

UZBEKISTAN AT TWENTY-FIVE: WHAT NEXT?

PAUL STRONSKI

Uzbekistan is Central Asia's geopolitical center of gravity. It not only is the region's most populous state but also borders all four other Central Asian states and Afghanistan. The country has been ruled with a firm hand by the same leader—Islam Karimov—since before the Soviet Union's collapse. Karimov's political skill, his willingness to oppress all opposition, his disregard for the scorn of the international community, and his clever geopolitical maneuvering have given Uzbekistan a degree of stability that few predicted when it gained independence.

But change will come to Uzbekistan, and its political system, security apparatus, and economy will be put to the test in the coming years. The country's ability to weather that test will have implications for the rest of the region. Its success will make it possible for Uzbekistan's neighbors to continue along their current trajectories. However, if it stumbles and creates any sort of instability in the heart of Central Asia, the consequences for the entire region—and, perhaps, even for key outside players like Russia and China—could be dire.

Uzbekistan's position in the middle of Central Asia is a source of strength and vulnerability. Its shared borders with Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have enabled it to intervene in their domestic affairs and enhanced its international standing. At the same time, these countries' internal instability has in turn posed a threat to Uzbekistan. In the years to come, the security environment in Uzbekistan's immediate neighborhood will probably become far less stable.

However, as the external environment becomes more challenging, the biggest test facing Uzbekistan is likely to be

at home, rather than abroad. Domestic uncertainties include the first leadership succession since independence and a deteriorating economy. More than 40 percent of the country's nearly 30 million people are under the age of twenty-five. The leadership's resistance to change has kept it from launching meaningful economic and political reforms and resulted in high unemployment. This problem will only get worse as more young Uzbeks reach working age.

With limited opportunities at home, millions of Uzbeks have gone abroad in search of work. Russia has absorbed most of these migrants, but the slowing Russian economy means fewer opportunities for Uzbeks. Similarly, China's economic slowdown could have real impacts in Uzbekistan; China is a major investor in the state-dominated Uzbek economy and a leading trade partner. Low prices for Uzbekistan's main exports—natural gas, cotton, and gold—exacerbate an already bleak economic picture.

The political future of the ruling regime is also uncertain. At age seventy-eight, Karimov has already outlived the average Central Asian male. Rumors about his ill health have been circulating

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Stronski is a senior associate in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program, where his research focuses on the relationship between Russia and neighboring countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

for years. He is the only leader most Uzbeks have ever known, and his legitimacy stems largely from his political longevity and his skill at maintaining domestic stability in a troubled region. His successor, who will likely assume office in difficult economic times, will lack the authority and perceived legitimacy that come from decades in power. Ironically, Karimov's iron rule has kept Uzbekistan relatively stable since 1991. When change comes, however, it may turn out that this stability was purchased at an enormous cost to the country's long-term future.

Assessing the political situation in Uzbekistan is not easy. The closed and oppressive nature of the regime, compounded by a general lack of transparency across the region, makes it difficult to judge the extent of its economic troubles, the attitudes of the public, and the fragility of the overall political situation. The regime has reportedly been investing in its security apparatus and its military, likely the region's most capable. It probably intends to continue relying on these forces to ensure domestic stability and external security in the challenging times to come. However, reliable information about the state of its military and security apparatus is scarce, creating additional uncertainties.

POLITICS IN AN AUTOCRACY

Without strong institutions of state or civil society in the Western sense, Uzbekistan's governing structure—highly opaque even to seasoned students of the country—appears to rest on a carefully maintained balance of personalities, interest groups, and regional clans. For the past quarter century, President Karimov, through a combination of political skill and heavy reliance on his security service, has stood at the top of the Uzbek political and economic structure. He has acted as the key arbiter among the prominent figures and powerful interests that compete for the country's economic, bureaucratic, and commercial resources. Although he has ruled with unequaled authority for a long time, recent developments suggest that the elite's unity is eroding, including within the Karimov family.

Gulnara Karimova, better known simply by her first name, was once the richest and most powerful woman in Central Asia and was rumored to be a potential successor to her father. In 2014, however, she found herself under house arrest, and her business empire has since been dismantled. Gulnara and her partners

are under investigation for corruption in Uzbekistan, Europe, and the United States for allegedly pocketing over \$1 billion in illegal payments from telecommunications companies—a sector she effectively controlled, according to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. The allegations center on TeliaSonera, a Swedish telecom company suspected of illicitly funneling money to Gulnara and her allies. Uzbek prosecutors have imprisoned many of Gulnara's allies for tax evasion and corruption, including her cousin, who is accused of organized crime connections, indicating that Gulnara's faction has been severely weakened.

