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## Uzbekistan's Afghan Strategy as a Factor in the Development of Cross-Border Interaction Between Central and South Asia

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**Abstract.** South and Central Asia have a thousand-year history of interaction, including the era of empires and the rivalry of great powers. The failure of the United States in establishing peace in Afghanistan demonstrates the importance of a regional initiative to resolve the situation in that country. The authors emphasize the importance of the ideas put forward by the Uzbek leadership, which can establish multifaceted relations between the countries of South and Central Asia. The methodological basis of the study is the geopolitical concept of H. Mackinder, the meaning of which is to single out the north-eastern part of Eurasia as a special and significant area — the Heartland. In recent years, Uzbekistan has established itself as a responsible regional actor, fulfilling its obligations. Central Asia and South Asia have a demographic complementarity that can change the rules of the game for the peoples of Eurasia. Uzbekistan has every chance to attract the attention of the international business, as it has a cheap labour workforce and sufficient opportunities to become a Eurasian business center. At the present time, Tashkent is on the threshold of a new stage in its involvement in the peace process in Afghanistan. The previous proposals, although acceptable, did not receive broad international support, nor adequate information and political promotion within the country. The development of Uzbekistan's strategy indicates a clear intention to actively participate in the settlement of the conflict and the consistent implementation of the country's position on this issue. Whatever the future scenario of the situation in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan will continue to be interested in minimizing the negative consequences of events in the neighboring country and will continue to play an important role in the process of resolving the situation. In the light of developing events, Uzbekistan should continue the Afghan strategy, adapting it in a timely manner to the evolving regional and international realities. On the one hand, Uzbekistan has become a full-fledged regional leader, offering its neighbors to discuss and resolve issues of interaction themselves. At the same time, thanks to a flexible approach, Tashkent is trying to avoid competition and any concerns of its neighbors about the country's increased ambitions.

**Key words:** geopolitical strategy, regional leadership, transport corridors, peace settlement, Afghan crisis, Sh. Mirziyoyev

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## Афганская стратегия Узбекистана как фактор развития трансграничного взаимодействия Центральной и Южной Азии

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**Аннотация.** Южная и Центральная Азия имеют тысячелетнюю историю взаимодействия, которая включает эпоху империй и соперничества великих держав. Неудачи США в установлении мира в Афганистане демонстрируют важность региональной инициативы по урегулированию ситуации в этой стране. Авторы подчеркивают значимость выдвигаемых узбекским руководством идей, которые могут способствовать налаживанию многоплановых отношений между странами Южной и Центральной Азии. Методологической основой исследования является геополитическая концепция Х. Макиндера, смысл которой заключается в выделении северо-восточной части Евразии в качестве особого и значимого пространства — Хартленда. Узбекистан за последние годы зарекомендовал себя как ответственный региональный актор, выполняющий взятые на себя обязательства. Центральная и Южная Азия обладают демографической взаимодополняемостью, которая может изменить правила игры для народов Евразии. Авторы приходят к выводу, что у Узбекистана есть все шансы привлечь внимание международного бизнеса, поскольку он располагает дешевой рабочей силой и достаточными возможностями для того, чтобы стать евразийским деловым центром. Сегодня Ташкент стоит на пороге нового этапа своего участия в мирном процессе в Афганистане. Предыдущие предложения, хотя и были приемлемыми, не получили широкой международной поддержки и адекватного информационного и политического продвижения внутри страны. Установлено, что эволюция стратегии Узбекистана свидетельствует о четком намерении активно участвовать в урегулировании конфликта и последовательной реализации позиции страны по этому вопросу. Каким бы ни был будущий сценарий развития ситуации в Афганистане, Узбекистан по-прежнему будет заинтересован в минимизации негативных последствий событий в соседней стране и продолжит играть важную роль в процессе урегулирования ситуации. В свете развивающихся событий Узбекистану следует продолжить афганскую стратегию, своевременно адаптируя ее к меняющимся региональным и международным реалиям. Узбекистан, с одной стороны, стал полноценным региональным лидером, предлагая своим соседям самим обсуждать и решать вопросы взаимодействия. С другой стороны, благодаря гибкому подходу Ташкент пытается избежать конкуренции и развеять опасения своих соседей по поводу возросших амбиций страны.

