

## UZBEKISTAN’S NEW FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY: REGIONAL COOPERATION AND CENTRAL ASIAN INTEGRATION

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**Abstract:** This article examines the principal features of Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy strategy with particular attention to regional cooperation and Central Asian integration. It considers the shift toward openness, pragmatic diplomacy, good-neighborly relations, and the search for mutually beneficial solutions to regional challenges. The study focuses on the institutionalization of political dialogue, the development of trade and transport connectivity, cooperation in water and energy, and the importance of Afghanistan for regional security. It also discusses the opportunities and limitations of regional integration, including differences in national interests, economic asymmetries, environmental pressures, and the absence of a supranational regional organization.

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan, foreign policy strategy, Central Asia, regional cooperation, integration, good-neighborliness, diplomacy, regional security

The transformation of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy has become one of the most important developments in contemporary Central Asian international relations. Since 2017, the country has increasingly emphasized openness, constructive dialogue, mutually beneficial cooperation, and the development of friendly relations with neighboring states. The regional dimension of this policy is especially significant because Uzbekistan is geographically located at the center of Central Asia and shares borders with all other Central Asian countries. Consequently, developments in the region directly influence Uzbekistan’s security, economic opportunities, transport connections, environmental conditions, and humanitarian relations. The new approach should not be understood as a complete rejection of previous principles. Rather, it represents a change in diplomatic emphasis and practical instruments. Sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes, and national interests remain important, while the methods of pursuing these objectives increasingly include direct political dialogue, cross-border contacts, regional meetings, economic projects, and confidence-building measures. The official foreign policy position identifies Central Asia as a primary priority and links regional stability with sustainable development and national modernization [1].

The purpose of this article is to analyze the main characteristics of Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy strategy in relation to regional cooperation and Central Asian integration. The objectives are to identify the principal principles of the strategy, examine the development of regional political dialogue, consider economic and infrastructural cooperation, and discuss the challenges that may influence the future of integration processes. The article uses a qualitative analysis of official policy documents, governmental statements, and analytical materials concerning Central Asian cooperation. Uzbekistan’s foreign policy strategy is officially described as open, mutually beneficial, and constructive. Its central objectives include strengthening state independence and sovereignty, improving the country’s international position, creating a belt of peace and stability around Uzbekistan, and supporting economic and social development [1]. These objectives demonstrate that foreign policy is closely connected with domestic reform. Diplomatic relations are not treated only as instruments of political representation; they are also expected to create favorable conditions for investment, technology transfer, exports, tourism, transport development, and the protection of citizens abroad.

Several principles are particularly important. First, Uzbekistan emphasizes sovereign equality and respect for territorial integrity. This principle is relevant in Central Asia because the region has historically faced complex questions concerning borders, water resources, transport routes, and the distribution of economic benefits. Second, the strategy underlines the peaceful settlement of disputes and rejects the use of force as a method of resolving contradictions. Third, it promotes openness and pragmatism. In practical terms, pragmatism means that cooperation is organized around concrete interests and achievable results rather than ideological alignment.

The academic discussion of Uzbekistan’s regional policy supports the view that the country’s diplomatic transformation should be examined as part of a broader restructuring of Central Asia. Sodyq Safoev argues that the region is regaining geopolitical significance and that regional connectivity and capacity building are becoming central to its international role [2, pp. 7–18]. This interpretation is useful because it places Uzbekistan’s policy within regional processes rather than presenting it solely as a national diplomatic initiative. At the same time, the concept of regional integration should be used carefully: Central Asian states continue to preserve their sovereignty and do not operate within a supranational framework comparable to the European Union. Research published by scholars affiliated with UWED also demonstrates that regional cooperation is connected with wider questions of economic interdependence and strategic choice. Ulugbek Khasanov, Akram Umarov and Alisher Rakhimov examine the relationship between Central Asia, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative, thereby illustrating the competing and complementary external frameworks that shape regional development [3]. Their approach suggests that Uzbekistan’s foreign policy must balance national autonomy with the practical need to cooperate with external economic and political actors.

