



RESEARCH

Uzbekistan and Southeast Asia: Exploring the Opportunities for Strengthening Relations

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Uzbekistan-Southeast Asia relations is an underexplored research topic, despite the growing significance of both Central Asia and Southeast Asia in world affairs. Uzbekistan lies at the heart of Central Asia, bordering all the four other Central Asian states, and has the largest population and thus largest potential market in Central Asia. This article examines the opportunities for strengthening relations between Uzbekistan and Southeast Asian countries, and also with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It particularly looks at how Southeast Asia can be alternative economic partners for Uzbekistan in its attempt to diversify foreign relations and modernize the country. This article firstly examines Uzbekistan's foreign policy, particularly its attempts to diversify relations and economic partners to enhance its strategic space and flexibility and how Uzbekistan views relations with key countries in Southeast Asia as opportunities for doing so. Secondly, it looks at how Southeast Asia sees opportunities in Uzbekistan which is potentially the largest market in the region, centrally located with good potential connectivity, including with South Asia, and has a well-developed industrial base. It also has a more open and engaging foreign policy under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Lastly, it examines ways to further strengthen relations by arguing that both sides should also view each other through a regional lens and work towards forging region-to-region relations, thereby enhancing greater economic cooperation potential.

Keywords: Uzbekistan; Southeast Asia; ASEAN; BRI; EAEU; foreign policy

Introduction

The geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of Eurasia and Central Asia has been increasingly attracting the world's attention. Located at the heart of Eurasia, Central Asia has long been an arena for great-power competition as well as geoeconomic opportunities and potential. In this strategic landscape, the Central Asian states, far from being mere pawns, have demonstrated considerable agency by trying to manoeuvre between the great powers to enhance their strategic space, protect and promote their interests, and preserve their

sovereignty as well as the ruling regime's survival (see, for instance, Cooley 2012). The New Silk Roads or China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has further opened up opportunities for the Central Asian states to better connect with the global market and to advance their economic development. In particular, it has opened up opportunities for greater connectivity and trade, not only between Europe and Asia through the lands of Central Asia but also between Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Both regions are growing in global importance and represent new vast and untapped markets for each other. The ten Southeast Asian countries that are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have a combined population of 656 million, and a combined GDP of US\$ 3,166 billion in 2020. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, they enjoyed a steady GDP growth of approximately 5 percent annually (ASEAN Secretariat 2020). Just Indonesia alone, with a population of 270 million, can become a large significant market for Central Asian countries. Likewise, Central Asia, with a combined population of about 75 million and a combined GDP of about US\$ 289 billion in 2020, also presents a significant but yet largely untapped market for Southeast Asia. While Kazakhstan remains the largest economy with GDP at about US\$ 170 billion in 2020, Uzbekistan's economy has also been growing at around 5–7 percent prior to the pandemic, and it is the second largest economy in the region with GDP at 58 billion in 2020. Most importantly, it has the largest population at 34 million and thus represents the largest potential market for Southeast Asian countries in Central Asia (World Bank 2020). Uzbekistan therefore stands to play a pivotal role in strengthening relations and cooperation between Central Asia and Southeast Asia.

But relations between the countries of Central Asia and Southeast Asia remains an under-developed research area, compared with Central Asia's relations with other Asian countries, particularly China, but also Japan, South Korea, India and Iran (for example, Dadabaev 2016; Fumagalli 2016; Godehardt 2014; Kavalski 2010; Laruelle 2018; Mesbahi 2004). The Central Asian states' relations with these other Asian states are also part of their attempts to diversify relations with alternative partners to lessen their dependence on Russia and China. Nonetheless, amongst the Asian partners, China remains the predominant economic and political partner in Central Asia. While there have been some research on Southeast Asia's relations with Kazakhstan, the region's largest and most developed economy, and the regional leader that plays a central role in China's BRI (for example, Rangsimaporn 2020; Rangsimaporn 2021), I would argue that Southeast Asia's relations with Uzbekistan also deserves attention. This article would firstly examine Uzbekistan's foreign policy, particularly its attempts to diversify relations and economic partners to enhance its strategic space and flexibility, and how Uzbekistan views relations with key Southeast Asian countries as opportunities for doing so. Secondly, it looks at how Southeast Asian countries see opportunities in Uzbekistan which is potentially the largest market in the region, centrally located with good potential connectivity and bordering all the four other Central Asian states, and has a well-developed industrial base with a more open and engaging foreign policy under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Lastly, it examines ways to further strengthen relations by arguing that both sides should also view each other through a regional lens and work towards forging region-to-region relations such as by establishing a C5+1 mechanism with ASEAN and its member states. Furthermore, the recent increasing momentum towards exclusive Central Asian regionalism, without the involvement of external powers, has also opened up discussion of ASEAN as one suitable model for such Central Asian regional cooperation. Due to the geopolitical similarities that the countries of Central Asia and Southeast Asia share – both consisting of small and medium-sized states in a region where there is increasing great-power competition – the experience of ASEAN and its member countries in collectively managing relations with great powers could be of use for Central Asian states who are moving towards

greater regional cooperation amidst growing geopolitical tension. This could thus be another opportunity and area for strengthening relations and economic ties between Southeast Asia and Uzbekistan, which has been the key mover along with Kazakhstan towards greater Central Asian cooperation.

Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy: Diversifying Partners and Models of Development

Multi-vectorism in Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy

The foreign policies of Central Asian states have often been described as pursuing some variant of a multi-directional or multi-vector foreign policy, especially in terms of energy politics and security, by seeking multiple partners and pipeline routes in order to provide some strategic balancing and leverage with regards to the great powers (Blank 2012: 155; Cooley 2012: 68). This has particularly been the case for Kazakhstan, the country which is most associated with pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy, at least in terms of policy statements. Whether it has been successful in implementing this is, however, debatable due to Kazakhstan's long borders and multi-faceted links with both Russia and China that makes it vulnerable to these great powers' influences and, more recently, President Tokayev's decision to invite the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to help restore order during the January 2022 unrest (see, for example, Anceschi 2020: 108–109, 119 & 167; Anceschi 2022; Clarke 2015; Sullivan 2019). Uzbekistan too has been trying to practice such a policy, although, unlike Kazakhstan, this term is not mentioned in its foreign policy documents. Under President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's foreign policy aimed to pursue a policy of maintaining equal distance from all the great powers and strived for 'self-reliance' (*mustaqillik*) to ensure regime survival and independence (Fazendeiro 2018). This policy of 'equi-distance' under Karimov meant that Tashkent tried to equalise relations with all external players to obtain the maximum benefit from each (Ibragimova 2018a). Such a policy has also been described as 'multi-vectorial' wherein Uzbekistan seeks to maximise the benefits from a particular alignment while minimising the loss that relationship may incur, whilst safeguarding its independence and freedom of manoeuvre (Pikalov 2014). Karimov's 'multivectorism' entailed the pursuance of a 'non-committal adaptive foreign policy' that strived to maintain balanced relations with competing powers (Asiryanyan 2019). President Mirziyoyev has also followed such a course but with greater pro-activeness, openness, and engagement, particularly with its Central Asian neighbours as well as key external actors, in order to ensure a stable and conducive environment for Uzbekistan's development and modernisation and to provide balance in its relations with the great powers to preserve its independence. Mirziyoyev's approach is therefore arguably more similar to Kazakhstan's more open and engaging model of multi-vectorism (Dzhuraev 2019: 23–24).

Mirziyoyev's aim is to also pursue a 'more equal and balanced multi-vectored foreign economic policy' in order to advance Uzbekistan's economic development. Tashkent well recognises the fact that relying on only two major powers – Russia and China – will limit this progress, and it needed to 'diversify its trading partners and keep all its options open' (Madiyev 2021: 94 & 130). As part of this multi-vector foreign policy, Tashkent's aim is to seek new partners and diversify relations as much as possible, including with those in Asia such as Japan, South Korea and India, in order to help balance or hedge against China and Russia, the region's most dominant powers (Gussarova & Andžāns 2018: 13). The same rationale can be argued for Uzbekistan's foreign policy and views towards Southeast Asia, where some key states such as Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand are seen as potentially new and alternative economic partners and investors as part of Tashkent's attempt to diversify its foreign relations and modernise the country. As one prominent Uzbek expert and former

presidential advisor explained, Uzbekistan's foreign policy is becoming more multi-vector and it is trying to avoid overdependence on Russia and China by diversifying its economic partners, including with those in Southeast Asia. He sees Southeast Asian countries having strong economic potential with well-developed manufacturing, technological, agricultural and tourism industries that can help lessen Uzbekistan's economic reliance on China.¹

Southeast Asia in Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy

The importance of Southeast Asia is mentioned in Uzbekistan's foreign policy documents. Uzbekistan is still drafting a new foreign policy concept, so in the meantime the Strategy of Actions on five priority directions of development of Uzbekistan in 2017–2021 defines Tashkent's foreign policy priorities and tasks. One such task is to enhance cooperation with partner countries in Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam (MFA of Uzbekistan 2020). Uzbekistan is interested in developing relations with these countries as they have demonstrated impressive economic growth and have potential to collectively become one pole in a multipolar world. For Uzbekistan, the Southeast Asian countries are important in the following ways. Firstly, as potential strategic investors in Uzbekistan's economy. Secondly, due to their role and strategy to strengthen security in Asia through such fora as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Thirdly, their experience in striving to join the ranks of the world's most economically competitive countries, which could serve as a model for Uzbekistan's own development (Dzhuraeva 2017: 78). Uzbek experts also noted the 'huge untapped potential of cooperation' between Uzbekistan and ASEAN countries, particularly in trade, financial and investment, tourism, educational, and other fields (UWED 2018). Moreover, ASEAN is well recognized as forming one of the 'backbones' of the emerging security and cooperation architecture in the Asia-Pacific region as well as having growing potential in trade, economic, financial and investment potential for Uzbekistan (Abdullaeva 2018).

Uzbekistan under President Mirziyoyev has also stressed economic diplomacy to attract greater foreign economic cooperation and investment in general. In his speech to the Uzbek diplomatic corps in January 2018, he instructed that the development of foreign economic ties, increasing exports, attraction of investment and technology, and promoting tourism in Uzbekistan would become primary tasks for Uzbek diplomats (Mirziyoyev 2018). He proposed the creation of a specific department in the foreign ministry responsible for economic relations with foreign partners, including in tourism and export promotion, and tasked the Senate committee on foreign policy to spearhead the new policy shift. Moreover, Mirziyoyev himself often took the leading role in forging economic ties with foreign partners (Ibragimova 2018b). Amongst the ASEAN countries, Uzbekistan stressed the growing role of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia in particular as economic partners and that it was necessary for Uzbekistan to establish greater economic and political links with them (Dzhuraeva 2016: 57–58).

