



Is This Central Asia's ASEAN Moment?

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Hats off to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, First President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov of Turkmenistan, and President Sooronbay Jeenbekov of the Kyrgyz Republic. On November 29, 2019 these leaders jointly resolved to develop:

forms and mechanisms for the development of cooperation in the areas of trade, economy, investments, transport and transit, agriculture, industrial cooperation, protection of environment, energy, water resources, tourism, science and culture.

In short, they pledged to develop in Central Asia something akin to ASEAN, the Nordic Council, the Visegrad Group, or Mercosur. After centuries of being played against one another, the Central Asian states have linked arms to advance their common welfare.

Even though it took these newly independent countries 28 years to achieve this, the logic of their decision is impeccable. Their landlocked status, poor intraregional communication, minimal intraregional trade, and poor links in countless areas have greatly hampered development throughout the region. With an average population of barely 14 million, the individual countries of Central Asia rank with Chad, Somalia, or Zimbabwe. However, their combined population puts them in the same league with Britain, Thailand, or France. Through coordination and cooperation they seek to overcome the liabilities of intraregional isolation and reap the benefits of efficiency and scale.

The presidents do not view their as-yet unnamed Central Asian entity as an alternative to national sovereignty. Rather, they conceive it as a kind of second story to the full statehood they gained with the collapse of the USSR. For all of them it is a natural response to the increasingly competitive environment in which small states everywhere must function. And by joining forces they will discourage outside powers from playing them off each other.

The officials who signed the Tashkent document vary widely in experience. The convener, Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, has been in office for only three years, while Rahmon of Tajikistan was first elected in 1992 and survived a lengthy civil war. Although Nazarbayev officially left Kazakhstan's presidency in March after 29 years, he still bears the honorary title of Leader of the Nation, in which capacity he represented his country in Tashkent. Meanwhile, the presidents of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan have served 12 and two years, respectively.

The governments they head are equally diverse. All except Kyrgyzstan, which struggles to function as a parliamentary republic, are top-down regimes, which their mildest critics characterize as authoritarian. Indeed, over the years, not one has escaped the charge of dictatorship. Yet Mirziyoyev has launched a transformative program of reforms in Uzbekistan, while Nazarbayev's successor has announced the goal of making Kazakhstan a state that listens to its citizens. Rahmon justifies his one-man rule as necessary to prevent religious extremists from crossing into Tajikistan from Afghanistan, while Berdimukhammedov defends his authoritarianism as necessary to ward off foreign threats and preserve Turkmenistan's non-aligned status.

One might question if such diverse countries and leaders can work together successfully. Yet the commonalities of the five countries far outweigh their differences. All are Muslim societies and adhere to the relatively mild and commercially oriented Hanafi school. And while they proudly view their region as a major historical seat of the faith, they all have secular states, laws, and courts. All but Persiansate Tajikistan are Turkic, and all five societies can claim thousands of years of close commercial and cultural interaction with one another. This is no surprise, as these are the people who both originated and operated the Silk Roads. As Nazarbayev put it in 2017:

I know that we share a common past, a common culture, common values, and common understandings, and we also face common threats. Furthermore, I know that we all know each other far better than outsiders know us.

Acknowledging this basis for mutual collaboration in Central Asia, one should also note that some of the most successful regional entities globally are comprised of countries that differ radically from one another. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) includes among its member states Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim countries. While some of them boast participatory governments based on market economies, they also include authoritarian and communist states. In population ASEAN countries range from Indonesia (271 million) to Singapore (5.7 million) and Brunei (430,000). And yet they collaborate effectively through a complex web of coordinating, consultative, and legislative bodies in virtually every field of endeavor. Similarly, the venerable Nordic Council, formed in 1952, includes both members of the European Union and nonmembers, as well as members of NATO and nonmembers.

