



UZBEKISTAN AND PAKISTAN: NEW HORIZONS FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract. *The article examines the evolution of relations between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the formation of a strategic partnership between the two states. Drawing on official documents, analytical publications and press reporting, the study traces the historical preconditions of bilateral cooperation from the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, analyses the qualitative shift that followed the renewal of Uzbekistan's foreign policy after 2016, and assesses the current state of political dialogue, economic diplomacy, transport connectivity and security cooperation. Particular attention is paid to the trans-Afghan transport corridor; to the Joint Declarations on Strategic Partnership of 2021 and 2022, and to the high-level visits of 2025-2026. The article argues that Uzbek-Pakistani relations have moved from declarative cooperation to the practical implementation of joint projects, and that their further development will depend principally on the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan, the realization of transport and logistics projects and the institutionalization of coordination mechanisms. The partnership is interpreted as an important element in the formation of a new geo-economic architecture linking Central and South Asia.*

Keywords: *Uzbekistan, Pakistan, strategic partnership, Central Asia, South Asia, regional connectivity, transport diplomacy, trans-Afghan corridor, regional security, economic diplomacy.*

INTRODUCTION

Amid the transformation of the modern system of international relations and the intensification of regionalization processes, the development of interregional ties between Central and South Asia is of particular importance. In this context, Uzbek-Pakistani relations are becoming a key factor in shaping a new interconnected architecture for Eurasia (Akmalov, 2022:232).

It is worth noting that Uzbekistan has traditionally placed significant emphasis on the southern dimension of its foreign policy. Pakistan's geopolitical position, its access

to the Indian Ocean and its role in regional transport and communications projects have motivated Tashkent's persistent interest in developing cooperation with Islamabad (Galimov, 2022:88). However, it is precisely over the past ten years that bilateral relations have acquired a systemic and strategic nature. The purpose of the present article is to trace the evolution of this process, to identify the factors that have determined the transition to strategic partnership, and to assess the prospects of cooperation between the two states.

MAIN PART

A study of the history of Uzbek-Pakistani relations reveals that Islamabad was one of the first South Asian countries to express interest in developing cooperation with independent Uzbekistan. As early as 1992, diplomatic relations were established between the two countries, and a number of fundamental documents were signed, including the Treaty on the Principles of Interstate Relations and Cooperation, as well as trade and economic agreements (Khalid, 2026:2).

During visits to Uzbekistan by the Pakistani Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1992, the political and legal foundations for bilateral cooperation were laid. Even then, the development of transport links through Afghanistan, with the goal of providing Uzbekistan with access to Pakistani ports, was considered an important area of cooperation. A logical continuation of this approach was the official visit of the first President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, to Pakistan in August 1992, during which a package of agreements on energy, irrigation, telecommunications and the mutual protection of investments was signed (Akmalov, 2022:234).

However, in the 1990s the development of bilateral relations was complicated by the situation in Afghanistan and by Islamabad's involvement in the Afghan crisis, which caused serious concern among the Central Asian states. During this period, issues of regional security and of countering extremism became an important element of the Uzbek-Pakistani dialogue (Galimov, 2022:91). Despite these difficulties, Uzbekistan remained Pakistan's leading trade and economic partner in Central Asia for a long time. This demonstrated the continued mutual interest of both sides in developing cooperation (Akmalov, 2022:233).

A qualitative shift in the development of Uzbek-Pakistani relations occurred after 2016, when Uzbekistan began implementing a renewed foreign policy initiated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Tashkent's new foreign policy strategy was based on the following key principles: prioritizing regional cooperation; developing the interconnectedness of Central and South Asia; economizing foreign policy; creating a favourable external environment for the country's modernization; and developing transport diplomacy and transit infrastructure (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025).

In this context, Pakistan began to be viewed not only as an important bilateral partner but also as a strategic link in the implementation of the concept of interregional connectivity. The initiative to develop the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan transport corridor, which envisages the construction of a railway route from Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul and Peshawar, acquired particular significance. Implementation of this project could provide the Central Asian countries with the shortest possible access to Pakistan's seaports and significantly change the region's transport and logistics architecture (NIPS, 2023:7; Khan, 2026).

It should be emphasized that it was in recent years that bilateral relations acquired a formally established strategic character. A key milestone was the signing of the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in July 2021 during the visit of the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan to Tashkent. The next step was the adoption of the Joint Declaration on Further Steps to Develop the Strategic Partnership in March 2022 during the state visit of the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, to Pakistan (Chaudhry, 2025). These documents reflect the transition of Uzbek-Pakistani relations from primarily bilateral interaction to the formation of long-term strategic cooperation aimed at ensuring sustainable regional connectivity and security (Akmalov, 2022:236). The regional framework for this transition was outlined at the international conference "Central and South Asia: Regional Interconnectivity. Challenges and Opportunities", held in Tashkent in July 2021 (SCO Secretariat, 2021).