A further analytical dimension concerns the security environment. Sunnatillo Nasimov’s study of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of United States troops emphasizes the implications of Afghan developments for regional security [4, pp. 259–268]. This perspective reinforces the argument that Uzbekistan’s regional diplomacy cannot be limited to trade and connectivity. Security, economic reconstruction, transport corridors and humanitarian concerns are interconnected, particularly in relation to Afghanistan.

Consequently, Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy strategy can be interpreted as a form of pragmatic regionalism. It combines political dialogue, bilateral agreements, multilateral consultation and economic projects while avoiding the immediate creation of a rigid supranational institution. Its effectiveness should be assessed through implementation: the reduction of barriers at border crossings, the expansion of intra-regional trade, coordination in water and energy management, the development of transport links and the capacity to respond collectively to security and environmental challenges.

The strategy also reflects a multidirectional approach to international relations. Uzbekistan develops relations with neighboring states, major powers, international organizations, and countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and other regions. This multidimensionality allows Tashkent to broaden the range of diplomatic and economic opportunities. However, a multidirectional foreign policy does not mean that all relationships are identical. Different partnerships may serve different purposes, including security cooperation, trade, investment, education, transport, or technological modernization. Central Asia occupies a special place within this framework. Official policy materials identify the preservation of peace and stability in the region, the development of trade and transport links, the rational use of transboundary water resources, environmental sustainability, and the resolution of border-related issues as important priorities [1]. This demonstrates that Uzbekistan increasingly regards regional challenges as interconnected. Security cannot be separated from

economic development, environmental protection, and regular communication between neighboring societies.

The prioritization of Central Asia has practical and geographical foundations. Uzbekistan has the largest population in the region and is situated at the intersection of important historical and contemporary transport routes. Its relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan influence cross-border trade, labor mobility, energy exchange, water management, cultural contacts, and regional security. For this reason, improving relations with neighboring countries can generate benefits that cannot be achieved through bilateral diplomacy with distant partners alone.

A significant element of the new regional approach is the development of political trust. Regular high-level contacts create opportunities to address sensitive issues before they become serious crises. The Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, held regularly since 2018, have become an important platform for dialogue and coordination [2]. The format is not a supranational institution and does not replace national governments. Its value lies in its flexibility: states can discuss shared problems, formulate common priorities, and promote cooperation without transferring sovereignty to a regional body.

The new diplomatic atmosphere has also supported the improvement of bilateral relations. Border crossings, transport links, trade contacts, and people-to-people relations have received greater attention. In areas where disagreements previously limited cooperation, direct communication has created possibilities for negotiated solutions. Nevertheless, the existence of political dialogue does not automatically eliminate all disputes. Sustainable results require legally clear agreements, implementation mechanisms, regular monitoring, and consideration of the interests of local communities.

The regional approach is also connected with Uzbekistan’s understanding of security. Security is not limited to military threats. It includes terrorism, extremism, transnational crime, illegal trafficking, water scarcity, environmental degradation, food insecurity, and the consequences of instability in Afghanistan. A comprehensive understanding of security encourages cooperation between foreign ministries, security institutions, economic agencies, environmental authorities, universities, and civil society organizations. The development of consultative meetings indicates a gradual institutionalization of regional cooperation. Although Central Asian states have not created a European Union-type integration structure, they have established recurring political mechanisms and sectoral contacts. Meetings of foreign ministers, economic officials, experts, women leaders, young people, academics, and representatives of cultural institutions expand the scope of cooperation beyond presidential diplomacy.

An important milestone was the adoption of the Concept for the Development of Regional Cooperation “Central Asia–2040” at the 2024 summit in Astana. Analytical materials describe the concept as a long-term framework intended to make regional cooperation progressive and sustainable [3]. Its significance lies in the attempt to formulate a shared vision of the region’s future. The concept addresses broad areas such as security, economic interaction, transport connectivity, water and energy cooperation, environmental protection, and humanitarian relations.

