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3 May 2018

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/86491/>

MPRA Paper No. 86491, posted 08 May 2018 13:30 UTC

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03.05.2018

## **New Trends in Kyrgyz Foreign Policy**

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### **Introduction**

Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy is characterized to be multi-dimensional or multi vector concentrated on the consolidation of flexible and many-sided external relations with its neighboring states and regional players. In the historical perspective, international relations experts and scholars argue that "Kyrgyzstan's first president Askar Akaev is considered to be the founder of the multi-vector foreign policy in the Kyrgyz Republic"(Dimensions, p.62). As a result, the new-born country started to participate in international foreign policy agendas through signing bilateral agreements with its allies and attracting intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations from various corners of the world.

It is argued that there are several factors which cause multi-vector policy. If some political experts highlight that it is connected due to size and dependency of Kyrgyzstan from other countries, others also refer to poor economic situation and security concerns. In this regard Yasar Sari stated "Geopolitical and geo-economic situation of Kyrgyzstan complicated the development of an independent foreign policy. Therefore, Kyrgyzstan introduced a multi-vector foreign policy"(2017, p.137) One could agree with the fact that Kyrgyzstan, like Tadjikistan, is economically poor and has relatively less natural resources than other Central Asian countries. Indisputably, it was one of the main factors to strengthen cooperation and partnership in regional scope and beyond the region.

The paper aims to investigate the new tendencies from the major three dimensions of external foreign policy which are regional, continental and global areas. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, "The regional approach is implemented to strengthen good and friendly relations with neighboring states, continental approach is aimed at developing diplomatic relations with major powers like Russia, the USA the European Union, China, Turkey and the global approach prioritizes active engagement in UN system"(Dimensions, 2008, p.64).

Furthermore, it is important to point out the recent obstacles in the strengthening of multi-vector policy by the state. For instance, during the presidency of Almazbek Atambaev, Kyrgyzstan also needed to show clear position regarding the Ukrainian crisis, or intergovernmental relations

between Kyrgyzstan and brother nations (Turkey, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) was in difficult situation. In addition, Kyrgyz –Kazakh border was blocked for trucks, Kyrgyz farmers lost their profit. However, recent foreign policy trends confirm that the state is gradually making shifts towards new objectives and priorities. Therefore, this paper will strongly attempt to introduce with the main transformations under the governance of the president Soorobai Jeenbekov and will tackle recent political events in the formation of foreign policy objectives of the state nowadays. The paper focuses on question: What foreign policy actions and resolutions have been produced since the presidency of Sooronbai Jeenbekov in Kyrgyzstan?

### **Regional approach**

The state visit of the president of Uzbekistan to the Kyrgyz Republic serves as the historically important event in the development of trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian affairs between two states. As a result, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan notes that “On September 5<sup>th</sup> in 2017, the presidents signed an agreement concerning Uzbek and Kyrgyz state border issues” (New, 2017,). As a result, 70 % of border disputed areas are solved and intergovernmental agreements on demarcation and delimitation is signed. The mutual agreement resulted in the operation of Tashkent-Balykchy railway system in the summer seasons. Affairs of Uzbekistan believe that (New, 2018). “Since 2018, the routine functions all year round carrying 300 passengers per course” In assessment of this project, we can highlight that the state border resolution positively resulted in the growth of agricultural sector. Farmers and businessmen are enabled to export fruits and vegetables to Uzbekistan in a profitable and freeway (New, 2018). Concentration on the regional sector in order to improve agriculture and livestock is also manifested in the negotiations about the activation of “Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China” new automobile corridor. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan highlights that it will positively contribute to the development of domestic trade market and tourism sector of both states (New,2017,). The point is that entrepreneurs and businessmen can carry out active business plans and contracts without barriers and constraints. At the same time, the project contributes to the attraction of tourists and investors from various states to Kyrgyzstan. Hence, Kyrgyzstan’s cooperation with Uzbekistan has opened new horizons in settling the enduring border issues and further development of cross-border communication, and increase of economic turnover. For instance, with the new administration there have been noticed changes in Kyrgyz-Kazakh relations as well.

