

INTERSECTING POLICIES:
*EXPLORING THE DOMESTIC
FOUNDATIONS OF UZBEKISTAN'S
CHANGING STANCE ON CHINA*

Intersecting Policies: *Exploring the Domestic Foundations of Uzbekistan's Changing Stance on China*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research paper examines the evolution of Uzbekistan's policy towards China, focusing on the interplay between domestic and foreign policies. It highlights that Uzbekistan enjoys greater flexibility in its relations with external powers compared to its neighbours, with Russia retaining significant influence due to its Soviet legacy. However, China's presence has been significant for Uzbekistan, primarily as a means of diversifying its global connections and reducing Russia's dominance.

The paper highlights that Beijing initially approached Uzbekistan with security cooperation in mind, particularly regarding the issue of Uyghur activism. It suggests that cooperation in combating Uyghur separatism within Uzbekistan was beneficial not only to Beijing, but also to the first President Islam Karimov's political regime.

The policy towards China under Shavkat Mirziyoyev has seen some changes, reflecting his broader reformist agenda. A significant economic development is the increased access of Uzbek businesses to the Chinese market. The PRC has emerged as a principal investor in the Uzbek economy, and its influence is increasingly visible in local media, education, and arms imports. The "new Uzbekistan" is also adopting aspects of China's state administration practices, particularly in anticorruption policies and poverty alleviation.

The research paper also notes that local experts in Uzbekistan do not have direct access to decision-makers and tend to avoid addressing contemporary trends in relations with China.

The paper concludes by noting that, while China is seen as an alternative to Russian influence, this direction of foreign policy faces its own set of constraints.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, Central Asia has undergone significant transformations, both internally and externally. Uzbekistan, situated at the heart of the region, has experienced dramatic changes that render it almost unrecognizable compared to its state a decade ago. This transformation extends to its foreign policy, which has stimulated numerous other dynamic trends within Central Asia. Another major concurrent trend reshaping the region, and specifically Uzbekistan, is the growing presence of China.

These evolving trends warrant further exploration. Existing research on Tashkent's policy towards Beijing often overlooks the interplay between Uzbekistan's foreign and domestic policies. It erroneously suggests that Uzbekistan's foreign policy actions exist in isolation from its domestic policy objectives. In my view, the reality is markedly different. In many instances, decisions that ostensibly appear to solely benefit China are equally advantageous for Uzbekistan. It is not Beijing that is driving Tashkent towards closer cooperation; rather, it is a mutually beneficial arrangement.

It is crucial to note that China's interests in Uzbekistan align with Tashkent's domestic political objectives. From security concerns to healthcare collaboration, the leadership of both China and Uzbekistan, particularly during the initial stages of relationship establishment, shared common perspectives. This congruence facilitated a gradual escalation of interaction over the years. Consequently, Tashkent's foreign policy decisions should be viewed as an extension of its domestic policy.

It is essential, however, not to overstate China's role in Uzbekistan's development. Despite its expanding economic presence and even the exchange of governance expertise, China does not monopolize the role of partner. Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy and protectionist economy have by design facilitated diversified dependencies on various countries. Tashkent is keen to avoid granting any external power leverage over any dimension of its purview, and China is no exception to this.

The main question of this research paper is: How has Uzbekistan's policy towards China evolved over time, and what factors have influenced this transformation? The paper uncovers a nuanced shift in Uzbekistan's stance towards China, propelled by a complex interplay of domestic policies and other economic, political, and social factors. Despite historical ties with Russia and the significant presence of other external actors in the country, Uzbekistan is increasingly engaging with China to diversify its foreign relations and stimulate economic growth. This engagement, however, is marked by caution. The study also reveals

the inherent challenges and unique features of this relationship that are not evident in Tashkent's dealings with other partners.

This paper offers valuable insights into the changing dynamics of Uzbekistan's decision-making process regarding its relationship with China. It contributes to a broader understanding of how smaller nations navigate their foreign policies amidst larger global powers. Furthermore, it illuminates the parallels between domestic and foreign policies in the decision-making process. The findings could inform policymakers and scholars interested in Central Asian studies, international relations, and global economics.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach to understand the evolution of Uzbekistan's policy towards China. An extensive review of existing literature on Uzbekistan's foreign policy, Central Asian geopolitics, and Sino-Uzbek relations provides the theoretical foundation for the study. The paper presents a detailed analysis of Uzbekistan's domestic and foreign policy documents, speeches by political leaders and diplomats, and official statements that help trace the shifts in the country's stance towards China. Statistical data on economic indicators, trade volumes, and investment patterns are analysed to quantify the extent of Sino-Uzbek engagement over time. Semi-structured interviews with local scholars and experts in the field provide insights into the motivations and implications of these policy shifts.

THE POWER OF HAVING A DISTANCE

If the era of Islam Karimov's rule over Uzbekistan's foreign policy were to be characterized by a single term, it would be "protectionism." In the initial years following independence, Tashkent's primary objective was to bolster its self-sufficiency across all domains, ranging from economic to security concerns. Uzbekistan prioritized the development of its internal resources, viewing external resources as supplementary assistance in areas where development was necessary but could not be achieved independently.

Uzbekistan's unique geopolitical position partially enabled it to pursue such a foreign policy. The country is insulated from major powers by its regional neighbours, while its central geographic location and large population render it an influential actor within Central Asia. Uzbekistan's geographic centrality also made it the hub of the region's industrial infrastructure and connections during the Soviet era, endowing it with economic advantages that persists to this day. However, the existence of this regional buffer zone has also precluded Uzbekistan from capitalizing on the trade benefits of sharing a border with a thriving economy. Consequently, Tashkent relied on its internal capabilities for development, forming the foundation of the "Uzbek model" of governance.

Since its inception, the "Uzbek model" has undergone numerous transformations, yet certain features have remained constant. For instance, Uzbekistan's economy continues to rely primarily on internal resources and remains one of the most insular globally. According to the economic openness index,¹ Uzbekistan ranks 111th out of 157 states, compared to Kazakhstan's 72nd and Kyrgyzstan's 104th place. Similarly, on the economic freedom index,² Uzbekistan ranks 117th out of 161 states, with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan ranking 64th and 116th, respectively. Moreover, Uzbekistan does not participate in any economic organizations, such as the World Trade Organization or the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), nor does it consistently belong to any military alliances such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Uzbekistan inherited extensive military-technical capabilities from its Soviet past and currently ranks 62nd in the world on Global Firepower's military capability index,³ the highest ranking among Central Asian countries.

¹ Global Index of Economic Openness, 2019. *Templeton World Charity Foundation*, retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://ti.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/GIEO-2019.pdf>

² Index of economic freedom, 2022. *Heritage Foundation*, retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20221108204000/https://www.heritage.org/index/ranking>

³ 2023 Military Strength Ranking. *GlobalFirepower.com*, retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>

In other words, Uzbekistan enjoys greater flexibility in its relations with external powers compared to its neighbours. However, Russia retains significant influence due to its Soviet legacy: production chains were already established through Moscow, and transport and logistics dependencies limited trade alternatives with other countries. Thus, other countries had to build their presence in Uzbekistan from scratch.

China's presence was significant for Uzbekistan, primarily as a means of diversifying its global connections and reducing Russia's dominance in the long term. Additionally, the industrial, financial, and technological capabilities of the PRC, which have been steadily advancing since the mid-1980s, presented ample opportunities for cooperation between the two countries.

From Tashkent's perspective, China was a convenient partner. The absence of a shared border between the two countries meant that, unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan, newly independent Uzbekistan did not have to engage in potentially contentious and hazardous negotiations over territorial disputes with Beijing in the early years of their relationship. Furthermore, the lack of a common border alleviated concerns about potential Sinophobia within Uzbek society, as has occurred and continues to occur in countries bordering China.

Moreover, unlike other countries, China officially adheres to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations in its foreign policy and publicly advocates for equal relations. This does not imply that Beijing's actions have not influenced Tashkent's decisions; however, it is important to note that other major powers have behaved differently. Russia has openly sought to intervene in the domestic politics of former Soviet republics using all available means. Western countries lack Moscow's imperial ambitions in the region but nonetheless have expressed a desire to see Uzbekistan adopt democratic reforms and liberalize its domestic affairs. It goes without saying that Beijing lagged far behind Russia in its ability to influence domestic politics in Uzbekistan or any other Central Asian state.

From Beijing's perspective, each country in the region possessed unique attributes. Tajikistan, as the only Central Asian country bordering both China and Afghanistan, became the focus of security cooperation for Beijing. Turkmenistan was valued for its natural gas resources, while Kazakhstan was prized for its oil reserves. Kyrgyzstan was viewed as a gateway for Chinese products into the region. Uzbekistan distinguished itself with its well-established industrial base and large domestic market of over 30 million people, particularly in light of the impending overproduction crisis in the PRC in the early 2000s. Despite this, economic considerations were not at the core of the relationship between the two countries; rather, they were later superimposed upon the fundamental issue of security cooperation.

As with Tajikistan, Beijing initially approached Uzbekistan with security cooperation in mind.

Security Comes First

The PRC was the second country with which independent Uzbekistan established official diplomatic relations in January 1992, several months before Russia or the United States.⁴

Islam Karimov's first official visit as president was also to China.⁵ In March 1992, at the invitation of Chinese President Yang Shangkun (楊尚昆), Uzbekistan's government delegation signed 15 fundamental cooperation agreements with China, including the first joint communiqué.⁶ In this document, Uzbekistan declared that it “recognizes the position of the government of the People's Republic of China on maintaining China's territorial integrity and will establish and maintain relations only with the government of the People's Republic of China, which is the sole legitimate government of China.”

Like many other countries with official diplomatic relations with the PRC, Uzbekistan has adhered to the “one China” policy from the outset and is among the countries that do not maintain unofficial relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan). This stance is a prerequisite for Beijing's cooperation with any country, and Uzbekistan initially adopted a pro-Beijing position for pragmatic reasons. Relations with Taiwan would have yielded few benefits given Uzbekistan's geographic isolation and would have simultaneously damaged relations with Beijing.

Tashkent's initial objective in its China policy was to establish connections with the leadership.⁷

Throughout the 1990s, high-ranking Chinese officials visited Uzbekistan, including Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), Timur Dawamadi (铁木尔·达瓦买提), an ethnic Uyghur, in 1993; head of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Li Peng (李鹏), in 1994; head of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), in 1995; and Vice Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Qian Qichen (钱其琛), in 1999.

Uzbek officials also actively visited China, including Prosecutor General Nigmatilla Yuldoshev, Foreign Ministers Saidmukhtar Saidkasymov and Abdulaziz Kamilov, Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Yunusov, and others.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Countries with which Uzbekistan has established diplomatic relations”, retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://mfa.uz/ru/pages/strani-kotoriye-uzbekistan-ustanovil-diplomaticheskiye-otnosheniya>

⁵ Islam Karimov Foundation, “Foreign Policy, 1992” [Ташқи сиёсат, 1992 йил], retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20220128162231/http://islomkarimov.uz/ru/page/tashqi-siyosat-1992-yil>

⁶ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Uzbekistan, “About the visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov to the People's Republic of China” [О визите Президента Республики Узбекистан Ислама Каримова в Китайскую Народную Республику], (June 17, 2004), retrieved October 23, 2023, from http://uz.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/zwxg/zywj/200406/t20040617_1958782.htm

⁷ All evidence of the following meetings was obtained from the archives of the Islam Karimov Foundation's website “Foreign Policy” page [Ташқи сиёсат], retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://fondkarimov.uz/uz/bosh-sahifa/>

High-level visits also occurred in the summer of 1996 when Chinese President Jiang Zemin (江泽民) visited Uzbekistan as part of his tour of Central Asia.

Each visit between Uzbekistan and China resulted in the signing of memorandums, agreements, and treaties that now form the foundation of their bilateral relations. These include agreements on cooperation in various fields such as culture, education, healthcare, tourism, sports, science, technical, and economic cooperation. While most of these documents were routine and unremarkable, they were essential for relationship-building.

