

MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY OF UZBEKISTAN: EVOLUTION, STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Obidov Sanjar

Phd applicant

Email. Sanjarobidov079@gmail.com

+998975665651

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21622282>

Abstract

Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan has adopted a multi-vector foreign policy focused on maintaining balanced ties with various nations and international entities. This approach has gained momentum since 2017 as a component of the nation's political and economic changes. This study aims to explore the evolution of Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy and its key priorities. The study focuses on examining official documents, scholarly literature and academic articles. The results indicate that Uzbekistan aims to enhance regional collaboration, broaden global partnerships, and safeguard its national interests via a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy. Simultaneously, the competition in geopolitics and challenges to regional security requires thoughtful diplomatic decisions. The research finds that the multi-vector strategy has emerged as a key aspect of Uzbekistan's foreign policy and aids in the nation's sustainable growth and global collaboration.

Key words: Uzbekistan; Multi-vector foreign policy; Strategic autonomy; Balance of Interest; Diplomacy; Regional and global cooperation; International organizations.

Introduction

After gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan began to build its own foreign policy based on the principles of sovereignty, peaceful cooperation, and the protection of national interests. During the first years of independence, the country's foreign policy mainly focused on strengthening statehood, establishing diplomatic relations, and ensuring national security.¹ Over time, Uzbekistan expanded its international cooperation with neighboring countries and major global partners.

A new stage of foreign policy started in 2017 with the introduction of wide-ranging political and economic reforms. Uzbekistan adopted a more open and active approach, giving greater attention to regional cooperation, economic diplomacy, and participation in international organizations.² This transformation strengthened the country's position in Central Asia and increased its engagement with the wider international community.

Today, the multi-vector foreign policy has become an important instrument for balancing relations with different partners while protecting Uzbekistan's national interests. The purpose of this study is to examine the evolution of Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy, identify its main priorities, and assess its significance in the current international environment.

Theoretical background

The concept of “Multi-vector foreign policy” actually entered the academic literature through Kazakhstan's foreign policy and the idea of multi-vector foreign policy involves a country's aim to establish balanced and positive connections with various nations and global entities while not

¹ Melvin, N. (2000). *Uzbekistan: Transition to Authoritarianism*. Taylor and Francis Group publication.
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203645611/uzbekistan-neil-melvin>

² *Five years with action strategy: result of the reform* (2022) Development Strategy center
<https://strategy.uz/index.php?news=1478&lang=en>

relying on one sole political or economic ally. This method is frequently utilized by smaller and intermediate powers situated in intricate geopolitical contexts.³ The primary goal is to safeguard national interests while ensuring adaptability in global relations.

A close related concept to multi-vector policy is “Strategic autonomy” which refers to a state’s capacity to independently determine foreign policy choices grounded in its national interests instead of external influences. Strategic autonomy enables nations to collaborate with various partners while maintaining their political and economic freedom. A strategically independent nation can adopt diplomatic stances that the current superpowers find unfavorable. It can deploy military capabilities without relying solely on another nation’s equipment or approval.⁴ It can retain sufficient oversight of essential supply chains to mitigate pressure from competitors.

Another important term in international relations is “Balance of Interest” that explains how countries establish stable agreements by aligning the strength of preferences from both sides in a negotiation, rather than depending only on the allocation of military or economic influence (as seen in traditional balance-of-power theory). The core idea is that an outcome remains stable when each side gains more from the agreement on the matters it values most, even if the total material benefits are uneven.⁵

Main Part: Evolution of Uzbekistan’s Multi-Vector Foreign Policy.

In the post-independence period under President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy emphasized preserving internal stability, prioritizing state sovereignty, and steering clear of regional conflicts. This era featured strict border regulations, restricted economic engagement, and occasional diplomatic tensions with adjacent Central Asian countries. The state preferred bilateral ties instead of extensive regional integration. The United States was among the first countries to acknowledge Uzbekistan’s independence and forge diplomatic relations. Since their early independence, the United States has exhibited a regional interest in Central Asian countries, advancing the Silk Road Strategy Act (1999) and the Freedom Support Act (1992).⁶ Moreover, it became a member of major international organizations such as United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe the year after the independence.

