

## **THE POLITICAL IMAGE OF UZBEKISTAN IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE CONTEXT OF COOPERATION AND INTEGRATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This research explores the evolving leadership image of Uzbekistan in the context of Central Asia's political, economic, and social landscape. Since the beginning of the reform era, Uzbekistan has actively promoted regional cooperation and pursued integration policies aimed at strengthening ties with neighboring countries. The paper analyzes Uzbekistan's initiatives in diplomacy, trade, infrastructure development, and cultural exchange to assess how these efforts have shaped its reputation as a regional leader. The study also examines the challenges and opportunities facing Uzbekistan as it balances national interests with collective regional goals. Emphasis is placed on recent foreign policy strategies and the country's role in multilateral platforms. Through a comprehensive evaluation, the paper highlights Uzbekistan's growing influence in promoting peace, development, and unity within Central Asia.*

**Key words:** *Uzbekistan, Central Asia, regional cooperation, integration, leadership image, foreign policy, diplomacy, multilateralism, regional development, international relations.*

### **ANNOTATSIYA**

*Ushbu ilmiy ish O'zbekistonning Markaziy Osiyodagi yetakchilik imidji shakllanishini hamda uning mintaqaviy hamkorlik va integratsiyaga yo'naltirilgan siyosatini o'rganadi. So'nggi yillarda O'zbekiston qo'shni davlatlar bilan do'stona munosabatlarni rivojlantirish, savdo-iqtisodiy aloqalarni mustahkamlash, infratuzilma loyihalarini amalga oshirish va madaniy almashinuv orqali mintaqada barqarorlik va taraqqiyotga xizmat qilayotgan faol tashqi siyosat yuritmoqda. Tadqiqotda mamlakatning diplomatik tashabbuslari, ko'p tomonlama tashkilotlardagi ishtiroki, shuningdek, mintaqaviy yetakchilik sari intilishdagi imkoniyat va qiyinchiliklar tahlil qilinadi. O'zbekistonning mintaqada tinchlik, taraqqiyot va birlikni mustahkamlashdagi o'rni keng yoritib beriladi.*

***Kalit so‘zlar:*** O‘zbekiston, Markaziy Osiyo, mintaqaviy hamkorlik, integratsiya, yetakchilik imidji, tashqi siyosat, diplomatiya, ko‘p tomonlama munosabatlar, mintaqaviy taraqqiyot, xalqaro munosabatlar.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Central Asia is one of the important regions in geopolitical and economic terms, and the cooperation among the countries within it is crucial for regional stability and development. In recent years, Uzbekistan has been striving to strengthen its position as one of the leading countries in the region. The openness in foreign policy, the strengthening of friendly relations with neighboring countries, and active participation in economic integration and transport-logistics projects are contributing to the formation of Uzbekistan's leadership image in Central Asia.

The foreign policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan, under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, is aimed at strengthening regional integration, focusing on enhancing strategic cooperation with neighboring countries, and actively working to ensure the alignment of economic and political interests. Additionally, we will analyze Uzbekistan's cooperation with Central Asian countries, its economic and diplomatic relations, and its role in the processes of regional integration.

## **METHODS**

This research is based on a qualitative methodological approach, combining descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods. Data were collected from a variety of sources, including official documents, academic literature, expert analyses, and international reports. The study utilizes content analysis to examine Uzbekistan's policy documents, speeches, and regional cooperation strategies. A comparative analysis is also applied to evaluate Uzbekistan's regional role in contrast with other Central Asian countries. Through this multi-method approach, the study aims to comprehensively assess Uzbekistan's leadership image and its contribution to regional integration and cooperation.

## **DISCUSSIONS AND RESULTS**

One of the main priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy is to establish close cooperation with the Central Asian countries. Since 2017, the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has been pursuing a policy based on open dialogue with regional states and addressing regional issues<sup>1</sup>.

**The issues in Uzbekistan's relations with regional countries.** The relations established with neighboring states by Uzbekistan until 2016 required a thorough

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<sup>1</sup> Mirziyoyev Sh. M. Markaziy Osiyo davlatlari bilan ochiq muloqot siyosati. O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti rasmiy sayti, 2018. URL: <https://president.uz/uz>.

reassessment of all matters<sup>2</sup>. Long-standing disputes, when approached correctly, could lead to reasonable solutions, but the "contradictions" regarding these issues not only resulted in disagreements but often caused unpleasant incidents at the borders as well.