Regarding the cooperation between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it has been highlighted that the states dealt with tense border relations in the last months of 2017. The Diplomat correspondent Catherine Putz argues that “Kazakhstan’s increased border controls led to a slowdown in trade

about \$14.3 million in damage to the Kyrgyz economy. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit in Minsk between N.Nazarbayev and S.Jeenbekov featured the necessary positive diplomatic language” (2017, p.4). Through the cited source, it is understandable that the bilateral agreement between presidents in Minsk helped to resolve border relations and the two month trade war has been successfully ceased.

Furthermore, Kabar news agency reports Sooronbai Jeenbekov’s comments by stating that “Kyrgyz-Kazakh relations will only deepen in the future, because there are no closer people than Kyrgyz and Kazakhs. At these meetings, problematic issues on borders and economic cooperation were resolved, and there was a significant increase in the GDP of the Kyrgyz Republic”(Jeenbekov, 2018). Having observed the strained trade and border relations between states, citizens hardly ever believed that the trade control would be eventually eliminated. But the new presidency of Sooronbai Jeenbekov helped to come up with effective resolutions on settling the border disputes impose hope for the citizens of Kyrgyzstan. Non-acceptance of the Kazakh government of Kyrgyz food production and industry creates many burdens for factory workers and exporters of the state. So, the proper concentration and technical modernization on the weaknesses in terms of veterinary and sanitary compatibility of Kyrgyzstan would be positively resulted in the increase of the national budget.

### **Continental approach**

It is worth mentioning the blossoming relations with the European Union and the Kyrgyz Republic that led to positive outcomes in the eradicating processes of gender and political inequality, trade barriers, legal offences and unemployment in the state. According to the minister of foreign affairs of Kyrgyzstan Erlan Abdyldaev, “In 2014, the EU subsidized 184 million euros in consolidation of the Rule of Law, fight against corruption, legal and judicial reforms”(2017, p.11). The Rule of Law initiative influenced the judiciary system through conducting collaborative seminars, assembling the judges and introducing them with new techniques and methodologies. Application of rule of law and progressive reports in judicial system has been seen as necessary precondition for democratic governance in Kyrgyzstan. In powerful and prospering European states, Singapore or the United States, the capacity of the Supreme Court is huge, and the most significant differentiation is that the judges overseas do not depend on the government. People respect and obey the laws; they are not corrupted and carry out transparent system of working. Hence, the level of crimes and corruption is also less. So, further development of the Rule of Law Platform in Kyrgyzstan is deemed to be vital.

The next important element gained after the EU-Kyrgyzstan cooperation is that Kyrgyzstan was able to have GSP+ status with the EU in 2016, which stands for the Generalized Scheme of Preferences. This status positively simplified and benefited the trade relations in Kyrgyzstan. For instance, Kabar National News Agency explains this conception by interpreting that “The GSP+ enhanced preferences mean full removal of tariffs on more than 6000 product categories, a step forward from the GSP scheme. Kyrgyz exporters will be able supply to the European Union at zero tariff rate agricultural products such as fruits, processed fruits, dried fruits, tobacco, and textiles, felt products, clothing, including leather, and carpet”(European, 2016). This status contributes to the development of economic sector, since good trade relations with foreign states raise the investment on agriculture, food production and the exchange of goods. Moreover, food production and exporting to the EU member states is particularly beneficial to Kyrgyzstan. For instance, the Kyrgyz dried fruits stand out from other states with its ecological cleanness (European, 2016). Therefore, the representatives of the Delegation of the EU highly believe that Kyrgyz farmers have a full potential to successfully send products overseas and increase strategic trade relations with European states.

