

Central Asian leaders defy scepticism

Despite the forecasts of sceptics, the second summit of Central Asian heads of state took place at the Kuksaroy Palace in Tashkent on 29 November 2019. The summit, hosted by Uzbekistan's President Shavket Mirziyoyev and officially labelled a "consultative meeting", was attended by Kazakhstan's former president (and continuing strongman) Nursultan Nazarbayev; Kyrgyzstan's President Sooronbai Jeenbekov; Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon; and Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov.

The first summit, hosted by Kazakhstan, was held in Nur-Sultan in March 2019. The parties agreed to maintain the momentum they had created by holding the next summit in Kyrgyzstan in 2020. The question remains, is this beginning of a new era in the region, or it is still too early to say?

There are, indeed, numerous issues that feed scepticism about further cooperation among the region's countries. One issue that has attracted scholarly attention and has considerable divisive potential is that of water resource distribution. The region has scant water resources, but its economies have an increasing demand for water. As Nazarbaev announced during the first summit, "a major issue is problems around water sharing. Our countries have 70 million people living here around two major rivers – the Amudarya and the Syrdarya – and we agreed today that no political bargaining is acceptable in that matter". Another positive indication is that Tajikistan and Uzbekistan made considerable progress towards settling their dispute over water resources before the summit.

A new source of tension in the region relates to the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan (TAT) railway. A victim of the tense relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the railway was supposed to link landlocked Tajikistan to Turkmenistan not through Uzbekistan – the shortest route – but through Afghanistan. Yet, in September 2019, Tajikistan announced that it was suspending construction of the railway until further notice. Tajik officials openly declared that the reason for this sudden change was a warming of relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. This time, it was Turkmenistan that appeared surprised and unhappy. However, despite pessimistic

predictions, Turkmenistan's president, who had skipped the previous summit in Nur-Sultan, was present in Tashkent on 29 November.

Another important issue remains border delimitation. For instance, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share a border of 971 kilometres, of which about 471 kilometres remain in dispute. This issue remains contentious as it affects access to resources, and efforts towards settlement of this dispute have failed to prevent violent clashes between border communities in previous years. As for similar problems between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, both sides have recently given positive signals regarding a definitive settlement of the issue.

Finally, the economic rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is potentially divisive. Uzbekistan has a population one and a half times larger than that of Kazakhstan, but an economy only one third the size. On the other hand, Uzbekistan has a bigger market and a more diverse economy, based on its industrial sector, while the Kazakh economy mainly relies on natural resource exploitation. This apparent challenge presents huge potential if it can be transformed into an opportunity for cooperation. While Uzbeks can look to gain from Kazakh experience in attracting foreign investment, Kazakhs may benefit from Uzbek experience in economic diversification. Despite mutual caution, rapprochement appears to be under way. The recent change of leadership in Tashkent and a post-Karimov thaw are contributing to an increase in bilateral trade between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which increased substantially in 2018, according to official statements.

The issues identified may seem to suggest that deepening regional cooperation may face serious impediments. Nevertheless, the summit provided a strong signal announcing that it is time to put aside animosities, with the region's countries not only capable of taking up pressing challenges without external mediation, but eager to do so. That said, the scope of the summit was predominantly economic. Leaders discussed the enhancement of economic and industrial cooperation, modernisation of energy and transport infrastructure, and the elimination of trade barriers between countries. The leaders agreed on the necessity of establishing a well-connected modern transport system that could facilitate exchange flows among the region's countries. Modernising the regional

transport network is vital for Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, landlocked countries that rely on Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan for access to trade routes via ports on the Caspian Sea.

The summit also witnessed strong Uzbek leadership in the regional integration initiative. Tashkent is asserting itself as the key actor in the region, capable of political and diplomatic efforts smooth the path to achieving regional integration goals. Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev demonstrated a constructive approach in dealing with his regional counterparts. During the summit, he proposed organising an Investment Forum of Central Asian countries in Tashkent and annual meetings of the leaders of the chambers of commerce to boost cooperation in a range of sectors, from agriculture to industry and textiles.

Despite the generally positive overall trend in Central Asian relations, the political thaw may be vulnerable to various internal and external factors. Nevertheless, the region's leaders seem to accept the idea that the biggest challenges, in particular those caused by climate change and globalisation, can only be met through collective action.