



THE INTERNATIONAL IMAGE OF CENTRAL ASIA AND UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

This article examines the international image of Central Asia and Uzbekistan in the context of contemporary transformations in world politics and regional development. Special attention is paid to the fact that in the twenty-first century the power of a state is determined not only by its military, economic, or resource potential, but also by its reputation, foreign-policy legitimacy, investment attractiveness, cultural influence, and diplomatic reliability. The article analyzes the transformation of international perceptions of Central Asia: from earlier stereotypes associated with closed political systems, resource dependence, transport isolation, and geopolitical rivalry among major powers, to a new image of the region as an important transport and logistics hub, a source of energy and raw materials, a space of demographic growth, multi-vector diplomacy, and regional integration.

Keywords: International image, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, regional integration, foreign policy, multi-vector diplomacy, transport corridors, investment attractiveness, cultural diplomacy, geopolitics, regional cooperation, reforms.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, it is increasingly evident that the strength of states and regions in international relations is determined not only by their military potential, natural resources, or economic indicators, but also by their international image — that is, by their reputation and authority in the eyes of the global community, investors, international organizations, foreign governments, and the media. Indeed, international image is an important factor shaping a state's foreign-policy legitimacy, investment attractiveness, tourism potential, cultural influence, and diplomatic reliability.

For a long time, Central Asia was viewed in international politics mainly as a “geopolitical intermediate space,” a “region between Russia and China,” or a “peripheral area linked to the security of Afghanistan.” However, in recent years, the



international image of this region has been undergoing a significant transformation. Under current conditions, Central Asia is increasingly entering the global agenda in terms of transport and communication corridors, energy, water security, green economy, digital transformation, regional integration, and balanced diplomacy with major powers.

Uzbekistan, as a country experiencing rapid economic, industrial, and demographic growth, occupies a special place in these processes. The country's open foreign policy, its diplomatic approach aimed at improving relations not only with neighboring states but also with countries across the world, economic liberalization, and the promotion of tourism and cultural heritage all contribute to the rethinking and renewal of Uzbekistan's international image. From this perspective, it can be argued that the improvement and strengthening of Uzbekistan's image also contributes to the improvement and strengthening of the image of the entire region. Investors, partners, international organizations, and rating agencies often draw their conclusions and forecasts on the basis of the general characteristics of the region.

In order to discuss and analyze the growing and strengthening international image of Central Asia and Uzbekistan, it is first necessary to understand the essence of international image itself.

International image may be defined as the general perception, assessment, and symbolic representation of a state or region formed in the external world and in the consciousness of the international community. It is usually shaped by the following factors:

first, the political system of the state, the quality of governance, and the direction, success, and effectiveness of reforms carried out by the state and public institutions;

second, economic stability and development, the investment climate, and the market opportunities of a particular state or region;

third, reliability in foreign policy, commitment to regional cooperation, and diplomatic activity;

fourth, rich culture, historical heritage, and the potential of education, science, and tourism;

fifth, international assessments in the fields of human rights, freedom of speech and religion, anti-corruption efforts, and the rule of law.

All these factors are essential for enhancing and consolidating the international image of a state, nation, people, and region.



Thus, international image is not merely the product of propaganda or advertising. It is formed as a result of real political and economic reforms, adherence to international obligations, internal stability, and effective communication with the outside world.

The International Image of Central Asia: From Old Stereotypes to New Opportunities

For a long period, Central Asia was associated in international perception with a number of stereotypes. Some states of the region — such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — were often described through the prism of closed political systems, resource-dependent economies, water and border conflicts, security problems related to Afghanistan, transport isolation caused by the lack of direct access to the sea, and rivalry among major powers. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, in particular, were frequently perceived as economies heavily dependent on the export of raw materials and natural resources. However, such stereotypes did not fully reflect the real potential of the region.

Today, the international image of Central Asia is dynamically changing in several new directions, both in terms of content and intensity.