If the case for regional coordination and collaboration in Central Asia is so strong, why was such an initiative not mounted before now? The fact is that it was, and these efforts can even be traced to the last decades of Soviet rule. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s the First Secretaries of the Communist Parties of all five Central Asian republics frequently consulted with one another and coordinated their dealings with Party leaders in the Kremlin. The key figure in this unofficial but intensive form of regionalism was Sharof Rashidov, who ruled Uzbekistan between 1959 and 1983, but his counterparts in all the other republics participated actively. By so doing they created a kind of semi-autonomy for their republics as a group.

This broke down after independence, as each new country focused on asserting its own sovereignty and identity. Their path was difficult, for all five had to design and adopt new laws and institutions, establish themselves on the international scene, and create symbols and rituals that enabled members of the public to view themselves as citizens of a nation-state rather than subjects of an empire. While all this was taking place, they had also to completely reorganize their economies, taking control of sectors that had heretofore been run from Moscow and introducing private property to a populace long accustomed to life under communism.

For most of the 1990s the new governments were preoccupied with these concerns. Yet they consolidated their rule and survived. Tajikistan, which endured a brutal civil war, achieved peace in 1997. Confidence returned everywhere. It was in this mood that three countries — Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan — launched the Central Asia Union, which later became known as the Central Asia Cooperation Organization. The bold founders designed this body to address even the most sensitive region-wide issues, including water and security. Turkmenistan, citing its UN-approved nonaligned status, stood aside, but Tajikistan was ready to join once peace was concluded there. Then Vladimir Putin intervened.

Putin's first move was to seek observer status for Russia. With no alternative, members acceded to this request, but it was quickly followed by a request for Russia to be admitted as a full member. No sooner had the Central Asians acceded to this than Putin proposed to close down the regional body and replace it with what became his Eurasian Economic Union. As had happened so often over recent centuries, centrifugal force overwhelmed region-based centripetalism.

But the Central Asians did not abandon their quest for regionally-based cooperation and collaboration. Their new tool for advancing this cause was to make their region a nuclear free zone. Kazakhstan had voluntarily given up its nuclear arms in 1992 and in that same year the five presidents met in Almaty and declared their intention to keep their region free of nuclear arms. This idea germinated quietly until 1997, when a meeting in Turkmenistan's capital of Ashgabat produced a formal proposal signed by all five countries, which the General Assembly of the United Nations promptly approved by consensus. Then followed another period of quiet diplomacy at the international level, which culminated in 2006 with the signing in Kazakhstan of a treaty banning nuclear weapons from the region. The United States, France, and Britain opposed this step while both Russia and China supported it. Relying on none of these partners, the Central Asians successfully asserted their right to act as a group, without the interference of outside powers.

At this point the initiative for regional collaboration shifted to sympathetic foreign powers. In 2004, Japan, eager to outflank China in the region, began convening annual meetings with all five countries as a group in what it called the "Central Asia Plus Japan" initiative. The European Union copied this format for their own annual meetings and, significantly, backed it with a new strategy for "Enhanced Integration for Prosperity in Central Asia." What the Central Asians had difficulty doing on their own, they could accomplish with the help of sympathetic outsiders, East and West.

The United States, preoccupied with Afghanistan, ignored this centripetal movement within Central Asia. Over several years Uzbekistan sought to persuade Washington to use its Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFA) with Central Asian countries as a platform for region-wide meetings. But Washington remained indifferent. Finally, in 2015 Kairat Umarov, Kazakhstan's ambassador to Washington, proposed to then-Secretary of State John Kerry that America create a "C5+1" structure comprising the five Central Asian states and Washington. Kerry agreed, but the State Department did little to lift the resulting consultations above the level of bureaucratic routine.

The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2018 gave a new impetus to the movement for Central Asian regionalism. By making improved relations with Uzbekistan's Central Asian neighbors his first priority, Mirziyoyev swept away many impediments to cooperation and coordination. When he proposed a new meeting of the five presidents, Nazarbayev immediately offered not only to host the group in Astana but to issue the invitation in the name of its initiator, Uzbekistan. A new era of regional comity had begun.

