The five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – only recently represented one of the most disconnected regions of the world, but have now launched a new regional cooperation drive.

As a non-permanent of the UN Security Council, Kazakhstan is making efforts for the region to speak with one voice on major international issues.
Astana hosts little-publicised Central Asia summit

Expert: One Belt One Road can have ‘huge importance’ for Central Asia

Astana meeting on Syria takes place without Western oversight

Minister: Central Asia can be a model of peace, security and cooperation

Political analyst: In Central Asia, the personality factor is very important
Only a couple of years ago, a summit of the five Central Asia countries would have been absolutely unthinkable. But the leaders came together on Thursday (15 March) and decided to hold such meetings annually, always at the same time of the year, which is a major holiday in the region.

The leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan met in the Kazakh capital Astana, much to the surprise of the international community. The short notice resulted in the absence of foreign journalists. Only two journalists from Western media were present, including EURACTIV.

The idea for holding such a summit has been floated for some time, but the date remained unconfirmed until the last moment.

The Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev hosted the summit in his presidential palace. The guests were Uzbekistan’s Shavkat Mirziyoev, Emomali Rahmon from Tajikistan, Sooronbai Jeenbekov of Kyrgyzstan, and the parliament speaker of Turkmenistan, Akja Nurberdyeva.

The president of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, did not attend because of a previously planned official visit to Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Instead, Turkmenistan was represented by a large delegation, including the president’s son, who chairs the country’s parliamentary foreign affairs committee.

Kazakh diplomats said no similar summit had taken place in the last 20 years. Even when leaders did meet, previous summits yielded too few achievements to remember. One of the big reasons for the change of mood is the democratisation in Uzbekistan following the death of its first leader Islam Karimov in 2016.

His successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been pursuing a less autocratic path, seeking to reform and liberalise the country and mend ties in the region.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

All five Central Asian countries are former Soviet Republics and the lingua franca of the meetings is Russian, but there was a distinct feeling that Russia, which is absent from this format, was...
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the elephant in the room.

The summit was officially called a “consultative meeting”, in an obvious effort not to raise eyebrows in Moscow. No documents from the meeting were adopted.

Addressing the press after the summit, Nazarbayev praised the active economic cooperation of all countries of Central Asia with the Russian Federation and with China.

He paid tribute to Mirziyoyev, stressing that he had been the initiator of the leaders’ meeting.

Nazarbayev said that all the leaders of the region have held bilateral meetings, stressing the role of Mirziyoyev, but also of the new leader of Kyrgyzstan, Sooronbai Jeenbekov for improving bilateral ties.

His main message was that independently of other formats, nobody could solve better inter-regional problems in Central Asia better than the countries themselves.

According to the UN, Nazarbayev said, over the past 10 years, the average GDP growth in Central Asia was 6.2%, well above the world average of 2.6% in the same period. However, he noted that this was not reflected in mutual trade, giving as an example that local traders preferred to import fruits from Israel rather than from across the border.

Indeed, only 5% of the volume of trade of the countries of Central Asia is among themselves, and for many of them, the only way to travel by plane to one capital to another is via Istanbul.

Nazarbayev also pointed to the need for economies to switch to a new innovative digital platform while noting the importance of optimising tariff policy and simplifying administrative procedures for transit traffic. He also stressed the importance of addressing the issues of using transboundary water resources on the basis of common legal positions, mutual respect and respect for the interests of all parties.

The use of water resources has for many years been a source of tensions but progress has been made and the countries now consult among themselves instead of allowing the tensions over water to become a casus belli.

Nazarbayev praised the initiative of the president of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon to organise a high-level conference on water and sustainable development in Dushanbe in June.

THE SKELETON IN THE CLOSET

Nazarbayev also said that the states of Central Asia make their contribution in support of socio-economic development and political settlement in Afghanistan. As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2017-2018 Kazakhstan working actively in this direction at the international level, Nursultan Nazarbayev said.

EURACTIV spoke to Roman Vassilenko, Kazakhstan’s deputy foreign minister, who shed more light on the project of trilateral cooperation between his country, Afghanistan and the EU. The project is based on Kazakhstan’s experience, in place since 2010, of educating 1,000 Afghans in peaceful professions such as engineers, doctors, agricultural specialists or nurses.

Under this project, Kazakhstan has provided $50 million of its own money to educate the Afghans but now the EU is expected to join in the financing and focus on educating Afghan women.

