

THE FORMATION OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND CHINA

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Abstract: This article examines the establishment and evolution of diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and the People's Republic of China, highlighting their historical underpinnings, political dynamics, and strategic significance within the broader context of Central Asian geopolitics. By situating the formation of bilateral relations in the aftermath of Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, the research underscores the multifaceted drivers of cooperation, including political recognition, economic interdependence, and regional security imperatives. Special emphasis is placed on the mechanisms through which China's growing global influence, articulated through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, has shaped Uzbekistan's foreign policy orientations, while Uzbekistan's strategic geographical position and reform-driven domestic policy have enhanced its role as a reliable partner for China. The study not only investigates the political and economic determinants of bilateral cooperation but also addresses the challenges, contradictions, and opportunities inherent in these relations. In doing so, the article contributes to the academic discourse on post-Soviet state diplomacy, Sino-Central Asian engagement, and the transformation of Eurasian international relations.

Keywords: Uzbekistan–China relations; diplomatic recognition; Central Asia; foreign policy; Belt and Road Initiative; political cooperation; economic partnership; Eurasian geopolitics.

Introduction: The establishment of diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and the People's Republic of China represents a significant milestone in the contemporary history of Central Asia, reflecting not only the reconfiguration of international politics after the dissolution of the Soviet Union but also the emergence of new paradigms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in Eurasia. In the early 1990s, when Uzbekistan declared its independence and embarked on the path of sovereign state-building, one of the most urgent tasks it faced was the construction of a foreign policy architecture capable of ensuring its international recognition, political legitimacy, and economic integration into the global system. China, as a rising power with both historical connections to the region and a growing interest in expanding its influence across Eurasia, quickly emerged as one of the key actors in shaping Uzbekistan's external relations. The diplomatic recognition of Uzbekistan by China in January 1992 and the subsequent establishment of official diplomatic ties laid the foundation for a partnership that has since expanded in scope and deepened in strategic significance. Historically, the relationship between the territories that now comprise Uzbekistan and China predates the formation of modern nation-states, tracing its origins to the transcontinental Silk Road that facilitated trade, cultural exchanges, and the transmission of ideas between East and West.

Ancient cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva were vibrant centers of commerce and learning that maintained dynamic connections with the Chinese civilization, particularly during the Han and Tang dynasties, when caravan routes flourished and intellectual currents traveled alongside material goods. These premodern linkages not only shaped the socio-economic landscapes of Central Asia but also generated cultural memories that inform contemporary diplomatic narratives. Thus, the modern diplomatic partnership can be seen as both a continuation of historical patterns of engagement and a reconfiguration of them under the conditions of globalization, sovereignty, and regional integration. The initial stage of Uzbekistan–China relations was characterized by the establishment of mutual trust, the negotiation of diplomatic protocols, and the articulation of shared political values, particularly the principles of sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and respect for territorial integrity. These principles became the cornerstone of bilateral relations, distinguishing them from more asymmetrical or ideologically driven alliances that often marked the Cold War era. For Uzbekistan, cultivating relations with China was not only an exercise in diversifying its foreign policy portfolio but also a strategic necessity, given the geopolitical vulnerabilities of a landlocked state surrounded by major powers. For China, on the other hand, engaging with Uzbekistan served multiple purposes: consolidating its influence in Central Asia, securing stability on its western borders, and creating favorable conditions for the advancement of long-term economic and security initiatives. Over time, the bilateral relationship developed into a multi-vector partnership encompassing political dialogue, economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, and security collaboration. The political dimension has been manifested through regular high-level visits, the signing of bilateral agreements, and the alignment of positions in regional and international forums such as the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization[1]. Economically, China has emerged as one of Uzbekistan’s largest trading partners and investors, particularly in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and manufacturing. This trajectory has been further reinforced by China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which positions Uzbekistan as a vital hub within transcontinental transportation and logistics networks. The cultural and humanitarian dimension of relations has also expanded, with growing academic exchanges, educational programs, and people-to-people interactions that foster mutual understanding and trust. Nevertheless, the development of Uzbekistan–China relations has not been without challenges and contradictions. While the partnership is often described in terms of mutual benefit and strategic complementarity, critical observers have raised questions about asymmetries in economic dependence, the potential risks of debt accumulation, and the implications of China’s growing presence for Uzbekistan’s sovereignty and policy autonomy. At the same time, regional dynamics—including the competition for influence among external powers such as Russia, the United States, and the European Union—have complicated the calculus of bilateral relations. Moreover, the evolving domestic contexts of both countries, including Uzbekistan’s reform agenda and China’s shifting global strategies, have added layers of complexity to the partnership. From an academic perspective, the study of Uzbekistan–China diplomatic relations is significant for several reasons[2]. First, it provides insights into the foreign policy strategies of post-Soviet states navigating a complex international environment marked by both opportunities and constraints. Second, it contributes to the understanding of China’s global rise and its efforts to reshape the international system by forging new partnerships, particularly in strategically important regions such as Central Asia. Third, it highlights the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical imperatives, demonstrating how the echoes of the Silk Road continue to resonate in modern diplomacy. Finally, it underscores the importance of examining bilateral relations not in isolation but as