Gulnara and others see her dramatic fall from power as part of a succession struggle with security chief Rustam Inoyatov, whom she accused of turning her father against her. Outside observers have little insight into the internal dynamics of the Karimov family, which once ruled with impunity, or its competitors, real and alleged. However, Gulnara's house arrest, which is real, suggests that impunity may not be forever, and that President Karimov must listen to and accommodate the interests of the security services and other powerful groups. Many of these interests groups were probably concerned that Gulnara's corruption had gotten out of hand and tarnished the image of the ruling elite. Members of that elite, possibly including Rustam Inoyatov, may have feared that her activities could have posed a threat to the regime itself and acted to sideline her well before the start of the succession process. With their move against Gulnara, the security services appear to be positioning themselves to retain their pivotal place in the country's politics.

Beyond these apparent security service machinations, there are other indications that Uzbekistan's political elites are gearing up for the post-Karimov era. Karimov was reelected in a highly flawed vote in March 2015. Although a new election is not anticipated for several years, the Uzbek parliament secretly passed legislation in late 2015 lowering the number of signatures required for presidential candidates to stand for election. Karimov quietly signed the measure into law on December 31, 2015. The new law reverses three previous legislative actions that raised the bar on running for office and made it even more difficult for challengers to run in presidential elections. Officials offered no explanation for the new law's timing or why it was kept secret. However, its enactment suggests that powerful

interest groups are laying the groundwork and creating political space for themselves (although hardly for the population at large) for the succession contest that is sure to come. Yet, it provides few clues about who the potential presidential successors could be.

Uzbekistan's constitution mandates that if the president dies or becomes incapacitated, executive power will transfer to the head of Uzbekistan's Senate for three months pending a new election. However, official political institutions in the country are weak and the Senate head is an obscure figure. If Karimov leaves office early, the elites will likely follow the letter of the constitution to secure a veneer of legitimacy for the process. But the real decisions will almost certainly be made through closed-door bargaining among the country's power brokers—the security apparatus, the most powerful ministries, and the major interest groups and clans. Their ability to reach a compromise quickly would make for a smoother transition. If they do not reach an early consensus, the likelihood of a generally weaker political figure, like the Senate head, remaining in place increases. The latter scenario could lead to protracted political jockeying and even domestic instability.

Besides security service head Inoyatov, there are several other presumed contenders to succeed Karimov. Finance Minister Rustam Azimov and Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev are possible candidates. Both are little known outside Uzbekistan, but they are likely to be more reform-oriented than their potential rivals from the security services.

Other possible presidential successors include lesser-known candidates from the country's powerful regional clans, most of which fell into line under Karimov's rule despite predictions in the 1990s that rivalries among them could unravel the country's post-Soviet stability. However, clan unity easily could splinter in the post-Karimov era as different groups lobby for power.

The most important clan interests are probably based around Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara, and the Fergana Valley—regions with the greatest population density or economic potential. Tashkent—the city and the capital region—is the richest, best educated, and most industrialized part of the country. More than other areas, it is a place where many of

the cultural and social legacies of the Soviet era remain visible. Prominent figures in Tashkent will seek to preserve their and the region's interests in any leadership change.

The Samarkand clan—from which the Karimovs hail—is important not only because of its connection to the first family but also because the region includes the country's Tajik minority, raising the question of whether and how ethnicity might influence the succession process or post-succession domestic tranquility. Officially, Tajiks constitute only about 5 percent of the population. However, some analysts believe that figure is actually higher and that Tajiks often identify themselves as ethnic Uzbeks to improve their opportunities for economic or social advancement.

In the culturally conservative Fergana Valley, Islam generally plays a greater role in public life and political dynamics than in other parts of the country. Regional clans from the Fergana Valley are not as influential as others, but they derive power from their ability to control and pacify their volatile and densely populated home region, which has a long history of social unrest. Fergana is the site of some of the most violent government clampdowns on dissent, the worst of which occurred in Andijan in 2005. The Fergana Valley's growing population and its shared borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan make stability there essential for Uzbekistan's long-term security. Moving forward into the post-Karimov era, local elites' ability to keep the region that way could give them added clout with Tashkent in any future reorientation of the political system. The region's interest groups should not be overlooked and could influence elite negotiations in the post-Karimov era.

