

Regional Cooperation Priorities in Foreign Policy: Strategic Path to Stability and Prosperity for Uzbekistan

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Since late 2016, Uzbekistan has undergone the most necessary changes in its foreign policy. These institutional-legal changes give new, accurate content to the country's active, open approach not only to the Central Asian region but also to the global community. Regional cooperation, diversified international partnerships, and foreign investments are at the top of the priority agenda. This adjustment, responding to continuously evolving geopolitics, provides crucial insights into the dynamics of regional integrative and global cooperative processes.

Uzbekistan has established trade relations with 208 countries of the world **The largest trading partners of Uzbekistan in 2023:**



Source: Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan

Legal Bases and Policy Strategic Documents

Uzbekistan's foreign policy is based upon a significant legal framework reflected in the primary documents: the Constitution,¹ Concept of Foreign

¹ The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan (1992). <https://lex.uz/docs/6451070>

Policy, Defense Doctrine,² Strategy of Actions,³ “Uzbekistan – 2030” Strategy⁴ and others. The general frameworks mentioned above underline Uzbekistan's principles of non-interference, peaceful conflict resolution, and non-alignment with military blocs. By including these principles in its strategic documents, Uzbekistan aims to instil trust for rapprochement and position itself as a reliable partner in the international arena.

The Strategy of Actions 2017-2021 was a watershed moment in Uzbekistan's foreign policy: it promoted an active policy in terms of relations with the partners of regional and global forces to foster economic and political stability. This proactive stance further solidified relations with neighbouring countries. It made the position of Uzbekistan strong within regional organizations, including but not limited to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Economic Cooperation Organization, and the Organization of Turkic States.

The 2022-2026 Development Strategy has been laid upon those guidelines, which seek diversified international partnerships and further solidified economic diplomacy.⁵ Uzbekistan is proposed as a key state in countering world challenges and contributing to regional stability. For this purpose, work is underway to advance innovative work on sustainable development and comprehensive reforms launched by the “Uzbekistan – 2030” Strategy. Strategic positioning along the ancient Silk Road allows Uzbekistan to work towards becoming a regional economic centre that actively supports trade and connectivity; it has been advanced by infrastructural projects such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway and the Trans-Afghan railway.

Advancing Regional Cooperation and Integration

President Mirziyoyev has been at the forefront of the significant uplift in regional cooperation taking place in Central Asia. Thus, Uzbekistan has been quite proactive in reaching out not only to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

² The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On the Defense Doctrine of the Republic of Uzbekistan”, LRU-458 (2018). <https://lex.uz/docs/-3495885>

³ The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On the Strategy of Action for the further development of the Republic of Uzbekistan”, PF-4947 (2017). <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/-3107036>

⁴ The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On the “Uzbekistan – 2030” Strategy”, PF-158 (2023). <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6600413>

⁵ The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On the development strategy of the New Uzbekistan for 2022 – 2026”, PF-60 (2022). <https://lex.uz/docs/-5841063>

and Turkmenistan but also in being a key stakeholder whose interests lie in regional stability and sustainable development, leading to the successful conduct of efforts on its part for a regional consensus on issues such as the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of Central Asian States.

That means that Uzbekistan is an active stakeholder in most of the problems existing at the regional level due to its interest in regional stability and sustainable development. With all of this, Uzbekistan has shown its interest in stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. With international conferences hosted,⁶ diplomatic dialogues opened,⁷ and infrastructure projects implemented by Uzbekistan,⁸ it has become an important protagonist in advancing peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan, consequently directly affecting the stability and security of Central Asia.

Since 2017, bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and each of the Central Asian countries, which developed into strategic partnerships with Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, have significantly increased. For 2022, agreements on further deepening these partnerships have emphasized its regional leadership role even more. It further delimited the border with Kyrgyzstan and signed an alliance treaty with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. All this reflects Uzbekistan's dedication to ensuring a cooperative and rich regional environment.

⁶ Uzbekistan hosted several high-level international conferences on Afghanistan in Tashkent titled "Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Connectivity" (March 27, 2018) "Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities" (July 15-16, 2021) and "Afghanistan: Security and Economic Development" (July 25-26, 2022). Moreover, the first meeting of Special Representatives of the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan was organized in Tashkent on March 7, 2023.