Although the meeting took place as planned, the follow-up meeting scheduled for Tashkent was postponed. Rumors circulated that both the Kyrgyz and Turkmen had offered objections. Many thought the regionalist movement had died. But it hadn't. At the joint initiative of the Central Asian ambassadors to the United Nations, the General Assembly on June 22, 2018 approved a resolution "Affirming Cooperation in Central Asia" that acknowledged the existence of Central Asia as a world region with its own interests and objectives, and with the right to organize itself to advance them. All the major powers, including China, Russia, the EU, and the United States, voted in favor. Then, in February 2019, Uzbekistan organized a major conference on regional cooperation in Tashkent. Of great significance was the fact that the secretary general of the United Nations blessed the event, affirming its international legitimacy.

But now a new centrifugal force was being exerted across the region. Under great pressure from Russia, Kyrgyzstan had joined Putin's Eurasian Economic Union. Now that pressure was refocusing on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Tashkent managed to gain time by accepting only observer status for a period of five years, a step that provided cover for its smaller neighbor Tajikistan. Given the fact that Uzbekistan had earlier joined and then quit both the western-oriented GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) organization and Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), this temporizing cannot be seen as simply a means of delaying membership.

It is one thing to affirm common interests and declare solidarity, and quite another to develop institutions and structures to give permanence to such mutual relations. Here the November 29 declaration is deliberately vague. Besides calling for annual meetings of the presidents around the time of the ancient and region-wide Nowruz festival, which coincides with the vernal equinox, the conferees launched a process of discussion to determine the most appropriate institutional structures for their collaboration. Meanwhile, region-wide meetings of think tanks and educational institutions have already taken place, and many more such conclaves are planned.

As they plan their future regional organization, the Central Asians will closely examine the experience of existing entities like ASEAN, the Nordic Council, etc. This has already begun, with several analytic papers already in print and a study visit to Singapore to enable young Central Asian leaders to meet with officials of ASEAN. The key will be to learn from both the successes and failures of others; in other words, to *adapt*, and not simply *adopt*. Given the strong sense of regional identity and self-interest that exists in Central Asia, one can expect this process of institutionalization to yield some innovative results.

What, then, are the chances of success for the new regional institutions that the Central Asian presidents announced in Tashkent on November 29? There are many causes for concern. Among these, the broad differences between the economic, social, and institutional resources of the participating countries present a particularly acute challenge. What works in Kazakhstan may not work in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan. The effort to find a middle ground will inevitably consume time and energy, and could well prevent action.

A second possible retardant will be the huge demands and sheer magnetic attraction of global engagement. Obviously, the founding presidents see their new entity as a way to facilitate successful engagement with international structures, not as an alternative to them. But the endless claims of foreign governments, international financial institutions, and donor organizations could upstage intraregional developments and draw attention and energy away from them. Only if regional elites and publics perceive regional organizations as benefitting them personally will the new initiative succeed.

Still a third possible brake on the development of a regional association of Central Asian states could be opposition from Moscow. President Putin has always presented his Eurasian Economic Community (2000) and Eurasian Economic Union (2014) as better alternatives to any purely regional organization of Central Asians. That is why he moved to close down the Central Asia Union. The Central Asians are understandably concerned over the overwhelming economic and demographic disparity between Russia and all the EAEU's other members. Beyond this, they know that Moscow sees the EAEU as a means of weaning the entire region from its ties with Europe and the West in favor of a grand new "Greater Eurasia" built around Russia and China. And, finally, they realize that Russia wants the resulting east-west trade to be channeled through Siberia, not Central Asia, which would return their region to the lowly status of a supplier of energy and raw materials.

