

New Uzbekistan: The Republic's Strategic Re-orientation in an Evolving International System

¹*Monalisa Deka*

¹*Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*

ABSTRACT

The transformation of Uzbekistan since 2016 under Shavkat Mirziyoyev represents a significant case of strategic re-orientation in a post-Soviet state navigating an evolving international system. Moving away from the isolationist tendencies of the Islam Karimov era, Uzbekistan has embraced regionalism, economic openness, and multi-vector diplomacy. This article examines how “New Uzbekistan” reflects a recalibration of foreign policy rooted in regional engagement, geo-economic connectivity, and strategic balancing among major powers. It argues that Uzbekistan’s transformation illustrates how middle powers adapt to systemic changes through pragmatic diplomacy, regional leadership, and economic integration. The study adopts a qualitative, mixed method research design to examine Uzbekistan’s strategic re-orientation in the post 2016 period. It combines comparative foreign policy analysis with a case study approach, focusing on key shifts under the leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The research relies on primary sources including official government documents, policy speeches, bilateral agreements and regional cooperation frameworks. It also incorporates secondary sources such as academic literature, policy reports, and think tank analyses. A process-tracing method is employed to identify causal mechanisms driving policy transformation, particularly in areas of regional diplomacy, economic liberalisation, and multilateral engagement. The study further utilises a geopolitical analytical framework to situate Uzbekistan’s evolving strategy within broader dynamics of great power competition, regional integration, and Eurasian connectivity.

INTRODUCTION: RECASTING A POST-SOVIET STATE

The notion of “New Uzbekistan” has emerged as one of the most compelling political and strategic narratives in post-Soviet Eurasia. It represents not merely a change in leadership or policy emphasis, but a broader reimagining of the state’s identity, role, and aspirations within the international system. Since 2016, under the leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has embarked on a path of reform and recalibration that contrasts sharply with its earlier trajectory.

This transformation is unfolding at a time when the global order itself is undergoing profound change. The erosion of unipolarity, the intensification of great power competition, the rise of regionalism, and the growing salience of connectivity corridors have all redefined the strategic landscape. For a landlocked and historically cautious state like Uzbekistan, adapting to these changes has required both internal restructuring and external repositioning (Toktogulov, 2022).

This article argues that “New Uzbekistan” is best understood as a strategic re-orientation shaped by three interrelated dynamics: (1) the shift from isolationism to proactive regionalism, (2) the adoption of multi-vector diplomacy in a competitive Eurasian environment, and (3) the pursuit of geo-economic connectivity as a pathway to strategic autonomy. Together, these elements constitute a coherent, albeit evolving, response to the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly fragmented international system.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The Primary Research question that the paper seeks to analyse is that ‘How has Uzbekistan’s foreign policy re-orientation since 2016 under Shavkat Mirziyoyev reshaped its regional and global strategic positioning in an evolving international system?’

SUB-QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does Uzbekistan's new foreign policy represents continuity Vs Change from the Islam Karimov era?
2. How has the shift toward regional integration("Central Asia First") altered intra-regional dynamics?
3. What role do economic diplomacy and multi-vector engagement play in Uzbekistan's strategy?
4. How is Uzbekistan navigating great power competition among Russia, China, the U.S., and the EU?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature broadly agrees that Uzbekistan has undergone a significant foreign policy transformation since 2016, moving away from relative isolation toward proactive engagement. Scholars highlight that the Mirziyoyev administration has prioritized regional diplomacy, economic openness, and multilateral cooperation. However, an important scholarly debate revolves around whether this shift represents a fundamental transformation or merely a tactical adjustment. Toktogulov (2022), for instance, argues that while Uzbekistan has adopted a more constructive and cooperative tone, its core principles—such as strategic autonomy and military neutrality—remain intact.

A key strand of literature focuses on continuity with the Karimov era. Uzbekistan has historically emphasized:

- Sovereignty and non-alignment
- Central Asia as a priority region
- Cautious engagement with external powers

Recent studies suggest that Mirziyoyev has retained these foundations but redefined their implementation through pragmatism and openness.

At the same time, other scholars argue that the scale of change is substantial, particularly in:

- Restoring ties with neighbors (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan)
- Participating actively in regional organizations
- Expanding global economic partnerships

Another major theme is Uzbekistan's renewed commitment to Central Asian regionalism. Earlier, regional cooperation was hindered by tensions and border disputes, but recent scholarship highlights Uzbekistan's role as a driver of regional integration.

Mirziyoyev's approach emphasizes:

- Conflict resolution with neighbors
- Economic connectivity (trade, transport corridors)
- Regional institutionalization

This aligns with arguments that Uzbekistan is attempting to position itself as a regional leader, using diplomacy and economic tools to shape Central Asia's future.