Singapore occupies a prominent place in Uzbekistan's relations with Southeast Asian countries due to its significant economic role and its successful political and economic development model that Tashkent sought to emulate. At the beginning of the 21st century, Singapore was Uzbekistan's largest trading partner from Southeast Asia, with trade amounting to US\$ 76.1 million in 2005 and US\$ 86.2 million in 2006. Since July 2003, the two countries also signed an Agreement on Economic and Cultural Cooperation which served as an important legal document for expanding economic relations and mutual investment and

¹ Author's interview, Tashkent, November 16, 2021.

the two countries have held regular business forums which facilitate closer links and trade between their businesses in such sectors as textiles, electro-technical, pharmaceutical, automobile, and chemistry industry, as well as between educational establishments (Shoqulov 2020: 131–132; UZDaily 2012). The two countries are also exploring the possibility of establishing a Business Council and the conclusion of a free trade agreement (FTA) (Ministry of Investments 2020). As **Table 1** shows, according to the latest trade figures from Uzbekistan's State Committee on Statistics, Singapore is still Uzbekistan's largest trading partner from Southeast Asia with total trade at US\$ 175.6 million in 2021. The second largest is Vietnam with bilateral trade worth US\$ 138.7 million (State Committee on Statistics 2022). Relations with Vietnam is also gaining prominence due to the traditional close ties from the Soviet period. Uzbekistan's foreign minister Abdulaziz Kamilov called Vietnam an 'important partner' and a 'bridge' for Uzbekistan to build relations with other Southeast Asian countries (Vietnam News Agency 2020).

Southeast Asia as Models of Political and Socio-Economic Development

Moreover, since gaining independence in the beginning of the 1990s, Central Asian elites, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, had expressed interest in learning from the successful models of political and socio-economic development in such Southeast Asian countries as Singapore and Malaysia – the so-called 'Asian Tigers.' The objective of the Central Asian elites was to foster alternative partnerships with countries that do not apply geopolitical pressure and can serve as models for economic development (Laruelle & Peyrouse 2013: 110). For example, in an interview with journalists prior to his state visit to Singapore in January 2007, President Karimov expressed admiration for the 'Singaporean miracle' which managed to transform a poor country into a highly developed state within a short time. Singapore's experience in successfully developing its country based on its own cultural values and specifics without necessarily copying the 'Western Anglo-Saxon model' was particularly useful for Uzbekistan, which was trying to follow its own modernization path based on its own cultural and civilizational identity (Dzhuraeva 2017: 72–73, 81). Similarly, Malaysia's then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's Vision 2020, which outlined the 'Asian' approach towards development, resonated well with Central Asian leaders, including President Karimov, as it entailed 'modernisation without democratisation' and that a strong authoritarian government 'would go unquestioned as long as it delivered continued prosperity' (Stark 2006: 457–458). As Karimov himself wrote, 'First people seek a full stomach, to be fed and well clothed. First the economy, then politics...' (cited from Fazendeiro 2018: 31). Uzbekistan under Karimov thus focused on strengthening links with Malaysia, Singapore and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia in Southeast Asia.

Singapore's leading standards in education and human resources development also attracted Uzbekistan's interest. Following President Karimov's aforementioned state visit in 2007, the Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS) in Tashkent was established in September that year, providing opportunities for students from Uzbekistan and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries to benefit from the Singaporean institute's high-level educational standards, academic curricula and programmes in the fields of business, management and finance (MDIS 2022). Malaysia is also following in this field. In 2019, an Uzbek-Malaysian joint faculty was established on the basis of the Tashkent Financial Institute and, in 2020, the International University 'Binary' was founded in the city of Urgench in cooperation with the Malaysian University of Management and Entrepreneurship 'Binary' (Karimov and Madimarov 2021). Malaysia is also a popular destination for Uzbek students in Southeast Asia with approximately 200 students enrolled in Malaysia's universities and educational institutions (Hazri 2021).

Table 1: Uzbekistan's trade statistics with key Southeast Asian countries (2016–2021) in US\$ million.

Year	2016			2017			2018			2019			2020			2021* (preliminary data)		
	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total
Indonesia	38.2	8.5	46.7	28.6	7.5	36.1	41.6	10.8	52.4	23.0	21.3	44.3	20.9	18.6	39.5	8.8	16.6	25.4
Malaysia	10.5	69.1	79.6	4.8	60.7	65.5	8.1	70.9	79	7.8	109.1	116.9	12.0	64.1	76.1	17.6	58.0	75.6
Singapore	70.3	11.0	81.3	678	24.9	92.7	71.6	20.5	92.1	34.2	147.3	181.5	58.0	67.7	125.7	102.3	73.3	175.6
Viet Nam	6.0	23.1	29.1	21.7	12.2	33.9	28.9	25.8	54.7	15.2	59.7	74.9	13.0	72.9	85.9	21.0	117.7	138.7
Thailand	13.6	12.2	25.8	1.5	12.9	14.4	3.1	22.4	25.5	2.8	30.2	33	0.5	110.8	111.3	6.9	35.5	42.4
Total	138.6	123.9	262.5	124.4	118.2	242.6	153.3	150.4	303.7	83	367.6	450.6	104.4	334.1	438.5	156.6	301.1	457.7

Source: The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics.
<https://stat.uz/en/official-statistics/merchandise-trade>.