**Ключевые слова:** геополитическая стратегия, региональное лидерство, транспортные коридоры, мирное урегулирование, афганский кризис, Ш. Мирзиёев

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### Introduction

The classical Mackinderian model of global geopolitics exhibited a strong ontological preference for the geographical advantages of civilizations, intertwined with how technological advancements influence power distribution across continents and seas. However, the failure

to account for the exclusivity of larger processes affecting states necessitates a complementary perspective that considers how actors perceive and respond to structural frameworks. Mackinder's model arguably aligns more closely with neoclassical realism, wherein state actions are determined by structural conditions.

In the contemporary era, Central Asian states are perceived as participants in a modern iteration of the Great Game, echoing the classical competition between the Russian and British empires of the 19th century (Kazancev, 2008; Cooley, 2012). The emergence of a rising China introduces a qualitative shift, transforming the contest into a triangular rivalry between Russia, the United States, and China.

The institutional landscape of Central Asian geopolitics can be categorized into three distinct types: networks that preserve the Soviet legacy, Chinese geoeconomic support for regional economies, and the security framework led by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The economic cooperation between China and Central Asian states is indicative of China's growing influence in the region, as evidenced by the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Porshneva, Rakhimov, & Razinkov, 2022). The Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative, launched by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013,<sup>1</sup> demonstrates Beijing's growing interest in the Central Asian region. The China — Central Asia Summit, held in Xi'an, in May 2023 saw a pledge of 26 billion RMB loans to Central Asian states from China. These are aimed at developing Soviet-era infrastructure and enhancing energy, trade and military exchanges.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by Kazakhstan — China investment roundtable, where 47 agreements worth USD 22 billion were signed.<sup>3</sup> As an

example, the leadership of Uzbekistan took another step towards economic cooperation with China, heralding China's socialist achievements as a guiding path for the Central Asian countries.<sup>4</sup>

The Russian perspective on Central Asian geopolitics stems from the historical perception of the region as one of the three components of the "greatest natural fortress" of the Old World.<sup>5</sup> In the context of the current international political situation, Russia is forced to enhance the readiness of its military bases in Central Asia to counter the expanding US presence in the region under the pretext of fighting terrorism,<sup>6</sup> while China, which also opposes such a presence, is intensifying its economic cooperation with the Central Asian states.

Thus, the rivalry between the three powers is complemented by their multilayered relations with the Central Asian states. This approach, combining both confrontational and complementary elements, has paved the way for the formation of a new economic reality in the region (Reeves, 2018).

### **Uzbekistan in the Transregional Context of Central and South Asia**

The trans-regional architecture linking South and Central Asia continues to reflect the dynamics of the 19th century 'Great Game.' The term *Bolshaya Igra* (Great Game), as coined by

<sup>1</sup> President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries // The Belt and Road Portal. September 7, 2013. URL: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/1849.html> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Tan C. K. China's Xi Pledges Billions in Loans to Central Asian Nations // Nikkei Asia. May 19, 2023. URL: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-s-Xi-pledges-billions-in-loans-to-Central-Asian-nations> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>3</sup> Omirgazy D. Kazakhstan and China Sign 47 Agreements Worth \$ 22 Billion, as Tokayev Outlines Key Areas for Partnership // The Astana Times. May 18, 2023. URL: <https://astanatimes.com/2023/05/kazakhstan-and-china-sign-47-agreements-worth-22-billion-as-tokayev-outlines-key-areas-for-partnership/> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>4</sup> Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan' // Embassy of the People's Republic of China in India. May 18, 2023. URL: [http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202305/t20230521\\_11080865.htm](http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202305/t20230521_11080865.htm) (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>5</sup> Mackinder H. J. The Round World and the Winning of the Peace // Foreign Affairs. 1943. Vol. 21, no. 4. P. 601. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20029780> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>6</sup> Russia Boosting Combat Readiness of Its Central Asia Bases to Counter US, Defence Minister Says // Reuters. April 28, 2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-boosting-combat-readiness-its-c-asia-bases-counter-us-defence-minister-2023-04-28/> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

Russian scholars, serves as a metaphor for the strategic maneuvers executed by continental and maritime powers on the Central Asian chessboard (Hopkirk, 2006). The Central Asian states play a crucial role in shifting the balance on it, which explains why major powers have consistently competed for influence within the Central Asian nations (Edwards, 2003).

