



NEW UZBEKISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA: GOOD NEIGHBORLINESS AS A GUARANTEE OF DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes one of the key priorities of New Uzbekistan's foreign policy — good neighborly relations and regional cooperation with the Central Asian states. It also examines the current directions and future prospects of cooperation in the political, economic, transport-communication, and cultural-humanitarian spheres.

KEYWORDS: Principle of good neighborliness, Qambarota and Rogun HPPs, World Trade Organization, "Central Asia +", "geopolitical pluralism", conflict, consensus, regional integration.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the current global crises, the paradigms of intergovernmental cooperation are changing, and new trends are emerging in the foreign policies of states. As one of the most important principles of international relations, the concept of good neighborliness was proposed in the mid-20th century by Western countries and the United States (e.g., President F. Roosevelt's foreign policy toward Latin American countries) and was later recognized in UN documents as a principle of international law.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODS

The article thoroughly analyzes the key principles of political and economic cooperation in Central Asia, Uzbekistan's initiatives, and their outcomes. It explores the historical stages of the development of good neighborly relations in the region, considering political, economic, ecological, and cultural-humanitarian factors in an interrelated manner. The impact of good neighborliness on regional stability and integration is evaluated comprehensively. Various forms of cooperation with Central Asian countries, trade indicators, political dialogues, and the scale of foreign policy activities are comparatively analyzed. The content of presidential speeches, UN resolutions, statements by international experts and official organizations is reviewed, and key ideas relevant to the topic are identified. Trade volumes between Uzbekistan and neighboring countries, foreign trade shares, bridge, transport, and infrastructure projects are examined using statistical data.

In the literature review, the works of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, speeches at the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian heads of state, as well as official documents from the UN, WTO, SCO, and other international organizations, statements by WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, expert commentaries, and scholarly works by A.Q. Shirinov, R.T. Jo'rayev, and M.B. Isaboyev are analyzed.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

In international relations, good neighborliness is considered one of the fundamental principles of intergovernmental cooperation. However, throughout history, there were periods when states—or more precisely, their leaders—lacked the necessary conditions, capabilities, or political will to implement this principle in practice. As a result, conflicts became an objective reality in various regions of the world, or regions became dependent on the “vital interests” of a dominant power.

According to B.A. Khojanov, Head of the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations at the Higher School of Strategic Analysis and Prospective Studies of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and a candidate of political sciences, associate professor, the principle of good neighborliness has the following distinctive features:

This principle promotes cooperation not only within a single country but also throughout an entire region, replacing confrontation with collaboration among neighboring states.

The nature of political dialogue in the region is largely shaped by the foreign policy of the state that advocates for good neighborliness.

A state promoting good neighborly policy is recognized not only regionally but also at the international level. In this context, recognition is a critical category in international relations.

Today, the international community views Uzbekistan from a new perspective — more precisely, as the initiator of constructive dialogue in the Central Asian region — and acknowledges its efforts in this direction. The three key aspects of good neighborliness mentioned above are clearly reflected in the foreign policy activities of New Uzbekistan.

As President Shavkat Mirziyoyev puts it, Central Asia is one of the few regions in the world where closely related peoples have lived peacefully and harmoniously for centuries. Indeed, the Central Asian region, covering 3,962,790 square kilometers (10% of the Asian continent), has a population of nearly 80 million — approximately 1% of the global population. While these figures may seem modest on a global scale, thanks to the growing efforts of Uzbekistan as a regionally responsible state, the world is rediscovering Central Asia.

Over the past four years, Uzbekistan's mutual trade with neighboring countries has increased nearly fivefold. Prior to 2016, Uzbekistan's annual trade turnover with Central Asian countries averaged \$100–150 million, while by the end of 2020 this figure rose by approximately 53%. Trade volume increased eightfold with Kyrgyzstan, fivefold with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and by \$1 billion with Kazakhstan. Progress has also been observed in addressing regional ecological and water-energy issues. Uzbekistan has explored the possibility of participating in the construction projects of the Qambarota and Rogun hydropower plants. The construction of a segment of the “Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran–Oman” transport corridor has become a project of strategic importance. New railway and road bridges over the Amu Darya River — “Turkmenabad–Farab” — have been opened. Furthermore, the “Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Caspian Sea–South Caucasus” corridor, which connects to the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and provides access to the Black Sea ports of Georgia, Turkey, Romania, and other countries, has created favorable opportunities for building a vital transport and communication network.

