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THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA–TAJIKISTAN STRATEGIC COOPERATION FOR UZBEKISTAN

Abstract. *This article examines China's relations with Central Asian countries, with particular emphasis on its strategic cooperation with Tajikistan. It analyzes the possible implications of this bilateral partnership for Uzbekistan, focusing on regional security, alternative transport corridors, economic dependence, and competition over strategic resources. Drawing on policy reports, international news coverage, and comparative analysis, the article identifies possible changes in Uzbekistan's transit position, its regional security environment, and its capacity to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy. The findings indicate that closer China–Tajikistan cooperation may strengthen border protection and economic connectivity, while also creating long-term risks of asymmetric dependence and reduced room for diplomatic maneuver. These consequences remain contingent on infrastructure implementation, regional stability, and the choices made by Central Asian governments.*

Keywords: *China–Tajikistan relations, Wakhan Corridor, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), multi-vector foreign policy, transit corridors, regional security*

INTRODUCTION

Cooperation between China and the countries of Central Asia has expanded steadily, and Tajikistan has become one of Beijing's closest regional partners. Their relationship was elevated to a strategic level during Xi Jinping's visit to Tajikistan in July 2024. During President Emomali Rahmon's state visit to China in May 2026, the two countries signed a treaty on perpetual friendship, good-neighborliness, and cooperation, giving their partnership a legally binding foundation. Approximately 31 intergovernmental documents were also signed in fields including trade, investment, artificial intelligence, green mining, and agriculture (The Diplomat, 2026a).

Alongside the economic dimension, security cooperation is expanding rapidly and may raise especially important questions for Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan shares borders with both Tajikistan and Afghanistan, while China's Central Asian transport strategy has historically relied heavily on corridors passing through Uzbek territory. A more prominent role for Tajikistan could change this configuration (GIS Reports, 2026). This article therefore examines how China–Tajikistan cooperation could affect Uzbekistan's regional security calculations, transit advantages, and multi-vector diplomacy.

METHODS

The study uses qualitative content analysis and comparative analysis of policy assessments and open-source reports concerning China–Tajikistan strategic cooperation. Sources include studies by the Carnegie Endowment, the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), and GIS Reports; an OECD report; and reporting published in 2025–2026 by Reuters, The Diplomat, The Times of Central Asia, Eurasianet, and The National Interest. The analysis compares evidence across three themes: security cooperation, transport and economic dependency, and critical mineral resources. It then evaluates their possible implications for Uzbekistan. As an interpretive, document-based study, it identifies plausible risks and scenarios rather than establishing causal effects or forecasting outcomes with certainty.

RESULTS

Security cooperation and the changing regional environment

China's security cooperation with Tajikistan has deepened in recent years and accelerated following incidents in late 2025. In November 2025, Chinese workers were killed in attacks originating from the Afghan side of the border in Tajikistan's Khatlon region. Tajik authorities reported that the attacks had come from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province (Reuters, 2026). The incidents temporarily interrupted construction of an important road connecting Tajikistan and China (The Diplomat, 2026b). The Chinese embassy urged its citizens to leave the border area and called for measures to safeguard Chinese nationals (GIS Reports, 2026).

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In October 2026, Chinese Premier Li Qiang made an official visit to Tajikistan and participated in a meeting within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation framework. In talks with Emomali Rahmon, he emphasized deeper law-enforcement and security cooperation, stronger intelligence-sharing, and joint efforts against terrorism, separatism, and extremism. He also expressed the expectation that Tajikistan would take firm steps to protect Chinese citizens and enterprises (CGTN, 2026; Reuters, 2026). For Beijing, Tajikistan is not only an economic partner but also a buffer with direct relevance to security in Xinjiang. Its 1,344-kilometre border with Afghanistan and geographic proximity to the Wakhan Corridor help explain its strategic significance.

In March 2026, Tajikistan's parliament approved construction of nine new Chinese-funded border posts (The Diplomat, 2026b). The project, valued at more than 569 million somoni (approximately USD 61 million), is financed through a non-repayable grant and is to be implemented in three stages. Chinese engineers will install and configure surveillance, communication, and protection systems along the Afghan border. This builds on twelve comparable facilities constructed in 2017–2018. Reports indicate that at least fifteen Chinese-funded military or security installations have appeared in Tajikistan over the last decade, including a monitoring facility in the Pamirs established in 2016 by China's Ministry of Public Security (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). GIS Reports (2026) also describes a semi-covert Chinese military presence in eastern Tajikistan and two units of the People's Armed Police reportedly deployed to safeguard projects. Such developments may expand Chinese influence while creating new vulnerabilities for Tajikistan.

