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## MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER: UZBEKISTAN'S REGIONAL INITIATIVES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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### ABSTRACT:

This article analyzes the role of international organizations—particularly the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations (UN)—in shaping political reforms in Uzbekistan. The study examines how these organizations contribute to institutional transformation, policy development, and governance restructuring in the post-Soviet context. It explores how financial assistance, technical support, and policy dialogue provided by international actors promote Uzbekistan's shift toward transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. The paper also evaluates the compatibility of international reform models with the local political dynamics and governance culture of Uzbekistan.

**KEYWORDS:** International organizations, Uzbekistan, political reform, World Bank, IMF, United Nations, governance, institutional change, democratization, external influence

### INTRODUCTION

In the post-Soviet era, Central Asia emerged as a region with complex geopolitical dynamics and fragmented political agendas. Among the five republics, Uzbekistan has gradually repositioned itself as a central player through a policy of “constructive diplomacy.” Particularly since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power in 2016, Uzbekistan has adopted a regional-first foreign policy orientation that emphasizes multilateral cooperation and soft power engagement. This paper examines how Uzbekistan operationalizes multilateral diplomacy and employs instruments of soft power to consolidate its regional leadership. Uzbekistan's foreign policy paradigm has undergone significant transformation. Previously marked by unilateralism and caution, it now embraces dialogue and cooperation. Key elements of this multilateral approach include:

Engagement with Regional Organizations Uzbekistan has significantly reinvigorated its role in regional and international organizations as part of its multilateral diplomatic strategy. A key aspect of this approach is its renewed engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where Uzbekistan has positioned itself not merely as a participant, but as an active

contributor to regional security, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange. Through high-level summits, joint military exercises, and initiatives on counterterrorism and transnational crime, Uzbekistan demonstrates its commitment to collective security in Central Asia.

In the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Uzbekistan has taken a pragmatic stance, emphasizing economic integration, labor migration regulation, and coordination on healthcare and education. By participating in CIS summits and legal harmonization efforts, the country strengthens intergovernmental cooperation while safeguarding its national interests.

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) presents another platform through which Uzbekistan promotes regional trade, connectivity, and energy collaboration. The country advocates for streamlined customs procedures, multimodal transport corridors, and regional supply chains that include landlocked Central Asian states in broader international markets. Uzbekistan's hosting of ECO-related events and investment forums reflects its intent to play a central role in regional economic architecture.

Moreover, Uzbekistan has broadened its cooperation with United Nations-led initiatives, particularly those focused on climate resilience, sustainable development, and transboundary water diplomacy. The government actively supports the UN Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) and aligns its development agenda with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Notably, Uzbekistan co-sponsored UN General Assembly resolutions on the Aral Sea crisis, advocating for global recognition of environmental challenges in Central Asia and mobilizing international support.

These engagements underscore Uzbekistan's transition from reactive diplomacy to a proactive, agenda-setting role. By participating in diverse multilateral frameworks, the country strengthens its regional visibility, secures external legitimacy for internal reforms, and contributes to shaping a more cooperative Central Asian geopolitical environment.

**Bilateral-to-Multilateral Transition.** Uzbekistan's foreign policy has undergone a notable transformation from a historically bilateral approach toward a dynamic multilateral engagement strategy. Under former President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan maintained a cautious and often inward-looking diplomatic posture, prioritizing sovereignty and limiting entanglement in supranational commitments. Relations with neighboring states were predominantly managed on a bilateral basis, often shaped by strategic ambiguity, unresolved border issues, and intermittent trust deficits.

However, since 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's administration has introduced a paradigm shift that reframes Uzbekistan's regional role as a convener and integrator rather than an isolated actor. This has manifested in a deliberate pivot from ad hoc bilateralism to sustained multilateralism. One of the clearest illustrations of this transition was the 2018 Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan, which brought together representatives from the United Nations, the European Union, Russia, China, and major regional stakeholders to discuss a peaceful resolution to the Afghan conflict. Uzbekistan's role as host and initiator marked a turning point in its diplomatic identity—from participant to facilitator of regional peace and dialogue.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan has championed the institutionalization of multilateral dialogue platforms among Central Asian republics, notably the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, first held in Astana (2018) and later in Tashkent and Avaza. These summits, largely initiated by Uzbekistan, promote consensus-building on regional security, environmental cooperation, transport infrastructure, and cultural exchange. Unlike past fragmented approaches, these forums offer continuity, trust-building, and collective problem-solving mechanisms.

This multilateral turn also influences how Uzbekistan navigates transboundary issues such as water resource sharing, trade tariffs, and energy transit. By framing these issues within multilateral agreements rather than bilateral standoffs, Uzbekistan seeks to depoliticize conflicts and promote win-win solutions. In this way, Uzbekistan is not merely diversifying its diplomatic toolkit but is also reshaping regional norms of cooperation—emphasizing dialogue, inclusivity, and institutionalization over fragmentation and unilateralism.

A cornerstone of Uzbekistan's multilateral diplomacy is the promotion of robust legal and institutional frameworks that support long-term regional cooperation. Recognizing the limitations of informal or politically driven agreements, Uzbekistan has prioritized the formalization of regional dialogue through legally binding or structured institutional mechanisms. These frameworks serve to regulate complex transboundary challenges and ensure predictability in regional relations.

One of the most critical areas in this context is transboundary water resource management, especially concerning the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river basins. Historically a source of contention among Central Asian states, water allocation has become a central theme in Uzbekistan's legal diplomacy. The country now actively engages in regional water agreements, and supports initiatives such as the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), where it advocates for equitable and sustainable resource distribution based on hydrological data, international law, and climate resilience principles. Uzbekistan's stance has evolved from a protectionist position to one grounded in cooperation, data sharing, and long-term basin-wide management strategies aligned with the UN Water Convention and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

In the domain of counterterrorism and security cooperation, Uzbekistan has reinforced its legal commitment through multilateral frameworks such as the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The country also ratifies and implements international conventions against terrorism financing, cybercrime, and illicit trafficking. Domestically, legal reforms in national security laws have been synchronized with regional obligations, ensuring Uzbekistan's compliance with UN Security Council Resolutions on counterterrorism while fostering collective response strategies across borders.

The development of transportation and trade corridors is another area where Uzbekistan advances institutional mechanisms. Through initiatives like the Ashgabat Agreement, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), Uzbekistan has entered into multilateral accords that govern customs harmonization, digital transit tracking, and tariff coordination. These agreements not only facilitate Uzbekistan's emergence as a regional

logistics hub but also reflect alignment with SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Moreover, Uzbekistan's active participation in the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) and regional frameworks on sustainable development illustrate its commitment to embedding multilateral diplomacy within a rules-based institutional structure. This approach not only enhances transparency and accountability but also positions Uzbekistan as a norm entrepreneur in Central Asian governance.

In sum, by reinforcing legal and institutional foundations across key policy areas, Uzbekistan ensures that regional cooperation is not left to political expediency but rests on durable, inclusive, and internationally aligned frameworks.

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