

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND UZBEKISTAN IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: AGENCY AND CHINA’S SECURITY AND ECONOMIC ROLE IN CENTRAL ASIA



<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7336738>

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***Annotation.** This research arises from the Western/Russian-centric character of studies on Uzbekistan’s foreign policy that have ignored or downplayed China’s security and economic role in the development of the country’s foreign relations. The paper provides a preliminary analysis of data collected during fieldwork in Uzbekistan between May and July 2022 and underlines how the relevance and characteristics of Uzbekistan’s relations with China help to uncover the importance of Uzbekistan’s agency in developing its foreign policy, away from analyses focused on the great powers and their influence on Central Asia.*

***Key words:** Uzbekistan, China, agency, Central Asia, SCO, BRI, security, trade, development, foreign policy.*

In the academic literature, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy during Islam Karimov has often been described as fluctuant due to its reactions to geopolitical and regional events resulting in important sudden shifts in terms of international relations (Anceschi, 2010; Cooley, 2012; Fumagalli, 2017; Spechler and Spechler, 2010). As with any common depiction, the lenses and perspectives through which research narratives are developed influence the outcome of research. Most political scientists in Western countries, and often in Russia and Central Asia, share a common Russia-centric perspective, due to academic background or to the influence of Russian language in education, academia and political elites (Dadabaev and Heathershaw, 2020). In addition, Western attention to Central Asia in the aftermath of 9/11 has produced a disproportionate amount of literature connected to the role of the United States in the region and in Uzbekistan. It is not a case therefore, that the narratives created around Uzbekistan’s foreign policy focus strongly on the country’s relations with the Russian Federation and the USA.

This paper follows the path well designed by scholar like Timur Dadabaev (2016, 2018a) in both a theoretical and a substantial direction. Starting from the latter, this paper supports the enhanced relevance of the Asian vector of Uzbekistani foreign policy, as in the context of fluctuations in terms of relations with Russia and the US two important Asian partners maintained solid and stable relations with Uzbekistan: South Korea and the People’s Republic of China (Dadabaev, 2018a). Although South Korea has been a very relevant partner for Tashkent after the country’s independence from the USSR, this paper will focus on the PRC due to the interesting upward trend of its relations with Uzbekistan towards the present role as main trade associate and strategic partner, also through the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Belt and Road Initiative. The aim is to rebalance the preponderance of analyses on relations with Russia and the USA in Uzbekistani foreign policy.

At the same time, theoretically the paper takes the distance from normative and interest-focused approaches, by supporting the constructivist character of Uzbekistan’s foreign relations, where interests and values are developed and readjusted as a result of social interactions with the

domestic, regional and international environment and with global actors (Hay, 2002; Dadabaev, 2017). This approach does not only suggest that Uzbekistan's foreign policy fundamentals have evolved over time depending on the different substantial and temporal contexts, but that the empirical relevance of perspectives from Uzbekistan, and not only from foreign actors, become central to understand the direction of the country's foreign relations.

This is relevant in the context of the analysis of China's role in Uzbekistan, particularly when performed by scholars with a background in China studies. As Dadabaev and Heathershaw (2020) underline, “the absence of agency or the attribution of limited agency to CA states remains the central problem” (p. 757) in IR perspectives, where “Central Asian states are imagined as ‘weak’, ‘small’, and client states that have no choice but to sign up, on the terms of these large powers” (p. 750). Hence, after arguing for more research on the Asian vector and defusing the focus on Russia and the United States, the paper calls for empirical research and extensive engagement with local Uzbekistani actors to avoid building new colonised narratives from East to substitute those from the North-West.

Blending discussions from Central Asian studies, China studies, and global studies, the article looks at the role of Central Asian agency in the construction of China's role in Central Asia and potentially in the Global South. This contribution is a preliminary analysis of data coming from two months of fieldwork in Uzbekistan between May and July 2022, where around 30 Uzbekistani officials, scholars, businesspeople, activists, together with a few Chinese businessmen were interviewed by the author on Uzbekistan's relations with China.

The United States and China share many similarities in terms of their approach to newly independent Central Asian states, particularly in terms of security cooperation. Both powers have been attracted to the region due to the enhanced danger of instability caused by the Taliban upheaval in 1996 (Primbetov and Mukashev, 2016). At the time, both the Clinton administration and the leadership of the PRC started considering Central Asia as a more relevant strategic area where to focus diplomatic attention. While the US did so by a series of state visits to the region (US Department of State, 2022), China started cooperating with Russia to develop the Shanghai Five border settlement grouping into a security mechanism.