Uzbekistan is the main initiator of the policy of good neighborliness in the Central Asian region. It can be said that the constructive model of close regional cooperation in international relations has developed directly in connection with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's initiative to launch the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State.

This initiative was supported by all Central Asian countries, and the first Consultative Meeting was held in 2018 in Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan), the second in 2019 in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), the third in 2021 in Avaza (Turkmenistan), the fourth in 2022 in Cholpon-Ata (Kyrgyzstan), and the fifth in Dushanbe (Tajikistan). These meetings marked a new phase in the regional diplomacy of Central Asia. The format of Consultative Meetings among the heads of state of Central Asia, initiated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has put an end to “geopolitical pluralism” in the region and created favorable conditions for a policy of close neighborly diplomacy. Importantly, this format is neither an integration structure nor a political institution, and the meeting agendas do not include such objectives. The leaders of regional countries have explicitly stated that they are not seeking to replicate formal integration or establish political institutions but prefer the consultative format and have no intention of directing these efforts against the interests of other countries.

The practical significance of the Consultative Meetings based on good neighborliness is reflected in the following:

First, due to the political processes of the past seven years in Central Asia, leading global powers are being forced to recognize that the countries in the region are not merely objects of geopolitical interests, but possess their own geopolitical power and potential. In this context, the new format of the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian leaders — initiated by the President of Uzbekistan — is geopolitically significant as it is conducted without the involvement of external powers.

Second, today, consensus and cooperation prevail over conflict in Central Asia. Regional countries are actively working on the rational use of water resources and the integration of innovative technologies into this process. Moreover, rather than continuing to view Afghanistan solely as a traditional source of threat within the regional security system, the focus has shifted toward helping the country take firm steps toward peace and development — a position that aligns with the shared interests of Central Asian nations in ensuring regional stability.

As emphasized by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev: "We firmly believe in the establishment of peace on the soil of neighboring Afghanistan and will continue to provide practical support in this noble cause. Today, the construction of the Trans-Afghan transport corridor connecting Central Asia with the Indian Ocean is an urgent task. The realization of this major project will contribute to stability and economic growth across our entire region."

Establishing peace in Afghanistan and ensuring interconnectivity between Central and South Asia is widely recognized by the international community as one of the positive outcomes of Uzbekistan's pragmatic foreign policy.

Third, economic cooperation is increasingly becoming a key pillar of good neighborly relations. According to statistical data, Uzbekistan's total trade turnover with Central Asian countries reached USD 7.2 billion in 2023. These countries accounted for 11.5% of Uzbekistan's overall foreign trade, with Kazakhstan representing 61% of regional trade, Turkmenistan 15%, Kyrgyzstan 13%, and Tajikistan 11%. There is no doubt that the Consultative Meetings are making a significant contribution to strengthening and expanding regional ties.

Fourth, typically, mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperation involve not only bilateral relations but also multilateral ones within political institutions. Today, Central Asian states also participate in various formats of cooperation. All five regional countries are members of the



United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). However, only Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which has a military-political status. Additionally, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015.

According to World Trade Organization (WTO) Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala:

“If all Central Asian countries become WTO members, their trade rules and procedures will be automatically harmonized, which will make doing business in the region easier and cheaper. This will serve as a healthy stimulus for economic activity and bring benefits to the entire regional population. Kazakhstan joined the WTO in 2015, Kyrgyzstan in 1998, and Tajikistan in 2013. Uzbekistan’s accession process has reached an advanced stage. Considering that Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are also in the process of joining the WTO, this situation may lead to stronger regional integration and trade.”

It is natural to ask: How does membership in various international organizations affect the cooperation among Central Asian states? The answer is that differences in organizational affiliation do not hinder regional cooperation among like-minded states that are closely tied by shared historical, political, and cultural connections.

It is also worth noting that for many years, Uzbekistan remained outside these organizations. However, thanks to the reforms implemented under New Uzbekistan, significant steps toward WTO accession have been taken since 2017. In 2020, Uzbekistan obtained observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

At present, it is widely acknowledged that the era of New Uzbekistan marks a period of profound transformation in the history of Uzbek statehood. Today, New Uzbekistan is not merely a participant in international relations, but a regionally responsible state with a growing economy and the confidence to advance its foreign policy initiatives on the global stage.

Uzbekistan has made major contributions to the adoption of several resolutions by the UN General Assembly, including: “Strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian region” (June 2018), “Enlightenment and religious tolerance” (December 2018), “Sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central Asia” (December 2019), and “Declaring the Aral Sea region a zone of environmental innovations and technologies” (May 2021).