Security cooperation also extends to digital infrastructure. Huawei equipment reportedly serves approximately 70% of Tajikistan's mobile users, while the capital's Safe City camera network was built using a USD 21 million Chinese loan. ZTE equipment underpins government communications. The resulting technology can enable monitoring and interruption of internet traffic, creating both domestic state capacity and potential strategic dependencies. In May 2026, China agreed to provide Tajikistan with intelligence, policing, and counterterrorism equipment worth more than USD 7.6 million as a grant. Eight Chinese specialists were expected to install the equipment and train personnel (The Times of Central Asia, 2026a).

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The May 2026 bilateral treaty provided a legal framework for this closer relationship. Unlike the 2025 multilateral China–Central Asia agreement, it more explicitly addresses military-technical cooperation, training, and military exchanges, and establishes immediate consultations during crises. It also commits each side not to participate in alliances or activities directed against the other's sovereignty, security, or territorial integrity. This provision could influence how Tajikistan manages external security partnerships (MP-IDSA, 2026).

Joint military exercises have become another regular feature. Tajikistan participated in nineteen of the thirty-six exercises held by China with Central Asian states between 2002 and 2023, principally focused on border protection and counterterrorism. China has also supplied armored vehicles, mortars, and other equipment. This assistance may reduce Tajikistan's exclusive reliance on Russia's military base while introducing an additional dependency. Russia's military commitments in Ukraine have created space for China to strengthen its presence in border management and economic security (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025).

For many years, the prevailing regional division of roles was that Russia provided security while China served as a leading commercial partner and infrastructure investor. The war in Ukraine has unsettled that arrangement, and Central Asian governments have become more cautious in dealings with Moscow. Russia–Tajikistan relations deteriorated further after the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack. The China–Central Asia summit in Xi'an in 2023 illustrates Beijing's growing regional role (GIS Reports, 2026). The economic balance has shifted as well: during January–May 2025, China accounted for 24.8% of Tajikistan's trade, compared with Russia's 23.2%, becoming its leading trading partner for the first time in more than two decades (Ismailov, 2025).

Transport corridors and Uzbekistan's transit position

Tajikistan matters to Beijing for two interrelated reasons. First, its border with Afghanistan makes it a potential starting point for routes linking the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through Afghanistan to Turkmen gas supplies and Pakistan's Gwadar port. Second, some analysts argue that Beijing views Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as more dependable partners than Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in certain transport scenarios. Concern that Western sanctions pressure could affect Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan may

encourage China to develop alternative routes through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (GIS Reports, 2026).

Much of the BRI's existing Central Asian network passes through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, including pipelines carrying Turkmen hydrocarbons toward China. If alternative corridors become commercially viable and attract significant freight flows, Uzbekistan could lose part of its strategically important transit position and associated bargaining power. This is, however, a conditional and long-term risk. GIS Reports (2026) acknowledges that Afghan routes depend on security conditions and that Tajikistan's current role in these plans remains limited. Sanctions-related rerouting is likewise a scenario rather than an established outcome.

Economic dependence and the policy space of Uzbekistan

Because Uzbekistan borders Tajikistan, the expansion of Chinese armed or security-related presence in the neighboring country would directly enter Tashkent's security calculations. If military-technical cooperation deepens and treaty-based consultations become operational, the regional security architecture could shift toward greater Chinese influence. This might reduce Russia's traditional role while narrowing the range of options available to Uzbekistan.

Tajikistan illustrates the potential consequences of asymmetric economic dependence. China is its largest creditor and holds nearly one-third of its external debt. Tajikistan has also discussed fuel imports with China, which reportedly provides approximately one-sixth of the humanitarian aid it receives (Sachs, 2026). Trade remains imbalanced: from January to May 2025, China exported USD 787 million to Tajikistan, while Tajik exports to China amounted to USD 177 million (Ismailov, 2025). Following the withdrawal of Canada's Tethys and France's Total from the Bokhtar field, the site came under the management of the Chinese state-owned company CNPC (GIS Reports, 2026). Debt exposure and treaty commitments may constrain Dushanbe's strategic autonomy and indirectly shape its positions on water, borders, and transport. The diffusion of Chinese Safe City and digital surveillance models also raises questions about data sovereignty and internal security practices.

