Uzbekistan's defensive self-reliance: Karimov's foreign policy legacy

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Islam Karimov, the former president of Uzbekistan, died on Friday 2 September 2016, a day after the 25th anniversary of his country's independence. Karimov was at the time of his death the oldest ruler of any country in the former Soviet space, having governed the republic since his appointment as secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party in mid-1989. His legacy will continue to be hotly debated. Unlike Boris Yeltsin, post-Soviet Russia's first president, Karimov never toyed with deep political and economic reform. Rather, he advocated political centralization and authoritarianism, eschewed rapid price liberalization, rejected large-scale privatization and promoted self-reliance, pursuing a foreign policy based largely on strengthening national sovereignty and protecting international political equality of status.[1] All these aspects of Uzbekistani politics constitute a complex legacy, one which will affect the country's domestic and international politics for years to come, as well as the wider politics of central Asia. As the most populous of all the post-Soviet central Asian republics,[2] double-landlocked and surrounded by five states (Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan), Uzbekistan is a state whose foreign policy will have inescapable repercussions.

Karimov's death provides an opportunity to gauge the origins and consequences of that legacy, and this article is aimed at contributing to that assessment. I do not, however, set out to analyse the full extent of Karimov's political approach. Rather, I assess the nature of Uzbekistani foreign policy, which I categorize as a type of 'defensive self-reliance', and the extent to which this conditioned the

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[1] For excellent overviews of Uzbekistan's political economy and ideology, see Annette Bohr, *Uzbekistan politics and foreign policy* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998); Andrew March, 'From Leninism to Karimovism: hegemony, ideology and authoritarian legitimation', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19: 4, 2003, pp. 307–36; Martin Spechler, *The political economy of reform in Central Asia: Uzbekistan under authoritarianism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Dina Spechler and Martin Spechler, 'Uzbekistan among the Great Powers', *Communist and Post-Communist Parties* 42: 3, 2009, pp. 353–73.

[2] Uzbekistan had in 2015, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), a population of over 31 million people, nearly twice as many as Kazakhstan (17.45 million inhabitants), making it central Asia's second most populous state: see 'Basic statistics 2016', http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/183338/basic-statistics-2016.pdf. Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs in this article were accessible on 6 Dec. 2016. 'Double land-locked' means that two political borders have to be crossed before the ocean is reached.

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international engagement of the government of Uzbekistan (henceforth GoU). I argue that 'defensive self-reliance' has tended to make the GoU:

- pursue international political equality of status and thus harbour deep suspicions of states that are (or seem to be) actively promoting a hegemonic agenda in central Asia;
- focus almost exclusively on the pursuit of bilateral relations;
- take an aggressive as opposed to a conciliatory stance when defending its international image;
- struggle to attain economic self-sufficiency;
- steer clear of embracing an expansionist ideology.

Although many, if not all, states display several of those characteristics at any one point in time, what makes the GoU different is the extent to which it has embraced each and every one of them. At the same time, these trends overlap with one another and should be considered with caution. They are general patterns, not definitive depictions of what has always happened or predictions of what will necessarily happen again. Patterns do not change easily, but they are far from immutable. Nor do I claim that all of the GoU's positions in the international arena can be encapsulated in the single term 'self-reliance'. There is substantial evidence of certain dealings, especially in the economic sphere, that have more to do with protecting wealthy political elites than with deciding the future of the country.[3] Nevertheless, irrespective of Uzbekistan's political opacity, it is important to be aware of how the GoU has justified its foreign policy. My article is aimed precisely at detecting those justifications and underscoring their continuities; for Uzbekistan's new leadership must decide whether or not to perpetuate Karimov's legacy—whether to transform, consolidate or maintain the status quo. Paying attention to those legacies provides us with a basis upon which to gauge what has changed and what is likely to continue into the future.

To construct my argument, I begin by conceptualizing and distinguishing between 'defensive' and 'offensive' manifestations of self-reliance. I then review the patterns of Uzbekistani self-reliance and conclude with a brief assessment of the potential consequences in the event of a change occurring in the near future. I do not aim to make predictions; rather, it is my intention to foster a conversation about those legacies and their repercussions. It is important to note that I refer to the GoU and Karimov somewhat interchangeably. Karimov was always a spokesperson for the state on foreign policy matters, and many of his works and speeches provide the conceptual apparatus through which policies were (and may well continue to be) justified in Uzbekistan.[4]

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[3] On Uzbekistan's opaque political economy, see David Lewis, *The temptations of tyranny in central Asia* (London: Hurst, 2008), pp. 11–76; Bakhodyr Muradov and Alisher Ilkhamov, 'Uzbekistan's cotton sector: financial flows and distribution of resources', Open Society Eurasia Program working paper (New York, Open Society Foundations, Oct. 2014); Alexander Cooley and J. C. Sharman, 'Blurring the line between licit and illicit: transnational corruption networks in Central Asia and beyond', *Central Asian Survey* 34: 1, 2015, pp. 11–28.

[4] Leila Kazemi, 'Domestic sources of Uzbekistan's foreign policy', *Journal of International Affairs* 56: 2, 2003, pp. 205–206.

Understanding Uzbekistan's 'defensive self-reliance'

Self-reliance carries with it the imprint of an anti-colonial struggle, based on developing a distinctive approach to political-economic development. Uzbekistan is not alone in expressing itself in terms akin to post-colonialist discourse, in so far as most of its neighbours have at one point or another criticized the former Soviet Union and what they perceived to be an imperial legacy, characterized by exploitative centre–periphery relations.[5] But this pursuit of detachment from the 'colonial' centre—or any powerful 'centre', for that matter—has been especially prominent in the GoU's foreign policy. Without going into too much historical contextual detail, it is worth bearing in mind that self-reliance arose gradually rather than immediately after Uzbekistani independence. The period of Soviet reform that began in 1983 and continued through the middle of that decade with the appeal by Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, for 'new thinking', effectively laid the basis for a conservative like Islam Karimov to rise to power. Political instability and then the rapid dissolution of the USSR, followed by the inability of its former member states to secure a common economic agreement (such as monetary union with Russia), consolidated Karimov's sceptical and generally independent outlook, which came to be known by one common concept, that of self-reliance (*mustaqillik*).

