

Economy as a Driver of Integration: How Uzbekistan's Initiatives Shape the New SCO Agenda



President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev's address at the SCO Summit and in the "SCO Plus" format on 1 September 2025, in Tianjin once again confirmed Tashkent's active, well-calibrated, and strategically structured foreign economic policy.

The initiatives presented not only reflect Uzbekistan's national development priorities but also shape a constructive agenda for the entire SCO space. This is particularly evident in the economic dimension, where Uzbekistan proposes systemic and pragmatic solutions capable of launching a "new wave" of economic cooperation among member states.

The President of Uzbekistan outlined a number of priorities aimed at strengthening the SCO's role as a center of power across the Eurasian space. Notably, all of the initiatives are seamlessly aligned both with Tashkent's previously advanced proposals and with the broader multilateral agenda promoted on various international platforms. This demonstrates a high degree of coherence—both vertically and horizontally.

The proposal to establish a SCO Regional Center for Critical Materials reflects not only a profound understanding of the current technological transformation of the global economy but also Uzbekistan's determination to play an active role in shaping the region's new industrial architecture. In an era of rapid scientific and technological progress, when rare-earth metals are becoming the "oil of the future," Uzbekistan is consistently building a strategy to strengthen its position in this market. As President Mirziyoyev emphasized: "In the conditions of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it is important to create a solid foundation for strengthening Uzbekistan's position in the rare minerals market."

The country possesses significant reserves of more than 30 rare and strategically important elements, including tungsten, molybdenum, lithium, magnesium, and titanium, which are in demand in high-tech sectors ranging from microelectronics to renewable energy. Over the next three years, 76 projects worth

US\$2.6 billion are planned, focused on extraction and processing of rare metals, as well as the creation of specialized technoparks in Tashkent and Samarkand regions.

Against this background, the idea of forming an SCO production and technological space acquires special importance. Combining China's industrial capacity with the immense resource potential of Central Asian countries, endowed with substantial proven and prospective reserves of rare-earth and critical minerals, could become a growth point for the entire Organization.

Today, China controls 60 percent of global rare-earth mining and 85 percent of processing—an industrial and technological advantage that makes it a key partner for SCO states. Moreover, according to the International Energy Agency, global demand for these materials could triple by 2030. In this context, the proposal to establish a Regional Center for Critical Materials within the SCO is highly relevant, serving as both a response to the growing structural deficit of strategic resources and a step toward deeper integration of the region into global value chains.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has succeeded in creating a truly favorable investment climate. This is evidenced by quantitative indicators: between 2017 and 2024, US\$188 billion was invested in the country's economy, including US\$87 billion in foreign investment. The number of enterprises with foreign capital has exceeded 16,000—3.2 times more than in 2017. These figures convincingly demonstrate growing international confidence and the strengthening of Uzbekistan's position as one of the leading investment destinations in the region.

It is in this context that the proposal to hold an annual SCO Invest Forum—and Uzbekistan's readiness to host the first such forum in 2026—appears especially significant. This is not merely a declarative initiative but a clear signal that Tashkent not only generates ideas but also assumes institutional responsibility for their implementation, offering a platform for systemic investment dialogue at the SCO level.

According to approximate estimates, the SCO space already accounts for up to 20 percent of global foreign direct investment, underlining the region's growing attractiveness and its increasing strategic role in the global economy. The SCO Invest Forum could institutionalize this potential, transforming it into a sustainable platform for cooperation, capital attraction, and joint project development.

President Mirziyoyev also emphasized the importance of developing transport connectivity. Projects such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, its linkage with the Trans-Afghan corridor, and the development of multimodal routes along the North-South and East-West axes collectively form the concept of a unified SCO transport space. This lays the groundwork for a large-scale logistical transformation and stronger regional economic interconnectedness.

Equally significant are the initiatives aimed at promoting a “green” transformation. The launch of a Regional Platform for Climate Change Adaptation, digitalization, and the application of artificial intelligence in environmental risk forecasting opens prospects for technological modernization of the region based on sustainable development principles.

The formation of a production and technological space, the launch of SCO Invest, the development of transport corridors, and the advancement of a green agenda—all these measures form a coherent strategy reflecting both Uzbekistan's national priorities and the long-term interests of SCO member states.

These initiatives clearly demonstrate an understanding of the strategic advantages of Central Asia. As the SCO expands, the region increasingly asserts itself as a link connecting the world's largest geo-economic spaces—East and West, North and South. This is not just a metaphor: the figures speak for themselves.

According to the World Bank and IMF, from 2023 to 2025, Central Asian countries—including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—are showing steady economic growth averaging 5–6 percent, significantly higher than the global rate of 2.8–3.2 percent.

Central Asia today is not only the geographic core of Eurasia but also an economic linchpin capable of uniting the entire SCO space into a single macroregional system. This makes the region a key element of resilience and balance within the Organization.

It is increasingly evident that the economic dimension is becoming the backbone of the SCO's activities. In this regard, the Samarkand Summit marked a true turning point, with an unprecedented number of documents adopted—44 agreements, including a range of strategic and conceptual decisions aimed at giving the Organization a practical dimension.

Among the key documents were the SCO Member States' Concept on Connectivity and Effective Transport Corridors, the Program on Cooperation in the Use of Renewable Energy Sources, the Program to Promote Industrial Cooperation among the Business Communities of SCO Countries, the Program on Artificial Intelligence Development Cooperation, as well as the Concept on "Smart" Agriculture and Agro-Innovation.

These decisions became genuine strategic benchmarks, consolidating the transformation of the SCO from a platform of political dialogue into a space of practical economic partnership. They lay the foundation for building a sustainable macroregional architecture capable of addressing modern challenges and competing for resources and investment.

Thus, the economic initiatives advanced by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev demonstrate not only diplomatic activity but also close alignment with Uzbekistan's internal development agenda. The country positions itself as a state that not only puts forward ideas but also creates institutional and substantive conditions for their practical implementation. As one of the economic drivers of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is confidently shaping new contours of regional cooperation, acting as a catalyst for the SCO's transformation into a pragmatic, results-oriented platform for economic integration.

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