

CONTENT AND CONSEQUENCES OF UZBEKISTAN'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY MODEL

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Abstract

The article focuses on the changes and transformations in Uzbekistan's foreign policy after 2016. The main topic of the article is to investigate the impact of the large-scale and comprehensive reforms initiated by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who was elected President of Uzbekistan in 2016, on foreign policy. The article seeks to answer the question of which priorities shaped the change and transformation in Uzbek foreign policy. To answer this question, the content of the post-2016 foreign policy is first analyzed. The new Uzbek foreign policy has abandoned the security-only approach that has dominated the past and now addresses security issues in the context of economic growth. The link between security issues and economic growth underpins the new foreign policy model. This assumption guided the fictional basis and methodological framework of the article. In the article, the concrete effects of the new foreign policy model are tested in detail in the context of regional transportation corridors and the Afghan issue. The article concludes that the foreign policy activities of Uzbekistan after 2016 have been shaped within the framework of a new model.

Keywords

Uzbekistan, New Foreign Policy Model, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Economization, Transport Corridors, Afghanistan.

Resumo

O artigo centra-se nas mudanças e transformações da política externa do Uzbequistão após 2016. O principal tópico do artigo é investigar o impacto das reformas abrangentes e de grande escala iniciadas por Shavkat Mirziyoyev, que foi eleito Presidente do Uzbequistão em 2016, na política externa. O artigo procura responder à questão de saber quais as prioridades que moldaram a mudança e a transformação da política externa uzbeque. Para responder a esta questão, analisa-se em primeiro lugar o conteúdo da política externa pós-2016. A nova política externa uzbeque abandonou a abordagem exclusivamente securitária que dominou o passado e aborda agora as questões de segurança no contexto do crescimento económico. A ligação entre as questões de segurança e o crescimento económico está na base do novo modelo de política externa. Este pressuposto orientou a base ficcional e o quadro metodológico do artigo. No artigo, os efeitos concretos do novo modelo de política externa são testados em pormenor no contexto dos corredores de transporte regionais e da questão



afegã. O artigo conclui que as actividades de política externa do Uzbequistão após 2016 foram moldadas no âmbito de um novo modelo.

Palavras-chave

Uzbequistão, Novo Modelo de Política Externa, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Economização, Corredores de Transporte, Afeganistão.

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Introduction

Uzbekistan is strategically located in the heart of Asia. This strategic location offers great opportunities for Uzbekistan's future regional and global influence. Having gained its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has been more isolated and cautious in its relations with the external world for political, geopolitical and security reasons until 2016. In this context, it is possible to say that Uzbek foreign policy has developed in a security-oriented manner since the collapse of the Soviet Union until 2016. The foreign policy pursued by Islam Karimov, the first President of Uzbekistan and the country's permanent leader until 2016, was shaped within the framework of a security-oriented approach. This security approach pushed Uzbekistan to adopt an isolationist foreign policy behaviour model.

The reform-oriented foreign policy approach of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power after Karimov's death in 2016, differed sharply from the previous period. Mirziyoyev's sweeping reforms have resonated at the national, regional and international levels. Economic and social reforms have paved the way for the emergence of a new Uzbekistan phenomenon. Mirziyoyev's reforms, which prioritised economic pragmatism, drastically changed foreign policy and the characteristics of regional and international relations of the new Uzbekistan. In this context, comprehensive reforms paved the way for the formation of foreign policy within the framework of a new model. One of the most important concrete results of the new foreign policy is the economicisation of foreign policy. This approach means that the security foreign policy of the past has been abandoned. The new foreign policy approach, which prioritises the development of Uzbekistan's foreign relations on an economic basis, has yielded positive results in a short time. In this context, there has been a visible change and transformation in Uzbekistan's regional and international relations.

The new foreign policy approach, which emerged as a result of the comprehensive reforms initiated by Mirziyoyev, has given Uzbekistan the characteristic of being a predictable partner both in the regional and international arena. In this framework, Uzbekistan has been able to use its favourable geographical advantages as an effective mechanism for its economic growth and development.