In this regard, Uzbekistan, which controls much of the Ferghana Valley and is strategically positioned at the crossroads of Central (five post-Soviet republics and Afghanistan<sup>7</sup>), West (Arab world and Iran) and South (Hindustan) Asia, has experienced a significant uptick in trade with neighboring countries since 2017 and onwards (Starr & Cornell, 2018). This nation has taken proactive steps to bolster regional economic integration and cooperation, as evidenced by its pivotal role in resuming the format of the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia. In its efforts to enhance connectivity and trade routes, Uzbekistan has constructed vital bridges across the Amu Darya, facilitating direct links with Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman, Kyrgyzstan, and China. These infrastructural developments complement the longstanding ties with Russia, further enriched by the integration of Russian transport networks with the Belt and Road Initiative's expansive synergies.

However, Uzbekistan's strategic location also exposes it to the challenges of drug trafficking and the spread of extremist ideologies. President Mirziyoyev has been vocal about the necessity for enhanced cooperation among Central Asian states in tackling issues such as counter-terrorism, arms smuggling, illegal migration, and drug trafficking. He has emphasized the "indivisibility of security" concept, advocating for both bilateral and multilateral cooperation

frameworks.<sup>8</sup> In March 2018, President Mirziyoyev initiated the first consultative meeting of Central Asian heads,<sup>9</sup> signaling a robust desire to fortify fraternal ties within the region. Furthermore, in 2018, Uzbekistan spearheaded a resolution at the United Nations (UN), aimed at promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development across Central Asia.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan is actively developing relations with the leading states of South Asia. For example, in 2016, Uzbekistan was invited by Pakistan to join the China — Pakistan Economic Corridor for regional trade benefits (Khetran & Khalid, 2019). The two countries share a common concern against the extremist groups lodged in the Waziristan region in Pakistan, where the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)<sup>11</sup> and Al-Qaeda<sup>12</sup> have joined with local warlords challenging the rule of law. Counter-terrorism cooperation between Tashkent and Islamabad extends to the SCO, where both countries

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<sup>8</sup> Shavkat Mirziyoyev: Security Is Indivisible, Its Essential Bedrock Is Trust // President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. June 15, 2019. URL: <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/2668> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>9</sup> Pogorelskaya A. Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Leaders: The Evolution of Agenda // TSU Center for Eurasian Studies Analytical Review. 2023 (October 20). No. 12. URL: [https://eurasian-studies.tsu.ru/en/analytics/publications/anastasiia-pogorel-skaia-format-konsul-tativnykh-vstrech-liderov-stran-tcentral-noi-azii-evoliutciia-povestki/download/1267/file\\_en](https://eurasian-studies.tsu.ru/en/analytics/publications/anastasiia-pogorel-skaia-format-konsul-tativnykh-vstrech-liderov-stran-tcentral-noi-azii-evoliutciia-povestki/download/1267/file_en) (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>10</sup> The Initiative of the President of Uzbekistan Is Unanimously Supported by the International Community // The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations. December 14, 2018. URL: <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/initiative-president-uzbekistan-unanimously-supported-international-community> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>11</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>12</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

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<sup>7</sup> Speech by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly // President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. September 21, 2021. URL: <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/4632> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

share mutual concerns about the escalating tensions in Afghanistan and their potential implications for the security and stability of neighbouring states. Jihadist factions led by Uzbeks, notably the Islamic Jihad Union<sup>13</sup> and the IMU (banned in Russia), play a specific role in the Afghanistan and Pakistan conflicts. The Islamic Jihad Union (banned in Russia), closely allied to the Haqqani network, conducts operations in Afghanistan and recruits Central Asians via propaganda. Its focus has shifted from Europe in 2007 to reinforcing its presence and activities in Central Asia, particularly Afghanistan. The IMU similarly engages in recruitment efforts, focusing on mobilizing Muslims to fight in South Asia and targeting Pakistani forces.<sup>14</sup>

Uzbekistan has significant trade relations with Bangladesh. In 2021, Uzbekistan's exports to Bangladesh amounted to USD 10.6 million, dominated by non-retail pure cotton yarn, raw cotton, and light rubberized knitted fabric. Over the past 21 years, these exports have seen an annual decrease of 2.03%, dropping from USD 16.4 million in 2000 to USD 10.6 million in 2021. Conversely, Bangladesh's exports to Uzbekistan in 2021 were valued at USD 16.9 million, with jute yarn, packaged medicaments, and non-knit men's coats being the main products. These exports have experienced a significant annual growth of 27.3% on average, increasing from USD 106,000 in 2000 to USD 16.9 million in 2021.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>14</sup> Binnie J., Wright J. The Evolving Role of Uzbek-led Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan // CTC Sentinel. 2009. Vol. 2, no. 8. P. 5–7. URL: <https://ctc westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Vol2Iss8-Art2.pdf> (accessed: 12.02.2023).

