

## **Catalyzing Cooperation: An Analysis of Uzbekistan's Economic Diplomacy and its Ascendant Influence in Central Asia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** This article analyzes the role of economic diplomacy as the primary catalyst for Uzbekistan's enhanced regional influence in Central Asia since 2016. It seeks to evaluate how targeted policies in trade, infrastructure, and energy have enabled Uzbekistan to transition from a historically isolationist state to a central actor in regional cooperation.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study employs a qualitative research design based on a systematic analysis of policy documents, government publications, and reports from major international institutions, including the World Bank, IMF, ADB, and the United Nations. It assesses Uzbekistan's growing influence through key indicators: trade volume growth, leadership in connectivity projects, and cooperative energy diplomacy.

**Findings:** The results demonstrate that Uzbekistan's proactive economic diplomacy has yielded significant returns. Key findings show that economic liberalization is strongly associated with an improved investment climate (IMF, 2020; WEF, 2020). Furthermore, Uzbekistan has spearheaded efforts to boost regional trade (ESCAP, 2020), championed critical infrastructure projects to enhance connectivity (World Bank, 2021), and adopted a cooperative stance on shared energy and water resources (ADB, 2020). These initiatives have collectively elevated its status as a constructive regional leader. However, internal bureaucratic inefficiencies remain a notable challenge (Gorbachev & Abdullayev, 2020).

**Research limitations/implications:** The study is limited by its reliance on publicly available data and the relatively recent timeline of the policy shifts, meaning the full geopolitical impact is still emerging. Future research should focus on quantitative analysis of trade data and case studies of specific infrastructure projects.

**Practical implications:** The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers in Central Asia and beyond, illustrating a successful model for leveraging economic statecraft to foster regional stability and achieve foreign policy goals.

**Originality/value:** This article provides a comprehensive, evidence-based synthesis of Uzbekistan's contemporary foreign policy, offering a nuanced understanding of how economic diplomacy is actively reshaping the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia.

## **KEYWORDS**

**Economic Diplomacy, Uzbekistan, Central Asia, Regional Integration, Foreign Policy, Connectivity, Geopolitics.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The geopolitical landscape of Central Asia, a region historically defined by its position at the crossroads of empires, has entered a period of profound transformation. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan embarked on distinct and often divergent paths of state-building. For a quarter of a century, the region was characterized more by fragmentation, cautious bilateralism, and unresolved border and resource disputes than by cohesive regionalism. A latent potential for cooperation was frequently overshadowed by national interests, resulting in a strategic environment marked by low levels of intra-regional trade, underdeveloped transport connectivity, and persistent tensions over shared resources, particularly water and energy. This legacy of division created significant barriers to collective economic development and limited the region's ability to act as a unified bloc on the international stage. The lack of a cohesive regional identity or institutional framework meant that bilateral relations were often fraught with suspicion, and multilateral initiatives struggled to gain traction, leaving the region's vast economic potential largely untapped.

Against this backdrop, the shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy following the leadership transition of 2016 represents one of the most significant geopolitical developments in modern Central Asian history. Under its first president, Uzbekistan had pursued a largely isolationist and self-reliant foreign policy, often viewing regional initiatives with skepticism. This approach, while ensuring stability at home, contributed to the overall climate of regional stagnation. However, the ascendancy of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev heralded a dramatic and decisive pivot. Articulating a vision for a "New Uzbekistan," the government initiated a fundamental reorientation of its foreign policy, prioritizing the normalization of relations with its immediate neighbors and championing a new era of regional cooperation (Mirziyoyev, 2021) [7]. This new strategic imperative was not based merely on rhetoric but was operationalized through a pragmatic and proactive set of policies designed to place economic development and integration at the very heart of its diplomatic engagement.