The next embodiment of continental approach is the external relationship of Kyrgyzstan with Russia. It is worth underlining the fact that Kyrgyzstan is aimed at consolidation of the strategic partnership, diplomatic ties with Russia, since “S.Jeenbekov’s first presidential trip to Russia manifests the president’s foreign policy preferences”(C.Putz, 2017, p.1). The annexation of the state to the Eurasian Economic Union is considered to be the fundamental explanation to the development of Kyrgyz-Russian partnership. Political experts and analysts emphasize that the creation of the Kyrgyz-Russian Fund and the new distribution of customs duties are perceived as the major advantages of the collaboration between two states. As a matter of fact, Marina Indina argues that “Within six months, in 2016 the national budget of the Kyrgyz Republic has gained \$160 million additional revenue due to the establishment of imports customs duties system”(2016, p.3). We can be informed that the imports customs duties provided positive outcomes for business entrepreneurs and agriculture owners. Due to the functioning of the Kyrgyz-Russian Fund, citizens have more financial opportunities in running their own businesses.

By contrast, many representatives of anti-Eurasian movement argue that the scale of economic development of EAEU members is absolutely varied. For instance, the expert on foreign policy of the Institute of World Economy and Politics say that “Kazakhstan’s GDP is \$203bln, Belarus’s GDP is \$71 billion and Russia’s is two trillion dollars (J.Sarabekov, 2015, p.3). The relatively high rate of GDP of member states creates challenges for Kyrgyzstan in dealing with the increase of import duty of the EAEU. Being the member of the World Trade organization,

Kyrgyzstan had low import rates that helped Kyrgyz workers to buy cheap products from China and re-export to neighboring states. For instance, (J.Sarabekov, 2015, p.7) “The low customs rate of Kyrgyzstan in comparison with other EAEU members led to the increase in prices of import goods from China. Consequently, workers in market such as “Kara-Suu”, “Madina”, “Dordoï” are burdened with high import rates that led to the decrease of the level of re-export and the increase of bankruptcy.

Furthermore, with a mission to strengthen the national security policy, Kyrgyzstan considers opening of military bases and militarization action as key components of its multidimensional foreign policy agenda. According to Catherine Putz, “The state officials highlight that in order to improve national security; the state should be open to the establishment of Russian military base in the south Kyrgyzstan. S.Jeenbekov says it is up to Russia”(2018, p.13).The country’s support of the opening of the second Russian military base in the southern part only confirms its strategic military preferences. Additionally, president’s choice of the construction of Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan manifests the state’s high level of trust to Russia in prospective armed conflict with threatening states.

In this respect, it can be analyzed that Kyrgyzstan’s multi-vector policy derived from national security interest. Analysis of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan foreign policy from 1991 till 2014 clearly showed how Kyrgyzstan interplayed with all major players in the region and benefitted from cooperation. However, from 2014 geopolitical interests of neighboring Russia and China has increased in the region, resulting the intensification of regional cooperation in particular hydropower and security area (D.Taldybaeva, 2017). Today, when Kyrgyzstan is involved in tight cooperation with Russia and China, when Russia and China extended their geopolitical interest in the region, a representative of Eurasian Research Institute argues that Kyrgyzstan should further strengthen their relations with their historical overlords, due to Chinese economic growth which already is ranked in the first place (D.Taldybaeva, 2017). The prioritized areas of economic relations with China are reflected in the realization of hydropower projects and repairing of old of highways of Kyrgyzstan. Regarding this point, Dinara Taldybaeva says that “China's State Power Investment Corporation and the government of Kyrgyzstan agreed on the construction of the Kazarman chain of hydropower plant on the Naryn river with the subsidies over \$1,565 ”(2017, p.3). So, it should be noted that China is one of the prominent investors on economic development projects. Indisputably, regional challenges including security and economic issues cannot be solved without participation of Russia and China. However, it would be wrong to exclude the role of the EU and western countries in Central Asia for stability. Stability and development in Central Asia will take place only when illnesses of economy such

as corruption and family regimes will be eradicated. Regional cooperation of Central Asian countries with China and Russia do not consider addressing fights against corruption or democratic governance. Therefore, the role of the EU funded projects is crucial to civil society development and democracy promotion for Kyrgyzstan as well as to other Central Asian countries.

