

# Central Asia and China at the Contemporary Stage of Development: A Partnership Oriented Toward a Common Future



At the contemporary stage, the development of constructive relations with China has become one of the key priorities of the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries. In recent years, these countries have achieved a high degree of political trust and stable economic interaction. Within this partnership, the strategic cooperation between Tashkent and Beijing holds a special place – it has become a symbol of exemplary relations based on pragmatism, mutual respect, and a shared aspiration for joint development.

For Uzbekistan, China has always been and remains a friendly neighbor and a reliable, time-tested partner. Today, it is fair to assert with confidence that the current stage of relations between Uzbekistan and China is the most productive and intense in the entire history of bilateral ties.

Such progress has been made possible thanks to regular and constructive political dialogue, as well as strong and trusting relationships between the leaders of the two countries – the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and the President of China, Xi Jinping.

It is noteworthy that in 2023, the heads of state held four meetings, each of which not only strengthened the agreements reached but also opened up new horizons for cooperation.

Equally symbolic was the President of Uzbekistan's visit to China in January 2024, underlining the special importance of the Chinese direction for the country's foreign policy.

As a result of the talks, relations were elevated to the level of an all-weather strategic partnership. Uzbekistan joined the ranks of countries with which Beijing builds maximally trusting, stable, and long-term ties. This is a result not only of intensive high-level dialogue but also of real steps toward deepening economic, technological, and humanitarian cooperation.

One of the most vivid examples is the dynamic of trade and economic cooperation. Today, China is Uzbekistan's largest foreign economic partner. In 2024, the turnover in goods reached \$12.4 billion, with plans to increase it to \$20 billion by 2030.

At the same time, Chinese investments in Uzbekistan's economy over the past seven years have exceeded

\$23 billion, encompassing key sectors such as the chemical industry, engineering, pharmaceuticals, energy, and infrastructure.

Notably, trade and investment cooperation continue to diversify, deepen, and expand into new sectors. In particular, industrial collaboration is becoming a sought-after direction. Chinese manufacturers, including EXEED and BYD, are actively entering the country's market. A joint project to launch electric vehicle production in Jizzakh region became BYD's first manufacturing enterprise outside China and a symbol of the transition to high-tech industrial partnership.

Environmental and technological aspects hold particular importance in this process. Uzbekistan, aiming for sustainable development, is implementing the national green growth strategy through 2030 and is actively engaging Chinese technologies in the renewable energy sector. In 2023 alone, agreements were signed for the construction of 11 solar and wind power plants, totaling \$4.4 billion in cost.

Moreover, in recent years, interaction between Uzbekistan and China in the realm of e-commerce has reached a new level. In September 2022, a permanent national pavilion of Uzbekistan was launched on the Alibaba platform, featuring more than 100 items of textile, agricultural, and food industry products. In the future, the plan is to open new sectoral sections and expand the number of product listings to 300.

At the same time, it is fair to note that sustainable development is impossible without a humanitarian component. As repeatedly emphasized by heads of state, culture and education form the spiritual foundation for the rapprochement of peoples. In recent years, there has been an increasingly strong mutual interest in learning each other's languages.

In Tashkent since 2005 and in Samarkand since 2014, Confucius Institutes have been operating, making significant contributions to the popularization and teaching of the Chinese language and culture. Annually, more than a thousand students attend them.

Conversely, since 2010, the Central University for Nationalities in China has had a department specializing in the Uzbek language. In 2018, Shanghai International Studies University launched an undergraduate program in Uzbek Language and established the Center for Uzbek Language and Culture.

A compelling example of successful cooperation in this area is the Luban Workshops, created by China in collaboration with the Central Asian countries, educational centers named after the legendary Chinese inventor and craftsman. These projects train specialists with practical high-tech skills in demand in modern economic sectors.

A significant impetus was also given to interaction between the countries in the tourism sector. Uzbekistan, like China, is a vibrant country with a rich historical and cultural heritage and unique ancient architectural monuments that have long attracted attention from foreign tourists from around the world.

In this context, the visa waiver between China and Uzbekistan, effective from 2024, and the signing of the Tourism Cooperation Plan for 2024–2026, open new horizons for business exchanges, student exchanges, humanitarian projects, and tourism.

All of this brings bilateral ties closer to the people and activates the-so-called people's diplomacy.

Additionally, ties between the academic and analytical structures of Uzbekistan and China are dynamically developing and expanding. A regular and open dialogue between the think tanks of our countries has been established within various joint conferences, roundtables, and expert meetings.

Against this backdrop, the experience of the Uzbek-Chinese partnership logically fits into a broader context – China's cooperation with the entire Central Asia, which in recent years has demonstrated an unwavering dynamic of sustained growth.

Together with the Chinese side, a large number of projects have been implemented in the energy, mining,

and manufacturing sectors, and various industrial parks and free economic zones have been established.

Beijing has firmly secured its position as a key partner of the region's countries in developing transport and logistics infrastructure. With the assistance of China, the multimodal "China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan" road and the international border cooperation center "Khorgos" have been implemented. Highways and railways have been built and reconstructed, and bridges and tunnels erected.

In parallel, China has become one of the key destinations for products from the regional states. Central Asian countries are steadily expanding the range of competitive goods, agricultural and food products supplied to China's enormous consumer market. At the same time, the structure of trade continues to broaden. Rapid development is seen in cross-border e-commerce.

As a result, there has been a rapid increase in the volume of regional trade with China. Between 2017 and 2024, the turnover between Central Asian countries and China increased 2.5 times to \$60.7 billion; exports grew 1.9 times to \$27.1 billion, while imports increased 3.4 times to \$33.6 billion. At the same time, China is the leading trade partner for all Central Asian countries. In 2024, the share of trade with China in the total turnover of the region's countries averaged 24%.

