

# Understanding the relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan: from defensive realism to constructivist policy in the period of 1991-2024

Mirjalol Murtozaev O'tkirjon o'g'li

Third-year student at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Junior Research Fellow at the IAIS, Uzbekistan

**Received:** 29 January 2025; **Accepted:** 28 February 2025; **Published:** 31 March 2025

**Abstract:** This paper explores the transition from defensive realism to constructivist policies in Uzbekistan's approach toward Afghanistan, analysing the driving factors behind this shift and its implications for regional stability. By examining key historical moments, policy decisions, and emerging trends, it provides insight into how Uzbekistan's foreign policy has adapted to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Taliban, Airtom Free Zone, realism, constructivism, Trans-Afghan corridor.

**Introduction:** The relationship between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan has historically been shaped by geographical proximity, cultural ties, and shared security concerns. Over the decades, this relationship has evolved under the influence of shifting geopolitical dynamics, regional challenges, and changes in domestic policies. Initially characterized by defensive realism, where Uzbekistan prioritized securing its borders and minimizing external threats from Afghanistan, recent years have seen a gradual shift toward a more constructivist approach, emphasizing cooperation, mutual understanding, and regional integration. Defensive realism, rooted in the idea of self-preservation and power balancing, guided Uzbekistan's policies toward Afghanistan during periods of instability, particularly following the Soviet withdrawal and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. Uzbekistan's strategies during this time focused on fortifying borders, limiting spillover effects of conflict, and maintaining a defensive posture to safeguard its sovereignty. However, as regional dynamics have evolved, Tashkent has increasingly recognized the importance of engaging with Afghanistan through dialogue, development initiatives, and multilateral frameworks. This shift aligns with constructivist principles, where ideas, norms, and identities play a central role in shaping foreign policy. Uzbekistan's renewed approach seeks to foster stability in

Afghanistan through economic cooperation, infrastructure projects, and cultural exchange, reflecting a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between peace and regional prosperity.

## Theoretical Framework. Defensive Realism

First, before understanding defensive realism, it is necessary to understand the essence of realism. John Mearsheimer, one of the most prominent academic realists today, cites five fundamental rules of realism the international system is anarchic. States, by nature, have offensive military capabilities and the ability to harm or destroy each other. No state can ever be sure that another state will not use its offensive military capabilities. The primary motive that governs states is survival. It argues that states are instrumentally rational. Realism is a complex and diverse family of views, theories, and arguments that are routinely applied in international relations. Two main strands of realism are widely prevalent today. Firstly, offensive realism mainly advanced by John Mearsheimer, holds that states seek to increase their power because they can never be sure that current friendly states will not oppose them in the future. Another one is defensive realism, mainly associated with Kenneth Waltz, argues that rational states in anarchy are primarily concerned with maintaining (not improving) their relative power.

Mearsheimer considers offensive realism to be the best or most authentic form of realism. However, most modern realists (and indeed all non-realists) see this as an empirical rather than a theoretical matter. Some states are, in fact, status quo powers. Others are revisionists. How many generations can a defensive realist world of status quo great powers (safe from revisionist states that seek to continually improve their positions) develop (for example, in Europe over the century following Napoleon's defeat in 1815)? Here, it is shown that defensive realism emphasizes the state as the primary and attempts to minimize obstacles in an anarchic international system. It advocates balancing strategies that emphasize the maximum power of the dominant powers without creating alliances that diverge from realism. In particular, after World War II, this defensive realism determined the organizational policies of many states. Then, after the war, the dissolution of the Soviet Union also broke out, with the main goal of preserving and protecting the sovereignty of the breakaway states. It is precisely the Central Asian states that have acted on the principle of preserving their territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Such factors, in the context of Uzbekistan, explain the country's initial focus on border security and minimizing the spread of instability from Afghanistan.

