

## MODERN WORLD AND THE PRIORITIES OF UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

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**Abstract** *Article examines the transformation of the contemporary international system under conditions of global polycrisis and analyzes the evolving priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy within this turbulent environment. It argues that the current stage of world politics is characterized by the erosion of traditional multilateral institutions, increasing geopolitical fragmentation, and the growing role of ad hoc power-based arrangements. Against this background, Central Asia emerges as a region demonstrating an alternative model of pragmatic regional cooperation, driven by shared interests and a gradually forming regional identity. The study highlights Uzbekistan's multi-vector and proactive foreign policy as a strategic response to global uncertainty, enabling the country to diversify risks, attract investment, and strengthen its role as a regional connector. Particular attention is paid to key areas such as connectivity, energy diversification, critical minerals, and engagement within C5+1 formats. The article concludes that Uzbekistan's mission in the emerging world order is to act as a stable, predictable partner and a bridge between regions, transforming its geographic position into a source of economic and geopolitical advantage.*

**Keywords:** *Uzbekistan; foreign policy; Central Asia; regional cooperation; economic diplomacy; C5+1 format; regional integration.*

### Introduction

Speaking at the last UN General Assembly, Uzbekistan's President Sh. M. Mirziyoyev stated: "Today, we are witnessing the weakening role of international institutions, the growth of contradictions, conflicts, and wars in the world... and the aggravation of economic and humanitarian crises. All this is shaping a completely new and troubling geopolitical reality."



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Under the current exceptionally complex international conditions, analysis of the factors, appearances, and consequences of the acute crisis of the modern world has not only theoretical but also direct applied significance. Uzbek diplomacy and the country's expert community urgently need to understand the priorities, principles, and mechanisms of foreign policy at this stage of global development.

### **The modern world is in a state of polycrisis**

Recently, experts have coined a new term: polycrisis, which describes the simultaneous occurrence of several catastrophic events: geopolitical conflicts, economic fragmentation, technological rivalry, environmental degradation, migration pressures, pandemics, and institutional decline. Indeed, the world order is in a state of strategic uncertainty. It is increasingly characterized by instability, deep mutual distrust, a high level of confrontation among the leading centers of power, and, most dangerously, a growing acceptability of the use of force in interstate relations.

In 2025, global military expenditure amounted to \$2.63 trillion. United States military spending in 2025 was about \$997 billion; the combined military expenditure of the 27 European Union countries was \$452 billion; China spent about \$314 billion; and Russia about \$149 billion. This was the sharpest increase since the end of the Cold War, and the upward trend in defence spending has continued for ten consecutive years. At the end of 2024, the revenue of the world's 100 largest defence companies from arms sales and military services increased by 5.9%, reaching a record \$679 billion.

At the same time, 839 million people were living in extreme poverty; around 318 million people lacked permanent housing, and almost 2.8 billion – more than one third of the world's population – did not have adequate housing.

Competition is intensifying in all spheres, while inequality in living standards across regions is deepening. The destructive potential of transnational threats to peace and stability is rising sharply. Dangerous environmental degradation and the aggravation of planetary ecological problems are undermining the prospects for global sustainable development and creating serious threats to the fate of present and future generations.

Crisis follows crisis – bloody wars, epidemics that paralyze the world, economic sanctions unprecedented in scale, and mass forced

migration. In my view, however, all these are merely symptoms of a deeper structural transformation: the breakdown of the previous architecture of international relations and the transition to a new, still-undefined model of world politics. In other words, they are manifestations of a wider and more profound crisis associated with the erosion of the rules, institutions, and norms that shaped the post-Second World War international system.

What increasingly prevails in world politics is not a policy of thoughtful reforms but decisive action aimed at dismantling established institutions, alliances, and norms. In many cases, destruction proceeds without a clear understanding of what will replace what has been dismantled.

One reason for this appears to be that, over many years, efforts to increase the effectiveness of public administration encouraged the adoption of 'corporate management' principles and the recruitment of business elites into government structures. Among other consequences, this contributed to the penetration into governance psychology of what Joseph Schumpeter defined as 'creative destruction' as a condition of business development.

