

Uzbekistan and its Relationship with the USA during Islam Karimov Regime: An Evaluation

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Abstract

The development of the relationship between an undeclared authoritarian state, Uzbekistan and the USA, the self-proclaimed guardian of democracy has always been a matter of constant debate and discussion for the foreign policy experts. The tremendous efforts of the Uzbek leaders to obtain considerable attention from Washington and in return the ambivalent response of US towards the region in 1990s decade, later, more particularly after 9/11 incident, the least lasting dramatic development of warm relations between the two region had opened up ample prospects for critical enquiry about their bilateral ties. This paper seeks to analyse the development and ups and downs of the relationship between Uzbekistan and the USA since 1992 up to the recent year. It also investigates the sources of conflict and cooperation between these two states and evaluates the prospects of their bilateral ties.

1 Introduction

Uzbekistan, since its incorporation into the Russian empire in 19th century, was being known as an integral part of tsarist Russia and later, a constituent republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic(USSR). During the cold war period, when the world powers got divided into two ideologically antagonistic blocs led by two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, Uzbekistan persistently stood with the Soviet Union till the last breath of the USSR. Hence, there was no question of developing a cordial relation between USA and Uzbekistan till the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, the collapse of the USSR gifted unexpected and undesired independence to the Central Asian states. Freedom from the Soviet Union had never been a long waited and precious dream for the Uzbek leaders and its citizens, neither had they fought the years-long struggle for accomplishing it. Instead, some scholars like Ajay Patnaik (2016), Mariya Omelicheva (2007),

and others argue that like other CA states, Uzbekistan was heavily dependent on the economic aids of the USSR and had hardly had any preparation to be disintegrated from it.

However, after obtaining independence, protection and preservation of sovereignty and integrity of the state have become the first and foremost *raison d'état* of the CA states for which they have been consistently working since independence. The President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, proved himself as more aggressive in zealously preserving the states' *raison d'état* at any cost. The disintegration of the USSR which brought about unexpected sovereignty to the CA states ushered in some non-traditional security threats like arms smuggling, drug trafficking, environmental degradations, religious extremism and terrorism into the region. To deal with such security threats, it became inevitable for the newly established regime of Uzbekistan to search for new friends in the international system. This paper has been divided into four parts. In the first part, it presents a brief overview of Uzbekistan. The next section elaborates how Islam Karimov continuously emphasised to initiate and maintain warm relations with the USA during the 1990s. This section also explains how the Uzbek regime adopted pro-USA positions in several crucial international issues such as Iran-USA dispute, Iraq-USA war etc. to project himself as the reliable partner of the USA in the Central Asian region. The third part outlines the ambivalent response of the USA towards Uzbekistan during the decade of the 1990s. This section also analyses how the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, had brought a dramatic shift to the Uzbekistan-USA relations that made each other closer to fight unitedly against terrorism in Afghanistan. The fourth section of the paper talks about the Andijan massacre and its impact on USA-Uzbekistan bilateral ties. It analyses how the USA's strong condemnation and the demand for an independent investigation on the Andijan massacre adversely deteriorated their relationship that pushed the Uzbek leaders closer to the Russian federation.

2 Overview of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is one of the largest countries in Central Asia. It emerged as an independent state on August 31, 1991, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Geographically, Uzbekistan is situated in "the heart of Central Asia" and on "the ancient Great Silk Road between Asia and Europe" (Uzbekistan Country Overview 2015). Being the third-largest country in Central Asia it covers an area of 447,000 square kilometres. It is the only country in Turkestan that shares borders with each other country in the region. Uzbekistan shares its boundary with Kazakhstan in the north and with Kyrgyzstan in the north-east. In the south-east, it shares a border with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in the south-west, and Afghanistan in the south. About 80% of Uzbekistan's landmass is surrounded by plane desert or semi-desert, with the vast Kyzyl-Kum Desert covering its "northern lowlands". "To the south-east are the foothills of the Tien Shan, which rise steadily to heights reaching 4,500 meters above sea level" (Central Asia Atlas of Natural Resources, 2010). Uzbekistan also has a short border with Afghanistan, which is considered to be one of the most unstable countries in the world. Uzbekistan is a dry, landlocked country. Being entirely bordered by landlocked countries, Uzbekistan is also called a doubly landlocked country.