Uzbekistan's Increasing Attraction for Southeast Asia

New Beginnings and Mirziyoyev's Reforms

During the early 1990s, ties between Southeast Asia and the newly independent Central Asian countries appeared promising as both sides were keen to establish new relationships. Southeast Asian countries also viewed Central Asian countries as fellow Asians and Muslims for some Islamic countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia (Thambipillai 1994: 95–97). Amongst the newly independent Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan held the most promise for enhanced bilateral relations because they are the largest countries in terms of size and population respectively (Thambipillai 2019 reissued: 234). Recognizing Uzbekistan's importance, both Malaysia and Indonesia set up embassies in Tashkent in 1993 and 1994 respectively. Vietnam also had an embassy in Tashkent but closed it down, and relations with Uzbekistan are now covered by Vietnam's embassy in Moscow. Karimov's own interest in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in particular led to those countries having a favourable comparative edge in their economic role in Uzbekistan. For example, Petronas, Malaysia's leading energy company, won the rights to participate in the exploration and exploitation of gas deposits on the Ust-Yurt Plateau (Urga, Kuanysh, Akchalak) adjacent to the Aral Sea, for which Gazprom had its licenses revoked in 2009 (Laruelle & Peyrouse 2013: 110).² However, in 2013, Petronas decided to withdraw from all of its Uzbekistan exploration and production projects for commercial reasons, which include production sharing agreements (PSA) on the aforementioned Ust-Yurt Plateau, the Surkhanski gas field, and the Baisun oil and gas field in southern Uzbekistan (TCA 2013).

But it is under President Mirziyoyev that Uzbekistan's attraction for Southeast Asia noticeably increased. After assuming the presidency in late 2016, Mirziyoyev implemented significant reforms in the economic sphere in terms of economic liberalization, currency convertibility, and banking sector reforms that noticeably improved the business and investment climate. Additionally, his more open and engaging foreign policy has made Uzbekistan a more attractive partner to do business with (Kangas 2018).³ As ASEAN Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi remarked to Uzbekistan's Ambassador to ASEAN, these reforms have opened up prospects for the expansion of transport, trade and investment relations between Uzbekistan and ASEAN countries (MFA of Uzbekistan 2019). Mirziyoyev is also trying to create an export-oriented industrial base by attracting technology transfer to this end from Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea (Dadabaev 2018: 751–752). Southeast Asian countries, therefore, also have an opportunity to assist Uzbekistan in its perhaps less-advanced technological needs and to develop its industries in areas such as textiles, agriculture, halal food, and tourism, in which they have leading expertise in. In 2018, it was also reported that Petronas might re-enter Uzbekistan's oil and gas market following Mirziyoyev's reforms that improved the investment climate, though this has yet to be the case (AzerNews 2018).

Amongst the Southeast Asian countries, Singapore and Malaysia have again taken the lead in expanding their economic presence in Uzbekistan. As of 2017, Singapore jointly financed more than 20 enterprises in Uzbekistan in the fields of electrical engineering, food industry,

² Indeed, Tashkent's decision arguably led to Russian President Medvedev's decision to downgrade Uzbekistan by visiting Kazakhstan first upon assuming the presidency as a reprisal, in clear contrast to Putin who visited Uzbekistan first in 2000 (Fazendeiro 2018: 81).

³ The government removed currency controls, allowing the national currency to float freely. The Law 'On Banks and Banking Activities' was amended which redefined and updated the Central Bank's power with emphasis on price stability and oversight. It also allowed foreign investors to own up to 5 percent of the shares of domestic banks. Furthermore, rules on anti-money laundering, currency transactions, settlements, and improving the availability of banking services were adopted, which all helped enhance foreign investors' and business's confidence. Author's online interview with Uzbek economics expert, June 3, 2022.

wood-processing industry, and trade. The two countries also have more than 20 major joint projects in the sphere of finance, oil and gas and light industry, and have held regular business forums. Moreover, at the beginning of 2017, an agreement was signed to create a joint enterprise called Indorama Kokand Fertilizers with the participation of Singapore's Indorama Corporation with a value of more than US\$ 80 million to produce fertilizers (Dzhuraeva 2017: 78–81). Since 2019, a Singaporean company 'Six Clouds Pte Ltd' has also assisted in the introduction of new educational software products and interactive digital learning platforms into Uzbekistan's education system (Shoqulov 2020: 133). As of 2020, Malaysia has invested in 31 enterprises in Uzbekistan, 21 of which are with 100 percent Malaysian funding. These investments are in such areas as oil and gas, textile, furniture, electric products, and financial and tourism services (Karimov & Madimarov 2021).

Thailand had also been exploring economic opportunities in Uzbekistan. In September 2015, it sent a foreign ministry delegation to visit the country during which the Uzbek side expressed interest in Thai investments in the agricultural and food-processing fields, for instance, in livestock breeding and freshwater fish farming, as well as in the tourism industry, all areas of which Thailand has expertise. Nonetheless, no significant progress was made then due to such obstacles as the need to find reliable local partners to help with the complex rules and regulations, language barriers, and the unstable banking and financial systems that have yet to reach international standards (MFA of Thailand 2016). However, with the improvement in Uzbekistan's business climate and financial system under Mirziyoyev, Thailand's businesses became more interested in investing there. For example, in June 2019, Thailand's Wyncoast Industrial Park company signed an MoU with Uzbekistan's Ministry of Innovative Development to initiate a project to research and develop solar energy in Uzbekistan. The company has invested in total US\$ 1.2 million to help establish a solar carport in Tashkent with the capacity of 264 Kilowatt and total area of 2,000 sq. m., as well as solar farms in Nukus city and the Khorezm region with capacity of 1.001 Megawatt per project.⁴

Uzbekistan's Connectivity Potential

Furthermore, Uzbekistan's unique central position means that it has much potential to play a greater role in China's BRI, thereby enhancing its potential attractiveness for Southeast Asia. Located at the heart of Central Asia, it is the region's most populous country and the only one that shares borders with all of the other Central Asian states. It has the greatest potential for industrial development due to its Soviet legacy and a large and young labour force. Its newfound openness will benefit China's BRI directly by making it easier and more secure for China and other countries to invest in transport infrastructure, and indirectly by facilitating economic growth in Central Asia (Overland & Vakulchuk 2018). Moreover, Mirziyoyev's abandonment of Karimov's more isolationist stance has helped unlocked Uzbekistan's geographical potential, re-opening trans-regional transport routes that were previously closed (Anceschi 2019).

