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Uzbekistan-Tajikistan strategic partnership: Mirziyoyev sharpens Tashkent's regional policy

The visit of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon in Tashkent and the signature of a Treaty on Strategic Partnership represents the logical conclusion of the Uzbekistan's foreign policy undertaken by the President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, mainly focussed on Central Asia. (Farkhod Tolipov, *Uzbekistan-Tajikistan Relations: The Long Way to Strategic Partnership*, "Central Asian Caucasus Analyst Institute", September 18, 2018).

As a matter of fact, the improvement of relations between these neighbouring countries - based on the principles of friendship, good-neighbourliness and consideration reciprocal interests - will enhance the joint efforts to promote economic and political cooperation in the region, also providing security and stability.

After decades of tensions, at present Uzbekistan and Tajikistan appear ready to cooperate in both bilateral and regional domains, putting apart the reciprocal mistrust that characterized negatively bilateral relations during the era of the former Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

This improved political dialogue will lead to the solution of the most sensitive bilateral problems: among them, the cooperation on border crossing issues, water management and regional security appear to be the most relevant. President Mirziyoyev has sent positive signals to promote bilateral cooperation and mutual trust, changing the visa regime for Tajik citizens introduced in 2000 to prevent terrorist infiltration coming through Tajikistan from Afghanistan: last year, Uzbekistan has reopened border crossings and eased visa requirements for short-term tourist visits by Tajik citizens.

Concerning water management, Uzbekistan's long-term opposition to the development of the Rogun

hydropower project - fearing the reduction of water availability for agricultural and cotton production - has been shelved and Mirziyoyev's government currently accepts that project. Moreover it declares its willingness to join a project that will contribute to provide regional water security. Finally, the decision to build jointly two hydropower plants on the Zarafshan River underlines the historical change in Uzbek-Tajik bilateral relations.

Security is perceived as a shared concern for both Tashkent and Dushanbe, because they fear potential terrorist attacks and incursions from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have increased cooperation between their defence ministries, aimed at improving the transit of military contingents along the shared border: in September, for the first time after independence, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan organized joint military exercises involving national border guards, deploying them in the sensitive area of the Sughd Region in Tajikistan (John C. K. Daly, *Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Conduct First Joint Military Exercises*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor", Vol. 15 Issue: 134, September 25, 2018).

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