part of broader regional and global dynamics that shape the evolution of international order. Given the multifaceted nature of Uzbekistan–China relations, this article adopts an interdisciplinary and multi-layered approach to analyzing their formation and development. By situating the diplomatic partnership within historical, political, economic, and cultural frameworks, the study seeks to illuminate both the structural factors and the agency-driven choices that have shaped the trajectory of bilateral cooperation. In doing so, it aims to contribute to scholarly debates on Eurasian geopolitics, post-Soviet foreign policies, and the global implications of China’s engagement with emerging states. The subsequent sections of the article will provide a comprehensive review of relevant literature, outline the methodological approaches employed, present the main findings, and engage in a critical discussion of the implications of these results for both theory and practice.

Literature review: The scholarly exploration of Uzbekistan–China relations has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers worldwide, particularly after the proclamation of Uzbekistan’s independence in 1991 and the subsequent geopolitical reconfiguration of Central Asia. In the broader field of international relations, the bilateral partnership has been analyzed through various theoretical and methodological lenses, ranging from realist interpretations that emphasize power politics and strategic interests to liberal perspectives focusing on interdependence, institutional frameworks, and the role of economic cooperation. Within this spectrum, the works of foreign scholars stand out for their nuanced assessments of how the Sino-Uzbek partnership contributes to both regional stability and the global ambitions of China. One of the most influential contributions comes from Sebastian Peyrouse, a French scholar whose research on Sino-Central Asian interactions emphasizes the structural dynamics of China’s engagement with the region[3]. Peyrouse underscores the role of Central Asia as both a strategic buffer and a crucial corridor for China’s westward expansion under the Belt and Road Initiative. In his analysis, Uzbekistan emerges as a particularly significant partner due to its demographic weight, reform-oriented domestic agenda, and pivotal geographical location at the heart of Eurasian trade routes. Peyrouse argues that while China’s economic penetration into Uzbekistan has been instrumental in modernizing key sectors such as energy and infrastructure, it simultaneously raises questions about asymmetrical dependence and the potential marginalization of local industries[4]. His scholarship situates Uzbekistan–China relations within the broader narrative of China’s attempts to reshape Eurasian connectivity, thereby linking the bilateral partnership to global transformations in trade, finance, and diplomacy. Another noteworthy perspective is offered by Elizabeth Wishnick, an American scholar specializing in Chinese foreign policy and security studies[5]. Wishnick highlights the security dimension of Sino-Uzbek relations, particularly in the context of counterterrorism, border stability, and the fight against transnational threats in the post-9/11 era. She stresses the importance of Uzbekistan’s participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a platform where Chinese and Uzbek security interests converge. Wishnick contends that while Beijing’s emphasis on combating the “three evils” (terrorism, separatism, and extremism) aligns with Tashkent’s concerns about domestic radicalism and regional instability, the asymmetrical distribution of power within the SCO often privileges Chinese interests. Nonetheless, she acknowledges that Uzbekistan has skillfully leveraged its participation in such frameworks to enhance its international standing and diversify its security partnerships beyond Russia and the West[6]. Taken together, the contributions of Peyrouse and Wishnick illuminate two critical dimensions of Uzbekistan–China diplomatic relations: the economic-structural dimension that ties Uzbekistan into China’s grand strategy of Eurasian integration, and the

security-strategic dimension that anchors bilateral cooperation in the imperatives of stability and counterterrorism. Their works underscore both the opportunities and the vulnerabilities inherent in the partnership, providing a complex, multi-layered picture that avoids simplistic characterizations of either dependence or autonomy. Moreover, these scholarly insights suggest that Uzbekistan–China relations must be understood not merely as a dyadic interaction but as part of a broader regional and global order undergoing rapid transformation.

Methodology: The methodological framework of this study is grounded in a multidisciplinary approach that integrates the principles of historical-comparative analysis, systemic-structural inquiry, and geopolitical contextualization, thereby ensuring a comprehensive examination of Uzbekistan–China diplomatic relations. Historical-comparative analysis is employed to trace the genesis and transformation of bilateral interactions from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the present day, allowing for the identification of continuities and ruptures in diplomatic practices. Systemic-structural inquiry, derived from international relations theory, is utilized to conceptualize the Uzbekistan–China partnership within the broader architecture of global and regional power configurations, particularly the Eurasian subsystem shaped by the Belt and Road Initiative and the institutional mechanisms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Additionally, geopolitical contextualization provides a spatial-temporal lens through which the strategic significance of Uzbekistan’s geographical location and resource potential are evaluated in relation to China’s westward expansion and global rise. The research also applies elements of content analysis to official treaties, communiqués, and policy documents, thereby triangulating primary sources with secondary scholarly interpretations. Collectively, these methods constitute a holistic and scientifically rigorous framework that not only situates Uzbekistan–China relations within a multi-level analytical matrix but also elucidates their dynamic interplay across political, economic, and security dimensions.

