains crucial. Within this context, Italy-Kazakhstan energy relations can be considered the principal vector for Italy in Central Asia. Specifically, Eni, together with a wealth of service companies owned or co-owned by Italian businesses, concentrates the bulk of its work on Karachaganak and Kashagan, two of the largest hydrocarbon projects in the country. This article argued that the strength of the oil and gas-fuelled relationship between Italy and Kazakhstan contributed to the forging of excellent diplomatic relations.

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Il presente volume della serie «Eurasiatrica. Quaderni di Studi su Balcani, Anatolia, Iran, Caucaso e Asia Centrale» è interamente dedicato all'area centro-asiatica e caspica. Scopo del volume è di catturare e restituire al lettore una parte delle rilevanti trasformazioni istituzionali, politiche ed economiche che stanno interessando l'area centro-asiatica. Lungi dal rivolgersi ai soli studiosi d'area, il volume muove dal presupposto che guardare all'Asia centrale aiuti a comprendere dinamiche che trascendono i confini della regione, a inquadrare cioè processi e tendenze che caratterizzano il sistema internazionale post-bipolare e la più ampia convivenza nello spazio eurasiatico. Intercettare e rappresentare queste dinamiche e questi temi è lo scopo del presente volume, che – sullo sfondo del crescente interesse istituzionale e imprenditoriale italiano verso l'area – mira non secondariamente a delineare gli interessi e le priorità di azione del Sistema Paese nei rapporti con gli interlocutori centro-asiatici e caspici.



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