<sup>15</sup> Bangladesh // The Observatory of Economic Complexity. URL: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/bgd> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

In turn, the relationship between India and Uzbekistan is anchored in historical and cultural ties. The post-Soviet foundation was laid during President Islam Karimov's visit to India from 17–19 August 1991, during which significant agreements were signed in various sectors.<sup>16</sup> The Indian Consulate General in Tashkent was inaugurated on April 7th, 1987 and was elevated to an Embassy in March 1992 following the independence of Uzbekistan.<sup>17</sup> The post-1991 era saw intensified bilateral engagements, with notable visits from both sides leading to the signing of key agreements on trade, economic cooperation, and the establishment of strategic partnerships. The trade relationship is governed by the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation signed in May 1993,<sup>18</sup> offering mutual Most Favored Nation treatment and promoting cooperation in the economic, industrial, scientific, and technical fields, including support for small and medium enterprises. Additionally, both countries have entered into agreements to prevent double taxation and to encourage and protect bilateral investments.

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in collaboration in the fields of information technology and agriculture, driven by a series of agreements and Uzbekistan's active engagement in the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program. Moreover, the vibrant cultural exchanges between India and Uzbekistan, with performances by troupes from both countries at festivals and events, have further enriched the dynamic cultural links between the two nations. The involvement of Uzbekistan in the India — Central Asia Dialogues exemplifies the countries' commitment to regional stability, particularly in Afghanistan, and their mutual interests in economic and cultural cooperation.

<sup>16</sup> Indo-Uzbek Political Relations // Embassy of India in Republic of Uzbekistan. URL: [http://www.indembassy.uz/uzbekistan\\_polit](http://www.indembassy.uz/uzbekistan_polit) (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

This partnership has been especially evident in defense and security, where joint military exercises and agreements highlight a strategic trust and a collective approach to combating common threats such as terrorism and trafficking.

Despite the potential for greater economic interaction, with bilateral trade at approximately USD 690 million, efforts are underway to enhance trade and investment through a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) and significant Indian investment in sectors of the Uzbek economy such as pharmaceuticals and IT.<sup>19</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the resilience of this partnership, with both nations providing essential medical assistance to each other, demonstrating a strong cooperative spirit.

The Afghan orientation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy should be singled out separately. Afghanistan, with its strategically important geographical location and its role as a bridge between Central and South Asia, is at the same time a challenge for the countries of these regions. There are deep ethno-cultural ties between Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia, which have often been used by great powers to realise their strategic goals. Limiting the analysis of regional dynamics to trade, economic and political interests alone does not allow us to fully understand the complexity of processes in this region (Berkowitz, 2007). In general, the opposition of Pashtuns to Turkic and non-Pashtun ethnic groups determines not only the fate of the country itself, but also of the countries of South and Central Asia (Misdaq, 2006, pp. 199–207).

Historically, regional conflicts are reflected in the tribal and ethnic groupings scattered across Central and South Asia. The zone of constant migration and conflict in the region was established as early as the years of the Kushan Empire (30–375). It included the Fergana Valley,

Afghanistan and the north-western parts of India. Thus, Afghanistan is the geo-cultural watershed of the South and Central Asian region (Puri, 1994, pp. 247–264).

However, the modern perception of the idea of cross-border interaction between the two regions is based on the period of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when Great Britain tried to define its sphere of influence in opposition to Tsarist Russia, which was perceived as a threat to British interests. In this context, Afghanistan's status as a buffer state and its desire to remain neutral played a key role in shaping the geopolitical picture of the region.

In the 21st century, Afghanistan's security and stability emerged as a crucial condition for the successful development of integration processes, which was associated with the launch of China's Belt and Road initiative and the possibility of economic integration between South and Central Asia.

