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China in the Modern Politics of the Republic of Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This study investigates the multifaceted dynamics of Uzbekistan-China cooperation within the evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly in light of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While previous research has primarily focused on economic implications, this paper identifies a knowledge gap regarding the political, security, and diplomatic dimensions that influence this partnership. The study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Uzbekistan's strategic foreign policy approaches and the role of Chinese investment in shaping regional infrastructure and employment. Through qualitative analysis, it highlights the role of cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges in fostering mutual understanding. Findings reveal that, beyond economic gains, Uzbekistan-China cooperation promotes diplomatic stability and development in Central Asia. These insights emphasize the partnership's potential for sustainable growth, especially as geopolitical contexts continue to shift, underscoring the need for ongoing critical evaluation of such international relations.

Keywords: China, Republic of Uzbekistan, Belt and Road, Investments, Soft power, SCO

1. Introduction

The escalation of geopolitical tensions caused by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, coupled with the imposition of sanctions on Russia and other countries, including China, have led to discussions on how countries can manage the complex power dynamics in the current international environment. Uzbekistan, a key player in Central Asia, is at the center of this discussion. The changing international situation in 2022 has led to increased interest in Central Asia from external stakeholders. The easing of COVID-19 restrictions has further facilitated the return of influential players to the region, bringing more global attention to the five Central Asian countries.

Uzbekistan, in particular, has attracted increased attention due to its strong economic potential, rich resources, and large population. In light of the growing tensions, Uzbekistan has pursued a balanced foreign policy by establishing multifaceted relationships with major global players. This strategy reflects the country's strategic location at the heart of Central Asia and its commitment to maintaining its independence and sovereignty in a rapidly changing global environment. Uzbekistan, like other Central Asian countries, faces pressure from Western countries, which have threatened to impose sanctions on local companies if they are found to be violating sanctions imposed on Russia [1]. However, Uzbekistan's strong ties with Russia and friendly relations with its leadership have prevented the country from distancing itself from Russia, despite calls from American officials for such a step [2].

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2. Materials and Methods

China has long shown interest in Uzbekistan. This interest has intensified since 2022, when China stepped up its engagement in Central Asia. While it is not entirely accurate to say that 2022 marked the beginning of closer relations between Beijing and Tashkent, until then, relations between the two countries had been developing positively, both bilaterally and within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in 2013. China plays an important role in Uzbekistan's political, economic, cultural and humanitarian spheres. The leaders of both countries are eager to maintain regular dialogue by meeting at multilateral and bilateral venues. China's renewed cooperation with Uzbekistan is driven by the Chinese government's desire to make up for the time lost during the pandemic. It is no coincidence that Chinese President Xi Jinping decided to visit the Central Asian region for the first time in 2 years after the easing of coronavirus-related restrictions [3].

In 2023, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev visited China to attend the Central Asia-China Summit, and a comprehensive program for the development of strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and China was approved. This program was aimed at creating favorable conditions for Chinese business in the Uzbek market, including various initiatives. During his visit to Xi'an, Mirziyoyev signed many economic cooperation agreements and launched several joint ventures. In January 2014, the President of Uzbekistan visited China, where he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping, emphasizing the close partnership and long-term nature of bilateral relations. They discussed joint projects for the future and admired each other's economic achievements.

The President emphasized that this is his first foreign trip this year, emphasizing the importance of China in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. It is noteworthy that cooperation between the two countries goes beyond intergovernmental projects. Strengthening interregional cooperation is an important aspect of their partnership. As part of Shavkat Mirziyoyev's state visit to China, a bilateral interregional forum was held in Urumqi, bringing together business representatives from both countries. The event was accompanied by an exhibition showcasing Uzbekistan's achievements and the potential of the Central Asian region.

The forum resulted in the establishment of the Uzbekistan-China Regional Cooperation Council, reflecting the growing importance of China's role in Uzbekistan's foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev's leadership. Uzbekistan has moved away from its previous isolationist approach and is actively seeking to expand ties with China, both economically and politically. However, in addition to the economic challenges that currently dominate the bilateral agenda, Uzbekistan faces security challenges, including the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the situation in Afghanistan, which remain of great concern to the Uzbek government. China, although not taking on a direct security role, plays a significant role in maintaining peace and stability in Central Asia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

For Uzbekistan, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is the most important international forum for security cooperation. It serves as a bridge between the countries of the region and external actors such as Russia and China, who cooperate with the Uzbek government to ensure stability within the country and in the region as a whole. A notable event was the 2022 SCO summit in Samarkand, which took place after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine. During this meeting, the leaders of the organization discussed current security issues and future directions for the development of international relations. These discussions were influenced by the discourse in the Western world, which has a significant impact on the current situation.

For Uzbekistan, the main security challenges remain centered around Afghanistan, including risks associated with the spread of radical Islam, cyber threats, food insecurity, and depletion of water resources - areas in which Uzbekistan and China are currently

cooperating. It is worth noting that the potential of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) does not allow it to fully address security issues in the border region of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, which is a problem that Uzbekistan seeks to resolve on its own. In addition to the capabilities of the SCO, there are other pressing security issues in the region, such as the need to ensure political stability in Afghanistan and increase transparency within the country. These include the creation of an inclusive government, which is advocated by all SCO members, but which has been rejected by the current Afghan authorities led by the Taliban movement. The Taliban movement has been declared a banned group by Russia, and maintaining control over the territory of Afghanistan is another important aspect.

