

# Central Asia is a Key Vector of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy



***“The main priority of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy is the Central Asian region, with which our country’s national interests are linked. We remain committed to pursuing an open, friendly and pragmatic policy towards our closest neighbors,” - President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev***

Analyzing the events of recent years, as well as the processes taking place in Central Asia, the radical changes that have taken place in the region in a fairly short period of time become obvious.

Many experts agree that the region has managed to radically change its appearance and established idea of itself. Even in the recent past, relations between the countries were filled with unresolved problems and acute contradictions, be it border issues or water use.

However, interstate conflicts that seemed inevitable just recently now seem like an absurd scenario. Suspicion, skepticism and unhealthy rivalry have been replaced by trust, mutual understanding and the desire to jointly solve common problems facing the region.

Today, thanks to the political consolidation of the leaders of the five countries, Central Asia has become a space of trust, good neighborliness and mutually beneficial cooperation. The region has become more sustainable and stable, independently overcoming emerging challenges and threats, has entered a trajectory of progressive development, transforming into a center of economic and investment activity.

Central Asia has begun to play an increasingly important role in shaping the global agenda as a responsible and predictable subject of international relations.

Without a doubt, such a development of events has become a practical result of the far-sighted and proactive foreign policy of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who from the first days of taking office as the head of the country defined the Central Asian region, with which the vital

interests of our republic are connected, as a key priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

The main objectives of regional policy were to strengthen good-neighborliness and trust, resolve existing problems, develop pan-regional cooperation, and actively interact in the international arena.

The High-Level International Conference under the auspices of the UN "Central Asia: One Past and Common Future", organized at the initiative of Uzbekistan in November 2017 in Samarkand, laid the foundation for further actions to build a fundamentally new format of regional cooperation, as well as holding regular Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia.

In fact, the activation of the Central Asian vector of Uzbekistan's foreign policy created the necessary conditions for the formation of a healthy political climate in the region, made it possible to radically improve interstate relations with its neighbors, laying the foundations for further consolidation and integration of Central Asia in a new format.

Reflecting on the results that have been achieved in just over seven years, the following key factors can be identified:

**Firstly**, a unique model of interstate cooperation has been formed in the region, which allows maintaining stability, security and ensuring sustainable development, where the key mechanism is the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia initiated by the President of Uzbekistan.

This format, regularly held since 2018, has become the supporting structure of the architecture of regional cooperation, where important political decisions are made and the main vectors of interaction between the countries of the region are laid. In recent years, it has transformed into a practical mechanism for the development and strengthening of the legal framework and institutional foundations of interstate cooperation in Central Asia.

Various cooperation mechanisms have been launched, including meetings of heads of foreign policy and line ministries. Meetings of women leaders, rectors, scientists, youth, economic forums and exhibitions, and a number of cultural and humanitarian events are held on a regular basis.

Along with this, significant conceptual documents, including long-term ones, have been adopted over the past six summits. In particular, one of the significant events was the adoption of the Concept for the Development of Regional Cooperation "Central Asia - 2040" at the Astana Summit in August 2024, in which the Central Asian states, noting that the processes of interstate rapprochement in the region have acquired a sustainable and irreversible character, express a common political will to continue comprehensive regional cooperation and declare their readiness to bear joint responsibility for the common future.

At the same time, the states exclude confrontational, bloc and ideological approaches to resolving issues on the global and regional agenda, note the exclusively positive, open and constructive nature of the processes of interstate rapprochement in Central Asia, state their commitment to the political and diplomatic settlement of all disagreements and disputes, express their readiness to jointly form a capacious interconnected regional market, a developed space for industrial and production cooperation, an integrated transport and water-energy system, and a common environmental protection zone.

At the same time, the adoption of the Roadmap for the Development of Regional Cooperation for 2025-2027 demonstrates the readiness of the countries of the region to increase active actions and emphasizes their desire for the practical implementation of the conceptual documents adopted.

**Secondly**, political consolidation and the achieved high level of mutual trust have become a trigger for economic development. Today, the countries of the region are consistently moving from the exchange of goods to the development of production and technological cooperation, joint formation of added value, and are increasing their competitiveness in world markets. As a result, Central Asia is transforming into an

important link in interregional interconnectedness and global production chains.