The transformation of the global security architecture and the international economy intensified with the arrival of the current United States administration. For decades, the United States stood at the forefront of building the post-war system of international relations. That system consistently pursued three goals: strengthening multilateral international institutions and universal international law; promoting an open economic system and free international trade; and prioritizing the spread of liberal democratic values and human rights.

The 2026 Munich Security Conference stated that the global security architecture is "under destruction". According to its report, destruction is increasingly perceived as a form of efficiency, while international institutions are viewed as overly bureaucratic and incapable of adaptation.

It is important to note that this policy of the 'destructive hammer' did not emerge out of nowhere and cannot be reduced to the subjective views of individuals. It rests on widespread public disappointment with existing institutions and the norms of international law. Negative assessments of the fundamental principles of the world order established after 1945 are growing, and, most importantly, there is increasing doubt about their ability to adapt to contemporary realities.

The United Nations offers the clearest example of this contradiction. It remains the only universal organization with global legitimacy, yet it is increasingly criticized as overly bureaucratic, slow in decision-making, and insufficiently representative of contemporary geopolitical realities. Initially, people perceived the UN not as a discussion club, but as a world government or a world parliament. Over time, however, these perceptions changed. Today, even some professional diplomats consider the UN too large, awkward in its actions, and costly given its low efficiency. The entire UN system is roughly a \$66-68 billion enterprise per year. The regular budget of the UN Secretariat, together with peacekeeping, costs \$8.83 billion annually.

It also does not adequately represent the modern world. Japan, the second-largest contributor to the UN budget after the United States, provides nearly 10% of the budget yet is not even a permanent member of the Security Council. The same is true of Germany, the fourth-largest contributor, which provides 6.3%. India, the world's most populous country, is likewise pressing for the expansion of the Security Council.

As a result, confidence in the effectiveness of multilateral governance continues to decline.

Under these conditions, leading analysts see the concept of a future order based not on institutions but on personal agreements among leaders. International politics is becoming more personalized and transactional. The world is witnessing the emergence of a model in which order is shaped less by institutions and more by ad hoc agreements among powerful leaders. This trend signals a return to a system in which security is determined not primarily by law, but by the temporary understandings of major actors. Such a development makes the international environment more fluid, less predictable, and more unequal.

This would mean a return to a logic in which security is determined not by law, but by agreements among the strong.

Another striking trend of the contemporary world is fragmentation.

In the view of leading European politicians, the emerging reality requires abandoning unjustified expectations of the revival of transatlantic unity. In their opinion, Europe is being forced to separate from America. The institutional response to the new situation in Europe has been the concept of 'NATO 3.0.'

The destruction of alliances was vividly manifested in the crises around Greenland and, especially, during the war in Iran.

In this sense, the global crisis is not only a crisis of institutions, but also a crisis of political imagination and strategic responsibility. In our view, this leads to the following conclusion: the world has not become less interconnected, but it has become one with less trust and mutual understanding. This is a dangerous combination.

Three major fault lines are now visible. The first concerns security: the role of military power has sharply increased. The second concerns the economy: sanctions, export controls, financial restrictions, and the securitization of supply chains are reshaping international commerce. The third concerns technology: control over data standards, artificial intelligence, digital platforms, and cybersecurity increasingly determines who sets the rules in the global system.

These developments indicate that the era of classical postwar international politics has ended. The world is entering a prolonged transitional phase during which a new architecture of global security, economic interaction, and technological governance will gradually take shape. The problem is that this transition is unfolding without consensus, without reliable rules, and amid heightened confrontation.

Ahead lies a long process of forming a new paradigm of international relations.

### **The main regional trends**

Central Asia is not an isolated part of the world, and ongoing global challenges certainly cannot negatively impact the region's sustainable development. Moreover, the crisis of world politics directly affects the prospects for the region's modernization and economic and social progress. Increasing geopolitical and economic rivalry diverts resources from human development, environmental degradation, energy security, food supply, water management, public health, and transport connectivity.