Considering the opaque nature of clan politics and the political system overall, assessing the true state of Uzbekistan's domestic politics is an inherently difficult task. After Gulnara's rapid fall from grace, the extended Karimov family is likely worried about its fate in the post-Karimov era—a factor that could explain why many family members have distanced themselves from her. Moving forward, the potential for elite infighting will depend on multiple factors, including whether Karimov negotiates his exit through an orderly succession process (likely with immunity guarantees for his family) or whether a political vacuum is created by his sudden death or incapacitation.

ECONOMIC TROUBLES AT HOME

A quarter century after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Uzbek economy is a top-down, state-driven enterprise. The country has an overregulated financial and banking sector and very limited opportunities for foreign ownership in strategic sectors—defined broadly as anything the government considers of national importance. It does not have an independent judiciary or a transparent legal process, and its currency is not convertible.

Uzbekistan's economy is highly dependent on raw materials exports—gas, cotton, precious metals, and food. Global prices for the three main drivers of its economy—cotton, gold, and natural gas—are down, highlighting the need for economic reform and diversification. Low commodity prices, particularly for natural gas, also undercut Uzbekistan's negotiating position vis-à-vis its key economic partners, notably China.

Despite these obvious shortcomings, the economy at first glance appears relatively firm, at least on paper. After independence, GDP growth reportedly remained modest until the mid-2000s, averaging 1.1 percent annually. But the economy picked up steam, and yearly growth averaged 8.4 percent between 2007 and 2014, according to the World Bank. In September 2015, the IMF lauded “Uzbekistan's strong growth in recent years and the authorities' prudent macroeconomic management, which has yielded healthy fiscal balances, large external buffers, and low public debt.”

Still, the current global economic downturn has sent palpable ripples through Uzbekistan's economy; growth fell to 6.8 percent in 2015 and is projected to hover between 6.5 percent and 7 percent until 2020, according to the IMF. While these numbers compare favorably with the forecasts for some of Uzbekistan's neighbors, economic statistics on Uzbekistan—even those used by international organizations—are highly suspect. Recent news that multiple Uzbek employers are in massive arrears on salary payments suggests that the economy is quite troubled.

There are other signs that Uzbekistan's economy is not as strong in reality as it is on paper. The country's manufacturing sector is anemic. Car production—through local subsidiaries of the

United States' General Motors and South Korea's Daewoo—is a potential bright spot, although not as bright as it seems at first glance. Uzbekistan's car factories are kit-assembly plants that put together cars with components imported from South Korea and elsewhere. This business model limits the potential of the automobile industry to stimulate broad-based employment. Furthermore, economic struggles in Kazakhstan and Russia—important markets for Uzbekistan-produced cars—have eroded middle-class discretionary spending in both countries.

Uzbekistan's investment climate is poor, and the country is struggling to attract big investors. The TeliaSonera telecommunications scandal damaged Uzbekistan's image, as have international investigations into bribery allegations against Uzbek officials by other foreign companies. Foreign direct investment is needed to diversify the economy, but the regime has a poor track record when it comes to welcoming foreign investors. Businesspeople from Russia and China may be less risk-prone than many of their Western counterparts. China's Huawei and ZTE, for example, have set up kit-assembly plants for telecommunications components and are increasingly active in the telecom sector. Yet, companies from these countries also have run afoul of local corruption problems. Furthermore, while Russian and especially Chinese investments might meet immediate economic needs, Uzbekistan's excessive reliance on these two sources increases the country's risk of dependence. Recent experience shows that when the Russian and Chinese economies falter, the ripples can reach Uzbekistan quickly.

The prospects for medium-sized and small investors, who serve as engines for local-level economic growth and poverty alleviation in many developing countries, are just as bleak, if not worse. Uzbekistan has seen slight improvements in its business climate, but these have focused mostly on appeasing large-scale investors. The country climbed from 103 to 87 in the World Bank's Doing Business 2016 report, but it is still far behind fellow Eurasian states, including Armenia at 35, Kazakhstan at 41, Russia at 51, Azerbaijan at 63, and Kyrgyzstan at 67.

Karimov has spoken of the need to open up the economy to greater entrepreneurship and foreign investment, but this talk has not yet translated into action. Real reform requires less corruption and more transparency, both of which could

undermine the informal power structures upon which Uzbekistan's political system rests. Karimov, a product of Soviet-era political and economic institutions, also appears to have little understanding of global markets and has a poor record on fulfilling promises for economic reform.