It was during this period that both the US and China started engaging more directly with Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia and the only one of the three Central Asian Republics neighbouring Afghanistan that was interested, or able, to cooperate with foreign powers in the field of security (Turkmenistan maintained a neutral position and Tajikistan was recovering from the civil war). If the process was pushed massively by 9/11, both the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in mid-2001 and the American visits to Uzbekistan underline preliminary security interests by the two powers in the region.

At the same time, from an economic perspective, the late 1990s represented years of economic crises both in (East/Southeast) Asia and Russia. The Asian economic crisis in 1997 severely impacted the international image of the so-called Asian tigers and deflated the allure of a number of developing and developed countries in Asia such as South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, whose economic success was a popular model for other non-Western countries in terms of economic development (see Asian influence in Karimov's post-independence economic policy, Hanks 2000). Even more importantly, the newly established Russian Federation was going through political and economic troubles that led to a full economic debacle in 1998 and to a change of leadership and path in the Russian state.

These developments seemed reason enough to push the Uzbekistani leadership to explore new paths outside what could be considered a traditional direction of Central Asian politics towards the Eurasian continent and Russia. China and the United States were perceived as better alternatives, especially when compared to the rest of the declining neighbourhood. The War on Terror and

resulting conflicts in Central Asia and the Middle East seemed therefore more of an opportunity to move further through a path that was already traced than a driver of geopolitical change.

It is in this context that Uzbekistan decided to join the Western-leaning GUUAM in 1997 and not to renew the Collective Security Treaty in 1999. This move can be analysed in many ways depending on different positions. Two opposing perspectives seem relevant for our discussion, one from the academic literature and the other from a direct source in Uzbekistan. The first depicts this kind of developments in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy as a desire for international recognition by the world’s leading powers (Fazendeiro, 2017), the second as a proclivity and admiration by President Islam Karimov towards the developed West, as opposed to the declining Soviet space (Anonymous personal interview).

Yet, if we add China to the picture, these developments can be put in a context of a general policy shift in Uzbekistan’s foreign relations towards less binding commitments and new potential vectors of cooperation. Uzbekistan’s participation to the founding of the SCO in 2001 and subsequent proposal to open the SCO Regional Anti-terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent fuelled the Asian vector of Uzbekistani foreign policy and circumscribed multilateral relations with Russia in what can be described an institution of Asian regionalism (Marochkin and Bezborodov, 2022). In this context it is hard to subscribe to one or the other reason or set of reasons for change in Uzbekistan’s policy, but what is clear is that economic and security contexts and the connected role of global and regional actors importantly informed the country’s policy.

Another instance reverses the experience of the late 1990s and pushes Uzbekistan away from the West, through a process similar to the one that led the country to join GUUAM and SCO and to leave the CST. In 2005, while the Colour Revolutions were sweeping the post-Soviet world, an anti-leadership protest in Andijan led to state repression. Escalating in a crisis between the United States and Uzbekistan, the event resulted in the request of expulsion of US troops from the Uzbekistani Karshi-Khanabad base used between 2001 and 2005 by the US-led coalition fighting in Afghanistan. In this instance the blame game is easier as the Bush administration flagship ‘Freedom Agenda’, which refocused the US security agenda around democracy and human rights, alienated Uzbekistan, and led to distrust towards American presence in Central Asia. The latter was described by scholars as an instance of ‘regime security’, i.e., the necessity to protect the integrity of the Uzbekistani regime endangered by the reformist agenda (Fumagalli, 2017).

An anonymous Uzbekistani official interviewed by the author said that in the case of Andijan “the SCO gave us [Uzbekistan] political support”. And again that “US policy at the time was to bring the destabilisation from the Middle East to Central Asia, the SCO was used to balance American influence through a common declaration” (Anonymous Official, personal interview). Again the role of the SCO is hyped in this context, but not as the cause for Uzbekistan’s change of heart as often depicted by the Western focus on influence from great powers, but as an agential instrument for Uzbekistan to amplify its voice and balance American presence, with the help of Russia, China and the other member states that join the common declaration asking the US military to leave the region.

However, although Uzbekistan in 2005 re-joined the CSTO and the newly born Eurasian Economic Community and seemed to have reconnected with the Eurasian tradition, the redirection did not last long, and Uzbekistan left EuraSeC in 2008 and the CSTO in 2012. The focus on regime security was short-lived and much more convincing here is the literature’s focus on self-reliance, connected to recognition, prestige and equality in the international arena and lack of control from outside powers (Fazendeiro, 2017). It is impossible to not consider non-interference in internal affairs as an attractive characteristic of non-Western cooperation. Yet again the context here is relevant and the Asian vector can help us add some nuance to these developments.