But to a certain extent, if one looks at Central Asia today, one sees a different picture from that of the world as a whole. While global multilateralism is fading, this region is alive with practical construction – building bridges rather than walls. The main message of Uzbekistan's President Sh.M.Mirziyoyev's "regional doctrine" is

simple: no country can fully capitalize on its natural endowments alone; this requires joint action with neighboring states. Likewise, the solution to major contemporary problems – transnational threats, connectivity, environmental issues, energy, and others – requires multilateral efforts. In a fractured world, regions must become the new engines of multilateralism.

Globalization remains the main trend of world development. The de-globalization proclaimed by some experts is difficult to imagine, since it is impossible to stop international trade, the international division of labor, international migration, or the free flow of information. To remain within this broader tendency means deepening international cooperation, and the first step in that direction is the deepening of regional ties. Regionalization is a natural element of globalization and demonstrates its irreversibility.

The first prerequisite of regional cooperation is a clearly defined goal and a visible prospect of political or economic gain. This is the foundation of genuine and voluntary commitment.

Second, cooperation implies not only gains but also concessions. Governments must be ready to delegate part of their exclusive prerogatives. This is not always easy, but there is no alternative.

Third, a usually underestimated but vital factor of successful regional cooperation is the existence of shared principles and values in state and economic systems.

What may be called a new “regional identity” for Central Asia is gradually emerging. It is a vital precursor of regional cooperation and a foundation for a system of shared values.

For Uzbekistan and Central Asia, recent developments confirm the relevance of a course based on independent, multi-vector, and proactive foreign policy.

The strengthening of regional cooperation today is not merely a political goal, but a strategic necessity. This is fully true for Central Asian regionalism.

Over the past eight years, the aggregate GDP of the Central Asian countries has increased almost 2.5-fold, reaching \$520 billion. Industry in Central Asia has been growing at around 6% per year, which is twice the global average. The volume of external trade has more than doubled, as has mutual trade among the countries of the region. Uzbekistan's trade turnover with the states of the region has increased threefold.

In November 2025, at the Seventh Consultative Meeting of the Leaders of Central Asia in Tashkent, a decision was adopted to admit Azerbaijan as a full participant in this format. This marked a genuinely new geopolitical turn. For the region, Azerbaijan is a window toward the Caspian-European and Middle Eastern directions: corridors, energy, logistics, and communications.

Over the past two years, Uzbekistan has established allied strategic partnerships with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. This has created an entirely new geopolitical reality. The first summit held in Baku among the Presidents of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan demonstrated the emergence of a solid geostrategic triangle.

In this shifting landscape, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan are emerging as a constellation of Middle Powers. They are moving beyond traditional abstention toward a policy of strategic responsibility.

Last year also demonstrated a significant recalibration of the C5+1 format of multilateral diplomacy—a joint dialogue of Central Asian states with leading world powers.

In April 2025, the EU-Central Asia summit took place in Samarkand. In June, the second China-Central Asia summit was held in Astana, where the countries signed a treaty on 'eternal good-neighborliness.' In October, the second Russia-Central Asia summit was held in Dushanbe, again demonstrating the region's importance to major centers of power. In November, the Central Asia-United States summit in the C5+1 format took place at the White House in Washington. In December, the 'Japan-Central Asia' summit was held in Tokyo.

In previous years, C5+1 summits served mainly as platforms for dialogue and the adoption of general political declarations. They are now becoming increasingly oriented toward practical projects. Most importantly, the outlines of mechanisms and financing for the implementation of joint development programs have begun to take shape. The agenda of such summits has been extended.

It included critical minerals. The interests of foreign partners in the region have taken on a strategic, multidimensional character, with the economy, resources, and supply chains coming to the fore. Central Asia has an acute need for high-technology and environmentally sound projects in this sphere. At the same time, the region cannot once again become a raw-material appendage of industrialized states. Joint projects must be oriented toward creating

intra-regional added value through the development of a full production chain – from geological exploration and extraction to processing and the production of semi-finished and finished goods.

Energy is another key area. The region's main priority is diversifying its energy mix and using traditional energy sources more efficiently. No less important is the agenda of the 'peaceful atom' and uranium: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan together provide a substantial share of global uranium production.