Existing scholarship has also examined Uzbekistan's foreign policy prior to 2016, particularly the security-driven and defensive orientation under Islam Karimov. Fazendeiro (2017), conceptualises this period as one of "defensive self-reliance," highlighting how threat perception, regime security, and strategic autonomy shaped Uzbekistan's isolationist posture. The central objective of this article is to explain how Uzbekistan's post-2016 domestic reform agenda translated into a coherent foreign policy model, and through which mechanisms this transformation reshaped regional engagement. Accordingly, the article is guided by the following research question: How and through which priorities has Uzbekistan's foreign policy been restructured after 2016, and what explains the shift from a security-oriented to an economically driven foreign policy model? The study analyses the emergence of this new foreign policy model by linking domestic reform priorities with foreign policy outputs. To this end, the article examines two policy domains—regional transport corridors and Afghanistan policy—as empirical test cases through which the operationalisation of the new model can be observed.

This article draws on insights from Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), particularly literature on foreign policy change, leadership agency, and the role of domestic priorities in shaping external behaviour. From an FPA perspective, leadership transitions represent critical junctures that enable policy reorientation, especially in systems characterised by strong executive authority. In this context, Mirziyoyev's rise to power constitutes a leadership-driven foreign policy shift, where domestic economic reform imperatives redefined threat perceptions and policy priorities. The concept of economic pragmatism is used here as an analytical lens to capture the recalibration of security concerns through economic instruments, while desecuritisation explains the reframing of issues such as regional connectivity and Afghanistan from existential threats to opportunities for cooperation.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative case-study design informed by foreign policy analysis. It combines document analysis of official strategies, presidential speeches, policy programmes, and regional initiatives with secondary academic sources. The analysis proceeds in three steps: first, identifying the core priorities shaping Uzbekistan's post-2016 foreign policy; second, conceptualising these priorities through the lens of economic pragmatism and desecuritisation; and third, empirically testing the explanatory power of this framework through the cases of regional transport corridors and Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan. This design allows for a systematic alignment between the research question, empirical sections, and conclusions.

Opening Discourse in the Mirziyoyev Era: A New Foreign Policy Model?

Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been attracting attention since the second half of 2016, when President Mirziyoyev launched large-scale reforms. Today one can speak confidently enough about the emergence of the new phenomenon of Uzbekistan's foreign policy (Makhmudov, 2021: 121). Mirziyoyev launched a series of large-scale reforms that can be called 'thawing'. Uzbek foreign policy achieved notable successes in the first year of Mirziyoyev's rule (Kazantsev & Gushev, 2018: 300).



In 2016, after Karimov's death, a new political cycle began in Uzbekistan, and the country's new leadership was faced with the task of overcoming the existing negative inertia of Karimov's foreign policy course. Following Mirziyoyev's victory in the presidential elections, the change of power took place without social and political upheavals, allowing the new Uzbek leadership to focus on addressing the country's economic development problems (Borisov, 2019: 131). During Karimov's years in power, Uzbekistan had become a rather closed country in terms of foreign policy. The new President Mirziyoyev set a course to achieve regional leadership by eliminating the country's isolation and intensifying foreign policy, especially in relations with neighbouring states, while continuing to pursue the concept of the state's non-aligned status and non-participation in military conflicts outside Uzbekistan (Paderina, 2018). Karimov was the permanent president of Uzbekistan for 26 years. Regarded as an influential and authoritarian personality, Karimov's political regime in Uzbekistan was the harshest in the post-Soviet space, based on authoritarianism with a super-presidential model of governance. Some observers claim that Uzbekistan's foreign policy under Karimov was a 'pendulum' swinging from Russia to the United States. In the last years of Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan exhibited a kind of isolationism in both regional and international relations (Izteleuova & Lapenko, 2021).

For the first time in decades, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has undergone a major change. Principles such as strengthening foreign economic cooperation, ending public squabbles with neighbours, easing travel restrictions, and making Central Asian solidarity a key foreign policy goal heralded a major shift (Weitz, 2018: 9). Uzbekistan, which does not prioritise any state in its foreign policy, has signed strategic partnership documents with both the US and Russia. As mentioned above, Uzbekistan's 'piggy bank of strategic partnerships' includes the US, Russia, China, the EU, Türkiye, India, Pakistan, South Korea, Japan and all its Central Asian neighbours.

