

Uzbekistan's initiatives to ensure peace and stability in Central Asia, raising relations of friendship and cooperation with neighboring states to a new level

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to analyze Uzbekistan's proactive foreign policy initiatives to ensure peace, stability, and deeper regional integration in Central Asia, particularly through diplomacy, environmental action, infrastructure development, and cross-border cooperation.

Research methodology: The research applies a qualitative analysis approach, drawing from official documents, international agreements, and speeches by Uzbekistan's leadership. The analysis focuses on five thematic areas: peace-building in Afghanistan, ecological cooperation, water management, transport infrastructure, and nuclear disarmament.

Results: Uzbekistan has emerged as a regional leader by facilitating consultative meetings among Central Asian heads of state, advocating for a nuclear-weapon-free zone, investing in sustainable transport networks like the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, and promoting ecological innovation in the Aral Sea basin. These initiatives have enhanced economic ties, border stability, environmental security, and Uzbekistan's geopolitical relevance in the region.

Conclusions: Uzbekistan's strategic initiatives have significantly contributed to regional peace and stability while reinforcing economic and environmental cooperation. However, challenges such as Afghan instability, climate change, and water disputes remain critical to long-term regional security.

Limitations: This study is based on secondary sources and public policy documents; it does not incorporate fieldwork or interviews with stakeholders in the region, which could enrich the understanding of local-level impacts.

Contribution: This research contributes to regional studies and international relations by highlighting how a mid-sized state like Uzbekistan can play a catalytic role in fostering multilateral cooperation and addressing transboundary challenges in a post-Soviet context.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, A Nuclear-weapon-free zone, Aral Sea, Central Asia, Initiatives*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Current situation: A Brief Overview

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has explicitly made Central Asia its top foreign policy priority (Dadabaev, 2019). During his speech at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasized that a peaceful and prosperous Central Asia is Uzbekistan's most important goal (Mirziyoyev, 2017). As a result of the policy of compromise cooperation of the Republic of Uzbekistan with neighboring countries, positive results have been achieved in the issue of borders and undefined territories, which have negatively affected relations for many years (Saud & Gul, 2023). Achieving "no problems with neighbors" was set as the most important goal. In particular, as a result of active diplomatic relations, the length of the state border of the Republic of Uzbekistan increased from 6,221 km to 7,103 km in 2018 (Agency, 2025). Work on the legal formalization of the border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan has been fully completed, the border with Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan Bodaubayeva and Turkeeva (2023) has been delimited, dozens of border checkpoints have resumed operations, border trade zones have been established with all countries of the region, and a procedure has been introduced for citizens to cross the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border using ID cards (Abdullaev, 2018).

In the field of water and energy, ecology, an "roadmap" for the joint construction of the 1st Kambarata hydroelectric power station was signed between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, and agreements Ataev (2023) were also reached on jointly resolving the issue of draining water from the Toktogul reservoir during the summer growing season, as well as on the operating mode of the Bahri-Tajik (Kayrakkum) reservoir during the growing season between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan (Asia, 2024). In addition, Uzbekistan's relations with the countries of Central Asia have been raised to the level of strategic partnership, in particular, allied relations have been established with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan (Hamzaoglu, 2022).

As a result, Uzbekistan's trade relations with neighboring countries have developed, and the dynamics of mutual visits of citizens to Uzbekistan has increased. In particular, the total volume of foreign trade turnover of the Central Asian countries in Uzbekistan amounted to \$788 million in 2018 and reached \$6,973 million in 2024 (Komilov, 2024). A growth trend was also observed in the number of visitors to Uzbekistan. If in 2018 4 million 612 thousand citizens from Central Asian countries visited Uzbekistan for various purposes, then by 2024 their number exceeded 6 million 336 thousand (Nematov, 2018). At the same time, the share of citizens visiting Uzbekistan from neighboring countries is 75% of the total number of visitors.