In addition to the Taiwan issue, the People's Republic of China (PRC) also sought to gain Uzbekistan's support on the "Xinjiang issue." The dissolution of the USSR presented a potential crisis of destabilization for China. The emergence of independent Turkic-speaking countries with societies that are culturally and religiously similar to the Uyghurs on the border with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was a dangerous precedent for Beijing. Furthermore, there was the risk of support for separatist sentiments in Xinjiang from Central Asia. Beijing's concerns were fuelled by the fact that approximately 500 thousand (or according to other estimates, 2 million) ethnic Uyghurs lived in Uzbekistan. This was not entirely unfounded as, since the early 1990s, branches of various organizations advocating for the liberation of Xinjiang had begun to appear in the country.⁸

Beijing successfully reached an understanding with Uzbekistan on the national question. It is known⁹ that Islam Karimov personally handed over materials on the activities of members of organizations advocating for the independence of East Turkestan to the PRC leadership. Additionally, practically all Uyghur organizations formed on a national basis began to close¹⁰ in Uzbekistan, even if they did not engage in political issues. Moreover, Uzbekistan's law enforcement agencies privately handed over members of these organizations to the Chinese even before both parties had signed an extradition agreement.

Many attribute Tashkent's enthusiasm for cooperating with China on the issue of Uyghur separatism to the possibility that China may have promised Uzbekistan economic incentives in exchange, such as preferential loans or financial assistance. Others suggest that Uzbekistan, having recently declared its independence, could not resist the pressure exerted by Beijing.

However, it is important to note that cooperation in combating Uyghur separatism within Uzbekistan was also beneficial to Karimov's political regime. Despite leading Uzbekistan since the end of the Soviet era, Islam Karimov faced a crisis of legitimacy after 1991. In the early years of independence, other political groups attempted to weaken Karimov's position. Furthermore, during the late

⁸ Some of the groups later merged with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which is recognized as a terrorist organization in the countries of Central Asia.

⁹ "Relations between China and Uzbekistan" [Отношения Китая с Узбекистаном], China Internet Information Center, (July 2004), retrieved October 23, 2023, from <http://russian.china.org.cn/russian/117611.htm>

¹⁰ "No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs", Uyghur Human Rights Project, (June 24, 2021), retrieved July 29, 2023, from <https://uhrp.org/report/no-space-left-to-run-chinas-transnational-repression-of-uyghurs/>

1990s, Uzbekistan experienced attacks and violence from the outside, including incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into Kyrgyzstan, spillover from the civil war in Tajikistan, and violence in Xinjiang.

To protect his position, Karimov fought against any groups and organizations that could potentially destabilize the regime. The young and increasingly authoritarian political regime in Uzbekistan had little time for any dissidents or separatist, be they local or Uyghur.

During the transitional period following the dissolution of the USSR, Karimov's political regime faced its own "Xinjiang" crisis in the form of movements within the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan. Certain factions within the Karakalpakstan elite sought¹¹ independence from Uzbekistan. Furthermore, Karimov's policies towards national minorities within Uzbekistan mirrored his approach towards the Uyghurs. Uzbekistan is home to millions of ethnic Tajiks and hundreds of thousands of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen. These groups were subjected to language restrictions;¹² for instance, under Karimov's regime, there was a significant reduction in the number of Kazakh¹³ and Tajik¹⁴ schools. In relation to the Uyghurs, Karimov went as far as to deny¹⁵ their existence within Uzbekistan.

The political regimes of Uzbekistan and China both grappled with issues of separatism, largely due to their historical reliance on Soviet policy frameworks. Prior to Xi Jinping's ascension to power, China, akin to Uzbekistan, largely adhered to Marxist-Leninist principles in its national politics. However, the collapse of the USSR highlighted potential stability issues within these frameworks, prompting both regimes to independently tighten their national policies.

Consequently, Tashkent demonstrated a profound understanding of Beijing's stance on these matters. There was no need for the Chinese administration to elucidate to Karimov the inherent risks that seeds of separatism posed to the stability of a political regime. This mutual comprehension was evident during President Li Peng's 1994 visit to Uzbekistan, where he openly discussed the perceived threat of separatist and terrorist groups that China believed were congregating in the region with the intent to destabilize Beijing.¹⁶

¹¹ Reuel R. Hanks, *A Separate Space?: Karakalpak Nationalism and Devolution in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan*, (Europe-Asia Studies, 2000), Vol. 52, No. 5, pp. 939-953, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/713663098>

¹² Murat Sadykov, "Uzbekistan: The Tajik Language is Suppressed" [Узбекистан: Таджикский Язык Подавляется], Eurasianet, (March 8, 2018), retrieved October 28, 2023, <https://russian.eurasianet.org/node/60375>

¹³ Nurtai Lahanuly, "More than 100 Kazakh schools have been closed in Uzbekistan" [В Узбекистане закрыли более 100 казахских школ], Radio Azattyk, (September 15, 2015), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/uzbekistam-kazakhsie-shkoly-interview-khalmuratov/27248688.html>

¹⁴ Sarvinos Ruhullo, "Open letter from Tajiks of Uzbekistan: 'Do not close Tajik schools'" [Открытое письмо таджиков Узбекистана: «Не закрывайте таджикские школы»], Radio Ozodi, (January 24, 2018), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/28993296.html>

¹⁵ "Invisible Uyghurs of Uzbekistan" [Невидимые Уйгуры Узбекистана], Eurasianet, (July 3, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://russian.eurasianet.org/%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BC%D1%8B%D0%B5-%D1%83%D0%B9%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%80%D1%8B-%D1%83%D0%B7%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0>

¹⁶ UK Parliament Committees, "China and Central Asia – UK Policy Options", written evidence submitted by Raffello Pan-

Hence, the “concessions” made to China should rather be interpreted as a pragmatic strategy adopted by the Uzbek political regime to bolster its stability. It was also during this period that cooperation in the realm of security began to be institutionalized and codified. Fundamental agreements such as those “on legal assistance in civil and criminal cases,”¹⁷ and “on extradition”¹⁸ were signed, marking a significant milestone in China-Uzbekistan diplomatic relations.

Pragmatic Friendship

Following the establishment of a legal framework and the attainment of consensus on key issues (namely, the status of Taiwan and the Xinjiang question), economic cooperation between the two nations intensified. Prior to this, cooperation did exist, albeit in a limited capacity, primarily in the form of loans and aid amounting to approximately half a million RMB (equivalent to about US\$60 million).¹⁹

Since the early 2000s, there has been a marked escalation in trade between Uzbekistan and China, with trade figures doubling in monetary terms over a decade. However, economic collaboration gained further momentum following the most significant political crisis in Uzbekistan’s contemporary history—the severe quelling of protests in Andijan in 2005. This incident served as a watershed moment in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy trajectory, prompting the nation to distance itself from all countries and international organizations that criticized Tashkent’s actions and called for a transparent, independent investigation.

China, akin to Russia, was among the nations that endorsed Karimov’s actions and echoed the official narrative of the events. This stance was viewed within the context of the “Colour Revolutions” narrative, which holds significant importance for Beijing, Moscow, and Tashkent alike. Kong Quan (孔泉), a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry at the time, stated: “The recent developments in Uzbekistan are its internal affairs. We support efforts to combat terrorism, extremism, and separatism. We hope that order will be restored and life in Uzbekistan will return to normal.”²⁰

tucci (ECA0020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/119646/html/>

¹⁷ “Agreement between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the People’s Republic of China on Legal Assistance in Civil and Criminal Matters (Beijing, December 11, 1997, ratified by the Resolution of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan on May 1, 1998 No. 626-1, entered into force on December 11, 1998)” [Договор Между Республикой Узбекистан и Китайской Народной Республикой о Правовой Помощи По Гражданским и Уголовным Дела (Пекин, 11 Декабря 1997 Года, Ратифицирован Постановлением Ом РУз 1 Мая 1998 Года N 626-1, Вступил в Силу с 11 Декабря 1998 Года)], NRM.Uz, retrieved October 23, 2023, from [https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=42274_dogovor_mejdu_respublikoy_uzbekistan_i_kitayskoy_narodnoy_respublikoy_o_pravovoy_pomoshchi_po_grajdanskim_i_ugolovnym_delam_\(pekin_11_dekabrya_1997_g_ratificirovan_postanovleniem_om_ruz_ot_1_maya_1998_goda_n_626-i\)&products=1_vse_zakonodatelstvo_uzbekistana](https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=42274_dogovor_mejdu_respublikoy_uzbekistan_i_kitayskoy_narodnoy_respublikoy_o_pravovoy_pomoshchi_po_grajdanskim_i_ugolovnym_delam_(pekin_11_dekabrya_1997_g_ratificirovan_postanovleniem_om_ruz_ot_1_maya_1998_goda_n_626-i)&products=1_vse_zakonodatelstvo_uzbekistana)

¹⁸ <https://lex.uz/acts/2197709>

¹⁹ Nargis Kassenova, “How China’s Foreign Aid Fosters Social Bonds with Central Asian Ruling Elites,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (December 7, 2022), retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/07/how-china-s-foreign-aid-fosters-social-bonds-with-central-asian-ruling-elites-pub-88579>

²⁰ Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs answers questions on China-Japan consultations on East China Sea

Subsequently, Islam Karimov expressed his appreciation for the relationship between Tashkent and Beijing, stating: “We have a saying: ‘A friend is known in trouble.’ China proved to be such a friend, extending a helping hand in difficult times.”²¹

Karimov’s assertion held a degree of veracity. The Cotton Campaign, a global human rights coalition, initiated²² a boycott²³ of Uzbekistan’s primary export product, colloquially referred to as “white gold” due to its significance, in response to the employment of forced and child labour in its production. This action led to a substantial increase²⁴ in cotton supplies from Uzbekistan to China. In 2002, a mere 3.12 percent (US\$21.7 million) of Uzbekistan’s cotton export was destined for China. However, by 2006, this figure had escalated tenfold to 33.9 percent (US\$465 million).²⁵

The capacity of Chinese businesses to acclimate²⁶ to local conditions played a significant role in ensuring that these companies remained unscathed by scandals in Uzbekistan during the tenure of Islam Karimov. Numerous media investigations have shed light on the challenges foreign investors faced during this period, including high-level corruption and illicit corporate raids, predominantly orchestrated by Gulnara Karimova, the first president’s daughter. The case involving the American corporation Coca-Cola was particularly prominent.²⁷

As numerous Western companies were compelled to exit Uzbekistan, this created opportunities for other entities, including those from China, to establish a presence. This was particularly evident in the telecommunications sector.²⁸ Two Chinese telecommunications giants have been operating in the Uzbek market since the early 2000s. Huawei inaugurated its representative office in Uzbekistan in 1999, collaborating with *Uztelecom*, the largest Uzbek operator, boasting a network encompassing the entire country. ZTE commenced its operations in Uzbekistan slightly later, in 2004, and began supplying USB modems and routers to virtually all local mobile operators, including *UzMobile*, *Ucell*, *Beeline*, and *MTS*.²⁹

issues [外交部发言人就中日将就东海问题磋商等答问], retrieved October 23, 2023, from https://www.gov.cn/gov-web/xwfb/2005-05/27/content_1387.htm

²¹ “Uzbekistan and China- Friends in a Difficult Moment” [Узбекистан и Китай – Друзья в Трудную Минуту], Eurasianet, (July 24, 2017), retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://russian.eurasianet.org/node/63196>

²² “Uzbekistan — Cotton Campaign”, Cotton Campaign, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.cottoncampaign.org/uzbekistan>.

²³ “Child Labour- Forced Labour: ILO Welcomes Lifting of Cotton Campaign Boycott of Uzbekistan.” International Labour Organization, (March 14, 2022), retrieved October 23, 2023, from https://www.ilo.org/europe/info/news/WCMS_839591/lang-en/index.htm#:~:text=The%20boycott%20was%20imposed%20in,lifted%20on%2010%20March%202022.

