



Can Central Asia Seize the Initiative?

October 30, 2022 **S. Frederick Starr** *The National Interest*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Islamic Extremism; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Afghanistan; Central Asia; Russia

Since their independence from the USSR, the five Central Asian states that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union in 1991 have been the object of great power dreams. Russia, with steady persistence, has tried to lure them back into its sphere of influence, if not of direct control, through economic and security alliances. The United States and Europe have worked to develop them as market economies, and to implant civil society and democratic institutions there. Meanwhile, China assigned them key roles in its Belt and Road Initiative and loaned them billions to develop economic strengths that complement Beijing's own. Applying Julius Caesar's classic *divide et impera* maxim, all these major powers have offered rewards for cooperation and withheld them from the recalcitrant. As a result, the Central Asians risked becoming mere *objects* of great power maneuvers and not *subjects* in their own right.

This summer, the Central Asians themselves took two steps to overcome this fate. First, on July 21 the presidents of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, meeting at Issyk-Kul in the Kyrgyz Republic, signed a far-ranging agreement to coordinate their efforts by forging a web of institutional links. These cover areas as diverse as trade, economics, social policy, ecology, medical research, and security. Such a regional consultative structure is urgently needed. Until now, Central Asia has been the only major world region that does not have its own web of institutional ties, i.e., a structure for formulating common policies and organizations capable of implementing them. This left the region at the mercy of major powers and of neighboring states, all of which have proven adept at playing Central Asians off against each other.

Furthermore, on July 26 the same regional states, supported by senior officials from several dozen other countries worldwide, including the United States, Russia, India, the European Union, and China, convened in Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, for the purpose of expanding contacts with the new government in Kabul. Their immediate goals were to eliminate threats from extremist bands operating from Afghan territory and to identify changes in Taliban policies that would open the door to broader interaction between Afghanistan, its Central Asian neighbors, and the world. These meetings covered areas as diverse as information, finance, and women's and minority rights. Their longer-term objective was to improve relations to the point that the Central Asians could open direct transport corridors through Afghanistan to Pakistan, India, Southeast Asia, and Iran.

Whether these two ambitious initiatives will succeed is an open question. Their very existence, however, reflects the Central Asians' determination to shape their own destiny and to emerge as a world region with linking institutions comparable to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Baltic Council, or other regional bodies worldwide.

WHY, THREE decades after gaining independence, have the Central Asian states suddenly focused on linking arms and collaborating? Three very different developments gave rise to this important movement. First, the unplanned and abrupt American withdrawal from Afghanistan left the Central Asian countries facing a chaotic and potentially dangerous neighbor to the south. Besides threatening a rise of instability across the region, the tumult in Afghanistan extinguished the hope of opening southward trade routes that would give the Central Asians direct access to the Indian subcontinent and the booming economies of Southeast Asia. The importance of that potential "door to the south" cannot be overestimated. Without it, all Central Asia would be left under Russia's economic and political thumb and unable to constrain China's economic incursions. Only with such a corridor to South Asia would these countries be able to affirm their own sovereignty and independence while at the same time establishing balanced and constructive relations with all the major political and economic powers.

Second, Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine sent a shock wave across all Central Asia, not least because, like Ukraine, all the states in that region had only recently freed themselves from Russian rule and now feared that Moscow was trying to impose it anew. This was no mere paranoia on the part of the new sovereignties. Had Vladimir Putin not compared himself to Peter the Great, who expanded Russia's territory by conquering neighbors? Had Dmitry Medvedev, head of Russia's Security Council and former Russian president, not announced that the attack on Ukraine was but the first step towards reassembling all the lands that had formerly been part of the Soviet Union? Central Asians had already established contacts with the West, but those links did not suffice to enable them to counterbalance pressures from the north and east. The obvious next step was to create new economic and political links with South and Southeast Asia. But this requires reopening links of communication and trade that have lain dormant since the rise of the Soviet Union.

The third factor that gave rise to the new spirit of regional vitality on display at Issyk-Kul and Tashkent was the rise of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as president of Uzbekistan. His predecessor, Islam Karimov, had solidified Uzbekistan's independence by walling the country off from its neighbors, including the other four Central Asian states and Afghanistan. Uzbekistan advanced, but at the price of the resentment of its regional neighbors and the hostility of the West, which condemned its heavy-handed treatment of its own population. Mirziyoyev, Karimov's former prime minister, brought a sharp change of course after his election in 2016. In a series of dramatic moves, he instituted legal reforms, set about developing a market economy, and loosened many long-standing controls on the Uzbek populace. Most important, he declared peace with all Uzbekistan's neighbors, opened cross-border contacts and trade, and began systematically reaching out to the other Central Asian states. By so doing, he launched the movement that bore fruit in Issyk-Kul and Tashkent.