Asked what would be the advantages, Vassilenko said that in Kazakhstan, a secular but also a Muslim-majority country, the Afghans who come to study “don’t feel like they find themselves in a very different cultural environment”.

He also stressed that the programme had proven its effectiveness because 100% of the Afghan students who have studied here return home and three-quarters of them found a job after returning to Afghanistan.

Vassilenko said the programme was “tried and tested”, it was economical and would be an example of well-spent EU money.

“It’s not only a win-win situation, it’s perhaps a win-win-win situation for Afghanistan, for Kazakhstan, because we are helping our neighbour, and for the EU, for whom this will be very well spent money”, he said.

The next meeting of the five Central Asian countries, in which EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini is also expected to take part, will take place in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, on 26 March and it will be entirely dedicated to the situation in Afghanistan.

Regarding a follow-up at the highest level, Nazarbayev said the leaders had decided to meet annually ahead of the Norouz (Nowruz) holiday, which is marked in Central Asia on the vernal equinox, as a sign of spring, which falls between 20 March and 23 March.

Next year’s Central Asia summit will be held in Tashkent, Nazarbayev said.

While the leaders were holding their summit, the Kazakhs capital opened its doors for another round of the Astana talks on Syria, featuring the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran. Its main events will unfold on Friday.
Kazakh political analyst Zhumabek Sarabekov discusses the Skripal poisoning case, the war in Syria, and the geopolitics of Central Asia, including the role of the EU.

Zhumabek Sarabekov is a senior expert at the Institute of World Economics and Politics of Kazakhstan. He spoke to EURACTIV’s Senior Editor Georgi Gotev.

I have been to Kazakhstan three times over the last year. Amazing things have been happening in the world in the meantime, the latest being the risk of a major trade war between the US and the EU, and the tensions with Russia around the Skripal case. What does the world look like seen from Kazakhstan?

I agree that there is less and less security, including strategic security, because major players are unable to have a dialogue. We can interpret the recent statements of the Russian President at the Federal Assembly [On 1 March Putin staged an unusual display of military might and warned that Russia has new high-technology nuclear weapons that he said could overcome any defences] as a call on

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the West to recognise Russia as a world might and to re-format relations. However, we also see that Western states have no intention to strike a compromise with Russia. This puts in jeopardy basic agreements such as the Intermediary-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles treaty, the Strategic Arms Limitation treaties – their terms expire shortly and we see no interest from the US to prolong those treaties.

So an arms race is beginning. We see that cyber-warfare is actively developing, which also represents a threat for the whole world, and I can agree with experts who say we are already witnessing a large-scale hybrid war in the information sphere, in the sphere of economics in terms of sanctions and in cyberspace.

Who is to blame? Putin’s testosterone?

No, we should not blame only Russia, as often happens in a family conflict, it’s not the fault of only one side. We are witnessing the incapacity of the world’s major countries to work towards a compromise between themselves. From the perspective of Kazakhstan, there is a growing risk that an incidental conflict can escalate into a full-scale conflict.

In its capacity of President of the United Nations Security Council last January, Kazakhstan has called for reinforcing the strategic dialogue between states, for strengthening the regime of nuclear non-proliferation, to jointly fight terrorism, because the threat of terrorism is taking very big proportions, we see that its nature is changing.

There are more and more “lone wolves” which are very hard to be detected. For Central Asia, from where many foreign fighters have originated, and have fought alongside Daesh in Iraq and Syria, there is a risk with some of them who are returning. At the same time, some of those who return should be rehabilitated, there are women, children, and it would be a mistake to treat them as terrorists.

Kazakhstan has good expertise on Russia, would you share your thoughts about the Skripal case?

It’s very difficult to comment at this stage because there is too little information. Nevertheless, I think what is important is to conduct a thorough investigation with the participation of the Russian side. It is clear, however, that at this stage this is not happening. It is important for the UK and Russia to find a mutually acceptable format to regulate this problem because the downside is already more than enough. It’s in nobody’s interest to increase the confrontation.

Kazakhstan succeeds in having good relations with the USA, your president Nursultan Nazarbayev was received by Donald Trump in the White House last January, also with Russia and China. How do you succeed in these crazy times?

It’s not easy and it’s becoming more and more complicated, with contradictions among big players accumulating. Nevertheless, the multi-vector policy has proven to be optimal for Kazakhstan. It has enabled a stable and sustainable development of our economy and of our state. We succeed as you say because our country has resources.

