

UZBEKISTAN–CHINA RELATIONS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Over the past decade, relations between Uzbekistan and China have developed from routine neighborly diplomacy into one of the most dynamic partnerships in Eurasia. While high-level visits, investment agreements and infrastructure projects form the bilateral core, multilateral platforms have been just as important. This article examines how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the China–Central Asia mechanism, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the United Nations system and development banks provide shared space for coordination, trust-building and joint projects. It also discusses the main challenges and prospects of the partnership.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, China, SCO, Belt and Road Initiative, China–Central Asia format, Central Asia, multilateralism, connectivity.

Introduction

Uzbekistan and China established diplomatic relations in January 1992, shortly after Uzbekistan became independent. For much of the following two decades, relations were cordial but limited in scope. Since 2016, and especially since the launch of Uzbekistan's reform agenda, the relationship has deepened markedly. Both governments now describe it as a comprehensive strategic partnership, and in recent years the language has moved toward an even closer "all-weather" format.

Two features make this partnership distinctive. First, it is driven by complementary needs: Uzbekistan, a double-landlocked country, seeks diversified transport corridors, investment and technology, while China seeks secure overland routes, stable neighbors and new markets. Second, it is anchored in multilateral institutions that give both sides predictable rules, regular contact and a common diplomatic vocabulary built around sovereignty, non-interference and mutual benefit.

2. Overview of Multilateral Frameworks

The table below summarizes the main international and regional platforms through which Uzbekistan and China cooperate.

Framework	Type	Main areas of cooperation	Significance for the relationship
Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)	Regional security and economic organization	Counterterrorism, border security, trade, energy, culture	Core institutional platform; RATS is headquartered in Tashkent
China–Central Asia mechanism	Summit-level regional format (China + five Central Asian states)	Trade, transport, digital economy, people-to-people exchanges	Gives Central Asia a collective voice in dealings with China
Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	Connectivity and investment framework	Railways, roads, logistics hubs, energy, industry	Main driver of infrastructure and investment projects
United Nations system	Global organization	Sovereignty, development, Afghanistan, climate, security	Shared support for international law and a central UN role
Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)	Multilateral development bank	Energy, transport, urban infrastructure	Co-financing of development projects
CICA	Intergovernmental forum	Confidence-building, regional security dialogue	Consultation on Asian security issues

3. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

3.1 Institutional role

The SCO is the most important multilateral framework linking Tashkent and Beijing. Uzbekistan joined in 2001 when the Shanghai Five was transformed into the SCO, and China is the organization's leading founding power. The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), based in Tashkent, is the organization's permanent body for security cooperation and gives Uzbekistan a distinctive institutional role.

3.2 Uzbekistan's chairmanship

Uzbekistan chaired the SCO in 2021–2022, and the chairmanship culminated in the Samarkand summit of September 2022. China was an active partner throughout. The summit advanced the organization's enlargement, strengthened its economic and connectivity agenda, and reaffirmed the shared principles of mutual respect, non-interference and cooperation among states with different political systems. For Uzbekistan, the chairmanship raised its international profile. For China, it confirmed Central Asia as a priority region for its diplomacy.

3.3 Areas of practical cooperation

Area	Examples of cooperation
Security	Counterterrorism exercises, intelligence exchange through RATS, border management, cyber and drug-trafficking threats
Economy	Trade and investment facilitation, customs cooperation, transport and energy projects
Humanitarian	Education, culture, youth and tourism exchanges, media cooperation
Political	Coordination of positions on regional stability, including Afghanistan

4. The Belt and Road Initiative and Connectivity

Uzbekistan was an early supporter of the BRI, and the initiative now shapes a large part of the bilateral agenda. For Uzbekistan, the BRI offers a way to reduce transport costs and reach new markets. For China, Uzbekistan is a central link on land routes toward Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