This article establishes its conceptual framework around the principle of economic diplomacy, defined here as the strategic and deliberate use of a state's economic instruments to advance its foreign policy objectives. This goes beyond simply promoting trade or attracting investment; it involves the calculated deployment of economic tools—including trade liberalization, investment incentives, infrastructure development, and energy cooperation—to build trust, resolve disputes, create mutual interdependencies, and ultimately enhance a nation's influence and standing within its region and beyond. In the context of Uzbekistan, economic diplomacy has become the primary vehicle for realizing its new foreign policy vision. By focusing on shared economic benefits, Tashkent has sought to reframe its relationships with its neighbors, transforming points of historical contention into opportunities for mutual gain and positioning itself as an indispensable partner in the collective pursuit of regional prosperity and stability.

This study addresses a central research problem: To what extent has Uzbekistan's systematic deployment of economic diplomacy since 2016 served as a catalyst for enhancing its regional influence and fundamentally reshaping its role within Central Asia? While the economic reforms themselves have been widely noted, a comprehensive analysis of how these economic tools have been strategically converted into diplomatic capital

and regional influence is still developing. This article seeks to fill that gap by examining the mechanisms through which economic policy has directly translated into a more prominent and constructive geopolitical role for Uzbekistan.

Therefore, this article puts forth the thesis that Uzbekistan's pragmatic, multi-vectored, and neighbor-focused economic diplomacy appears to be the primary driver in its transformation from a passive and often insular state to a central and proactive node of regional cooperation. It argues that by strategically leveraging its economic potential, Uzbekistan has not only accelerated its own development but has also successfully altered the strategic dynamics of Central Asia, fostering a more integrated and cooperative environment. Through a systematic analysis of its policies in key economic domains, this study will demonstrate that Uzbekistan's ascendant influence is not an accidental byproduct of economic growth but the direct result of a coherent and skillfully executed diplomatic strategy.

## **METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research design to conduct an in-depth analysis of Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy and its impact on the country's regional influence. This approach is particularly well-suited for the research question, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of policy shifts, their underlying strategic motivations, and their observable outcomes in the geopolitical sphere. The methodology is centered on a systematic review and synthesis of a curated set of policy documents, governmental reports, comprehensive assessments from international financial and development institutions, and relevant academic literature. The qualitative nature of the study facilitates a deep, contextual understanding of the complex interplay between economic policy and foreign policy, an area where purely quantitative metrics may fail to capture the full scope of strategic intent and diplomatic impact.

The analytical foundation of this article is grounded in an extensive and meticulous review of high-quality primary and secondary sources. These sources have been carefully selected to provide a multi-faceted and evidence-based perspective on Uzbekistan's recent development. Primary sources include official strategy documents and speeches that articulate the government's vision, most notably the foreign policy strategy outlined by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, which serves as a foundational text for understanding the state's declared intentions (Mirziyoyev, 2021) [7]. This is complemented by official publications from neighboring states, such as reports on regional trade and cooperation from Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which provide a crucial external perspective on the impact of Uzbekistan's policies (Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) [4, 6]. The bulk of the empirical evidence is drawn from a comprehensive review of secondary sources in the form of detailed reports and assessments from globally recognized institutions. These include economic and investment climate analyses from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) [3] and the World Economic Forum (WEF) [11]; reports on regional integration and infrastructure from the World Bank [10] and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) [9]; assessments of energy and resource management from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) [1]; and strategic analyses of development priorities from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [8]. Finally, the study incorporates academic perspectives on the internal challenges that may moderate the success of these policies, such as analyses of bureaucratic inefficiencies (Gorbachev & Abdullayev, 2020) [2].