In the region, others too profess the multi-vector policy, but unfortunately, they don’t have the resources to conduct such a policy. Kazakhstan has accumulated such resources thanks to its economic potential, thanks to its very active work on the foreign policy stage, including at the UN Security Council, with its participation in various regional organisations. This is a terrain for manoeuvre, which allows keeping equal distance with the key global players.

Your country has been active in the framework of the Astana process, in the context of the Syrian tragedy. But the situation on the ground is hardly improving. What is your comment?

Regrettably, this is so, but it would be wrong to say that the efforts to regulate the situation brought no results. In the framework of the Astana process, four de-escalation zones have been created...

But one of them is precisely Eastern Ghouta...

The sides, both sides, breach those agreements. But this doesn’t mean that the Astana process or the UN-led peace process should be abandoned. Regarding the leverage of Astana, it should be understood that Kazakhstan takes a neutral position, we don’t take the side of the government forces or the opposition, we provide a platform. Without any doubt, the Astana process deserves to be continued. We have heard comments “Why the Astana process when there is the Geneva process”, but it should be understood that Astana has no claims to substitute the Geneva process. Practically all members of the Security Council recognise the contribution of the Astana process for the ceasefire.

What is your analysis of the meeting of the leaders of the Central Asian countries on 15 March?

The key factor is, of course, Uzbekistan, the new President, the new leadership of the country are in favour of an open dialogue with their neighbours. In the beginning, there was a lot of scepticism as to how long this could last, but now it’s clear that Tashkent is serious about this new policy.

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I am told that personalities play too much role in Central Asia. How long will it be like that?

For the situation to change, institutions are needed. However, with regard to the Central Asia cooperation, the institutional side, the creation of a supranational union is a matter for the more distant future. We will live and we will see.

Turkmenistan’s policy of neutrality seems to be an obstacle for regional structures?

We observe that Turkmenistan’s foreign policy is also changing. Faced with difficulties in the economy, in the security sphere, Turkmenistan is becoming more active in regional cooperation.

What is the importance of the Chinese One Belt One Road initiative for your country and Central Asia?

The importance is huge because at this time few would be ready to offer investment, fresh money for infrastructure projects. On the other side, One Belt One Road doesn’t have as an objective to reinforce Central Asian cooperation. Nevertheless, the result will be the improved transport connectivity in the region, leading to better trade opportunities, and lifting barriers, also in the field of investments, of administration, customs etc. One of the multiplication effects of One Belt One Road could be precisely the improved connectivity of the region, which will lay the ground for better economic relations. But we are also aware that the project entails geopolitical risks.

Obviously, China’s influence will grow enormously...

One of the greatest risks for Central Asian integration is related precisely to the external factors. It’s difficult to say that the region is geopolitically autonomous. There are countries which geopolitical players can influence. And their influence can also put brakes on the process. In the leaders’ statements, it was said that their meeting is not directed against anyone. These are realities we should take into account.

What does the EU look like from your perspective? A sick body?

I guess I’m a Euro-optimist. I wrote my thesis on the EU. Many speak of the crisis of European integration, but I think the crisis creates the conditions for the Union to emerge stronger from it. Which probably means moving from an economic union toward a political union. The Europeans will decide, but we would like to see a strong EU.

But the present-day problems influence negatively the EU’s capacity to conduct a foreign policy. The EU will adopt a new strategy for Central Asia in 2019 with a general objective to reinforce cooperation, but it’s difficult for the EU to enforce a common foreign policy because it requires consultations, coordination and is a lengthy process. This is the downside for the EU as a geopolitical player in the region.

The multi-vector policy needs a strong EU. And it should be reminded that the EU countries are for Kazakhstan the biggest trade partner, the biggest investor. We don’t want to make wrong geopolitical choices. We want to cooperate at the same time, as we are already doing it, with Europe, with Russia, with China, with the Islamic world, with the US. For us, the EU is necessary.

Do you believe the North Korean problem can be solved?

At least we can expect results from the meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un.

Will you propose to host the meeting?

In theory, everything is possible.
Kazakhstan and Russia urged the US on Friday (16 March) to engage “in a constructive dialogue” in the context of the unfolding tragedy in Syria. But no US or Western diplomats were present at the eight edition of the Syria talks, held in the framework of the so-called Astana process.