### **Constructivism**

In the process of understanding the emergence of certain political schools, it can be witnessed that the appearance of these schools mostly based on the historical context. Many events that occurred in International Relations in the 20th century, in turn, created the basis for the widespread spread of several political schools in the world. Consequently, after the Cold War, major changes occurred in the theory of international relations. It became clear that classical theories such as realism and liberalism were not flexible enough to explain new events and trends in the international system. In this context, the theory of constructivism clearly demonstrated that interstate relations are formed not only on the basis of power and economic interests, but also through ideas, beliefs, culture, identity and social constructions. It was also seen that the national identity and interests of states are in a state of flux. For example, the process of integration of Central and Eastern European countries from the communist system to the West has fundamentally changed the political orientations of the court identity and organization. In these processes, the importance of trust, historical memory and normative norms of states in each other is demonstrated. The ideas of realism and liberalism, the system of democracy, and the stability of the United States, such

as the system of democracy, are accepted by any state based on its own views and what is suitable for it, and states can determine their position in international relations under any circumstances, and if the time comes, they can change it to another. Alexander Wendt, one of the founders of constructivism, in his book called "Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics", explains the anarchic nature of the international system as a social construction of states and lists several of its manifestations. In this, criticizing realism and liberalism, they consider it wrong to see anarchy as a permanent and unchanging state. Constructivism, on the other hand, explains anarchy as a problem that is shaped by the mutual expectations and problems of states. States and their identities are shaped by how they relate to each other. For example, if states see each other as adversaries, the international system will be more stable. Realism sees anarchy as fixed and permanent. This ignores the social role of states. Liberalism, on the other hand, focuses on cooperation and interdependence, but does not fully understand the importance of norms and powers that organize the international system. Constructivism, on the other hand, offers a broader view of the changing role of norms and anarchy in the international system. That is, anarchy is not natural, but is "created" by states. In his book "The World of Our Making", Nicholas Onuf explained the role of social construction in the international system. Nicholas Onuf was the first scholar to widely use the term "constructivism" in international relations and to formalize the scientific picture, turning it into a modern theoretical school. To give a few real-life examples of his views, let us consider the relations between China and the United States, where the two countries continue to develop economic relations, even though they are considered to be the ruling powers in the global system. According to constructivism, the economic integration of China and the United States is based on the rules of engagement and trade between them. The division and reunification of Germany (1949-1990) was divided into two states, East and West Germany, for almost 40 years. After the end of the Cold War, these states were peacefully reunited. According to constructivism: The division of Germany into East and West was the result of ideological and identity constructions in the international system (socialism and capitalism). The unification is associated with the strengthening of international norms and peace-based powers. Constructivism allows us to analyse interstate relations not only in terms of power and interests, but also in terms of ideas and normative systems. This theory emphasizes the dynamic and fluid nature of the international system, leading to a deeper

understanding of the interdependence of states and the desire for cooperation, and the constant presence of ideas, identities, cultures, and beliefs in social life, shaping interests. Also, the flexible and dynamic nature of constructivism simplifies its application in the system of international relations.

### Background

During the presidency of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan was based on absolute defensive realism. This approach was shaped by the complex security situation in the region, in particular, the Taliban threat, drug trafficking, and terrorism. During the years of independence, Uzbekistan was seriously threatened by the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s and the capture of Kabul in 1996. Islam Karimov took strong security measures on the Afghan border, and the borders were completely closed. Therefore, I. Karimov made the prevention of regional terrorism his main goal. He considered the Taliban, as well as extremist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), to be the main threat to security. To combat this, he did not intervene directly in Afghanistan's internal affairs, but actively participated in the fight against regional terrorism after joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). On July 19-20, 1999, the next meeting of the "6Q2" group on Afghanistan was held in Tashkent under the auspices of the UN. It was attended by delegations of the member countries of the group - at the level of deputy foreign ministers, and the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi. At the end of the meeting, the "Tashkent Declaration" was signed on the main principles of resolving the conflict in Afghanistan. After the US began military operations in Afghanistan in 2001, Uzbekistan strengthened its borders to protect itself from threats associated with the Taliban. Karimov's foreign policy was based on the principle of non-interference in the internal political affairs of Afghanistan. He maintained minimal diplomatic relations with the legitimate government of Afghanistan, only to ensure stability and security. In 2001, Islam Karimov supported the U.S. counterterrorism strategy and allowed the U.S. military to use the Termez military base. According to him: "Instability in Afghanistan poses a direct threat to the security of Uzbekistan. We must use all possibilities to ensure peace in the region."