Despite growing scholarship, several gaps remain:

- Limited integration of geopolitical and geo-economic frameworks in a single analysis
- Insufficient focus on Uzbekistan's role in emerging Eurasian connectivity networks
- Lack of process-tracing studies explaining *how* and *why* policy change occurred

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: LEGACY OF CAUTION AND SOVEREIGNTY

To appreciate the significance of Uzbekistan's current re-orientation, it is essential to situate it within its historical context. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan, under Islam Karimov, pursued a state-building strategy centered on sovereignty, stability, and regime consolidation. This approach was shaped by both internal vulnerabilities—such as ethnic diversity, economic underdevelopment, and the threat of extremism—and external

uncertainties in the post-Cold War order. Karimov's foreign policy was characterized by a deliberate distancing from multilateral commitments and a reluctance to embrace regional integration. Uzbekistan withdrew from several regional initiatives and maintained a cautious stance toward external powers. While this policy ensured a degree of autonomy and internal control, it also resulted in limited economic integration and strained relations with neighboring states (Saud, 2018).

By the mid-2010s, however, the limitations of this model had become increasingly evident. Economic stagnation, demographic pressures, and the need for modernization necessitated a shift toward greater openness and engagement. The transition of power in 2016 thus marked not only a political turning point but also a strategic inflection point.

THE EMERGENCE OF “NEW UZBEKISTAN”

The concept of “New Uzbekistan” encapsulates the reform agenda introduced by Mirziyoyev. It reflects a deliberate effort to redefine the state's domestic governance and international posture. At the domestic level, reforms have included currency liberalization, administrative restructuring, judicial improvements, and measures to enhance transparency and accountability.

At the international level, the shift has been equally pronounced. Uzbekistan has actively sought to rebuild trust with its neighbors, attract foreign investment, and position itself as a constructive actor in regional and global affairs. This dual transformation underscores the interdependence of domestic and foreign policy in shaping the country's strategic trajectory.

Importantly, “New Uzbekistan” is not a wholesale departure from the past. Elements of continuity—such as the emphasis on sovereignty and stability—remain central. However, these are now complemented by a greater willingness to engage, cooperate, and adapt.

Regionalism Revisited: Central Asia as Strategic Core

One of the most striking features of Uzbekistan's re-orientation has been its renewed focus on Central Asia. Historically, regional relations in Central Asia were marked by mistrust, competition, and unresolved disputes. Uzbekistan, as the most populous state in the region, often adopted a dominant yet cautious posture.

The early twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence of Uzbekistan as a state seeking to redefine its strategic identity after decades of caution and relative isolation. When Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed the presidency of Uzbekistan in 2016, he inherited a state possessing considerable demographic weight, a pivotal geographic position, and untapped economic potential, yet constrained by regional mistrust and international isolation. His policy has combined internal reform with a multi-vector diplomacy grounded in pragmatic calculations of national interest rather than ideological aspirations. At the global level, Mirziyoyev has pursued a diplomact of equilibrium. Rather than aligning unequivocally with any major power, Uzbekistan engaged simultaneously with Russia, China, the United States, and Europe, seeking economic modernization and strategic autonomy in equal measure. This multivectorism is tantamount to a classical calculation: that for a state situated at the crossroads of great-power interests, independence is preserved not by isolation but by balanced engagement (Allayarov, 2026).

In that sense, Uzbekistan's involvement in the Board of Peace established by U.S. President Donald Trump highlights Tashkent's readiness to engage in emerging diplomatic frameworks beyond traditional multilateral institutions. In his address during the first summit of the Board of Peace on February 19, Mirziyoyev stresses that “Uzbekistan has supported the peacebuilding initiative of establishing the Board of Peace, firmly declared its commitment to take a practical part in its successful implementation”. He added “Uzbekistan is ready to make a tangible contribution to the construction of residential buildings, kindergartens, schools, and hospitals”. Uzbekistan is driven by several motivations in joining the new organization beyond its multi-vector diplomacy. First and foremost, Tashkent seeks to elevate U.S.-Uzbekistan relations to the level of a strategic partnership grounded in economic cooperation and selective collaboration on global security and peace initiatives (Allayarov, 2026).

In addition, Uzbekistan's seat at the organization means its contribution to solving global crises, not just regional issue, which enhances its image as a 'middle power' in the foreseeable future. Secondly, this organization is aimed at maintaining international peace and stability through economic development. In this regard, it create an opportunity for Uzbek construction and engineering firms to gain access to Middle Eastern markets and form partnerships with major global contractors by being involved in construction, engineering, and infrastructure development. This experience earns credibility for future projects. It should be noted that significant supply chains are needed for reconstruction, which presents Uzbekistan with opportunities to participate through its transport companies, air cargo services, transit routes, and railway logistics. Also, it is perfectly aligned with Uzbekistan's vision of presenting itself as a regional connectivity hub.

