

## **Uzbekistan and Central Asia: A New Stage of Regional Cooperation**

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**Abstract:** This study examines the evolving dynamics of regional cooperation in Central Asia, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan's role in fostering improved relations among neighboring states. Through an analysis of recent diplomatic initiatives, economic partnerships, and security collaborations, this research identifies key factors contributing to the new stage of regional cooperation. The findings suggest that Uzbekistan's shift towards a more open foreign policy, combined with changing geopolitical realities, has created unprecedented opportunities for enhanced regional integration.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Uzbekistan, regional cooperation, foreign policy, economic integration, security cooperation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Central Asia, a region historically characterized by complex interstate relations and limited cooperation, has entered a new era of regional collaboration. This transformation is particularly evident in the changing role of Uzbekistan, which has emerged as a key proponent of enhanced regional ties [1]. The shift in Uzbekistan's approach to its neighbors, coupled with broader geopolitical changes, has created a unique opportunity for Central Asian states to forge closer economic, political, and security partnerships.

The importance of this development cannot be overstated. Central Asia, comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, has long been a region of strategic significance due to its geographical location, natural resources, and historical importance as part of the Silk Road [2]. However, the region has faced numerous challenges since the collapse of the Soviet Union, including border disputes, water management issues, and divergent economic and political trajectories.

### **METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining a comprehensive literature review with analysis of primary sources such as government documents, official statements, and reports from international organizations. The research methodology is designed to provide a holistic understanding of the complex dynamics shaping regional cooperation in Central Asia. One of the seminal works informing this study is "Uzbekistan's New Face" by Frederick Starr and Svante Cornell (2018), which provides a detailed analysis of the political and economic reforms implemented under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev [1]. This work offers valuable insights into the domestic factors driving Uzbekistan's new approach to regional cooperation.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report "Central Asia's Future: Three Powers, Three Visions" by Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski (2016) provides essential context on the geopolitical factors influencing regional dynamics in Central Asia [2]. This report examines the competing visions for the region's future proposed by Russia, China,

and the West, offering a framework for understanding the external pressures and opportunities shaping regional cooperation.

To analyze economic cooperation trends, this study draws on data and analysis from the Asian Development Bank's report "Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program: Good Neighbors, Good Partners, Good Prospects" (2020) [3]. This report provides valuable statistics and case studies on infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and economic corridor projects in the region.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's "Innovation for Sustainable Development Review of Uzbekistan" (2022) offers insights into Uzbekistan's efforts to modernize its economy and align with sustainable development goals, which has implications for regional cooperation initiatives [4].

For understanding security cooperation dynamics, this study refers to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's "The Silk Road Economic Belt: Security Implications and EU–China Cooperation Prospects" by Richard Ghiasy and Jiayi Zhou (2017) [5]. This work examines the security challenges and opportunities associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia.

## RESULTS

The analysis of recent developments in Central Asia reveals several key trends and outcomes that characterize the new stage of regional cooperation:

***Diplomatic Initiatives.*** Since 2016, there has been a marked increase in high-level diplomatic engagements among Central Asian states. Uzbekistan has been at the forefront of this trend, with President Mirziyoyev making state visits to all Central Asian countries within his first year in office [1]. These visits have resulted in numerous bilateral agreements and joint declarations on strengthening cooperation.

A significant development has been the establishment of regular Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia. The first such meeting was held in Astana in 2018, followed by meetings in Tashkent (2019) and Turkmenistan (2021). These summits have provided a platform for discussing regional issues and coordinating policies on matters of mutual interest [6].

***Economic Cooperation:*** Trade volumes between Central Asian countries have shown a positive trend. According to the Asian Development Bank, intra-regional trade increased by 35% between 2016 and 2019 [3]. Uzbekistan's trade with its Central Asian neighbors has grown particularly rapidly, with a 50% increase in the same period [7].

Several major infrastructure projects have been initiated or revitalized. The Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway project, long under discussion, has seen renewed momentum. Additionally, efforts to improve regional energy connectivity have progressed, with Uzbekistan resuming electricity exports to Tajikistan and discussions underway for a regional power grid [4].