More economic trouble might be brewing for Uzbekistan in Russia, where approximately 3 million Uzbek citizens work as migrant laborers. (The actual number of Uzbek migrants in Russia may be higher, but not all migrants can obtain legal work permits.) As the Russian economy stumbles under the dual pressures of low energy prices and Western sanctions, jobs for Central Asian migrants are drying up. According to the Russian Central Bank, remittances from Russia dropped by slightly more than half in the first three quarters of 2015 compared to the same period in 2014. This trickle-down impact of Russia's slowdown, combined with low commodity prices, demonstrates that Tashkent's top-down state economy cannot insulate itself from the wider world. With remittances officially accounting for about 12 percent of Uzbekistan's GDP, economic troubles abroad can have significant impacts at home.

SOCIAL UNREST ON THE HORIZON?

In addition to preventing political and economic modernization, the Karimov government's authoritarian policies have rendered civil society weak and unable to promote change. There is no tradition of social participation in governance in Uzbekistan, and an atmosphere of fear pervades the country. At the same time, the government's social welfare and education systems have failed to keep pace with population growth. The gap between what is needed and what the government can deliver raises fundamental questions about the regime's long-term ability to provide its citizens with the basics required for human security and participation in a modern economy.

As poverty and socioeconomic discontent increase, the security services likely will continue or even expand their efforts to monitor and suppress independent political and social movements in the country. The inability of Uzbek civil society—both religious and secular—to participate in any sort of public discourse and voice concern about the country's governance presumably forces dissent underground. This makes it impossible

to accurately assess and understand the extent of dissatisfaction inside the country. It also increases the potential that social, political, or religious discontent—or a combination—could break out at a time of political or economic change.

STABILITY THREATS FROM UZBEKISTAN'S DIFFICULT NEIGHBORHOOD

While the challenges within Uzbekistan are mounting, evolving complexities in the region are also testing the country's stability. Uzbekistan plays an important role in Afghanistan and will continue to do so even after the United States draws down its troops. Uzbekistan's shared border with Afghanistan, its sizeable security establishment, and its long-standing commercial and political ties to key power players will continue to make it a prominent actor in that country. But the channels of influence run both ways, and Tashkent also faces two major destabilizing factors emanating from across the Afghan border: drug trafficking and radical extremism.

About one-quarter of the global heroin supply travels through Central Asia, with Uzbekistan serving as a key transit state for Afghan heroin and opium going to Russia and Europe. Weak governance, state corruption, transnational Eurasian organized crime networks, and widespread poverty help fuel the flow of drugs into and through Uzbekistan, and feed much of its citizens' drug use.

More worrying than drugs for Tashkent is the resurgence of the Taliban and other radical extremist groups, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), in Afghanistan's north. Tashkent fears the Western drawdown from Afghanistan is premature, even though radical groups inside Afghanistan appear to pose little direct threat to Uzbekistan. The IMU, for example, was pushed out of Central Asia over a decade ago and shifted its focus to Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, unease about the IMU and its relationship with the self-proclaimed Islamic State has seeped into Tashkent. In September 2014, IMU leader Usmon Ghazi announced his allegiance to the Islamic State, and under still-unclear circumstances, the group's flag was hoisted in Tashkent in August 2015. The incident rattled the city, as have scattered reports about the Islamic State's presence in northern Afghanistan.

Despite fears that radical Islamist groups are increasing their strength in the region, an explosion of Islamist violence in Uzbekistan appears unlikely in the near future. The government often amplifies the Islamist threat to justify its harsh crackdowns on civil society and to elicit security assistance from outside powers. However, the nontransparent nature of the regime makes it unclear how severe the extremist threat to Uzbekistan eventually could become.

For people concerned about the influence of extremists in Uzbekistan, Uzbek participation in the Syrian civil war is a source of worry. However, the high numbers of Central Asian fighters in the Middle East—up to 4,000—that are often cited by analysts and advocacy groups appear to be based on Central Asian government figures and are likely inflated.

Most Uzbek fighters in Syria apparently are not traveling directly from their home country to the Middle East, an itinerary that could alert security officials. More often than not, the path to radical extremism for Central Asians includes extended stops as migrant laborers in Russia, where they become detached from family and community networks at home, experience racism and harassment, and seem more vulnerable to radical messages. This includes the case of an Uzbek imam who migrated to the city of Khabarovsk in the Russian Far East in 2012. He later traveled to Syria, where he was killed fighting on behalf of the Islamic State in early 2016. To date, few of the radicalized Central Asians in Russia are focusing their anger on Central Asia, but Uzbekistan's lack of economic and employment opportunities for its population, which would reduce the need to export excess labor, risks becoming a security threat.