From a political perspective, supporting U.S.-led initiatives can secure potential diplomatic backing from international financial institutions and open avenues for partnership across multiple sectors, particularly in technology (Allayarov, 2026). It sends a strong signal to western investors that Uzbekistan is a reliable and responsible partner, which would potentially lead to increasing foreign direct investment. Political backing should be added to this list as the U.S. would assist Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, to address pressing regional issues(ibid).

Uzbekistan has consistently supported global peace and stability, as demonstrated by Mirziyoyev's leadership in fostering cordial relations among Central Asian states and promoting the collective resolution of regional problems. The objectives of this newly established organization are consistent with uzbekistan's foreign policy goals of contributing to international peace and stability, thereby elevating the country's role from a regional mediator to a more active contributor to international peace and security (Allayarov, 2026).

In the past, such a degree of partnership between the U.S. and Uzbekistan would have been almost unimaginable. However, the recent reorientation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, shaped by current geopolitical realities, reflects Mirziyoyev's vision of a "New Uzbekistan" as a more open, modern, and citizen-oriented state (Allayarov, 2026). Under Mirziyoyev, this approach has shifted toward cooperative regionalism. Uzbekistan has prioritized the normalization of relations with neighboring countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Longstanding border disputes have been addressed, trade barriers reduced, and cross-border connectivity enhanced.

This regional engagement is not merely diplomatic; it is strategic. Central Asia is increasingly viewed as a collective geopolitical space whose stability and prosperity are mutually reinforcing. Uzbekistan has played a leading role in convening regional summits and promoting dialogue on shared challenges such as water management, energy security, and counterterrorism (Chaudhury, 2025).

The emphasis on regionalism also reflects a broader recognition of the limits of unilateralism. In an interconnected world, regional cooperation provides both economic opportunities and strategic leverage. For Uzbekistan, it serves as a foundation for broader engagement with external powers (Chaudhury, 2025).

MULTI-VECTOR DIPLOMACY: BALANCING COMPETING POWERS

In the context of an evolving international system, Uzbekistan has adopted a policy of multi-vector diplomacy. This approach seeks to balance relations with major powers while avoiding excessive dependence on any single actor. It is a pragmatic response to the realities of great power competition in Eurasia.

Relations with Russia remain a cornerstone of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Historical ties, economic interdependence, and security cooperation continue to underpin this relationship. Russia is a key destination for Uzbek labor migrants and an important partner in defense and energy sectors.

At the same time, Uzbekistan has significantly expanded its engagement with China. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, China has become a major investor in

Uzbekistan's infrastructure and industrial development. This partnership aligns with Uzbekistan's geoeconomic ambitions but also requires careful management to avoid overdependence.

Engagement with Western actors, including the United States and the European Union, has also intensified. These relationships are focused on trade, governance reforms, and security cooperation. Uzbekistan's efforts to join the World Trade Organization further illustrate its commitment to integrating into the global economy.

Participation in multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation provides an additional platform for balancing interests and engaging with regional stakeholders.

GEOECONOMICS AND CONNECTIVITY: FROM LANDLOCKED TO LAND-LINKED

Uzbekistan's geography has long been both a constraint and a strategic asset. As a doubly landlocked country, it faces significant challenges in accessing global markets. However, its central location also positions it as a potential hub for transcontinental connectivity. The "New Uzbekistan" strategy places a strong emphasis on transforming this geographic reality into an advantage. Infrastructure development, transport corridors, and energy networks are central to this vision. Projects linking Uzbekistan to Afghanistan and onward to South Asia are particularly significant. These initiatives aim to provide access to seaports and diversify trade routes (Saud, 2018).

Westward connectivity through the Caspian Sea region offers additional opportunities. By integrating into trans-Caspian corridors, Uzbekistan can connect to markets in Europe and the Middle East. These efforts are aligned with broader trends in global supply chains, which increasingly prioritize resilience and diversification (ibid).

The focus on geoeconomics reflects a broader shift in international relations, where economic considerations play a central role in shaping strategic behavior. For Uzbekistan, connectivity is not merely an economic objective; it is a means of enhancing sovereignty and strategic autonomy (Saud, 2018).

AFGHANISTAN FACTOR: OPPORTUNITY AND UNCERTAINTY

No discussion of Uzbekistan's strategic re-orientation would be complete without addressing the role of Afghanistan. As a पड़ोसी state, Afghanistan occupies a critical position in Uzbekistan's security and connectivity calculations.