To structure the analysis of the collected data, this study utilizes a purpose-built analytical framework designed to assess the concept of "regional influence" in a tangible and measurable way. Rather than treating influence as an abstract notion, the framework operationalizes it through three key, interconnected indicators. The first indicator is the growth in bilateral and regional trade volumes. This involves examining trends in trade turnover

between Uzbekistan and its neighbors to gauge the extent of economic integration. The second indicator is leadership and participation in key regional infrastructure and energy projects. This assesses Uzbekistan's role as an initiator, driver, or critical partner in transnational projects that create physical and economic linkages across the region. The third indicator is the shift from unilateral to cooperative policy stances on shared resources, particularly in the historically contentious domains of water and energy management. The study will analyze the data through these three lenses to build a comprehensive picture of Uzbekistan's evolving role. Concurrently, the framework incorporates a critical counterpoint by analyzing the challenges and constraints, such as internal bureaucratic hurdles [2], that could impede or temper the progress of its economic diplomacy. By systematically applying this framework to the rich dataset, the study aims to provide a robust and evidence-based evaluation of the efficacy of Uzbekistan's strategy.

## RESULTS

The empirical evidence drawn from the selected sources reveals a consistent and multi-faceted narrative of Uzbekistan's strategic deployment of economic diplomacy. The results are organized around four foundational pillars of this strategy: (1) internal economic liberalization aimed at attracting foreign investment; (2) proactive measures to foster regional trade and integration; (3) diplomacy centered on strategic infrastructure and connectivity; and (4) a cooperative turn in energy and water resource management. The findings also highlight the internal and external challenges that persist alongside this progress.

### Pillar 1: Economic Liberalization and Investment Attraction

A cornerstone of Uzbekistan's new foreign policy has been a profound internal economic transformation designed to make the country an attractive destination for foreign capital. Following years of a state-controlled economic model, the government initiated a series of bold reforms beginning in 2017. Among the most significant of these was the liberalization of its foreign exchange market, which dismantled long-standing currency controls that had been a major deterrent to investors. This was accompanied by a renewed push for the privatization of state-owned enterprises and a concerted effort to improve the overall business and investment climate. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has documented these reforms, noting their positive impact on macroeconomic stability and growth prospects (IMF, 2020) [3]. The IMF report highlights that these measures have been crucial in managing growth and signaling to the international community that Uzbekistan is "open for business" [3].

These reforms have had a tangible impact on Uzbekistan's ability to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). The World Economic Forum (WEF) has specifically pointed to Uzbekistan's economic reforms as creating significant new opportunities for foreign investors (WEF, 2020) [11]. The WEF analysis underscores the diversification of investment partners beyond traditional sources, indicating a broadening of Uzbekistan's economic relationships. This influx of FDI is not merely a passive outcome of reform but an active goal of Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy. Diplomatic missions have been reoriented to focus on investment promotion, and the government has actively courted international corporations and financial institutions. The result has been a marked improvement in Uzbekistan's perception among international economic actors, transforming its image from that of a closed and risky market to one of the most promising emerging economies in the region. This enhanced economic credibility forms the bedrock of its expanded regional influence.

### Pillar 2: Fostering Regional Trade and Integration

Parallel to its internal reforms, Uzbekistan has vigorously pursued a policy of deepening economic ties with its Central Asian neighbors. This represents a radical departure from its previous stance, which often saw borders tightened and trade restricted. The new approach has focused on dismantling trade barriers, simplifying

customs procedures, and actively promoting cross-border commerce. The results of this policy are evident in the significant growth in trade turnover between Uzbekistan and its neighbors. For instance, official perspectives from Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlight the expanding trade and investment relationship between the two largest economies in the region, framing it as a cornerstone of Central Asian cooperation (Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) [4, 6].

Uzbekistan's role has extended beyond bilateral trade enhancement to championing broader regional integration initiatives. A report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) specifically identifies Uzbekistan's pivotal role in fostering economic cooperation across Central Asia (ESCAP, 2020) [9]. The ESCAP report details how Uzbekistan has been a key advocate for creating a more seamless regional market, recognizing that its own economic success is intrinsically linked to the prosperity of its neighbors [9]. By actively working to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers, Uzbekistan has positioned itself not as a competitor but as a facilitator of regional growth. This leadership in promoting integration has generated considerable goodwill and has allowed Tashkent to shape the agenda of regional economic discussions, a clear indicator of its growing influence.