While Afghanistan raises security concerns for Uzbekistan around illicit drugs and radical extremism, Russia's confrontational posturing raises other concerns. Recent Russian actions—its aggression in Ukraine, its military intervention in Syria, and the rapid deterioration of its ties with the West (including Turkey)—also threaten Uzbekistan's security. Russia's actions highlight Moscow's unpredictable nature, justifying Tashkent's long-standing attempts to distance itself from most Russian-dominated regional security or economic structures. Tashkent responded to the Ukraine conflict by trying to reinvigorate its diversified approach to foreign policy, touting

the government's ties to the United States and China, as well as to India, Israel, and South Korea, among others. Moscow's erratic and combative international agenda, however, complicates Tashkent's ability to maneuver among its many interlocutors.

Moscow's actions in Ukraine have demonstrated its ambition to influence the internal affairs of its neighbors. The likelihood of Russia interfering in the domestic affairs of Eurasian states appears higher during political transitions, as rival factions seek outside help. This is a potential problem for Uzbekistan with its succession uncertainties. A direct Crimea-style Russian military intervention in Uzbekistan is unlikely, since the ethnic Russian population of Uzbekistan is only about 5 percent and the countries lack common borders. But some local analysts believe Russia is stoking a separatist movement in Uzbekistan's autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, and that Moscow is already laying the groundwork for future meddling in Uzbek political life if the succession scenario installs a reformer or otherwise plays out not to Moscow's advantage.

CHINA'S EVOLVING INFLUENCE

If Moscow wishes to maintain its influence in Uzbekistan, it will need to keep an eye out for China's growing role in the region. Tashkent's relationship with Beijing is developing fast. The Chinese-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization is Uzbekistan's preferred regional security organization in part because it provides a counterbalance to Russia's efforts to dominate the regional security landscape. Tashkent also agreed to develop a strategic partnership with Beijing in 2012, the same year that it left the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for the second time, reportedly over disagreements with Moscow about its efforts to push for greater foreign policy coordination among CSTO member states.

Tashkent is eager to partner with Beijing. Trade turnover between the two countries, which did not exceed \$136 million annually for the first decade of Uzbekistan's independence, gained momentum in the early 2000s and amounted to just under \$3 billion in the first three quarters of 2015 alone. China's One Belt, One Road initiative appeals to Tashkent's top-down model for economic development. The two countries have pledged greater cooperation, and the Chinese have promised investments in railroads, roads, tunnels, and other transportation

projects. A recent proposal envisions a high-speed rail line connecting Urumqi, in China's Xinjiang Province, to Tehran, Iran, with stops in Tashkent and Samarkand, as well as in the capitals of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.

The two countries have also signed several agreements for Chinese participation in exploring and developing Uzbekistan's natural gas reserves and gas transportation infrastructure, specifically the Central Asia–China gas pipeline. The next stage of that project—the much-celebrated Line D—would transport gas from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The execution of these contracts, however, has been spotty. Uzbek officials announced in 2012 that gas exports to China would reach 10 billion cubic meters a year by the end of 2015. Yet Chinese authorities announced in April 2015 that gas imports from Uzbekistan had ceased a few months earlier, and it is unclear how much Uzbek gas China currently receives. Even Line D appears to be on hold, likely the result of low gas prices that are softening demand in China, as well as Chinese economic worries.

Despite these bumps in the road, Uzbek authorities continue to see cooperation with China as a win. Beijing attaches fewer strings to its engagements with Uzbekistan than Russia, with its pressure on Uzbekistan to integrate more closely with Russian-dominated economic and security structures, or the United States, with its efforts to promote democratic reform. However, as Chinese investments in Uzbekistan grow, the likelihood increases that China will focus not only on economics but also on political and security issues.

TROUBLED REGIONAL TIES

Karimov's ambitions for Uzbekistan to be Central Asia's regional leader are complicated by difficult relationships with the country's immediate neighbors.