What was actually accomplished in the region-wide protocol—formally known as the “Agreement on Friendship, Neighborliness, and Cooperation for Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century”—that the five presidents agreed upon in July? The document includes thirty-two sections that are designed to “consolidate their efforts” for mutual benefit. Of course, it commits signatories to respect existing borders, to not interfere in the internal affairs of other partner countries, and to resolve differences peacefully (sect. 2). But it goes far beyond this. Thus, section 5 calls for mutual support in the face of threats to the “independence, sovereignty, and territorial wholeness” of any member state. Backing up this call, the protocol (sect. 6) commits the signatories to abstain from joining any military bloc that might threaten any of the five states, and to forbid their territories to be used by any foreign state for activities directed against any of the other member states.

Nor were these mere words. Section 7 calls on the parties “to realize mutual action to develop collaboration in military and military-technical sphere on issues of mutual interest.” This parallels Article V of the Washington Treaty that governs the actions of NATO members, which states that an attack on any NATO member is to be considered an attack on them all. Section 7 also commits the signatories to coordinate their actions with respect to all other international and regional organizations to which they may belong. Among threats requiring such coordinated action are specified: terrorism, extremism, separatism, international criminal groups involved with narcotics and arms, and human trafficking. However, the same logic would extend to all other threats to the sovereignty of any member state. The goal, states the protocol, is to establish all of Central Asia as a “zone of peace.”

The many other chapters of the protocol commit members to develop structures for cooperation in legislative and judicial matters, transport, logistics (sect. 14), and all activities affecting trade and investment. The document then goes on to commit members to joint action with respect to the reconstitution of the depleted Aral Sea (sect. 19). Topping off this ambitious agenda is the call for closer links among the academic institutions of member states (sect. 20, 21), structured exchanges of teachers and specialists, the sharing of fundamental and applied research (sect. 24) in diverse fields, including medicine and technology, and the development of common information systems (sect. 23). Tourism also claims a place in the document (sect. 27), which calls for region-wide tours supported by common visas.

One may object that the five presidents papered over important differences between the languages, histories, and cultures of the signatory states. Anticipating such criticism, they went out of their way to affirm that Central Asia constitutes “a single historical and cultural space” (sect. 25), in which diverse peoples have fruitfully interacted and collaborated for millennia. Their agenda called for studying and making known these neglected commonalities. Moreover, the presidents acknowledged that within the borders of each country are linguistic, cultural, and religious minorities. On this delicate issue, they all agreed to support such minorities within their borders and enable them to thrive without compulsion from the national governments (sect. 26).

Three of the presidents signed the protocol at the Issyk-Kul meeting, while the other two—Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan and Serdar Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan—gave assurances that they would sign at the next meeting of the group. The former evidently wanted first to resolve the conflict on the Tajik border with Kyrgyzstan, while the latter, in office for only three months, wanted first to consult with his colleagues in Ashgabat. Both assured their colleagues of their support for the project.

Could this initiative prove to be a will-of-the-wisp, a noble statement of intent that cannot be realized in practice? History provides some grounds for optimism. The five countries managed in 2009 to sign a treaty declaring that Central Asia would henceforth be a nuclear-free zone. Although the United States objected, both Russia and China accepted this move. And between 1994 and 2006 the same states organized a Central Asia Union or Central Asia Economic Union, which covered both economic and security issues. So successful was this common venture that Putin himself asked to be admitted as an observer. Then he demanded to join as a member. In neither case were the Central Asians in a position to object. Finally, after a pause of two more years, Putin dissolved the grouping, and insisted that it be merged into his new Eurasian Economic Union.

Now that Russia is mired in a calamitous war in Ukraine, it is questionable whether Moscow is in a position to make good on a similar demand today. True, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan, in his opening statement at Issyk-Kul, suggested that at some future time Russia might be invited to join. But knowledgeable insiders interpret this general statement as a tactic to gain time, and not as a serious proposal. Matching Tokayev's speculation was Kyrgyz president Sadyr Japarov's suggestion that at some future time Azerbaijan might be invited to join.

