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The Uzbekistan/EAEU link and its foreign policy consequences

Uzbekistan's potential adhesion to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) would represent a significant about-turn in its foreign policy, traditionally based on the development of bilateral relations and avoiding to be included in multilateral initiatives (with the exception of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), especially under Russian influence.

Until today there are no official statements of the Uzbek government to join the EAEU (a Russia-led supranational organization aimed at promoting the economic integration in the region, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Belarus) but a similar decision will influence the geopolitical scenario in the post-Soviet space, enhancing the role of Moscow.

In June 2019, President Mirziyoyev expressed his concerns about the growing difficulties of the national manufactures to access markets, while the adhesion to the EAEU would offer them new opportunities. As a matter of fact, he stated that trade with other EAEU members accounts for 70% of Uzbekistan's external trade: eventual barriers or restrictions to the Uzbek goods could damage Tashkent's current economic growth (Fozil Mashrab, Uzbekistan Faces Mounting Economic Costs From Staying out of Russian-Led Eurasian Union, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 16, Issue: 107, July 25, 2019). In October, during an interview Valentina Matviyenko, the chair of Russia's upper house, declared that after a bilateral meeting in Tashkent, Mirziyoyev took the decision to join EAEU. After few days, the first deputy chairman of the Senate, Safayev intervened to clarify Uzbekistan's position, explaining that there is not yet a final decision about membership and that it will be necessary to wait a governmental commission's evaluation about possible economic-political costs and benefits linked to Uzbekistan's adhesion («Ўзбекистон миллий манфаатларга раҳна солувчи ҳеч қандай шартномага қўл қўймайди». Содиқ Сафоев ЕОИИга абзолик эҳтимоли ҳақида, Kun.uz, October 4, 2019).

Uzbekistan's decision to join EAEU could contribute to bolster significantly Russia's geopolitical project to restore its economic and political influence in post-Soviet Central Asia: unlike other EAEU members

(especially Kyrgyzstan and Armenia), Uzbekistan has a strong economy, a powerful industrial sector and it is the most populous country (and the main market) in the region. One of the main tasks for Tashkent will be to contain Russian neo-imperialist approach, that could affect Uzbekistan's multivector foreign policy. Furthermore, this decision could also influence the bilateral relations with China, the main trade partner for Uzbekistan and a key investor in the country, actually excluded from the Russian project of economic integration. In August, Uzbek Foreign Minister Aripov defined China as “the *closest and most reliable neighbour and partner*” of Uzbekistan (Xinhua, August 28, 2019).

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