### **The Afghan Crisis and Uzbekistan**

Due to a combination of geographical, geopolitical and geo-economic factors, Uzbekistan is one of Afghanistan's most important neighbours. The outcome of the peaceful settlement process in Afghanistan directly affects Uzbekistan. The peace projects of the Afghan settlement cannot be fully implemented without taking into account its interests.

Over the past two decades, Uzbekistan has actively participated in the processes of political and economic resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan. In addition to increasing economic activity and trade with its southern neighbour, Uzbekistan brought global and regional players together at a major international conference on "Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Cooperation" in Tashkent in March 2018 (Özkan & Omonkulov, 2020). It is noteworthy that the Tashkent Conference of 2018 was attended in addition to the Afghan government, by all six neighbouring states of

<sup>19</sup> Brief on India — Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations // Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. October 6, 2023. URL: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/uzbekistan.pdf> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

Afghanistan (i.e., Iran, which is experiencing a period of cooling in relations with the United States), as well as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, which consider the Afghan problem as a source of external threats and potential destabilisation of the Central Asian region. The main providers of donor assistance to Afghanistan also participated in the conference (Sazhenov, 2020).

The Uzbek leader's appeal to perceive Afghanistan not just as a source of threat but also as a land of opportunities has received widespread international support. It is clear that the integration of Afghanistan into regional economic activities is important for the Central Asian countries (Umarov, 2021). Additionally, at the 2018 Tashkent Conference, the Uzbek President highlighted the importance of advancing the peace process on three interrelated fronts: intra-Afghan, regional, and global. The first level focuses on fostering dialogue within Afghanistan, the second seeks consensus among Afghanistan's neighboring countries and several Muslim nations on resolving the conflict, and the third involves global powers and donor agencies providing political and financial backing for the peace efforts and Afghanistan's economic rebuilding.<sup>20</sup> In 2017, a special post of the Special Representative of the President of Uzbekistan in Afghanistan was established.<sup>21</sup> The creation of such a post demonstrates the special attention of the Uzbek leadership to relations with Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian republic that has adopted a state-level strategy to promote its national interests of the republic in

Afghanistan. The Uzbek initiative of the "6+2" format began in 1997 under the auspices of the UN (Pritchins, 2020). It sought the participation in the Afghan peace process, by the six neighbouring countries of Afghanistan comprising Pakistan, Iran, China, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and the guarantor countries, the United States and the Russian Federation. The goal of this format was to resolve the Afghan conflict through the reconciliation between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban.<sup>22</sup> Thanks to the activities of the Contact Group that on July 21, 1999, the "Tashkent Declaration on Fundamental Principles for the Peaceful Resolution of the Conflict in Afghanistan" was signed in the presence of the warring parties.<sup>23</sup> In 2020, Tashkent established a consultative format of interaction with the United States to solve the Afghan problem.<sup>24</sup> Compared to other participants in the negotiations in the peace process of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan was among the earliest to establish contact with the leadership of the Taliban movement (banned in Russia), whose opinion and influence the Uzbek side intended to take into account in any further development of the intra-Afghan dialogue.<sup>25</sup>

Thanks to the principled stance of the President of Uzbekistan, the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan has always

<sup>22</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>23</sup> Tashkent Declaration on Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan // United Nations Peacemaker. July 19, 1999. URL: <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/node/9441> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>24</sup> Joint Statement on the U.S. — Afghanistan — Uzbekistan Trilateral Meeting // U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan. May 27, 2020. URL: <https://uz.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-afghanistan-uzbekistan-trilateral-meeting/> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>25</sup> Sigov Y. The Afghan Card of Tashkent // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. May 4, 2021. (In Russian). URL: [https://www.ng.ru/cis/2021-05-11/8\\_8144\\_map.html](https://www.ng.ru/cis/2021-05-11/8_8144_map.html) (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>20</sup> Tolipov F. The Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Too Much Diplomacy, Too Little Solution // CACI Analyst. May 29, 2018. URL: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13521-the-tashkent-conference-on-afghanistan-too-much-diplomacy-too-little-solution.html> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>21</sup> Special Representative of President of Uzbekistan for Afghanistan appointed // UZ Daily. May 25, 2017. URL: <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/special-representative-of-president-of-uzbekistan-for-afghanistan-appointed/> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

remained open to all transport cargo traffic. This policy has facilitated the continuous flow of shipments of food, basic necessities, raw materials and fuel to Afghanistan, ensuring the normal functioning of the country during this difficult time. It is noteworthy that the UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed his gratitude to President Mirziyoyev for his efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the countries affected in the region, including Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> Earlier, the President of Uzbekistan proposed to the UN leadership the creation of a special committee on the socio-economic development of Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, Tashkent is committed exclusively to a political settlement of the Afghan conflict through multilateral inter-Afghan negotiations.