It should be noted that the region is a capacious consumer market, has a powerful resource-raw material and production potential, and developed human capital. In particular, the region contains about 20% of the world's uranium reserves, 17% of oil, 7% of natural gas, significant deposits of rare earth metals, as well as powerful potential in the field of hydropower and solar energy.

In addition, Central Asia is home to a growing labor pool. The level of 80 million people has already been reached and according to UN estimates, the region's population will exceed 100 million people by 2050. At the same time, Central Asia is one of the "youngest" regions in the world. The average age of the population is only 28.7 years.

Moreover, the region's economy has demonstrated steady growth (6.2%) over the past ten years, doubling the world average (2.6%). Since 2016, the total regional GDP has increased by 60%, reaching \$450 billion by the end of 2023.

At the same time, Central Asia is becoming an important participant in global economic relations: the volume of its foreign trade has more than doubled over the past 7 years, reaching about \$225 billion. At the same time, intraregional trade has increased 4.5 times (from \$2.4 to \$11 billion). The volume of attracted investments in Central Asia has increased almost 2 times – from \$27 billion in 2016 to \$50 billion in 2023. At the same time, mutual direct investments between the Central Asian countries are also growing – by an average of 9% per year.

Currently, the number of joint ventures has increased many times. For example, since 2016, the number of enterprises with the participation of capital from Central Asian countries in Uzbekistan has increased almost 6 times – to 1,830, and the number of joint ventures with the participation of Uzbek capital in Central Asian countries – by 8.5 times (over 4.7 thousand).

In recent years, the Central Asian countries have paid increased attention to increasing industrial cooperation, which is becoming one of the main areas of regional cooperation.

To this end, Uzbekistan is promoting the creation of border trade and industrial zones with all countries in the region. In addition, the Uzbek-Kyrgyz and Uzbek-Tajik investment funds have been launched in a bilateral format to finance large joint projects. Within the framework of these institutions, cooperation projects have already begun in the automotive industry, electrical engineering, textile industry, and agriculture. Together, this opens up new opportunities for establishing the production of import-substituting products and ensuring the sustainability of industrial infrastructure.

**Thirdly**, the growing political subjectivity of Central Asia allows the countries of the region to act on the world stage with one voice and effectively defend common interests.

The positive processes that are observed in the region increase the interest of extra-regional partners in Central Asia, turning the region into a point of attraction for world powers and leading states. This is reflected in the created dialogue formats "CA Plus", which allow combining the various interests of extra-regional actors, directing them in a constructive direction in the interests of sustainable development of Central Asia. Today, more than 10 such dialogue platforms are developing quite fruitfully, 6 of which were created in the last 5 years. At the same time, starting in 2022, many of these formats are held at the level of heads of state – with China, the USA, Germany, the EU. In 2025, South Korea will also be included in this number.

Along with this, visits to the region by leaders of the world's leading countries have noticeably increased, in particular by German Chancellor O. Scholz, French President E. Macron, Italian President S. Mattarella and others.

Having formulated a unified position on key issues – security, investment, transport and logistics – the

Central Asian countries speak out within the framework of the “CA Plus” platforms with one voice, effectively defending a stronger negotiating position, promoting common interests.

The key role in this is played by the Concept of Interaction of Central Asian States within the Framework of Multilateral Formats, adopted at the fourth Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia in Cholpon-Ata. According to the document, the interaction of the states of the region is aimed at promoting common interests, increasing the economic return of cooperation with extra-regional partners, jointly developing proposals for the implementation of specific regional projects in priority areas, attracting investments, progressive practices and technologies of partner countries in the development of the “digital” economy in the Central Asian states to overcome the gap in new digital technologies and deepening the integration of the region into global economic relations. The growing level of subjectivity is also evidenced by the initiatives jointly promoted by the Central Asian countries in the UN, which are receiving broad support. If in the period from 1991 to 2016, about 20 resolutions were adopted in the UN at the initiative of the Central Asian countries, then from 2016 to the present, more than 25 have been adopted. In particular, the states of the region have jointly expressed a consolidated position on the importance of strengthening transport and logistics interconnectivity, and have acted as a united front in effectively solving drug-related problems. However, the main attention is traditionally paid to the fight against environmental threats and challenges.

