

Evolving Sino-Uzbek relations: a constructivist analysis of the belt and road initiative and recent reforms (2015-2023)

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Abstract: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched by the People's Republic of China in 2013. After a while, it has been regarded as one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects throughout modern history due to its trillion-dollar expenditures and the involvement of multiple states. It aims to connect the Eurasian and African continents into one network of transport and trade routes. This initiative from a certain angle revives the ancient Silk Road and promotes economic integration across regions. Uzbekistan is, from its geographical position, located in a double-landlocked place in Central Asia. Hence, it has been experiencing difficulties in foreign trade and political connectivity since its establishment. The Chinese project, the BRI, provides an opportunity to expand its global presence and modernize its economy. Despite its significance, the academic space has not fully captured the evolving dynamics of Sino-Uzbek relations under the BRI. Existing literature often addresses the broader scope of the BRI or China's influence in Central Asia but fails to adequately explore Uzbekistan's unique position within the initiative. As a critical intersection in the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, Uzbekistan represents a case of successful alignment between a national development strategy and a global connectivity project. This underexplored aspect makes the study of Sino-Uzbek relations particularly relevant.

Keywords: Sino-Uzbek relations, constructivist analysis, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Introduction: In Uzbekistan since 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has introduced significant political reforms. These reforms focus on economic liberalization, enhancing regional cooperation, and attracting foreign investments. The alignment of these reforms with the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative has transformed Sino-Uzbek relations into a strategic partnership. The effects of Mirziyoyev's "Action Strategy for 2017–2021," particularly in trade liberalization and modernizing infrastructures, have been a focal point in Uzbekistan's active engagement with the BRI. The Ferghana Valley's Angren-Pop railway and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan multimodal corridor are two of the major infrastructure projects that demonstrate the practical benefits of this cooperation (Qoraboyev, 2018; Umarov, 2023). This report seeks to answer the question: How have China's BRI-related projects' economic corridors (that cross the territories of Uzbekistan) and did President Sh.Mirziyoyev's domestic reforms influence the

evolution of Sino-Uzbek relations. In order to make it more transparent, the report shows things in sections. As in the first paragraphs, the framework of the relations between those states in IR theories is included. The follow-up section is a background description of the bilateral relationship throughout a certain timeframe. After that, the analysis focuses on key factors such as geopolitics, economics, infrastructure, and identity. These are the main topics being examined. The report concludes with a summary of the findings and a discussion about why they are important and future plausible policy suggestions. Additional contexts concern the alignment of Uzbekistan's reforms with BRI goals, the role of historical ties, and the impact on regional connectivity. The study uses qualitative methods: they include both governments' bilateral and domestic policy documents, bilateral trade data via BRI projects, and case studies of key BRI projects in order to understand these dynamics. By highlighting the role of shared ideas in international

relations, the paper sheds light on Central Asia's growing geopolitical importance.

Theoretical framework.

Bilateral relations between China and Uzbekistan (mostly related to their interconnected initiative, BRI) can be analyzed within constructivist viewpoints and its framework. Realism, which centers its logic on ideas like survival to the fittest, balance of power, strong takes down weak states, etc., or liberalism, in which institutional cooperation and economic interdependence are the only way to achieve true prosperity. Unlike IR theories above, constructivism highlights the importance of shared ideas, norms, and identities in shaping the behavior of states. It will be more accurate if one tries to imagine the sight of a garden. Gardens' growth depends not just on the quality of soil or the weather because its master's choices (about what to plant and how to nurture it) are major influencers. Gardeners can create a magnificent place or let it become another jungle, based on their decisions. In the same way, states' national interests are rooted (not in human nature) in mutual understandings of people rather than solely determined by material realities. In short, a garden is what its master makes of it, the analogy to Alexander Wendt's influential statement. (Wendt, 1999). Realism explains state behavior as driven by survival and power competition. In the context of Sino-Uzbek relations, realism might highlight China's pursuit of strategic dominance in Central Asia and Uzbekistan's balancing foreign policy between major powers like Russia and China. However, this attitude does not take the cooperative dimension of their partnership and its effect towards regional economic prosperity, and stability into account. Liberalism, on the other hand, would frame the BRI as an extension of institutional and trade-based cooperation, emphasizing Uzbekistan's integration into global markets. While valid, this view neglects the role of cultural and historical ties that underpin the relationship.