²⁴ “Latest Cotton News | Cotton News Updates,” Fibre2Fashion, (April 28, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from https://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/cotton-news/newsdetails.aspx?news_id=114055

²⁵ “Uzbekistan (UZB) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners | OEC”, The Observatory of Economic Complexity, retrieved April 28, 2022, from <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/uzb?depthSelector1=HS2Depth&yearSelector1=2011>

²⁶ Van Der Kley, Dirk, & Niva Yau, “How Central Asians Pushed Chinese Firms to Localize”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (October 15, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/15/how-central-asians-pushed-chinese-firms-to-localize-pub-85561>

²⁷ Eckel, Mike, “Exclusive: How Coca-Cola Helped Uzbekistan Seize a Lucrative Bottling Operation from U.S. Citizens”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, (June 22, 2021), retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-coca-cola-franchise-karimova/31320385.html>

²⁸ “Mapping China’s Tech Giants | ASPI | Australian Strategic Policy Institute”, Australian Strategic Policy Institute- International Cyber Policy Centre, retrieved April 28, 2023 from <https://chinatechmap.aspi.org.au/#/data/>.

²⁹ “ZTE in Uzbekistan”, ZTE Corporation (Archived). Accessed April 28, 2022 via Wayback Machine at <https://web.archive>.

During a period when the market was characterized by a diverse range of companies, state institutions, including the Presidential Administration and the University of World Economics and Diplomacy, opted not to utilize the services of Chinese corporations. Instead, they chose to engage with the Swedish telecommunications giant, Ericsson.³⁰

However, in the mid-2000s and early 2010s, all major market participants, barring the Chinese telecommunications giants, were compelled to exit Uzbekistan due to a series of scandals, mounting pressure, and an increasingly complex political landscape. This included Swedish TeliaSonera, Russian-Norwegian VypelCom, and Russian MTS.³¹ Subsequently, Ericsson also announced its departure.

These developments effectively transformed Chinese corporations into near-monopoly suppliers of telecommunications equipment in Uzbekistan. As per data from 2011, equipment from Huawei Technologies serviced over 55 percent of Uzbekistan's population, establishing the company as the primary provider of telecommunications solutions.³²

The energy sector was also a source of several scandals, and a number of Chinese companies also withdrew from the market, albeit in a discreet manner. This was likely not a consequence of corruption, but rather due to Tashkent's selective approach in determining market entry. In the mid-2000s, two Chinese companies, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (Sinopec), announced their intention to enter the Uzbek energy market. In 2005, Sinopec planned to invest US\$110 million to explore new deposits and rejuvenate stalled projects in the Ferghana valley in eastern Uzbekistan.³³ Concurrently, CNPC was also considering Uzbekistan as a potential investment destination.³⁴ However, several years later it was revealed that Sinopec had decided to abandon³⁵ the project, while CNPC had remained.³⁶

[org/web/20220428210725/http://zte.ru/company/zte-in-uzbekistan/](http://web/20220428210725/http://zte.ru/company/zte-in-uzbekistan/).

³⁰ "Ericsson in Uzbekistan", Infocom (Archived), accessed April 28, 2022 via Wayback Machine at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120511104114/http://infocom.uz/2003/11/10/ericsson/>.

³¹ Roque, Stella & Miranda Patrucic, "VimpelCom Fined US\$ 795 Million Over Uzbekistan Telecoms Bribes." Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), (February 19, 2016), retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/4958-vimpelcom-fined-us-795-million-over-uzbekistan-telecoms-bribes>.

³² "Huawei Technologies in Uzbekistan: Support for the Development of Informatization and the Country's Economy", Infocom (Archived), accessed October 15, 2011 via Wayback Machine at <https://web.archive.org/web/20111015030537/http://infocom.uz/2011/03/18/huawei-technologies-v-uzbekis-tane-podderzhka-razvitiya-informatizatsii-i-ekonomiki-stranyi/>

³³ "Sinopec to Pump \$106m into Uzbek Fields.", Upstream Online, (May 16, 2005), <https://www.upstreamonline.com/online/sinopec-to-pump-106m-into-uzbek-fields/1-1-1032326>

³⁴ "CNPC Eyes Oil in Uzbekistan", Upstream Online, retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://www.upstreamonline.com/live-fsu/cnpc-eyes-oil-in-uzbekistan/1-1-1033064>

³⁵ "China's Sinopec Drops Uzbek Energy Project - Source", Reuters, (April 19, 2007), retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/sinopec-uzbekistan-idUKL1969631820070419>

³⁶ "CNPC's Uzbekistan subsidiary to perform 2,500 km of 2D work in 2007", UZ DAILY, (October 16, 2007), retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/1479>

Broadening The Friendship

During the mid-2000s, Tashkent and Beijing began to broaden their focus, encompassing an expanding array of issues. This shift is evident in the changing composition of officials who visited Uzbekistan during this period. In the initial decade, visits were predominantly undertaken by high-ranking officials seeking to establish contacts and familiarize themselves with the country. However, as the second decade unfolded, the complexity of the bilateral relations between the two countries increased. Representatives from various Chinese state structures began to visit with specific proposals for cooperation, signalling a transition from general diplomatic engagement to more targeted and strategic interactions.

The enduring relevance of security concerns—with a focus on terrorism, separatism, and extremism—for both political regimes led to these being colloquially referred to as the “three forces of evil” (三个势力). During the 2000s, the political regimes of both the PRC and Uzbekistan found themselves grappling with a surge in radical activities. This shared predicament was particularly pronounced in Xinjiang and against Uzbekistan’s Karimov regime. Uzbekistan became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. The following year, Ismail Aymat (司马义·艾买提), a member of China’s State Council who was responsible for policymaking in Xinjiang, made an official visit to Uzbekistan. Subsequent to this diplomatic engagement, in 2003, the two parties entered into an agreement to collaborate in their efforts to “counter terrorism, separatism, and extremism.”³⁷

In 2001, Vice Premier Li Lanqing (李岚清), the official responsible for China’s national education policy, embarked on a diplomatic visit to Uzbekistan. This visit was followed by the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Central Asia, located in Uzbekistan, three years later.³⁸

In 2007, the Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, Wen Jiabao (温家宝), was received by Karimov at the Oksaroy residence. This meeting culminated in the signing of an agreement³⁹ on “technical and economic

³⁷ National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism and extremism” [Соглашение между Правительством Республики Узбекистан и Правительством Китайской Народной Республики о сотрудничестве в борьбе с терроризмом, сепаратизмом и экстремизмом], Nrm.uz, retrieved October 23, 2023, from [https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=557545_soglashenie_mejdu_pravitelstvom_respubliki_uzbekistan_i_pravitelstvom_kitayskoy_narodnoy_respubliki_o_sotrudnichestve_v_borbe_s_terrorizmom_separatizmom_i_ekstremizmom_\(tashkent_4_sentyabrya_2003_goda\)&products=1_vse_zakonodatelstvo_uzbekistana](https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=557545_soglashenie_mejdu_pravitelstvom_respubliki_uzbekistan_i_pravitelstvom_kitayskoy_narodnoy_respubliki_o_sotrudnichestve_v_borbe_s_terrorizmom_separatizmom_i_ekstremizmom_(tashkent_4_sentyabrya_2003_goda)&products=1_vse_zakonodatelstvo_uzbekistana)

³⁸ National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Agreement on cooperation in the establishment of the Confucius Institute in Tashkent between the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China” [Соглашение о сотрудничестве в создании Института им. Конфуция в г. Ташкенте между Министерством высшего и среднего специального образования Республики Узбекистан и Министерством образования Китайской Народной Республики], Nrm.uz, retrieved October 23, 2023, from [https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=65526_soglashenie_o_sotrudnichestve_v_sozdanii_instituta_im_konfuciya_v_g_tashkente_mejdu_ministerstvom_vysshego_i_srednego_specialnogo_obrazovaniya_respubliki_uzbekistan_i_ministerstvom_obrazovaniya_kitayskoy_narodnoy_respubliki_\(tashkent_15_iyunya_2004_g_vstuplenie_v_silu_s_15_iyunya_2004_g_\)&products=1_vse_zakonodatelstvo_uzbekistana](https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=65526_soglashenie_o_sotrudnichestve_v_sozdanii_instituta_im_konfuciya_v_g_tashkente_mejdu_ministerstvom_vysshego_i_srednego_specialnogo_obrazovaniya_respubliki_uzbekistan_i_ministerstvom_obrazovaniya_kitayskoy_narodnoy_respubliki_(tashkent_15_iyunya_2004_g_vstuplenie_v_silu_s_15_iyunya_2004_g_)&products=1_vse_zakonodatelstvo_uzbekistana)

³⁹ National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated March 04, 2014 No.48,” [Постановление Кабинета Министров Республики Узбекистан от 04

cooperation” between China and Uzbekistan, which included a provision for aid amounting to 60 million RMB (US\$7.5 million).

In the same year, Ma Kai (马凯), Chairman of the State Committee for Development and Reforms of the People’s Republic of China, visited Uzbekistan. During this visit, an agreement⁴⁰ was signed with Rustam Azimov, the Minister of Finance of Uzbekistan. This agreement outlined “the principles for the construction and operation of the Uzbekistan-China gas pipeline,” thereby laying the foundation for energy trade between Central Asia and China.

In essence, China began to put forth concrete proposals, and Uzbekistan started to identify areas where cooperation with Beijing would be beneficial. The impact of Chinese investment started to become increasingly apparent.

One of the earliest large-scale projects was the establishment of the first joint Uzbek Potash Fertilizer Plant in Central Asia.⁴¹ This venture was a collaboration between the Chinese China International Trust Investment Corporation (CITIC, 中信集团) and Uzkimyosanoat. The plant, which represented an investment of US\$110 million, was constructed in the Kashkadarya region.

Furthermore, the first Chinese industrial park in Central Asia, known as Peng Sheng, was also established during this period.⁴² These developments underscored the growing economic ties between China and Central Asia.

During the Karimov era, Uzbekistan permitted Chinese investment in a select few sectors: energy, agriculture, chemicals, and infrastructure. Beyond these areas, cooperation was largely restricted. The Uzbek media seldom covered China-related news, and educational institutions demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm in collaborating with foreign universities and organizations, including those from China.

There were a few minor projects that facilitated cultural exchange. For instance, in the mid-2010s, the Yoshlar (Youngsters) TV channel, which is part of the National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan, broadcasted Chinese TV shows such as the “Legend of Lu Zhen” (陆贞传奇). This show was translated into Uzbek as “Muhabbat afsonasi” or “A Legend of Love.” Despite these efforts, the overall level of engagement between the two countries remained limited during this period.

Uzbekistan’s policy towards China was formulated without the input of expert

марта 2014 года №48], Lex.uz, retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/1331484>

⁴⁰ National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated May 04, 2018 No.1378049” [Постановление Кабинета Министров Республики Узбекистан от 04 мая 2018 года №1378049], Lex.uz, retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/docs/1378049?ONDATE=04.05.2018>

⁴¹ “CITIC Construction”, CITIC Group, retrieved October 23, 2023, from https://construction.citic/en/content/details_47_2380.html

⁴² National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated June 24, 2009 No.1708537” [Постановление Президента Республики Узбекистан от 24 июня 2009 года №1708537], Lex.uz, retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/m/acts/1708537?ONDATE=24.06.2009%2000>

opinions. Sinologists and International Relations analysts based in Tashkent and Samarkand, whom I had the opportunity to meet, expressed that they lacked access to decision-makers and that their perspectives were largely overlooked.⁴³ The Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies, the oldest institution of its kind in the post-USSR space (established in 1918 as the Turkestan Institute of Oriental Studies), was once a central hub for research on China and other Asian nations during the USSR era.⁴⁴ However, in independent Uzbekistan, it has lost its prominence. The prohibition on political science during Islam Karimov's tenure further underscored the regime's disregard for specialists in related fields.