3. Results and Discussion

The economic partnership between Uzbekistan and China is a mutually beneficial relationship. China is Uzbekistan's main trading partner, and in March 2024, trade turnover between the two countries exceeded \$3 billion. Russia ranked second with a trade turnover of more than \$2.8 billion, accounting for 19% of Uzbekistan's total trade turnover [4]. Китайский экспорт в Узбекистан значительно увеличился, увеличившись на 121% в 2022 году и еще больше увеличившись на 151% в конце 2023 года, но Узбекистан испытывает дефицит торгового баланса с Китаем, поскольку его импорт превышает экспорт. Китай в основном экспортирует в Узбекистан машины, оборудование и промышленные товары, в то время как Узбекистан в основном экспортирует услуги, промышленную продукцию и топливо [5]. China is actively seeking investment opportunities in Uzbekistan, which has attracted the largest amount of foreign direct investment in the region. In 2023 alone, Chinese investment inflows exceeded two billion dollars, and several well-known companies have established a presence in the country. Notable examples of such companies include Huawei, ZTE, Sinotruck, and Heng Bang Textile Central Asia.

Uzbekistan and China jointly developed the Yangi Avlod Industrial Zone in Tashkent, covering an area of 664.5 hectares. Under this partnership, China has invested in projects related to the production of wastewater treatment equipment, municipal solid waste management, e-waste recycling, and landfill gas energy generation. Cooperation between the two countries in the field of special economic zones has been fruitful, and bilateral economic forums regularly provide a platform for discussing opportunities to expand the Uzbek market for Chinese goods.

Uzbekistan, as a country bordering all other Central Asian states, is an important transit hub for the implementation of the International Partnership Program. In particular, the construction of a railway connecting China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan with the European railway network via the Caspian Sea and Turkey is currently on the agenda. This railway will become an important trade and transport route for the region. The Chinese government is expected to be the main investor in the Central Asian segment of this project. Despite ongoing discussions, neither side has removed the project from their agenda, as both continue to face difficulties in securing funding and coordinating efforts on the China-Kyrgyzstan section of the railway. However, an agreement on the project was signed at the China-Central Asia Summit in 2023 [6].

The initiative is of paramount importance to both parties involved. China is developing a network of transport and logistics routes under the International Port Project (IPP), and is also exploring alternative routes to bypass potential obstacles. These include Russia, whose transit capacity has been curtailed by sanctions, and Kazakhstan, which sometimes detains "suspicious" cargo at its borders for fear of secondary sanctions. The rail link with Uzbekistan is in line with China's goal of strengthening its economic influence in Eurasia. Uzbekistan's strategy involves diversifying supply chains with partners that share its interests, and Uzbekistan recognizes the potential role it could play

as a regional transit hub. Despite its landlocked status, it could become a leader in the region compared to its geographically more advantageous Central Asian neighbors.

Uzbekistan and China are actively working to improve their railway transport systems in various directions. In 2023, an important milestone was reached with the opening of a new cross-border railway connecting the Chinese city of Liuzhou with Uzbekistan, in particular with the aim of facilitating trade in industrial goods. Liuzhou, located in the south of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, is well known for its automobile and auto component production. With this new route, China hopes to increase automobile exports to the Uzbek market. The two countries are working together to ensure the smooth operation of supply chains on both existing and newly created transport routes. China is investing in the digitalization of its railway and road transport systems, while Uzbekistan is working to improve the skills of its transport specialists through joint educational programs.

R. Makhmudov emphasizes that Uzbekistan's foreign policy has undergone significant changes, shifting priorities from security issues to economic aspects of international relations. In this regard, the implementation of transport projects in China with the participation of Uzbekistan can potentially significantly expand the country's transport and logistics capabilities, facilitating its integration into the international market. Another important area of cooperation between Uzbekistan and China is the energy sector. Despite the fact that Uzbekistan has decided to suspend natural gas exports in 2022, China is exploring the possibility of building a fourth branch of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline through Uzbekistan. China's goal is to increase gas supplies.

Given China's focus on diversifying its pipeline infrastructure, China has identified Uzbekistan as a potential source of gas production. Several projects are currently being implemented in the oil and gas industry of Uzbekistan. These include Dengizkul, Khadzhihvat, and Sharki-Adat. They are controlled by the New Silk Road Oil and Gas joint venture. The China Petroleum Company (CNPC) is interested in creating underground gas storage facilities and modernizing Uzbekistan's gas transportation systems. It also wants to train qualified personnel to work for Chinese oil and gas companies in the country.

4. Conclusion

Thus, having considered some aspects of cooperation between Uzbekistan and China, it can be concluded that bilateral cooperation has significant potential to address pressing issues facing both countries. In the current geopolitical climate characterized by tensions, Uzbekistan pursues a policy of neutrality and applies a multi-vector strategy in relations with key partners. The importance of bilateral ties between the two countries is rooted in China's desire to invest in Uzbekistan's economic development, while Uzbekistan is open to accepting these investments. Moreover, the dialogue between these countries is free from political considerations, and their approaches to international issues coincide. China is actively implementing Uzbekistan's industrial development strategy, paying special attention to such sectors as manufacturing, oil and gas, digital technologies and logistics, which are in high demand in the modern economy. The country is establishing institutional partnerships with Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries in the "Central Asia +" format, which serves as a platform for multilateral dialogue. Despite China's growing economic influence, there are still challenges to overcome, such as expanding Uzbekistan's export capabilities, reducing its dependence on imports, creating more jobs for its citizens, pursuing a diversified foreign policy, and addressing security concerns.

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