Constructivism fills the pores that were left out by former theories to fully understand this phenomenon. The theory recognizes how China's portrayal of the BRI projects is not merely power projection schemes but as a "civilizational project". Unexpectedly from the other side, Uzbekistan's historical identity, ancient Uzbek cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara were renowned as centers of trade, culture, and intellectual exchange, which provided the foundations for Uzbekistan's claim as a key hub and controller of the ancient Silk Road that resonates with its Chinese counterpart. Both narratives affected the dynamics of the mutual partnership between them. An interesting approach would be comparing President Mirziyoyev's speech about the

state of Uzbekistan as a "bridge" between Eastern and Western continents and China's one of the great long-term political visions of the whole of Eurasia. Both political concepts somehow coincide with one another and strive to promote the integration of Eurasia, which accelerates mutual cooperation. (Dadabaev, 2018; Komolitdinova & JianPing, 2020).

Uzbekistan's infrastructure projects are integrated into the Belt and Road Initiative's China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, and this reflects both economic pragmatism and a shared commitment to regional connectivity. The \$22.8 billion economic package was signed during Mirziyoyev's visit to China in 2017, and it clearly indicates that mutual trust and aligned goals drive this partnership. Additionally, any means of cultural and educational programs, like the ones with Confucius Institutes and educational exchanges. They also represent that shared norms and values complete the part of material investments, and strengthen cooperation. (Umarov, 2023; Qoraboyev, 2018).

Constructivism helps explain how Uzbekistan actively shapes its relationship with China. Instead of just accepting Chinese investments, Uzbekistan uses its location and economic strengths to get fair deals that benefit both sides. This challenges the common idea that smaller countries are always dependent on bigger ones. By looking at real examples and using constructivist theory, we can see how complex the relationship between Uzbekistan and China is. It also shows that shared ideas and goals can have a big impact on global projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.

Background

Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991, and China was one of the first countries to recognize it. That action was a sign that their ties had been created since its establishment. Diplomatic ties were established in 1992, although both sides would get little benefit. This partnership gained traction as China emerged as a major economic and political power. In the early years, China's engagement in Uzbekistan was limited to small-scale trade and technical assistance. During the presidency period of Karimov, Uzbekistan basically implemented protectionism. The early years of Karimov and beyond that period had only one substantial plan, the administration's plan – achieving self-sufficiency as soon as possible. However, as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was introduced in 2013, the dynamics of this relationship shifted significantly.

China is interested in Uzbekistan for several reasons. Uzbekistan's location is very important because it connects key regions in the China-Central Asia-West

Asia Economic Corridor. The country also has valuable resources like natural gas, uranium, and rare earth metals, which attract Chinese investments in energy and mining. Along with economic reasons, China has political goals. It wants to keep Central Asia stable to stop extremism from spreading and to protect its western areas, especially Xinjiang. (Dadabaev, 2018).

