



FROM REALPOLITIK TO CONSTRUCTIVISM: UZBEKISTAN'S ROLE IN SHAPING A NEW CENTRAL ASIAN IDENTITY (2016–2030)

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Abstract

This essay examines how Uzbekistan's 2016 leadership transition catalyzed a fundamental shift in its foreign policy, moving from a realist doctrine of defensive self-reliance toward a constructivist strategy of open pragmatism and regional leadership. Drawing on recent scholarship in international relations theory and Central Asian political economy, the essay argues that this transition has not only transformed Uzbekistan's bilateral relationships with its neighbors but has also contributed to the emergence of a new cooperative identity across Central Asia. The analysis addresses economic diplomacy, water politics, and the counterargument regarding institutional fragility before concluding that the material foundations of regional interdependence make a return to isolationism increasingly unlikely.

Introduction

The year 2016 marked a turning point in the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. For twenty-five years following independence, Uzbekistan pursued a foreign policy centered on absolute sovereignty and deliberate distance from regional organizations and international commitments. The country positioned itself as a "geopolitical pendulum," carefully balancing relations with Russia, China, and the United States to avoid dependence on any single external power (Kobilov, 2025). This strategy, described by scholars as "defensive self-reliance," preserved national independence but came at a significant cost: fragmented regional infrastructure,



closed borders, and a growing inability to attract the investment and connectivity that economic modernization required (Fazendeiro, 2017).

When a leadership transition occurred in 2016, a comprehensive reform process followed. The new administration placed “open pragmatism” and a “Central Asia First” orientation at the center of national development, restoring direct flights with neighbors, reopening border checkpoints, and initiating diplomatic dialogue on long-standing disputes. The “Uzbekistan-2030” Strategy now serves as the primary roadmap for this transformation, targeting \$250 billion in total investments and positioning the country as the region’s primary connectivity hub (Masharipov & Khasanov, 2025).

This essay argues that the post-2016 transition from a rigid realist foreign policy toward a constructivist approach has fundamentally redefined Uzbekistan’s regional identity, transforming it from a reluctant neighbor into one of the primary catalysts for Central Asian integration. This shift is significant not only for the region but also as a case study in how states can deliberately reconstruct their identities and interests through sustained diplomatic engagement.

The Legacy of Defensive Self-Reliance (1991–2016)

To understand the significance of the current transformation, it is necessary to examine the foreign policy logic that dominated Uzbekistan’s first twenty-five years of independence. The administration of the first president consistently prioritized what Fazendeiro (2017) terms “defensive self-reliance”: a strategy that placed absolute sovereignty above regional cooperation and treated external commitments as potential threats to national autonomy. This manifested in Uzbekistan’s repeated withdrawal from regional organizations, its resistance to binding multilateral agreements, and the deliberate closure of borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that persisted for over a decade.



The consequences were substantial. By maintaining this posture, Uzbekistan effectively isolated itself from the economic opportunities that regional integration could have provided. Masharipov and Khasanov (2025) describe the resulting situation as a „landlocked prison”: a condition in which geographic disadvantage was compounded by policy choices that prevented the development of the cross-border infrastructure and coordination mechanisms necessary for trade and investment. As the gap between Uzbekistan’s economic potential and its actual performance widened in the 2010s, the strategic logic of isolation became increasingly difficult to sustain.

Theoretical Framework: From Realism to Constructivism

The transformation of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy can be understood through the lens of international relations theory. Under the previous administration, regional affairs were understood through a fundamentally realist framework: states were seen as self-interested actors competing in a zero-sum environment where a neighbor’s gain was necessarily a potential loss for Uzbekistan’s own security and influence (Fazendeiro, 2017; Kazhenova, 2024). This worldview made sustained cooperation structurally difficult, because every concession was interpreted as vulnerability.

The post-2016 administration has, by contrast, operated according to a constructivist logic. Constructivism in international relations holds that state identities and interests are not fixed but are shaped and reshaped through interaction, communication, and the gradual development of shared norms (Dadabaev et al., 2023). A clear early example of this shift appeared in the immediate post-2016 period, when the new leadership began reopening border crossings with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan - steps that would have been politically unthinkable under the previous administration. These symbolic acts signaled a new willingness to view neighbors as partners rather than threats, and they set in motion a process of trust-building that has continued to deepen.



Current analysis indicates that Uzbekistan has moved toward viewing Central Asia as a “single organism,” in which the prosperity of one country supports the stability of all others (Dadabaev, 2018). This reconceptualization has also been reflected in a new diplomatic culture, characterized by the informal practice of *maslahat* (collective consultation) and a greater emphasis on face-to-face engagement at both the governmental and civil society levels (Kobilov, 2025).

