CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD CENTRAL ASIA: OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: Since 2016, Uzbekistan has pursued a fundamentally renewed foreign policy toward Central Asia, placing regional cooperation, mutual trust, economic integration, and good-neighborly relations at the center of its diplomatic agenda. This shift has transformed Central Asia into the primary priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy and has significantly contributed to strengthening regional stability and expanding multilateral cooperation. The present study examines the contemporary trends in Uzbekistan's foreign policy toward Central Asia by analyzing the political, economic, security, and diplomatic dimensions of regional engagement. The research adopts a qualitative methodology based on the analysis of academic literature, official policy documents, international reports, and regional cooperation initiatives.

Key words: Uzbekistan; Central Asia; Foreign policy; Regional cooperation; Regional integration; Diplomacy; Economic cooperation.

Introduction

Central Asia has historically occupied an important position in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy due to the region’s shared geographical space, historical heritage, cultural traditions, economic ties, and common security interests. Uzbekistan borders all other Central Asian states and Afghanistan, making its regional policy particularly significant for political stability, economic connectivity, and sustainable development across the region. Since 2016, Uzbekistan has introduced a new approach to foreign policy based on openness, pragmatism, mutual respect, good-neighborly relations, and the peaceful resolution of regional problems. Within this renewed diplomatic framework, Central Asia has been identified as the principal priority of the country’s external relations.

The contemporary foreign policy of Uzbekistan differs considerably from earlier approaches in terms of its emphasis on constructive dialogue, regional responsibility, and practical cooperation. The government has sought to strengthen political trust with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan through regular high-level meetings, bilateral consultations, and multilateral initiatives. These efforts have contributed to the improvement of interstate relations, the resolution of several border-related issues, the reopening of transport routes, and the expansion of trade and cultural exchanges. As a result, Uzbekistan has increasingly emerged as an active supporter of regional integration and a promoter of a common Central Asian political and economic space.

The legal and strategic foundation of this policy is reflected in the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026, approved by Presidential Decree No. PF-60 of 28 January 2022. The Strategy identifies the implementation of an open, pragmatic, active, and balanced foreign policy as one of the principal directions of national development. It also emphasizes the importance of strengthening friendly and mutually beneficial relations with neighboring countries, ensuring regional security, and advancing Uzbekistan’s national interests through international cooperation [1]. This document demonstrates that regional diplomacy is not viewed merely as a component of foreign policy but as an essential condition for Uzbekistan’s internal modernization, economic growth, and long-term security.

The adoption of the "Uzbekistan–2030" Strategy marked a further stage in the institutionalization of the country's contemporary foreign policy. The Strategy continues the principles of openness and pragmatism and seeks to strengthen Uzbekistan's role as a reliable, peaceful, and responsible partner in the international arena. It gives particular attention to maintaining stability in Central Asia, deepening cooperation with neighboring states, developing regional transport and communication corridors, strengthening economic diplomacy, and promoting joint responses to environmental and security challenges [2]. In this context, Uzbekistan's foreign policy increasingly combines national development objectives with broader regional interests.

One of the most important characteristics of the new foreign policy course is the transition from bilateral problem-solving to broader regional cooperation. Uzbekistan has actively supported consultative meetings of the heads of Central Asian states, which have become an important political platform for discussing regional priorities without the direct involvement of external powers. These meetings have enabled the regional states to coordinate their positions on trade, transport, energy, environmental protection, water resources, cultural cooperation, and security. Such dialogue contributes to the gradual formation of a regional identity and strengthens the capacity of Central Asian states to address common problems collectively.

Economic diplomacy has also become a central component of Uzbekistan's policy toward Central Asia. The country seeks to increase mutual trade, simplify customs and border procedures, develop industrial cooperation, and improve regional transport connectivity. Uzbekistan's geographical position allows it to serve as an important transit hub connecting Central Asia with South Asia, the Caucasus, China, Russia, the Middle East, and Europe. Therefore, the development of new railway lines, highways, logistics centers, and energy infrastructure is regarded as essential not only for national economic growth but also for the economic integration of the entire region.