On the security side, the CSTO looked like an uneasy forum for Uzbekistan. Although the postcolonial features of Uzbekistan’s relations with Russia are very debated amongst the Uzbekistani academic community and political elite, it was clear from discussions during fieldwork that the Uzbekistani elite recognises the problematic aspect of Russian influence in the country, particularly amongst the younger generations. An aspect of Uzbekistani foreign relations that became particularly relevant after 2008, when Russian international behaviour changed towards a more assertive role (see war in Georgia and the developing situation in Ukraine).

This aspect connects well to the ideologically neo-colonial features of the American freedom agenda. Both ideological frameworks proved difficult to support relations with Uzbekistan. The Obama administration’s decision to rebuild bridges with Uzbekistan to support the Northern Distribution Network for the war in Afghanistan removed part of the ideological pressure, but did not mean that US-Uzbekistan relations reached the level of the US-Uzbekistani honeymoon before 2005. A parallel strike against American global power was surely represented by Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008, which cracked the perfection of Western pre-eminence in the post-Cold War order.

In both developments, the role of the PRC is fundamental for analytical purposes. In the context of security, the China-centred SCO and RATS represented much more comfortable forums for Uzbekistan’s participation in regional antiterrorism and military cooperation. Although many in the West and outside the West depict the vote by consensus (unanimous vote) as leading to the ineffectiveness of the organisation, the perspective from Uzbekistan is that consensus allowed each member state to contribute to the institutional and ideological backbone of the organisation. An anonymous Uzbekistani official interviewed in Tashkent affirmed for example that “Uzbekistan’s contribution to the SCO was to make sure that the organisation was never against third countries or international organisations”. This perception of agency in the SCO, where “even a small country can block a big initiative” (Uzbekistani official, personal interview), is a fundamental aspect of the China-inspired institution.

But the most important aspect of China’s relations with Uzbekistan lies in their economic partnership. The Western literature has often depicted China’s role in Uzbekistan as tepid, compared to the much more prominent Chinese presence in other Central Asian countries, even after the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012), when China was to become Uzbekistan’s main trade partner (from 2014 almost continuously until nowadays, Dadabaev, 2018b).

If Karimov’s foreign policy was considered unusual by the literature, his economic policy was depicted as very protectionist, illiberal and conservative. Again, the ‘rules of the game’ as described by Fazendeiro (2015) made it difficult for foreign powers to impact the carefully crafted status quo that saw Russian pre-eminence balanced by relations with South Korea and regional partners. In this context China managed in the years between 2001 and 2014 to match Russia’s economic role and curtail the relevance of other partners. One interesting perspective from Uzbekistan is that China’s support of Uzbekistan during the GFC was fundamental in paving the way to China’s enhanced cooperation with Uzbekistan (Paramonov, personal interview). Taking from this and moving towards the conclusion, we will shift the discussion to a more general analysis of why China succeeded in building strong economic ties with Uzbekistan.

The aspects we singled-out about Uzbekistan’s foreign policy are sensitivity to context, preservation of political regime and non-interference in internal affairs, uneasiness with neo-colonial behaviour (often called by other names), and evolving security and economic necessities. Surely, with the help of contextual aspects, China has managed to match these requirements, even if, as the global literature underlines, China’s presence in developing countries have the potential to impact economic security and independence leading to neo-colonial relations with the PRC. China’s

relations with Central Asia have recently been characterised as an ‘inadvertent empire’ (Pantucci & Petersen, 2022).

While some perspectives connect this to (plural) China’s adaptivity to the contexts in its international cooperation abroad (Carnegie, 2022), where the PRC is seen to have conformed with Uzbekistan’s conditions (Mukhamedjanov, personal interview), other voices in Uzbekistan point to the socialisation of China’s own interests in Central Asia through the SCO and the BRI (Tolipov, personal interview).

What is lacking in the literature, and thus has become the focus of this research, is an in-depth look into Uzbekistan’s agency in this process. While the limited length of this contribution does not allow for a complete outline of Uzbekistan’s agential tools in influencing the so-called adaptation of China’s behaviour to the context or the socialisation of Chinese ideas into Central Asia, the findings of this research point at economic, legislative, political and security aspects of Uzbekistan’s (perception of) agency. While the relevance of this analysis is mostly connected to China’s role in Uzbekistan, it does impact the literature on Uzbekistan’s foreign policy and adds contextual empirical data to research in International Development Studies on China’s economic and political impact on developing countries.

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