The new foreign policy has led to normalisation of relations with neighbouring Central Asian countries, a wide range of bilateral relations, expansion of cooperation with extra-regional actors and active participation in infrastructure projects. As a result, a few years later Uzbekistan expanded its influence in Central Asia (Kazimir, 2024: 499). In 2022-2023 alone, more than 150 high-level and senior-level events were organised in Central Asia. Consultative meetings of leaders of the states of the region, a unique mechanism for the development of regional cooperation, were initiated (Tojhiyev, 2024). Uzbekistan takes an active part in these events and meetings. Limited opportunities in Uzbekistan had led millions of Uzbeks to migrate to Russia and Kazakhstan. Tense relations with its neighbours, resulting in economic blockades, closed borders and broken communication links, greatly hindered beneficial economic cooperation. For example, the volume of trade between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan was only \$10 million in 2015. Mirziyoyev's new foreign policy creates many opportunities for Uzbekistan. In this context, Uzbekistan can make more effective use of its strategic location in the centre of the region, bordering four other Central Asian states, and thus potentially become a major trade hub (Zhunisbek, 2020). Abdulaziz Kamilov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, stated that a significant improvement in the political situation in Central Asia is one of the most



important results of the new foreign policy approach. In this context, the formation of a real spirit of good neighbourliness in the region and the beginning of joint work between Uzbekistan and neighbouring states on solving vital regional problems have become vital (Yuz.uz, 2025).

The priorities of the foreign policy of the new Uzbekistan were first defined *in the Strategy of Action on Five Priority Development Areas of the Republic of Uzbekistan* for 2017-2021. This document listed the main priorities of Uzbek foreign policy as follows (O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidentining Formoni, 2017). Within the framework of the strategy of action of the Republic of Uzbekistan on five priority development areas for 2017-2021, about 300 laws, more than 4 thousand decrees of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan were adopted, aimed at carrying out fundamental reforms in all spheres of state and social life (O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidentining farmoni, 2022). The emergence of the new phenomenon of foreign policy of Uzbekistan is a consequence of socio-economic reforms that began in the country in 2017. It is also the goals of creating a fundamentally new business and socio-political environment that meets the requirements of the modern era that determine foreign policy tasks related to opening markets, attracting investments, modern technologies and knowledge, and building new transport corridors (Makhmudov, 2021).

Speaking about the nature of Uzbekistan's proactive policy, Makhmudov notes that a feature of this policy is the fundamental rejection of the 'win-lose' approach, which exists today as a rule of doing business in the big world geopolitics, according to which there must always be a winner and a loser. According to Makhmudov, Uzbekistan adopts the opposite win-win approach in its relations with other actors of world politics and economy, where all participants in the relationship are expected to win on the political or economic issue under discussion (Makhmudov, 2021). Uzbekistan's foreign policy interests are primarily based on domestic development priorities, which in fact implies a clear shift towards the economicisation of the country's international cooperation and the strengthening of economic pragmatism in foreign relations (Neymatov & Karimov, 2021).

The New Uzbekistan Development Strategy in 2022 was approved by Presidential decree. The Development Strategy covers five areas and 100 goals in a seven-year strategy aimed at 'creating a new Uzbekistan.' The New Uzbekistan Development Strategy for 2022 envisages a comprehensive modernisation. The 2022 Development Strategy consists of the following seven priority areas (O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidentining farmoni, 2022).