⁷ Uzbekistan constructively and pragmatically accepted the formation of the Transitional Administration of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" (the interim government) immediately after the Taliban took Kabul. On October 7, 2021, a visit to Kabul was made by the head of Uzbekistan's foreign ministry, Abdulaziz Kamilov. Recently, a delegation from Uzbekistan, led by Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov, visited Afghanistan on August 17, 2024. The Prime Minister of Uzbekistan became one of the highest-ranking officials to visit Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Additionally, on August 29, 2024, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov and acting Prime Minister of Afghanistan Abdul Ghani Barodar inaugurated the International Trade Center "Termez". In addition, regular business forums are held in the two countries' capitals to deepen economic ties and increase bilateral trade.

⁸ At the initiative of Uzbekistan, the international transport and logistics hub "Termez Cargo Center" has been established and is currently operating effectively in Termez to deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. An educational centre for Afghan citizens is functioning, and the construction of an international trade zone in the Surkhandarya region has begun, along with active steps to implement various infrastructure and social projects in Afghanistan. In particular, trans-Afghan transport corridors from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean ports ("Mazar-e-Sharif –Kabul – Peshawar" and "Mazar-e-Sharif – Herat" railways), Surkhan-Puli Khumri power transmission line, Termez International Trade Centre, major infrastructure projects such as the establishment of cross-border free economic zones in Uzbek–Afghan border are being implemented.

The Sixth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asia, held in Astana on August 9, 2024, highlighted a growth trend of increasing regional integration across the area. One of the peculiarities of the meeting was that it concerned the search for new lines of work to deepen collaboration among Central Asian countries. The meeting discussed everything from economic cooperation to security, where every head of state gave his country's view and expressed the findings and solutions. During his address, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev stressed the necessity of evolving the Consultative Meeting format to strengthen regional integration efforts and expand the long-term partnership agenda among the member states.⁹

This summit was important not only because of the discussions it promoted but also due to the tangible returns from it. Among the key outcomes was the signing by all the heads of Central Asian states of the "Central Asia-2040" Concept of Development of Regional Cooperation. It is a full-fledged strategic document that, in detail, lays out a roadmap for nurturing regional cooperation over the next two decades. Consensus regarding this idea means very high trust, mutual understanding, and common commitment of the heads of Central Asian states to the consolidation of integration processes. The accord is possibly a precursor to deepened economic and political relations within the region, with a sustained unified Central Asian identity and cooperative future.¹⁰

Economic Integration and Growth

The high level of friendship that characterizes the country's foreign policy and fraternal relationships with its neighbours have significantly increased political dialogue and mutual trust in the region. By the end of 2023, trade turnover for Uzbekistan with states of Central Asia increased threefold compared to 2016, reaching \$7.2 billion.¹¹ It provides relatively strong arguments in favour of Uzbekistan's effectiveness in proactive regional diplomacy and its positive impact on the Central Asian economy.

⁹ Official website of the President of Uzbekistan. (2024, August 09). *Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, at the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia*. <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/7456>

¹⁰ CPC | Central Asia Consultative Meeting: Strengthening Regional Ties and Expanding Horizons. <https://caspiantpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/central-asia-consultative-meeting-strengthening-regional-ties-and-expanding-horizons>

¹¹ Review.uz. (2024, January 25). *Infographics: Uzbekistan's trade with Central Asian countries in January-December 2023*. <https://review.uz/en/post/infografika-torgovlya-uzbekistana-so-stranami-centralnoy-azii-za>

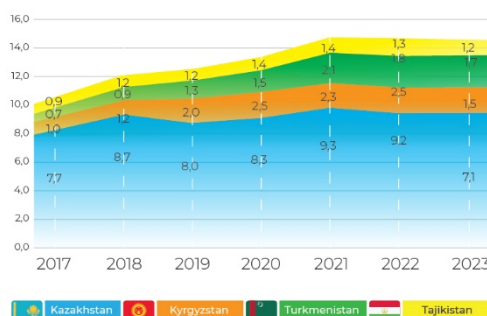
Cooperation with Central Asian States



Source: Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan

As a result of Uzbekistan's proactive regional diplomacy, the GDP volume in Central Asian states has increased by 40%, trade turnover has grown more than 2.5 times, mutual investments have expanded nearly sixfold, and foreign direct investments have grown by 45%.¹² These economic strides prove Uzbekistan's commitment to a cooperative and prosperous regional environment and speak volumes about the tangible benefits of its proactive regional diplomacy.