Even the experts from the presidential administration's internal think tank, the Institute of Strategic and Regional Studies, were unable to see their research implemented. Their primary task was to align the outcomes of their "research" with a pre-established framework provided to them. According to a private conversation with a former employee, all materials underwent rigorous editing, and there was no guarantee that these materials would ultimately reach the decision-makers.⁴⁵

The policy towards China in the "new Uzbekistan" under Shavkat Mirziyoyev has inherited much from the Karimov era. However, Mirziyoyev has introduced several innovations in his approach towards Beijing, mirroring his broader reformist agenda.

⁴³ It is important to note, however, that this lack of consultation is not exclusive to China-related policies but is characteristic of the decision-making process in authoritarian regimes.

⁴⁴ "History of TSUOS", Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, retrieved October 27, 2023, from <https://tsuos.uz/ru/institut-tarixi/>

⁴⁵ This is based on interviews with former employees of the institute who were engaged in the Chinese direction in the 2000-2010s. Interviews were conducted by Temur Umarov in Tashkent and Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in summer 2022.

OLD CHINA AND THE “NEW UZBEKISTAN”

Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who succeeded Islam Karimov following his demise in 2016, was already well-versed in Uzbekistan's relations with China. Despite not having held any positions in the Foreign Ministry, which is directly responsible for relations with other countries, Mirziyoyev's role as Karimov's right-hand man in the position of prime minister since 2003 had endowed him with considerable power.

Mirziyoyev's involvement in matters pertaining to relations with China is evident from official documents. Most presidential decrees concerning cooperation projects with the PRC include a clause stating that “control over the execution is entrusted to the prime minister.”⁴⁶

Moreover, he frequently met and hosted foreign guests, including those from China.⁴⁷ For instance, during Xi Jinping's visit to Uzbekistan in 2016, a few months prior to Karimov's death, Mirziyoyev was present. In essence, Mirziyoyev has been aware of all major projects between Uzbekistan and China since 2003 and has developed an understanding of how the cooperation functions. Although Mirziyoyev did not have full control over the system as prime minister, this did not hinder him from identifying its shortcomings. He subsequently initiated efforts to rectify these.

Trade with Obstacles

Following Mirziyoyev's rise to power, the economy of Uzbekistan has become significantly more open than it has ever been. Since 2016, the country's external trade⁴⁸ turnover has been increasing annually by 90-120 percent.⁴⁹ Concurrently,

⁴⁶ National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Search Results for ‘China’”, Lex.uz, retrieved October 16, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/ru/search/all?searchtitle=%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B9>

⁴⁷ “China, Russia Pledge to Deepen Practical Cooperation, Strengthen Coordination” [Китай и Россия обещают углубить практическое сотрудничество, усилить координацию], China.org.cn, (March 22, 2023), retrieved October 28, 2023, from http://russian.china.org.cn/international/txt/2016-06/22/content_38715243.htm

⁴⁸ Uzbek official data on economic relations between the two countries often differ from Chinese ones. For example, in 2021, according to Chinese official sources, trade with Uzbekistan amounted to more than US\$7.2 billion, and according to Uzbek data US\$6.6 billion. The text uses Chinese data whenever possible to simplify international comparisons.

⁴⁹ Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Macroeconomic Indicators”, Stat.uz, (October 17, 2023), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://stat.uz/en/official-statistics/macro-indicators>

trade with China has been steadily growing since the onset of the 21st century, particularly since 2015. During peak years, the annual growth rate reached up to 48 percent. China has largely solidified its position as Uzbekistan's primary trading partner, occasionally being surpassed by Russia.

Imports from China to Uzbekistan have been, with some exceptions, on an upward trajectory since 2016 and exceeded US\$7.5 billion in 2022.⁵⁰ According to data from the first nine months of 2023 provided by the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, Uzbekistan had already imported goods worth \$9.1 billion by August of 2023.⁵¹

China accounts for a quarter of Uzbekistan's global imports. The primary imports from China to Uzbekistan consist of high-tech machinery, including bulldozers, air conditioning machines, vacuum pumps, refrigerators, and automatic data-processing machines. Collectively, a third of the technological equipment used in production in Uzbekistan is imported from China.

Another significant category of imports is electrical machinery, which includes telephones for cellular networks, monitors and projectors, transistors, and similar semiconductor devices. The dependence of Uzbekistan on China for the supply of these goods is even greater than for high-tech machinery, with about half of all electrical machinery imported to Uzbekistan originating from the PRC.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan imports a diverse range of other goods from China. However, unlike other countries in the region, Uzbekistan does not rely on China for consumer goods. Instead, imports are primarily concentrated in manufacturing areas: polyethers and polymers of vinyl chloride (with China accounting for approximately 40 percent of these imports), and flat-rolled products of iron or non-alloy steel (around 20 percent).

In recent years, there has been a growth in supply of motor cars (China's share in the supply of these goods to Uzbekistan has increased from 9 to 23 percent) and rail locomotives powered by electrical accumulators (from 1 to 27 percent), and during the pandemic, supplies of vaccines and other pharmaceutical products (accounting for more than US\$200 million).⁵² One of the main reasons for this growth is the establishment of Chinese factories in Uzbekistan.

The primary impediment to the inundation of the Uzbek market with Chinese commodities is the imposition of substantial import duties, a cornerstone

⁵⁰ General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, "Total Value Table of Import and Export Goods by Country (Region) in December 2022 (in USD)" [2022年12月进出口商品国别(地区)总值表(美元值)], Customs.gov.cn, (January 18, 2023), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfx-gk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/4807727/index.html>

⁵¹ General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, "August 2023 Import and Export Commodity Country (Region) Total Value Table (in USD)" [2023年8月进出口商品国别(地区)总值表(美元值)], Customs.gov.cn, (September 18, 2023), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfx-gk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/5380391/index.html>

⁵² See reference 50.

of President Karimov's economic protectionism. This strategy was partially implemented to foster an insular economic environment conducive to the emergence and dominance of local monopolies within the domestic market. The incumbent administration is endeavouring to dismantle this legacy, albeit in the face of formidable opposition from beneficiaries of the existing system. The segment of the elite of Uzbekistan who control major corporations and wield significant influence advocate for the preservation of market exclusivity to ward off potential foreign competitors.

Interestingly, the merchandise produced by these local monopolies often incorporates Chinese components or is manufactured in collaboration with Chinese enterprises. For instance, Artel, a subsidiary of the Akfa Holding Group founded by Jahongir Artykhodzhaev, the former mayor of Tashkent, collaborates⁵³ with the Chinese firm Midea (美的集团) to produce electronics and assembles smartphones using Chinese components.⁵⁴ This reliance on Chinese products extends beyond large corporations to encompass governmental entities. A controversy erupted in 2018 on the Uzbek segment of Facebook when it was revealed that even the art decorations adorning Tashkent city were purchased⁵⁵ from Alibaba's AliExpress, an international analogue of the Chinese e-commerce platform Taobao.

The situation is different with Uzbekistan's exports to China. For major Uzbekistani producers, the Chinese market is often seen as the *crème de la crème* of all regional markets in terms of its enormous demand. However, it is impossible to enter this market without special permission.

Prior to the tenure of Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's annual exports to China seldom surpassed a value of US\$1 billion. The monetary volume of annual export began to increase in the 2010s, although it rarely exceeded US\$2 billion. In 2018, a significant milestone was reached when exports from Uzbekistan to China reached US\$2.3 billion, for the first time exceeding 2 billion. However, this figure subsequently declined, particularly during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. Despite these challenges, 2022 saw exports reach US\$2.2 billion.⁵⁶

The composition of Uzbekistan's exports is becoming increasingly diversified. This trend is evident when examining the proportion of cotton in the country's export portfolio. In the early 2000s, cotton was often the sole major product exported from Uzbekistan. However, in recent years other commodities such as

⁵³ "Tashkent street art turned out to be a copy of Chinese mass-produced goods" [Ташкентский стрит-арт оказался копией китайского ширпотреба], *Fergana News*, (July 24, 2018), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200217203223/http://demo.artel.uz:80/ru/page/about>

⁵⁴ "Artel begins sales of mobile phones under its own brand (photo)" [Artel начинает продажи мобильных телефонов под своим брендом (фото)], *Газета.uz*, (December 17, 2012), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2012/12/17/artel/#>

⁵⁵ Meta Description, Artel, retrieved October 22, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20181028132646/http://www.fergananews.com:80/news/31508>

⁵⁶ General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, "Statistical Monthly Report for 2023" [2023年统计月报], *Customs.gov.cn*, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxx-gk/2799825/302274/302277/4899681/index.html>

mineral fuels, copper, plastics, and fruits have become increasingly prominent in the country's export profile.

Under the leadership of Mirziyoyev, Tashkent has consistently prioritized enhancing the access of Uzbek producers to the Chinese market during negotiations. In February 2018, an Uzbek trade mission was established⁵⁷ in Qingdao to assist Uzbek entrepreneurs in marketing their goods and services in China. These negotiations have yielded fruitful outcomes, with several protocols on phytosanitary requirements being signed⁵⁸ between the Plant Protection and Quarantine Agency of Uzbekistan and the General Administration of Customs of China in recent years. This has facilitated the entry of Uzbek agricultural enterprises into the Chinese market, enabling them to export a variety of goods including cherries, lemons, gourds, dried and fresh hot peppers, pomegranates, beans, sesame, raisins, dried apricots, walnuts, grape seeds, peanuts, and honey.

The timing of these negotiations was strategically advantageous for Uzbekistan. The repercussions of China's increasingly confrontational foreign policy on global trade chains presented an opportunity for Uzbekistan's agricultural sector. The trade war initiated by former US President Donald Trump inadvertently benefited Uzbekistan. For example, in 2018, the market share of Uzbek cherries in China surged from zero to 50 percent,⁵⁹ while the United States' share declined from 80 percent in 2017 to 38 in 2018.

Massive Growth in a Shallow Pool

A notable development in the economic relations between Uzbekistan and China is the increasing access of Uzbek businesses to the Chinese market. During the Karimov era, Uzbek businesses were largely excluded from the Chinese market, with only a few exceptions. For instance, in August 2000, the first Uzbek-Chinese joint venture, Uzbek Fair (O'zbek yarmarkasi), was established in Beijing, but there has been little information about it since then. However, recent years have seen some progress in this area. In 2019, a trading floor of the Uzbek Republican Commodity and Raw Materials Exchange was inaugurated⁶⁰ in Shanghai, operating

⁵⁷ "A trading representative office of Uzbekistan has opened in China" [В Китае открылось торговое представительство Узбекистана], UZ DAILY, (March 5, 2018), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.uzdaily.uz/ru/post/36448>

⁵⁸ "Uzbekistan and China signed protocols opening the Chinese market for Uzbek beans and dried melon," [Узбекистан и Китай подписали протоколы, открывающие китайский рынок для узбекской фасоли и сушёной дыни] AgroWorld, (2023, August 27). Retrieved October 30, 2023, from https://agroworld.uz/ru/mediacentre/novosti.php?ELEMENT_ID=63120

⁵⁹ "Uzbekistan trying to replace U.S. in supply of cherries to Chinese market", Kun.uz, (July 23, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://m.kun.uz/en/news/2019/07/23/uzbekistan-trying-to-replace-us-in-supply-of-cherries-to-chinese-market>

⁶⁰ "The Uzbek Commodity and Raw Materials Exchange has entered the Chinese market" [Узбекская товарно-сырьевая биржа вышла на китайский рынок], Dividends, (January 28, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://dividends.nuz.uz/2019/01/28/uzbekskaja-tovarno-syrevaja-birzha-vyshla-na-kitajskij-rynok/>

under the auspices of the Chinese Xinjiang Asia-Europe International Material Trade Center.

While the presence of Uzbek organizations in China remains limited, there has been a significant increase in the number of Chinese organizations operating in Uzbekistan. These are notably predominantly small and medium-sized businesses that are not confined to the capital of Uzbekistan. In 2022, the number of enterprises with Chinese capital in the country surged to 2,141, marking a 12 percent increase compared to 2021.⁶¹

The increase in Chinese enterprises operating in Uzbekistan is indeed noteworthy. However, the Uzbek economy is still only gradually opening up to foreign capital. Out of over half a million⁶² registered legal entities in the country, a mere 2 percent (or 15,801 according to the State Statistics Committee for January 2023) are foreign-owned. In other words, Chinese companies constitute only around 14 percent of those with foreign capital. Furthermore, when considering this metric, China trails behind Russia (3,156) and Türkiye (2,204).