Connectivity is considered a crucial factor of partnership. The discussion of the Middle Corridor takes place at a moment when connectivity is no longer a purely technical matter of moving goods from point A to point B. It is becoming a strategic question of resilience, the sovereignty of supply chains, and the ability of our economies to remain open under pressure - whether that pressure comes from geopolitical shocks, climate stress, or technological disruption. That is why, in the coming years, Uzbekistan alone will invest \$12 billion in modernizing its transport and communication systems.

The Middle Corridor has evolved into a critical bridge between Asia and Europe. Yet progress must be accompanied by an honest assessment of bottlenecks. Despite growth, delivery times remain volatile, and corridor capacity remains constrained. The decline in the Caspian Sea's water level has become a critical operational challenge: vessels may load only about 65% of their capacity, and waiting times at ports can reach up to 30 days. Added to this are shortages of rolling stock and ferries, limited capacity on some rail segments, and gaps in coordination. The result is a promising corridor, but not yet consistently bankable in commercial terms.

The EBRD estimates that modernization of the Trans-Caspian route requires around EUR 18.5 billion. But such expenditures are undoubtedly worthwhile. Over the past decade, trade between the European Union and Central Asia has doubled – from EUR 25 billion in 2015 to EUR 56 billion in 2025.

Security is another area of growing relevance. Cooperation between foreign partners and Central Asian countries in areas such as counterterrorism, illegal migration, organized crime, and other transnational threats to peace and security is becoming increasingly active.

In this context, it is important to note that Afghanistan – an indispensable part of Central Asia – is both a factor of regional

security and an element of regional connectivity; in fact, these are two sides of the same coin. Trans-Afghan routes open the region to South Asia, with a population of around 2 billion, and to the ports of the Indian Ocean, making them one of the most promising directions for regional integration.

For Uzbekistan, the key project remains the Kabul Corridor: even at the initial stage, its cargo flow could reach around 22 million tons per year, and by 2040, it could exceed 33 million tons.

Another momentum-indicating development, demonstrating a drastic change in the world community's perception of the region, occurred in December last year. United States President Donald Trump invited the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to the G20 summit in Miami in 2026. This is a signal of the highest level: it means an invitation to the table where the major actors discuss the architecture of the world order.

Why is Central Asia now attracting such strong interest from the leading powers? Because the modern world lacks three things: predictability, connectivity, and the resources of the future. Central Asia is a junction of routes linking North and South, East and West; it is also a region rich in what the new economy needs, from energy to critical materials. An additional important point is that the region has become much more cooperative, which increases confidence in it as a partner.

Some see such an interest as a new version of the 'Great Game' for dominance in Central Asia. Maybe it is so. But it is no longer the game of Kipling's era. Then, the region was a passive object. Today, the countries of Central Asia are subjects with their own agenda, ambitions, and a clear understanding of their national interests.

The main effect of Uzbekistan's regional policy is that strategic connectedness has replaced strategic uncertainty: there is more trust, more joint formats, and more practical projects. This is precisely the formation of a Central Asian community.

In line with recent regional trends, Central Asia has also found its own voice: more audible and stronger.

### **Uzbekistan in a turbulent international environment**

For Uzbekistan, the current global turbulence creates both vulnerabilities and opportunities. Geopolitical fragmentation, accelerated energy transition, climate pressures, technological

competition, and tighter global financial conditions all increase uncertainty. At the same time, they also elevate the strategic importance of states capable of acting as reliable partners, regional connectors, and platforms for pragmatic cooperation. In such conditions, Uzbekistan's multidirectional foreign policy acquires clear instrumental value: by diversifying external ties across multiple political and economic centers, the country can reduce dependence, distribute risks, and transform external shocks into development opportunities.

For Uzbekistan, this opens two windows. The first is economic: technology, investment, and new supply chains. The second is political: a new status also means new responsibility. If one is invited to major tables, this is not only an honor, but also a test – a test of stability, responsibility, predictability, and the ability to be a bridge rather than a battlefield of interests.

