

Interview of Dr. Batir TURSUNOV, Acting Director of the ISRS under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the newspaper "Xalq Suzi"

1. How do you assess the main processes occurring in Central Asia today, the prospects for their development and the role of Uzbekistan in these processes?

Without any overstatement, for the first time since the 1990s today a new paradigm of interstate relations is being formed in Central Asia. The countries of the region confirmed their readiness to build a new system of relations, which contributes to the correlation of the national interests of each of them with the region-wide priorities in the areas of security and sustainable development. Naturally, the solution to this issue is not an easy task, but the analysis of the path that countries have taken in the last two years allows us to look to the future of regional cooperation with an optimism.

First, in a short period of time, the dialogue between the leaders has become systemic, as evidenced by the frequent regular visits and negotiations at the highest level. A bright example of this was the first consultative meeting of the Heads of Central Asia states held in March 2018 in Astana, the initiative of which was launched by President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the Samarkand International Conference "Central Asia: Shared Past and Common Future, Cooperation for the sake of sustainable development and mutual prosperity" in November 2017. The second meeting is scheduled in April of this year, in Tashkent.

Secondly, interaction between the foreign affairs agencies of the Central Asian states has reached a qualitatively new level. Meetings of foreign ministers of the countries of the region, both on a bilateral basis and in the format of "Central Asia Plus", have become regular. Of course, mutual consultations and negotiations are an important, indispensable mechanism in the process of developing common positions and approaches to solving urgent problems of regional security and development.

Thirdly, I would like to emphasize that Uzbekistan has signed agreements on strategic partnership with all the states of Central Asia. This in itself speaks of a qualitatively new level of relations with neighboring countries, which have such features as mutual consideration of interests, a high level of openness and political trust.

Fourthly, in the last two years we have witnessed the establishment and strengthening of cooperation between Uzbekistan and the countries of Central Asia at the regional level. Bilateral activities became into practice and successfully carried out between the leaders of the border areas of Uzbekistan and the neighboring countries.

The focus is not only to the tasks of trade and the economy, but also issues of cultural-humanitarian interaction, in which the popular role is played by public diplomacy.

Fifth, the countries of Central Asia have opened each other not only borders, but also markets. There has been a trend of steady growth in mutual trade of Uzbekistan with neighboring countries, the aggregate volumes of which increased from more than 2.4 billion dollars in 2017 to over 3.5 billion dollars in 2018.

For the first time since the 1990s, the region began industrial cooperation, as well as the implementation of joint investment projects.

In a word, the changes that we are seeing today in Central Asia have had a positive effect on the lives of millions of people in the region, first of all to the population in the border areas. One evidence of this is that in 2018 over 3.5 million citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan visited our country. In turn, millions of our citizens began to travel to neighboring countries.

Equally important is the unequivocal support of the global community of current processes in our region, which was expressed by the adoption of a special UN resolution on Central Asia. This was an unprecedented event in the modern history of the states of the region, as it was unanimously supported by the countries of almost all continents of the world - Australia, North and South America, Asia, Africa and Europe.

At present, in Central Asia and beyond its borders there is a clear understanding that only stable, dynamically developing and prosperous states of the region can become attractive, constructive and long-term partners of the international community. Such changes prompted international partners to fundamentally revise their approaches to Central Asia. This gives hope and confidence in the security, development and prosperity of a strategically important region located in the heart of the vast expanse of Eurasia.

Perhaps today it is difficult to fully understand the significance of these events, the ongoing positive trends and processes in the region for the present and future of the countries and peoples of Central Asia. However, one thing is clear: for the first time in the years of independence, the Central Asian states have confirmed not only the ability to jointly solve common regional problems, but also ensure the well-being and prosperity of more than 70 million people in the region.

Thanks to these positive processes in Central Asia, today our region is again in the center of attention of the world community. At the same time, everyone is united in the fact that the catalyst for such cardinal changes was the large-scale reforms initiated under the leadership of President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

In this regard, some foreign experts emphasize that Uzbekistan has actually become the “main newsmaker” in Central Asia. The role of Uzbekistan in modern trends in Central Asia is difficult to overestimate. And it is no coincidence. Uzbekistan is the largest state in the region, where almost half of the population of Central Asia live, that is, every second resident of the region is a citizen of our country.

Moreover, the Republic of Uzbekistan is the only state in Central Asia that has common borders with all countries of the region, including Afghanistan. At the same time, Uzbekistan is the second largest economy in Central Asia, which has entered a period of dynamic development, technological modernization and structural diversification. According to many foreign experts, all these objective factors, especially taking into account the new open, constructive and proactive regional policy of President Sh. Mirziyoyev, determine the central role of Uzbekistan in the current processes in Central Asia.

2. In your opinion, what kind issues are the most relevant in the region and should be discussed during the conference?

It should be noted that at the conference representatives of more than 100 leading the international expert-analytical community, distinguished scientists and researchers will participate. They are directly involved in the issues of Central Asia. These are well-known “think tanks” of the USA, Germany, Russia, China, Canada, Great Britain, Turkey, India, and also the countries of Central Asia, with which the ISRS maintains close partnerships.

Among them are the Royal Institute of United Forces of Great Britain, the German Institute for International Affairs and Security, the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies, the University of Toronto, the Chinese Academy of Modern International Relations, the National Institute for Strategic Relations of Kyrgyzstan, the Higher School of Economics of Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus Institute and etc.