In May 2017, Uzbekistan signed with China an agreement to facilitate road transportation and increase the transport of goods via rail and road between them. The project aimed to connect the Uzbek city of Andijan and the Chinese city of Kashgar via Osh and Irkeshtam in Kyrgyzstan. This is the shortest route between them and would allow Uzbekistan to avoid the use of Kazakh railroads, which take longer and cost more (Dadabaev 2018: 761–762). Uzbekistan's Transport Ministry has been pushing for the acceleration of the railway project linking the three countries, but problems with the gauge and route as well as the financial aspects of the project remain unresolved and an intergovernmental agreement on its

⁴ Author's conversation with the Chairman and CEO of Wyncoast Industrial Park PCL, Nur-Sultan, July 19, 2021.

construction has yet to be signed (Gazeta 2020). Although the route was officially opened in October 2017 and started functioning in February 2018, only the segments in China and Uzbekistan are operated by railway, while the cargo is transported by trucks in the Kyrgyzstan section. No rail connection yet exists that directly link China and Uzbekistan via Kyrgyzstan, and financing the Kyrgyzstan section remains a problem. This mixture of railroads and high-ways would probably be the arrangement used for the foreseeable future (Hashimova 2020a). However, the disruption to the main land transport route between Asia and Europe via Russia due to Western sanctions on Russia following its war on Ukraine have prompted these three countries to revitalise this route as one alternative. Speaking at the economic forum of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in May 2022, the Uzbek President announced plans to construct this railway link. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also discussed this possibility with his Kyrgyz and Uzbek counterparts during the Central Asia – China foreign ministers' meeting in June 2022 (Lillis 2022; RFE/RL 2022).

Tashkent is also playing an active role in promoting connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia. Being a doubly landlocked country, Uzbekistan has a strong interest in improving connectivity and gaining access to the sea via South Asia. Uzbekistan has expressed interest to accede to the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA), which includes Pakistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, in order to be able to utilize Pakistan's Karachi and Gwadar ports, thereby potentially gaining better access to other markets, including that of Southeast Asia (Devonshire-Ellis 2020). At a trilateral meeting between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in February 2021, the countries agreed on a joint action plan to construct the 573 km long Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railroad, which would be connected with the existing Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif cross-border line that opened in January 2012. This project would contribute to ensuring Central Asian access to the Indian Ocean by linking up the two regions' railroad systems. The project is aimed to facilitate growth in inter-regional trade, including that with Southeast Asia, as well as substantially reduce delivery times (Cuenca 2021; Embassy of Uzbekistan in Japan 2021).

Uzbekistan has also been interested and active in strengthening ties and connectivity with India, including in the development of the Chabahar Port in Iran that forms a significant part of India's proposed International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project. This project aims to connect India to the markets of Central Asia, Russia, and Europe via Iran and Afghanistan as well as provide an alternative route to China's BRI, especially to the Chinese development of Pakistan's Gwadar Port. New Delhi views the development of the Chabahar Port as not only central to the completion of the INSTC to provide greater connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia, but also of strategic importance in the context of regional geopolitical contestation between India and China, as well as Pakistan (Pant & Mehta 2018). Tashkent fully supported India's INSTC project, while India involved Uzbekistan in its Chabahar project, which would give Uzbekistan access to a deep-water port (Marjani 2020). The INSTC is also seen as potentially connecting Southeast Asia to Central Asia, should the India-Myanmar-Thailand transport corridor also become operational. This would mean that Southeast Asia would have cheaper and faster access to Central Asia and northern Europe, while providing Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus with new connections to South and Southeast Asia (Shariatinia 2018). Nonetheless, more recently, Uzbekistan has given preference to accessing Pakistan's ports via Afghanistan as mentioned above, which is the shortest route for Uzbekistan to access a seaport. Such a route would also be cheaper than transporting to the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas. Furthermore, Tashkent is seeking new alternative routes to lessen its reliance on Iran's Bandar Abbas port (Hashimova 2021).

As one Uzbekistani expert further noted, the network of land roads and railways from Southeast Asia to India, which New Delhi was trying to develop as an alternative to the BRI,

could get a natural extension through the territory of Pakistan and Afghanistan and further to Central Asia (Yakubov 2020). However, this particular 'extension' is very unlikely to happen given the continued tensions between India and Pakistan and deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.⁵ Indeed, even the development of the INSTC and of the Chabahar Port is fraught with challenges due to US renewed economic sanctions on Iran, continued instability in Afghanistan, Iran's own unfavourable business climate and protectionist trade policies that are not in line with international regulations, and divergent foreign policy interests and priorities between New Delhi and Tehran (Pant & Mehta 2018: 673–678; Shariatinia 2018). US sanctions on Iran also adversely affected the willingness of Southeast Asian countries to use Iran's Bandar Abbas and Chabahar ports to transport goods to Central Asia, despite its potential of being a shorter route.⁶ The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 poses another significant challenge to Central Asia–South Asia connectivity. Uzbekistan, however, is determined to push forwards connectivity projects. Indeed, Tashkent hosted a major conference on promoting Central Asia–South Asia connectivity and trade in July 2021, while significant territorial gains were being made by the Taliban, and Tashkent is now actively engaging with the new Taliban regime. Uzbekistan is aiming to be a conduit for greater Central Asian trade with South Asia, and possibly with other regions beyond that such as Southeast Asia (Pannier 2021a; Pannier 2021b; RFE/RL 2021). Nonetheless, due to the combination of security and economic problems already mentioned, it appears unlikely that such a connectivity link between Uzbekistan and Southeast Asia would materialise in the foreseeable future.