The share of Central Asian countries in the foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan, in percent



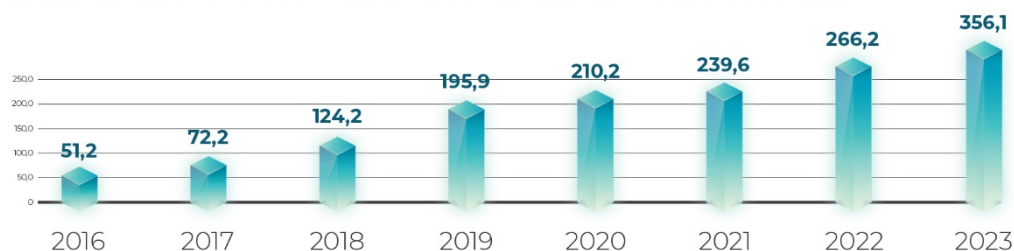
The share of some countries in the total volume of foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan, in percent



Source: Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan

¹² Official website of the President of Uzbekistan. (2023, September 14). *Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, at the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia*. <https://president.uz/uz/lists/view/6658>

Fixed capital investments disbursed. trillion soums



Fixed capital investments disbursed by investor countries, trillion soums

	10,6	17,1	30,2	85,4	89,8	101,4	113,9	201,7
China	1,6	2,6	7,4	22,4	28,3	21,4	18,9	49,2
Russia	3,6	9,5	7,1	9,0	13,8	24,0	18,5	27,3
Turkey	0	0	0,1	4,5	8,4	11,4	11,5	13,0
Germany	0,1	0	0,4	2,8	5,6	7,6	8,5	8,9
USA	0,1	0,3	0,3	5,7	4,8	3,1	4,4	3,7
Japan	0,1	1,1	2,7	4,9	3,3	0,1	0	0,7
Korea	2,1	0,3	4,4	6,1	3,1	1,1	1,8	1,6
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023

Source: Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan

"Central Asia Plus" Framework: Exemplary Model of Multilateral Cooperation

Uzbekistan's pragmatic foreign policy has set its relations with leading foreign countries, which are actively developing political-diplomatic trade and socio-humanitarian and strategic cooperation on a qualitatively new level. In 2017, for the first time, international partners started to develop relations with Central Asian countries within the framework of a multilateral configuration known as "C5+1." Japan and South Korea proposed the format; later, India, the EU, some of its members, Russia, and China all followed with similar proposals.

Today, the format of "Central Asia Plus", which has evolved into a significant platform for multilateral dialogues, is becoming a geopolitical mechanism for balancing the interests of regional states with their major international partners. This practice will contribute to developing mutually beneficial relations and joint proposals over several currently urgent issues.

Such an active and pragmatic regional policy of Uzbekistan has significantly contributed to increasing regional interaction among Central Asian countries to an unprecedented level, through which its leadership and influence in multilateral cooperation have been displayed. This policy of Uzbekistan has recently been one of the major factors increasing the role of

Central Asia in modern international relations. The idea of the "spirit of Central Asia" entered world political discussions concerned with the recent reach in predictability and stability of the region.¹³ Deeper regional cooperation will overcome common economic and security problems, enhancing Central Asia's importance on the world political map.

Indeed, Uzbekistan has favoured regional cooperation in several dimensions, including the economy, trade, energy, transport, security, and culture. Indeed, over the recent years, Uzbekistan has been actively and substantively implementing diverse programs of international development and interregional cooperation within Central Asia through many of its diplomatic platforms to ascertain a commitment to being a responsible member of the global community.

Conclusion: The Role of Uzbekistan in Creating a Secure Regional Future

Implementing foreign policy principles of non-interference, peaceful settlement of conflicts, and strategic cooperation has largely gained the country recognition among the advanced regional states of vital significance in global affairs. By communicating actively with regional and international players, Uzbekistan has gained a better position globally and contributed to overall stability and development.

The role of Uzbekistan in maintaining and stabilizing regional integration in Central Asia has been crucial. This initiative has proved to be the case because audiences are inspired. At the same time, the real example of perspectives on a practical and prosperous future is under joint leadership in Central Asia and beyond.

¹³ Khasanov, Ulugbek. (2021, September 21). *The spirit of Central Asia as a factor in regional policy*. <https://yuz.uz/ru/news/dux-tsentrlnoy-azii-kak-faktor-regionalnoy-politiki>