Parallel to that, Chinese investments are steadily increasing, directed to key sectors of the economy, contributing to the modernization and sustainable development of the region. As of 2024, the total volume of Chinese direct investment and loans to Central Asian countries exceeded \$24 billion. Among recipients, the most significant volumes were in Kazakhstan, at \$15.5 billion, and Uzbekistan, at \$7.2 billion.

By the end of 2024, more than 9,000 enterprises with Chinese capital were operating in the region's countries, indicating a high level of Chinese business presence in the region's economies.

In other words, mutually beneficial cooperation with China contributes invaluable input to the progressive development of Central Asia, promoting economic growth, strengthening connectivity, and, in general, enhancing the region's stability and sustainable development.

In turn, the guarantor of such a dynamic development of relations is the unwavering observance of fundamental principles – mutual trust, mutual support, equality, solidarity, respect, and consideration of each other's interests and choice of their own development path.

The second summit of Central Asian country leaders and China, held in June of the current year, served as confirmation of this. The event demonstrated a high degree of political trust, as well as readiness to strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation between China and the Central Asian region. The Astana Declaration, adopted at its conclusion, along with signed documents and planned projects, defined the future contours of multilateral interaction.

A most important outcome of the meeting was the signing of the Treaty of Eternal Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation, which became not only a symbol of mutual trust but also a catalyst for elevating dialogue to a fundamentally new level. Its role lies in creating a solid legal and political foundation for long-term cooperation that contributes to the sustainable development of the region and the resolution of common challenges.

It is worth noting that, thanks to the establishment of the permanent Secretariat "Central Asia – China" in Xi'an in 2023, the format acquired a stable institutional basis, distinguishing it from many other regional platforms.

Without a doubt, such positive outcomes of multilateral interaction largely reflect the radical changes and new reality that have emerged in the region in recent years. As President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev remarked, "Today this is already a different Central Asia – it is cohesive and strong, open to dialogue and full-scale partnership".

The figures confirm this. Since 2000, the cumulative GDP of the region's countries has increased more

than tenfold, from \$46 billion to nearly \$520 billion. In recent years, economic growth rates have exceeded 6%, which is twice the global average. The total volume of accumulated Chinese investments in the region over the past 17 years has reached nearly \$70 billion, with an annual growth rate of around 5.5%.

A high level of consolidation among the countries was also confirmed by the sixth Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia. The decisions made demonstrate a willingness to move towards forming a comprehensive regional market capable of active integration into the global economy.

A logical continuation of the region's consistent course was the expansion of partnership with China, which has firmly established itself as a responsible and reliable ally of Central Asia.

All of this allows one to assert that a new architecture of interaction between Central Asia and China has already become a reality – pragmatic, institutionally structured, and future-oriented.

Drawing on the region's common development priorities, as voiced by the leaders of the region's countries and China, several promising directions of cooperation are clearly emerging, intended to give an additional impetus to multilateral interaction.

First, at present, particular urgency is being generated by advancing joint industrial cooperation projects. The Central Asian states, possessing abundant human capital, production, and resource potential, together with China, can focus on the deep processing of raw materials and industrial cooperation, resulting in the production of high-added-value goods and their realization in third-country markets. To create a system of interconnected industrial clusters, technoparks, and logistics hubs with the involvement of Chinese investment, technological and scientific solutions, at the Astana Summit held in June of this year, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed developing a long-term strategy – the “Industrial and Infrastructure Belt: Central Asia – China”.

Second, the introduction of effective financial instruments capable of supporting large-scale regional projects has become a pressing issue. According to expert estimates, the shortfall in capital investment for infrastructure development in Central Asia amounts to hundreds of billions of dollars. In this regard, as noted by the Head of State, it is appropriate to establish a Central Asia – China Development Fund, which could become an effective platform for fostering infrastructure initiatives.

Third, issues of food security and stable food supplies are at the forefront in light of ongoing global crises marked by rising geopolitical tensions. Persistent conflicts lead to disruptions in agricultural supply chains and price increases. At the same time, in Central Asia, environmental problems are exacerbated by global climate change, water scarcity, desertification, and soil degradation, resulting in reduced crop yields. Considering China's rich experience, promising cooperation appears to be in ecology and environmental protection through the exchange of experience, technologies, and highly qualified personnel. In this vein, it is crucial to accelerate the adoption and implementation of the green development program initiated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev through 2030, followed by the establishment of an Ecological Alliance for dialogue and partnership in the fight against desertification, the restoration of degraded lands, and the enhancement of bioecological resilience in arid and desert zones.

Fourth, close cooperation across all these spheres requires robust transport and logistics communications, openness of economies to global markets, and connectivity to centers of economic activity. In the interest of developing a shared vision for cooperation prospects between Central Asia and China in this strategic domain, Uzbekistan advocates for the formation of a unified map of transport corridors and modern transit infrastructure.

Fifth, resting on the principle of respect for cultural diversity, our cooperation opens up new opportunities for intercultural exchange to millions of people. Our leaders have repeatedly emphasized that our priceless asset is a shared aspiration for mutual cultural enrichment and rapprochement of peoples.

This goal underlies the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan to establish a unified digital portal, the

Cultural Heritage of the Silk Road, which aims to unite the historical and cultural resources of Central Asia and China, making them accessible to researchers, students, tourists, and representatives of the creative industries.

Overall, building mutually beneficial cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and China not only meets the challenges of the present but also shapes the contours of a future in which regional stability, sustainable development, and good neighborliness become primary guiding priorities.

It can be confidently stated that the spirit of cooperation that has formed between our countries, based on the principles of equality, openness, pragmatism, and mutual support, will be the guarantee of successful development of relations for many years to come.

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