In 1983, the Uzbek party elites were the first targets of Moscow's attempt to tackle corruption and economic stagnation throughout the USSR. Increased political instability fostered a growing sense of dissatisfaction with political and economic restructuring across the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic.[6] That dissatisfaction culminated in June 1989, when political and economic grievances in the Ferghana region of Uzbekistan sparked violence. As a consequence, Gorbachev's former appointee, Rafiq Nishanov, was replaced by Karimov, who advocated not only greater stability but also an Uzbek approach to economic development, insisting that Uzbekistan be allowed to find its 'own way to the market' (*svoi put k rynku*).[7]

Karimov was gradually sowing the seeds of self-reliance, but was still far from promising a complete overhaul of the country's arrangements. In the event, what could initially have been simply an appeal for greater autonomy quickly turned into a deeper political struggle. The USSR was at the time beset by a power dispute between the centre and the national republics.[8] That dynamic—coupled with Gorbachev's attempt to resolve the issue by the establishment of a new treaty of union—gradually convinced Karimov of the need for further political and economic equality. Karimov called for 'strengthening economic independence' and greater political autonomy in order to prevent the centre from encroaching upon Uzbek affairs.[9] At this point, circumstances were far from conducive to self-reliance. Karimov was keen on preserving stability. He argued against abolishing the Union while also demonstrating his reluctance to allow things to remain as they had been before. Still suspicious of the centre, Karimov argued that the Union should allow Uzbekistan to trade in the international market, a position reinforced by the failed Soviet coup against Gorbachev of August 1991.[10]

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[5] Diana T. Kudaibergenova, 'The use and abuse of postcolonial discourses in post-independent Kazakhstan', *Europe–Asia Studies* 68: 5, 2016, pp. 917–35; Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch, eds, *Sovereignty after empire: comparing the Middle East and central Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); John Heathershaw, 'Central Asian statehood in post-colonial perspective', in Emilian Kavalski, ed., *Stable outside, fragile inside? Post-Soviet statehood in central Asia'*, (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 87–106; Laura Adams, 'Can we apply post-colonial theory in Central Asia?', *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 7: 1, 2008, pp. 2–7.

[6] James Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: a Soviet republic's road to sovereignty* (London: Westview, 1991).

[7] 'Uzbekistan: svoi put k rynku', *Pravda Vostoka*, 23 Nov. 1990, p. 1.

[8] On the power dispute, see Edward Walker, *Dissolution: sovereignty and the breakup of the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

In the aftermath of the coup, Uzbekistan declared its independence; yet even this did not amount to a complete transformation of its status, not least because a renewed Union could still in theory be established. Indeed, Gorbachev campaigned for the ratification of a new Union treaty while Uzbekistan's President, much like his Russian counterpart, pleaded for a confederation organized around a weak central authority.[11] Gorbachev's authority had nevertheless been weakened, and Ukraine's declaration of independence was backed up by a popular vote in favour on 1 December. Russia, Ukraine and Belarus further undermined Gorbachev by agreeing to set up the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); the central Asian republics, with a view to preserving economic stability, then followed suit and joined the CIS in late December, thereby bringing about the dissolution of the USSR.[12]

The GoU remained keen on preserving some sort of economic and political arrangement with key CIS states for the sake of maintaining economic stability. This aim proved to be unattainable, not least because, despite his plea for stability, Karimov continued to appeal for Uzbekistan's political equality with Russia and the preservation of its sovereignty. In other words, the GoU advocated the maintenance of a common monetary area, but remained adamant that it would not compromise its economic and political independence.[13] Prolonged and often tense negotiations with Moscow were ultimately to no avail, and in late 1993 the GoU was forced to issue its own currency, the som.

Once a monetary or economic union was no longer an option, stability no longer depended on the centre. *Mustaqillik* or the 'self-reliant idea' (*mustaqillik g'oyasi*) became the central slogan of the Uzbek regime, often appearing in the title of published collections of Karimov's works, many of which became part of Uzbekistan's school curriculum.[14]

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[9] 'Vystuplenie', *Pravda Vostoka*, 24 March 1990, pp. 1–2.

[10] See Karimov's declarations on the need for economic independence before and after the coup: 'V slozhnoi obstanovke neobkhodima mudraia politika', *Pravda Vostoka*, 15 Feb. 1991, pp. 1–3; 'Vystuplenie', *Pravda Vostoka*, 21 Nov. 1991, pp. 1–2.

[11] 'My za konfederatsiu', *Pravda Vostoka*, 24 Oct. 1991, pp. 1–2.

[12] Serhii Plokhy, *The last empire: the final days of the Soviet Union* (London: Oneworld, 2014), pp. 266–387.

[13] Henry Hale, 'Islam, state-building and the foreign policy of Uzbekistan', in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, eds, *The new geopolitics of central Asia and its borderlands* (London: Tauris, 1994), pp. 136–74.

[14] e.g. Muzaffar Ortiqov, *Milly istiqlol g'oyasi* (Tashkent: O'zbekiston faylasuflari milliy jamiyati nashriyoti, 2009); M. Abdullayev and M. Abdullayeva, eds, *Mustaqillik: izohli ilmiy-ommabop lug'at* (Tashkent: Sharq, 2009).

Making sense of self-reliance

The pursuit of autonomy, self-sufficiency and international equality of status came to play a central role in the GoU's approach to international affairs, although its foreign policy has not always been explained with reference to the concept of self-reliance. Rather, the GoU's foreign policy tends to be described in terms of a pendulum that swings from side to side.[15] Its policy after independence does indeed seem erratic at times, presenting no small challenge to those trying to understand what really drives the GoU's decision-making. Scholars and experts alike have invoked the notion of 'balancing among powers', that is, the need for the GoU to align itself with one power in order to placate the threats springing from a stronger rival.[16] This concept is especially attractive to those who explain foreign policies with recourse to the 'New Great Game' narrative, another label applied to central Asia, premised on the notion that the region's republics are systematically balancing against major powers, such as Russia, the United States, India and China.[17] In contrast to these 'balancing' analyses, others focus less on the security dimension than on extracting benefits, such as economic rent. From this perspective, some scholars refer to the concept of multi-vectoralism, a policy which allows the GoU to 'extract maximum concessions within a confined treaty without jeopardising its independence or its ability to pursue an independent line of action'.[18]

All such perspectives successfully highlight certain factors in Uzbekistani decision-making, but they do not always underscore the main trend upon which it rests. To take an example, although the GoU's decision to enter the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2006 can be regarded as an attempt to balance against 'western' encroachment, the GoU never, as shown below, aligned itself with Russia, nor did it become a reliable ally of Moscow. Furthermore, although multi-vectoralism is a useful heuristic with which to generalize about the foreign policies of post-Soviet states, especially those that position themselves somewhere in between the 'western' and Russian spheres of influence, it does little to distinguish Uzbekistan from other states labelled in like manner. Kazakhstan's foreign policy can be considered multi-vectoral, but its political economy is more open—and its relations fluctuated far less—than Uzbekistan's.[19]

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[15] D. Faizullaev, 'Uzbekistan: novyi dreif na zapad?', *Vserossiiskii ekonomicheskii zhurnal*, vol. 4, 2010, pp. 146–59; Farkhod Tolipov, 'Micro-geopolitics of central Asia: a Uzbekistan perspective', *Strategic Analysis* 34: 4, 2011, p. 633.