The process is held under the patronage of “the guarantor states” – Russia, Turkey and Iran. The three ministers met in this format for the first time in Moscow in December 2016. Russia and Turkey were the first to agree on the format and Iran joined later. Eight sessions of the talks have been held in Astana.

Speaking to journalists, mainly from Kazakhstan and Russia, Kazakhstan’s Foreign Minister Kairat Adrakhmanov reminded that for the past 14 months his country has been providing the venue for the Astana talks, as complementary to the Geneva process where a settlement should be reached under UN auspices.

Nevertheless, the Astana talks happened to be the only platform that worked last year and reached certain decisions: on the transfer of prisoners, the transfer of dead bodies and on the four de-escalation zones, one of which, Eastern Gouta, has gained sad notoriety lately.

This time, however, the “guarantor states” met without the Syrian government and Syrian opposition, and without the official observers, the USA and Jordan. Outside the “guarantors” and the host state, only a deputy of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, was present. Unlike the previous session held in the same hotel in Astana, when its

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lobby was full of Western diplomats, this time there were none to be seen.

The three ministers, Sergei Lavrov, Javad Zarif and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu came to Astana with the understanding that they would focus on the situation in two so-called “de-escalation zones” – Eastern Ghouta and Idlib, and on implementing the decisions from a recent meeting in Sochi on setting up a constitutional commission and continuing talks in Geneva.

The Kazakh Foreign Minister Abdrakhmanov warned that the brutal events in Eastern Ghouta were undermining the de-escalation arrangements.

"Agreements reached in Astana must not remain solely on paper. They must produce tangible results if the credibility of the efforts of the international community is to be maintained", he said.

The minister stressed that Kazakhstan calls on all actors, including the Syrian government, the Syrian armed opposition, the guarantor states and “the other countries that can exercise influence” to comply with the relevant UN resolution 2401 and stop the “unnecessary bloodshed”.

"Against the backdrop of the growing tensions over the situation on the ground, we believe there is an urgent need for international actors, first and foremost Russia and the US, to engage in a constructive dialogue on this issue. The successful cooperation of these two influential forces in resolving the situation in Syria would serve the interest of all parties concerned, and the Syrian people as a whole”, he said.

He added that as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and a neutral mediator, Kazakhstan will continue its services for the cessation of bloodshed. He said his country believed that maintaining dialogue would contribute to the implementation of a full ceasefire agreement and a peaceful resolution of the long-running conflict.

Urging for inter-Syrian dialogue, Abdrakhmanov stressed that it is the Syrians themselves who should shape the future of their political system, including a change to the country’s constitution, administrative structure, and deciding on the procedure for presidential and parliamentary elections.

Abdrakhmanov praised a recent meeting in Sochi held in the last days of December, within the Astana process.

Kazakhstan was not involved in the Sochi meeting and reports from Sochi say that the effort was largely a failure because the Syrian opposition boycotted the venue.

However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the Sochi meeting “unprecedented”, adding that “all major ethnic and confessional groups of the Syrian society were represented”.

The Russian minister said Astana had confirmed its role as “one of the most important capitals of Eurasia”, in particular in the context of the Astana process. He said that for millions of people in Syria, Astana has become a synonym of hope.

Lavrov said progress in Sochi was based on the full respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, which in his words “is not to the taste of all”.

“Those who in violation of international law, in blatant violation of UN resolution 2254, take the course of splitting Syria, of changing the regime change with the aim of having, along with this important Middle East country, the emergence of small principalities, under the control of foreign players, obviously, these people don’t welcome what we do in Astana and what we agree in Astana,” Lavrov said and added:

“Nevertheless I’m convinced that we are on the right side of history, on the right side of the international law”.

He voiced hope that the US-led coalition in Syria would realise that they should not support the extremists, “as is now the case in Eastern Ghouta”, and that it would instead fight terrorist organisations, including Jabhat Al-Nusra – something it has failed to since the times of the Obama administration.

The three ministers adopted a ‘Joint statement’ in which the most important element is the decision to hold a trilateral summit in Istanbul on 4 April on the post-Sochi process.

Turkey’s Çavuşoğlu called the meeting useful and praised the Astana format in general. He said all sides had agreed the “Sochi process” to continue first in Istanbul, and then in Iran.

He also said there was a need to have different strategies for neutralising terrorists, especially in places with a dense civilian population.

“We are also against the going of all terrorists to Idlib [in northwestern Syria]. There, they constitute a threat to the people, opposition and to all of us,” he stressed. Turkey considers the Kurdish militants as terrorists.