Yet whether joining the EAEU is wise or foolish, it need not preclude membership in the new regional organization. If this were to change, it would, of course, be a cause for grave concern. But it should be noted that Russia voted for the 2018 UN resolution affirming Central Asia as a world region entitled to organize in order to protect its own interests, and made no overt moves to thwart the November 29 statement. With so many ambitions and commitments elsewhere, Putin may decide to give Central Asians a pass on their self-organization. Or maybe not. And if not, the Kremlin can call on its many assets across the region, including the security services in several of the countries.

Here the role of other outside powers comes into play. China has its own ambitions in Central Asia but has indicated its intention to respect the Central Asians' decision to form a purely regional association. Japan has long supported such arrangements, as has the EU. If European commercial and political contacts continue to deepen, as appears likely, the Central Asians will think twice before putting them at risk. The same holds for the United States, which until now has invested mainly in Central Asian energy and raw materials. This is now changing rapidly, with new investments and interactions emerging daily at both official and unofficial levels.

The only problem with this formulation is that up to now Washington's response to the new regionalism in Central Asia has been passive, unimaginative, and bureaucratic. Yes, it claims to support the emerging regional spirit, but to date it has not even taken full advantage of its TIFA and C5+1 agreements to back Central Asia's emergence as an organized world region. Whatever the State Department may say, money is not the issue, since the new investments are market-based and private. Rather, it is the failure of the State Department, other relevant U.S. agencies, and private foundations to use their *convening power* to bring together Central Asians in ways that benefit the growth of regional contacts and structures.

This dark picture is brightened by important positive forces. Prominent among them is the spirit of urgency that prevails across the region. Facing pressures from the north and common security challenges like drug trafficking and religious extremism, they know they must seek common responses, and organize themselves to implement them. Moreover, all countries of the region are awakening to the reality that they must compete in a rapidly changing global economic environment, in which they must either work with their neighbors or fade away as sovereign states.

A further positive element is the leavening influence of reforms in Uzbekistan. Whether or not they are copied by neighboring states, the Mirziyoyev reforms have removed many impediments to fruitful interaction on the regional level, and set processes in motion that will further this development. Significant increases in intraregional travel, communications, investment, cultural exchanges, and citizen interactions are daily increasing the chances for success of the November 29 program. Indeed, the geometric increase of such contacts are transforming regionalism from a purely top-down process to one in which change is also being generated from below as well as from above.

It is still too early to say whether the presidency of Kassim-Jomart Tokayev in Kazakhstan will have a similarly positive impact on the development of region-wide consultative institutions. However, this is strongly likely. Tokayev has declared his intention to shift to a more responsive and citizen-based mode of governing. Given his cautious manner, his steps in this direction will be the more easily borrowed and assimilated by other regional states. Moreover, Tokayev has more international experience than any of his regional peers. Significantly, he was the author of the widely copied strategy of "balancing" the major external powers against one another through positive relations. As such, he understands clearly that it will be far easier for the Central Asian countries to achieve such a balance by acting in coordination with one another than by acting alone. He knows that the best way to prevent outside powers from playing the ancient "divide and conquer game" in Central Asia is for the Central Asian countries to act in consort, through a process of communication and coordination.

The document signed in Tashkent by all the regional leaders on November 29 clearly indicates that they have all come to this same conclusion. They see the new Central Asia-wide structures as an essential component of the development of their own states and societies. Moreover, their joint declaration makes clear that participating countries will be free to join or not join any other groupings or alliances they wish, provided they honor their commitments to their Central Asian neighbors.

Stated differently, they do not advance the need for Central Asia-wide institutions in a spirit of opposition to any foreign power or economic bloc but as the best way to overcome their landlocked status, relatively small populations, and distance from major economic centers. Far from seeing this step as in any way revolutionary, they view it as affirming their deepest historical and cultural traditions. As they state in their joint resolution of November 29 2019, “The [proposed] political dialogue and positive processes of interstate rapprochement in Central Asia are of an open and constructive nature and are not aimed against the interests of third parties.”

On this basis, the United States, Russia, China, the EU, and the entire international community should welcome and embrace this innovative and promising project.

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