One of the features of the renewed vector of the Afghan policy is the emphasis on humanitarian cooperation. Now Tashkent boldly speaks about them even as earlier such initiatives were not particularly advertised. Thus, it was proposed to establish an International Fund to Support Education in Afghanistan. An educational centre for training Afghan citizens was opened in the Surkhandarya province bordering Afghanistan. The agreement to establish this center was signed during Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's visit to Uzbekistan in December 2017.<sup>28</sup> In 2018, an educational centre for training Afghan citizens has been opened in the Surkhandarya

region bordering Afghanistan, which last year received more than 100 students.<sup>29</sup> Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are planning to launch a project to provide education to Afghan women. These measures are an attempt by Tashkent to create conditions to prevent the radicalisation of Afghan youth, especially in the northern regions. Capacity-building cooperation is also taking place with regard to civil servants. For example, in 2019, the parties discussed the organisation by Uzbekistan of training courses for employees of the prosecutor's office of Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup>

A considerable number of Uzbek projects, including transport corridors, are tied to Afghanistan, which has a serious transport and transit potential. The country's territory has historically served as a space through which India interacted with the rest of Eurasia. The transport and transit capabilities of modern Afghanistan should and can be used, and the efforts of the Government of Uzbekistan in this context are understandable. Several projects are being developed, for example, the Termez — Mazar-i-Sharif — Kabul — Peshawar railway project will not only open a new and shortest path to the promising markets of South Asia, but also contribute to the achievement of peace in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> It is noteworthy that the change of power in Kabul did not have a serious impact on this project — in July 2022, field work on the Trans-Afghanistan Railway project began,<sup>32</sup> and in October 2023, the head of the Afghan Railways Authority, Bakht-ur-Rahman Sharafat,

<sup>26</sup> UN Secretary-General Sends a Message to Shavkat Mirziyoyev Praising Measures Uzbekistan Has Taken to Fight Coronavirus // KUN.UZ. May 12, 2020. URL: <https://kun.uz/en/45890234> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>27</sup> Uzbekistan President Proposes Establishment of a Permanent UN Committee on Afghanistan // Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Malaysia. September 25, 2020. URL: [https://uzbekembassy.com.my/eng/news\\_press/uzbekistan\\_president\\_proposes\\_establishment\\_of\\_a\\_permanent\\_un\\_committee\\_on\\_afghanistan.html](https://uzbekembassy.com.my/eng/news_press/uzbekistan_president_proposes_establishment_of_a_permanent_un_committee_on_afghanistan.html) (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>28</sup> Afghanistan: The Dialogue Is Expanding // Institute of Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. July 3, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://isrs.uz/ru/maqolalar/afganistan-dialog-rassiraetsa> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>29</sup> Educational Center on Training Afghan Citizens Opens in Uzbekistan // UZ Daily. January 24, 2018. URL: <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/educational-center-on-training-afghan-citizens-opens-in-uzbekistan/> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>30</sup> Sarukhanyan Yu. Afghan Traditions of Uzbek Foreign Policy // Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting. 2019. URL: <https://cabar.asia/en/afghan-traditions-of-the-uzbek-foreign-policy> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>31</sup> Prospects of Economic Cooperation Between Central and South Asia // TOLONews. June 4, 2021. URL: <https://tolonews.com/opinion-172557> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>32</sup> Field Work on the Trans-Afghan Railway Project Started // RZD. July 26, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://company.rzd.ru/ru/9401/page/78314?id=204058> (accessed: 10.12.2023).



said that the feasibility study of the project will be completed by July 2024.<sup>33</sup> The Minister of Transport of Uzbekistan, I.R. Mahkamov, said that in 2025 it is planned to start work on the construction of the Trans-Afghan railway line.<sup>34</sup>