[16] Matteo Fumagalli, 'Alignments and realignments in central Asia: the rationale and implications of Uzbekistan's rapprochement with Russia', *International Political Science Review* 28: 3, 2007, pp. 253–71.

[17] See excellent critiques of the 'New Great Game' in Alexander Cooley, *Great games, local rules: the new Great Power contest in central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Matthew Edwards, 'The New Great Game and the new great games: disciples of Kipling and Mackinder', *Central Asian Survey* 22: 1, 2003, pp. 83–102.

[18] Aleksandr Pikalov, 'Uzbekistan between the Great Powers: a balancing act or a multi-vectorial approach?', *Central Asian Survey* 33: 3, 2014, p. 298.

[19] Reuel Hanks, 'Multi-vector politics and Kazakhstan's emerging role as a geo-strategic player in Central Asia', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11: 3, 2009, pp. 257–67.

The pursuit of self-reliance

In order to make sense of the GoU's international role, it is necessary to consider whether and, if so, how it relates to other foreign policies. Kal Holsti once referred to self-reliance as a pattern of international interaction in which 'dependence or vulnerability are scrupulously avoided', and in which 'some selective exclusionist policies—usually in the form of import substitution programmes—are instituted'.[20] Gregory Gleason suggested that Uzbekistan's economy had shifted towards the pursuit of economic self-reliance after 1993.[21] But beyond economic protectionism, there is also a political dimension to self-reliance. Holsti suggests that in the course of pursuing self-reliance military commitments are often rejected, especially if they are based on supporting 'other states' interests which are not similar to one's own'.[22] Put differently, self-reliance implies defending oneself according to one's own means and seldom compromising on national interest. Hence, self-reliant states tend to be conservative in their political outlook, confident about their own values, aims and capacities and, at the same time, suspicious of alternative modes of living, producing and engaging in politics. This somewhat introverted perspective on international affairs implies rejecting most if not all positions that may compromise sovereignty. By extension, it also entails a 'zero-sum' perspective on international relations, with the concomitant assumption that a negotiation will produce a clear winner and a clear loser. Self-reliance is not open to substantial concessions.

Besides preserving sovereignty and promoting self-sufficiency, self-reliant states attempt to foster an image of strength. They appeal for what Alexander Wendt called 'thick recognition', that is, to be considered an equal among equals, not only in name but also with regard to how resources are shared.[23] To that effect, self-reliant states reject being junior partners. On the contrary, they are just as 'great' as—and never less than—any other major international actor. In practice, therefore, most self-reliant states conduct their diplomacy by way of bilateralism, for this enables the state to negotiate treaties and agreements in a manner that prevents additional compromises getting in its way.

Defensive and offensive self-reliance

States that pursue self-reliance are, in short, concerned with preserving international equality of status and with presenting an image of strength, and remain reluctant to compromise on sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency. That said, not all self-reliant states act in the same way. There is arguably a difference between 'defensively' and 'offensively' self-reliant states. 'Offensively self-reliant' states share those qualities and also seek even further international recognition.

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[20] Kal Holsti, *Why nations realign: foreign policy restructuring in the postwar world* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 4.

[21] Gregory Gleason, *Markets and politics in central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 119.

[22] Holsti, *Why nations realign*, p. 4.

[23] Alexander Wendt, 'Why a world state is inevitable', *European Journal of International Relations* 9: 4, 2003, p. 511.

Being either more confident about or more capable of guaranteeing their self-reliance, they tend to enforce their interests abroad. Indeed, because of that confidence and/or capacity, an 'offensively self-reliant' state is also more proactive in promoting a so-called sphere of influence, feeling its interests less vulnerable to attack by others, whereas a 'defensively self-reliant' state is more closed in its posture, scarcely pursuing those aims beyond the confines of its own territory.

A few historical examples will illustrate these differences between defensive and offensive self-reliance. The 1960s and 1970s offer a rich array of sources on self-reliance, not least because in these decades it was in common currency as a description of socialist states that were sceptical of both Soviet and capitalist 'imperialism'.[24] Many such states were also part of the Non-Aligned Movement, founded in Belgrade in 1961 by Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia and Yugoslavia. At this period, self-reliance was not only a political stance in opposition to 'imperialism' and reluctance to commit to either Cold War bloc, but also inwardly driven, concentrated on a unique national form of development, an idea usually promoted under the slogan of the 'X way to socialism', such as the 'Burmese way to socialism'.[25]

China, during most of the 1960s, was a case of offensive self-reliance. Reluctant to follow the Soviet Union's lead, Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, suggested that China could not blindly follow Soviet communism, arguing that Marxism 'no longer constitutes a universal and immutable fundamental theory, but merely one more contribution from the West which must be digested and critically made to serve China'.[26] Mao underscored instead *zi li geng sheng*, often translated as self-reliance or the ability to 'produce even more with one's own strength'.[27] Mao's Cultural Revolution and assault on orthodox Marxism were not just for internal consumption, but also had an externally focused aspect, with a view to fostering a new Sino-communist model.[28] Maoist self-reliance was aggressive, if not expansionist, as exemplified by the Sino-Indian war of 1962. But, as noted above, self-reliance need not be offensive. A defensive and less ostentatious form of self-reliance was invoked, for example, by Tanzania in 1967, when its President, Julius Nyerere, declared that he would pursue a form of African socialism. Nyerere's more inward-looking approach focused mainly on fostering collectivization and self-sufficiency among rural cooperatives, an approach which was labelled *ujamma* and which attracted support from a few western states.[29]

Having introduced self-reliance and its chief features, the remainder of this article focuses on the legacy of that pursuit by Uzbekistan under Karimov, an account that makes no claim to be exhaustive, but synthesizes key patterns and continuities. In presenting this account, I argue that Karimov advocated a defensive form of self-reliance—which is not to say that the GoU did not sometimes deviate from the pattern. During Tajikistan's civil war, for instance, the GoU was an active participant in the conflict, supporting the Popular Front and the country's northern elites. Moreover, after the peace settlement, the GoU supported rebellion within Tajikistan in 1998.[30] These incidents, however, were exceptions to the rule. The pursuit of Uzbekistani self-reliance was mostly defensive, marked by five key trends: the relentless pursuit of equality; a focus on bilateral relations; an energetic defence of Uzbekistan's national image; a drive for self-sufficiency; and a reluctance to embrace expansionist ideological agendas.

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[24] Self-reliance became a slogan in the developing world during this period. See Roger MacGinty and Andrew Williams, *Conflict and development* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 10, 150.

[25] For a good discussion of Burmese self-reliance, see Helga Turku, *Isolationist states in an interdependent world* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 96–9.

[26] Stuart Schram, ed., *Chairman Mao talks to the people: talks and letters 1956–1971* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), p. 36.

[27] Michael Yahuda, *Towards the end of isolationism: China's foreign policy after Mao* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 52.

