

## End of an era?

The death of the Uzbek President throws region into uncertainty

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President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, with Baroness Ashton, former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy  
Image: European External Action Service

Islam Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan since its inception, died the 2nd of September. The aftermath of his death has left the country facing a future of uncertainty. Initially, confusion surrounded the announcement of Karimov's death. As early as the 29th August, Ferganews, a Moscow-based news agency announced the Uzbek president had died. However, it was not until the 2nd September did the Uzbek cabinet officially confirm Karimov's death.

Uzbekistan is not often the subject of global media attention, indeed it only became a recognised country after gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

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Uzbekistan's relationship with Europe and the USA has fluctuated under Karimov's leadership. This reached a low during the investigations into the Andijan Massacre but significantly improved when Uzbekistan's proved willing to help US efforts in central Asia and Afghanistan. More recently, it appeared that Karimov's leadership steered Uzbekistan more towards Putin's Russia. While on the peripheries of the former Soviet Union and still today barely on Moscow's radar, Uzbekistan still remains geopolitically significant. For Russia, the significance manifests itself in large gold and uranium deposits. For the USA and European countries, Uzbekistan provides a strategic corridor in and out of Afghanistan. This became ever more important when NATO relations with Pakistan became volatile. Immediately after the events on

9/11, Karimov allowed the USA to use an Uzbek air base.

Relations soured following the events in Andijan, and the USA was ordered to get out from Uzbekistan entirely following the condemnation of Karimov's actions by the US government. The Uzbek government was perfidious throughout the inquest into the massacre, with many laying the blame at the feet of Karimov. The massacre saw a number estimated between 182-1500 protesters killed by the Uzbek Interior Ministry and National Security Service troops. The massacre put the spotlight on Karimov's human rights record which to his death remained under scrutiny. Relations have improved since then, though it would be more accurate to say that Uzbekistan aligns itself more closely with Russia and China than it does Europe and the USA.

As expected, within the last couple of days, Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been appointed as acting president following the backing of the Uzbek parliament. Radical change is certainly not expected as Mirziyoyev was the Uzbek prime minister under Karimov and the two worked closely and shared political ideals.

These events in Uzbekistan have been followed by political shakeups in Armenia and Kazakhstan. The central Asian region currently appears unstable. Russia has a vested interest in the stability of their neighbouring countries as has been shown recently in the west with its activities in the Baltic states; Moscow remaining intent on securing its sphere of influence in border countries. Further, Uzbekistan's largest ethnic minority are also Russians. Putin, in the past with Ukraine and Georgia, has put troops on the ground on the premise of aiding or liberating native Russian people. This is not to say the same will take place in Uzbekistan, but it may indicate that Russia will be monitoring the situation carefully to ensure that the next president of Uzbekistan remains in close contact with Moscow as Karimov, before his death, had.



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