Answering a question, Lavrov said Moscow will expel British diplomats in response to London’s move to kick out 23 Russian officials, following an attempt to poison ex-double agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury.

“Of course we will,” Lavrov said when asked whether Moscow will respond in kind to the expulsion of Russian diplomats announced by British Prime Minister Theresa May.
In a wide-ranging interview, Galymzhan Koishybeyev, deputy minister of foreign affairs of Kazakhstan, told EURACTIV about the results of a recent summit of the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan) and the past and the future of regional cooperation.

Galymzhan Koishybeyev is a career diplomat. He has served as ambassador to Lithuania (2008-2012, also accredited to Latvia and Estonia) and to Finland (2012-2016).

He spoke to EURACTIV’s Senior Editor Georgi Gotev.

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which in the recent past represented one of the most disconnected regions of the world, are participating in new efforts of regional cooperation. What contributed to this?

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Thanks for the question, but, first, let me disagree with you about “one of the most disconnected regions in the world”.

I can assure you that for a quarter of a century of independent development, the countries of Central Asia have managed to establish effective mechanisms both at the bilateral and multilateral levels, which allow solving almost all issues.

First of all I want to note that the process of rapprochement of the peoples of Central Asia, which have a common history, geographical, cultural and religious affinity, is natural. Similar economic and political issues, traditionally established industrial and social ties create real prerequisites for closer cooperation.

If you delve into the history of geopolitical processes in the Central Asian region, you can divide it into several stages. The first stage, which lasted from 1990 to 1993, was characterized by the search for new independent states by an independent development path and was accompanied by a critical attitude towards the common past.

By the mid-1990s, the second stage was coming when, after the disengagement in the Central Asian countries, the understanding of the need to establish new interstate economic ties came.

Since 1998, the third period has begun, connected with the establishment of the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) and the rethinking of integration ideology, the abandonment of ambitious projects, the focus on solving the pressing problems of the region. The parties approved the Implementation Development Strategy of CAEC for the period up to 2005, as well as the Program of Priority Actions for the Formation of a Single Economic Space for the period until 2002, which provided for stage-by-stage economic cooperation from a simple form of a free trade zone to the formation of a common market for goods and services, capital and work force.

The fourth stage was marked by the transformation in 2002 of CAEC into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), the expansion of the goals and objectives of the new organization. The agreement on the establishment of the CACO ensured the continuity of previously adopted contracts and decisions within the framework of CAEC.

The main goals and tasks of the CACO were the implementation of effective cooperation in the political, economic, scientific, technical, environmental, cultural and humanitarian spheres, as well as in the field of security and stability.

On 18 October 2004, Russia joined CACO, and in October 2005 the decision was made to merge CACO with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), which, in fact, meant the suspension of the real process of Central Asian cooperation.

In 2008, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan made a proposal to create the Union of Central Asian States (SCAG).

With the creation of the Customs Union and the beginning of the functioning of the Eurasian Economic Community, deep economic cooperation in the format of the SCAG was already difficult at the time, but there were other mechanisms for the development of the Central Asian dialogue.

In this situation, the main interests of Kazakhstan in Central Asia were related to the tasks to remove barriers to sustainable development, to the modernisation of the entire region. Many of our integration ideas have found application in the creation of larger associations.

In general, the main component of the rapprochement processes taking place in Central Asia were the expectations – to solve together the problems of economic development, ecology, regional security, etc.

In this context, the working (consultative) meeting of the heads of state of Central Asia held on 15 March this year has become a truly historic landmark event, symbolizing the beginning of a new stage in the formation of the region, a qualitatively new level of interaction.

Today Kazakhstan continues the step-by-step measures to implement the initiative of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev on the regional rapprochement of the Central Asian countries.

At the same time, it should be noted that the significant strengthening of bilateral relations with Tashkent, the willingness of the elected President of Kyrgyzstan to build relations with neighboring states in a constructive and mutually beneficial manner create the prerequisites for the formation of a microclimate of mutual understanding and cooperation in the region.

What are the main areas of cooperation identified at this summit, although I notice that you call it officially “working consultative meeting”? At this stage, the greatest interest for five countries in the region is represented by cooperation in the following areas: security, trade, transport and transit; Agriculture; hydropower engineering; cultural and humanitarian development.

In general, the holding of the Summit of Heads of State of Central Asia in Astana has made it possible to coordinate joint efforts to address the pressing problems of the region and to bring our strategic interests closer together.

