



FRIENDLY COOPERATION WITH CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

– A PRIORITY DIRECTION OF UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY



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The reforms, openness, transparency, renewal, and changes observed in the domestic policy of Uzbekistan in recent years are also evident in the country's foreign policy. As an equal actor in international relations, Uzbekistan pursues an active foreign policy at the regional and global levels by developing mutually beneficial relations with foreign partners. International experts and observers also recognize this consistent and constructive foreign policy. Even in these times of global pandemic, Uzbekistan has paid particular attention to ensuring socio-economic stability and maintaining cooperation with the region's countries and the international community.

One of Uzbekistan's main foreign policy objectives is to create an atmosphere of peace, stability, and security around its territory [1]. In this regard, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has identified the development and strengthening of friendly, good-

neighborly, and mutually beneficial relations with Central Asian states as a key foreign policy priority [2]. Within the 2020 State Program framework, Uzbekistan continued its consistent, open, and pragmatic foreign policy activities, including with its neighbors in Central Asia.

In particular, to bring relations between Uzbekistan and the countries of the Central Asian region to a qualitatively new level, throughout 2020, state bodies for foreign policy and economic activities carried out 35 high-level visits and held various events at multiple levels. Moreover, Tashkent effectively implemented public diplomacy by conducting more than 90 different meetings, video conferences, roundtables, and other events with the participation of scientists and artists, cultural and religious figures, business people and youth, tourism, and sports organizations, public associations, and NGOs [3].



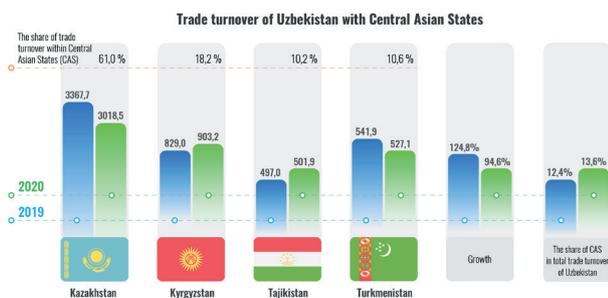
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It should be noted that in recent years, as a result of the initiatives of President Mirziyoyev that the leaders of neighboring countries fully supported, political dialogue and personal trust among the Presidents have been strengthened. Regular consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders have been established [4].



As a result, the level of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region has notably improved. In particular, in 2017-2019, trade turnover with Central Asian countries increased by an average of more than 50 percent annually and amounted to \$5.2 billion. According to the statistics for 2020, despite the global pandemic, the total trade turnover of Uzbekistan with Central Asian states reached \$5 billion [5]. Significantly, the share of Central Asian states in the total foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan increased from 12.4 percent in 2019 to 13.6 percent in 2020, in which the share of Kazakhstan accounts for 61 percent, Kyrgyzstan – 18.2 percent, Turkmenistan – 10.6 percent, and Tajikistan – 10.2 percent [6].



Such improvement in trade and economic relations among the Central Asia states has helped to increase the investment attractiveness of the entire region. In particular, during 2017-2020, more than 300 agreements and about \$75 billion worth of contracts were signed between Uzbekistan and the region's countries [7].

As a result of Uzbekistan's open, constructive, and pragmatic policy towards Central Asia, complex and confusing problems such as water use, delimitation, and demarcation of state borders between Uzbekistan and neighboring countries, use of transport

communications, and state borders crossings have increasingly been addressed and resolved throughout 2017-2020. Five years ago, the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border was crossed by 200-300 people a day. On the eve of the global pandemic, this figure reached 30,000 a day, and 20,000 citizens a day crossed the Uzbek-Tajik border [8].

Uzbekistan's openness and constructive policy towards the Central Asian states are further illustrated by the joint measures taken by the regional leaders during the global pandemic to help each other and mitigate the impact of the spread of the coronavirus. Despite the worldwide pandemic, today, there is an active partnership among the Central Asian states and a constant dialogue among the heads of state. Countries in the region have been providing humanitarian assistance to each other since the early days of the spread of coronavirus infection. Uzbekistan has repeatedly sent humanitarian aid to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In response, our neighbors, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, have provided humanitarian assistance to restore the Sardoba Reservoir. In December 2020, with the support of Uzbekistan, an infectious diseases hospital with 200 beds and fully equipped with the necessary medical equipment was commissioned in Kyrgyzstan [9]. Moreover, during the pandemic, the exchange of information and experience in the field of medicine to fight against coronavirus and the uninterrupted movement of goods across state borders of the Central Asian states was maintained.