Opportunities in Uzbekistan's Potential EAEU Membership?

Uzbekistan's potential of becoming a member of the EAEU, adding 34 million people to the EAEU's 184 million, presents another attraction for Southeast Asian countries who seek access to this growing Eurasian economic zone and market. Southeast Asian countries like Viet Nam and Singapore have already concluded an FTA with the EAEU in 2015 and 2019 respectively. Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand have all signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) with the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), the EAEU's regulatory body, with the hope of concluding an FTA later. Indeed, Indonesia is highly likely to be the next Southeast Asian country to conclude an FTA with the EAEU. ASEAN and the EAEU have also been considering an FTA between them, and a MoU on cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), the EAEU's regulatory body, and the ASEAN Secretariat was signed in November 2018 to enhance familiarity between the two sides first (Yi 2018).

Although in December 2020 Uzbekistan became an observer to the EAEU and not yet a member, the possibility of Uzbekistan joining in the future adds to the attraction of the EAEU market for Southeast Asian countries. Uzbekistan's population of around 34 million means that it could potentially become the second-largest market in the EAEU after Russia. A poll conducted in May 2020 by the Centre for Economic Research and Reforms, a respected think tank under the presidential administration in Uzbekistan, which polled 1,300 Uzbek college students and representatives from the public and private sectors, showed that respondents' views were nearly equally favourable regarding Uzbekistan joining the WTO (78 percent) as well as the EAEU (74 percent). The same think tank had also earlier delivered a study on the favourable economic consequences of EAEU membership. Given the Centre's close ties to President Mirziyoyev, such conclusions may possibly indicate Uzbekistan's future EAEU membership (Hashimova 2020b). The post-pandemic economic downturn is also argued as

⁵ Author's conversation with a diplomat from a South Asian country, Nur-Sultan, January 12, 2021.

⁶ Author's meeting with Thai Ministry of Commerce official, Nur-Sultan, March 13, 2019, and author's participation in a meeting with the Indonesian Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, January 28, 2019.

potentially accelerating Uzbekistan's accession to the EAEU as it would offer full access to any of the Union's post-pandemic plans to revitalise trade across the EAEU economic zone as well as legalise the post-residency status of more than 2 million Uzbeks working in the EAEU area, mostly in Russia. Indeed, Uzbekistan's trade and economic cooperation with the EAEU countries had already significantly increased since Mirziyoyev came into power in 2016 (Anceschi & Paramonov 2020: 150–151). However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is likely to dampen any appetite for becoming a full member of this Russian-dominated union anytime soon. Even before the invasion, Tashkent was in no hurry to join and was carefully studying the experiences of other EAEU members and weighing the pros and cons. Nonetheless, should Uzbekistan decide to join the EAEU in the future, then Southeast Asian countries with already an FTA with the EAEU, like Vietnam and Singapore, could become more important trading partners for Uzbekistan.⁷

Exploring Further Ways to Strengthen Relations

Enhancing Interregional Cooperation

Relations between Uzbekistan and Southeast Asia could also be strengthened through enhancing interregional cooperation between Central Asia and Southeast Asia. This could be done by establishing a C5+1 mechanism with ASEAN. In recent years, such a C5+1 dialogue format between the five Central Asian states and external partners have become increasingly popular. Such a format has been established with Japan, South Korea, the US, India, the EU, and even recently with Russia and China who had previously preferred dealing with the Central Asian states bilaterally. The first C5+1 meeting between the Central Asian states and the secretariat of the League of Arab States and some of its member countries was also held on the side-lines of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) foreign ministers' meeting in Nur-Sultan in October 2021.⁸ A similar format could therefore be established between the five Central Asian states and the ASEAN secretariat as well as ASEAN's ten member countries. Indeed, the then Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev (2007) had earlier proposed the establishment of an 'ASEAN plus Central Asia political and economic dialogue' to further develop interregional cooperation between Central Asia and ASEAN countries. Likewise, in 2006, the then ASEAN Secretary-General Ong Keng Yong agreed with Kazakhstan's then Ambassador to Indonesia, Mukhtar Tileuberdi (currently Kazakhstan's foreign minister), to establish an ASEAN + Central Asia political dialogue (Urazaeva 2011: 76). However, there have been no further developments in this direction, although it remains a highly feasible prospect should there be the requisite political will from both sides. Indeed, ASEAN itself has similar formats with its dialogue partners so both Central Asian and ASEAN countries are well familiar with such a dialogue format. In fact, the first C5+1 format was established by Japan in 2004 and modelled on the ASEAN+3 (Japan, Korea, and China) format and reapplied to Central Asia (Dadabaev 2016: 15 & 146).