Uzbekistan, in particular, under President Shavkat Mirzijiyev, has
**significantly improved relations with its neighbours, including Kazakhstan. How do you assess this?**

Yes, we can state that today the countries of Central Asia are changing their strategy in favor of a unifying position. An important role in this process was played by the transit of power in Uzbekistan.

In the new foreign policy concept of Uzbekistan for the countries of the region, the priority stated by Shavkat Mirziyoyev for normalising relations with neighbours is of particular importance. In Tashkent there is an understanding of the need to solve the accumulated problems in the region exclusively in the legal field, which creates good opportunities for constructive dialogue in the region.

The character of Kazakh-Uzbek relations, which has changed significantly since the end of 2016, acquires a new reality, including positive trends in the political, trade-economic, cultural-humanitarian and regional aspects. 2017 in the interaction of the two countries can be rightfully considered as historical. Five meetings between the two presidents took place, of which four were the visit of the head of Uzbekistan to the Republic of Kazakhstan and the visit of the head of our state to Tashkent.

The presidents reached the most important agreements that bring the Kazakh-Uzbek relations to a qualitatively new level. As a result of two state visits, 27 bilateral documents of various levels were signed, two business forums were held with the participation of 400 companies, within which trade contracts and investment agreements were signed for a total of $ 1.2 billion. An ambitious goal is set to increase the volume of mutual trade to $ 5 billion by 2020. Today, the tasks facing the governments of the two countries are progressively implemented.

**President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov does not participate in the summit. Is this a drawback?**

Personally, I do not consider this a disadvantage. At this meeting, Turkmenistan was represented at a very high level, by the Speaker of the Parliament. In addition, the president of Turkmenistan sent a personal message to the participants of the meeting. According to available information, during this period of time he carried out a previously planned visit to the United Arab Emirates.

It should also be noted that neutral Turkmenistan, which for a long time distanced itself from regional ties, also today demonstrates a serious desire to cooperate with its regional neighbors on a pragmatic basis.

At the same time, against the background of previous years, Kazakh-Turkmen relations also gained positive dynamics and character.

A new page in the history of bilateral relations was opened by the state visit of the President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, to Astana in April 2017. On this occasion were signed historically important documents: the Strategic Partnership Treaty and the Agreement on the demarcation of the Kazakh-Turkmen state border, thanks to which the cooperation reached a qualitatively new strategic level.
A change at the helm of Uzbekistan 18 months ago turned out to be a game-changer that greatly improved relations in Central Asia, where the personality factor remains crucial.

Anastassiya Reshetnyak is a research fellow at the Department of Foreign and International Security, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (KAZISS).

She spoke to EURACTIV’s Senior Editor Georgi Gotev.

We are meeting just after the leaders of the five countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan) met in Astana for the first time in many years. How would you assess the importance of such a summit?

Let me start by saying that the official name of this meeting was Working Consultative Meeting of the heads of the Central Asian countries, it was not called a summit. And the document adopted concerned the Bright Holiday of Nauryz. This is a holiday that unites us in civilisational terms, it means peace, blossom,
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spring, beauty, love.

A decision to meet regularly ahead of Nauryz was adopted...

Let's see how this will materialise next year. But in any case, this is a very good initiative.

Speaking about how the Central Asian format was reanimated, this happened on the scene of the United Nations last year, when Kazakhstan became a non-permanent member of the Security Council for 2017-2018. Kazakhstan made efforts to gather the ministers from the five Central Asian countries. This happened twice, and logically came the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev for holding a conference in Samarkand of Central Asia [at the level of foreign ministers, with the participation of EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini, in November 2017]. At this conference, the Astana meeting at the level of heads of states was envisaged.

What I would like to say is that the personality factor is very important. Things changed when in Uzbekistan Mr Mirziyoyev came to power. This is the moment which made cooperation possible.

But it is too early to speak about integration. Integration on the Eurasian continent is very complicated. We have the Eurasian Economic Union, we have The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, we have the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and many overlapping organisations, in charge of economic cooperation, on improving the infrastructure, of security, against terrorism etc.

During the last 25 years, such organisations were created not only from within, but from the outside. The EU, for example, made a “strategy” for Central Asia, the USA did several projects, in the beginning, it was about a big Central Asia, then New Silk Road, now the relations are in the format of the so-called C5+1.

