



CENTRAL ASIA March 2018

The summit of Central Asian presidents in Astana: moving towards an “endogenous” regional cooperation?

On 15-16 March Central Asian presidents gathered in Astana attending a consultative summit which represented a historical event for the region: after 27 years of independence, they have expressed a strong will to promote and enhance regional cooperation in order to solve existent disputes as well as ensuring security and stability. Only Turkmenistan’s president did not attend the summit – coherently with the neutrality status adopted in 1995 which is also recognized by the United Nations – even if the country was represented by the Parliament’s speaker Nurberdieva, confirming Turkmenistan’s interest to be involved in the ongoing regional dialogue.

The summit in Astana was the fifth high-level meeting involving Central Asian presidents after 1991: in the previous summits they discussed how to preserve economic independence and political sovereignty and security issues, but mutual distrust and personal rivalries negatively affected the potential achievement of shared results, mainly because they were not able to solve the existent disputes. In the last two years, the regional scenario has completely changed following the results of the Uzbekistan’s proactive foreign policy, which aims to improve relations and cooperation with neighbouring countries and it is based on the promotion of a regular political dialogue which is allowing Central Asian states to ease traditional divergences, also enhancing economic and trade cooperation to promote security and stability in the region. In the joint statement after the summit, Central Asian presidents stressed that “mutually beneficial trade, economic and investment cooperation, the expansion of the regional transit and transport infrastructure, the rational development of water, energy and food potential, the development of industry and processing industries, the use of advanced technologies and innovations, the advancement of the digital economy will contribute to the sustainable growth of the well-being of the Central Asian nations” (Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Joint Statement of the Heads of Central Asian States on the Bright Holiday of Nauryz*, Akorda.kz, 15 marzo 2018).

The complete demarcation of territorial borders and the shared management of the water resource are the traditional issues which have hampered and delayed the development of a regional cooperation. After

decades of frozen relations, during his recent visit in Tajikistan in early March Uzbekistan's president Mirziyoyev expressed his support to the realization of Rogun hydropower plant, a project that Uzbekistan always opposed fearing to be deprived of the water necessary for the "white gold" (cotton) production: during the Astana summit, Central Asian presidents discussed on the need to realize an integrated management of the water resource respecting the interests of all involved actors (Central Asia Leaders Confab but Stop Short of Binding Commitments, *Eurasianet*, March 16, 2016).

Furthermore, the agreements on the territorial demarcation between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the restoration of multiple border crossings between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have created the condition to develop and successfully implement a new framework of regional cooperation in the economic, trade and energy fields.

This improved dialogue among Central Asian presidents could also have some interesting geopolitical repercussions: as a matter of fact, Central Asian republics appear engaged to promote an "endogenous" regional cooperation, primarily based on the achievement of their own interests and goals, therefore balancing the initiatives of regional integration promoted by the powerful external players like Russia and China. Even if the idea of a shared Central Asian foreign policy could be geopolitically attractive, the strong economic influence of China – promoted by means of the Belt and Road Initiative – and the role of Russia as regional security provider will probably delay the aspirations of Central Asian countries to emancipate themselves from the Sino-Russian influence.

Fabio Indeo – *PhD holder in Geopolitics at University of Trieste and non-resident fellow research at Center for Energy Governance and Security (EGS South Korea).*