The death of President Islam Karimov in 2016 brought big changes to Uzbekistan's foreign policy. The new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, took a different approach. He focused on working with neighboring countries and opening up the economy. In February 2017, Uzbekistan adopted a thoroughly crafted reform manifesto: the 2017-2021 National Development Strategy. That strategy possesses five priority areas: reform of public administration; reform of the judiciary and empowering the rule of law; economic development and liberalization; the social area; and security and foreign policy. The Strategy concerns accomplishing 5 main goals to boost economic development and liberalization. First, it is to keep the economy stable and maintain strong economic growth. Another one is that it plans to make the national economy more competitive by pushing for deeper reforms and updating key industries. Third, it focuses on improving agriculture and helping it grow faster. Fourth, it includes reforms to reduce the government's control over the economy, protect private property rights, and support small businesses and private entrepreneurship. Finally, it emphasizes balanced growth across all regions, districts, and cities to ensure fair development everywhere. These reforms made Uzbekistan a more attractive partner for China, aligning with the BRI's goals of connectivity and trade facilitation. (South Caucasus and Central Asia, 2020). Another subsequent government agenda is already in process - the New Uzbekistan Development Strategy. This strategy is somehow a further continuation of the previous agenda and smoothly aligns with the BRI projects. The well-known ancient Silk Road was redesigned as the new global "The Silk Road Economic Belt" over the land. To the world's surprise, through the seas as well, "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". Both of the projects were announced in the early fall as a "One Belt One Road" project by China in 2013. Cultural, political, economic, and free trade exchange structures are shown through developing marine routes and building roads over the land among 68 Asian, African, and European countries. In figures, it is approximately 50% of resources in the universe and 40 percent of global GDP are covered in this international project. Establishing large-scale prospects for the nations that were involved in the joint venture, the initiative has been integrated with five aspects by the Chinese

government. These aspects are policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. Financial integration calls for establishing a common financial system within OBOR under the AIIB, BRICS New Development Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) development bank, and support the Silk Road Fund. Building connections between nations means promoting cultural and academic exchanges that benefit everyone.

Throughout the previous decades, Uzbekistan has been through relationships with big powers like Russia, China, and the United States of America by balancing relative influences. However, the vast amount of Chinese investments through the Initiative has solely made China a more important partner for Uzbekistan. This has raised questions about Uzbekistan's ability to maintain its strategic autonomy. Despite everything, Uzbekistan's leadership still managed to turn this very cooperation with China into an instrument for promoting the interests of its national development goals. For example, infrastructure modernization and industrial growth: construction of the Angren-Pap railway and modernization of the Navoi Free Economic Zone (Qoraboyev, 2018).

Besides this, cultural and educational exchanges have also warmed up Sino-Uzbek ties. The establishment of Confucius Institutes in Uzbekistan and the growing numbers of Uzbek students studying in China reflects a softer power dimension of the relationship. Indeed, these have led not only to greater people-to-people contact but also to the creation of a labor force that could operate and manage Chinese-driven initiatives within the region. (Komolitdinova & JianPing, 2020).

The relationship has indeed been positive overall, but it has also had its downside. Debts that come from projects, dependency on Chinese technology, and restricted local participation in BRI projects are all sources of debate in Uzbekistan. Addressing these issues is very crucial in order to ensure that the partnership will be mutual and long-term. (Dadabaev, 2018).

Analysis.

Identity and Norm Evolution

Constructivist analysis highlights how shared norms and historical identities have strengthened Sino-Uzbek ties. For Uzbekistan's nation, its foreign policy, the Silk Road narrative is not just a legacy or symbol but a tool to project its aspirations for leadership in regional connectivity and trade. This fits well with China's idea of the OBOR as a way to promote mutual growth. By demonstrating its important role in the Silk Road's legacy, Uzbekistan has made itself a key partner in

China's plans for better connections. (Dadabaev, 2018; Komolitdinova & JianPing, 2020). The interplay between historical identity and contemporary policy is further evident in Uzbekistan's proactive engagement with the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. Rather than passively responding to Chinese initiatives, Uzbekistan has actively sought to shape its role within the BRI framework, drawing on historical and geographic advantages. Such a strategic approach challenges traditional dependency narratives, placing Uzbekistan as an agent in co-creating a new Silk Road narrative with benefits for both nations.