Project or direction	Description	Expected benefit
China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway	A long-discussed railway corridor linking the three countries, with construction launched in recent years	Shorter freight transit between China and Central Asia; new access toward South Asia and the Middle East
Logistics hubs, dry ports and border crossings	Modernization of terminals and customs infrastructure	Faster and cheaper trans-Eurasian trade
Energy cooperation	Chinese participation in power generation, renewables and energy infrastructure	Greater energy security and diversification
Industrial and mining projects	Investment in chemicals, construction materials, mining and manufacturing	Industrial upgrading and job creation

China has become one of Uzbekistan's largest trading partners and investors, with annual bilateral trade now at roughly the ten-billion-dollar level and still growing. Trade is gradually diversifying: Uzbekistan exports agricultural products, textiles and raw materials, while China supplies machinery, equipment, vehicles and technology.

5. The China–Central Asia Mechanism

A more recent multilateral track is the China–Central Asia format, which brings together China and the five Central Asian states at leaders' level. The first summit was held in Xi'an in 2023 and the second in Astana in 2025. The mechanism institutionalizes regular dialogue and has produced agreements on trade facilitation, transport links, digital economy cooperation and cultural exchange.

For Uzbekistan, the format has two advantages. It provides a platform to advance regional projects and economic priorities with China. It also encourages Central Asian states to coordinate positions, which strengthens their bargaining position in relations with large external partners, China included.

6. Cooperation in the United Nations and Other Forums

Both countries support the central role of the United Nations, respect for international law, and the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In UN bodies they frequently share positions on development, security and the need for political solutions to regional conflicts.

Afghanistan is an area of particular shared interest. Both Tashkent and Beijing want regional stability, effective counterterrorism and economic engagement that prevents Afghanistan from becoming a source of insecurity. Uzbekistan's emphasis on Afghan connectivity, including the proposed Trans-Afghan railway, is compatible with China's interest in regional integration.

Development finance. Uzbekistan is a member of the AIIB, in which China is the largest shareholder. The bank has financed or co-financed projects in energy, transport and urban infrastructure, offering another multilateral channel for cooperation.

Other forums. Both states also take part in dialogue formats such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which supports consultation on regional security issues.

7. Education, Culture and People-to-People Ties

Multilateral and bilateral frameworks together support growing humanitarian exchanges.

Field	Developments
Education	University partnerships, scholarships, Chinese-language teaching, Confucius Institutes and Luban Workshops for vocational training
Tourism and travel	Visa facilitation measures and expanded air and rail connections
Culture and media	Cultural years, festivals, translation projects and media exchanges

These ties broaden the social base of the partnership and help build mutual understanding beyond government circles.

8. Challenges and Prospects

8.1 Main challenges

Challenge	Explanation
Multi-vector foreign policy	Uzbekistan balances cooperation with China against ties with Russia, the EU, the United States, Turkey, the Gulf states and others, and seeks to avoid dependence on any single partner
Debt and financing	Large infrastructure projects require careful attention to debt sustainability and transparent financing terms
Local employment and content	Public expectations that Chinese-funded projects employ local workers and use local suppliers
Environmental and social standards	Need to align large projects with environmental, labor and community standards
Trade balance and technology transfer	Efforts to diversify Uzbek exports and gain more technology and value-added production

8.2 Prospects

Despite these challenges, the outlook is positive. Both governments emphasize equality, mutual benefit and non-interference, and multilateral institutions provide predictable rules and regular channels for resolving differences. As transport corridors take shape and economic integration deepens, cooperation within the SCO, the China–Central Asia format and the UN system is likely to remain a cornerstone of the partnership. Key areas for future growth include:

- Transport and logistics corridors, including the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway
- Green energy, including solar, wind and energy storage
- Digital economy, e-commerce and artificial intelligence
- Agriculture and food processing
- Education, science and technology cooperation

9. Conclusion

Uzbekistan–China relations show how bilateral partnership and multilateralism can reinforce each other. Through the SCO, the China–Central Asia mechanism, the BRI and cooperation in global institutions, the two countries have created a durable framework for security, trade and development. If they continue to balance ambition with transparency and mutual respect, their partnership can contribute not only to national prosperity but also to the stability and connectivity of the wider Eurasian region.

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