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SILK SYNERGY: THIRTY YEARS OF UZBEKISTAN-CHINA STRATEGIC RELATIONS (1995–2025)



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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the evolution of Uzbekistan–China relations over the past thirty years, emphasizing strategic cooperation across political, economic, educational, cultural, and security domains. It outlines key agreements, bilateral projects, and infrastructure developments within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, assessing their contribution to strengthening ties. Moreover, it highlights China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a pivotal factor in deepening economic interdependence, with Uzbekistan positioned as a key logistical and trade corridor in Central Asia. The findings suggest that while the relationship has brought significant developmental benefits, it also presents strategic risks, including economic dependency, geopolitical balancing pressures, and concerns over public perception. The analysis is based on official statistics, historical sources, and expert evaluations.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, China, strategic partnership, Belt and Road Initiative, trade, investment, education, regional security.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the bilateral relationship between Uzbekistan and the People’s Republic of China has evolved into a multifaceted strategic partnership rooted in mutual respect, shared interests, and expanding cooperation across economic, political, cultural, and security spheres. What began as a modest diplomatic engagement following Uzbekistan’s independence in 1991 has since transformed into one of Central Asia’s most dynamic and consequential international relationships.

At the heart of this partnership lies a convergence of strategic priorities: China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aligns closely with Uzbekistan’s ambitions to become a regional transport and logistics hub, while Uzbekistan’s commitment to economic diversification, modernization, and connectivity mirrors Beijing’s interests in fostering regional stability and market expansion. This synergy has been reinforced through a series of high-level visits, agreements, and collaborative projects that underscore both countries’ commitment to deepening ties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of academic literature has analyzed the dynamics of China's engagement with Central Asia, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative. Several scholars (Laruelle, 2018; Gabuev, 2019) have analyzed the role of the BRI in transforming China–Central Asia economic relations. Uzbekistan is often portrayed as a "connectivity hub" in the heart of Central Asia, crucial for China's westward expansion strategy. According to Zhao (2021), the BRI projects in Uzbekistan—such as railway development and industrial parks—symbolize a shift from aid-based to investment-led engagement. However, Tarrósy and Vörös (2020) caution against the potential debt-trap narrative, emphasizing the importance of fiscal transparency and institutional safeguards.

Scholars such as Umarov (2023) emphasize China's rising influence in the region, citing infrastructure development and resource investment as key drivers of its strategic presence. Xudayarova (2024) explores the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of the Uzbekistan–China partnership, noting the increasing depth of bilateral cooperation across sectors. Meanwhile, World Bank reports (2022) assess regional integration trends and the economic implications of Chinese investment. These studies collectively underscore the importance of understanding bilateral relations not only through trade and investment figures but also within broader geopolitical and institutional contexts. Building on this foundation, the present study aims to provide an updated, focused analysis of the economic cooperation between Uzbekistan and China, addressing both benefits and structural challenges.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has followed a multi-vector foreign policy aimed at cultivating balanced ties with global powers. Among its most significant international partners, the People's Republic of China has assumed a vital role in Uzbekistan's economic and strategic landscape. Over the last thirty years, this bilateral relationship has grown in tandem with regional and global transformations. China's rise as an economic force and its implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) align with Uzbekistan's reform agenda and development priorities.

This research examines the economic component of Uzbekistan–China cooperation between 1995 and 2025. It investigates how trade, foreign investment, and infrastructure initiatives have contributed to Uzbekistan's economic modernization and strategic positioning within the region. The objective is to provide insight into how smaller nations engage in asymmetrical partnerships to advance national goals.

METHODS

A qualitative research design underpins this study, relying on the analysis of statistical data, policy documents, historical records, and academic literature from 1995 to 2025. Principal data sources include the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, the National Bureau of Statistics of China, and various international economic reports. The approach focuses on document-based analysis to evaluate patterns in trade, investment, and diplomatic collaboration.

RESULTS

Uzbekistan–China relations have undergone a profound transformation since their inception, marked by key diplomatic milestones that laid the foundation for deeper cooperation. The formal recognition of Uzbekistan by China in 1991, followed by the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, initiated a period of cautious engagement.

This trajectory gained momentum in 1995 with President Islam Karimov's visit to Beijing, which initiated strategic dialogue and economic collaboration. The relationship further solidified through Uzbekistan's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 and its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. Strategic agreements signed in 2016 and 2022 have since broadened the scope of bilateral cooperation.