[28] Chen Zhimin, 'Nationalism, internationalism and Chinese foreign policy', *Journal of Contemporary China* 14: 42, 2005, pp. 35–53.

[29] Thomas J. Biersteker, 'Self-reliance in theory and practice in Tanzanian trade relations', *International Organization* 34: 2, 1980, pp. 229–64.

The relentless pursuit of equality

The 'equalization' of nations was a staple feature of Soviet thinking. The aim was to eliminate economic inequity among the Soviet Union's constituent states with a view to freeing them from the shackles of backwardness, thereby eradicating nationalism and creating a single Soviet identity.[31] However, this pursuit of equality was not based solely on economics. It is also a core principle of sovereignty, a notion enshrined in the Soviet Union's 1922 foundational treaty.[32] In Uzbekistan, with the coming of Karimov to power, the pursuit of equality, both economic and political, gained added momentum. Whether or not inspired by Marxism/Leninism, Karimov's demands for equality reflected the sceptical attitude towards the Soviet centre widespread among local intellectuals and communist elites. Many in these elites campaigned for greater autonomy without necessarily seeking to cut all ties with the centre.[33] The pursuit of economic and political equality subsequently became a core aim of Karimov's administration.

During Karimov's first official visit to Russia in late October 1991, when the Soviet Union was already in its last days, Karimov and the local press argued that the relationship between Russia and Uzbekistan was to be based first and foremost on a dialogue of equals (*dialog ravnopravnykh*),[34] regardless of the fact that the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic was by far the more powerful of the two states. That position, described in Uzbek as *tenglik*, would continue to be advocated in the following years. Soon after independence, Karimov reiterated that concern in one of his first published works as president of an internationally recognized state:

> The foreign policy of the Republic is based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states. To be an equal among equals,

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[30] Charles Fairbanks, S. Frederick Starr, C. Richard Nelson and Kenneth Weisbrode, *Strategic assessment of central Asia* (Washington DC: Atlantic Council and Central Asia–Caucasus Institute, 1999), p. 49.

[31] Donna Bahry and Carol Nechemias, 'Half full or half empty? The debate over Soviet regional equality', *Slavic Review* 40: 3, 1981, pp. 366–83.

[32] On the Soviet context, see Walker, *Dissolution*, pp. 27–9; Cummings and Hinnebusch, eds, *Sovereignty after empire*, pp. 1–24. For sovereignty and equality in international affairs, see Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: organized hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 16.

[33] Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan*.

[34] 'Uzbekistan i Rossiia—dialog ravnopravnykh', *Pravda Vostoka*, 29 Oct. 1991, p. 1.

to break free from the 'elder brother' syndrome of the past—this is what we shall be guided by in our relations with the CIS states and in our foreign policy in general.[35]

Having determined the republic's concern with equality, Karimov never ceased to invoke it. The aim was in fact congruent with several of the GoU's other concerns, explaining why the pursuit of bilateralism was deemed so significant and why the GoU rarely took criticism lightly. If Uzbekistan was to be equal to all others, it should be treated as such, although that aim was not always attainable. For example, Karimov's frustration at the inability to secure political equality with a Great Power was well evinced during the so-called 'war on terror'. Karimov had taken the situation after 9/11 as an opportunity to campaign for a stronger connection with the United States, not least to guarantee recognition of his state as a key partner. In early 2002 he campaigned for that privilege, travelling to the United States to sign a 'Declaration of Strategic Partnership'. Uzbekistan had, it seemed, achieved equality, for the two states were now partners, on paper at least. But on paper it would remain.

The partnership agreement was kept secret for the first few months, perhaps because it was, as John Heathershaw suggested, a partnership in name only.[36] Most of the declaration was beset by sundry American demands for reform, with Washington offering only limited security guarantees. After the declaration was revealed in the summer of 2002, the image of equality of status quickly faded away, particularly because Washington refused to support its partner once it became increasingly subject to international criticism for its human rights situation.[37] Karimov wrote to his American counterpart with a view to obtaining political and economic support, but his pleas were fruitless: Bush replied to the effect that he too was sceptical about Uzbekistan's model of development and that the GoU should abide by its stated intent to reform.[38]

Had that been Washington's response to all authoritarian partners, Uzbekistan might well not have felt disparaged. But that was far from the case. Uzbekistan had in effect been excluded from the privileged treatment that Washington reserved for its other authoritarian allies, such as Egypt and Pakistan; states with which it cooperated actively and towards which it voiced less criticism.[39] In short, the demand for political equality was central to the GoU's foreign policy, but not always met, not least because many actors, like the United States, were not willing to recognize Uzbekistan as an equal or even as a crucial partner.

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[35] Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan: the road of independence and progress* (Tashkent: Uzbekiston, 1992), p. 23.

[36] John Heathershaw, 'Worlds apart: the making and remaking of geopolitical space in the US–Uzbekistani strategic partnership', *Central Asian Survey* 26: 1, 2007, pp. 123–40.

[37] For an interesting account of the declaration's revelation, see Lewis, *Temptations of tyranny*, p. 17.

[38] Kurt H. Meppen, 'US–Uzbek bilateral relations: policy options', in John C. K. Daly, Kurt H. Meppen, Vladimir Socor and S. Frederick Starr, eds, *Anatomy of a crisis: US–Uzbekistan relations, 2001–2005* (Washington DC: Central Asia–Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2006), p. 31.

[39] Martha Brill Olcott, 'US relations to Uzbekistan: a double standard of second class treatment?', testimony prepared for delivery to House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Government Operations, 14 June 2007, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/olcottcompleteltestimony__2_.pdf.

Bilateral relations above all

The GoU's international role was further elucidated after it passed its 1996 foreign policy law.[40] The decree not only highlighted the pursuit of independence and equality, but also stipulated in article 6 that Uzbekistan was to remain free from politico-military coalitions. The law also recognized the significance of Uzbekistan's membership of the Non-Aligned Movement, which it had joined in 1993. Uzbekistan was in fact the first central Asian republic to do so, with Turkmenistan joining two years later.[41]

The attempt to avoid both military alliances and political blocs was in line with defensive self-reliance. And yet, legal stipulations aside, the GoU's concern with remaining outside international politico-military coalitions needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. The GoU was party to the Collective Security Treaty (CST), from which it withdrew in 1999 following the Taliban's conquest of northern Afghanistan and a major disagreement with Moscow over arms supplies.[42] Uzbekistan was then a member of GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) between 1999 and 2002; and later, in 2006, it joined Eurasec and the CSTO, two international organizations that it then decided to leave in 2008 and 2012 respectively. The image of a pendulum certainly comes to mind. Furthermore, in the light of the 1996 law, the very fact that Uzbekistan was a member, however temporarily, of those organizations certainly calls into question the legal premises of its foreign policy, to the point that a sceptic would surely regard its appeals to self-reliance as mere rhetoric.