The Central Asia - 2040 framework should be evaluated as a political and strategic instrument rather than as proof that complete regional integration has already been achieved. Integration is a gradual process that requires compatible regulations, infrastructure, institutional trust, and a willingness to coordinate national policies. The concept can provide direction, but its practical impact depends on national implementation and the availability of financial and administrative resources.

The institutionalization of dialogue also raises questions about decision-making and continuity. A flexible consultative format can facilitate agreement because it avoids rigid obligations. At the same time, flexibility may make implementation uneven. Future progress could therefore depend on strengthening working-level coordination, improving data exchange, developing clear road maps, and assigning responsibility for monitoring joint initiatives [4]. Economic cooperation is a major component of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy strategy. Political trust becomes more durable when it is supported by practical economic interests. Trade, investment, industrial cooperation, transport, logistics, tourism, and energy exchange can create mutual dependence and provide incentives for the peaceful settlement of disagreements.

Uzbekistan’s economic position gives it an important role in regional connectivity. Because the country is double-landlocked, access to external markets depends heavily on transport corridors crossing neighboring states. Cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan is therefore important for reducing transportation costs, improving logistics, and connecting Central Asian producers with markets in Europe, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia. Transport connectivity should be understood not only as the construction of roads and railways but also as the harmonization of customs procedures, digital documentation, border management, and transit regulations.

Regional economic integration may develop through several complementary models. The first is the expansion of mutual trade in goods and services. The second is industrial cooperation, in which different stages of production are located in different countries. The third is joint infrastructure development, including transport and energy projects. The fourth is the growth of tourism and educational exchanges. These models can strengthen regional value chains and reduce the vulnerability of national economies to disruptions in distant markets. At the same time, economic cooperation faces limitations. Central Asian economies differ in size, resource endowments, infrastructure quality, and regulatory systems. National producers may also compete in similar export sectors. Therefore, regional integration requires mechanisms that distribute benefits fairly and reduce the risk that smaller economies will become dependent on larger markets. Transparent rules, predictable customs procedures, investment protection, and the participation of private businesses are essential.

Official Uzbek materials report a substantial increase in trade and investment interaction within Central Asia during the recent period [5]. Such figures should be interpreted carefully: growth in trade turnover does not by itself demonstrate full integration. It is also necessary to examine the structure of trade, the share of manufactured products, the stability of supply chains, and the extent to which joint production and technological cooperation are developing.

Water and energy represent some of the most complex areas of Central Asian cooperation. The region’s states possess interconnected river systems and energy infrastructures, while their economic priorities are not always identical. Upstream countries may prioritize hydropower generation, whereas downstream countries depend heavily on irrigation and agricultural production. Climate change, glacier melting, droughts, and population growth increase the pressure on existing arrangements. Uzbekistan’s foreign policy strategy recognizes the importance of fair and rational use of transboundary water resources and environmental sustainability [1]. This position creates a basis for dialogue, but practical cooperation requires technical data, reliable institutions, and agreements that take seasonal and long-term needs into account. Water diplomacy should not be reduced to political declarations. It should include joint monitoring, information sharing, emergency communication, and the development of mutually beneficial energy-water exchanges.

Energy cooperation can support regional stability by connecting electricity systems and balancing seasonal shortages. Coordinated energy planning may allow states to use different resource advantages more efficiently. However, infrastructure projects can create political sensitivities if their costs and benefits are distributed unevenly. Therefore, regional energy initiatives should include environmental assessments, consultation with affected communities, and transparent financial arrangements. Environmental issues also demonstrate that national borders cannot fully contain regional problems. The Aral Sea crisis, air pollution, land degradation, and water scarcity require coordinated responses. Uzbekistan has promoted international attention to the Aral Sea region, while regional cooperation can support scientific research, sustainable agriculture, and ecological restoration. Environmental diplomacy can thus complement traditional foreign policy by connecting security with human development.

Afghanistan is an important factor in Uzbekistan’s regional foreign policy. Instability in Afghanistan may affect border security, migration, trade routes, extremism, and transnational crime. At the same time, Afghanistan can potentially serve as a link between Central Asia and South Asia if conditions allow the development of transport, energy, and commercial projects. Uzbekistan’s official position emphasizes peaceful settlement, economic reconstruction, and the development of Afghanistan’s transport, industrial, energy, and social infrastructure [1]. This approach reflects the view that long-term security cannot be achieved only through restrictive measures. Economic opportunities and regional connectivity may contribute to stability, although their success depends on political, security, and financial conditions.