However, the growing presence of Chinese businesses in Uzbekistan has led to more intensive cooperation between local enterprises and their Chinese counterparts than ever before.⁶³ Numerous accounts of such collaborations can be found in the Uzbek media.⁶⁴ This trend has also stimulated growth in the local consulting market, with firms offering guidance on navigating the “peculiarities of working with Chinese businessmen.” Some of these companies even advise on social media to “treat Chinese engineers with respect” and “extend as much hospitality and courtesy to the Chinese as possible.”

While the presence of Chinese enterprises in Uzbekistan remains relatively limited, their visibility has increased significantly. Currently, the number of major projects (valued at over US\$100 million) involving Chinese capital is nearing 30.⁶⁵ For instance, China National Chemical Engineering (CNCE) has been appointed as the general contractor for a US\$400 million project to establish a polyvinyl chloride plant based in the Navoiyot cluster. Similarly, China Energy Engineering Corporation (CEEC) has been selected as the general contractor for a thermal power plant in the Syrdarya region, with 49 percent of the plant's shares acquired by the Silk Road Fund in 2022.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “In Uzbekistan, most of the enterprises with the participation of capital from which countries?”, Stat.uz, (January 12, 2023), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://stat.uz/en/press-center/news-of-committee/33449-o-zbekistonda-qaysi-davlatlarning-kapitali-ishtirokidagi-korxonalar-ko-proq-3>

⁶² STATISTIKA | Rasmiy kanal, Telegram, 5:44 PM, (July 15, 2022), retrieved from https://t.me/statistika_rasmiy/2457

⁶³ “A meeting between Chinese and Samarkand entrepreneurs took place in Samarkand” [В Самарканде состоялась встреча китайских и самаркандских предпринимателей], STV, (July 18, 2017), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <http://stv.uz/news/economic/6544-v-samarkande-sostoyalas-vstrecha-kitayskih-i-samarkandskih-predprinimatelev.html>

⁶⁴ “Personal Experience: How a Company from Uzbekistan Encountered and Fought Fraud on Alibaba” [Личный опыт: как компания из Узбекистана столкнулась и боролась с мошенничеством на Alibaba], Spot.uz, (May 12, 2020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.spot.uz/ru/2020/05/12/alibaba/>

⁶⁵ “China Global Investment Tracker”, American Enterprise Institute, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>

⁶⁶ “The President gave the green light to the construction of the second phase of the polyvinyl chloride manufacturing

However, it is crucial to note that Uzbekistan is making concerted efforts to diversify investors in large-scale projects, rather than entrusting them entirely to a single company. For example, in the Navoiyazot cluster project, CNCE is collaborating with the Turkish Tatarstan Trade House. Meanwhile, CEEC is constructing its thermal power plant in partnership with Saudi Arabia's ACWA. Funding for these projects is sourced not only from Chinese banks but also from international financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the OPEC Fund for International Development, DEG (Deutsche Investitions-Und Entwicklungsgesellschaft Mbh), and the World Bank.

China, however, has emerged as the principal investor in the Uzbek economy. There is considerable variation in the statistical data on investments in Uzbekistan across different sources, primarily due to differences in calculation methodologies. Regardless of the source, however, there is an unmistakable trend of increasing Chinese capital in Uzbekistan. According to the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation of the People's Republic of China, there has been a marked surge in Chinese investments in Uzbekistan since 2017.⁶⁷ Prior to 2017, investments from China seldom reached US\$1 billion. However, since that year, the annual investment figures have typically surpassed US\$3 billion.

In the first half of 2023, China has continued to play the role of primary investor in Uzbekistan's economy, with investments totalling over 139 trillion Uzbekistani so'ms (equivalent to US\$2.2 billion). In the same period, Uzbekistan attracted investments worth US\$11.4 billion, indicating that approximately one-fifth of these investments originated from China. Other significant investors include Russia, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia.

Simultaneously, Uzbekistan's debt to China has been on the rise. During the tenure of Islam Karimov, the authorities propagated the widely held belief that the Uzbek economy was free of external debt to any country. However, Tashkent now officially discloses data on external debts. In 2022, Uzbekistan's public debt amounted to US\$29.2 billion, equivalent to 36.4 percent of the country's GDP. China accounts for 16.7 percent of Uzbekistan's debt: The China State Development Bank (US\$2.2 billion) and the Exim Bank of China (US\$2 billion) rank as the third and fourth largest creditors for Uzbekistan. The Asian Development Bank (US\$5.2 billion) and the World Bank (US\$4.3 billion), which collectively account for 36.1 percent of Uzbekistan's total public debt, are the first and second largest debt holders.⁶⁸

While Uzbekistan is relatively secure compared to other Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, with debts not exceeding 60 percent of GDP, there

plant" [Президент дал старт строительству 2-й очереди завода по производству поливинилхлорида], Газета.uz, (August 20, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/08/30/navoiyazot/>

⁶⁷ Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China, "Going Global' Public Service Platform" ["走出去" 公共服务平台], MOFCOM, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <http://fec.mofcom.gov.cn/article/tjsj/tjgb/>

⁶⁸ Ministry of Economy and Finance of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Review of State Debt Status and Dynamics of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2022" [Ўзбекистон Республикаси давлат қарзи ҳолати ва динамикаси шарҳи 2022], retrieved October 28, 2023, from https://api.mf.uz/media/filestore/DB_2022.pdf

is growing concern about the increasing debt to China. Survey data indicates⁶⁹ that Uzbek society is becoming increasingly sceptical of economic cooperation with China. Certain popular Uzbek-language media outlets, such as Kun.uz, frequently report⁷⁰ on situations in other parts of the world where countries have fallen into what is often referred to as China's "debt trap diplomacy."

The former Chinese Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Jiang Yan (姜岩), has even addressed criticism of China on this issue, stating: "...when Western banks or international financial institutions provide debt, this is perceived as a benefit, but when China provides debt or loans, it is viewed as a threat. This dichotomy is often misunderstood."⁷¹

Wolf Warrior Activity

The increased media activity of the Chinese ambassador to Uzbekistan represents a novel aspect of the relations between Uzbekistan and China. This shift can be attributed not only to the changing behaviour of Chinese diplomats globally, often referred to as "wolf warrior diplomacy," but also to internal changes within Uzbekistan.

Since 2016 there has been a slight relaxation in the Uzbek political regime's control over local media. This is reflected in the Reporters Without Borders index, which indicates some progress made by Uzbekistan in this area. Over the past seven years, Uzbekistan has climbed in the ranking from number 166 to 137.⁷² Local bloggers and journalists have become significantly more visible. For instance, the popular YouTube channel Alter Ego has dedicated several of its videos to China's presence in Uzbekistan, including an hour-long interview⁷³ with the former Chinese Ambassador Jiang Yan.

Appearances by Chinese diplomats in local media are becoming increasingly

⁶⁹ David Trilling, "Poll shows Uzbeks, like neighbors, growing leery of Chinese investments", Eurasianet, (October 22, 2020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://eurasianet.org/poll-shows-uzbeks-like-neighbors-growing-leery-of-chinese-investments>

⁷⁰ "China's 'debt trap diplomacy.' How much of a threat is it to Central Asia?" [Хитойнинг «қарз қопқони дипломатияси». Бу Марказий Осиё учун қанчалик хатарли?], Kun.uz, (October 31, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://kun.uz/news/2022/10/31/xitoyning-qarz-qopqoni-diplomatiyasi-bu-markaziy-osiyo-uchun-qanchalik-xatarli>

⁷¹ The original quote was in Russian, and the ambassador used the term "trap" rather than "threat." The peculiarity of the phrase lies in the rhyming of these words in Russian: "Когда западные банки или международные финансовые учреждения предоставляют долг — это уже лепёшка, а когда Китай предоставляет долг или кредиты — это уже ловушка. Люди иногда не разбираются." Retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://youtu.be/7KWxDfY0aq8?si=WN6T-NPwo2vzNMJU>

⁷² Index, Reporters Without Borders, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://rsf.org/en/index>

⁷³ "China does not claim a sphere of influence in Central Asia." Extensive interview with the PRC Ambassador in Uzbekistan" ["Китай не претендует на сферу влияния в Центральной Азии". Большое интервью посла КНР в Узбекистане], Alter Ego. Все про Узбекистан YouTube, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://youtu.be/7KWxDfY0aq8?si=WN6T-NPwo2vzNMJU>

common.⁷⁴ While some local media outlets maintain objectivity and occasionally critique China's policy in Xinjiang,⁷⁵ others collaborate with Chinese media. The primary purveyor of the China-led narrative in Uzbek media is Podrobno.uz, which features a special page titled "Uzbekistan-China: Key for the Future."⁷⁶ There is no explicit mention of an agreement between Podrobno.uz and any Chinese media agency on the website. However, some articles appear to echo the propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party. Thousands of Uzbek readers regularly encounter articles about "prosperity in Xinjiang"⁷⁷ or how "the Communist Party led China to the revival of the Chinese nation."⁷⁸ Additionally, the main editor of the outlet participates in events on information exchange organized by the Information Bureau of the People's Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.⁷⁹

China's influence is also evident in other sectors in Uzbekistan, particularly in education. The first Confucius Institute of the People's Republic of China in Central Asia was established at the Tashkent Institute of Oriental Studies. According to the Chinese Embassy, over 4,000 students⁸⁰ have studied there, and approximately 1,200⁸¹ are currently enrolled. In 2014, another Confucius Institute was inaugurated at the Samarkand Institute of Foreign Languages, from which more than 3,000 students⁸² have graduated. Saodat Nasirova, the director of the Confucius Institute in Tashkent, has noted that the demand for Chinese language instruction in Uzbekistan exceeds what the Confucius Institutes can currently provide.

Samarkand, the second largest city in Uzbekistan, is emerging as another hub for China's educational presence. In 2018, The "Silk Road" International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage was opened⁸³ in downtown Samarkand near a

⁷⁴ Embassy of China in Uzbekistan [Посольство Китая в Узбекистане], Telegram, 5:52 PM, (October 21, 2022), retrieved from <https://t.me/EmbassyofChinaInUzbekistan/5579>

⁷⁵ "Documents related to China's policy towards Uyghurs were submitted to the UN" [Xitoyning uyg'urlar bo'yicha siyosatiga oid hujjatlar OAVga sizdirildi], Kun.uz, (November 25, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://kun.uz/uz/news/2019/11/25/xitoyning-uygurlar-boyicha-siyosatiga-oid-hujjatlar-oavga-sizdirildi>

⁷⁶ "Uzbekistan and China: keys to the future" [Узбекистан и Китай: ключи от будущего], Podrobno.uz, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/>

⁷⁷ "Ten years of change: Xinjiang amazed ambassadors with its development and prosperity" [Десять лет перемен: Синьцзян удивил послов своим развитием и благополучием], Podrobno.uz, (September 15, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/desyat-let-peremen-sintszyan-udivil-poslov-svoim-razvitiem-i-blagopoluchiem/>

⁷⁸ "The Phenomenon of the Communist Party: What is the secret of the Chinese nation's success" [Феномен Компартии. В чем заключается секрет успеха китайской нации], Podrobno.uz, (October 29, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/fenomen-kompartii-v-chem-zaklyuchaetsya-sekret-uspekha-kitayskoy-natsii?sphrase_id=5025863

⁷⁹ "An international conference 'Hello, Silk Road' was held in China" [В Китае прошла международная конференция «Привет, Шелковый путь»], UZ DAILY, (July 27, 2023), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.uzdaily.uz/ru/post/78713>

⁸⁰ "The Confucius Institute in Tashkent has received a new building" [Институт Конфуция в Ташкенте получил новое здание], Podrobno.uz, (September 26, 2018), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/institut-konfutsiya-v-tashkente-poluchil-novoe-zdanie/>