While looking at the economic prospects of Uzbekistan, it is observed that Uzbekistan is one of the largest cotton producer countries in the world. At present, it is the eighth-largest cotton producer and the eleventh-largest cotton exporter in the world. Moreover, Uzbekistan is also rich in certain other kinds of natural resources like hydrocarbon, gold, copper, and Uranium.

Demographically, Uzbekistan, being the most populous country in Central Asia, has a population of approximately 32 million. It is important to note that it is one of the poorest countries in Turkestan, and most of the people are still dwelling in rural areas which are heavily dependent on cotton farming for their livelihood. The United Nations Development Programme's report on "Poverty, Inequality, and Vulnerability in the transition and developing economies of Europe and Central Asia" (2014) has indicated the pathetic conditions of the people of Uzbekistan. According to this report, if the "Purchasing Power Parity (PPP)\$4.30/ Day poverty line is treated as a regional income poverty threshold and if PPP\$ 2.15/Day is accepted as a regional threshold for extreme income poverty", then, the people who live in extreme income poverty in Uzbekistan would be more than 10 million. Naturally, this data speaks a lot about the contemporary socio-political and economic situation in the region.

Ethnographically, Uzbekistan has numerous ethnic groups. However, the most dominant ethnic group in Uzbekistan is the ethnic Uzbeks. It comprises 80% of the total population. According to the statistics of the Government of Uzbekistan, over 129 ethnic groups are living in Uzbekistan. (Uzbekistan, Country overview, 2015) Since independence, Uzbekistan has taken the membership of some regional and international organisations. At present, it is a member of United Nations, Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO). It also joined the Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUAM) alliance in 1997 but formally withdrew from it in 2005. (Sevim & Rozanov, 2014).

3 Initial Period of Uzbekistan-USA Relations

In order to understand the initial development of relations between Uzbek and US, it is essential to study the early year's foreign policy of Uzbekistan. As the central Asian countries were ill-prepared for independence from the Soviet Union because of its economic dependency, the disintegration carried out a severe political and economic crisis in this region (Pomfret, 1995). Uzbekistan was also not an exception. In the aftermath of independence, Uzbekistan faced multiple complications such as security threat coming from Islamic extremism as well as a severe economic crisis. These problems had greatly influenced the making of the foreign policy of Uzbekistan in the first decade. "The chief objective of Uzbekistan's foreign policy since the country's independence in 1991 has been to preserve internal stability and security for its super-presidential, authoritarian regime" (Spechler and Spechler 2010). After observing Uzbekistan's foreign policy in the first decade of independence, the foreign policy experts of this region have claimed that the Uzbek leadership had always been showing priorities to make a healthy relationship with the USA,

the sole superpower after the collapse of Soviet Union. In the 1990s, it had taken several pro-USA initiatives and decisions in several disputed issues of the Middle East to portray itself as the most reliable partner in Central Asia. The enthusiasm of Uzbek leadership towards the USA arises an important question. Why did Uzbekistan demonstrate so much of interest to make cordial relations with the USA?

4 Examining the reasons behind the pro-USA policy of Uzbekistan in the 1990s

In the first decade of independence, the Uzbek leaders consistently made significant efforts to attract the attention of the USA chiefly because of the following reasons-

Firstly, the leaders of the newly emerged Uzbekistan considered the growing Islamic Fundamentalism coming from Afghanistan as one of the most dangerous threats to the internal stability and security of the country in the 1990s. The emergence of the militant group namely Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and its alliance with the most terrible terrorist group, i.e. Taliban as well as 'Hizbut Tahir al Islami' had carried out serious security threat to the region. Nevertheless, during that period the President Islam Karimov could not deal with Islamic extremism single-handedly. Hence, it had become inevitable for Karimov to develop strong ties with the dominant international ally like the USA.