Cooperation with South Asian countries is increasingly mentioned by Uzbek officials, both within the framework of domestic transformations<sup>35</sup> and for regional projects including the formation of international transport corridors. On July 15–16, 2021, the Uzbek president Mirziyoyev addressed the international conference “Central and South Asia: Regional Interconnectedness. Challenges and Opportunities,” where he outlined ten initiatives to strengthen cooperation between the countries of Central and South Asia.<sup>36</sup> Experts tend to view these proposals as a large-scale and well-developed program, the implementation of which may well lead cooperation between Central and South Asian states to a new round of stable and peaceful development. Thus, we see the signature of Tashkent on the development of the regional economy as a guarantee of peace. It has been patronised by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has been successfully promoting this cooperation concerning Afghanistan for the past two years and now he has managed to consolidate the regional players around him.

<sup>33</sup> The Feasibility Study of the Trans-Afghan Railway Project Will Be Presented in Summer 2024 // TASS. October 26, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/19118439> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>34</sup> Trans-Afghan Railway Construction Set to Begin in 2025 // KUN.UZ. February 5, 2025. URL: <https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/02/05/trans-afghan-railway-construction-set-to-begin-in-2025> (accessed: 07.02.2025).

<sup>35</sup> Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the International Conference “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities” // President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. July 16, 2021. URL: <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/4484> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>36</sup> Panfilova V. Tashkent Offered Central Asia a New Agenda // *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. August 4, 2021. (In Russian). URL: [https://www.ng.ru/cis/2021-08-04/100\\_190004082021.html](https://www.ng.ru/cis/2021-08-04/100_190004082021.html) (accessed: 10.12.2023).

It is necessary to re-examine the specific interests of Uzbekistan in the Afghan direction, which encourage it to participate more actively in the peace process. There are three groups of such interests:

1) security concerns, in particular, countering Islamist extremism and drug smuggling,

2) foreign policy issues related to overcoming self-isolation and developing bilateral relations with regional and global players. This should also include participation in the intra-Afghan settlement as a factor in consolidating informal leadership in the Central Asian region of the post-Soviet space,

3) economic issues: deepening trade and economic relations with the Central Asian countries of the region, creating transit routes and appropriate infrastructure for access to seaports and facilitating access to new markets (Sazhenov, 2020).

In one way or another, Uzbekistan's initiatives in the Afghan direction fit into the already established trend of regionalisation of the Afghan conflict, i.e., the increasing involvement of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries and prominent players in the region in the settlement process (Ergashev, 2013). Uzbekistan has considerable potential to continue its actions in this area, which, if successful, could raise Uzbekistan's profile in the international community, which is already gradually happening. In the future, Uzbekistan may, for example, provide a platform for inter-Afghan negotiations or act as a mediator. Even before the Taliban (banned in Russia) came to power in Afghanistan in 2021, it was clear that Uzbekistan's future political line in this direction was likely to continue to be characterised by a combination of seeking a new, more active role in resolving the Afghan conflict and a pragmatic, sometimes cautious foreign policy.

The new reality that emerged after the Taliban (banned in Russia) came to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 has generally not changed Uzbekistan's intentions to continue expanding its involvement in the Afghan

settlement. The Uzbek government has adopted a proactive approach, advocating active engagement with the new Afghan government and avoiding its isolation. On the other hand, Uzbekistan is in no hurry to recognise the new authorities in Kabul. According to I.R. Irgashev, Special Representative of the President of Uzbekistan for Afghanistan, Uzbekistan intends to move towards official recognition only together with the international community.<sup>37</sup>

In September, the leader of Uzbekistan said already that it was necessary to develop dialogue with the new Afghan authorities and prevent the isolation of the country, which is in a difficult period of its development, facing a large number of problems.<sup>38</sup>

In October 2021, acting Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi met with Uzbek Ambassador Y.M. Shadmanov and Uzbek Foreign Minister A.K. Kamilov. Following the meeting, the Uzbek side expressed its intention to assist in the reconstruction of the airport in Mazar-e-Sharif, as well as to develop relations in transit, energy and trade.<sup>39</sup>

As early as 2022, speaking at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit,

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<sup>37</sup> Imamova N. Uzbekistan Seeks to Engage Taliban Without Alienating West // VOA News. May 4, 2022. URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbekistan-seeks-to-engage-taliban-without-alienating-west/6557338.html> (accessed: 10.12.2024).