The Development Strategy envisages the implementation of various measures that will form the basis for Uzbekistan to become an 'upper-middle-income country'. In this regard, it defines the objectives in concrete figures and puts in place mechanisms to achieve them. Among the many other priorities set out in the 2022-2026 Development Strategy are further economic liberalisation, privatisation in most areas, competition, elimination of monopolies, attracting more foreign investment, stabilising prices, supporting the development of 'driver areas of the economy' and decentralisation to give more powers to the regions. The development strategy prioritises building a new



Uzbekistan by strengthening the country's security and defence capacity and pursuing an open, pragmatic and active foreign policy (Taraqqiyot Strategiyasi Markazi, 2022). Located on the Great Silk Road, Uzbekistan has been a country of strategic importance for foreign trade and communication for centuries. Naturally, it was considered the heart of Central Asia due to the region's role in socio-political, commercial and cultural spheres. Today, Uzbekistan is strengthening ties of cooperation in Central Asia and becoming a more reliable partner for the international community, while remaining true to the traditions of its historical heritage (Bekar, 2022). In this context, the 2022 Development Strategy allows the new Uzbekistan to further consolidate its foreign policy model.

In the context of the changing world order, new domestic and foreign policy vectors are emerging, and the need to amend the Constitution after the 2021 presidential elections has become apparent. It was announced that the people of Uzbekistan should be directly involved in the drafting of the updated Constitution. To this end, a portal entitled 'Mening Konstitutsiyam' ('My Constitution') and a 24-hour call centre for receiving proposals for amendments to the Constitution were established (Avatkov&Rojkhova, 2023: 72). The revised Constitution of Uzbekistan was adopted in a referendum held on 30 April 2023. In the referendum, 90.2 per cent of Uzbekistan citizens approved the new Constitution. Mirziyoyev stated that the result of the referendum reflected the dreams, hopes and aspirations of the Uzbek people to build a new Uzbekistan (O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidentining Farmoni, 2023). After the adoption of the new Constitution, the development strategy entered a new stage. In this regard, on 11 September 2023, Mirziyoyev approved the 'Strategy of Uzbekistan-2030'. Analysing the priorities of the Strategy, it is possible to identify specific objectives aimed at strengthening the attractive image of the country, especially in areas such as education, sport and tourism. In particular, the gradual implementation of the relevant objectives of the strategy can serve to increase the prestige of the country and actively promote an attractive image of it internationally. This contributes to pursuing an open, pragmatic and active foreign policy (Saidazimhujayeva, 2023: 233-236).

Key Priorities of Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy Model: Economic Pragmatism and Transport Corridors

One of the most important points of the new Uzbek policy that differed from the Karimov era was the economicisation of foreign policy. In Uzbekistan's new foreign policy model, security issues now play a role as a factor that provides the necessary conditions for economic growth. Thus, the economic component started to play a more important role in shaping the new development model of the country. To describe the new philosophy of international cooperation, the term 'economicisation', which has become a distinctive feature of Uzbekistan's modern foreign policy, has become the most important element defining the new foreign policy model (Makhmudov, 2021: 121). The economicisation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy has manifested itself in its active and deep integration into international financial, trade and economic communities (Yuldasheva, 2023: 278). In this context, post-2016 Uzbekistan aimed to enter a new era of international trade and



investment. The new Uzbekistan aspires to develop trade relations with the European Union, the United States of America (USA) and South Korea. Negotiations with the EU in Tashkent in 2019 demonstrated this will. The Uzbek leadership is prioritising the process of replacing the 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU with a new agreement in line with modern conditions. In addition, during President Mirziyoyev's visits to South Korea, the US and the EU, arguments were expressed that Uzbekistan will soon join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Umirdinov, 2019).

On 7 July 2020, negotiations between Uzbekistan and the WTO resumed after a 15-year break. At the 9th meeting of the Working Group on Uzbekistan's Accession in 2024, held on 5 and 6 December, a high-level government delegation headed by Deputy Prime Minister Jamshid Khodjaev reaffirmed the country's strong intention to rapidly advance negotiations with WTO members with a view to completing the process by 2026 (WTO, 2024). It is worth noting that membership in international economic structures will provide Uzbekistan with the opportunity to strengthen its position in foreign trade and realise mutually beneficial cooperation. Today, there are very few countries in the world that are not WTO members. In Central Asia, these are Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. WTO membership will provide guarantees for investors entering Uzbekistan and the country's trading partners. In addition, in the case of WTO membership, Uzbekistan will have the right to complain about trade decisions of other countries. All full members of the WTO have the opportunity to participate in the development of international trade rules (Izteleuova&Lapenko, 2021). Uzbekistan has set membership in the WTO as one of its priority foreign policy goals.