Secondly, after getting independence from the USSR, Islam Karimov had become conscious enough about its authoritarian regime as well as the independent existence of the region and committed to maintaining its integrity and sovereignty of the state at any cost. He was worry about the possible imperial ambition of Russian federation to the central Asian region, as this region had enough bitter experience under the direct dominance of Russian imperialism. That is why he gradually disengaged itself from the Russian Federation, the successor state of USSR. A significant effort was the establishment of the Central Asian Union in 1994 by the initiative of Tashkent which was renamed as the Central Asian Economic community in 1998(Kazantsev) In a nutshell, Uzbekistan sought to develop healthy relations with the USA as a "counterweight to Russia". The Uzbekistan regime started to see the USA as a "potentially reliable security partner" (Spechler & Spechler, 2010)

5 Uzbekistan's pro-USA policies in the 1990s decade:

However, despite the negligence expressed by Washington towards Uzbekistan, the Uzbek leadership often tried to prove itself as the most pro-USA country in the Central Asian region. In the next section, the paper explains various pro-USA initiatives taken by president Islam Karimov to promote and strengthen bilateral ties with the USA.

Uzbekistan's stand on Iran-USA dispute:

The long-running conflict between Iran and the USA offered a golden opportunity to the Uzbek regime to ingratiate itself with Washington. The history of Iran USA relations beginning from the 19th century to till the government of Mohamed Raza Pahlavi both the nation had maintained good

relationships between them. The dispute arose only after the 1979 Iranian revolution when it was seen some possibilities that Iran might use its Civilian Nuclear Program to develop nuclear weapons, which are continuing with them. This relation further deteriorated during the presidentship of Bill Clinton when he imposed a trade embargo on Tehran in 1995. It prohibited American companies from dealing with any business and commerce with Tehran. In this dispute, Uzbekistan quickly supported Clinton's policy of trade embargo as it considered Iran as a dangerous threat in Central Asia. To demonstrate its support, Uzbekistan also cancelled a planned visit of Uzbek's foreign minister to Tehran.

Similarly, it also extended its support to the US-led Iran Libya sanctions act, which threatened to penalise foreign companies if they invested more than \$40 million in the energy sector of Iran and Libya. That is why, in 1996, when the UN General Assembly took a vote on this act. Uzbekistan was one of the three states that stood in favour of the United States (Akbarjadeh, 2005).

Uzbekistan's position on Iraq-USA War:

The leadership of Uzbekistan also procured pro-USA position regarding the disputed matters of Iraq USA relations. It recognised UN-imposed sanctions and accepted the "role of the United States as the leading power in enforcing them" (Akbarjadeh, 2005). It is said that to some extent, Uzbekistan also supported the punitive airstrike on Iraq in 1998 after the UN inspection team was forced to withdraw from that country. President Karimov appropriated a dubious position in this incident by expressing its dissatisfaction with US strike on the one hand and by justifying this bombing as desirable on the other.

Later it proved itself as a pro-USA country in the region by signing up to the 'Coalition of Willing' which was introduced by the Bush administration to indicate to the states who supported, militarily or verbally, the 2003 Iraq invasion and later, the military presence in post-invasion Iraq.

Uzbekistan's outlook towards NATO's eastward expansion:

Another significant issue which offered Tashkent an opportunity to use its overtures was the US plan for the eastward expansion of NATO. In this issue, Tashkent projected itself as the reliable and natural ally of Washington in the process of De-Sovietization. Although Russia objected the admission of East European states to NATO and sought to turn the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) into a military alliance as an alternative to NATO, Uzbekistan unequivocally rejected both the objections and ambitions of Russia. Instead, President Karimov warned that the realisation of Russia's ambition for the CIS would turn the clock back and return CIS members to the past.