The main reason for the disagreement was the lack of compromise on the use of water and transport communications<sup>3</sup>, the delimitation of state borders between Uzbekistan and neighboring countries, and the crossing of border points.

In 2018, at the initiative of Uzbekistan, a **"Consultative Meeting of the Leaders of Central Asian States"** was organized in Tashkent<sup>4</sup>. This format created a new platform for discussing important issues among regional states and achieving mutual agreements. This indicates that Uzbekistan is actively participating as a leading state in the processes of regional integration.

The economic relations of Uzbekistan with the Central Asian countries are strengthening, and the volume of trade is increasing<sup>5</sup>. The country is striving to enhance its economic leadership by developing regional trade and implementing infrastructure projects.

**Uzbekistan–Kazakhstan trade cooperation.** In recent years, the trade volume between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan has approached 5 billion dollars. Both countries are implementing joint projects in the industrial and agricultural sectors.

**Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan cooperation.** Uzbekistan has expanded transport-logistics cooperation to enhance opportunities for access to Iranian ports through Turkmenistan<sup>6</sup>. This demonstrates Uzbekistan's leading role in the regional transport network.

**Uzbekistan–Tajikistan relations.** In recent years, cooperation with Tajikistan in the economic and energy sectors has developed, and mutual trade volume has sharply increased. Uzbekistan is contributing to regional cooperation by establishing electricity exports to Tajikistan.

Water resources in Central Asia are of strategic importance. Uzbekistan is promoting a balanced approach to resolving water and energy issues as a regional leader.

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<sup>2</sup> Мирзиёев Ш. М. Развитие регионального сотрудничества в Центральной Азии. Журнал международных отношений, 2019. URL: <https://journal.uz/ru>.

<sup>3</sup> Mirziyoyev Sh. M. Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy in Central Asia. Central Asia Review, 2020. URL: <https://centralasia.org/en>.

<sup>4</sup> Markaziy Osiyo davlatlari rahbarlarining Konsultativ uchrashuvi. O'zbekiston Milliy axborot agentligi, 2018. URL: <https://uza.uz/uz>.

<sup>5</sup> Экономическое сотрудничество Узбекистана с Центральной Азией. Новости Центральной Азии, 2021. URL: <https://news.ca/ru>.

<sup>6</sup> O'zbekiston-Turkmaniston transport-logistika hamkorligi. Transport va logistika jurnali, № 5., 2022. – B. 23-29.

Uzbekistan is working to improve cooperative relations with Tajikistan regarding the Rogun Hydropower Plant project<sup>7</sup>. This project, which previously caused contentious debates, is now being addressed through bilateral dialogue.

**Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan political-diplomatic cooperation.** The political relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan significantly improved after 2017. As a result of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's regional cooperation policy, the atmosphere of friendship and trust between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was strengthened<sup>8</sup>.

In 2017, 85 percent of the 1375 km long state border between the two countries was demarcated. This helped to resolve a long-standing conflict.

In 2023, the "**Kampirobod Water Reservoir Agreement**" was signed. Within the framework of this agreement, a compromise was reached regarding the use of water resources between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The leaders of the countries regularly meet to reach agreements on further developing strategic cooperation.

Additionally, Uzbekistan is planning to expand its opportunities to access the markets of China and South Asia through Kyrgyzstan.

Currently, the establishment of joint clusters for the production and export of agricultural products between Uzbekistan and Central Asian countries can deepen regional economic integration. By developing transport and trade routes between Uzbekistan, China, and Central Asia, Uzbekistan can further strengthen its position as a transit country.

**The people's diplomacy of Uzbekistan.** Uzbekistan is striving to strengthen its leadership image in the region through its cultural diplomacy. In particular, higher education and cultural exchange programs are positioning Uzbekistan as an educational center in the region.

Uzbekistan's major universities (MDIS Tashkent, Westminster University, and other higher education institutions) are accepting students from neighboring countries. This indicates the country's desire to lead in the field of science and education.