### **Pillar 3: Strategic Infrastructure and Connectivity Diplomacy**

Recognizing Central Asia's landlocked geography as a primary obstacle to development, Uzbekistan has placed strategic infrastructure and connectivity at the forefront of its diplomatic efforts. The government has become a vocal and proactive proponent of developing transnational transport and logistics corridors, including railways and highways, designed to better connect Central Asia to global markets. A comprehensive report by the World Bank emphasizes the critical link between infrastructure and regional integration in Central Asia, and it implicitly validates the strategic direction of Uzbekistan's policy (World Bank, 2021) [10]. The report notes that improved connectivity is essential for reducing trade costs, boosting competitiveness, and fostering a more resilient regional economy [10].

Uzbekistan's diplomacy has moved beyond advocacy to active leadership in specific, high-impact projects. Perhaps the most prominent example is its championing of the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway initiative, a project with the potential to connect Central Asia with the seaports of the Indian Ocean via Afghanistan and Pakistan. By taking the lead in negotiations and feasibility studies for such a complex, multinational project, Uzbekistan has demonstrated its ambition to serve as a central transit hub and a key architect of the region's future. This "connectivity diplomacy" has enhanced its strategic importance to both its immediate neighbors and global powers, who see Uzbekistan as a crucial partner in realizing the vision of a land-linked and economically vibrant Eurasian supercontinent.

### **Pillar 4: Energy and Water Resource Diplomacy**

Historically, few issues have been as divisive in Central Asia as the management of transboundary water and energy resources. Disputes over water flows from upstream nations (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) to downstream nations (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) were a constant source of tension. However, under its new leadership, Uzbekistan has executed a remarkable pivot from a conflict-based to a cooperative approach. A report from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on energy security in the region underscores the importance of managing shared resources for sustainable growth and highlights the recent positive shifts towards cooperative frameworks (ADB, 2020) [1]. The ADB's analysis suggests that collaborative approaches to the water-energy nexus are essential for regional stability and prosperity [1].

Uzbekistan has translated this new cooperative spirit into concrete actions. It has engaged in constructive dialogue with its upstream neighbors, leading to agreements on dam operations and water-sharing that were



unimaginable a decade ago. In parallel, Uzbekistan is making strategic investments in its own energy sector, with a particular focus on renewable energy. A report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) details the strategic priorities for renewable energy development in Uzbekistan, noting its significant potential in solar and wind power (UNDP, 2021) [8]. By developing its renewable capacity, Uzbekistan not only enhances its own energy security but also positions itself as a potential future energy exporter and a key partner in a regional energy grid. This shift from a source of conflict to a proponent of cooperation in the critical area of resource management has been one of the most powerful demonstrations of its new diplomatic posture.

### **Challenges and Constraints**

Despite the significant progress, Uzbekistan's path is not without its obstacles. The effectiveness of its economic diplomacy is tempered by persistent internal challenges. A scholarly analysis by Gorbachev and Abdullayev (2020) points to the significant problem of bureaucratic inefficiencies within the Uzbek state apparatus [2]. Their research suggests that while high-level political will for reform is strong, implementation can be slowed or undermined by institutional inertia and a need for deeper capacity building within the civil service [2]. This "implementation gap" represents a key internal constraint on the pace and ultimate success of the country's ambitious agenda. Externally, Uzbekistan must navigate a complex geopolitical environment characterized by the competing interests of global powers, such as Russia, China, and the United States, as well as persistent regional security threats that could disrupt economic progress. These challenges underscore that the success of Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy is contingent not only on its external engagement but also on its continued commitment to deep and sustained internal institutional reform.