Similar trends are visible in Uzbekistan. The number of Chinese companies reportedly rose from 2,241 in 2022 to 3,357 in 2024 and 6,060 in the first half of

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2026, exceeding the 3,454 Russian companies recorded at that time (Sachs, 2026). The National Interest (2025) highlights the imbalance in China–Uzbekistan trade, in which Chinese exports substantially exceed imports, and associates it with Uzbekistan's limited industrial capacity and vulnerability to dependency. If both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan become more economically reliant on Beijing, the room for other external partners could narrow. Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy seeks to balance relations with Russia, China, Western countries, and regional neighbors. Its improving ties with Tajikistan, including strategic partnership arrangements, are valuable, but maintaining this balance could become more difficult as Chinese influence in Tajikistan expands. Major projects such as the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway also require regional stability; instability near the Tajik–Afghan border could have indirect consequences for them.

Critical minerals and resource security

Chinese influence in Tajikistan has also expanded through mining. Chinese firms have a major role in gold extraction, and Tajikistan is the world's second-largest producer of antimony. Half of TALCO Gold is owned by China's Tibet Huayu Mining, and a new plant with an annual capacity of up to 5,000 tonnes of antimony metal reportedly began operating in 2026. OECD findings indicate that China accounts for much of the foreign investment in Tajik mining and that Chinese firms hold a substantial share of the licenses (OECD, 2026; The Diplomat, 2026c).

Processing and export patterns are also closely aligned with Chinese demand. In 2024, almost all of Tajikistan's antimony ores and concentrates were exported to China. Western countries have shown growing interest in diversification. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio raised the prospect of expanded cooperation with Tajikistan on critical minerals, while the European Union already sources more than half of its antimony imports from Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has pursued a somewhat different strategy: in February 2026, it signed a framework agreement with the United States on investment in critical minerals. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan also relies on Chinese capital for processing copper and iron ore, and a large proportion of its refined copper exports went to China in 2024 (The Times of Central Asia, 2026b).

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Resource projects and security cooperation are closely interconnected. In November 2025, two attacks targeted Chinese personnel near Tajikistan's Afghan border, causing casualties at a gold-mining camp and among road-construction workers. China's position as Tajikistan's largest creditor also gives Beijing significant financial leverage (Reuters, 2026). For Uzbekistan, the implications run in two directions. Greater Chinese control over Tajik resources could reshape regional supply chains in China's favor, while the need to protect mining and infrastructure projects may further expand Beijing's security activities. Although Tashkent seeks balance through closer Western partnerships, deeper Chinese integration in a neighboring country may complicate Uzbekistan's options for diversification. China's role in water and energy projects remains more limited, yet its combined financial and security influence could still alter regional dynamics.

DISCUSSION

The evidence suggests that China–Tajikistan cooperation should not be understood simply as a bilateral economic relationship. Border infrastructure, intelligence cooperation, digital technology, credit, transport planning, and critical minerals form overlapping channels of influence. For Uzbekistan, these developments present three related but distinct strategic concerns: changing security arrangements on its borders, the possible emergence of transport routes that bypass its territory, and the contraction of options for economic and diplomatic diversification.

These outcomes are not inevitable. Alternative transit corridors remain dependent on political stability, investment, and actual commercial uptake. Similarly, greater Chinese involvement in Tajikistan does not automatically remove Uzbekistan's ability to engage with multiple partners. The analysis relies on publicly available secondary materials and reported figures; it does not independently verify every infrastructure claim or provide a quantitative estimate of future effects. The findings therefore indicate conditions to monitor rather than certain forecasts.

CONCLUSION

China's relationship with Tajikistan has become a significant factor in Central Asia's geopolitical balance. Border-post construction, military exercises, and intensified

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intelligence cooperation are strengthening its security dimension, while financial, trade, and mineral-resource ties may increase Tajikistan's reliance on Beijing. Russia's diminished relative influence may offer China additional opportunities to consolidate its economic and security role.

For Uzbekistan, the most consequential potential effects concern transit corridors, the neighboring security environment, and the maintenance of a multi-vector foreign policy. The development of alternative Chinese transport routes, expanding Chinese influence through Tajikistan, and increasing economic dependence across the region could restrict Uzbekistan's bargaining space. To mitigate these risks, Tashkent would benefit from diversifying partnerships, expanding relations with Western and regional actors, and sustaining a balanced approach to regional security. The scale of these effects will depend on future infrastructure development, local security conditions, and the policy choices of the states concerned.

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