THE ISSYK-KUL Protocols formed the context in which the Tashkent conference took place only five days later. The immediate focus of this much larger conclave was to mobilize regional and international support for the Afghan economy so as to relieve human suffering there. The organizers also wanted to encourage countries worldwide to expand contacts with the Taliban rulers so as to reduce Afghanistan's isolation and foster regional stability and development. Beyond this, the Uzbeks hoped to enlist both the Taliban and international partners in opening routes across Afghanistan for the transport of electrical energy, gas, electronic information, and goods of all sort to South and Southeast Asia.

More than a hundred officials from thirty-three countries in Central Asia, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Asia presented their governments' positions on these matters. The largest delegation, however, came from various offices of the United Nations. As a prelude to their presentations, most national representatives enumerated their countries' generous gifts of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. Russia's representative, however, all but apologized for having provided only two plane loads of aid, while the Chinese representative blandly reported that China now buys carpets, figs, and almonds from Afghanistan. America's special representative for Afghanistan noted that U.S. assistance far surpassed that of any other country.

The Taliban delegation numbered nineteen, including the ministers of foreign affairs and finance, head of counterintelligence, the head of Afghan railroads, and several officials of the Central Bank. Even though many speakers from other countries referred to the Taliban as Afghanistan's "temporary government," nearly three dozen of their governments had already exchanged charges d'affaires with Kabul and seemed only to be awaiting the removal of existing impediments in order to elevate their contact to the ambassadorial level. First among these impediments were the Taliban's laws and practices affecting the lives of Afghan women and girls.

Nearly all speakers raised this issue, including representatives from across the Middle East, Europe, India, Japan, and China. The United States signaled the overriding importance of this concern by including a report from its special envoy for Afghan women, girls, and human rights, Afghan-born Rina Amiri. China's representative, too, expressed concern over the fate of Afghan women but averred that the only way to improve their lot was to engage with Kabul, not shun it.

The European Union's Thomas Niklasson offered the most comprehensive list of additional concerns, including eliminating terrorist groups, lifting censorship, and establishing the rule of law. The Iranian spokesman demanded that Kabul cease terrorist acts and extend equal rights to all ethnic and religious minorities, e.g., the Shiite Hazara.

Amir Khan Muttaqi Mawlawi, Afghanistan's acting minister of foreign affairs, listened to all this in stony silence. He began his response by asking if anyone present was willing to acknowledge Taliban achievements, among them the reopening of universities, employment of women in health and education, the reintegration of 500,000 former civil servants into the new administration, and the burning of stocks of narcotics. "Is this not progress?" he asked.

Mawlawi then insisted that "We believe in political reform" and that the Taliban "has entered a new phase of engagement with former enemies." The Taliban government, he affirmed, is fully prepared to discuss all outstanding issues and to work out practical solutions that all parties could live with. However, he insisted that development and human rights must be treated separately: "Let us not link one issue with all others," he pleaded.

Even though opening a "window to South Asia" through Afghanistan was not the main focus of the conference, more than half the speakers championed the prospect nonetheless, including all the Central Asians, Pakistan, India, China, and the Afghans themselves. However, it was noted that the Russians' route south avoids Central Asia and skirts Afghanistan to the west, while the Chinese version skirts Afghanistan to the east. The Uzbeks and Afghans, by contrast, argued that the shortest and most efficient route is from Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan on the east and Iran to the West.

In light of this, China's representative made a telling concession, announcing Beijing's willingness to participate in the construction of a spur from Peshawar in Pakistan to Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan, namely, the same 760-kilometer rail line that is the main focus of Uzbekistan's and Pakistan's campaign. In a private meeting, the Taliban's director of railroads, Bakht-ur Rehman Sharafat, told me that he strongly supports this project, noting that this railroad was shorter and more cost-effective than the north-south routes under development by Russia and China, both of which skirt Afghanistan.

A striking feature of the conference was that, on the "window to the South" and most other issues, the five Central Asian countries spoke emphatically and with one voice. In doing so they reflected the common stand on regional policy that had led to the signing of the Issyk-Kul Protocol only five days earlier. Indeed, in a notable presentation, Kazakhstan's Special Representative for Afghanistan Talgat Kaliev praised the Central Asians' "concerted regional policy," thanked Uzbekistan for its role in bringing it about, and concluded that Tashkent "can always depend on [Kazakhstan]."

WHO WERE the main drivers of these two landmark events? The Issyk-Kul meeting was organized jointly by the five presidents, with Uzbekistan's Mirziyoyev taking a prominent role. The Tashkent conference on Afghanistan was also initiated by Mirziyoyev. The meeting was opened by Abdulaziz Komilov, special representative of the president of Uzbekistan for foreign affairs, who reminded attendees that the purpose of the conclave was to reduce and eliminate Afghanistan's isolation from its neighbors and from the regional and world economies. To this end, he called for new links with Afghan society, "including its women."