Despite Moscow's objection, Uzbekistan joined in the "outer periphery" of NATO in 1994 by signing up for the NATO Partnership for Peace programme. Moreover, Uzbekistan formed the "Central Asian Battalion" (Centrazbat) with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan as a peacekeeping force within the charter of NATO PfP and participated in a "joint military" exercise with US force. Subsequent US-Centrazbat exercises were held in 1997, 1998, and 2000 in central Asia (Akbarjadeh, 2005). Moreover, it also supported NATO operation in Yugoslavia in April 1999.

When Russia tried to create a united front against the NATO bombing in Yugoslavia, Uzbekistan deliberately maintained a distance from Russia regarding this matter and refused to sign a declaration against NATO bombing.

6 President Islam Karimov first visit to the USA:

Since the beginning, the Uzbek President was keen to develop a strong relationship with the USA rather than Russia for promoting and preserving its regime and national interest. Taking into consideration this aspect, he for the first time visited the white house in June 1996. However, this visit did not proceed smoothly. The US president initially refused to sit with him in a face to face meeting because of the poor human records of Uzbekistan. In order to make his first visit fruitful, Uzbekistan had to declare a presidential pardon officially to 89 political prisoners in the country on the eve of his first visit to Washington. As a result, pentagon warmly welcomed him to the USA. During the visit, he met US secretary of defence William Perry and discussed security issues in Central Asia. At this meeting, William Perry praised Uzbekistan as an 'Island of stability' in the region (Starr, January-February, 1996). Subsequently, President Karimov was also succeeded to project itself as the staunch supporter of the eastward policy of NATO's expansion by viewing NATO as 'offering a gateway to regional stability and security for the former Soviet bloc.' (Akbarjadeh, 2005)

7 The US response to Uzbekistan in the 1990s

Initially, the US administration was ambivalent in its response to Uzbek overtures. Although Washington recognised Uzbekistan, as an independent country on December 25 1991, and established its embassy on March 16 1992, it did not express much interest to make warm relations with Uzbekistan. The scholars have argued that many factors had prevented the USA in developing strong ties with this central Asian region. These factors can be identified as follows-

Absence of government intention and strategy for democratic reforms and economic liberalisation in Uzbekistan.

Poor human rights record in Uzbekistan.

Lack of affluence in natural resources to attract the attention of the USA. (Akbarjadeh, 2005)

However, the overtures of Uzbekistan and the emerging threat of international terrorism from Afghanistan gradually changed the earlier attitude of Clinton's administration towards Uzbekistan. According to the Washington Post, "the August 1998 attacks by Al-Qaeda on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were the catalyst that brought Washington and Tashkent together" (Washington Post, October 14, 2001). Another significant event which highlighted the importance of Uzbekistan for Clinton's administration in its ongoing anti-terrorist campaign in central Asia and Afghanistan was the August 2000 incident, in which the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan kidnapped four American mountaineers. The hostage managed to escape their captors, but it compelled the US administration for rethinking about IMU and Uzbekistan. After this

incident, USA listed IMU as a "terrorist organisation linked to Al-Qaeda", which provided a new dimension to the US Uzbek ties (Akbarjadeh, 2005).

8 US- Uzbek Relations After the 9/11 Terror Attack:

The USA realised the geostrategic importance of Uzbekistan only after the unprecedentedly horrific 9/11 terror attack on the World Trade Centre by Laden led Taliban. After that, the USA declared 'War on Terror' against Taliban and sought Uzbekistan's help to succeed in this operation. The president Islam Karimov immediately supported US 'war on terror' and offered an airbase just north of the Afghanistan border, namely 'Karshi Khanabad' to use American airmen against Taliban. In return, Uzbekistan received "a hundred millions of dollars in grants" from the USA during 2001-2003 as a gif of loyalty. During that period, the US-Uzbek relations arrived at the peak point. (Pikalov, July 2014)

In 2002 President Islam Karimov again visited Washington where he signed 'Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework Agreement' with the USA. This agreement confirmed Washington commitment to Uzbekistan's security and territorial integrity, in return Uzbekistan reaffirmed its pledge of support for the US-led War on Terror.

This agreement also included a nuclear nonproliferation programme to replace highly enriched Uranium from an Uzbek research reactor with lower grade material.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that during this short period, the USA had hardly criticised the poor human records of Uzbekistan.