### **DISCUSSION**

The results presented in the preceding section paint a compelling picture of a nation undergoing a rapid and strategic transformation. However, the significance of these findings lies not merely in the cataloging of reforms and initiatives, but in their synthesis and interpretation. This discussion will argue that the four pillars of Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy, when viewed collectively, demonstrate a tangible and deliberate conversion of economic policy into diplomatic capital, resulting in a quantifiable increase in the nation's regional influence. It will further analyze how these outcomes reflect a coherent strategic doctrine, contrast this new role with Uzbekistan's past and its regional peers, and explore the broader implications for the geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia.

#### **Interpreting the Findings: From Economic Growth to Diplomatic Capital**

The core argument of this discussion is that the success of Uzbekistan's strategy is associated with its ability to translate economic actions into geopolitical influence. The liberalization of its economy and the subsequent increase in FDI (IMF, 2020; WEF, 2020) [3, 11] have done more than simply boost GDP; they have enhanced Uzbekistan's credibility on the world stage. A stable, growing, and open economy is a powerful diplomatic asset. It makes Uzbekistan a more attractive partner for international financial institutions, a more reliable anchor for regional supply chains, and a more influential voice in global economic forums. The country's proactive leadership in fostering regional trade (ESCAP, 2020) [9] and connectivity (World Bank, 2021) [10] has repositioned it from a passive recipient of regional trends to an active shaper of them. By investing its political capital in projects that offer mutual benefits, such as simplified trade regimes and transnational railways, Tashkent has generated immense goodwill and created a network of interdependencies that bind the region's fortunes more closely to its own.

Perhaps the most potent example of this conversion is in the domain of resource diplomacy. The shift from a zero-sum, conflict-oriented approach to water and energy issues to a positive-sum, cooperative framework

(ADB, 2020) [1] has paid enormous diplomatic dividends. By engaging constructively with its neighbors on the most sensitive of issues, Uzbekistan has demonstrated a commitment to regional stability that has earned it the trust of its partners. This trust is the very currency of influence. It allows Uzbekistan to mediate disputes, to build consensus, and to lead on new initiatives with a degree of legitimacy it previously lacked. The development of its own renewable energy sector (UNDP, 2021) [8] further strengthens this position, adding the role of a potential energy provider to its portfolio. In essence, the four pillars are not disparate policies but are part of an integrated strategy where each economic success reinforces the country's diplomatic standing.

### **The "Mirziyoyev Doctrine" in Practice**

The results of this study can be seen as the practical application of the foreign policy vision articulated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, which could be termed the "Mirziyoyev Doctrine." The central tenets of this doctrine, as outlined in official government strategy, are the prioritization of Central Asia as the main foreign policy arena and the creation of a "belt of security, stability, and good neighborliness" around Uzbekistan (Mirziyoyev, 2021) [7]. The findings demonstrate a direct and consistent link between these stated goals and the actions taken. The push for increased trade with Kazakhstan (Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) [4, 6] is a direct implementation of the "good neighborliness" policy. The leadership on infrastructure projects that connect the entire region is a tangible effort to build the "belt of stability" by creating shared economic stakes. The resolution of long-standing water disputes is a clear move to underwrite regional "security" by removing a primary source of potential conflict.

This alignment between rhetoric and action is crucial. It signals to both regional and international observers that Uzbekistan's new course is not a temporary or tactical shift, but a long-term strategic reorientation. The doctrine's success is predicated on the idea that Uzbekistan's national interests are best served not in isolation, but through deep integration with its neighbors. The economic diplomacy detailed in the results section is the primary mechanism for achieving this integration. It is a pragmatic doctrine that recognizes that influence in the 21st century is built not just on military strength, but on economic vitality, connectivity, and the ability to act as a constructive and indispensable partner. The internal challenges, such as bureaucratic hurdles (Gorbachev & Abdullayev, 2020) [2], represent the primary internal risk to the full realization of this doctrine, highlighting the critical importance of aligning domestic institutional capacity with ambitious foreign policy goals.