Infrastructure development is central to the BRI's impact in Uzbekistan. The Angren-Pap railway, completed in 2016 with a \$2 billion investment, connects the Fergana Valley to Uzbekistan's broader transport network. This project reduces transport times and costs, facilitating smoother trade flows. A similar trend can be seen in the boost of regional trade due to the multimodal corridor of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan. Using sea routes to transport goods between these regions has decreased by 15% and increased exports in agriculture, textiles, and manufacturing (World Bank, 2020; Komolitdinova & JianPing, 2020). The improvements in infrastructure backed by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also help make the economy more inclusive. Investments in secondary roads and logistics hubs enhance access for remote communities, linking them to larger markets. This dual effect of national and regional connectivity highlights the BRI's transformative potential. For the sake of the national interest of Uzbekistan, these mentioned projects are considered more than material benefits; they, in some sense, symbolize a return to its previous historical role as a key player in regional trade (South Caucasus and Central Asia, 2020).

Governance in Uzbekistan under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has exhibited deep engagement with the Chinese model of incremental reform. The similarity of his pragmatic policy, especially his strategy of pilot regions, is akin to the Chinese approach of "crossing the river by feeling for stones." Indeed, Mirziyoyev is often compared to Deng Xiaoping. For instance, the Jizzakh region has been designated as a testing ground for agricultural specialization, an initiative that reflects how Uzbekistan adapts successful foreign practices to its local context (Qoraboyev, 2018).

In addition, the experience of China in poverty reduction has influenced the approaches of Uzbekistan. By January 2022, Uzbekistan had set a national poverty line of 498,000 Uzbekistani soums (\$46) per month, drawing on the experiences of China's integrated methods of poverty reduction. Emphasis on the development of strong social infrastructure, such as

access to clean water and modernization of healthcare, is in line with BRI principles of inclusive development. During a February 2022 meeting in Beijing, Mirziyoyev and Xi Jinping agreed to jointly study and implement Chinese methods of combating poverty. This alignment demonstrates the integration of governance practices rooted in shared developmental goals (South Caucasus and Central Asia Belt and Road Initiative, 2020; Qoraboyev, 2018).

Economic Integration

Uzbekistan and China have signed numerous joint agreements for regional economic integration under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These joint agreements can be considered full proof of the existence of constructivism principles. China turned into the largest investor in Uzbekistan after the construction of the BRI in 2015. Bilateral trade grew from \$4.1 billion in 2015 to \$9.8 billion in 2022. These investments are mostly spent on key sectors such as renewable energy firms in the Navoi and Samarkand regions, on the development of industrial parks and logistics centers.

The normative evolution within the Sino-Uzbek economic relationship is evident in the creation of new financial and regulatory frameworks. For example, the unification of Uzbekistan's currency exchange rates and guarantees for investor rights demonstrate how shared principles of economic openness have been institutionalized. This reflects a shift in Uzbekistan's norms toward greater integration into global financial systems, facilitated by its partnership with China.

Cultural values also help in building economic ties. Frequent meetings between leaders and long-term agreements show mutual respect and understanding. Sino-Uzbek nations seeing their political leaders having a collaborative project with a strong emphasis on a win-win position possibly create a cooperative identity. This evolution will make working easier for both parties. Using constructivist ideas and real-life examples, we can see that the partnership between Uzbekistan and China is not just about money. It is about shared values and cooperation as well.

Geopolitical Implications

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has dramatically changed Uzbekistan's strategic situation. The Initiative put the country in the context of regional and global connectivity. By joining economic corridors like the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, Uzbekistan has improved its standing as a key transit country. This passage makes Uzbekistan stronger on the world stage and connects trade routes from East Asia to Europe and the Middle East. From a constructivist perspective, changing scenarios reflect

shifting regional norms where connectivity and interdependence are rewriting the meaning of power.