In January 2021, the governments of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, together with the United States, launched the Central Asia Investment Partnership to attract at least \$1 billion over five years to support projects that advance private-sector-led growth and increase economic connectivity within Central Asia and the broader region. Working through the C5+1 platform, the initiative will seek to take advantage of opportunities for increasing trade, development, and connectivity to make each country in Central Asia stronger and more prosperous [10].

The growing importance and role of Central Asia in the world community can be seen in the organization of various formats of multilateral cooperation between the region and external actors. Existing multilateral cooperation formats such as “Central Asia – United States”, “Central Asia – European Union”, “Central Asia – Republic of Korea”, “Central Asia – Japan” were enriched with the new ones such as “Central Asia – India”, “Central Asia – China” and “Central Asia – Russia”. Significantly, this indicates that the new environment created by the positive changes in the region has increased the attention of the world’s leading countries to Central Asia. It also shows that foreign countries are focusing on developing bilateral cooperation and a single regional, multilateral relationship.

The role of Central Asian states as a single political and diplomatic entity, as well as the increasing mutual understanding and solidarity of the countries of the region, was reflected in the Joint Statement of the Presidents of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan about the protests and riots in Kyrgyzstan in October 2020. In that joint statement, the heads of other the four Central Asian states expressed the hope that all political parties and public circles in Kyrgyzstan would make the necessary efforts to ensure peace and tranquility and to resolve the problems that had arisen, by adhering to Kyrgyzstan’s constitution and national legislation [11].

In addition, the timely reaction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan [12] and other countries of the region to the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict has demonstrated the willingness of regional actors to manage the situation by their means without external interference. Under the Kyrgyz and Tajik leaders’ moderate approach, escalation of the conflict has been prevented, and both sides agreed on a ceasefire on May 1, 2021 [13]. Meanwhile, complete resolution of border issues is time-consuming. It requires a comprehensive, systemic solution, considering the state and local context. The process of clarifying the boundaries should be accompanied by improving infrastructure and socio-economic benefits for residents of both states [14]. In this regard, the border agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in March 2021 can be seen as the beginning of a new process in Central Asia [15] concerning border issues.

It should be noted that the stability and solidarity of the Central Asian states, firstly, contribute to the well-being of the people. Secondly, it increases the region’s investment attractiveness and creates opportunities for cooperation with foreign partners and investors. The new environment formed and further strengthened between Uzbekistan and the region’s countries will serve to achieve these goals and enhance mutual political, trade, economic, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation.



President Mirziyoyev’s address to Parliament and the State Program for 2021 pays special attention to strengthening good neighborly relations with the Central Asia countries. Specifically, the State Program for 2021 – “The Year of Support for Youth and Public Health Promotion” [16] — includes an action plan for the consistent continuation of relations among Central Asian states:

- the development of a comprehensive program of measures to bring Uzbekistan’s bilateral and regional ties with Central Asian states to a qualitatively new level;
- the effective use of Public Diplomacy;
- the joint solution of existing barriers to strengthening good neighborly relations;
- the creation of favorable conditions for the development of trade and economic ties and the growth of trade turnover, strengthening cooperation;
- ensuring the effective use of transit and logistics potential of the region and the development of transport infrastructure;
- intensification of collaboration between the regions (including border areas) of Central Asia.

Uzbekistan also works to further strengthen its relations with Central Asian states through multilateral organizations, including the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Turkic Council, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and other structures by improving not only political and diplomatic relations but also economic, inter-parliamentary, and public diplomacy connections. Besides, considering the presidency of Uzbekistan of the SCO in 2021-2022, the development of priorities and critical measures is also planned in the State Program for 2021.

Uzbekistan is the only country in the region that borders all Central Asian states; any changes in the country’s political, economic, and cultural spheres directly affect other neighboring states. Uzbekistan’s current foreign policy enhances its international position. It contributes to the sustainable and consistent development of Central Asia as a whole, turning the region into a space of cooperation with enormous opportunity.

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