

## UZBEKISTAN AND TAJIKISTAN: IS CONSTRUCTIVE POLICY A GAME CHANGER?

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### Abstract

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are two post-soviet republics, that have become independent due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. There have been ups and downs in the relationship between these countries since they became independent entities. Therefore, there is a need to conduct an analysis as to reach the proper interpretation and the nature of relationship between these countries.

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan; Tajikistan; International Relations Theory; realism; liberalism; constructivism; Clash of Civilizations.

### Background

On December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1991, only days away from the eve of New Year, the Soviet Union, the largest military, and the second largest economy in the world, collapsed without a single shot. It was the moment of greatest uncertainty in the whole history of human civilization. Never before had great powers ever collapsed so peacefully. While the fall of the Soviet Union set the stage for new multipolar world order, it has soon become quite evident the hardships of interpreting the nature of relations emerging from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. All these new entities were modelled after classical nation-state frameworks, although their historical evolution defied a specific culture or nation (certainly except for Russia). Hardest among the hardest is to decipher the politics of Central Asia, which was divided into five constituent republics without any historical precedence during the Soviet era. The relations between the two such republics - Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are particularly interesting. Historically both – Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were Soviet constituencies, loosely formed mainly for administrative purposes with abundant fault lines along the border. Until the end of Soviet rule, such fault lines hadn't mattered, as everything was under the firm control of soviet disciplinary muscles. After the fall of Soviet rule, both countries suddenly found themselves independent,





which paved the way for the ups and downs in the new patterns of their relations. In this work, I will try to explore the nature and patterns of this relationship through the lens of realist, liberal, and constructivist theories of international relations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Realism and liberalism are two dominant theories in international relations with rich history, while constructivism is one of the theories gaining popularity in post-Cold War era scholarship. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have one of the most complex relationships in Central Asian politics after the dissolution of the USSR. The narrative about the patterns of the relationship between these countries through the lens of international relations theories unique insights and may help understand the nature of conflicts in this volatile region.

### **Did real politics bring anything tangible?**

Perhaps a good explanation of the new game of thrones in Central Asia seemingly stems from realism, one of the dominant schools in international relations. According to realists, nation-states always act rationally to pursue their interests in uncertain international political environments characterized by competition (Freyberg-Inan. 2004). Shortly after its independence, Uzbekistan tried to support anti-Islamist communist forces in the country, whose functionaries were ethnic Uzbeks and represented Tajikistan's government. So the relationships were quite stable, with Tashkent strongly backing government forces in the civil war. However, after the civil war ended, Islamist insurgents were included in the new Tajik government, which lacked ethnic Uzbek clans that were supported by Uzbekistan during the negotiations. Uzbekistan's position gradually shifted from peaceful co-existence into de-facto containment and isolation. The relationship soon deteriorated again with new disputes over water resources. It is easy to explain why the relationships soured since Tajikistan's peace with Tajik insurgents naturally alarmed Tashkent that he was henceforth alone in this struggle, and felt essentially "betrayed". Also, nation-states should pursue their interests against other players and resources can be a good example of what can be defined by "interests". More importantly, however, new realists, such as, Huntington's (1996) theory about the clash of civilizations seemingly explains the nature of relationships between the countries, Uzbekistan was the representative of new Turkic power, which



should naturally pursue its interests against Tajikistan, a country that belongs to Iranian civilization. In fact, the country allegedly backed separatism in one of the Uzbek-majority regions in Tajikistan, while Tajikistan responded in kind: a testimony to the soundness of the theory. We must, however, not forget about how realism and the clash of civilizations evolved to explain international politics. These theories essentially analyze events, from a Eurocentric perspective, taking western-style institutions as a blueprint upon which their arguments ebb and flow. In most cases, their explanations ostensibly fit most of the conflicts: understanding ethnicity or resources are drivers of the conflict doesn't naturally require a PhD. What is dismissed, however, post-soviet "nation-states" function entirely differently from Western nation-states. Rwodzi (2015) argued that the concept of nation state is inapplicable to the realities of Africa. His view may be relatable to the context of Central Asian politics too, since the historical evolution of Central Asian countries drastically differ from that of Western countries, which become manifest particularly in the political systems and their extension to political decision making. Specifically, the whim of the head of state is far more powerful than the nation-state's actual interests in determining the direction of foreign policy in post-soviet countries. What's more, the interest of the state and the interest of the head of state is blurred at best, and the same at worst. Most experts believe that the sudden deterioration of the relationship between the two countries could not have been solely explained by the contradictions in their interests or so-called civilizational factors. Back then it was unrealistic that Uzbekistan might have gained any resources from the worsening of its relations with Tajikistan, which history proved. Essentially, the restoration of peace in Tajikistan and good relations with the country were in the best interests of both countries. It is alleged that Uzbek President Islom Karimov had a personal distaste for the new Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and the era of poor relations between the countries correlates with the time period in which the ascendancy of Rahmon to the Tajik presidency and Islam Karimov's death occurred, after which the relationship rapidly improved. Could this be a coincidence or factors that led to the clash of interests were suddenly gone? Or was there a change in the ethnic or cultural makeup of one of these countries, that led to the sudden improvement of relations? There was a change neither in the strategic interests of either nation states nor in the ethnic-cultural component of population or state bodies.