Uzbekistan has received many high-level visitors. Is this merely 'diplomatic tourism,' or is it a sign of something more? It means that the country is perceived as a point of opportunity rather than a 'territory of problems.' The geographical reach of this interest is also widening. Last December, the President of Paraguay paid the first-ever visit to Uzbekistan – a symbol of how Tashkent is becoming of interest even to distant regions. For investors and state leaders alike, the main requirements are stable rules and a clear strategy. Uzbekistan has learned to speak to the world in the language of projects: industry, logistics, energy, and education.

There is no alternative to a multi-vector policy. The world itself has become multipolar and conflict-prone. To place everything on one partner would be like building a house on a single pile. Multi-vector policy is not a matter of 'sitting on two chairs'; it is insurance for sovereignty and a way to secure better conditions. Competition among investors, technologies, and markets works in our favor if we act intelligently. Tashkent's multi-vector strategy takes on an instrumental meaning: by distributing risks across several economic and political centers, the country can turn external shocks into opportunities for development.

Under these conditions, it has become necessary to align the Republic of Uzbekistan's foreign-policy activity with international realities and the country's new status as a regional power.

Since 2016, within the framework of Uzbekistan's Development Strategy, significant work has been carried out to shape and implement the country's renewed foreign policy. During this period,

a new style of Uzbek foreign policy took shape. It is characterized by a constant aspiration for initiative, a strong sense of dignity, thoroughness, and predictability. The growing influence of Uzbekistan's foreign policy was promoted by a set of measures aimed at creating a fundamentally new political atmosphere in Central Asia, advancing important initiatives at the UN, and taking active steps to deepen international cooperation on the settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan – efforts that received high praise from the international community.

Progress always means responding to challenges. The main challenge for the Uzbek diplomacy is that tasks are multiplying and the workload is growing faster than personnel capacity-building. For this reason, a qualitative leap in personnel development is required in analysis, digital skills, and data and artificial intelligence work. Diplomats of a new generation are needed: languages, economics, digital literacy, and negotiation skills. Diplomacy must also rely more strongly on think tanks, business, the regions, and the diaspora.

The second challenge is how to maintain relations simultaneously with states that are in acute conflict with one another. This is the highest league of diplomacy. We are not obliged to choose a camp; we are obliged to choose the interest of development. This means upholding the principle of respect for international law and non-interference, focusing more on logistics, energy, education, and other areas where there is more benefit and less ideology, and preserving channels of dialogue.

### **It necessitates renewal of Uzbek diplomacy.**

First, intellectualization. Strong diplomacy begins with strong personnel and with a strong analytical capacity. Second, technological diplomacy: artificial intelligence, cyber issues, standards, data protection, and the country's digital reputation.' Third, public diplomacy: rebranding the country, reshaping its international image, and building trust in Uzbekistan as a reliable partner within the international community. Today, trust is also a form of infrastructure.

In light of current trends, it is critically important to build our own mechanisms of regional preventive diplomacy, crisis management, and coordination with neighbors on cross-border threats.

Another priority is the continued strategic diversification of international ties, with an emphasis on technological sovereignty.

Sustained progress in digitalization, human-capital development, and high technologies forms the foundation of competitiveness.

Finally, yet importantly, strengthening parliamentary diplomacy cannot be underestimated. As one of the key branches of power, parliament cannot remain detached from matters related to the defence of national interests in the international arena.

In January 2026, during a meeting with Uzbek diplomats, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev outlined several tasks. He made it clear that boosting economic diplomacy will be the main criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of ambassadors' work. Diplomatic missions are expected to focus on attracting investment and technologies, and opening new export markets. They are also supposed to facilitate increased tourist flows from host countries and to create the necessary conditions for legal labor migration from Uzbekistan to the respective states.

Today, as never before, societies' progress depends on upgrading "human capital", or capacity building. Accordingly, bringing the most advanced foreign universities into partnership with Uzbekistan's universities was defined as one of the most important tasks of diplomatic missions.

Uzbekistan's mission is to be an island of predictability in an unpredictable world and to turn geography into advantage: into routes, markets, technologies, and human capital. At the same time, it must strengthen the Central Asian community, because individually we are interesting, but together we are influential

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