The new Uzbek foreign policy seeks to expand its external economic ties by joining or developing cooperation with multilateral international organisations. In 2019, Uzbekistan joined the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), whose members include Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. One of the goals of this step was to expand trade, economic, scientific and technical cooperation with its closest neighbours in the region by creating favourable conditions for trade and investment, further simplifying customs and transit procedures, financial and banking transactions (Makhmudov, 2021: 123).

On 11 December 2020, Uzbekistan received observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAES), which can be seen as a necessary step to study the pros and cons of this organisation, in particular the economic development of the country, and possibly closer cooperation (Makhmudov, 2021: 123). As Mirziyoyev stated, 'We attach great importance to the development of close and multifaceted cooperation with EAES. It is important to use the potential of our countries, jointly remove barriers in trade relations, mutually create new markets'. According to him, the EAES countries are the main, natural trading partners of Uzbekistan, and this is evidenced by the fact that in recent years the trade turnover with them has almost doubled, as well as the creation of thousands of joint ventures (Gazeta uz, 2020).

The new foreign policy approach of Uzbekistan is characterised by transport projects. In this context, transport projects can be considered as a complement to the new Uzbek



foreign policy model. Uzbekistan's transport sector plays a special role in the country's economy due to geographical, historical geopolitical and a number of other factors. Uzbekistan is one of the two countries in the world, along with Liechtenstein, which is a *double landlocked country (double landlocked country)*, which is cut off from international sea routes by the territory of two or more countries. Therefore, the cost of transporting export and import cargoes as well as transit traffic becomes a critical factor of competitiveness (Yarashhova, 2019:524). The development of transport communications has always been seen as a priority task in Uzbekistan, which is located at the crossroads between the West and the East. Railway transport has consistently occupied a leading position in the main domestic and interstate transport operations of Uzbekistan, and the country's economy depends on the reliable operation of the railway (Nasirov & Kadirov, 2021: 15).

On 20-21 September 2018, Tashkent hosted the international conference 'Central Asia in the system of international transport corridors: strategic prospects and unrealised opportunities' on the development of transport and transit potential of the Central Asian region. The conference expressed interest in developing a strategy for the development of transport logistics in Central Asia with the participation of the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank and other international financial institutions.

Mirziyoyev made a number of constructive initiatives at the international conference 'Central and South Asia: Regional Interconnectedness: Challenges and Opportunities' in Tashkent in 2021. These initiatives included the signing of a multilateral Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the countries of Central and South Asia, the organisation of an annual interregional forum to discuss topical economic issues, the development of mutual investments, trade in goods and services, transport and energy communications. Infrastructure projects in particular include the construction of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway, which could strengthen the transit potential of Central and South Asia. This railway will revive the ancient trade route known as Uttarapatha, which connected India to Central Eurasia (Kazantsev 2021). Diversification of foreign economic relations and transport corridors is a vital issue in the near term. Uzbekistan in particular has been talking about the so-called Central Asia-South Asia link for years. However, the realisation of this mega project depends on peace and stability in Afghanistan (Tolipov, 2022: 8). Connecting Central and South Asia is seen as a new trend in the economic development of a wide geography.

The development of Uzbekistan's transit potential in the perspective up to 2035 requires taking into account a number of factors in which the assessment of the potential of intercontinental trade is key, taking into account the prospects for the development of the leading centres of freight creation and freight entrepreneurship in Eurasia- China, the EU, Russia, India, the Middle East region. These centres are the main drivers of intercontinental trade.

Uzbekistan considers the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor, or the Middle Corridor as it is commonly called, as one of its priority transport routes. The Central



Corridor is the most important route for Uzbekistan's foreign trade with EU countries. Given its strategic location in the heart of Central Asia and its strong economic ties with neighbouring countries, the new Uzbekistan has a key role to play in the successful implementation of the Central Corridor. For geopolitical reasons, the importance of this route bypassing Russia for Europe has increased. Currently, many countries do not want to be dependent on Russia's transport policy.