For their part, a prime goal of the Taliban team was to get Washington to return the reserves of their country's central bank. Western speakers made clear that they needed evidence that the new Afghan government could handle the funds responsibly, that the bank's operations would be transparent, and that the funds would be used for national development. Beyond this, however, the voices of finance and business were scarcely audible at the conference. Given the many other urgent issues before the assembly, this was probably inevitable. However, the obvious follow-on to this convocation would be to determine how a more open and practical-minded Afghanistan would be financed. Talk of funding from the Gulf states, Islamic Development Bank, and other entities was heard on the sidelines, but for now, this remained just talk.

In spite of the many upbeat moments of the Tashkent conference, there remained the conviction in many quarters that the Taliban had not really changed at all. A speaker from Kuwait stated bluntly that the real authority in Kabul was the Islamic State, or Daesh, while a UN speaker asserted that the Taliban remained in close contact with Al Qaeda. Only five days after the conference, U.S. president Joe Biden announced that a drone attack had killed the Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri at his Kabul residence, next door to the home of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban's minister of internal affairs. Haqqani promptly fled the country and Taliban officials denied all knowledge of Zawahiri's presence in Kabul.

At the same time, more positive notes were also audible. Thomas West, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan, acknowledged several areas of progress in Kabul before enumerating his government's list of problems. Many other speakers did likewise. Reports on a number of other developments seemed to confirm such progress. Typical was an update on the construction of the Surkhan-Pul-e-Khumri Power Line from Uzbekistan, which will exponentially increase Afghanistan's supply of electric power by 2025.

SUMMING UP, what can we conclude from the meeting of Central Asian presidents at Issyk-Kul and of the Tashkent conference on Afghanistan? First, both exhibited a degree of regional comity and practical collaboration that has rarely been seen in post-Soviet Central Asia. Prompted by the American pullout from Afghanistan; by Putin's villainous attack on Ukraine and his stated intention to reclaim former Soviet territories; and by the readiness of Uzbekistan and its president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, to exercise leadership; the regional states identified their own shared interests and goals and took concrete steps to advance them.

This has important implications for all the major powers. China appears ready to accept the emergence of a more self-confident new region on its border and that region's vigorous approach to Afghanistan. Russia, however, is still far from overcoming the imperial hangover that dates to the collapse of the USSR. For Washington and Brussels, this calls for a greater focus on the region as a whole, and on the region's own stated priorities, which happen to mesh neatly with those of the West. Central Asia now presents a realistic venue for America, Europe, and like-thinking states to balance the influence of Russia and China with benign activity involving neighbors of those superpowers. Any such support should be focused on the emerging regional institutions announced at Issyk-Kul, on the Central Asians' own efforts to strengthen market-based economic development in their countries, and on those countries' initiatives to stabilize Afghanistan and open transport corridors through that country. However, America and its friends in Europe and Asia need not rush to recognize the Taliban government, for the Central Asians' own efforts will provide a sober and reliable index of developments in Kabul.

During the years 2001–2019 the United States made the mistake of viewing Central Asia through the lens of its Afghan project. Now it can correct that by viewing Afghanistan, in part at least, in the broader context of America's strategic interests in Central Asia. This will not be easy, for both China and Russia harbor long-term designs on the entire region. Chinese investors have already returned to the vast copper deposits at Aynak south of Kabul, are planning to mine iron and coal in Bamayan, and are using drones to prospect for minerals near Bagram. The war in Ukraine has stalled Russia's aspirations in Afghanistan, but has not diminished Moscow's interest in building its own transport corridor to South Asia and expanding its economic and security footprint regionally.

The alternative to such engagement is clear: Central Asia and Afghanistan will increasingly be absorbed into the Sino-Russo orbit. This will leave those two powers in control of the entire heart of Eurasia, creating a single band of dependent states stretching from the Pacific to the Middle East and from the White Sea to the Arabian Sea. This would be the price the West would pay for further neglect of Central Asia and Afghanistan.

The meetings in Issyk-Kul and Tashkent showed clearly that America's abrupt departure from Afghanistan last summer and its long-term neglect of Central Asia did not mark the end of history. Quite the contrary. A sound path forward requires new thinking about this entire region, a challenge that cannot be met by gazing endlessly at the rear-view mirror.

S. Frederick Starr was Founding Chairman of the Kennan Institute and is currently Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at the American Foreign Policy Council.