At the 2008 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit: I. Karimov noted the situation in Afghanistan as a key problem for the security of Central Asia. He assessed the Taliban threat as a threat to global security. "Afghanistan will not be stabilized by military force alone, we must develop regional economic cooperation," Karimov said. In 2011, the Termez-

Mazar-e-Sharif railway resumed its operations. This served to deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and develop trade. Although Uzbek-Afghan relations during the time of Islam Karimov were mainly based on defensive realism, economic and humanitarian assistance initiatives also played an important role. Karimov saw the threats in Afghanistan as a direct threat to national security and supported international cooperation in this matter. In addition to establishing deep political ties with the government of Ashraf Ghani, attention was paid primarily to developing regional dialogue. This foreign policy was associated with a number of problems that arose at the time: corruption, weak governance, and division among political factions. There were also external threats. These included the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the emergence of ISIS-K, and the ongoing violence throughout the country. In 2017, at the initiative of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, an international conference was organized in Tashkent on regional security and the fight against terrorism. Ashraf Ghani emphasized the need for close cooperation with Uzbekistan in the trade, economic and security spheres. This meeting marked the beginning of a new era of relations. Accordingly, on September 10, 2017, at the conference in Kazakhstan, Ashraf Ghani and Shavkat Mirziyoyev held a separate meeting. During the conversation, the head of Uzbekistan proposed to establish an educational centre for training Afghan citizens in the city of Termez, and on November 13 of the same year, the centre began its activities with the visit of the President. This indicates that Uzbekistan's foreign policy has taken a step towards establishing pragmatic, constructive and good-neighbourly relations with Afghanistan. In addition, in 2016, the Termez Cargo Centre complex was opened in the city of Termez. It has been carrying out a number of tasks, including customs clearance, cargo manoeuvring, import-export and transit cargo storage, including customs and terminal storage, as well as intermodal transport, rail and road transport, and processing transit cargo to and from Afghanistan. Such projects have laid the foundation for the next stage of relations between the two countries. The work carried out, based on realism but in terms of ethnic and cultural proximity, has become a sign of constructivism. It has contributed to achieving stability in Afghanistan through initiatives aimed at economic cooperation.

The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 required the consideration of a number of issues between the two countries, and indeed between the countries of Central Asia as a whole. Uzbekistan did not officially recognize the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, but continued to maintain neighbourly and diplomatic relations. Among other things, meetings with Taliban

representatives were held in Tashkent, and many ministerial meetings were held and are still taking place in Kabul. With the Taliban's coming to power, Uzbekistan was forced to move from realism to constructivism in its foreign policy. Uzbekistan established functional relations with the Taliban. The main goal is to prevent possible threats from Afghanistan and ensure stability in the region. In 2022, the Uzbek government held talks with Taliban representatives in Termez and discussed border security and humanitarian assistance. Uzbekistan pays special attention to developing economic cooperation with Afghanistan. In this process, the integration of Afghanistan into the regional economic network has been identified as a priority. In particular, the Termez-Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway project is being discussed with the Taliban government and is expected to serve to strengthen trade relations between Central Asia and South Asia. Uzbekistan also continues to export electricity to Afghanistan. After the Taliban came to power, the economic and social crisis in Afghanistan deepened. In this situation, Uzbekistan regularly supplies food, medicine and other necessary humanitarian aid to Afghanistan through Termez. Also, in late 2021, Uzbekistan, in cooperation with the UN, established a centre for coordinating international assistance to Afghanistan.