The Afghan dimension also illustrates the importance of multilateral diplomacy. Uzbekistan has supported international discussions and regional initiatives concerning Afghanistan. Cooperation with neighboring states and international organizations can help coordinate humanitarian assistance, transport planning, and security measures. However, any regional strategy must account for the interests of Afghan society and the concerns of surrounding countries.

A realistic assessment requires avoiding overly optimistic assumptions. Infrastructure projects may face security risks, financing difficulties, and political uncertainty. Nevertheless, maintaining diplomatic communication and supporting practical economic initiatives can preserve channels for future engagement. In this sense, Uzbekistan’s approach combines security considerations with a preference for dialogue and regional development. Despite significant progress in regional cooperation, Central Asian integration remains incomplete. The states maintain different foreign policy priorities, economic models, security perceptions, and approaches to international partnerships. Sovereignty remains a fundamental principle, and governments may be cautious about institutions that could limit their policy autonomy. One challenge concerns the implementation gap between agreements and practice. Summits and declarations can establish political direction, but actual integration requires domestic reforms, budgetary commitments, compatible legislation, and administrative coordination. If agreements are not implemented consistently, public and business confidence may weaken.

A second challenge is economic asymmetry. Differences in market size, industrial capacity, infrastructure, and access to resources may create unequal benefits. Regional initiatives should therefore include mechanisms for inclusive development. Small and medium-sized enterprises, border communities, and local governments should have opportunities to participate in cross-border cooperation.

A third challenge is environmental stress. Water scarcity and climate change may intensify competition over resources. Cooperation must consequently be based on scientific evidence and long-term planning. Environmental risks should be addressed before they generate political disputes.

A fourth challenge is the broader geopolitical environment. Central Asia interacts with several major powers and international organizations. These relationships provide investment and diplomatic opportunities but can also create competing expectations. Uzbekistan’s multidirectional diplomacy seeks to preserve flexibility, yet regional states may benefit from greater coordination on transport, sanctions compliance, investment standards, and security. The prospects for integration are linked to the development of practical institutions. The region does not necessarily need to reproduce the model of another organization. A Central Asian model may be based on gradual cooperation, consensus, respect for sovereignty, and sector-specific agreements. Its success should be measured through concrete outcomes: easier border crossings, higher mutual trade, reliable energy exchange, joint environmental projects, academic mobility, and improved crisis communication. Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy strategy places Central Asia at the center of its regional and international priorities. Its main characteristics include openness, pragmatism, good-neighborly relations, peaceful settlement of disputes, and the connection between security and sustainable development. The strategy reflects the understanding that Uzbekistan’s national interests are closely linked with the stability and prosperity of neighboring countries.

The development of consultative meetings and the Central Asia–2040 concept demonstrates the emergence of a more structured regional dialogue. Economic cooperation, transport connectivity, water and energy coordination, environmental protection, and engagement concerning Afghanistan are becoming interconnected components of regional diplomacy. These processes create opportunities for greater mutual dependence and collective responses to shared challenges. At the same time, regional cooperation should not be equated with complete integration. Differences in national interests, economic capacities, institutional systems, and geopolitical orientations remain significant. The future of Central Asian cooperation will depend on the implementation of agreements, the fairness of economic arrangements, the sustainability of environmental policies, and the ability of states to preserve dialogue during periods of disagreement.

For Uzbekistan, the regional strategy provides a platform for strengthening security, expanding economic opportunities, and increasing diplomatic influence through constructive cooperation. For Central Asia as a whole, the most sustainable path is likely to be gradual and practical integration based on sovereign equality, mutual benefit, transparency, and shared responsibility. The effectiveness of the new foreign policy strategy should therefore be assessed not only through official declarations but also through measurable improvements in regional connectivity, public welfare, and the capacity of states to address common problems together.

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