That said, in spite of the GoU's willingness to join those organizations, some element of underlying consistency remains, for it never fully adhered to their principles. Rather, it viewed them as 'goodwill summits' from which to extract political leverage. Whenever multilateralism and greater economic integration were envisaged, not to mention the prospect of ever greater unity, Karimov criticized the organization in question. The GoU has remained a member of the CIS since 1991 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) since 2001, but both these organizations are for the most part goodwill summits through which bilateral relations may be developed; neither has yet pursued a strongly integrative agenda. Likewise, Uzbekistan was a member of the Central Asian Economic Union, but rarely conceded any moves towards deeper economic integration, in part because of its disputes with Kazakhstan over which should become the regional leader. Hence, when President Nazarbayev returned to the idea of establishing a Central Asian Union in 2007, Karimov 'stated bluntly that the creation of a Central Asian Union [was] premature, given the differences in economic and social development among the countries'.[43] Moreover, upon becoming a member of the CSTO, the

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[40] 'Ob osnovnykh printsipakh vneshepoliticheskoi deyatelnosti respubliki Uzbekistan', 26 Dec. 1995, http://Lex.uz/.

[41] All three of the other post-Soviet central Asian republics have observer status within the Non-Aligned Movement. For an excellent comparison between Turkmen and Uzbekistani foreign policies, see Luca Anceschi, 'Integrating domestic politics and foreign policy making: the cases of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan', *Central Asian Survey* 29: 2, 2010, pp. 143–58.

[42] See Karimov's position as expressed in: '(Refile) Uzbek head tells press in Kazakh capital about Tashkent blasts', BBC World Wide Monitoring, 21 Feb. 1999.

[43] Nurzhan Zhambekov, 'Central Asian Union and the obstacles to integration in central Asia', *Central Asia–*

GoU became the severest critic of deeper military cooperation, speaking against the creation of collective rapid reaction forces.[44]

In the light of the GoU's past actions, the 1996 law could also be read as staking out a position against politico-military integration or binding multilateral schemes. From a zero-sum perspective, multilateralism would imply compromising—perhaps even pooling—sovereignty. It would require the GoU to compromise on decisions in which it would potentially have less to gain than to lose. Bilateralism, by contrast, is a better means by which to foster self-reliance.

Karimov's interest in bilateralism was first expressed during the period of perestroika in the late 1980s, but became more explicit after 1991.[45] In discussion of the future of the CIS parliamentary assembly in 1993, Karimov indicated that the institution existed merely for the sake of establishing 'civilized relations and contacts between the CIS states and … long-term bilateral relations'.[46] This emphasis on using the CIS as a forum in which to foster bilateralism suggested that the GoU was not interested in enhancing the commonwealth's powers. In fact, the GoU's cautious approach to multilateralism corroborates Roy Allison's claim that central Asia is beset by 'virtual regionalism', whereby states join and participate in regional organizations with a view to strengthening their sovereignty.[47] The concern with bilateralism and with using organizations as a ploy by which to extract bilateral advantages became even more evident after 2006, when the GoU joined the CSTO and Eurasec. Upon joining the organizations, Karimov argued that they ought to be merged.[48] If the two were in fact united, either a centralized organization would appear, to which the GoU was evidently opposed, or their specific aims could no longer be implemented. In other words, the merger would potentially turn them into another goodwill summit, akin to the CIS, consisting of states with multiple—often incompatible—priorities. In fact, after Uzbekistan left Eurasec in 2006, Karimov justified the decision with a statement that the organization was 'duplicating' what the CIS and CSTO were already designed to do.[49] This was hardly the case, since Eurasec was intended primarily to promote economic integration among its member states. But the statement demonstrated that the GoU was not interested in binding multilateralism in any domain.

The GoU's scepticism towards multilateralism and its shifting positions need not imply that it is incapable of developing relatively frictionless relations. It has indeed been able to develop strong relations, especially economically, with China

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Caucasus Analyst, 7 Jan. 2015, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13116-central-asian-union-and-the-obstacles-to-integration-in-central-asia.html.

[44] Farkhod Tolipov, 'CSTO: collective security or collective confusion?', *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, 1 Sept. 2009, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/11896-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2009-9-1-art-11896.html.

[45] Not unlike other Soviet republics, the Uzbek SSR advocated bilateral relations (or 'horizontal relations' as they were coined) with other states: 'Mirsaidov vystuplenie', *Pravda Vostoka*, 21 Oct. 1990, p. 1.

[46] Quoted in 'President criticizes CIS interparliamentary assembly but says CIS necessary', BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), 5 Jan. 1993.

[47] Roy Allison, 'Virtual regionalism, regional structures and regime security in central Asia', *Central Asian Survey* 27: 2, 2008, pp. 185–202.

[48] See statement in 'Russian, Uzbek heads hold news conference in Tashkent', BBC SWB, 22 May 2006.

[49] 'Uzbekistan raziasnil motivy vikhoda iz EvrazES', *Kommersant.ru*, 14 Nov. 2008, http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1058872.

and South Korea, both of which have managed to invest in the country without criticizing—publicly at least—Uzbekistan's political and economic system.[50]

Defending the national image and projecting strength

The GoU has suffered persistently from bad publicity. Most western media portrayals can hardly mention Uzbekistan without speaking of torture and repression, while the Russian press invokes its own fair share of 'orientalist' slogans when referring to the country.[51] Many such depictions also extend to the higher echelons of power. Yeltsin, for example, made reference to Karimov as a man of the 'East': 'I remember … Islam Karimov, president of Uzbekistan, a wonderful person, a subtle man in the Oriental tradition.'[52] It is also worth bearing in mind that the GoU's inability to foster a more positive depiction was partially attributable to the image it acquired in the course of the notorious 1980s 'Cotton Affair' (*khlopok delo*), in which Uzbek Communist Party members were heavily criticized by the Soviet and western press alike for falsifying crop yields.[53] Furthermore, as Christian Bleuer has pointed out, Uzbek ethnicity has not been historically portrayed in the most flattering light, and even today several—especially the more popular—depictions reproduce primordial prejudices, many of which replicate the idea that modern Uzbeks still behave like their Turkic and Mongol ancestors.[54]

Leaving aside this arguably difficult starting-point, Uzbekistan's negative image is mostly its government's own doing. Its violent crackdown on local opposition, of which the February 1999 persecutions and the 2005 massacre in Andijan were the most notorious, do little to foster more positive perceptions.[55] A reputation for violence and assaults on political freedoms are unlikely to improve the country's portrayal in a post-Cold War order in which liberal values and democracy are systematically invoked, even if not universally shared. So important are these values, in fact, that the GoU itself cannot avoid referring to them. The preamble of Uzbekistan's constitution speaks of a 'commitment to the ideals of democracy';[56] while these are not translated into everyday action, the GoU has nevertheless admitted that Uzbekistan is on that path. Karimov also pointed out that it is a long and difficult path, and that it took the United States over 200 years to become a democracy.[57]

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[50] On South Korea in central Asia, see Matteo Fumagalli, 'Growing inter-Asian connections: links, rivalries, and challenges in South Korean–Central Asian relations', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7: 1, 2016, pp. 39–48. China, on the other hand, is by far the largest investor in Uzbekistan's domestic market. Recently Beijing invested over US$1 billion in the Kamchik tunnel and railway, connecting Angren to Pap in Uzbekistan: 'Uzbekistan completes work on construction of Angren–Pap railway', *UzDaily*, 15 Feb. 2016, http://uzdaily.com/articles-id-35114.htm.