In 2021, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's speech at the UN General Assembly: "The new situation in Afghanistan poses complex challenges for us. But we can achieve stability by involving this country in regional integration processes." At the "International Conference on Afghanistan" held in Tashkent in 2022, Uzbekistan discussed specific measures to include Afghanistan in regional trade and infrastructure projects. Mirziyoyev: "If Afghanistan becomes a peaceful and stable state, it will serve the development of the entire region." Shavkat Mirziyoyev touches on the goal of dialogue with the Taliban: "We seek to develop friendly and pragmatic relations with Afghanistan. This is necessary not only for regional security, but also for economic stability." With the emergence of the Taliban government, Uzbekistan has shifted its policy towards constructivism. This policy is aimed at ensuring regional security and strengthening economic ties. By engaging with the Taliban and developing economic cooperation, Uzbekistan has chosen a pragmatic and realistic approach to protect its national interests and contribute to regional stability.

### Analysis.

**From 1990 to 2016, the administration's stance was defensive realism.** Basic principle: Uzbekistan adopted a defensive realist stance in response to the internal turmoil and terrorist threats of the Ashraf Ghani-led

Afghan government. Strengthening security measures was its primary objective. The threat of terrorist groups entering Afghanistan was prevented by strengthening border control. Extremist organizations like the Taliban and ISIS-K (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - Khorasan Province) were stopped from spreading. Additionally, a multilateral strategy was used. Under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Uzbekistan backed group efforts to maintain regional stability. By refraining from direct political interference. Attention was paid to non-interference in Afghanistan's internal political affairs and external support for stability.

### Politics during the Taliban government. Transition to constructivism.

With the Taliban seizing power in 2021, the political situation changed dramatically. This forced Uzbekistan to adopt a new approach. With the Taliban coming to power, the issue of political stability in Afghanistan became uncertain. This created security threats for Central Asian countries, in particular Uzbekistan. The strategy of dialogue with the Taliban has become important in controlling problems such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. Continuing dialogue with the Taliban is interpreted as a pragmatic approach to Uzbekistan's foreign policy. This is not seen as a recognition of the political situation, but as an act aimed at protecting regional security and economic interests. Uzbekistan has tried to ensure stability in Afghanistan by acting as a mediator in the international community. Uzbekistan continues its efforts to develop regional trade and economic ties with Afghanistan. The Termez-Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway project, which was agreed upon with the Taliban government, will help integrate Afghanistan into the Central Asian and South Asian economic system. At the same time, Uzbekistan is supplying food, medicine, and energy to support Afghanistan's fragile economy. Weaknesses: Despite positive connections, Uzbekistan's security may be at risk due to the Taliban government's erratic policies. demands keeping a careful balance between communication and security.

Generally speaking, Uzbekistan's approach to Afghanistan has changed considerably throughout time. The constructivist approach has evolved as a policy aiming at long-term regional stability and cooperation, whereas the realist phase was focused on maintaining Uzbekistan's security. Uzbekistan is safeguarding its national interests and assisting Afghanistan's absorption into the international system by engaging in discussion with the Taliban. Weaknesses: Long-term cooperation opportunities have not been exploited. The ties necessary for regional economic development have not been sufficiently



developed. Constructivism (Taliban era). Active diplomatic relations with the Taliban serve to strengthen stability. Economic cooperation and cultural ties increase trust and help regional integration.