Tashkent's best relationships in the region are with the governments of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, although this has not always been the case. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan depend on each other for transit corridors both east and west—whether the existing Central Asia–China pipeline or Tashkent's long-shot ambition to link up with Persian Gulf ports through Turkmenistan and Iran. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have long

competed for leadership roles in Central Asia, with energy-rich Kazakhstan being economically more powerful and the more populous Uzbekistan enjoying stronger military and security structures. The two countries, however, are also mutually dependent. Kazakhstan is Uzbekistan's most important regional trade partner, while Uzbekistan is an important and capable buffer between Kazakhstan and less stable countries further to the south. Despite occasional disagreements, Uzbekistan's relations with both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are, for the most part, manageable, although Tashkent is increasingly nervous about instability along the Afghan-Turkmen border.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, however, have a more complicated history, dating back to the early Soviet era when the predominantly Tajik-speaking cities of Samarkand and Bukhara were incorporated into the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. Nationalistic Tajik elites continue to resent this arrangement, even if they are powerless to do anything about it. Uzbekistan also intervened in the Tajik civil war in the 1990s, helping to bring Tajikistan's current leader, Emomali Rahmon, to power, although Rahmon and Karimov reportedly now despise each other. Perceived mistreatment by Tajikistan of ethnic Uzbeks further complicates the bilateral relationship. At almost 14 percent of the population, Uzbeks constitute Tajikistan's largest minority group, but they are generally marginalized from Tajik politics and the education system. Relations between the countries are also strained by Tajikistan's planned Rogun Dam, a hydropower plant that Tashkent fears will deprive Uzbekistan and other downstream countries of the water needed to sustain their agricultural economies.

The Karimov regime regards Tajikistan as a source of instability. This has been particularly true over the past few years, as Rahmon moved to consolidate power. Tajikistan increasingly shows the characteristics of a failing state. Kyrgyzstan, too, has experienced bouts of instability since the late Soviet era. Political and social crises resulted in the overthrow of two presidents and mass violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan's section of the Fergana Valley. Frequent instability in the region's only democracy creates tension with highly authoritarian Uzbekistan, likely reinforcing Karimov's hardline approach to any sort of democratization.

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have not been able to resolve their border disputes in the Fergana Valley, further complicating their relationship. Approximately one-quarter of their common border remains disputed. The most vexing issues are the enclaves of Uzbek territory inside Kyrgyzstan and of Kyrgyz land surrounded by Uzbekistan—legacies of Soviet rule when borders mattered less than they do now. In the post-Soviet era, these pockets lack easy access to the country to which they officially belong, hurting their economies and undermining their residents' ability to maintain economic and political relations with their home country. The status of the enclaves is a combustible issue with no easy solution. It has led to ethnic clashes and skirmishes between border guards and likely will continue to do so.

Tashkent also has flexed its muscles by imposing economic blockades on its weaker neighbors, halting gas supplies and periodically closing border crossings with both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan during times of tension or instability in either country. These strained ties are a perennial problem for Central Asian regional stability and economic development. Given Uzbekistan's size, geographic location, and political reach across Central Asia, it naturally needs to be involved in any solutions to Central Asia's key problems. Pressing issues include the need to jump-start economic cooperation to alleviate poverty, to construct reliable regional transportation infrastructures, to expand opportunities for the growing population, to address water and border disputes, and to undermine the attractiveness of extremist messages. However, while regional solutions require Uzbekistan's involvement, Karimov's desire to dominate the region and his bellicosity have made regional cooperation more difficult.

HOW WILL THE NEXT PRESIDENT GOVERN?

As Uzbekistan deals with emerging geopolitical and economic challenges, it is unclear whether Karimov has the capacity—or the time left in office—to respond. Karimov has accomplished his goal of securing Uzbekistan's long-term sovereignty from Russia; he has transformed the country into one of the two most influential Central Asian states and managed to keep it stable for the first twenty-five years of independence. However, the price of his approach to governance has been tragically high for civil society and the country's long-term economic prospects.

The next Uzbek president will inherit these problems but will lack Karimov's standing as the father of the nation. This increases the potential that his successor may be more inclined toward nationalist rhetoric—a common device for politicians to shore up lagging domestic support and increase popular legitimacy. The possibility that Uzbekistan's next president may follow the pattern of politicians pandering to the populist Right—as seen recently in China, Poland, Russia, Turkey, and the United States—is troubling in light of Central Asia's fragile intraregional balance and Uzbekistan's own ethnic makeup, where minorities account for 20 percent of the population.

The tool kit that Karimov has used to remain in power for over twenty-five years is running low. The key question for the future is whether Uzbekistan's next president will have the authority, skill, and time to balance the country's competing interests and factions, while also dealing with its mounting economic, social, and security challenges.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, India, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2016 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.



@CarnegieEndow



facebook.com/CarnegieEndowment