On March 31, 2025, a trilateral meeting was held in the city of Khujand with the participation of the presidents of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. At it, an agreement was signed on the point of intersection of the state borders of the three countries, which serves to ensure stability and sustainable development in the region and enhance the international authority of the entire region (Rayimov, Mamatkabilov, & Eshmuradov, 2024). The government of Uzbekistan has put forward proposals for stabilizing the military-political situation in Afghanistan as a threat to the security of Central Asia (Burnashev, 2015), improving the ecological situation in the Aral Sea region, rational use of the region's water resources, non-use of nuclear weapons, and increasing transport and transit potential.

2. Literature review

2.1 Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy and Regional Peacebuilding

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has made Central Asia the top priority of its foreign policy. Guided by the principle of "zero problems with neighbors," the country has resolved long-standing border disputes, reopened border checkpoints, and significantly boosted cross-border trade and people-to-people exchanges (Dadabaev, 2019; Saud & Gul, 2023). These diplomatic efforts elevated bilateral relations to the level of strategic partnerships, particularly with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (Bodaubayeva & Turkeeva, 2023; Qizi, 2025).

Uzbekistan has also become a proactive player in peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. By initiating formats such as “6+2” and “6+3,” and hosting international peace conferences, Uzbekistan positioned itself as a mediator in promoting regional security (Yormatov & Abdurashidov, 2021). Furthermore, its humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and advocacy against isolating Afghan society demonstrate its role as a stabilizer in regional geopolitics (Yar, Zahid, & Miakhil, 2023).

2.2 Environmental Security and Regional Cooperation

Environmental issues, especially the Aral Sea disaster, remain among the gravest challenges in Central Asia. Uzbekistan has spearheaded international initiatives to designate the Aral Sea basin as a zone of environmental innovation and technology through UN resolutions (Mirzayev, 2021; Ugli, 2025). Climate change, rising air temperatures, and glacial retreat further highlight the urgency of regional solidarity (Bosson et al., 2023).

Uzbekistan has advocated constructive dialogue on transboundary water management with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to prevent disputes over the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, which are vital for agriculture and energy (Ataev, 2023). In addition, the government has promoted the adoption of new technologies to combat desertification, dust storms, and protect fragile mountain ecosystems (Eleftheriou et al., 2023; Xenarios et al., 2019).

2.3 Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia

The issue of nuclear weapons proliferation has long been a security concern in Central Asia. Uzbekistan played a central role in advancing the region as a nuclear-weapon-free zone. Initially proposed in 1993, the initiative materialized with a treaty signed in 2006 and entered into force in 2009, gaining recognition through the UN Security Council in 2014 (Komilov, 2024).

Recent scholarship underscores that the nuclear-weapon-free zone has strengthened trust-building among Central Asian states while enhancing their credibility in global security structures (Saud & Gul, 2023). By promoting non-proliferation and preventive diplomacy, Uzbekistan has aligned regional security with broader international disarmament norms.

2.4 Transport Infrastructure and Regional Integration

Beyond political and security dimensions, Uzbekistan has prioritized infrastructure development to foster regional economic integration. The Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan–China Railway project exemplifies this vision, reducing logistical costs, shortening transport routes to Europe, and opening up new opportunities for trade with South Asia (Bodaubayeva & Turkeeva, 2023).

The project also aims to integrate with the Trans-Afghan Corridor, further positioning Uzbekistan as a land-linked state that connects Central Asia with global markets (Komilov, 2024). Infrastructure-led integration reflects regionalism theories that emphasize connectivity as the backbone of economic interdependence and stability.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Initiatives for establishing peace in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is the southern neighbor of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the establishment of peace in this country will contribute to the stability and economic development of the region (Yar et al., 2023). In recent years, the government and people of Uzbekistan have been providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people (Yormatov & Abdurashidov, 2021). Under the First President of the Republic of Uzbekistan I. Karimov, the “6+2” format was proposed in 1999 to stabilize the situation and ensure security in Afghanistan, and the “6+3” format was proposed at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008.