Economic Diplomacy and Regional Connectivity

The institutionalization of economic diplomacy represents the most concrete pillar of Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy. As a double-landlocked nation - one surrounded by countries that are themselves landlocked - Uzbekistan faces structurally elevated transportation costs that constrain its access to global markets. The “Uzbekistan-2030” Strategy addresses this challenge directly, targeting \$250 billion in investment and prioritizing infrastructure development as its central mechanism (Masharipov & Khasanov, 2025; Umarova, 2024).

The most strategically significant infrastructure project is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway, which is projected to shorten the transit distance to European markets by approximately 900 kilometers (Khitakhunov, 2024). Although the railway remains under construction, the political commitments and financial agreements already concluded create a form of path dependency: once countries’ export revenues and transit systems become integrated around shared corridors, the cost of disrupting that cooperation rises dramatically for all parties. In this sense, infrastructure does not merely facilitate trade - it creates structural incentives for sustained political cooperation. Recent data supports this trend: Uzbekistan’s trade turnover with Kazakhstan alone exceeded \$4 billion in 2024, reflecting the growing depth of economic integration across the region (Umarova, 2024).

Norm-Building and the “Water Neighborhood”



Perhaps the most striking demonstration of Uzbekistan's constructivist turn is the transformation of its approach to transboundary water management. For decades, competition over the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers - the primary water sources for Central Asia's agricultural economies - was a defining source of regional tension. As a downstream nation, Uzbekistan historically opposed large upstream hydropower projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, fearing that reduced river flows would threaten its agricultural sector. Analysts frequently described the situation as a potential flashpoint for inter-state conflict (Dadabaev et al., 2023).

The post-2016 administration replaced this confrontational logic with what scholars have termed the "water neighborhood" framework. This approach reconceptualizes transboundary rivers not as contested national resources to be divided, but as shared ecological commons that require joint stewardship and coordinated governance (Dadabaev et al., 2023). In practice, this led Uzbekistan to drop its long-standing opposition to the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan and the Kambarata-1 hydropower project in Kyrgyzstan, and even to express interest in participating as a co-investor in these projects (Saud, 2018; Dadabaev et al., 2023). This represents a fundamental normative shift: rather than treating water as a zero-sum issue, Uzbekistan has embraced a model of shared responsibility that prioritizes long-term ecological sustainability and regional trust over short-term political posturing.

Counterargument: The Fragility of Leadership-Dependent Change

Despite the advances described above, critics raise important questions about the durability of Uzbekistan's new regional identity. The most significant concern is that the current transformation appears to rest heavily on the personal political will of the existing leadership, rather than on robust institutional structures that would survive a change of government (Kazhenova, 2024). Historical precedent in Central Asia supports this concern: regional integration initiatives have repeatedly stalled or



reversed when leadership transitions occurred or when the strategic interests of key states diverged. A future government in Uzbekistan or a neighboring country that adopted a more nationalist or isolationist orientation could, in theory, unravel many of the cooperative arrangements currently in place.

External factors add a further layer of risk. The construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal in Afghanistan, which is expected to divert a substantial portion of the Amu Darya's flow, poses a potential threat to regional water security that existing bilateral agreements are not fully equipped to address (Masharipov & Khasanov, 2025). Meanwhile, the accumulation of public debt through Chinese infrastructure financing raises legitimate questions about long-term financial autonomy (Kelkitli, 2022).

However, these concerns do not fundamentally undermine the constructivist argument. Two counterpoints are particularly important. First, the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State, which have convened regularly since 2018, represent a meaningful step toward institutionalizing the cooperative norms established since 2016. While these meetings remain informal, they have established a precedent of regular multilateral dialogue that would be politically costly to abandon. Second, and more fundamentally, the economic interdependence created by shared infrastructure corridors and growing bilateral trade volumes means that the material costs of a return to isolationism are now substantially higher than they were in 2016. The cooperative identity that has been constructed is no longer purely a product of political goodwill - it is increasingly embedded in the economic interests of all regional states.

Conclusion

The transformation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy since 2016 offers a compelling case study of how a state can deliberately reconstruct its regional identity within a relatively short period. By replacing the zero-sum logic of defensive self-



reliance with a constructivist framework of open pragmatism, Uzbekistan has repaired long-standing ruptures with its neighbors and provided Central Asia with a new vision of collective agency and interdependence. This shift has strengthened national security, attracted investment, and given the region a more coherent presence in international affairs.

Significant challenges remain. The dependence on personal leadership, the external pressure of the Qosh Tepa Canal, and growing infrastructure debt all represent genuine vulnerabilities that must be addressed through deeper institutional development. Nevertheless, the foundation of trust and economic interdependence built over the past decade provides a more resilient basis for navigating these challenges than isolated self-reliance ever could.

More broadly, Uzbekistan's experience suggests that the structural constraints facing landlocked post-Soviet states are not insurmountable. Through deliberate identity reconstruction and sustained economic diplomacy, it is possible to transform geographic disadvantage into new forms of regional agency. As the "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy continues to mature, its success or failure will offer important lessons not only for Central Asia but for any region seeking to move from fragmented rivalry toward cooperative integration.

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