At this event the participants will present their own assessments of current processes in the region, present their vision of the development prospects of the Central Asian countries in the context of regional

cooperation. During the forum, specialists will most likely also express their views on problematic issues, barriers or obstacles that have a negative impact or constraining positive trends in our region.

It is also natural to expect opinions and recommendations on overcoming the emerging challenges to regional security and development in Central Asia. This will be the practical side of our conference or, as they say, "what remains in the bottom line". This quite logically fits into the very name of this international conference - "Central Asian Connectivity: Challenges and New Opportunities".

To be more specific, the Afghan problem requires special attention, and not only regional security in Central Asia, but also the development prospects of the countries of the region as a whole depend on its solution. Discussions around the situation in Afghanistan are extremely important from the point of view that, to this day, unfortunately, stereotypical approaches of the 90s of the last century persist, which impede the formation of common positions on the Afghan settlement process.

Today it is important to bear in mind that the very nature of this conflict has changed, which has transformed into a global security problem. Dozens of near and distant states are involved in the Afghan crisis, as a result of which a joint, rigorous search for compromise solutions is required.

Another important issue requiring special attention is the threat of radicalization, extremism and terrorism, which have acquired unprecedented global dimensions. They penetrate into all societies, regardless of the level of socio-economic development, civilizational, cultural and religious affiliation of countries and regions. In this context, I would like to note that the international community pays special attention to the experience of Uzbekistan, where approaches to counteracting these threats are conceptually revised and the focus is not on fighting consequences, but on fighting for the minds of people, first and foremost, young people.

The priorities also include the prospects for regional cooperation in Central Asia in the trade and economic sphere. The joint research for new interesting ideas and projects for practical implementation, both within the framework of bilateral relations and in multilateral formats of interaction between the countries of the region, is extremely in demand today.

If you look at the structures of the economies of the Central Asian states, then, in fact, they are complementary. This factor is key from the point of view of intensifying and deepening cooperation not only in the trade and economic spheres, but also in the area of implementing joint investment projects. That is, here we are talking about improving the quality of cooperation between the countries of the region.

It seems that the focus of the participants of the conference will be on the implementation of projects in the transport and communications sector. The geographical location of Central Asia in the heart of Eurasia - from a geostrategic point of view, is both an advantage and a vulnerability. On the one hand, our countries are distant from major seaports. On the other hand, Central Asia is a natural link between the largest markets in Europe, the Asia-Pacific Region and the Middle East.

It is noteworthy that the current dynamics of regional cooperation is becoming a systemic factor contributing to the transformation of Central Asia into a nodal point for the connection of transport arteries in the vast territory of Eurasia.

It is gratifying to note that a lot has been done in this direction by the countries of Central Asia, moreover, in a short time. Since the beginning of 2017, a whole range of auto, air and rail routes connecting Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan have been renewed and opened.

Active intra-regional cooperation in this area strengthens the positions of the Central Asian countries in a

dialogue with neighboring countries and regions. Since August 2018, the turnover of goods through the international road corridor China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan has begun. Today, the project on building a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is on the agenda, which is intended to become a strategic hub of transit-transport routes between the markets of the Asia-Pacific Region, Europe and the Middle East.

At the same time, tremendous prospects are opening up for the countries of Central Asia for the implementation of new transport and communication projects on the East-West and North-South lines. Favorable condition is that today in the transformation of the region into a transport hub on the Eurasian continent, the neighboring major economies of Europe and China, India and Russia, Iran and Turkey show growing interest. And not to use these essentially unique opportunities would be a strategic mistake, especially for the countries of Central Asia that do not have access to the world's seas.

3. What is your opinion on the priorities of cooperation between the states of the region at this stage and in the future?

Modern globalization processes are not only increased challenges and threats, but also the emergence of new opportunities, which require from Central Asian countries to take joint measures to ensure regional stability, security and development. Today there is no doubt that the security of a single country in Central Asia cannot be viewed in isolation from the security of a neighboring state. Only by applying common efforts can the states of the region effectively overcome challenges and threats, such as radicalization, extremism, and terrorism.

Based on this, as well as the current dynamics of regional cooperation in Central Asia, it can be assumed that the countries of the region in the coming years will increasingly focus on achieving practical results, concrete projects in various fields. In addition to the areas of trade, economy, investment, transport communications, the focus will be on the issues of interaction in the cultural and humanitarian field.

It seems that cooperation in tourism sector, which is becoming a new driver of the economic development of Central Asian countries, will enter the active phase. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have already reached agreements on the introduction of “Asian Schengen”, which will give a new impetus to the increase in foreign tourists in these two states. Kyrgyzstan, also already “considering” this project and planning to join it.

At the same time, it is worth noting that intraregional tourism has a so-called. multiplier effect for Central Asia and should be considered not only from an economic point of view. Mutual trips of citizens of countries of the region is a direct opportunity to get to know their neighbors closer. This is a powerful tool for the natural convergence of the fraternal, friendly people of Central Asian region, who have been living together since ancient times.

The priority direction of cooperation between the countries of Central Asia should also be the strengthening of ties among the youth of the states of the region. It is not only about education, but also about direct contacts in the framework of joint cultural, mass, sporting and other events that can be held in various parts of the Central Asian region. In this context, the Youth Union of Uzbekistan can play a special role, uniting its efforts with its partners from the countries of Central Asia.

In general, the changing realities in Central Asia, as well as current globalization trends, require the countries of the region to take a fresh look at the strategic perspectives and advantages of regional cooperation. Our historical experience and recent achievements in regional cooperation show that the future of our countries and peoples is in our hands.