In 2018, an international conference on the Afghan issue “Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Interaction” was held in Tashkent, and important initiatives were put forward to stabilize the situation in this country (picture 1).



Picture 1.

Also, at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly in 2020, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev put forward an initiative to create a permanent committee under the UN to listen to the concerns of the Afghan people. At the same time, President Sh.Mirziyoyev, speaking about Afghanistan at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in 2023, proposed that: “Ignoring, isolating, and imposing sanctions only exacerbates the hardships faced by the ordinary Afghan people, humanitarian aid to the Afghan people should not be reduced, development of appropriate mechanisms to utilize Afghanistan’s frozen international assets to address the acute social problems in that country” (P. S. o. t. P. o. t. R. o. Uzbekistan, 2023).

3.2 Initiatives to improve the environmental situation in the region

On December 20, 2023, the UN General Assembly approved the resolution “Central Asia in the Face of Environmental Problems: Strengthening Regional Solidarity for Sustainable Development and Prosperity” proposed by the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Mirzayev, 2021). The document emphasizes the importance of strengthening regional cooperation in solving environmental problems in Central Asia, promoting socio-economic development, and taking measures to adapt to climate change (Xenarios et al., 2019). The important role of new and innovative technologies and best practices in combating desertification, drought, and dust storms was also emphasized (Eleftheriou et al., 2023). There are also calls to intensify efforts to protect mountain ecosystems and preserve glaciers (Bosson et al., 2023).

In his speech at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2023, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev noted that over the past 30 years, the air temperature in the region has risen by one and a half degrees. “This is twice the average global warming. As a result, almost a third of the total area of glaciers has been lost. If this trend continues, the flow of two major rivers in the region – the Amu Darya and Syr Darya – may decrease by 15% in the next two decades (P. S. o. t. P. o. t. R. o. Uzbekistan, 2014).

One of the problems threatening environmental security in Central Asia is the situation around the Aral Sea (Usha, 2016). The drying up of the Aral Sea, which was once the fourth largest lake in the world, is considered one of the largest environmental disasters in the world and the cause of a number of environmental, socio-economic, medical, and humanitarian problems for governments and communities in the region. Over the past 50 years, the volume of water flowing from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya into the Aral Sea has decreased fivefold, and the volume of the sea has decreased 14 times. The salinity of the sea increased 25 times and significantly exceeded the level of mineralization of the world’s oceans (Luo, Huang, Zhu, & Tong, 2019).

A sand-salt desert with a sea area of 5.5 million hectares has formed, where sand and salt storms are raging, which annually release more than 75 million tons of sand and salt into the atmosphere over a distance of several thousand kilometers. The Aral Sea disaster worsened the climatic conditions in the region, exacerbating the dryness and heat during the summer, and prolonging the cold and harsh winters. According to experts forecasts, by 2035-2050, the air temperature in the region may rise by another 1.5-3 degrees compared to current indicators (see picture 2).



Picture 2.

To improve the situation in the Aral Sea basin, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea was established in 1993, and the UN Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea region was established in 2018. On June 22, 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution “Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation to Ensure Peace, Stability and Sustainable Development in the Central Asian Region” on strengthening regional and international cooperation in order to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian region. The resolution emphasizes the importance of deeper and more coordinated cooperation between the Central Asian states and includes an appeal to the member states, including “Supporting the efforts of the Central Asian states aimed at mitigating the environmental and socio-economic consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea (see picture 3).



Picture 3.

At the 75th session of the UN General Assembly in 2020, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed the adoption of a special resolution of the UN General Assembly on declaring the Aral Sea region a zone of environmental innovation and technologies.