[51] Media depictions of Uzbekistan rarely presented the country in a positive light, even after its President suffered a stroke: 'An ailing despot', *The Economist*, 3 Sept. 2016, http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21706185-their-tyrant-nears-his-end-people-uzbekistan-hold-their-breath-ailing-despot; Deirdre Tynan, 'Brittle Uzbekistan hopes for a quick succession', International Crisis Group, 30 Aug. 2016, https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/brittle-uzbekistan-hopes-controlled-succession; Shaun Walker, 'Rumours of Uzbek president's death raise concerns over succession', *Guardian*, 30 Aug. 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/30/rumours-uzbek-president-islam-karimov-death-questions-succession.

[52] Boris Yeltsin, *Midnight diaries* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 249.

[53] Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan*, pp. 39–56.

[54] Christian M. Bleuer, 'From "slavers" to "warlords": descriptions of Afghanistan's Uzbeks in western writing', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 17 Oct. 2014, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/from-slavers-to-warlords-descriptions-of-afghanistans-uzbeks-in-western-writing/.

[55] On the repressions of 1999 and 2005, see: 'Uzbekistan: the Andijan uprising', Crisis Group Asia Briefing, Bishkek/Brussels, 25 May 2005; Abdumannob Polat and Nickolai Butkevich, 'Unraveling the mystery of the Tashkent bombings: theories and implications', *Demokratsiya* 8: 4, 2000, pp. 541–53.

And yet repression, illiberalism and the undemocratic nature of Uzbekistani politics do not entirely account for the country's negative image abroad. A further contributory factor is the less than conciliatory tone taken by Karimov and several of his officials when faced with criticism. Self-reliance demands full recognition, as it is based largely on demonstrating confidence and strength. But asserting strength has also its costs.[58] Unlike the President of neighbouring Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the GoU has seldom projected a conciliatory image in the international arena.[59] In 2010, Kazakhstan even managed to become the first former Soviet state to take the chair of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), no small feat for a country that was and is still far from being a liberal democracy by western standards. Irrespective of Uzbekistan's (to say the least) questionable democratic values, Karimov's defensive and highly critical attitude towards foreign interlocutors does little to improve the GoU's image abroad. Display of strength as a part of self-reliance depends on rejecting compromise and narratives other than one's own, a position which showcases determination, but backfires when it comes to obtaining sympathy or international support.[60]

During the period of openness (or glasnost) before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Karimov had been questioned by journalists as to why he criticized their reporting, to which he replied that he accepted media that were open to 'dialogue',[61] as if suggesting that his narrative needed to be accounted for if not fully recognized. Karimov often criticized journalists, especially those working in Moscow during the period of perestroika,[62] though he continued to do so long thereafter. Even during the Andijan crisis of 2005, in which the GoU was condemned by several western governments for indiscriminate killing, Karimov was still criticizing the Russian press, even though it had remained more or less sympathetic to the GoU's position.[63] This defensive posturing and compulsion to promote one's own narrative systematically is conducive to quarrelling. Few officials or political figures would seek to appear next to Karimov in a press conference—let alone voice their opinions—knowing that they were liable to be lectured by Uzbekistan's President. In this respect, Karimov's participation in the May 2015 CIS summit was yet another example of a vitriolic attack against those who questioned the GoU. At the time, Karimov caustically reprimanded Kyrgyzstan's President, Almaz Atambayev, for his remarks on the failure of several states to attend Russia's Victory Parade.[64] The GoU was also the first state of the post-Cold War era to decide—after being on the receiving end of considerable American criticism in the aftermath of the Andijan massacre—to expel US forces and take back its military base, notwithstanding its own continuing vested interest in stabilizing Afghanistan. There was only so much criticism that Uzbekistani self-reliance was willing to take, and most American forces had left the country by the end of that summer.

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[56] Constitution of Uzbekistan, http://www.ksu.uz/en/page/index/id/7.

[57] 'Uzbek leader reports on 5 October talks with US defence secretary', BBC SWB, 7 Oct. 2001.

[58] On projecting nationhood in Uzbekistan, see Laura Adams, *The spectacular state: culture and national identity in Uzbekistan* (London: Duke University Press, 2010).

[59] On Kazakhstan's pragmatic approach to foreign policy with the West and the EU in particular, see Luca Anceschi, 'The tyranny of pragmatism: EU–Kazakhstani relations', *Europe–Asia Studies* 66: 1, 2014, pp. 1–24.

[60] Displaying strength was not a lost cause, as shown by the BBC headline 'Islam Karimov: Uzbekistan strongman's death confirmed', BBC, 2 Sept. 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-37260375.

[61] 'Vernut doverie liudei', *Pravda Vostoka*, 22 July 1990.

[62] James Critchlow, 'Uzbek army recruits believed murders to avenge Ferghana killings', *Report on the USSR* 1: 4, 1989, pp. 23–5.

[63] Islam Karimov, 'Bizni tanlagan yo'limizdan hech kim Qaytarolmaydi', *O'zbek xalqi hech qachon, hech kimga qaram bo'lmaydi*, vol. 13 (Tashkent: O'zbekiston), p. 306.

The tendency to criticize others without allowing alternative voices to be heard further damages Uzbekistan's image in the international arena. In May 2003, during a summit set up by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Karimov again displayed his visible frustration with the criticisms levelled by international bureaucrats and politicians, many of whom took issue with the GoU's approach to economic development. At one point Karimov was so exasperated that he took off his translation apparatus on live television.[65]

All in all, the defensive posturing was not conducive to obtaining international support. Nor was it the best long-term strategy for establishing that image of greatness and equal status that Karimov had hoped to construct. Karimov had argued in one of his more renowned speeches after independence that Uzbekistan would be a 'future great state [*kelajagi buyuk davlat*]',[66] a statement repeated in his speech (published posthumously) celebrating Uzbekistan's 25-year independence anniversary: 'It was in those very times, when our people, by demonstrating in practice their resoluteness and steadfastness, did not lose their belief in the bright and great future of our Uzbekistan and Insha'Allah will never ever lose it.'[67] Whatever the GoU thinks of itself, and however it depicts itself for the home audience, many in the international arena would contest that image of greatness.