First, the region is being rediscovered as a transport and logistics hub and as an important land corridor for global trade. In particular, planned and developing trade routes connecting China and Europe, the Trans-Caspian Corridor, and connectivity projects with South Asia are turning Central Asia into an important link on the global trade map, especially against the background of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Second, the region is acquiring special significance as a source of energy and raw materials, particularly in the context of war and conflicts in the Middle East. Kazakhstan's oil and uranium potential, Turkmenistan's gas reserves, Uzbekistan's gold, copper, uranium, labor and demographic resources, as well as its industrial base, and the hydropower potential of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are transforming the region into a strategically important space.

Third, Central Asia is characterized by steady demographic growth and a young human capital base, shaped by its national and traditional characteristics. According to UNICEF, the population of the region increased from approximately 17.5 million people in 1950 to more than 80 million today, and by 2050 it is projected to exceed 114 million. This makes the region significant not only as a market, but also in terms



of labor resources and educational potential, especially against the background of growing demographic challenges in many countries of the world.

Fourth, Central Asia is increasingly presenting itself on the international stage as a region pursuing multi-vector diplomacy. The states of the region simultaneously develop relations with Russia, China, the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, South Korea, Japan, India, Iran, and Arab countries. This is taking place despite the many complexities in contemporary international relations caused by conflicts and by sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union against Russia and its partners.

Fifth, Central Asia is now increasingly regarded in the international arena as an independent regional actor. It is known that on April 4, 2025, the first summit of the leaders of the European Union and Central Asian states was held in Samarkand. The summit discussed cooperation in the areas of trade, transport, energy, critical raw materials, digital connectivity, and water resources. The European Commission announced a Global Gateway investment package of 12 billion euros for Central Asia, which once again demonstrates the growing dynamics of relations and confirms the importance of the region for global development.

The International Image of Uzbekistan

When speaking about the international image of Uzbekistan, it should be emphasized that the country is confidently moving along the path of dynamic integration and cooperation, first of all with neighboring states.

One of the key factors shaping the international image of the country is Uzbekistan's geographical location. Situated in the central part of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is the only state that borders all countries of the region. This factor turns it into a center of regional integration, trade, transport, security, and cultural ties.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has become increasingly recognizable on the international stage through several major images.

The first is the image of an opening state pursuing reforms. Since 2017, economic liberalization, currency convertibility, customs and tax reforms, modernization of public administration, and the activation of mechanisms for working with foreign investors have significantly changed the country's external image. The World Bank's 2025 Country Economic Memorandum notes that Uzbekistan has achieved significant progress in implementing economic reforms. At the same time, the development of



the private sector, job creation, strengthening of infrastructure, and deeper integration into global trade remain important tasks.

The second is the image of an initiator of regional cooperation. Uzbekistan has intensified dialogue with all neighboring states on borders, transport, trade, water and energy cooperation, and security. This policy has marked an important turning point in the country's international image: Uzbekistan has moved from a relatively closed and cautious foreign policy toward a course of regional openness and initiative. Today, these initiatives are positively received by all neighboring countries.

The third is the image of a historical, cultural, and civilizational center. Cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, Termez, and Shakhrisabz connect Uzbekistan with the civilization of the Silk Road, Islamic scholarship, architecture, craftsmanship, and cultural heritage. Therefore, cultural diplomacy and tourism occupy a special place in the international image of Uzbekistan. It has been reported that in 2024 the number of foreign tourists visiting Uzbekistan reached 8.2 million. In April–June 2025, more than three million foreign tourists visited the country, while the monthly indicator of inbound tourism exceeded one million people.

The fourth is the image of a state pursuing a multi-vector and balanced foreign policy. Uzbekistan seeks to build balanced cooperation with Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, the Organization of Turkic States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and other international structures. This approach presents Uzbekistan as a relatively pragmatic and diplomatically flexible state in the region.

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