Also, within the framework of the 2023 meeting of the Fund for Saving the Aral Sea in Tajikistan, a number of initiatives were put forward by the government of Uzbekistan. In particular, firstly, further improvement of the Fund's legal framework and modernization of its institutional mechanisms. Secondly, a critical review of the fourth program for providing assistance to the countries of the Aral Sea basin. Thirdly, strengthening systemic interaction on attracting investment, technology, and technical assistance to promote priority regional projects. Fourthly, the working bodies of the Fund, with the participation of international consultants, will develop long-term plans for the development of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya basins. Fifth, the formation of a culture of rational use of water and other natural resources (P. S. o. t. P. o. t. R. o. Uzbekistan, 2014). A similar integrated approach can be observed in Indonesia, where the Smart Village program links digital infrastructure with environmental resilience and rural economic empowerment (Endriyono, Gunarto, & Murwiati, 2025).

Water disputes have historically been a source of tension in Central Asia. Uzbekistan has shifted toward constructive dialogue on transboundary water resources, engaging with downstream and upstream neighbors like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This cooperative approach helps mitigate conflicts over the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers, vital for the region's agriculture and energy needs. The rational use of water resources in the region is becoming increasingly important today. This is especially true in the context of population growth in Central Asia, the melting of glaciers as a result of climate change, the reduction of water reserves, and the emergence of a new participant in water use in Central Asia. As a result of the insufficient flow of water resources into the Aral Sea, the ecological situation in the Aral Sea is worsening.

In particular, a new participant has emerged in the region, which, in essence, is not bound by any obligations with the states of Central Asia in the process of water use. The commissioning of the "Kushtepa" canal could fundamentally change the water use regime and balance in Central Asia. It is advisable for the government of Uzbekistan to form a Joint Working Group to study all aspects related to the construction of the "Kushtepa" canal and its impact on the water use regime of the Amu Darya River, with the involvement of research institutes of the Central Asian countries, and to involve representatives of Afghanistan in the regional dialogue on the joint use of water resources (S. A. u. t. P. o. t. R. o. Uzbekistan, 2024).

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Initiatives to make Central Asia a nuclear-weapon-free zone

The issue of the production, proliferation, and use of nuclear weapons in the region has been considered a threat to the security of Central Asia. This issue was resolved in several stages. In particular, in 1993, the First President of Uzbekistan I. Karimov, at the 48th session of the UN General Assembly, put forward the initiative Central Asia – a zone free of nuclear weapons. In 2006, the countries of the region signed a corresponding document on turning Central Asia into a nuclear-weapon-free zone. In 2009, this document entered into force. In 2014, the UN Security Council assumed a legal obligation regarding the region's nuclear-weapon-free status.

4.2 Initiatives for the development of transport infrastructure in the region

The development of transport infrastructure in the region serves the economic interests of Uzbekistan. The reason is that there are international transport corridors in the region that bypass the territory of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's geographical location allows it to access sea routes through the territories of at least two countries. This leads to increased transportation costs and time delays. The government of Uzbekistan has put forward such initiatives as the construction of the "Uzbekistan - Kyrgyzstan – China" railway in the region, the holding of an International Logistics Conference, the development of a regional program for the sustainable development of the Central Asian transport system, and the formation of a regional council on transport communications of the Central Asian countries.

In turn, the "Uzbekistan - Kyrgyzstan – China" railway project provides for broad cooperation based on advanced engineering, innovation, and digital solutions, adherence to high environmental standards. Within the framework of the project, it is planned to build 20 stations, 42 bridges, 25 tunnels along the Kashgar - Torugart - Makmal - Jalal-Abad - Andijan route, modern transit and logistics infrastructure, warehouses and terminals. The launch of this highway will significantly increase regional trade and investment, significantly reduce transport costs, and unlock the enormous transit potential of Central Asia. 15 million tons of cargo are transported annually along this route. The distance and duration of cargo delivery from China to European countries will be reduced by several thousand kilometers and almost by a week. It will be possible to establish regular passenger transportation. In the future, this railway line will connect with the Trans-Afghan corridor, allowing for the effective integration and strengthening of transport and communication networks between China, Central Asia, and South Asia.