Probably the most important transformative project, but one that really epitomizes these changes, is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan corridor. This is a multi-modal corridor, bypassing traditional Russian-dominated routes, giving Uzbekistan much greater scope to develop alternative routes and decrease reliance on Moscow. Uzbekistan establishes a key position in Central Asia through this corridor, therefore supporting new norms of multipolar engagement stressing sovereignty and balanced diplomacy. These changes indicate how actively Uzbekistan shapes its geopolitical identity instead of merely following different outside influences. (Dadabaev, 2018; Umarov, 2023). Another important and extensive corridor is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, which connects Uzbekistan to Europe by crossing states like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The line will replace existing overland routes across Russia. TITR will give Uzbekistan a broader range of options in the European market and will also facilitate a wider range of its commercial relations. Closer relations with both Turkey and the European Union make Uzbekistan less dependent on one player and allow it to evolve towards greater regional autonomy and multilateralism. Constructivist analysis may underline the fact that participation means a redefinition of role of Uzbekistan within the global order according to common ideas on regional development and integration.

For China, or any other great power security concerns will always be the priority; for China's domestic policy, its Xinjiang. Through the connection with Uzbekistan (Central Asia), it eliminates the causes of future possible regional instability. Additionally, the People's Republic of China will surely benefit from accessing new foreign local markets, and resources. The narratives about the Silk Road revival are present in both countries, and this situation consolidates mutual trust between China and Uzbekistan. High-level diplomatic exchanges and cultural initiatives, including joint festivals and Confucius Institutes, further institutionalize this trust, reflecting how norms evolve alongside material investments (Komolitdinova & JianPing, 2020). The Belt and Road Initiative's lines, and corridors crossed more than 64 countries. If those countries were categorized based on their energy business with China, nearly half of them would be included in the coal-leading energy category, and Uzbekistan would be one of them.

The BRI has given Uzbekistan a chance to rebalance its foreign policy. At the same time as nurturing close relations with China, Uzbekistan is still pursuing relations with Russia, Turkey, and Western powers.

This shows a normative turn toward pragmatic diplomacy, in which Uzbekistan maximizes its geopolitical benefit while maintaining sovereignty. The diversification of trade and diplomatic channels through BRI corridors has given Uzbekistan the leeway it needs to negotiate in an increasingly complex international environment. This approach, therefore, befits the constructivist logic by highlighting how changing norms and identities shape a nation's external engagements.

Domestic industries in Uzbekistan have increasingly collaborated with Chinese firms to leverage technological expertise. For instance, Artel, the largest electronics manufacturer in Uzbekistan, partners with the Chinese firm Midea to produce a wide range of consumer electronics, from smartphones to household appliances. This collaboration illustrates the increasing reliance on Chinese technology in almost all spheres, from consumer goods to government infrastructure projects. In 2018, a controversy erupted when it was revealed that art installations in Tashkent were sourced directly from AliExpress, illustrating the depth of reliance on Chinese e-commerce platforms (Qoraboyev, 2018; South Caucasus and Central Asia Belt and Road Initiative, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The development of Sino-Uzbek relations through the Belt and Road Initiative shows how combining national reforms with global projects can create significant change. A constructivist perspective highlights how shared ideas and historical ties have shaped this collaboration.

Uzbekistan's participation in projects like the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor has improved its political and economic influence. These projects have made Uzbekistan a key player in regional connections and given it more control over its foreign policy. The idea of Uzbekistan as a bridge between East and West connects to its history on the Silk Road. China benefits from secure trade routes and resources while sharing a vision of reviving the Silk Road with Uzbekistan. The government should look into these several possible foreign policy suggestions. They are plausible for the future implications for the Republic of Uzbekistan. Initially, balance is not solely attached to military power but to other fields as well. Hence, Uzbekistan should continue to expand its diplomatic and trade relations beyond China to maintain economic, and strategic autonomy. Engagement with other regional and global actors, including Turkey, the European Union, and India, can help Uzbekistan avoid over-dependence on a single partner. On the other hand, Uzbekistan should benefit from making the

relationship levels of Russia and China equal in every means of level to stabilize political advantage. In addition, the government should engage more actively with BRI projects and their collaboration process with local businesses. Constructing major partnership agreements as joint ventures will provide stable and equal opportunities and income within the place of Uzbekistan. Also, Uzbekistan could plausibly be at an advantage by managing the risks of foreign debt dependencies by spending a high proportion of loans on investing in local industrial or post-industrial firms.

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