### **Global approach**

The Kyrgyz Republic is building its own international course, depending on changes and trends in the world around, based on its potential and role in world processes. Kyrgyzstan implements foreign policy in accordance with the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, universally recognized principles and norms of international law. At the end of the 20th century, the country faced tasks related to the search, establishment of the place and role of the new state in the world community. In order to fully participate in cooperation with foreign countries in the frame of international organizations, the Kyrgyz Republic pursues a multi-vector, balanced and pragmatic foreign policy. The modern foreign policy situation is strongly influenced not only by the achievements of diplomats and politicians in the field of international relations, but also by domestic political and economic situation in the country. At the same time, the image of the Kyrgyz Republic in terms of its readiness to comply with all previously reached agreements and commitments in all formats of cooperation is expected to be associated with reliability and stability.

While talking about global context, the paper would highlight the case of the Kyrgyzstan in United Nations. Like many countries Kyrgyzstan also developed programs such as national strategy on sustainable development, which is based on United Nations international goals. Almost all UN agencies focus on humanitarian and development area. As a matter of fact, the recent report by the UN in Kyrgyzstan highlights that” Kyrgyzstan’s authorities supplied a new data collection machine to reveal gender-based violence and human trafficking at a roundtable prepared in partnership with the UNODC”(M.Brazko, 2018). With the help of this roundtable, the crimes related to human trafficking and gender violence will be detected faster that will result in the reduction of this serious law offences. Therefore, one can notice that Kyrgyz Government has been supporting active collaboration in the frame of UN. The nutrition programs and poverty reduction, advancement of gender equality, education and health improvement are included in national strategy for sustainable development.

During the presidency of the new president Sooronbay Jeenbekov, most local human rights activists hope for change in freedom of speech, human rights and political participation. For instance, progressive reform in government system, started since the resignation of Prime-Minister Sapar Isakov (A.Dzumashova, 2018). The government of Jeenbekov shows high commitment to fight against corruption. In addition, after the visit to European Commission, Jeenbekov denied from accusation against Journalist Kabay Karabekov (Kabay, 2018), which also shows his democratic step towards freedom of speech. This is still short period to give assessment for the tendency of Jeenbekov's policy in the frame of UN. What can be concluded that the new government also supports cooperation of Kyrgyzstan in the frame of UN and all UN launched programs are encouraged.

### **Conclusion**

It is worth concluding that the geopolitical and economic situations burdened the state to establish independent foreign policy strategy and led to the consolidation of multi-dimensional policy. Additionally, the national security incentives caused the state presidents of Kyrgyzstan to sign bilateral agreements on the continental, regional and global levels. The paper investigated that the regional approach of Kyrgyzstan helped to settle the border issues with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan which positively affected the interstate alliance and the opening of Uzbekistan-China-Kyrgyzstan automobile route. Additionally, the meeting of Sooronbai Jeenbekov and Nursultan Nazarbaev in Minsk contributed to the elimination of tense diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan. Hence, the active collaboration with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is vital in the development of domestic trade turnover, re-exporting and opening potential for farmers and factory workers.

Furthermore, the continental approach has manifested that the functioning of Kyrgyz Russian Fund is deemed to be the major development step in the state. Simple preferential terms due to the Eurasian Economic Union opened new possibilities for Kyrgyz migrants and the increase of the state's GDP. At the same time, the president welcomes the second construction of military base by Russia which is believed to increase the security. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan faced challenges in re-exporting and production of its own domestic products. The point is that uneven economic development rate of Kyrgyzstan in comparison with other EEAU creates visible downsides in the short-run perspective.

Regarding the level of cooperation of Kyrgyzstan with the UN, it has been emphasized that Sooronbai Jeenbekov highly encourages further partnership in combat with corruption, state poverty, weak nutrition and initiating cross-border communication and peace-building programs.

Concentration on the development of free mass media and the recent alternation of the Prime-Minister and state officials demonstrated the democratic preferences of the president. Tight diplomatic relations with Russia, China, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan guarantee the improvement of national security and flourishing of peaceful border relations. However, the collaboration with the EU, UN, and non-governmental organizations assists in the elimination processes of corruption and law enforcement strategies.

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