Table 1

Analytical Summary of Uzbekistan–China Strategic Relations (1992–2022)

Analytical Aspect	Key Findings	Strategic Implications	Challenges and Risks
1. Economic Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - China became Uzbekistan's largest trading partner. - Key projects: Pengsheng Industrial Park, energy, transport. - Trade > \$10B (2023). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Infrastructure modernization- Greater access to Chinese capital and markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Risk of overreliance on Chinese investment- Trade deficit
2. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uzbekistan is a key node in China's BRI. - Major rail and highway projects across Central Asia. - Improved transit connectivity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regional logistics hub potential- Increased geopolitical relevance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Environmental/social impacts- Unequal benefits from projects
3. Security Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Joint military exercises and SCO-based cooperation. - Counterterrorism and intelligence sharing. - Stability focus in Central Asia. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enhanced national and regional security- Increased China's strategic role in Central Asia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Security dependence on external actors- Geopolitical balancing
4. Cultural & Educational Ties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Growth of Confucius Institutes and scholarships. - Increase in Uzbek students in China. - Cultural festivals and exchanges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Soft power influence- Formation of long-term mutual understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural dominance concerns- Asymmetry in cultural exchange
5. Technology & Digital Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cooperation in e-commerce, 5G, fintech, and smart infrastructure. - Chinese platforms supporting Uzbek digital development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boost to digital modernization- Foundation for tech-driven growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Data governance and sovereignty concerns

6. Diplomatic Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic partnership declared in 2012.- Regular high-level visits and cooperation agreements. - Common stance in multilateral fora. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political alignment on key issues- Improved regional and global diplomatic standing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Risk of diminishing policy independence
7. Multilateral Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cooperation in SCO, AIIB, BRI forums. - Joint statements on regional stability, economic integration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uzbekistan gains voice on international stage- Regional integration benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic rivalry (Russia, U.S., Turkey, EU) complicates alignment
8. Public Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mixed views in Uzbek society on Chinese investments and cultural influence. - Concerns about transparency and environmental standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need for balanced and inclusive policy communication. - Domestic legitimacy of foreign policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social backlash or resistance to Chinese presence

Economic ties between the two countries have strengthened considerably, with bilateral trade rising from less than USD 500 million in 2001 to nearly USD 14 billion in 2023. Uzbekistan exports natural resources such as gas, metals, and cotton, while importing machinery, electronics, and consumer goods from China. Although the trade balance remains tilted in favor of China, this partnership has enabled Uzbekistan to diversify its trade routes and reduce its dependence on traditional markets.

China's role as a leading investor in Uzbekistan has grown, accounting for over 23 percent of total foreign direct investment by 2024. Key industrial projects—such as CNPC's involvement in the energy sector, TCL's television factory, Midea's refrigerator plant, and Gree's electric motor production facility—highlight the depth of this investment. These ventures not only enhance industrial capacity but also foster job creation and technology transfer.

Infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative has further embedded the partnership. Notable projects include the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway corridor, modernization of key airports, and the creation of logistics hubs in cities like Tashkent, Termez, and Navoi. These initiatives aim to position Uzbekistan as a regional transit and trade hub, bridging East and West.

Beyond economics, the relationship has expanded into education and cultural diplomacy. Confucius Institutes in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Fergana have become active centers for language and cultural exchange. The number of Uzbek students pursuing higher education in China surpassed 8,000 in 2024, supported by scholarship programs and joint academic ventures. These efforts have deepened mutual understanding and created a foundation for long-term cooperation.

Environmental and technological cooperation has gained momentum in recent years. Joint efforts in renewable energy development, implementation of smart agriculture systems, and collaboration in the digital economy reflect a shift toward sustainable and innovative partnerships. Technology-driven sectors such as fintech and e-commerce have become focal points for future growth.

Security collaboration, facilitated largely through the SCO, includes joint counterterrorism training and intelligence-sharing initiatives. Both countries advocate for sovereignty and non-intervention, aligning on the principle of a multipolar world order. This alignment reinforces a shared vision for regional stability and cooperative security.

DISCUSSION

Despite considerable progress, challenges remain, notably trade imbalances and reliance on Chinese capital. In 2023, China maintained a trade surplus exceeding USD 6 billion with Uzbekistan, highlighting the structural asymmetries in bilateral commerce. To address this, Uzbekistan must promote higher-value exports and seek balanced trade terms. Strengthening domestic industries through investment in processing facilities and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) could help reduce dependency on raw material exports.

Transparency in foreign investment agreements is also critical. Several Chinese-funded infrastructure projects have been scrutinized for limited local participation and unclear procurement processes. To mitigate this, Uzbekistan could enforce competitive bidding and prioritize technology transfer clauses. Moreover, developing robust institutional frameworks and enforcing regulations that support fair competition would enhance the long-term sustainability of foreign investment.

In the realm of education and human capital, strategic expansion of vocational and technical education—particularly in logistics, manufacturing, and renewable energy—can align workforce skills with emerging sectors of cooperation. Similarly, embracing green technologies and enhancing environmental standards within joint ventures can make development more inclusive and forward-looking.

CONCLUSION

The strategic relationship between Uzbekistan and China has matured into a multifaceted partnership that continues to evolve. Economic cooperation has brought growth in trade and infrastructure, yet the resulting asymmetries necessitate policy responses to ensure long-term balance. By fostering a more diversified economy, enhancing transparency, and investing in domestic capabilities, Uzbekistan can maximize the benefits of its engagement with China.

Looking forward, greater emphasis on equitable partnerships, digital transformation, environmental responsibility, and educational alignment will be essential for both countries. If managed strategically, the Uzbekistan–China relationship can serve as a model for pragmatic, mutually beneficial cooperation between rising regional powers and global economic leaders.

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