Results: The research findings demonstrate that the diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and China have undergone a profound transformation from formal recognition and pragmatic cooperation in the early 1990s to the establishment of a multidimensional strategic partnership characterized by deep political trust, expanding economic interdependence, and institutionalized security collaboration. The analysis reveals that Uzbekistan’s foreign policy of balancing among great powers has converged with China’s broader regional agenda, particularly within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Belt and Road Initiative, thereby creating a mutually reinforcing trajectory of integration. Empirical evidence from bilateral trade statistics, joint infrastructure projects, and diplomatic communiqués confirms that the Uzbekistan–China partnership has transcended transactional arrangements to evolve into a sustainable and long-term model of regional cooperation, wherein Uzbekistan emerges as a pivotal actor in China’s westward strategy and China simultaneously provides Uzbekistan with access to capital, technology, and geopolitical leverage, making their diplomatic interaction both historically unprecedented and strategically consequential.

Discussion: The scholarly debate surrounding the evolution of Uzbekistan–China diplomatic relations has elicited divergent interpretations among foreign researchers, particularly in regard to the nature, depth, and long-term implications of bilateral cooperation. One influential perspective is articulated by David Shambaugh, a prominent American sinologist, who argues that China’s engagement with Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, is primarily an extension of

its geostrategic ambitions aimed at reshaping the Eurasian order. Shambaugh emphasizes that the Belt and Road Initiative functions as a structural mechanism through which Beijing consolidates its political leverage and ensures regional compliance by intertwining infrastructure investment with security commitments[7]. According to his analysis, the asymmetry in economic capabilities between China and Uzbekistan inevitably generates dependency patterns, whereby Tashkent risks subordinating its long-term sovereignty to Beijing's broader strategic calculus. From this standpoint, Uzbekistan's partnership with China is perceived less as an equal diplomatic dialogue and more as a pragmatic adjustment to the realities of power distribution in Eurasia[8]. Contrastingly, Marlene Laruelle, a distinguished French scholar specializing in Central Asian studies, challenges this deterministic assessment by underscoring the agency of Uzbekistan in shaping the parameters of its diplomatic engagement with China. Laruelle argues that Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been marked by a consistent pursuit of "multi-vector" diplomacy, enabling Tashkent to benefit from Chinese economic resources while simultaneously maintaining constructive relations with Russia, the United States, and other regional actors[9]. In her interpretation, Uzbekistan's strategic positioning allows it to avoid overdependence on any single power, thereby transforming its relationship with China into a pragmatic partnership rather than a hierarchical subordination. She highlights evidence of Tashkent's selective acceptance of Chinese proposals, refusal to host foreign military bases, and active role in regional organizations as indicators of its capacity to assert autonomy within the framework of bilateral cooperation. The polemical tension between Shambaugh and Laruelle thus revolves around two fundamental questions: whether Uzbekistan is becoming structurally dependent on China or whether it successfully utilizes diplomatic flexibility to safeguard sovereignty while extracting developmental benefits[10]. While Shambaugh foregrounds the asymmetry of power and the inevitability of Chinese dominance, Laruelle underscores the adaptive strategies of small states in navigating great-power rivalries. This academic debate enriches the understanding of Uzbekistan–China relations by highlighting the dialectic between external structural pressures and internal agency, suggesting that the bilateral partnership should be analyzed not as a fixed trajectory but as a dynamic process contingent upon shifting regional, economic, and geopolitical variables.

Conclusion: The historical trajectory of Uzbekistan–China diplomatic relations illustrates a transition from initial recognition and cautious cooperation in the early 1990s to the establishment of a robust and multifaceted strategic partnership in the twenty-first century. The research confirms that bilateral interaction has been shaped by both structural imperatives—such as China's rising influence in Eurasia and Uzbekistan's pursuit of economic modernization—and by agency-driven strategies, including Tashkent's commitment to multi-vector diplomacy and Beijing's effort to balance regional stability with economic expansion. The analysis also underscores that the relationship is not unidirectional but rather dialectical, as evidenced by Uzbekistan's capacity to selectively engage with Chinese initiatives while preserving autonomy and diversifying its foreign policy portfolio. This has enabled both sides to consolidate mutual trust and to institutionalize cooperation across political, economic, cultural, and security domains.

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