⁸¹ Ren Qi, "Uzbekistan embarks on journey", China Daily, (March 30, 2017), retrieved October 28, 2023, from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/beltandroadinitiative/2017-03/30/content_28731593.htm

⁸² "Foreign agent or opportunities for youth? The Confucius Institute in Uzbekistan." [Иноагент или возможности для молодежи? Институт Конфуция в Узбекистане.], Alter Ego. Все про Узбекистан YouTube, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://youtu.be/tBCWuMK7dww>

⁸³ "Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated June 28, 2018, No. PP-3815: On the Establishment of the International Silk Road Tourism University" [Постановление Президента Республики Узбекистан, от 28.06.2018 г. № ПП-3815: О Создании Международного Университета Туризма «Шелковый Путь»], Lex.uz, retrieved October 28,

Chinese park featuring a monument to Confucius. The university offers Chinese language courses and has an agreement for a double degree program with Guilin University in China. The Vice-Chancellor of the University is Professor Zou Tongqian (邹统钎),⁸⁴ who previously served as an advisor to the President of the Beijing University of International Studies. The university also hosts a “Chinese Corner,” which has been visited by the Chinese Ambassador to Uzbekistan.⁸⁵

Collaborations between Uzbek universities and Chinese entities are expanding, encompassing not only academic institutions but also corporate entities. Chinese technology companies are particularly active in this regard. For instance, over the past seven years, Huawei has been conducting a “Seeds for the Future” program at the Tashkent University of Information Technologies, where students compete for internship opportunities at the company’s headquarters.⁸⁶ Other companies offer master classes for Uzbek students, while some, like ZTE, are establishing Smart Classrooms.⁸⁷

China’s stringent COVID-19 policy effectively closed the country to international students. However, prior to the pandemic, there was a steady increase in the number of students from Uzbekistan attending Chinese universities. While there are no official statistics on Uzbek students in China, visa centres report that there are approximately 2,000 students traveling annually and about 5,000 currently studying in China.⁸⁸

From China’s perspective, there has also been an increase in the number of visitors to Uzbekistan, primarily tourists rather than students. Since 2020, Uzbekistan has implemented a visa-free regime for Chinese citizens visiting the country for up to 7 days.⁸⁹ The volume of tourist traffic increased prior to the pandemic: in 2019, over 60,000 Chinese citizens visited Uzbekistan.

The proliferation of Chinese medicine in Uzbekistan, particularly since the onset of the pandemic, is another notable development. Uzbekistan is the only country in the region to have jointly produced vaccines with China (zf-uz-vac2001). During the pandemic, China extended several tranches of aid to Uzbekistan, including

2023, from <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/3799080?ONDATE=15.01.2022&ONDATE2=10.02.2021&action=compare>

⁸⁴ “Silk Road” International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://univ-silkroad.uz/ru/struktura/rukovodstvo/prorektoriy>

⁸⁵ “The Ambassador of China to Uzbekistan visited the Tourism University in Samarkand” [Университет туризма в Самарканде посетила Посол КНР в Узбекистане], STV, (August 23, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <http://stv.uz/news/newsamar/21648-universitet-turizma-v-samarkande-posetila-posol-knr-v-uzbekistane.html>

⁸⁶ “Seeds for the Future - HOMEPAGE”, Huawei, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.huawei.com/minisite/seeds-for-the-future/>

⁸⁷ “Provision of ZTE Smart Classroom for Samarkand Institute of Foreign Languages” [Предоставление ZTE Smart Classroom для Самаркандского Института Иностранных Языков], UZ DAILY, (June 6, 2017), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.uzdaily.uz/ru/post/32854>

⁸⁸ “About education in China for Uzbekistan citizens” [Про обучение в Китае для Узбекистанцев], StudyInChina, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://studyinchinas.com/ru/%D1%83%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%B1%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B5-%D0%B4%D0%BB%D1%8F-%D1%83%D0%B7%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%B2/>

⁸⁹ “Starting from 2020, Chinese citizens have a 7-day visa-free stay” [С 2020 года Китайским Гражданам – 7-Дневный Безвиз], NORMA, (September 12, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from https://www.norma.uz/novoe_v_zakonodatelstve/s_2020_goda_kitayskim_grajdanam_-7-dnevnyy_bezviz

dispatching doctors from China to consult with their Uzbek counterparts.⁹⁰ In 2020, the Ministry of Health of Uzbekistan agreed to establish a branch of the Jiangxi University of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Tashkent.⁹¹ However, this initiative has not yet progressed.

Despite China's active engagement with Uzbekistan in the realms of education and medicine, it would be premature to suggest a Chinese monopoly in these sectors. Over 4,000 students⁹² are enrolled at the German Goethe Institute in Tashkent, and Microsoft annually conducts the DigiGirlz program⁹³ to promote IT among women. Furthermore, there are 48.7 thousand Uzbek students studying in Russia. Additionally, there are over 30 branches of foreign universities in Uzbekistan, ranging from Singaporean to British institutions, but none from China as yet. Similarly, in the medical field, there are 50 clinics⁹⁴ across Uzbekistan that partner with foreign entities, and Chinese partners (such as Guangzhou Medical⁹⁵) represent only a fraction of these collaborations.

Law Enforcement Exchange

Security cooperation with China has continued to evolve in the “new Uzbekistan.” Historically, Uzbekistan has approached security issues with caution, avoiding deepening cooperation with any external force. Consequently, Tashkent has sought to diversify its ties as much as possible in this area, viewing China as one of the countries capable of facilitating this diversification.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China is the second main supplier of weapons and military equipment to Uzbekistan, following Russia. Since 2010, Uzbekistan has imported 24 percent of all its weapons from China (with 40 percent from Russia and 18 from France). Other sources such as the Kennan Institute⁹⁶ suggest that Uzbekistan is the only country

⁹⁰ “Medical professionals from Uzbekistan and China have launched online consultations for combating COVID-19” [Медики Узбекистана и Китая запустили онлайн-консультации по борьбе с COVID-19], Kun.uz, (April 24, 2020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://kun.uz/ru/46849667>

⁹¹ “A branch of a Chinese traditional medicine university will open in Uzbekistan” [Филиал китайского университета традиционной медицины откроется в Узбекистане], Газета.uz, (August 24, 2020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2020/08/24/china-med/>

⁹² “The President of the Federal Republic of Germany unveiled the Goethe monument in Tashkent” [Президент ФРГ открыл монумент Гёте в Ташкенте], Газета.uz, (May 28, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/05/28/goethe/>

⁹³ “The DigiGirlz program by Microsoft took place in Tashkent again” [В Ташкенте вновь прошла программа DigiGirlz от Microsoft], ICTNEWS, (March 6, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://ictnews.uz/06/03/2019/digigirlz/>

⁹⁴ ССВ матбуот котиби | Эмланиш – соғлик кафолати!, Telegram, 12:25 PM, (May 3, 2022), retrieved from <https://t.me/svmatbuotkotibi/8612>

⁹⁵ Guangzhou Medical of China LLC, a prominent network of Chinese clinics in Uzbekistan, came under scrutiny in April 2022. Legal proceedings were initiated against the company's officials under Article 186 of the Criminal Code, which pertains to the production, storage, and transportation for the purposes of marketing or sale of goods, as well as the performance of work or provision of services that fail to meet safety requirements. “The secret of the ‘Guangzhou’ clinic revealed” [Раскрыта тайна клиники «Гуанчжоу»], Toshkent shahar IIBB YouTube, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://youtu.be/-sggiT-xZwo?si=HeueUnyZKfRetx>

⁹⁶ Bradley Jardine & Edward Lemon, “In Russia's Shadow: China's Rising Security Presence in Central Asia”, KENNAN CABLE, No. 52 (May 2020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/>

in Central Asia to have spent more on weapons from China than from Russia. Regardless of the actual situation, two trends in arms imports to Uzbekistan are noteworthy: a) China is a significant supplier, but not the sole one; and b) the Uzbek army sources weapons from other countries in addition to Russia and China.

Broader military cooperation presents a similar picture. In 2019, the Chinese and Uzbek armed forces conducted bilateral military exercises for the first time.⁹⁷ That same year, a special forces detachment from Uzbekistan participated in exercises with American counterparts in Mississippi (USA) for the first time.⁹⁸ Uzbekistan also conducts bilateral military exercises with Russia, with the most recent one taking place on the border with Afghanistan in 2021.⁹⁹

What distinguishes the military exercises between Uzbekistan and China is that they were conducted between the law enforcement agencies of the two countries, specifically the National Guard¹⁰⁰ on the Uzbek side and the People's Armed Police (武警部队)¹⁰¹ on the Chinese side. Both of these security agencies are tasked with counterterrorism efforts in their respective countries, a mandate that encompasses a broad range of responsibilities, from societal control to border monitoring. Similar to the law on the National Guard of Uzbekistan, the latest version of the People's Republic of China's law on the People's Armed Police equips these law enforcement agencies with an extensive toolkit for executing these tasks.

It is crucial not to oversimplify this cooperation by categorizing it alongside collaborations between the armies of Uzbekistan and other states, as the responsibilities of these law enforcement agencies extend beyond the military sphere. The frequent meetings¹⁰² between the law enforcement agencies of China and Uzbekistan since 2017 suggest the potential exchange of practices between the two countries. This is particularly noteworthy given that Uzbekistan has already demonstrated a propensity to learn from China in other sectors.

[documents/KI_200519_cable 52_v1.pdf](#)

⁹⁷ "Photo: Exercises of the National Guard and People's Militia of China" [Фото: Учения Нацгвардии и Народной милиции Китая], Газета.uz, (May 7, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/05/07/gvardiya/>

⁹⁸ "Uzbekistan's special forces are participating in exercises in the United States for the first time" [Спецназ Узбекистана впервые участвует на учениях в США], Securex Uzbekistan, (January 27, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from https://securex.uz/ru/mediacentre/novosti.php?ELEMENT_ID=38499

⁹⁹ "Russia and Uzbekistan will begin exercises on the border with Afghanistan" [РФ и Узбекистан начнут учения на границе с Афганистаном], Интерфакс, (July 30, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.interfax.ru/world/781575>

¹⁰⁰ State institution "Adolat" National Legal Information Center under the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated November 18, 2020, No. ZRU-647: About the National Guard of the Republic of Uzbekistan" [Закон Республики Узбекистан, от 18.11.2020 г. № ЗРУ-647: О Национальной Гвардии Республики Узбекистан], Lex.uz, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/docs/5128318>

¹⁰¹ "The People's Republic of China Land Border Law (Passed by the 31st Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Thirteenth National People's Congress on October 23, 2021)" [中华人民共和国陆地国界法 (2021年10月23日第十三届全国人民代表大会常务委员会第三十一次会议通过)], Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China, (October 26, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from https://web.archive.org/web/20211229073926/http://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/flfggz/flfggzfl/202110/t20211026_440054.html

¹⁰² Niva Yau, "China's Security Management Towards Central Asia", Foreign Policy Research Institute, (April 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/chinas-security-management-towards-central-asia.pdf>

China as a Role Model

While Uzbekistan and China have been collaborating in the aforementioned areas for over a decade, the “new Uzbekistan” is charting a novel course in terms of adopting various aspects of the People’s Republic of China’s state administration practices. This is a development that has not previously been observed.