On the outside, there has been an evolution on how to perceive Central Asia, how to speak to Central Asia, while the projects from within Central Asia regrettablly didn’t have a substantial follow-up due to different reasons.

What we see now is that the heads of Central Asian countries find it sufficiently interesting to cooperate, to seek compromises, and even to meet, although traditionally the leaders of these countries prefer the bilateral formats. In a nutshell, the change of mood is very positive.

There is also probably a geopolitical reason, not to antagonise Russia by creating an organisation of former Soviet Republics? The West has created the impression that it is pushing for Central Asia to be a bloc, also because it’s easier to deal with a bloc. It will also be interesting to know what will be new in the new EU strategy for Central Asia, expected for 2019. Would you agree with such a geopolitical view?

Geopolitics is always a sensitive thing. What is important today is to be very cautious. In the 1990s there were many thunderous declarations about integration in Central Asia, there were secretariats and there were summits. But the question is why creating non-functional organisations. Do we need one more supra-national structure at an inter-governmental level? By the way, Turkmenistan has a neutral status [the country says its membership is with the United Nations], and it is very unlikely that it would agree to be part of an inter-governmental program with secretariat, staff, annual summits etc. Having said this, there are several topics on which the Central Asian countries can decide together.

You mentioned the revamped strategy of the EU for Central Asia. There is also the One Belt-One Road initiative of China, which is relevant for all Central Asian countries. We could synchronise our positions vis-à-vis China and offer Beijing a Central Asian answer. This means using this project in the interest of Central Asia, of its integration, in the sense that common infrastructure, as was said by the representatives of all Central Asian states at their meeting, is of critical importance. This is about energising inter-regional cooperation, and simplifying the exports from Central Asia to third countries.

Aren’t you worried about One Belt-One Road’s geopolitical aim, which is to extend China’s influence beyond its borders, on your territories?

For many years, Kazakhstan has declared its multi-vector policy. There is no way One Belt-One Road overweigh Eurasian integration in a geopolitical or another aspect, as Eurasian integration has its institutions, its mechanisms and rules for the trade in goods for example. This is of critical importance for Kazakhstan, and keeping the balance between such big geopolitical players such as Russia and China. Our country also aims to keep the same kind of balance vis-à-vis its Western partners, and with other influential countries such as South Korea or Japan.

Speaking to the press, your president Nursultan Nazabayev said it was not normal for the countries in Central Asia to import fruits from far away (he mentioned Israel), while fruits
are available across the border. Another issue is that for many of the Central Asian countries, to take a plane from one capital to another often means a stopover in Istanbul. Maybe connectivity is precisely the issue where the leaders should give an impetus toward solutions?

Indeed, for the last year we have already seen colossal changes in this respect. For example, the trade of Kazakhstan with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has grown by one-third, with Kyrgyzstan by 10%, also the trade between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan it has grown even more. And this concerns agricultural goods.

Regarding flights, new lines are opening between the capitals. Also, solutions to concrete problems at the borders are sought, with a lot of progress during the last year and a half. In that sense, this consultative platform is very productive for promoting dialogue and solutions. At the Astana meeting, the Presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan highlighted the need to make easier the movement of people in Central Asia.

The question of migration is also important, for us and for our partners. One of the issues is that the rights of workers of one of the Central Asian countries active in another country of the region would be regulated by simple mechanisms. The former President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov used to say, when workers from his country died in industrial accidents in Russia, that it’s their fault and that they should not have gone there in the first place.

On the occasion of a recent accident [on 18 January 52 Uzbek labour migrants died in a bus that went ablaze in the snowy steppes of Kazakhstan], new president Mirziyoyev said this is a big tragedy and he added that if people go to work in another country, that this is “our problem”, and that the solution should be to create more job opportunities.

During the last Russia-Uzbekistan meeting, important documents concerning labour rights were signed. The same practice should now follow between the countries of Central Asia.

How would you like relations with the EU to develop?

We have of course our obligations within the Eurasian Economic Union, but all countries from Central Asia have traditionally good relations with the EU. These relations started in a period where humanitarian aid was central, then developed on the basis of partnerships.

In the case of the Western sanctions against Russia, on the occasion of the recent visit of our president to the USA, he succeeded to agree with his American partners that the regime of sanctions against Russia should have as little as possible influence over Kazakhstan, as a country which is in the same economic space as Russia.

Something similar could also be agreed with the EU. This also concerns Kyrgyzstan, as another member of the Eurasian Economic Union.