After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the newly independent states discovered many threats to their security that were not as visible when they were still part of the Soviet Union. In particular, the young Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan faced many dangers. The more significant threat to these countries came from neighboring Afghanistan, engulfed in a civil war between numerous groups professing radical Islamism. Many of them had no intention of limiting their activities to Afghan territory.

Realizing that it was better to fight all these menaces together, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and many other countries signed the Collective Security Treaty in 1992.

However, in 1999 several states, including Uzbekistan, withdrew from the Treaty. One of the reasons was Tashkent's desire to get closer to the West. That same year, in 1999, Uzbekistan joined the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development established in the post-Soviet space by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova under the auspices of the Council of Europe. Uzbekistan's accession to GUAM was announced at the NATO summit in Washington, where the leaders of the GUAM countries adopted the Washington Declaration, which embodied the desire of these countries to cooperate with the EU and the United States.

In 2001, when US and allied forces entered Afghanistan, Uzbekistan made its Karshi Khanabad military airfield available to the Americans. Cooperation with the US, the presence of the US military in the country, and a hope for their early victory over Afghan terrorists probably led the Uzbek leadership to believe that it could ensure national security without participation in the Collective Security Treaty. It was then that the USA began to refer to Uzbekistan as "one of its key partners."
In 2002, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was established based on the Collective Security Treaty, which included Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. One of the main tasks of the CSTO was the protection of the Tajik-Afghan border, a long stretch of rugged mountainous terrain through which not only terrorist groups but also drug caravans could sneak in from Afghanistan.

US-Uzbekistan relations soon soured. In May 2005, there were anti-government protests and riots in Andijan in which protesters and several officers of security forces were killed. The authorities brutally suppressed the riots, and many civilians lost their lives. After Washington, as always concerned about human rights violations, demanded an independent investigation, the Uzbek authorities, in turn, insisted that the Americans leave Karshi Khanabad, which they did in November 2005.

Having ceased to be a "key partner" of the USA, Uzbekistan moved closer to former regional allies and joined the CSTO in 2006. However, its membership in the organization had more of a formal character. For example, Uzbekistan has not participated in CSTO joint anti-terrorist exercises, and Uzbek military personnel have not served in the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Forces or peacekeeping units. Apparently, Tashkent was hoping for promptly reestablishing relations with Washington. Indeed, the United States needed Uzbekistan to transport its cargoes to Afghanistan, so much that the Asian Development Bank allocated $165 million to build a railroad from the Uzbek city of Termez to the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif (most of the shares of the Asian Development Bank are owned by Japan, a US ally, and the United States).

In 2011, the United States decided to reduce its military presence in Afghanistan. A reduction in the number of foreign military personnel on Afghan territory has meant a proportional increase in the activity of Afghan terrorist groups. However, this did not seem to bother Tashkent, as its relations with Washington were improving. In the autumn of 2011, an Uzbek-American business forum was held in the American capital, to which Uzbek Minister of Foreign Affairs Elyor Ganiyev arrived in Washington. At the time, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said there were "signs of improvement in Uzbekistan's human rights record."

In 2012, Uzbekistan again suspended its membership in the CSTO but retained the opportunity to return. Tashkent attributed the move to poor relations with other CSTO members, its neighbors Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. And rumors have emerged in the press about the possible establishment of an American military base in the country. By mid-2012, US investments in the Uzbek economy exceeded $2 billion. So, although the US military base had never been established on Uzbek territory, it is obvious that Washington had its leverage on Uzbekistan. And Tashkent had its own benefit from its non-participation in the CSTO. For billions of American dollars, it could establish its own defense system without the participation of its neighbors. At least, as long as NATO troops stood in neighboring Afghanistan and kept terrorists in check.

All these years, the Americans talked about withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan, but this did not happen because there was no way to leave the country so that in a few weeks, it would not fall under the complete control of the Taliban (a movement banned in the Russian Federation). The pro-American government of Afghanistan was too weak. By 2018, the USA seemed to have realized that if it stayed in Afghanistan, it would be at war in Afghanistan forever. As a result, Washington began talks with the Taliban in 2018. The parties agreed that the USA would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, and the Taliban would stop terrorist activities and fight for power by legitimate means. In the summer of 2021, US troops withdrew from Afghanistan, and the Taliban dispersed Kabul's government forces, quickly crushing the remnants of resistance. As early as September 2021, they took over the entire country. It was hard to expect any other outcome.

The CSTO met the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan fully prepared to respond to a threat to any of its members in accordance with its protocols. The CSTO leadership met in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, September 15-16, 2021, to discuss security measures required because of the situation in Afghanistan. A plan for additional military exercises near the Tajik-Afghan border was outlined. However, CSTO forces already conduct such exercises in those dangerous places on a regular basis.

As for Uzbekistan, it has become unclear whether it should expect US support in the near future. While the American military forces were in Afghanistan, they needed Uzbekistan to transit goods. It brought good money to the budget of the Central Asian country, giving hope for American protection in case of danger. However, now that the USA has left Afghanistan, the situation has changed dramatically. The USA might be interested in the rare metals (including gold) that Uzbekistan is rich in, but as of mid-2020, the USA ranked only ninth among Uzbekistan's trading partners.

It may be time for a new agreement with the CSTO and Russia for Uzbekistan. However, there was no "rupture" between Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation: Unlike the United States, Russia is one of Uzbekistan's top three
trading partners. It is interested in the security of the entire Central Asian region, which adjoins its southern borders and Moscow has continued to supply arms to Uzbekistan at CSTO prices and trained the Uzbek military all these years. Of course, if a threat to Uzbekistan's security arises, Russia will provide it with the necessary support as a close partner and part of the common geopolitical space. In an interview on the current situation in Afghanistan, one Uzbek expert said: "Uzbekistan, as a country brotherly to Russia, expects that the republic will not be left in harm's way." There's no doubt about that.

The problem is: Uzbekistan is one of the most economically developed countries and has relatively powerful armed forces. Therefore, even in the worst-case scenario in Afghanistan, an attack on Uzbek territory is unlikely. If Afghan terrorists decide to engage in external aggression, it is far more likely to be Tajikistan, a poor country with a small army that will be a target. According to the Collective Security Treaty, in the event of an attack on Tajikistan, it would have to be defended at the risk of death by Russian military personnel. For this purpose, the Russian 201st Military Base is located near the Tajik-Afghan border and military personnel from other CSTO countries is also deployed there. Will Uzbekistan, not being a member of the CSTO and having no corresponding obligations, help these countries fight a common enemy?

So far, the picture is encouraging: In July 2021, the Uzbek military participated in exercises along with their Russian and Tajik counterparts on the Tajik-Afghan border. It is reported that similar exercises will be held in the fall of 2021. Of course, exercises and actual military operations are different matters. But we can hope that with good-neighborly relations with Russia and an understanding of the strategic situation in the region, Uzbekistan will contribute to the strengthening of regional security even without CSTO membership. Nevertheless, if it were to resume its membership in the CSTO, coordination of joint actions would be easier.

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