Six years later, Uzbekistan once again assumes the chairmanship of the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia. It coincides with the beginning of the second cycle of regional consolidation in Central Asia, the distinctive feature of which is the growth of its geostrategic importance.

Colossal changes in global politics and economics confront Central Asia with new challenges, while simultaneously opening up historic opportunities for creating strong conditions and prerequisites for regional integration. The solution of these problems requires even greater cohesion, solidarity and coordination of practical efforts in key areas of multilateral cooperation from all states of the region.

In this regard, the efforts of Uzbekistan as the chairing party will be focused on the following priority areas.

### **1. Deepening political dialogue and strategic trust in order to further strengthen regional stability, security and sustainability in Central Asia.**

This is especially relevant in light of the transformation of modern international relations, accompanied by a deficit of trust, aggravation of strategic competition between various centers of power, fragmentation of the global economy and strengthening of protectionist measures. In these conditions, the relevance of a joint response to traditional and new challenges by forming a common and indivisible security space increases.

In this context, the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan, voiced at the 6th Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia on the development of the Concept of Ensuring Regional Security and Stability in Central Asia, is becoming relevant. This conceptual document will provide an opportunity to define the central role of the Central Asian states in maintaining regional security, emphasize its indivisibility, ensure the inextricable link between security and sustainable development, show the priority of finding peaceful ways to resolve interstate disagreements and build common approaches to countering common challenges and threats, as well as outline firm adherence to the principles of multilateralism and international law.

Moreover, in order to give depth and strength to the political dialogue, it is necessary to fully utilize the possibilities of interparliamentary cooperation.

In order to improve the quality of implementation of the agreements reached and strengthen control over the activities of local executive authorities at the inter-parliamentary level, an important role can be played by the active involvement of civil society institutions, people’s deputies, and representative

authorities of border territories in this process.

## **2. Creating a “barrier-free” environment for the movement of goods, services, labor and capital with the formation of a Single Regional Market.**

The Central Asian states have enormous combined potential, including a capacious consumer market, industrial and production capacities, a pool of labor resources, a rich resource base for joint economic development and prosperity.

In the context of the observed volatility of financial markets and turbulence in the global economy, consolidation of efforts and full use of existing opportunities will allow the countries of the region to increase their resilience to modern challenges, contributing to the transformation of Central Asia into one of the most important centers of economic growth and investment activity.

However, the level of mutual integration between the countries of the region is still very low. High logistics costs remain due to the presence of customs barriers, administrative restrictions at checkpoints, which negatively affect their throughput.

In this regard, the agenda includes the organization of substantive consultations on the issues of eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers, recognizing certificates of conformity and unifying regulations, digitalization of customs operations and phytosanitary procedures, and mutual access to public procurement.

Along with this, the development of a Unified Industrialization Map for the region will be a priority to create short value chains, stimulate and implement new forms of industrial cooperation, and attract investments and technologies from leading international companies.

Of great importance in this regard is the Action Plan for the Development of Industrial Cooperation of Central Asian States for 2025-2027, adopted at the Astana Summit, which provides for the creation of a Fund for Financing Industrial Cooperation Projects, as well as a Data Bank of Investment Projects in the Field of Industrial Cooperation.

At the same time, consistent work will be carried out to implement the procedure for mutual recognition of national ID cards.

## **3. Development of transport interconnectivity and strengthening of the region’s transit potential.**

Today, Central Asia has enormous opportunities to regain its status as one of the key transport and transit hubs on the Eurasian continent.

It should be noted that the formation of a multi-variant system of transport corridors and logistics centers is the key to not only sustainable economic development, but also ensuring the security of all countries in the region.

In this context, the results of the second meeting of the transport ministers of the Central Asian states, held on the eve of the 6th Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia in Astana, are noteworthy. Following the meeting, the parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding aimed at interaction between the countries in the framework of creating a favorable environment for attracting investment, developing infrastructure and improving the regulatory framework governing the activities of transport and logistics centers.