Moreover, during the Astana Summit on August 14, 2024, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed the mutual recognition of national ID cards across Central Asia and the development of mass tourism products based on the principle of “One Tour – the Whole Region.”

The priority of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy is the Central Asian region — particularly the expansion and development of long-term and mutually beneficial relations with neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. To enhance processes of security, stability, and economic integration in Central Asia, the principle of “Central Asia — the top foreign policy priority for Uzbekistan” has been put into practice.

As a result, a completely new political atmosphere has emerged in the region, with growing mutual trust and strengthened good neighborly relations.

In 2017 alone, significant milestones were achieved: a railway agreement with Kazakhstan, a border agreement and declaration of strategic partnership with Kyrgyzstan, and expanded trade and aviation ties with Tajikistan — resulting in the highest bilateral trade turnover in 20

years. A strategic partnership was also established with Turkmenistan, and both road and rail bridges were commissioned.

These developments led to the emergence of a new geopolitical reality in the region, one based on mutual trust and respect.

On December 19, 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution "Sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central Asia." This initiative was originally proposed by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev during his meeting with UN Secretary-General António Guterres in Beijing in April 2019. The document was developed by Uzbekistan and presented on behalf of the Central Asian states. It was unanimously supported by all UN member states and co-sponsored by more than 50 countries from North and Latin America, Asia, Africa, and other continents — a clear indication that President Mirziyoyev's initiatives are viewed by the international community as timely and highly relevant.

In 2020, a new chapter began in Uzbekistan's cooperation with international organizations in the area of human rights, as the country was elected a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council for the first time. Experts from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) positively evaluated and supported Uzbekistan's new phase of democratic reforms and socio-economic transformations, as well as its policy of strengthening good neighborly relations in Central Asia.

Although Central Asian countries have cooperated within platforms such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO — with the exception of Turkmenistan), until 2018 there was no purely regional format for cooperation.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, drawing attention to the historical dynamics of global politics, stated: "Our open and effective dialogues, important initiatives, the launch of multilateral projects and programs, numerous joint events, and other such efforts have fundamentally transformed the image and perception of the region. Interest from external partners has significantly increased. Various meetings held in the 'Central Asia +' format are proof of this. Today, we can confidently say that the process of shaping a unique regional identity in Central Asia has begun. I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all my colleagues for their support in strengthening unity and solidarity, and for endorsing our joint efforts to expand multifaceted regional cooperation as a key priority of our countries' foreign policies."

The practical application of the good neighborliness principle has elevated Central Asia's position on the world stage. Today, Central Asia is no longer on the periphery of international politics; global attention toward the region is growing steadily. In this context, the emergence of new formats of cooperation — independent of integration blocs — is of great significance. Formats such as "Central Asia-USA," "Central Asia-European Union," "Central Asia-Republic of Korea," "Central Asia-Japan," "Central Asia-India," "Central Asia-China," and "Central Asia-Russia" demonstrate the high level of interest foreign powers have in conducting political dialogues with the countries of the region.

According to Johns Hopkins University Professor F. Starr, Central Asia is not a region in the shadow of Russia or China, nor is it the arena of the so-called "Great Games" often mentioned by Western political scientists. Rather, it is a distinct part of the world, defined by its own history and culture, and home to diverse ethnic groups who consider it their homeland.

Indeed, for many years, international discourse about Central Asia revolved around two opposing tendencies — cooperation or competition. In discussions of cooperation, emphasis

was placed on the cultural closeness of the peoples, their shared traditions and historical legacy, the contributions of great Central Asian thinkers to human progress, and the region's role in the development of Islamic civilization. On the other hand, international experts often cited the region's geopolitical location, economic capacity, use of natural resources, and political leadership as sources of regional rivalry and inter-state disputes, which they actively promoted. Christine Lagarde, then Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), remarked during a briefing following the IMF's Regional Conference on May 24, 2016: "The levels of development among Central Asian states vary. Some are heavily dependent on remittances, while others closely monitor commodity prices. However, all of them are closely interconnected. Many countries in the region are pursuing regional integration and trade development, but much more can still be done in this area."

In conclusion, the global integration of Central Asian countries is a complex yet promising process. The region's historical heritage, geographic location, and natural resources offer significant potential to enhance its role on the international stage. However, regional disputes, infrastructure challenges, and competition among external powers continue to slow this progress. Strengthening trust among states, developing infrastructure and transportation systems, and maintaining effective cooperation with international organizations are essential for deepening integration. In this regard, the policy of good neighborliness remains a key driving force.

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