In October 2024, China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signed an agreement to start construction of a new 454-kilometre-long railway at a cost of USD 4.7 billion, half of which will be financed by China. This project will help transport goods from China to Kyrgyzstan, Central Asian countries, the Middle East, including Türkiye, and the EU. Thus, the new railway will not only connect the countries in the Asian region, but will also become an important part of the Central Corridor connecting China to Europe via the countries of the South Caucasus (Evgrasina, 2024). On 29 January 2025, the Ankara Declaration signed in Ankara between Uzbekistan, Türkiye and Azerbaijan reaffirmed the importance of the Central Corridor and emphasised its role in increasing the transit potential of Uzbekistan, Türkiye and Azerbaijan. The Declaration also pays special attention to the need to strengthen the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), to consider ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of its activities and to maintain the full effectiveness of the mechanisms (Gazeta, uz, 2025).

It is obvious that for Uzbekistan and all other Central Asian countries, it is vital to have a well-developed and reliably functioning network of international transport corridors with access to sea and ocean ports, enabling the development of effective international cooperation to ensure sustainable socio-economic development. In this context, Uzbekistan both initiates and supports all reasonable initiatives in this direction (Nasirov & Kadirov, 2021: 14). Considering the geopolitical situation in Central Asia, it should be noted that Uzbekistan is currently becoming one of the important links in the normalisation of the situation in Afghanistan and a strategic hub for the Central Asian countries in the implementation of transport, logistics and other economic projects in the Asian region (Nasirov & Kadirov, 2021: 16).

How Do Post-2021 Changes in Afghanistan Affect the New Uzbekistan?

Due to geographical, geopolitical and geoeconomic factors, Uzbekistan is one of the key players among Afghanistan's neighbours in the process of solving the problems in this country. Without taking into account the role of this factor, the solution of the problems in Afghanistan cannot be fully realised. In this regard, over the past decades, Uzbekistan has actively participated in the development of political and economic decisions aimed at resolving the conflict in Afghanistan (Ergashev, 2021: 34-35). Uzbekistan's position on the solution of the Afghanistan conflict was initially based on two main premises. The first was the recognition that a solution through military action alone was not possible. The second was to increase the role and importance of the economic component in Afghanistan's reconstruction and conflict resolution programme. In this context, Uzbekistan has conducted parallel diplomatic activities to participate in the



implementation of economic projects and to combine the efforts of both Afghanistan's neighbouring countries and the US, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), China and Russia. Uzbekistan has consistently tried to pursue a policy that prioritises these two interrelated aspects (Ergashev, 2021: 35).

In the post-2016 Uzbek foreign policy model, Afghanistan is conceptualised not as a source of threat to stability and security, but as a bundle of opportunities, primarily economic development, for Uzbekistan and the Central Asian region. Support for peace and stability in Afghanistan, development of trade and economic cooperation with Kabul, Uzbekistan's promotion of initiatives for greater involvement of the international community in peacebuilding in Afghanistan, and the country's integration into the Central and South Asian connectivity projects promoted by Tashkent have formed the basis of the New Uzbek approach. This realistic approach is characterised by a high level of flexibility that enables Uzbekistan to build constructive relations with Afghanistan (Makhmudov, 2023: 80). Under Karimov, multi-vectorism, refusal to join military-political blocs, inadmissibility of deployment of Uzbek troops outside the country, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states dominated Uzbek foreign policy. Seeing a number of areas for cooperation in Afghanistan, Mirziyoyev adapted them to the new realities listed below (Nuriddinov, 2021):

- Afghanistan as a potential opportunity to build bridges between Central and South Asia;
- Involving Afghanistan in trade and economic relations;
- Using 'soft power' tools in Afghanistan to create a positive image of Uzbekistan.