After 2016, with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the helm, Uzbekistan developed a new, all-encompassing foreign policy doctrine. This doctrine presents Uzbekistan’s perspective and strategy regarding urgent global and regional security matters, contemporary challenges and dangers, and the establishment of a new world framework. The doctrine highlights diverse collaboration with developed countries, based on equality, mutual respect, trust, and awareness of each other’s interests. Emphasis is placed on sustaining steady political discussions with prominent nations in Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Africa, along with respected international organizations. The new President introduced new key principle shaping the new foreign policy such as: Pragmatism,

³ Clarke, M. (2015). *Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy: Diminishing Returns in an Era of Great Power. Pivots?* Australian National University. <https://theasanforum.org/kazakhstans-multi-vector-foreign-policy-diminishing-returns-in-an-era-of-great-power-pivots/>

⁴ A. Latham (2026). What is “Strategic autonomy” – and why is everyone suddenly reaching for it? The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/what-is-strategic-autonomy-and-why-is-everyone-suddenly-reaching-for-it-283825>

⁵ Model Diplomat (2026). *Balance of Interest*. <https://modeldiplomat.com/learn/glossary/balance-of-interest>

⁶ M. Atkhamova. (2025) *New Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy: From Strategic Partnerships to Regional Leadership after Independence*. European Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/399516550_New_Uzbekistan's_Foreign_Policy_From_Strategic_Partnerships_to_Regional_Leadership_after_Independence

Multilateralism, Proactivity, Openness, and Constructivism.⁷ Uzbekistan is consistently using diplomatic efforts with its neighbors, carefully calibrates cooperation with foreign countries to build its political strategy.

Opportunities and Challenges

The main achievement of this strategy is political and economic diversification. Non-alignment with any military-political bloc strengthens Uzbekistan's sovereignty and allows it to establish equal relations with major global powers (USA, Europe, Russia, China). In the economic sphere, the EU's GSP+ preferences, Chinese investments, and the Russian market are being used effectively at the same time.⁸ The strengthening of regional diplomacy is turning Central Asia into a major transit and investment center, increasing the state's international prestige. Since 2017, Uzbekistan has established 16 new diplomatic missions and consulates overseas, raising the total to 60 and extending diplomatic ties to 165 nations. Staffing numbers and pay at embassies, consular offices, missions to international organizations, and the foreign ministry have likewise been raised.⁹

However, this policy faces a number of systemic challenges. The intensification of confrontations between global powers makes it difficult to maintain balance and creates strong geopolitical pressures. Due to the lack of direct access to sea routes (double enclaves), export and transport corridors remain largely dependent on transport corridors in neighboring countries and Russia. This increases economic vulnerability in the face of international sanctions and geopolitical crises. In addition, the excessive share of some countries in foreign trade creates the risk of economic dependence, and instability in Afghanistan is a constant security threat.¹⁰

Conclusion

Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy has become an important part of its development since independence, especially after the reforms introduced in 2017. This policy helps the country build balanced and friendly relations with different countries and international organizations without depending too much on any single partner. As a result, Uzbekistan has expanded its economic cooperation, strengthened regional relations, and improved its international reputation.

At the same time, the country faces several challenges. Growing competition between major world powers, regional security issues, transport limitations, and the risk of economic dependence require careful and flexible foreign policy decisions. Therefore, maintaining a balance between different partners is becoming more difficult but also more important.

Overall, the multi-vector approach gives Uzbekistan greater opportunities to protect its national interests while increasing cooperation with both regional and global partners. If the government continues to follow a pragmatic, open, and balanced policy, Uzbekistan will be able to strengthen its position in the international community, support sustainable economic growth, and

⁷ Opinion of Foreign experts (2024). *The Multidimensional Foreign Policy of New Uzbekistan*. The Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (ISRS) <https://isrs.uz/en/content/8/post/455>

⁸ E. Tulyakov (2025). *Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy: Balancing East and West Through Strategic Openness*. The International Asia Today. <https://theasiatoday.org/essays/uzbekistans-new-foreign-policy-balancing-east-and-west-through-strategic-openness/>

⁹ Presidential Press Service (2026) *Uzbekistan recalibrates foreign policy amid global geopolitical shifts* <https://daryo.uz/en/2026/01/16/uzbekistan-recalibrates-foreign-policy-amid-global-geopolitical-shifts/>

¹⁰ Special Eurasia Team (2025) *Geopolitics of Uzbekistan as a Strategic Pivot in Eurasia*. SpecialEurasia web. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/11/24/geopolitics-uzbekistan/>

contribute to peace and stability in Central Asia. This strategy remains one of the country's most effective tools for achieving its long-term national goals.

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