Uzbekistan has pursued a pragmatic approach toward Afghanistan, emphasizing economic engagement and infrastructure development. Projects such as rail links and energy transmission lines are intended to integrate Afghanistan into regional networks, thereby promoting stability.

However, the situation in Afghanistan remains volatile. Political uncertainty, security challenges, and humanitarian crises pose significant risks. For Uzbekistan, balancing engagement with caution is essential. The success of its connectivity initiatives will depend in part on the stability of Afghanistan.

DOMESTIC REFORM AND INTERNATIONAL PERCEPTION

Uzbekistan's external re-orientation is closely linked to its domestic reform agenda. Efforts to improve governance, enhance the rule of law, and promote economic liberalization have contributed to a more favorable international image. These reforms have attracted foreign investment and strengthened partnerships with external actors. At the same time, challenges remain. Issues related to human rights, political pluralism, and institutional capacity continue to shape perceptions of Uzbekistan. The sustainability of the "New Uzbekistan" model will depend on the depth and consistency of these reforms (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2018).

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN A FRAGMENTING WORLD

The contemporary international system is characterized by fragmentation and uncertainty. The rivalry between major powers, shifting alliances, and the reconfiguration of global economic networks create both opportunities and constraints for middle powers like Uzbekistan.

In this context, strategic autonomy has emerged as a central objective of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. By diversifying partnerships, strengthening regional ties, and investing in connectivity, Uzbekistan seeks to reduce vulnerability and enhance its ability to navigate external pressures.

This approach is not without risks. Balancing competing interests requires diplomatic skill and flexibility. External shocks—such as economic crises or geopolitical conflicts—could test the resilience of Uzbekistan's strategy. Nevertheless, the emphasis on autonomy provides a guiding framework for navigating an uncertain environment.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS: SMALL STATE STRATEGY AND ADAPTIVE DIPLOMACY

From a theoretical perspective, Uzbekistan's re-orientation offers valuable insights into the behavior of small and medium-sized states in a changing international system. It illustrates the importance of adaptability, pragmatism, and strategic diversification.

The concept of multi-vector diplomacy, often associated with post-Soviet states, is particularly relevant. It reflects a recognition that alignment with a single power can limit policy options and increase vulnerability. By contrast, a diversified approach allows states to maximize opportunities and mitigate risks.

Uzbekistan's emphasis on regionalism and connectivity also highlights the growing importance of geoeconomics in international relations. Economic interdependence, infrastructure development, and trade networks are increasingly central to strategic competition.

INDIA AND NEW UZBEKISTAN: EXPANDING STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE

For countries like India, Uzbekistan's transformation presents significant opportunities. India has long recognized Central Asia as a region of strategic importance, particularly in the context of energy security, connectivity, and regional stability (Studies, 2024).

Uzbekistan's openness to engagement aligns with India's initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and its involvement in regional platforms like the SCO. Cooperation in areas such as defense, counterterrorism, and education has also expanded.

The development of connectivity routes through Afghanistan and Iran, including the Chabahar port, further enhances the potential for India-Uzbekistan cooperation. In this context, "New Uzbekistan" serves as a key partner in India's broader Eurasian strategy (Studies, 2024).

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite its progress, Uzbekistan's strategic re-orientation faces several challenges. Economic diversification remains incomplete, and dependence on certain sectors—such as commodities and remittances—persists. Regional cooperation, while improved, is still evolving and subject to political dynamics.

Externally, great power competition could constrain Uzbekistan's policy space. Managing relations with Russia, China, and the West requires careful calibration. Additionally, the uncertain situation in Afghanistan continues to pose risks to connectivity and security.

Domestic reforms, while significant, are ongoing. Ensuring their sustainability and institutionalization will be critical to maintaining momentum.

CONCLUSION: A PRAGMATIC PATH FORWARD

“New Uzbekistan” represents a nuanced and pragmatic response to the challenges of an evolving international system. By embracing regionalism, adopting multi-vector diplomacy, and prioritizing geoeconomic connectivity, Uzbekistan has repositioned itself as an emerging actor in Eurasian geopolitics.

This transformation is neither linear nor complete. It is an ongoing process shaped by internal dynamics and external pressures. However, the direction is clear: Uzbekistan is moving toward greater openness, engagement, and strategic autonomy.

For scholars and policymakers, the case of Uzbekistan offers important lessons on adaptation and resilience. In a world marked by uncertainty and change, the ability to recalibrate strategy and leverage opportunities will be key to success. “New Uzbekistan” exemplifies this approach, providing a model for how states can navigate—and shape—the evolving international system.

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