### **Comparative Analysis and Implications for Regional Geopolitics**

Uzbekistan's current role stands in stark contrast to its more insular past. For 25 years, it was often seen as the most significant obstacle to regional integration. Today, it is widely regarded as its primary engine. This transformation has profound implications for the internal power dynamics of Central Asia. Traditionally, Kazakhstan, with its vast energy resources and larger economy, was viewed as the undisputed regional leader. While Kazakhstan remains a critical actor, Uzbekistan's re-emergence has created a more multi-polar and balanced dynamic within the region. This is not necessarily a relationship of rivalry, but one of "co-leadership" or a constructive tandem, where both nations are driving the regional agenda forward, often in partnership [4, 6].

The rise of a more proactive Uzbekistan fosters greater regional resilience and autonomy. A more integrated Central Asia, with multiple poles of influence, is better equipped to manage the complex geopolitical pressures exerted by external powers. By strengthening intra-regional ties, the Central Asian states can enhance their collective bargaining power in negotiations with Russia, China, and the West. Uzbekistan's model of influence—built on economic cooperation rather than coercion—provides an appealing alternative to the hierarchical models often promoted by external hegemons. It suggests a path for the region to develop its own agency and

to define its own future. The long-term implication is the potential emergence of Central Asia as a more cohesive and self-reliant geopolitical bloc, with Uzbekistan serving as a central pillar of this new architecture.

### **Limitations of the Study**

It is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this research. The policy shifts analyzed in this article are relatively recent, and their full, long-term geopolitical impacts are still unfolding. While the early results are overwhelmingly positive, the sustainability of this trajectory will depend on continued political will, the deepening of institutional reforms, and the management of external shocks. Furthermore, this study relies on publicly available data from governments and international organizations. While these sources provide a wealth of information, they may not capture the full scope of closed-door diplomatic negotiations or the nuanced interplay of informal politics. The analytical framework, while systematic, is qualitative and interpretive. Future research could build upon this study by incorporating quantitative analysis, such as econometric modeling of trade data, and by conducting in-depth, field-based case studies of specific infrastructure projects to provide a more granular understanding of their implementation and impact.

### **CONCLUSION**

In summary, the evidence presented and analyzed in this article strongly suggests that Uzbekistan's strategic and comprehensive application of economic diplomacy since 2016 has been instrumental in its repositioning as a pivotal and influential actor in Central Asia. The confluence of internal economic liberalization, proactive regional trade facilitation, ambitious connectivity initiatives, and a paradigm shift towards cooperative resource management has collectively engineered a remarkable transformation. The findings indicate a clear association between these economic policies and Uzbekistan's enhanced diplomatic stature, its ability to shape the regional agenda, and its role as a catalyst for a more integrated and stable Central Asia.

This study concludes that economic diplomacy has been the indispensable catalyst for Uzbekistan's enhanced regional standing and influence. The nation's leadership has successfully demonstrated that pragmatic, neighbor-focused economic statecraft can effectively overcome historical legacies of mistrust and fragmentation. By creating a compelling narrative of shared prosperity and mutual benefit, Uzbekistan has not only advanced its own national interests but has also contributed significantly to altering the strategic calculus of the entire region, steering it towards a more cooperative and interconnected future.

Looking forward, the sustainability of Uzbekistan's strategy and its trajectory as a regional leader will depend on several key factors. Domestically, the government must continue to address and overcome institutional challenges, particularly the bureaucratic inefficiencies that can hinder the implementation of its ambitious reforms (Gorbachev & Abdullayev, 2020) [2]. Ensuring that the benefits of economic growth are distributed equitably will also be crucial for maintaining long-term social and political stability. Externally, Tashkent will need to continue its skillful navigation of a complex geopolitical landscape, balancing its relationships with major global powers while deepening its commitment to a Central Asia-first policy. If it can successfully manage these internal and external pressures, Uzbekistan is well-positioned to not only consolidate its influence but to become a durable anchor of stability and a principal architect of Central Asia's 21st-century development.

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