<sup>38</sup> See: Shavkat Mirziyoyev Urged the SCO to Dialogue with the New Government in Afghanistan // Gazeta.uz. September 17, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/17/sco-president/> (accessed: 10.12.2023); 'It Is Impossible to Allow Isolation of Afghanistan' — Shavkat Mirziyoyev // Gazeta.uz. September 21, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/21/afghanistan-un/> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>39</sup> See: Uzbek Ambassador Discusses Resumption of Air Communication with Afghan Foreign Minister // Gazeta.uz. October 2, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/10/02/kabul/> (accessed: 10.12.2023); Uzbek and Afghan Foreign Ministers Meet in Kabul // Gazeta.uz. October 7, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/10/07/uzb-afg/> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

Shavkat Mirziyoyev suggested that Asian countries should address the UN General Assembly with an initiative to form a high-level international negotiation group to negotiate with the Afghan authorities.<sup>40</sup>

In August 2024, a large delegation led by Uzbek Prime Minister A.N. Aripov visited Kabul, symbolising Uzbekistan's desire to develop good-neighbourly and mutually beneficial relations with its neighbour. As a result of this visit, 35 agreements were signed in the field of investment and trade totalling USD 3.5 billion.<sup>41</sup>

As a result, Tashkent regularly proposes initiatives to establish trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan and systematically provide humanitarian aid to the neighbouring country. Uzbekistan's efforts are aimed at preventing the isolation of Afghanistan and its transformation into a 'rogue state.'

## Conclusion

South and Central Asia have a millennia-old history, which went unnoticed in the era of empires and successive great power rivalries. The clash of their interests has had a negative impact on the development of intra-regional ties, which is especially evident in the situation with Afghanistan. The failure of the U.S. and the Western coalition to stabilise the internal situation in the country has once again underlined the importance of such peace initiatives that will affect Central Asian and South Asian countries. They have different political and economic capabilities, but their

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<sup>40</sup> "Communication and Trust Have Decreased to an Unprecedented Level" — Shavkat Mirziyoyev Delivers a Speech at CICA Summit // KUN.UZ. October 14, 2022. URL: <https://kun.uz/en/news/2022/10/14/communication-and-trust-have-decreased-to-an-unprecedented-level-shavkat-mirziyoyev-delivers-a-speech-at-cica-summit> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

<sup>41</sup> Qooyash H. R. 35 Investment, Trade Agreements Signed Between Afghanistan, Uzbekistan // TOLONews. August 17, 2024. URL: <https://tolonews.com/business-190282> (accessed: 08.12.2024).

collective will can certainly influence the development of events in Afghanistan.

Against this background, Uzbekistan stands out as an important actor capable of establishing multifaceted relations with both regional and great powers. Today, Tashkent stands at the brink of a new phase in its engagement with the Afghan peace process. Previous proposals, while suitable, lacked broad international support and adequate informational and political promotion domestically. The evolution of Uzbekistan's strategy indicates a clear intention to participate actively in the resolution of the conflict and a consistent implementation of the country's stance on the issue.

Whatever the future scenario of the situation in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan will remain interested in minimising the negative impact of events in the neighbouring country and will continue to play an important role in the process of resolving the situation. In the light of the unfolding events, Uzbekistan should continue the Afghan strategy, adapting it on time to the changing regional and international realities. At

present, Uzbekistan cannot be called a “forgotten actor” in the Afghan settlement. On the one hand, Uzbekistan has become a full-fledged regional leader, offering its neighbours to discuss and resolve issues of interaction themselves. At the same time, thanks to a flexible approach, Tashkent is trying to avoid competition and the fears of its neighbours about the country's increased ambitions. So far, it seems to be succeeding.

Uzbekistan's desire to contribute to the establishment of stability in Afghanistan is connected not only with the need to ensure its own security, which, of course, is an urgent task. The route to Pakistan's ports passes through Afghanistan. The Trans-Afghan Railway will connect Central and South Asia, which will contribute to the growth of trade between the regions, restore historical trade ties, and provide jobs for all participants in this interaction. Uzbekistan is also developing routes to ports in India and Iran, solving the important issue of access to the sea and thus contributing to the intensification of cross-border interaction.

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