In the meanwhile, Uzbekistan's formal relations with ASEAN should also be stepped up. In fact, Uzbekistan was the first Central Asian state to accredit its Ambassador to Indonesia as Ambassador to ASEAN in 2011, which reflected Uzbekistan's high interest to cooperate closer with Southeast Asia (UzDaily 2011). But unlike Kazakhstan which had expressed interest to develop formal partnership status with ASEAN or to become a participant of the ARF, Uzbekistan had not yet expressed such interest.⁹ Central Asian ties with ASEAN could also be enhanced through the promotion of closer relations between ASEAN and the Shanghai

⁷ Author's interviews with Uzbek experts, November 16 and 21, 2021, Tashkent and online, June 3, 2022.

⁸ Author's conversation with a senior Kazakhstani foreign ministry official, Nur-Sultan, November 3, 2021.

⁹ Author's email correspondence with ASEAN Secretariat, April 28, 2020.

Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in which all Central Asian states except for Turkmenistan are members. Cambodia is a SCO dialogue partner and a MoU on cooperation between the SCO and ASEAN Secretariats was signed in 2005. Since then, there have been regular meetings between senior officials from the two organisations, which Uzbekistan has often facilitated. For example, the ASEAN Secretary-General attended the SCO Summit in Tashkent, in June 2016, as Guest of the Chair. An ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General attended the SCO Summit in June 2010 in Tashkent, and the 18th Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the SCO Member States in November 2019 in Tashkent, both as Guest of the Chair.¹⁰ Nonetheless, as one Uzbek expert noted, cooperation remains largely weak, and it was felt that more could be done to strengthen cooperation (Dzhuraeva 2015: 17). As the then ASEAN Secretary-General, Surin Pitsuwan, told Uzbekistan's first Ambassador to ASEAN, Shavkat Dzhamalov, Uzbekistan could help forge closer ties between the SCO and ASEAN (Regnum 2011).

The ASEAN Model for Central Asian Regionalism?

Since the Central Asian republics gained independence, there have been attempts at forging an exclusive Central Asian regionalism, but these were not successful and often derailed by Russia. As one expert noted, Central Asia underwent more of a 'virtual regionalism' instead whereby the Central Asian states focused on preserving their regime security and strengthening their sovereignty against external pressures that threaten them by 'bandwagoning' with Russia and China, for instance, in the CSTO and SCO respectively (Allison 2008). Intraregional suspicion and rivalry, especially between the two regional leaders – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – and their leader's animosity and competing visions of regionalism did not help (Cummings 2012: 133–134; Anceschi 2020: 82–83). However, exclusive Central Asian regionalism in which external actors are not involved has been gaining momentum in recent years. This was given impetus by Mirziyoyev's new foreign policy approach of greater openness and engagement with Uzbekistan's Central Asian neighbours. As one Uzbek expert observed, under Mirziyoyev, 'Tashkent is trying to emerge from the isolation imposed by the late president Islam Karimov in regard to its closest neighbours, and to create a new, more open economic order in Central Asia' (Sattarov 2018). Likewise, one Uzbek diplomat stated that Mirziyoyev focused on pursuing 'a zero-problem policy' with its neighbours, giving primary importance to Central Asia, and then good relations with all the great powers as well as other extra-regional countries.¹¹ In March 2018, a Central Asian 'Consultative Meeting' of heads of states was held for the first time in Astana at the invitation of then President Nazarbayev but at the initiative of President Mirziyoyev. All heads of states attended except for Turkmenistan which was represented by the speaker of parliament. At the meeting, Mirziyoyev declared it was necessary to search for 'efficient mechanisms of expansion of effective regional cooperation' in Central Asia (Mavlanov 2019: 26–27). A second Central Asian summit was held in November 2019 in Tashkent where the leaders pledged to develop 'forms and mechanisms for the development of cooperation' in such areas as trade, economy, investments, transport, agriculture, industry, energy, tourism, environment, and water resources. They also agreed to meet annually and to launch a process of discussion to determine the most suitable institutional structures for cooperation (Starr 2019). The third summit meeting was held in Awaza, Turkmenistan, in August 2021, and attended by all five Central Asian leaders, during which the COVID-19 pandemic and the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan were high on the agenda. Both challenges have meant greater urgency for regional cooperation, despite Tajikistan's different and stronger position taken towards the Taliban (Pannier 2021c).

¹⁰ Author's email correspondence with ASEAN Secretariat, April 28, 2020.

¹¹ Author's conversation with an Uzbek diplomat, Nur-Sultan, April 1, 2019.

Following the first Central Asian summit, renewed discussions particularly in the expert community focused on institutionalising nascent Central Asian cooperation, by exploring the relevance of other regional cooperation structures. In February 2019, experts from Central Asia as well as from outside the region gathered in Tashkent to discuss international experiences of regional cooperation such as the EU, Nordic Council, Visegrad Group, and ASEAN, and their possible application to Central Asia (Rakhimov & Mirzaliev 2018). ASEAN's suitability has often been highlighted due to Southeast Asia's normative similarities to Central Asia. Central Asian leaders subscribe to the ASEAN principles of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states and the peaceful resolution of disputes (Horta 2014). Indeed, the SCO Charter outlines such principles as mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of states, and non-interference in internal affairs, or the so-called 'Shanghai Spirit' (Godehardt 2014: 125) that corresponds with the principles outlined in ASEAN's Charter or what is known as the 'ASEAN Way.' The SCO's model of cooperation is also in large part a copy of ASEAN's, and the two organizations share very similar underlying principles (consensus, flexibility, informality, sovereign enhancing cooperation) as well as focus (regime security, economic development and stability over promotion of democracy) (Aris 2009: 464). Central Asia can also benefit from ASEAN's experience in forging solidarity among its members to resist external powers from playing ASEAN members against each other. However, while this had earlier served ASEAN well, it is being increasingly challenged by intensifying US-China rivalry compounded by the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021. As one prominent former Singaporean diplomat – Bilahari Kausikan – opined, Central Asia can 'take inspiration from ASEAN's flexible and adaptive structure' and to define Central Asia in its own interests rather than just be 'passive' and 'let the region be defined by external great powers.' Moreover, the key lesson of ASEAN that Central Asia can take from is that 'smaller countries are never entirely without agency when dealing with big powers' (Akyibaev 2020).