One of the main factors in the revitalization of Uzbek-Pakistani relations has been the economic component of Uzbekistan's updated foreign policy. In recent years, trade and economic cooperation between the two countries has noticeably intensified. In 2024

mutual trade turnover exceeded 400 million United States dollars. More than 130 joint ventures with Pakistani capital operate in Uzbekistan, trading houses have been opened in Karachi and Tashkent, and direct flights between Tashkent and Lahore have been resumed (Dawn, 2026; Nematov, 2026).

The development of transport diplomacy is becoming an important area of cooperation. For Uzbekistan, as a landlocked state, securing access to global markets through the southern route is a strategic objective. In this context Pakistan is a key partner for Uzbekistan in implementing the concept of trans-Afghan connectivity (NIPS, 2023:11). The development of transport corridors through Afghanistan has the potential to reduce logistics costs, diversify export routes, strengthen the economic resilience of Central Asia, stimulate interregional trade and enhance the region's role in international economic processes (Khan, 2026; Saud, 2026). As Parvez Musharraf rightly noted, Pakistan represents "a natural link between the SCO states, connecting the heart of Eurasia with the Arabian Sea and South Asia" (The Asia Today, 2026).

Ensuring regional security remains a key area of Uzbek-Pakistani cooperation. Throughout the history of bilateral relations the Afghan issue has been central. Uzbekistan and Pakistan have a vested interest in the development of a stable and predictable Afghanistan, as the situation there directly affects the prospects for implementing regional transport and energy projects (Galimov, 2022:95).

Cooperation in combating international terrorism, extremism and transnational crime has become an important element of the relationship. Specifically, in 2001 the two sides signed an extradition agreement, and in 2005 an Agreement on Cooperation in the Fight against International Terrorism (Khalid, 2026:4). In today's world, Tashkent and Islamabad view security much more broadly than in terms of the traditional military and political dimension alone. Their understanding includes energy, transport, food and environmental security in the region. Multilateral cooperation formats, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Economic Cooperation Organization and international initiatives to develop connectivity between Central and South Asia, also play a significant role in developing the bilateral dialogue (SCO Secretariat, 2021; Pakistan Today, 2025).

High-level visits in 2025-2026 were particularly significant for the further strengthening of bilateral relations. In particular, the visit of the Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to Uzbekistan on 25-26 February 2025 contributed to the intensification

of economic cooperation and to the advancement of new infrastructure projects (Chaudhry, 2025). Equally important were the results of the state visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, to Pakistan on 5-6 February 2026. The high-level talks confirmed the high level of political trust between the two countries and demonstrated the parties' commitment to taking their strategic partnership to a new stage of development (Caspian Post, 2026; Saud, 2026).

During the talks the Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari emphasized Islamabad's readiness to deepen cooperation with Uzbekistan in the areas of transport infrastructure, trade, security, culture and humanitarian exchanges (Khalid, 2026:6). It should be noted that the current stage of Uzbek-Pakistani relations is characterized by a transition from declarative cooperation to the practical implementation of joint projects. The institutionalization of the strategic partnership and the development of sustainable coordination mechanisms in the political, economic and transport spheres are becoming a crucial factor (Nematov, 2026; Akmalov, 2022:237).

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the evolution of Uzbek-Pakistani relations shows that over the past decade cooperation between the two countries has acquired a qualitatively new strategic character. This process is directly linked to the transformation of Uzbekistan's foreign policy after 2016, which is focused on developing regional connectivity, transport diplomacy and economic cooperation (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025; Akmalov, 2022:235).

The current relations between Tashkent and Islamabad extend far beyond traditional bilateral interaction. They are becoming an important element in the formation of a new geo-economic architecture for Central and South Asia (NIPS, 2023:7). Despite ongoing challenges, primarily related to the situation in Afghanistan, to the limited level of trade and economic cooperation and to complex regional geopolitics, both sides demonstrate a strong interest in further deepening their strategic partnership (Galimov, 2022:95; Caspian Post, 2026).

It appears that the prospects for Uzbek-Pakistani relations will largely depend on the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan, on the successful implementation of transport and logistics projects, on the expansion of economic cooperation, on the strengthening of regional security mechanisms and on the development of humanitarian

and educational cooperation (Khalid, 2026:7; Saud, 2026). At the same time, it can already be seen that Uzbekistan and Pakistan are gradually shaping a new type of strategic partnership, based on pragmatism, mutual benefit and a shared interest in developing interregional connectivity. This circumstance suggests the emergence of new horizons for a strategic partnership between Tashkent and Islamabad, which could become a key factor in strengthening cooperation between Central and South Asia in the twenty-first century (Akmalov, 2022:238; The Asia Today, 2026).

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