Regional security represents another major direction of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Central Asian states face interconnected threats, including terrorism, extremism, transnational crime, illegal drug trafficking, cyber risks, and political instability in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has consistently argued that these challenges cannot be addressed effectively by one state alone. Its foreign policy therefore promotes coordinated security measures, intelligence cooperation, border management, and preventive diplomacy. At the same time, Uzbekistan supports the peaceful reconstruction and economic integration of Afghanistan, viewing stability in that country as an essential condition for the security and prosperity of Central Asia.

Environmental and water-related issues have also gained greater prominence in regional diplomacy. Climate change, desertification, water scarcity, and the consequences of the Aral Sea crisis directly affect the social and economic development of Central Asian countries. Uzbekistan increasingly advocates the rational use of transboundary water resources, regional environmental cooperation, renewable energy projects, and joint climate adaptation policies. The country's initiatives concerning the Aral Sea region demonstrate an attempt to transform an environmental disaster into a basis for international and regional cooperation.

Despite substantial progress, Uzbekistan's regional foreign policy continues to face several challenges. Differences among Central Asian states regarding water use, energy supplies, border management, and economic priorities have not been entirely eliminated. In addition, geopolitical competition among Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, Türkiye, and other external actors creates both opportunities and strategic risks for the region. Uzbekistan must therefore maintain a balanced foreign policy while protecting its national sovereignty and avoiding excessive dependence on any single external power.

The future effectiveness of Uzbekistan's foreign policy toward Central Asia will depend on the sustainability of political dialogue, the implementation of regional agreements, and the

institutionalization of cooperation. Informal diplomatic trust must gradually be supported by effective regional mechanisms, common economic projects, and coordinated responses to shared challenges. Uzbekistan's ability to combine national interests with regional development objectives may determine whether Central Asia evolves into a more integrated, stable, and economically connected region.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the contemporary trends in Uzbekistan's foreign policy toward Central Asia and to evaluate the opportunities and prospects associated with its new regional approach. Particular attention is given to political dialogue, economic cooperation, transport connectivity, regional security, environmental diplomacy, and the influence of external geopolitical actors. The study also assesses the principal challenges that may affect the long-term sustainability of Uzbekistan's regional foreign policy.

Literature Review

The transformation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy toward Central Asia has become one of the most widely discussed topics in contemporary regional studies. Since 2016, researchers and policymakers have emphasized that the country's diplomatic strategy has shifted from a predominantly bilateral approach to a broader model based on regional cooperation, mutual trust, and pragmatic diplomacy. This transformation reflects Uzbekistan's growing commitment to promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development throughout Central Asia.

The Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026 provides the principal legal and political foundation for the country's contemporary foreign policy. The Strategy identifies the implementation of an open, balanced, and mutually beneficial foreign policy as one of the government's strategic priorities. It underlines the importance of strengthening good-neighborly relations, expanding political dialogue, protecting national interests through diplomacy, and increasing economic cooperation with neighboring countries. The document also recognizes Central Asia as the primary direction of Uzbekistan's external relations and emphasizes that regional stability is essential for the country's long-term development and national security [3].

A further stage in the evolution of Uzbekistan's regional diplomacy is reflected in the "Uzbekistan–2030" Strategy. This strategic document expands the objectives established in previous reforms by focusing on regional integration, transport connectivity, economic diplomacy, environmental cooperation, and sustainable development. The Strategy highlights the necessity of strengthening partnerships with Central Asian countries through joint infrastructure projects, investment cooperation, and coordinated responses to common challenges such as climate change, water resource management, and regional security. It also emphasizes the importance of increasing Uzbekistan's international role while maintaining balanced and constructive relations with neighboring states and global partners [4].