4.3 Discussion

4.3.1 Initiatives for organizing consultative meetings of the heads of state of Central Asia

Today, the countries of Central Asia operate as part of many regional and international organizations. In particular, the UN, SCO, CIS, OTS, OCSA (organization of a collective security agreement), EEU (Eurasian Economic Union) and other structures serve the national interests of other countries. However, there was no single structure uniting the countries of Central Asia. In September 2017, at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev put forward the idea of holding consultative meetings of the heads of state of Central Asia.

In November 2017, the international conference “Central Asia: One Past and a Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity” was held in Samarkand. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the five participating states of the region supported the initiative put forward by the leader of Uzbekistan – the proposal to establish Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State. It was then that the “Samarkand Consensus” was formed, expressing the goal of all countries to develop regional cooperation, jointly discuss, seek solutions to, and make decisions on pressing issues for their states and the entire region (Nartoshevich, Qizi, & O‘g‘li, 2025). Then the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled “Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation to Ensure Peace, Stability and Sustainable Development in the Central Asian Region”.

Consultative meetings have been held in all Central Asian countries since 2018. The next 7th meeting is planned to be held in Uzbekistan in 2025. The inaugural meeting took place in Astana, Kazakhstan, in March 2018, followed by subsequent gatherings, such as the one in Tashkent in November 2019. These summits provide a platform for dialogue, trust building, and addressing regional challenges like border disputes, water management, and economic cooperation. However, fostering regional cooperation also depends on public digital engagement, as studies have shown that behavioral factors like perceived usefulness and facilitating conditions shape the adoption of digital services in multi-stakeholder environments (Putro & Sugiat, 2025). The initiative has been praised for fostering a unified approach to regional stability.

The proposals put forward by the Head of Uzbekistan at the last consultative meeting held in the Republic of Kazakhstan (2024) were as follows.

1. Development of economic partnership (establishment of meetings of the Economic Council at the level of Deputy Prime Ministers of the CA countries, formation of a single regional market).
2. Development of industrial cooperation (establishing the activities of the Council at the ministerial level, establishing the Central Investment Council, creating the Central Bank for Innovative Development, regularly holding joint investment forums).
3. Regional transport and communication (Acceptance of the Agreement on Transport and Transit).
4. Food security (organization of an international forum on ensuring food security of landlocked countries in the city of Tashkent).
5. Global climate change (development and adoption of a comprehensive program for the sustainable development of Central Asia, a regional strategy for the rational use of water resources of transboundary rivers).
6. Development of the energy sector.

5. Conclusion

Central Asian countries will remain a priority in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy. At the same time, work with neighbors will continue on the principle of reducing problems to zero. The share of neighboring countries in the foreign trade turnover of the countries of the region will increase significantly. At the same time, the military-political situation in Afghanistan, dust and salts carried by the wind from the Aral Sea, and the acceleration of the melting of glaciers and the depletion of water resources as a result of rising global air temperatures threaten regional security in the near future.

The initiatives put forward by the government of Uzbekistan are distinguished by their focus on ensuring peace and stability in Central Asia, developing relations of friendship and cooperation with neighboring states.

5.1 Suggestions

Future studies should expand their scope by conducting fieldwork and community-level interviews to better capture the socio-economic impacts of Uzbekistan's initiatives. Researchers are also encouraged to apply comparative approaches with other regional cooperation models and to analyze long-term strategies for ecological resilience and water management in Central Asia.

5.2 Recommendations

It is recommended that Uzbekistan intensify inclusive regional dialogues by involving civil society, private actors, and academic experts, while at the same time strengthening cooperation with international organizations to mobilize sustainable funding. The government should also prioritize joint research and technological innovation in areas such as water management, renewable energy, and climate adaptation, ensuring that peace and stability initiatives bring direct benefits to citizens across the region.

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