However, the warm relations between the USA and Uzbekistan lasted only a few years. Since 2004, the US administration again started to question the poor human records of Uzbekistan and cut civilian aid. It also started to persuade the Uzbek government to enforce democratic reforms and sent "NGOs and human rights groups" to pressurise the Karimov regime to "allow greater freedom". Such dubious attitude of US seriously dissatisfied Uzbek's president Karimov who declined to accept this pressure, stating, "We are deeply convinced that democracy and various types of so-called open society models are impossible to export we stand for an evolutionary, consistent nature of reforms and transformations"(Pikalov, July 2014). It rapidly deteriorated the normal relations between them. In the aftermath, the emergence of 'coloured revolution' in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan had carried out a severe threat to the non-democratic regime of Uzbekistan. Hence when the USA supported 'coloured revolution' which talked about 'regime change' and 'democratisation', it further declined the relationship between USA and Uzbekistan. As a result, Uzbekistan quit the pro-Western GUUAM in 2005. However, the most severe decline took place between them after the darkest incident of the Andijan massacre.

9 Andijan Massacre and Uzbekistan-US relation:

The widely discussed Andijan massacre can be considered as the last event, which gave the final shape to the decline of US-Uzbek ties. This incident took place on May 13, 2005. It happened

when "Uzbek interior ministry and National Security Service troops" indiscriminately shot into a gathering of protesters in Andijan. An unofficial data claimed that there were more than 1500 people, including children and women brutally killed in this massacre (Shishkin Philip, 2011). Although the government blamed the members of 'Hizbut Tahir', an Uzbekistan based terrorist organisation for this massacre, the scale of killing was such that the USA and European Union could no longer ignore Karimov "abuses". USA demanded an "independent investigation" of this incident which adversely affected the relations between the USA and Uzbekistan (Forster, 2003). As a result, Uzbekistan evicted American airman from the Karshi Khanabad. Since then, Uzbekistan has shifted its focus from the USA to Russia and China because "he needed friends to do business with without the fear of subversion". He found them in Russia and China, where "the foreign policy does not include democracy promotion" (Shishkin, 2011). On the same day, American force left Uzbekistan on November 14 2005; it started a new beginning with Russia by signing up a mutual defence alliance (Pikalov, July 2014). The realignment of Uzbekistan with Russia has adversely restricted the relations between Tashkent and Washington as no significant development has been seen since 2005. However, a slight improvement developed in 2007 when both the country sought to reengage their relations under the terms of the March 2002 declaration. In the first part of the year 2009, Karimov allowed the United States to transport military supplies through Uzbek territory to troops in Afghanistan where the fight against the Taliban was going on. Nevertheless, the US decision to withdraw its force from Afghanistan in 2014 has created another new complication between them as the presence of American troops in Afghanistan was beneficial for Uzbek's internal security (Sevim & Rozanov, 2014).

10 Conclusion

The ideological confrontation between an authoritarian regime and the liberal democratic system has often created difficulties and uneasiness in the relationship between Uzbekistan and USA. Moreover, the tactics of the intervention of the west, particularly USA in the foreign and domestic policy of underdeveloped and developing countries like Central Asian region through NGO and MNC in the name of promoting so-called democratic value has further made their relation bitter and complex. Because every sovereign state in the world whether it is small or big, weak or powerful always seeks to protect its own internal and external sovereignty at any cost and Uzbekistan is not an exception in this matter. Another important fact is that in the era of postmodernism, where the concept of Universalism has been persistently challenged, the US efforts to impose western democratic norms and values universally to all over the world have carried out complications to the traditional multiethnic states of Central Asia. Because Central Asian countries did not have any experience of western democracy.

Moreover, democracy is not a building, which can be built within a short period. It takes a long period to be well established. Nevertheless, instead of giving adequate importance to the traditions, multi-ethnicity and diversity of Uzbekistan, the USA's constant pressure of building democracy to the state has finally declined the usual relation between USA and Uzbekistan.

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