Mirziyoyev's approach is based on the fact that it is not Afghanistan itself that poses a threat, but the terrorist groups that have settled on its territory due to the civil war and pose a threat to the regional security of Central Asia. The first major change in Uzbekistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan after 2016 was desecuritisation of bilateral cooperation issues. Instead of focusing mainly on security issues, Tashkent emphasised the development of trade, economic, cultural, educational and people-to-people links between the countries. Existing restrictions on Afghan companies' access to the Uzbek market, the use of Uzbek railway corridors for importing and exporting goods to Afghanistan, and the issuance of visas to Afghan citizens were quickly lifted. Uzbekistan initiated efforts to promote Uzbek goods and services in Afghanistan by opening representative offices and trade houses. The second major change, another feature of Uzbekistan's new foreign policy in its relations with Afghanistan, was the gradual expansion of participation in multilateral formats for conflict resolution. Previously, Tashkent prioritised bilateral contacts in relations with Afghanistan and advocated the inappropriateness of participation in multilateral formats (Umarov, 2021: 9).

The Forum 'Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Cooperation' held in Tashkent in March 2018 and the international conference 'Central and South Asia: Regional Interconnectedness: Challenges and Opportunities', also held in Tashkent in



2021, were the main outputs of Uzbekistan's theses on the solution of the Afghan problem (Knyazev, 2023: 269). Uzbekistan's interests in Afghanistan are more focused on two aspects of cooperation: economic and transport and logistics. As it lacks access to the sea, Uzbekistan emphasises opening up to South Asia. Afghanistan is of particular importance for Uzbekistan as it has the potential to connect two major regions, Central and South Asia (Nuriddinov, 2021).

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 had a profound impact on regional dynamics. The rapid fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021 and the Taliban's seizure of control over the entire territory of Afghanistan, including the seemingly impregnable Panjsher Gorge, unexpectedly for many analysts, immediately after the withdrawal of US troops, made it necessary for all Central Asian countries to adjust their foreign policies to the new realities. According to Uzbek officials, the Taliban's return to power did not come as a surprise to them, as this development was foreseen two years ago and explicit security guarantees were received from the head of the Taliban's political office in Doha (Qatar), Mullah Abdul Ghani Barodar (Makhmudov, 2023: 87). Uzbekistan's Deputy Foreign Minister Farhod Arziyev said that 'they have been in contact with the Taliban for many years and consider the Taliban as an undeniable factor in Afghan society. The same principles defined by President Mirziyoyev will continue to be the main focus of their future approach, and Afghanistan is Uzbekistan's close and valued neighbour and considers it an integral part of Central Asia' (Gazeta uz, 2021).

On 26 July 2022, an international conference on 'Afghanistan: security and economic development' was held in Tashkent with the participation of special representatives of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, South, Central Asia, the Middle East, the European Union and the United States, as well as a delegation from the Taliban leadership. The conference participants expressed a common understanding that the main priority should be the revitalisation and strengthening of the economy as an important factor in achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan. It is necessary to promote the integration of Afghanistan into interregional economic processes and advance the implementation of socially significant and infrastructure projects, including the creation of interregional transport, energy and other corridors (Kun uz, 2022).

Given the geopolitical instability in the region and the unrecognised status of the Taliban government, Uzbekistan is developing a foreign policy that allows the country to protect its interests without the need for official diplomatic recognition. This strategy reflects a careful balancing act, using economic relations as an effective tool to influence and potentially control outcomes in bilateral relations (Boltayev & Mukhammedova, 2024).

According to some perspectives, Uzbekistan's increased emphasis on economic ties with Afghanistan is based on various strategic considerations. One of the most pressing issues for Uzbekistan is water security. The agricultural sector, which is vital for the country's economy, is heavily dependent on the water resources of the Amuderya River, which partly originates in Afghanistan. With the Taliban coming to power, Uzbekistan has faced the risk of possible manipulation of water rights, which could have disastrous consequences for its agricultural production and thus food security (Boltayev &



Mukhammedova, 2024). An irrigation canal under construction in Afghanistan aims to transform the agricultural landscape and provide water to millions of citizens suffering from regular drought. When completed, the Koshtepa Canal will be 285 kilometres long and will help irrigate the country's arid northern provinces. However, neighbouring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are extremely concerned about the impact on their water resources. The canal will divert resources from the Amuderya River and reduce the water supply of the two countries, which have been using water from this source since Soviet times. When the waterway is completed in 2028, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan could lose 15 per cent of their current water flows (Mamadshoyev, 2023). It should be noted that Central Asia's water security is inextricably linked to energy, food security, environment, unemployment, political stability and military security (Veretylnik, 2024: 633).