The second fallacy that realists have fallen under in the interpretation of Central Asian politics is that there is no anarchy in the international arena. In fact, the concept of anarchy in international relations had been absent in classical realism and has recently been inappropriately began to be used in the context actual international relations (Korvela. 2018). For the sake of better understanding, it is worth for clarifying that “anarchy” doesn’t denote “chaos” in the international politics, but, rather “the state of uncertainty”. From this perspective, it must be taken into account that all most and previous bodies in the post-soviet Central Asia had worked together in soviet bureaucracy and they can predict the moves of their counterparts quite easily due to the very similar governance and professional exposure. It is ironically this professional exposure – previous relations between office-holders that seem to determine the direction of relations between countries. Thus, realism offers explanations that ostensibly fit every circumstance, but, its failure to understand the mechanisms of processes in the post-soviet Central Asia undermines the theory’s accuracy.

### **Liberalism – a naïve optimism or something underway?**

Although Central Asian politics generally has everything, but inherent goodwill, which is the backbone of liberalism, it is still worth analyzing it from a liberal perspective. One of the strongest claims about post-soviet world politics that liberalism made was Francis Fukuyama’s (1989) End of History where he argued that there will not be political or military conflicts in the new era and that what is left is political liberalism and possible economic conflicts only. While myriad examples can disprove this view, it is still good to remember that the conflicts between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had both political and military components. Nevertheless, it should be admitted that there is a global trend towards democracy and liberal institutions which has reduced the conflicts all over the globe, most notably in Europe, which was the hotbed of war a century ago. Can democracy bring a sense of lasting peace in Central Asia is only a matter of speculation. After the death of long-time president Islom Karimov, the new Uzbek president – Shavkat Mirziyoyev announced liberal reforms, with which the improvement of relations with all countries in the world came, including with Tajikistan.



## **Constructivism – a game-changer in Central Asia**

The relationship between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan continued to escalate until 2016 when Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov died. After Karimov's death, new president Shavkat Mirziyoyev announced his doctrine of good neighbourhood and paid several visits to Tajikistan. This was followed by the abolition of visa requirements for travellers between the countries and the improvement of trade. It could have safely been assumed that the former president's distaste of Tajikistan's president was gone for good, which was a good reason why the relations improved. Nevertheless, a deeper look into the change in the politics of Central Asia offers something unique. Since its independence, Uzbekistan reinforced state nationalism in its internal and external politics, which, yet free from ethnocentricity, was basically seeing Uzbek government as the leader of Central Asia. This was a state-run ideology, that determined most office-holders self-perceived identity. After the end of authoritarianism, the new regime tried to promote criticism of the failures of the former cabinet to win popular support. This was a changing event in the conscience of most Uzbek who realized they were equals among equals in Central Asia. This has led changes in the opinions about other Central Asian countries, Tajikistan being one of them. As constructivists claim, change of perceptions may have led to a new identity, which materialized in the new pattern of relationship between both countries. What is more important, however, is that this may have worked and have brought what other approaches had failed: stability and the resolution of most issues. On March 2018 both countries agreed on joint cooperation over the disputed water sources. This turn of events may be good evidence that previously poor relations weren't a fight for something but simply constructs in the minds of leaders or officeholders that led to actual consequences. In short, constructivism may offer a controversial analysis of the affairs as a theory, but, it evidently offers new avenues for a lasting compromise as an approach.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, realism lacks institutional flavour, which undermines the accuracy of its application into the Central Asian environment, while liberalism is a good recipe for analyzing societies that are conducive to liberal institutions and heavy international control mechanisms. On the other hand, constructivism offers something realistic, which may have led to a mutually positive outcome.



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