Uzbekistan can strengthen its role as a leading humanitarian and educational center in the region by creating educational, cultural, and innovative platforms that unite the youth of Central Asia. It can take the lead in fostering collaboration among the younger generation of Uzbekistan through regional youth forums, IT and startup competitions, and student exchange programs.

Uzbekistan's leadership image in Central Asia is linked to its active participation in regional cooperation and integration processes. From political diplomacy to economic projects, and from transport to water resource issues, the broad range of

<sup>7</sup> Rog'un GES bo'yicha O'zbekiston-Tojikiston muloqoti. Energetika yangiliklari, 2022. URL: <https://energy.uz/uz>

<sup>8</sup> Демаркация границы между Узбекистаном и Кыргызстаном. Дипломатический вестник, № 8., 2017. – С. 12-19.

cultural activities is transforming the country into one of the main leaders in the region. Due to this, Uzbekistan's regional policy serves not only its own interests but also the stability and development of the entire Central Asia.

If we assume, the issue of creating a single economic space for Central Asian countries, similar to the European Union, is becoming increasingly relevant. Uzbekistan may present advanced initiatives to strengthen economic, transport, and customs integration. The implementation of joint projects to create a unified "Central Asia Transport Corridor" in the transport and logistics sector could accelerate regional economic development<sup>9</sup>.

Additionally, Uzbekistan and the countries in the region are focusing on the development of environmentally friendly energy sources. For instance, Uzbekistan may strengthen strategic cooperation with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in the development of solar and wind energy. Regional energy integration can promote the initiative to create a unified energy market in Central Asia by improving electricity transmission networks.

It is likely that in the future, the digital economy and technological cooperation may become a new direction for integration among the countries in the region. Uzbekistan has the opportunity to develop cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan through IT Park and digital transformation initiatives. Uzbekistan can promote advanced initiatives to create a unified e-commerce system, fintech collaboration, and an innovative startup ecosystem in Central Asia.

The role of Uzbekistan in strengthening regional security is increasing. For instance, despite not being a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Uzbekistan is actively participating in regional security issues. Uzbekistan is one of the countries undertaking an important mediation mission regarding the Afghanistan issue, holding strategic significance for regional stability.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Uzbekistan's leadership image in Central Asia has significantly strengthened in recent years, transforming the country into a crucial driving force for regional stability and development. It would not be an exaggeration to say that openness in foreign policy, the development of friendly relations with neighboring countries, and the deepening of economic cooperation have been key factors in enhancing Uzbekistan's influence in the region.

In recent years, our country has been actively working to strengthen friendly relations with foreign states, relying on the principles of preserving and developing

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<sup>9</sup> Prospects of a Single Economic Space in Central Asia. *Economic Integration Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3., 2024 – P. 55-63.



the culture, spiritual values, national traditions, and customs of all nations and ethnic groups living in our homeland. Currently, the lifestyle of our multi-ethnic people is improving further under the influence of the harmonious and cooperative relationships among representatives of more than 130 nations and ethnicities residing in our country. It is worth noting that, due to the initiatives of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and his active participation in high-level negotiations, the number of new partners and benefactors of the New Uzbekistan, which remains committed to the "Policy of Openness to the World," is increasing. As a result of the international visits of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, our country has established active diplomatic relations with foreign states.

Our country has paved the way for a new stage of regional cooperation through political leadership, economic integration, the development of transport and logistics infrastructure, a balanced approach to water and energy issues, and the promotion of cultural and educational diplomacy. The initiative of Uzbekistan has established consultative meetings among the Central Asian states, expanded trade and economic relations, and strengthened the institutional foundation of regional cooperation.

One of the pressing issues is the ecological problem of the Aral Sea, which compels the Central Asian countries to cooperate with each other. Uzbekistan can promote initiatives for ecological diplomacy and environmental protection as a leading state in this regard. Developing and implementing new projects in collaboration with neighboring countries on climate change adaptation can further strengthen Uzbekistan's leadership in the region.

As a result, Uzbekistan has succeeded not only in promoting its strategic interests but also in advancing initiatives that contribute to the stability and development of the entire Central Asia. This, in turn, serves to further strengthen the country's leadership image in the region. In the future, Uzbekistan's activities in this direction are expected to deepen regional integration and transform Central Asia into a stable and rapidly developing area.

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