Under Karimov’s leadership, Uzbekistan demonstrated interest in the Chinese experience. However, this interest was primarily manifested through joint conferences. For instance, in September 1996, a seminar titled “Social Policy in a Transitional Economy” was held in Tashkent, which saw participation from specialists from China.¹⁰³ Similarly, in 1997, another conference on “Prospects for Development and Integration into the World Economy of Central Asia” was attended by a delegation from China. Karimov also occasionally met with Chinese historians.¹⁰⁴

It is no secret that Tashkent, under the leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has begun to pay increased attention to the Chinese model of public administration. Mirziyoyev is often compared to the Chinese reformer Deng Xiaoping by local media, and he himself has expressed the need to “study the works of Deng Xiaoping.”¹⁰⁵ The influence of Chinese political philosophy on Uzbekistan’s leadership is evident. For instance, both countries’ leaders share similar rhetoric regarding the notion that “each country understands democracy in its own way.”¹⁰⁶

The approach to implementing reforms in Uzbekistan today, through pilot regions, is reminiscent of Beijing’s strategy of “crossing the river by feeling for stones” (摸石头过河) during the era of reforms and opening up. Just as experimental free trade zones were established in China during Deng Xiaoping’s era, experimental areas are now appearing in Uzbekistan where reforms are tested before potentially being implemented across the entire republic. For example, the Jizzakh region has become an experimental territory for implementing regional specialization in agricultural production by presidential decree.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ “Economy. 1996 year”, The Islam Karimov Academic and Educational Complex, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20201203133159/http://isloimkarimov.uz/en/page/iqtisodiyot-1996-yil>

¹⁰⁴ “Islam Karimov: ‘One who does not know history makes mistakes at every step, and a people who are not proud of their history cannot see their perspective’” [Ислам Каримов: «Тот, кто не знает историю, на каждом шагу совершает ошибки, народ, который не гордится своей историей, не может видеть свою перспективу»], Anhor.uz, (May 16, 2014), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://anhor.uz/society/islam-karimov-tot-kto-ne-znaet-istoriyu-na-kazhdom-shagu-sovershaet-oshibki/>

¹⁰⁵ “Review: Uzbekistan is studying and applying China’s experience in poverty reduction” [Обзор: Узбекистан изучает и применяет опыт Китая по сокращению бедности], ЖЭНЬМИНЬ ЖИБАО, (June 9, 2020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <http://russian.people.com.cn/n3/2020/0609/c31519-9698634.html>

¹⁰⁶ “Each state understands democracy in its own way — Shavkat Mirziyoyev” [«Каждое государство понимает демократию по-своему» — Шавкат Мирзиёев], Газета.uz, (September 27, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/27/democracy/>

¹⁰⁷ “Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan: On Additional Measures for the Specialization of Regions in the Republic in the Production of Agricultural Products” [Постановление Президента Республики Узбекистан: О дополнительных мерах по специализации регионов республики на производстве сельскохозяйственной продукции], UZA.uz, (May 11, 2020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://uza.uz/ru/posts/o-dopolnitelnykh-mer->

The leadership of Uzbekistan has publicly declared its intention to adapt the People's Republic of China's approach to two key issues: poverty alleviation and corruption eradication. Efforts to tailor the Chinese experience to Uzbek realities are currently underway. Tashkent has been implementing initiatives in both these areas for several years, closely studying the Chinese experience and discussing the specifics during negotiations with representatives of the People's Republic of China at various levels.

Poverty alleviation

Alleviating poverty in any nation extends beyond merely addressing budgetary or financial matters. The success of poverty reduction efforts hinges on the overall economic development of the country, the availability and accessibility of jobs, population income levels, the provision of education and healthcare, public infrastructure, the supply of high-quality drinking water, and environmental conditions, among other factors. Thus, by adapting the Chinese approach to combating poverty, Uzbekistan is essentially committing to adopting the Chinese model of providing all the necessary social infrastructure to uniformly improve living standards across the entire population in both urban and rural areas.

A review of recent anti-poverty legislation provides some insight into the influence of the Chinese experience in Uzbekistan. The presidential decree¹⁰⁸ “on measures to radically update state policy in the field of economic development and poverty reduction” underscores the importance of studying foreign experiences in these matters. During a meeting in Beijing in February 2022, Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Xi Jinping agreed¹⁰⁹ “on the implementation of joint activities to study and implement Chinese experience in the fight against poverty.”

The implementation of poverty reduction laws in Uzbekistan exhibits clear parallels with the Chinese experience. For instance, as of January 2022, the Uzbek government has established¹¹⁰ the national poverty line at 498,000 Uzbekistani so'ms (US\$46) per person per month, or 16,600 so'ms (US\$1.53) per day. However, according to the World Bank's classification, Uzbekistan falls under the category of lower middle-income countries, where the poverty threshold is set at

[akh-po-spetsializatsii-regionov-respubli-11-05-2020](https://lex.uz/docs/4778531)

¹⁰⁸ “Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated March 26, 2020, No. UP-5975: About Measures for a Radical Renewal of State Policy in the Field of Economic Development and Poverty Reduction” [Указ Президента Республики Узбекистан, от 26.03.2020 г. № УП-5975: О Мерах по Кардинальному Обновлению Государственной Политики в Сфере Развития Экономики и Сокращения Бедности], Lex.uz, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/docs/4778531>

¹⁰⁹ The official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “The leaders of Uzbekistan and China have advocated for further strengthening of comprehensive strategic partnership relations” [Лидеры Узбекистана и Китая выступили за дальнейшее укрепление отношений всестороннего стратегического партнерства], (February 5, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/4962>

¹¹⁰ UZSTAT | Rasmiy kanal, Telegram, 11:40 PM, (January 8, 2022), retrieved from <https://t.me/uzstataxborot/28990>

US\$3.65 per person per day.¹¹¹ The creation of its own national poverty measures may provide a more accurate reflection of the situation in a specific country. However, it also potentially facilitates the state's achievement of its goals within a set timeframe. Interestingly, Uzbekistan's poverty line is even below the global extreme poverty line of US\$2.15. This approach to defining poverty is reminiscent of Beijing's strategy, which also set a poverty line of approximately US\$2.25 per person per day, significantly lower than the threshold for upper-middle-income countries like China (US\$6.85).¹¹²

Similarly, to China,¹¹³ Uzbekistan's leadership has initiated the creation of databases for households below the poverty line, referred to as “temir daftar”¹¹⁴ (iron notebook). Families that fall into this category are registered by local authorities and can seek assistance in job placement and/or material and other forms of support.

Uzbek experts posit that adopting the Chinese approach will enable Uzbekistan to successfully achieve its objectives in combating poverty.¹¹⁵ While this may indeed be the case, it is important to note that China's successful poverty alleviation campaign, recognized by the United Nations, was underpinned by a rigid power hierarchy—the Communist Party. In Uzbekistan, local self-governance bodies (mahallas) fulfil this role. However, it should be acknowledged that the incentives for Chinese officials at the grassroots level were considerably more tangible, as meeting the KPIs set from above guaranteed advancement in the party hierarchy.¹¹⁶ Such effective “career elevators” do not exist in the Uzbek political system.

¹¹¹ “Fact Sheet: An Adjustment to Global Poverty Lines”, World Bank, (May 2, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2022/05/02/fact-sheet-an-adjustment-to-global-poverty-lines#6>

¹¹² “China's poverty line is not as stingy as commentators think”, *The Economist*, (June 18, 2020), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2020/06/18/chinas-poverty-line-is-not-as-stingy-as-commentators-think>

¹¹³ Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Is China Succeeding at Eradicating Poverty?”, ChinaPower Project, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://chinapower.csis.org/poverty/>

¹¹⁴ State institution ‘National Legal Information Center ‘Adolat’ under the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated April 28, 2021, No. 250: About Additional Measures for Social Support of Families, Women, and Youth in Need of Financial Assistance and Support” [O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Vazirlar Mahkamasining qarori, 28.04.2021 yildagi 250-son: Moddiy Yordam Va Ko‘Makka Muhtoj Oilalarni, Xotin-Qizlar Va Yoshlarni Ijtimoiy Qo‘llab-Quvvatlash Bo‘yicha Qo‘shimcha Chora-Tadbirlar To‘G‘Risida], Lex.uz, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/-5398681>

¹¹⁵ Ruslan Nailev, “Uzbekistan on the Path to Poverty Reduction: China's Experience” [Узбекистан на пути сокращения бедности: опыт Китая], Center for Economic Research and Reforms, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.cer.uz/ru/post/publication/uzbekistan-na-puti-sokrasenia-bednosti-opyt-kitaa>

¹¹⁶ Bruce J. Dickson, “Who Wants to Be a Communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China: The China Quarterly”, *Cambridge Core*, (December 5, 2013), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/abs/who-wants-to-be-a-communist-career-incentives-and-mobilized-loyalty-in-china/1E02B-598C0F406E0C16D3F768932222C>

Fighting Tigers and Flies in Uzbekistan

The challenge of combating corruption is arguably more complex than that of addressing poverty. Firstly, the success of China's anti-corruption efforts under President Xi Jinping is debatable as it is closely intertwined with the Chinese Communist Party's purge of disloyal party members. Secondly, in Uzbekistan, the issue of corruption is highly politicized and sensitive for political elites, rendering it nearly impossible to resolve without structural reforms.

Generally, corruption is a particularly sensitive issue in any country, especially in those where state institutions lack transparency, the rule of law is inconsistently enforced, or senior leadership and their associates are implicated. Typically, pervasive corruption, particularly at the state level, can be mitigated if the country has de facto independent branches of government, and if civil servants operate in a transparent manner, are accountable to society, and are closely monitored by independent media. In the absence of such an ideal environment, different political regimes resort to alternative methods to address the problem.

In 2013, immediately after Xi Jinping assumed power, a comprehensive anti-corruption campaign was initiated in China. Spearheaded by his close ally Wang Qishan (王岐山), who led the Chinese Communist Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, Xi Jinping embarked on a mission to "kill tigers and swat flies" (老虎苍蝇一起打), signifying a crackdown on corrupt officials at all levels, irrespective of their rank. The campaign yielded staggering results, with over 2 million officials at various levels being targeted.¹¹⁷

However, it is crucial to contextualize the Chinese anti-corruption campaign within the specificities of the Chinese political landscape. By launching this campaign, Xi Jinping effectively purged¹¹⁸ the party of potential adversaries during his first term and weakened his predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao by apprehending their protégés. This strategy largely facilitated his consolidation of power and enabled him to secure a third term at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party held in October 2022.¹¹⁹

It remains somewhat ambiguous as to what specific aspects of the Chinese political regime's approach to combating corruption Uzbekistan intends to adopt. However, parallels are already discernible between the anti-corruption efforts in Uzbekistan and China.

¹¹⁷ "Visualizing China's Anti-Corruption Campaign", ChinaFile, (August 15, 2018), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.chinafile.com/infographics/visualizing-chinas-anti-corruption-campaign>

¹¹⁸ Vita Spivak, "Iron Fingers of Xi: Who is choking Chinese corrupt officials" [Железные пальцы Си: кто держит за горло китайских коррупционеров], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (October 21, 2016), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/commentary/64899>

¹¹⁹ Alexander Gabuev, "Xi Forever: How the 20th CCP Congress Changed China" [Си навсегда. Как XX съезд КПК изменил Китай], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (October 26, 2022), , retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88261>

The presidential decree¹²⁰ “on additional measures to improve the anti-corruption system” alludes to the necessity of “implementing international standards and best foreign practices” in the fight against corruption. During Xi Jinping’s visit to Samarkand for the SCO summit, Mirziyoyev signed a memorandum¹²¹ “on cooperation in preventing and combating corruption” with his Chinese counterpart.

In 2020, an anti-corruption agency was established in Uzbekistan which reports directly to the president and is accountable to the Oliy Majlis (parliament).¹²² From its inception, the agency has collaborated with the Chinese Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.¹²³ The two entities plan to jointly develop “effective mechanisms to prevent corruption” within state bodies, conduct training programs aimed at instilling “honesty and ethical principles” in civil servants, and study Chinese practices in the field of rotation, which is considered one of the tools for preventing corruption.