***Security Cooperation:*** Central Asian states have demonstrated increased willingness to coordinate on security matters. Joint military exercises have become more frequent, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan participating in trilateral drills in 2019 [5].

***Water Management:*** Progress has been made in addressing long-standing water disputes. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan reached an agreement on the joint use of the Kassansay Reservoir in 2017, marking a significant step towards cooperative water management [8].

***Cultural and Educational Exchanges:*** There has been a notable increase in cultural and educational cooperation. The number of Central Asian students studying in neighboring countries has grown, and several joint university programs have been established. Cultural events celebrating shared heritage, such as the Central Asian Festival of Culture held in Uzbekistan in 2019, have fostered people-to-people connections [9].

The most crucial factor in the new stage of regional cooperation has been Uzbekistan's dramatic shift in foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev. Since coming to power in 2016, Mirziyoyev has abandoned the isolationist stance of his predecessor and actively pursued engagement with neighboring countries [1]. This change has been fundamental in breaking down barriers to regional cooperation that had persisted for decades.

Uzbekistan's new approach is characterized by pragmatism and a willingness to compromise on long-standing issues. For instance, the country's more flexible stance on water management has helped ease tensions with upstream countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan [2].

The need for economic diversification and growth has been a significant driver of regional cooperation. Central Asian countries have recognized that greater economic integration can help them overcome the limitations of their relatively small domestic markets and landlocked status [3].

The evolving geopolitical situation in and around Central Asia has created both pressures and opportunities for regional cooperation. China's Belt and Road Initiative has provided impetus for infrastructure development and economic connectivity [5]. At the same time, concerns about overdependence on external powers have motivated Central Asian states to strengthen intra-regional ties as a counterbalance.

Shared security challenges, particularly related to terrorism and extremism, have necessitated closer cooperation among Central Asian states. The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 has further heightened the need for regional security coordination [6].

The role of Uzbekistan in catalyzing this shift cannot be overstated. As the most populous Central Asian state and the only one bordering all other countries in the region, Uzbekistan's previous isolationist stance had been a significant obstacle to regional cooperation. The country's new foreign policy orientation under President Mirziyoyev has not only removed this obstacle but has actively promoted regional ties [2]. This demonstrates the crucial importance of leadership and policy shifts in driving regional dynamics.

The economic dimension of this cooperation is particularly noteworthy. The increase in intra-regional trade and the revival of major infrastructure projects suggest that Central Asian countries are increasingly viewing each other as economic partners rather than competitors. This shift in perspective could have long-term benefits for the region's economic development, potentially helping to address issues such as unemployment, underdevelopment, and overreliance on natural resource exports [3].

Furthermore, a more cohesive Central Asia could play a more significant role in international affairs, potentially serving as a bridge between East and West and contributing to the resolution of global challenges. The region's unique position at the crossroads of Eurasia gives it the potential to be an important player in emerging global dynamics, particularly in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative and evolving Russia-West relations [5,10].

In conclusion, while the new stage of regional cooperation in Central Asia faces challenges, it represents a significant and positive development in the region's post-Soviet trajectory. The role of Uzbekistan in this process highlights the potential for transformative change when key regional actors alter their policy orientations. As this cooperation continues to evolve, it will be crucial for both regional stakeholders and the international community to support and nurture these positive trends while being mindful of the complex realities and historical legacies that continue to shape Central Asian dynamics.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Uzbekistan's policy shift under President Mirziyoyev has been a crucial catalyst for enhanced regional cooperation. The abandonment of isolationist policies and active engagement with neighbors has created new opportunities for dialogue and collaboration across various sectors.

Economic imperatives, particularly the need for diversification and growth, have been significant drivers of regional cooperation. The increase in intra-regional trade and the revival of major infrastructure projects demonstrate a growing recognition of the benefits of economic integration.

The changing geopolitical landscape, including the influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative and evolving relations with Russia, has created both pressures and opportunities for regional cooperation. While significant progress has been made, challenges remain. These include structural economic differences, sovereignty concerns, the influence of external powers, and the need for stronger institutional frameworks for cooperation.

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