Based on the common priorities for the effective use of transport and logistics potential in the region, Uzbekistan advocates the organization of coordinated and systematic work in the following key areas:

- harmonization of standards in the field of tariff policy, introduction of a system of benefits and preferences, digitalization of the sector;

- development of a sustainable intraregional system of transport communications, launch of new air and rail routes, modernization of railways and roads, improvement of border crossing infrastructure;
- increasing the involvement of the countries of the region in the processes of creating transport corridors connecting Central and South Asia, ensuring diversification of communications on the routes along the East-West and North-South lines.

Among the most priority projects is the construction of the Trans-Afghan Corridor, which is of strategic importance not only for the countries of Central Asia, but also for South Asia. The development of the Trans-Afghan Corridor will provide the countries of the region with the shortest access to the ports of the Indian Ocean, connect South Asia with the markets of Central Asia, Russia, China and Europe.

In addition, the implementation of this project will become a powerful driver of sustainable development in Central and South Asia, and will strengthen consensus within Afghanistan and in the region on the issue of strengthening peace and stability in the country.

#### **4. Strengthening regional cooperation in water and energy security, climate resilience and “green development”.**

The huge potential in the field of renewable energy sources opens up additional opportunities for the region to achieve sustainable economic development, strengthen sectoral integration and successfully adapt to climate change. The adoption of a comprehensive Sustainable Development Program for Central Asian countries will facilitate the effective implementation of these strategic objectives.

At the same time, Uzbekistan will continue active efforts to implement strategic projects to increase electricity generation and export it to third countries and regions, strengthen the institutional foundations of mutually beneficial cooperation in this area, which will contribute to the creation of a self-sufficient Central Asian energy market in the future.

#### **5. Building cultural and humanitarian ties.**

A wealth of experience in statehood has been accumulated here, where many states arose, disintegrated and were revived again, where nomadic and settled agricultural ways of life collided and mixed.

Moreover, a Turkic-Sogdian spiritual and cultural symbiosis was formed in the region, when the history of the Turks and Sogdians was closely intertwined with each other and a process of cultural interaction between ancient Turkic-speaking and Iranian-speaking tribes took place.

All these processes undoubtedly contributed to the formation of a single historical-cultural and socio-political space, a unique political and legal culture of the peoples of Central Asia, which had a colossal impact on the development of world civilization.

As a result, a unique mentality of the peoples of Central Asia was formed, characterized by openness to the world, intercultural dialogue, and new trends. This explains the historical vector of external interaction of the peoples and states of Central Asia, which have always peacefully coexisted in the conditions of regionalism, and were distinguished by diverse, balanced relations with all parts of the world. In the current conditions, when geopolitical contradictions provoke fault lines along national and religious lines, more attention should be paid to developing a sense of belonging, cohesion, and awareness of common responsibility among the population for the future of the region.

A practical step in this direction could be the creation of the International Media Platform “History and Culture of Central Asia: One Past and Common Future”, proposed by the President of Uzbekistan, with the involvement of scientists and representatives of the general public to form pan-regional content, as well as holding a Scientific Forum in 2025 dedicated to the practical aspects of forming a regional identity.

Along with this, increasing the tourism potential could play a significant role in enhancing the image and recognition of Central Asia. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed to begin the practical implementation

of the joint program “One Tour – the Entire Region” covering the entire spectrum of tourism products.

There are 16 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the region. Moreover, excellent conditions have been created here for the development of various types of tourism, including such areas as pilgrimage, gastronomic, ecological, cultural and educational, extreme and geotourism. In this regard, work will be intensified to create tourist zones and clusters in transboundary territories, promote tourism products and routes.

Thus, the chairmanship of Uzbekistan will be aimed at strengthening the potential and authority of the mechanism of Consultative Meetings, as well as expanding the institutional framework for cooperation in Central Asia. At the same time, the main priority will be issues of further deepening economic cooperation, ensuring stability and sustainable development of the region, as well as promoting Central Asia as a single cultural and historical space.

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**Source**