## CONCLUSION

Uzbekistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan has undergone two significant changes in recent years. The first phase began in 1991, during the end of the Ashraf Ghani administration (1991-2021), when Uzbekistan emphasized security and transformed the US approach into a defensive realist policy. Border strengthening and security issues were addressed within multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the threat of internal insurgency and terrorism in Afghanistan was prevented from harming Central Asia. Uzbekistan kept its policy of non-interference in domestic affairs bleak with regard to Afghanistan during this period. The military power takeover of the Taliban over Afghanistan in 2021 signified major changes in the political map and called for alterations in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Talks with the Taliban inspired Uzbekistan to initiate action on constructivist principles. This period witnessed Uzbekistan's immovable policy of non-involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021 meant a drastic change in the political landscape, requiring changes in the foreign policy of Uzbekistan. The Taliban's talks inspired Uzbekistan to act upon constructivist principles. Uzbekistan established diplomatic ties with the Taliban and adopted a strategy to secure its borders and promote regional stability, albeit without formally recognizing the Taliban regime. Uzbekistan's constructive approach has been enriched by a number of initiatives aimed at developing economic and regional ties. In particular, the Termez-Mazar-e Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway project has become an important step towards regional economic integration. In addition, the Trans-Afghan Corridor is also one of the key projects today. If this project is implemented, Uzbekistan will have access to the sea and will have access to cheap trade services, and trade relations with the world will expand significantly. Afghanistan's economic growth will also increase significantly. Uzbekistan has also provided electricity, food and humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan. This policy is aimed at mitigating instability in the region and supporting the Afghan economy. The differences between the policies of these two periods clearly demonstrate the practical application of realism and constructivism. While realism from 1990 to 2016 was successful in ensuring security, it did not exploit the potential for long-term economic and regional cooperation. Constructivism during the Taliban era

focused on building trust through developing economic and cultural ties. It is clear that the Afghan people have developed a sense of familiarity with Uzbekistan and created bonds of friendship with it. Constructive approaches, indeed, bear fruit. The Airtom Free Zone, which has also for years enjoyed such use, is quite the manifest evidence of such.

The Afghan market was highly free there, and they engaged in very high-quality buying and selling. The goal of Uzbekistan's future policy toward Afghanistan will be to ensure sustained development by managing security and economic cooperation in a balanced manner. New possibilities may arise from chances for regional integration, international cooperation, and expanding commercial connections. Nevertheless, the erratic actions and perilous threats posed by the Taliban regime could still create potentially fatal complications for Uzbekistan. In all likelihood, such prudential foreign policy of Uzbekistan testifies to its ability to adapt itself to changing situations in the region. Uzbekistan, therefore, besides guard its security, contributes actively in preserving the regional peace in Central Asia by combining its economic and security goals. This makes Uzbekistan a reliable and responsible actor.

## REFERENCES

- Lobell, S. (2017, December 22). Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies.  
<https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-304>.
- Onuf, N. (2012). World of our making: Rules and rule in social theory and international relations. Routledge.
- Onuf, N. (2015). World Society of Our Making. Making Human: World Order and the Global Governance of Human Dignity, 200.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. "Structural Realism after the Cold War." International Security, vol. 25 no. 1, 2000, p. 5-41. Project MUSE, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/447711>.
- Wendt, A. (1995). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics (1992). In International Theory: Critical Investigations (pp. 129-177). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Scientific and Enlightenment Memorial Complex named after Islam Karimov. (2025). Tashqi siyosat. 1999 yil. <https://islomkarimov.uz/uz/page/tashqi-siyosat-1999-yil>
- Official web-site of the President of Uzbekistan. (2017b, September 10). President of Uzbekistan met with the President of Afghanistan.  
<https://theusajournals.com/index.php/ijhps>

<https://president.uz/en/lists/view/1016>

Official web-site of the President of Uzbekistan. (2021, September 21). Speech by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

<https://president.uz/en/lists/view/4632>

Official web-site of the President of Uzbekistan. (2018, March 27). Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the international conference on Afghanistan «Peace process, security cooperation and regional connectivity».

<https://president.uz/en/lists/view/1601>

<https://termezcargo.com/uz>

<https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2022/tashkent-hosts-international-conference-on-afghanistan---31742>