This cooperation has already yielded some results: the agency regularly reports¹²⁴ on the economic damage caused by corruption, thousands of criminal cases have been initiated¹²⁵ against officials at various levels, and Uzbekistan has been gradually improving its standing in corruption perception rankings.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ “Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated June 29, 2020, No. UP-6013: Additional Measures on Improvement of the Anti-Corruption System in the Republic of Uzbekistan” [Указ Президента Республики Узбекистан, от 29.06.2020 г. № УП-6013: О Дополнительных Мерах по Совершенствованию Системы Противодействия Коррупции в Республике Узбекистан], Lex.uz, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/4875786>

¹²¹ “Fight against poverty, regional development, and human resource preparation: What the leaders of Uzbekistan and China agreed upon” [Борьба с бедностью, развитие регионов и подготовка кадров: о чем договорились лидеры Узбекистана и Китая], Review.uz, (September 15, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://review.uz/post/kambagallikka-qarshi-kurashish-hududlarni-rivojlantirish-va-professional-kadrlar-tayyorlash-uzbekiston-va-xitoy-rahbarlari-nimalar-haqida-kelishib-olishdi-royxat>

¹²² “Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated June 29, 2020, No. UP-6013: Additional Measures on Improvement of the Anti-Corruption System in the Republic of Uzbekistan” [Указ Президента Республики Узбекистан, от 29.06.2020 г. № УП-6013: О Дополнительных Мерах по Совершенствованию Системы Противодействия Коррупции в Республике Узбекистан], Lex.uz, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://lex.uz/docs/4875786>

¹²³ Anti-corruption Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Bilateral cooperation in the field of anti-corruption is being established between Uzbekistan and the People’s Republic of China” [Налаживается Двустороннее Сотрудничество в Сфере Противодействия Коррупции между Узбекистаном и Китайской Народной Республикой], Anticorruption.uz, (February 25, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://anticorruption.uz/ru/item/2021/02/25/uzbekiston-va-khitoy-ortasida-korrupsiyaga-qarshi-kurashish-sohasida-ikki-tomonlama-hamkorlik-jolga-qojilmoqda>

¹²⁴ Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “Economic situation in the Republic of Uzbekistan in January-September 2023: Uzbekistan is entered Top 10 open data sources Country lists”, Stat.uz, (December 18, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://stat.uz/ru/o-komitete/2020-07-24-09-27-18>

¹²⁵ “The damage from corruption amounted to almost 600 billion som’s in six months” [Ущерб от коррупции за полгода составил почти 600 млрд сумов], Газета.uz, (September 24, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/24/korruption-stat/>

¹²⁶ “2021 Corruption Perceptions Index- Explore the results”, Transparency International, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/>

Analytics and Ear Access

One might logically surmise that Uzbekistan's inclination to partially adopt the Chinese model of development is the outcome of the efforts of Uzbekistan's China experts. However, if any influence exists, it appears to primarily stem from foreign consultants, including prominent figures from the Chinese expert community.

A notable example¹²⁷ is the renowned Chinese economist Justin Yifu Lin (林毅夫), author of numerous books including “Demystifying the Chinese Economy.” Lin's principles of New Structural Economics, introduced in 2011 and officially endorsed by the Chinese government shortly thereafter, propose that China's success could be exported and replicated. This principle may have influenced Uzbekistan's approach to economic development.

In Uzbekistan, local experts do not have direct access to power, and the “revolving doors” system is not operational. China observers primarily engage in purely academic, mostly historic, pursuits and tend to avoid addressing contemporary trends in relations with China. Independent think tanks, though few, are beginning to operate under the new conditions of relative freedom and are attracting grants (predominantly foreign) to support their activities. State support is absent according to my interlocutors from independent analytical institutions. In fact, the state appears to impede the normal operations of such organizations: in July 2022, the government introduced more stringent regulations for Uzbek non-profit organizations to receive foreign grants.¹²⁸

Interestingly, during field research it was revealed that none of the Uzbek think tanks that we were in contact with had ever received offers from Chinese organizations to fund potential projects related to Tashkent's relations with Beijing. Moreover, the interviewees mentioned that they had not received any research grants from Chinese entities.

Within the uppermost strata of Uzbekistan's leadership, there is a noticeable absence of individuals possessing an academic background in Chinese or Asian studies, a contrast to the situation in neighbouring Kazakhstan.

Despite this, there has been a discernible advancement in the community of China specialists in recent years. These local experts now openly discuss¹²⁹ challenges in the bilateral relationship with China and organize scholarly events centred around these issues, a development that was previously unthinkable.

¹²⁷ Peking University, “Professor Lin Yifu and his delegation were cordially received by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan”, Institute of New Structural Economics, (August 29, 2019), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.nse.pku.edu.cn/sylm/xwsd/496212.htm>

¹²⁸ “How will grant projects of local non-governmental non-profit organizations be implemented?” [Как будут реализовываться грантовые проекты местных ННО], “NORMA”, (June 15, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from https://www.norma.uz/novoe_v_zakonodatelstve/kak_budut_realizovyvatsya_grantovye_proekty_mestnyh_nno

¹²⁹ “Seminar 18. Sinology in Uzbekistan: Between Sinophobia and Sinophilia” [Семинар 18. Китаеведение в Узбекистане: между синофобией и синофилией], “BilimKarvoni”, retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://uzbk.org/?p=8507>

Furthermore, there are indications of increased backing for foundational regional studies education. A case in point is the transformation of the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies into a university in 2020, a change that has expanded its legal and financial capabilities.

CONCLUSION: IS CHINA REPLACING RUSSIA IN UZBEKISTAN?

Contrary to what might have been expected, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not disrupted Tashkent's strategic planning for its foreign policy. While some observers may perceive this as the end of Russian influence in Central Asia and the beginning of China's dominance, it is premature to confirm such trends.

Firstly, Uzbekistan's stance on Russia's aggression aligns with its previous reactions to similar incidents, such as the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In response to the current conflict in Ukraine, Uzbekistan, through its former Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdulaziz Kamilov,¹³⁰ has issued a statement refusing to recognize the eastern territories of Ukraine as new Russian territories. This consistency in Uzbekistan's foreign policy approach underscores its strategic direction.

However, since Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed power in Uzbekistan, a discernible shift in Uzbek foreign policy towards Russia has been evident. Economic relations between the two nations have strengthened, and Tashkent has joined the Eurasian Economic Union as an observer state. Even in the delicate realm of security, collaboration with Moscow has intensified: Shavkat Mirziyoyev attended a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (from which Uzbekistan withdrew in 2012) meeting on Afghanistan, the Uzbek military conducted joint exercises with Russia, and a visit from Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu sparked widespread speculation on Uzbek social media about the potential establishment of a Russian military base in Uzbekistan.¹³¹

Following the events of February 24, it has become apparent that maintaining the previous level of engagement with Moscow could lead to significant repercussions, including global diplomatic isolation and secondary sanctions. The Uzbek company Promcomplektlogistic was the first in Central Asia to face secondary sanctions imposed by the United States in relation to the ongoing Russian invasion.¹³²

¹³⁰ "Uzbekistan does not recognize Donetsk and Lugansk as independent republics" – FM Kamilov", KUN.UZ, (March 17, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://kun.uz/en/news/2022/03/17/uzbekistan-does-not-recognize-donetsk-and-lugansk-as-independent-republics-fm-kamilov>

¹³¹ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "The concerns regarding the signing of the Strategic Partnership Program in the military field until 2025 between Uzbekistan and Russia are groundless" [Официальный ответ. Опасения по поводу подписании Программы стратегического партнерства в военной области до 2025 года между Узбекистаном и Россией беспочвенны], Mudofaa.uz, (May 4, 2021), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20210607090632/https://mudofaa.uz/ru/45456/>

¹³² "The company from Uzbekistan fell under secondary US sanctions" [Компания из Узбекистана попала под вторичные санкции США], Газета.uz, (June 29, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/06/29/>

Given the current climate, it would be reasonable to speculate that Tashkent might seek alternatives to Russian influence from other global regions. However, unlike Astana, Tashkent's approach is distinct. To date, Uzbekistan has not made any extraordinary overtures in its relations with Moscow. It is highly likely that Uzbekistan's leadership is still formulating its subsequent strategies.

On one hand, there exists an opportunity to leverage a unique situation to transform their economy into a conduit for Russia into the non-sanctioned world: by establishing parallel imports and fostering cooperation with Russian businesses. Such a proposition could be advocated by the primary lobbyist for Moscow's interests in Uzbekistan, Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov,¹³³ who is reportedly being lobbied for by Tashkent with Europe to have his sanctions lifted.¹³⁴

On the other hand, since 24 February 2022, Russia does not appear to align with Uzbekistan's vision for future development. Any further economic convergence between Uzbekistan and Russia at this juncture would likely result in a one-way journey towards "isolation." This trajectory is in stark contrast to the policy of openness that Mirziyoyev has prioritized in his economic strategy. Uzbekistan will inevitably need to explore alternatives to Russian influence on certain issues. The most immediate alternative that comes to mind is China. However, the Chinese direction of Uzbek foreign policy has its own set of constraints.

Firstly, the political elites of the two nations are largely unfamiliar with each other. While Tashkent has extensive knowledge of and numerous informal ties with the Russian elites, speaking the same language and sharing a common understanding, the situation with China is markedly different. In Tashkent, there is a nebulous understanding of the composition and characteristics of the Chinese political and economic elites; the Uzbek leadership finds it challenging to comprehend their Chinese counterparts due to linguistic differences and disparate backgrounds.

The level of connection between the Uzbek elites and their Chinese counterparts is significantly lower than, for instance, between the Chinese and neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. However, this dynamic is evolving, with information coming to light as new business arrangements are being scrutinized by independent journalistic investigations, revealing informal connections between Uzbekistan's political elites and investors from Xinjiang, occasionally in association with counterparts in Kyrgyzstan.¹³⁵

Furthermore, in the primary areas where Uzbekistan is reliant on Russia, China is unable to provide assistance. To date, no country has been able to supplant

[sanctions/](#)

¹³³ Rafael Sattarov, "Alisher Usmanov: Uzbekistan's Oligarch of Choice", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (November 16, 2017), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/74600>

¹³⁴ Henry Foy & Max Seddon, "Uzbekistan lobbies EU to lift sanctions on Alisher Usmanov", Financial Times, (November 09, 2022), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.ft.com/content/6a42b111-a166-4a96-9ce6-d3d5b6a67d0c>

¹³⁵ James O'Brien, "They Were Accused of Smuggling. Now They're Partnering with the Uzbek State", OCCRP, (April 27, 2023), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://www.occrp.org/en/the-shadow-investor/they-were-accused-of-smuggling-now-theyre-partnering-with-the-uzbek-state>

Russia as the primary destination for Uzbek labour migrants: approximately 3 million Uzbek citizens travel to Russia for work annually, a trend that has persisted despite Russia's isolation and economic crisis due to sanctions.

On other matters, as demonstrated in the article, Uzbekistan prefers not to concentrate its resources in one area and diversifies its cooperation with various countries wherever possible. Above all, Uzbekistan relies on its own capabilities and continues to bolster its self-sufficiency, even after opening up to the world in 2016.

Consequently, it is unlikely that even a significant event that drastically alters the geopolitical landscape in Eurasia or globally would prompt Uzbekistan to fully align itself with China. While China's presence in the country may inevitably increase, it is improbable that Beijing will exert a monopolistic influence over Uzbekistan in the foreseeable future.

Recommendations

- 1. Deepen research on contemporary trends:** Given the significant role China plays in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, it is crucial to deepen research on contemporary trends in relations with China. This could involve expanding the focus beyond historical analysis to include current political, economic, and social dynamics.
- 2. Strengthen local expertise:** There is a need to strengthen the community of China specialists in Uzbekistan. This could be achieved through capacity building initiatives, academic exchange programs with global and other Central Asian institutions, and fostering closer ties between academia and government agencies.
- 3. Promote transparency and engagement:** Greater transparency and public engagement in foreign policy decision-making could help address potential constraints and challenges in the Sino-Uzbek relationship. This could involve regular briefings, public consultations, and inclusive policy dialogues.
- 4. Diversify foreign relations:** While China has emerged as a significant partner for Uzbekistan, it is important that Uzbekistan continue diversifying its foreign relations. This could help mitigate over-reliance on a single partner and ensure a balanced foreign policy.
- 5. Expand economic cooperation:** Given the increasing access of Uzbek businesses to the Chinese market, there is potential to further expand economic cooperation. This could involve exploring new sectors for collaboration, promoting joint ventures, and facilitating trade and investment.
- 6. Monitor influence in key sectors:** The growing influence of China in sectors such as the media and education warrants close monitoring to ensure that it aligns with Uzbekistan's national interests and values.