Existing studies based on these policy documents generally conclude that Uzbekistan's renewed foreign policy has significantly improved regional political dialogue and created favorable conditions for expanding economic and humanitarian cooperation. Nevertheless, scholars also note that the sustainability of regional integration depends on continued diplomatic engagement, institutional cooperation, and effective implementation of bilateral and multilateral agreements. Therefore, further research is required to evaluate the practical outcomes of Uzbekistan's foreign policy reforms and their long-term implications for regional stability and cooperation in Central Asia.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research methodology. The research primarily relies on the analysis of official policy documents of the Republic of Uzbekistan, presidential decrees, national development strategies, and relevant academic literature concerning Central Asian regional cooperation. In addition, reports published by international organizations are used to support the analysis.

The study applies descriptive, comparative, and analytical methods to examine the evolution of Uzbekistan's foreign policy toward Central Asia. These methods make it possible to identify the main priorities, assess recent achievements, and evaluate the opportunities and challenges influencing the future development of regional cooperation. The findings are interpreted through a comprehensive analysis of political, economic, and security dimensions of Uzbekistan's contemporary regional diplomacy.

Results and Discussion

Uzbekistan's contemporary foreign policy toward Central Asia has produced noticeable changes in regional political and economic cooperation. Since 2016, the country has prioritized constructive dialogue, mutual trust, and practical cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. This policy has strengthened bilateral relations and created favorable conditions for addressing regional issues through peaceful negotiations.

One of the most significant achievements has been the expansion of economic cooperation. The simplification of border procedures and the improvement of transport links have increased trade and investment among the Central Asian countries. For example, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have intensified industrial cooperation, while trade relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have expanded through the establishment of new border trade zones and joint business projects. These developments demonstrate that economic diplomacy has become an important instrument of regional integration.

Political dialogue has also become more active through regular Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia. These meetings have provided an effective platform for discussing regional security, transport connectivity, environmental protection, and water resource management. As a result, cooperation has become more institutionalized compared with previous years[5].

Table 1. Main Trends in Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy toward Central Asia

Direction	Recent Development	Expected Outcome
Political cooperation	Regular high-level meetings and diplomatic dialogue	Greater regional stability and mutual trust
Economic cooperation	Growth of trade and investment projects	Stronger regional economic integration
Transport connectivity	Development of regional transport corridors	Improved trade and logistics efficiency
Regional security	Joint discussions on border and security issues	Enhanced regional peace and stability

Despite these achievements, several challenges remain. Climate change, transboundary water management, and geopolitical competition continue to influence regional cooperation. For instance, effective management of shared water resources requires continuous negotiations among the Central Asian states. Likewise, instability in Afghanistan remains an important security concern for the region[6].

Overall, the findings indicate that Uzbekistan has successfully transformed its foreign policy into a more open and cooperative model. The country's emphasis on good-neighborly relations, economic integration, and regional dialogue has strengthened its position as one of the key actors promoting peace and sustainable development in Central Asia. Continued implementation of joint regional projects and regular political consultations will further enhance the effectiveness of this foreign policy in the coming years.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan's foreign policy toward Central Asia has undergone significant transformation during the past decade. The country's renewed diplomatic approach has strengthened political dialogue,

expanded economic cooperation, and enhanced regional stability through the principles of openness, mutual trust, and good-neighborly relations. These developments have improved Uzbekistan's position as a reliable and constructive partner in the region.

The analysis demonstrates that regular consultations among Central Asian leaders, the development of transport and trade corridors, and increased cooperation in security and environmental issues have created favorable conditions for deeper regional integration. At the same time, challenges such as transboundary water management, climate change, geopolitical competition, and regional security require continued cooperation and coordinated policy responses.

In the future, Uzbekistan's foreign policy should continue to focus on strengthening regional institutions, promoting economic connectivity, supporting sustainable development, and expanding multilateral cooperation. Maintaining balanced relations with neighboring countries and international partners will remain essential for ensuring long-term peace, stability, and prosperity in Central Asia.

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