By focusing on trade and economic cooperation, Uzbekistan prioritises creating leverage that can protect its interests in the face of potential challenges, particularly on water security issues. This pragmatic approach reflects a broader shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, in which national interests trump ideology. As Uzbekistan continues to navigate the complexities of its relations with Afghanistan, a strategy of economic engagement could be a powerful tool for future stability and security in the region (Boltayev & Mukhammedova, 2024). Afghanistan has never previously competed over the water resources of its border rivers, thus avoiding conflicts with Central Asian countries, but the construction of the Koshtepa canal could change the security situation on Afghanistan's northern border and force neighbouring former Soviet states to see the Afghan government's water policy as a threat to their national interests and national security ((Veretylnik, 2024: 633).

According to Makhmudova, further progress in Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan depends on several decisive conditions. These conditions will largely be shaped by the domestic and foreign policy actions of the new Afghan authorities. Afghanistan needs comprehensive social and economic modernisation. The Afghan government should prioritise not only controlling the domestic political situation, but also initiating sustainable economic growth, raising the income level of the population, gaining international recognition and improving the country's image on the world stage (Makhmudov, 2023: 91).

Conclusion

This article set out to explain how and why Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been restructured since 2016, addressing the research question of how domestic reform priorities translated into a new foreign policy model. By adopting a foreign-policy-analysis-informed research design and examining transport corridors and Afghanistan as test cases, the article demonstrates that Uzbekistan's post-2016 foreign policy change is best understood as a leadership-driven shift towards economic pragmatism. After 2016, Uzbekistan has made great strides both in socio-economic and foreign policy terms. Unlike the previous Uzbek leader Karimov, President Mirziyoyev has implemented



important and multifaceted reforms and thus intensified Uzbekistan's relations with the outside world. Mirziyoyev prioritised the construction of a new Uzbekistan with his multifaceted reforms. In this context, especially the development and diversification of foreign economic relations has become the strategic priority of the new Uzbekistan in foreign policy. Thanks to Mirziyoyev's policies, Uzbekistan's role in the regional equation has further increased, crystallised and consolidated. Thus, the new Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev's leadership has implemented a comprehensive and proactive foreign policy model. This foreign policy model has yielded significant results in a short period of time. One of the most important elements of the new model is the economicisation of foreign policy. This model has allowed Uzbekistan to economise international cooperation and strengthen economic pragmatism in foreign relations.

Uzbekistan, located at the very centre of Central Asia, has a very decisive position in the geostrategic and geoeconomic structuring of the region. In this context, the economic pragmatism guiding the new foreign policy model has further increased Uzbekistan's role in regional transport corridors. Uzbekistan started to use its geographical advantage more effectively in regional strategic cooperation mechanisms. In particular, Uzbekistan has adopted a constructive attitude towards the resolution of the Afghanistan issue and has treated its relations with this country as an important part of the regional economic order. In this context, Uzbekistan is one of the important links in the normalisation process of Afghanistan. The new Uzbekistan supports and even encourages the economic integration of Central and South Asia. This orientation shows that Uzbekistan treats the Afghan issue not only as a security-oriented issue, but also as an issue that has socio-economic dimensions and affects the dynamics of the entire region.

Mirziyoyev's reforms, which he has been emphasising and largely successfully implementing since 2016, have made Uzbekistan more visible in regional and international affairs. It is possible to say that this visibility has made a positive contribution to Uzbekistan's international image.

The analysis confirm that the economicisation of foreign policy is not merely a rhetorical shift but a structuring principle that redefines Uzbekistan's regional behaviour. By desecuritising relations with neighbouring states and reframing Afghanistan as an economic and connectivity opportunity, the new foreign policy model aligns closely with the research design and analytical framework developed in this study. In this sense, Uzbekistan's post-2016 foreign policy represents a coherent and analytically identifiable model rather than a collection of ad hoc policy adjustments.

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