Seeking economic self-sufficiency

The pursuit of self-reliance is based on economic self-sufficiency. Karimov made no bones about this: 'Our major task is to radically restructure the economy and introduce a structure capable of securing Uzbekistan's economic and political independence, taking into account all of our resources.'[68] To that end, the GoU adopted a model of economic self-sufficiency, grounded on wheat, cotton and energy production. This task, though costly, was not necessarily infeasible.

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[64] 'Karimov—bold and nasty', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 15 May 2015, http://www.rferl.org/content/karimov-bold-nasty-cis-summit/27017818.html.

[65] Lewis, *Temptations of tyranny*, pp. 35–6.

[66] Islam Karimov, 'Uzbekiston—kelajak buyuk davlat', in *Uzbekiston: milliy istiqlol, iqtisod, siyosat, mafkura*, vol. 1, 10 Dec. (Tashkent: O'zbekiston, 1996), pp. 95–130.

[67] 'Festive congratulation by the President of Uzbekistan', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, 31 Aug. 2016, http://www.mfa.uz/en/press/news/2016/08/8219/.

[68] Karimov, *Uzbekistan: the road*, p. 51.

Because Uzbekistan was more or less self-sufficient in energy and food, its GDP shrank far less after independence than that of other former Soviet states.[69]

In order to enforce self-sufficiency, the GoU adopted strict currency controls and a highly regulated exchange rate system.[70] That system was subjected to even tighter control after the Russian financial crisis of 1998 (although it was relaxed briefly in 2003 after the GoU negotiated reforms with the IMF). It proved resilient, even allowing Karimov to argue that Uzbekistan avoided the 2008 financial crisis that hit most market economies hard.[71] And yet this regulated and heavily centralized monetary system, on which self-sufficiency was based, took a substantial toll on the economy. Foreign officials often argue that Uzbekistan's currency system deters international companies from investing in the country or that it has severely handicapped small domestic businesses, many of which could have attempted to export their products.[72]

Self-sufficiency was not limited to agriculture and energy production. The GoU has also sought to minimize its dependence on its neighbours. This was especially noticeable in Uzbekistan's unilateral withdrawal from the joint—formerly Soviet—Central Asian Power System (CAPS) in 2009 and in its reorganization of its rail system;[73] after independence, a few sections of Uzbekistan's railway network were not in line with its actual territorial borders, with fragments leaving and re-entering the state. Although the former Soviet electric grid and rail systems were perhaps no longer suitable for the independent republics, since they are in theory supposed to control their own borders, the GoU's exchange rate system and unilateral decision-making do not foster central Asian prosperity and mutual trust. As potentially the largest internal market in the region, the GoU has done little, in its rigorous pursuit of self-sufficiency, to help the region's poorest economies, namely Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Rejection of an expansionist ideology

Defensive self-reliance is best displayed in the GoU's rejection of expansionist ideologies. By this I mean that it has not instrumentalized mono-ethnic nationalism or geopolitical constructs, such as Eurasianism, Islam or other such concepts, in order to project itself in the international arena. Karimov was particularly clear on this point: 'Uzbekistan has always been against all forms of radicalism … We are against religious fundamentalism, we are against Communist fundamentalism and, if you like, we are against democratic fundamentalism. We are for an evolutionary path of development.'[74] In short, removing the imprint of ideology was a central pillar of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, especially if it constituted a means by which to justify expansion. Karimov rejected Moscow's concept of the 'near abroad' and its appeal to protect Russian speakers in 1992,[75] for he understood that both notions could create a precedent on the basis of which to project influence abroad—as indeed has proved to be the case.[76] Karimov also paid little attention to the exhortation in 1992 by Turgut Özal, Turkey's former president, that the twenty-first century should be made 'the century of the Turks'.[77] At a time when Turkey was seen as an example for, and possible leader of, the central Asian republics, Karimov dismissed any such schemes, not least because they challenged Uzbekistan's international equality of status. If Turkey was to be a leader, so was Uzbekistan. Indeed, the GoU has declined to participate in any of the Turkic summits and councils since 1999, not only because of its determination to pursue international relations via bilateralism, but also because of the nationalist, if not expansionist, agenda underpinning those meetings.

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[69] Jeromin Zettelmeyer, 'The Uzbek growth puzzle', *IMF Staff Papers* 46: 3, 1999, pp. 274–92.

[70] Christof B. Rosenberg and Marteen Zeeuw, 'Welfare effects of Uzbekistan's exchange rate regime', *IMF Staff Papers* 48: 1, 2001, pp. 160–78.

[71] Islam Karimov, 'The global financial–economic crisis, ways and measures to overcome it in the conditions of Uzbekistan', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 March 2009, http://www.mfa.uz/en/press/library/2009/03/343/.

[72] Author's interviews conducted between 2010 and 2011 under conditions of guaranteed anonymity with officials who had worked in Uzbekistan.

[73] Sébastien Peyrouse, 'Central Asian power grid in danger?', *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, 9 Dec. 2009, http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/11960-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2009-12-9-art-11960.html.

The rejection of overtly expansionist ideologies has a geopolitical basis. For all its appeals to military, political and economic equality, Uzbekistan can in no way compete with the might of the larger powers surrounding central Asia. The best it can do, as noted above, is bargain for relative economic and political equality. Furthermore, besides the geopolitical constraint, there are genuine security concerns, such as instability in Afghanistan, that cannot simply be discounted even if they are exaggerated by the GoU and foreign observers alike. The entire first section of Karimov's most widely disseminated work, *Uzbekistan on the threshold of the twenty-first century*, is dedicated to 'Threats to security': seven chapters detailing issues ranging from potential and existing regional conflicts to ecological problems.[78] Karimov played a large role in underscoring the existence of 'danger' in central Asia, an emphasis that was congruent with his plea for defensive self-reliance, but did little to counter narratives that construct 'Central Asia as inherently and particularly dangerous'.[79] Defensive self-reliance is a matter not just of capacity but also of defending one's priorities from any perceived threat. It is also about confidence and/or the desire to promote those interests abroad.

As well as taking a cautious and threat-based perspective, the GoU has not practised a particularly offensive foreign policy. It has disputed borders (with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan especially: the three states have often been embroiled in prolonged border standoffs), and has vehemently opposed the construction of the Roghun Dam in Tajikistan. Nevertheless, its military interventionism has not taken an expansionist form.[80] Nor has the GoU ever espoused mono-ethnic nationalism abroad. On the contrary, during the 2010 Osh pogroms, for example, the GoU did not enforce its military might with a view to protecting Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks from violent attack.[81] Rather, Karimov has always stated that the government is determined to protect only the citizens of Uzbekistan, not Uzbeks everywhere.[82] Moreover, even when Karimov did make use of potentially nationalist historical slogans such as 'Turkestan is our Common Home' in the mid-1990s, perhaps to compete with Kazakhstani Eurasianism or Ankara's pan-Turkism, he quickly downplayed mono-ethnic nationalism, arguing that Turkestan was a geographic construct, not an ethnic one.[83] Either way, it is unclear whether the GoU could have benefited much from appropriating and deploying an expansionist ideology; in any event, it is clear that it has rarely done so. This may in fact be rather surprising, for the GoU often harks back to the glory days of the Timurids and in particular of Amir Timur (otherwise known as Tamerlane), a fifteenth-century ruler based in Samarkand, who conquered most of central Asia and part of the Middle East.