One leading Uzbek expert likewise called for Central Asian states to pursue a foreign policy of 'positive diversification' whereby there is a more coordinated policy among the Central Asian states and external powers are engaged with equally and inclusively. This avoids the zero-sum approach of 'negative diversification,' in which the foreign policy and strategic orientation of Central Asian states are conditioned by 'realist' balance of power thinking and great-power politics and competition that usually comes at the expense of the Central Asian states themselves (Tolipov 2007). He also argued that the 'eclectic' nature of their multi-vector foreign policies as well as the different ways this policy had been interpreted and pursued by each of the five Central Asian states had caused the failure of the 'five-sided system' in Central Asia where their multi-vector policies should instead be more concerted and coordinated in order to achieve successful regional cooperation (Tolipov 2020). The same expert also argued for greater Central Asian integration and cooperation to overcome the 'small-country complex of being afraid and incapable in front of the great powers.'¹² Another leading Uzbek expert similarly argued that amidst the recent rising tensions between the great powers which might force states to choose sides, Central Asian states need to boost their cooperation to maintain their resilience in the face of contemporary challenges and threats, including great-power competition. The establishment of effective intra-regional cooperation mechanisms would not only potentially counteract 'great power efforts to lock regional states into relations of dependence' but also allow them to develop a strong, unified voice in promoting their interests 'while avoiding being drawn into the zero-sum games of great powers.' The

¹² Author's interview with Farkhod Tolipov, Tashkent, November 21, 2021.

Central Asian states' deepening cooperation, foreign policy coordination, and confidence-building measures can 'act as a bulwark against great power destabilisation' (Umarov 2021).

Given ASEAN's long and relatively successful experience in regionalism, some Uzbek experts have noted the utility of studying the ASEAN model for Central Asia, but tailor-made for local conditions. One observed that while some believe that the ASEAN model to be the most applicable to Central Asia, he proposed that Central Asia set the bar higher from the outset and follow the EU model (Tolipov 2017: 27), although the ASEAN model might be a good first step. He opined that ASEAN should share its experience on how to develop regionalism and to deal with the great powers, which could also be done within the context of a C5+ASEAN dialogue.¹³ Studies of the ASEAN model, among others, have begun at the expert level with analytical papers published and discussions held. For example, a paper drafted by one research institute under Uzbekistan's Cabinet of Ministers studied ASEAN's positive economic development and concluded that the ASEAN experience could serve as a model for Central Asian regional integration (Mukhsimova 2015). However, discussions on the ASEAN model have mostly been held at the expert level and, so far, none of the Central Asian governments has officially contacted the ASEAN Secretariat to discuss this topic.¹⁴ Nonetheless, such expert discussion at the track-2 level should be further encouraged with the involvement of experts from both regions. This may later be raised to the track-1.5 level with officials and experts participating together and subsequently to the track-1 level where government representatives discuss with each other directly. One could argue that, similar to Japan's position, the ASEAN countries have an interest in helping Central Asia to succeed in achieving closer regional cooperation and even economic integration as this will pose a larger and more attractive market for Southeast Asian countries.¹⁵ How the ASEAN model can be applied to Central Asian regionalism and cooperation efforts can therefore prove to be another area that helps enhance further engagement and economic cooperation between Southeast Asia and Central Asia, including with Uzbekistan.

Conclusion

Relations between Uzbekistan and Southeast Asia is an underdeveloped research area that arguably deserves greater exploration. Key Southeast Asian countries can play important roles in Uzbekistan's pursuance of a multi-vector foreign policy, particularly in trying to diversify its economic partners to lessen its dependence on the two great powers of the region – Russia and China. They can also assist Uzbekistan in its modernisation and development drive. On their part, Southeast Asian countries see increasing economic potential in Uzbekistan due to its more welcoming foreign investment climate under Mirziyoyev and its central location with potential connectivity not only eastwards with China but also southwards with South Asia, which could provide an alternative link between Central Asia and Southeast Asia to the route through China. Uzbekistan's potential membership in the EAEU also provides further attraction for those Southeast Asian countries who have or plan to have FTAs with the EAEU, although Russia's invasion of Ukraine is likely to further postpone this if not completely derail it. Uzbekistan's relations with Southeast Asia could also be strengthened via greater inter-regional cooperation through such initiatives as a C5+ASEAN dialogue fora, closer cooperation between Uzbekistan and ASEAN, including through the SCO, and the sharing of ASEAN's experiences in regionalism with Central Asia's own efforts towards enhanced regional cooperation and possible economic integration. The latter would be in both regions'

¹³ Author's interview with Farkhod Tolipov, Tashkent, November 21, 2021.

¹⁴ Author's email correspondence with ASEAN Secretariat, April 28, 2020.

¹⁵ On Japan's position, see Madiyev (2021: 183).

interests as it would create a larger market for Southeast Asia whilst enhancing Central Asia's economic attractiveness and potential.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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