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[74] Quoted in 'Uzbek leader stresses common interests with Japanese', BBC SWB, 2 Aug. 2002.

[75] Islam Karimov, 'Oliy maqsadimiz', in *Bunyodkorlik yo'ldan*, vol. 4 (Tashkent: O'zbekiston, 1996), p. 212.

[76] On Russian justifications of military intervention, see Roy Allison, *Russia, the West and military intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[77] 'Ozal welcomes fellow presidents "21st century will be the century of the Turks"', BBC SWB, 2 Nov. 1992.

[78] Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the threshold of the twenty-first century* (London: Curzon, 1997), pp. 11–84.

[79] John Heathershaw and Nick Megoran, 'Contesting danger: a new agenda', *International Affairs* 87: 3, May 2011, p. 609.

[80] Filippo Menga, 'Building a nation through a dam: the case of Roghun in Tajikistan', *Nationalities Papers* 43: 3,

Conclusion

No longer headed by the same leader, the GoU will now have to decide on whether and how to take up the legacy of defensive self-reliance it inherits a quarter of a century after achieving independence. Over that period, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has sought to protect its sovereignty, especially by pushing for international equality of status, though that has not always been the optimal solution, nor perhaps the most practical. It has meant rejecting a number of compromises and refusing to recognize that Uzbekistan could only, to all intents and purposes, be a junior partner in several political–economic initiatives. Indeed, in spite of its economic potential and self-sufficiency, Uzbekistan's wealth and expertise can take it only so far in the context of the larger powers that surround it. And yet that staunch defence of equality, of its national image and of economic self-sufficiency has turned Uzbekistan into a state to be reckoned with. Karimov rarely budged, and few states have any illusion that they can get their way without first acknowledging the GoU's interests. The question, then, is what to do with this legacy, and what a changed stance would look like.

To make sense of potential changes it is important to note that the GoU does not have free rein in the region. Even though this article has highlighted continuities and the proactive dimension of the GoU's foreign policy, this is but one small part of the whole narrative. Like those of any other state, the GoU's actions inevitably depend on the surrounding context, particularly on Russian goodwill,

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2015, pp. 479–94; 'Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan in new standoff over mountain', Eurasianet, 24 Aug. 2016, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/80271. It remains to be seen whether the attempt at regional *rapprochement* made by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's acting president, will lead to greater cooperation in the future.

[81] Alisher Khadimov, 'What it takes to avert regional crisis: understanding the Uzbek government's responses to the June 2010 violence in south Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Affairs* 2: 2, 2015, pp. 168–88.

[82] For more on the Uzbek national question, see Matteo Fumagalli, 'Ethnicity, state formation and foreign policy: Uzbekistan and "Uzbeks abroad"', *Central Asian Survey* 26: 1, 2007, pp. 105–22.

[83] Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the threshold*, p. 46.

Chinese investment and political stability within its surrounding neighbours, the most important of which at the present moment is Afghanistan, whose violent civil war in the 1990s posed a genuine security challenge to the region as a whole. In any case, Uzbekistan—given its size and central location within central Asia—has enough leverage to affect policy outcomes within the region. So any change it makes in its policy is likely to be noticeable.

If Uzbekistan follows a path similar to other political transitions in the post-Soviet space, such as those of Russia and Turkmenistan, it is unlikely to make any sudden or abrupt change. Rather, the 'tradition' of self-reliance may well persist long after 2016. But that is not necessarily a prescription for relentless continuity, in so far as self-reliance offers avenues for subtle change. Much like Russia under President Vladimir Putin, who decided to put an end to Yeltsin's vacillation and push for greater assertiveness, Uzbekistan's leaders may decide to reinforce or loosen certain of Karimov's legacies, with a variety of policy outcomes. For instance, relaxing the pursuit of both status equality and self-sufficiency may open up Uzbekistan's international market and allow for greater movement of people and goods. And that would in turn require the ability to deal with criticism and to accept that many such initiatives cannot be fully controlled bilaterally, as global capitalism is usually decentralized and not subject to central regulation. Likewise, pushing for a more conciliatory tone and mitigating the concentration on bilateral relations could potentially foster greater connections among all the central Asian republics. It may also help the GoU rebuild its international image.

The potentially more problematic change to Uzbekistani foreign policy would be a shift from defensive to offensive self-reliance. In the aftermath of the Osh pogroms, for example, some Uzbekistani citizens and officials took issue (privately) with the fact that the GoU had not taken a more assertive, even aggressive, stance to protect its 'ethnic brethren' abroad.[84] A less defensive and more offensive government would raise the level of distrust in the region, forcing Moscow, maybe even Beijing, to take a more active role to balance against the GoU.[85] Offensive self-reliance would see the republic's international image deteriorate even further, as well as damage its cautious approach to expansionist ideology. In this respect, central Asia is already plagued by several geopolitical constructs, ranging from Eurasianism to visions of a new Great Silk Road.[86] The emergence of yet another assertive contender would only enhance competition and do little to foster cooperation. While I am not suggesting that there is any real prospect of offensive self-reliance coming to fruition, it is worth bearing in mind the potential repercussions thereof.

After 25 years of independence and 27 years with Karimov in the driving seat, the Uzbekistani authorities are in a position to reflect on the consequences of self-reliance. Should the country's foreign policy continue to be driven by suspicion of powerful states, ideas, companies and compromises? The uncertainties and complexities of perestroika in the late 1980s, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan may well have justified at one point or another the pursuit of self-reliance; it is now up to those same authorities to decide whether to replicate that policy in the years ahead, or to alter some of its main patterns. Only time will tell.

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[84] Khadimov, 'What it takes', pp. 183–7. Author's interviews conducted between 2010 and 2011 under conditions of guaranteed anonymity in central Asia.

[85] Roy Allison, 'Strategic reassertion in Russia's central Asia policy', *International Affairs* 80: 2, March 2004, p. 288.

[86] Marlene Laruelle, 'The US Silk Road: geopolitical imaginary or the repackaging of strategic interests?', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56: 4, 2015, pp. 360–75; Nick Megoran and Sevara Sharapova, eds, *Central Asia in International Relations: the legacies of Halford Mackinder* (London: Hurst, 2014); Marlene Laruelle, *Eurasianism: ideology of empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).