

# Uzbek-Russian Relations: Debt Relief (Case Study)

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to explore the dynamics of Uzbek-Russian bilateral relations. The topic is covered in the context of historical development but also with respect to current issues that shape international agenda. The paper identifies areas of existing cooperation and defines potential areas for improvement and future developments. We also examine limits and threats to deepening bilateral cooperation. This article employs also a case study approach to examine the impact of the debt relief program with Russia, which was agreed upon in 2014. The case study was conducted using a range of sources, including a review of official documents and news reports to provide a comprehensive analysis. In the article, we point out that Uzbek-Russian relations have been complex over time, with Uzbekistan pursuing a pragmatic approach based on the tradition of political realism. The relations are still dynamically changing and updating due to the need to protect and promote national interests in uncertain times, updates of the country's foreign policy priorities, or global trends reflected by the state leaders also at the bilateral level.

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan, Russia, Relations, Cooperation, Debt, Security.

**JEL classification:** *F 50, F 59, F 34*

## 1 Introduction

With the rapidly changing international political landscape, especially against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, it becomes imperative to explore and understand the dynamics of bilateral relations between nations. One such important relationship that requires closer examination is that between Russia and Uzbekistan. The motivation for this study lies in understanding the historical context of their relations and using it as a basis for making assumptions about the future trajectory of their bilateral relations. This article seeks to provide a comprehensive exploration of the Uzbek-Russian bilateral relationship using a case study with a specific focus on debt relief, offering insights into the potential impact on their relationship and the broader geopolitical implications.

The bilateral cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan has a history of more than 31 years. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan launched an independent

foreign policy based on the country's national interests. The neutral country aimed to interact with other post-Soviet states primarily within the CIS framework (MIIT UZ, 2020). However, Uzbekistan was forced to rebuild its diplomatic relations with Russia at a much higher level. In the context of global economic development in the 1990s, Russia quickly became a key partner of the Central Asian country.

Uzbek-Russian relations have remained the most important and highest priority for Uzbek's political leaders throughout its period of independence. The interaction between countries has been complex and ambiguous. The shared legacy of the Soviet era, as well as various historical, cultural, and economic factors, have shaped a unique dynamic in the relationship between the two countries. However, in recent years, the perception of a shared Soviet past has begun to change, and Uzbekistan's economic and security situation has been significantly changed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war has demonstrated the divergence in the development paths of the two countries and has affected the perspectives of future Uzbek-Russian cooperation (Pannier, 2022).

Despite this, bilateral relations remain stable and continue to develop in many areas, including politics, economics, security, culture, and education.

## 1.1 Literature Review

A significant amount of literature has been dedicated to the study of the development of bilateral relations between Russia and Uzbekistan over the past few decades. Various authors identify several major factors affecting these relations, primarily including security cooperation and economic ties.

- **Cooperation:** Brzezinski highlights the position of Uzbekistan in the region as being a buffer zone between the Islamic world and Russia. He argues that Uzbekistan has a specific role, particularly in the tensions between the West and Russia over control of the Central Asia region and its resources (Brzezinski, 1997). Monaghan describes Uzbekistan as an important player in Central Asia with a complex relationship with Russia that is characterized by both cooperation and competition, with Uzbekistan at times seeking to distance itself from Russia and pursue a more independent foreign policy (Monaghan, 2011). According to Yakubov, the cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia has experienced a steady rise and certain breakthroughs, and this is the main difference between the current stage of Uzbek-Russian relations (Yakubov, 2021).
- **Economy:** One key factor driving economic cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan is their shared energy interests (the construction of railways and gas pipelines). According to Fiona Hill Russia prompts energy ties with Uzbekistan due to the existing export infrastructure for pumping gas (Hill, 2002). Besides, the agriculture sector in Uzbekistan has a high potential. Eurasian Research Institute reports that Russia has shown significant interest in importing Uzbekistan's agricultural products (Eurasian Research Institute, 2020). International Crisis Group points out that Uzbekistan's economic relationship with Russia has been marked by tensions in the past over gas prices and transportation tariffs, and complicated by political factors, such as Uzbekistan's desire to reduce its dependence on Russia and attract FDIs from other countries (International Crisis Group, 2007).

Toktogulov agrees that countries have a longstanding history of economic cooperation but draws attention to the dynamic change in Russia's position, with China becoming the main export partner (Toktogulov, 2022).

- **Security:** Moore notes that Uzbekistan has been an important partner for Russia in combating terrorism and crime in Central Asia after 9/11 as both countries have been particularly concerned with the threat posed by Islamic terrorism in the region (Moore, 2007). According to Karin, the two countries have cooperated on a range of security initiatives, including joint military exercises or support for regional security organizations, with occasional political tensions over issues related to Uzbekistan's participation in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), although it never led to serious conflict (Karin, 2012). Luca Anceschi emphasizes the willingness of Uzbekistan to increase defence ties with Russia in the last decade and the change in the security policy under President Mirziyoyev (Anceschi, 2019). Stein argues that Russia has renewed its security partnership with Uzbekistan over the past few years, but that for now, it is not any different than Uzbekistan's other partnerships (Stein, 2021).

## 1.2 Legal Framework of Bilateral Relations

Diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Russia established after the fall of the Soviet Union were strengthened by a series of bilateral agreements and treaties.

The Collective Security Treaty (Tashkent Treaty) signed by the CIS Council of Heads of State launched the CSTO. The Treaty on Foundations of Inter-State Relations and Friendship and Cooperation signed by Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov and his Russian President Boris Yeltsin laid the legal foundation for Uzbek-Russian bilateral relations. The Agreement on Deepening Economic Cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia for 1998-2007 provides the basis for the trade regulation and economic ties between Russia and Uzbekistan (UZINFOCOM, 2023).

At the turn of the millennium, a cooling of mutual relations began, which lasted more or less until 2005, when Uzbekistan's relations with the West collapsed following the Andijan massacre. After the indiscriminate killing of hundreds of unarmed people who participated in a massive public protest, the EU imposed sanctions on Karimov's government (Human Rights Watch, 2005), therefore, the process of rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Russia began. In November 2005, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Islam Karimov signed an Agreement on an alliance taking relations between the two countries to a maximum level of closeness. The agreement unprecedented in the CIS stipulates that an attack on either country will be considered an act of "aggression" against both, it also grants each other the right to use military facilities on the territories of both countries (RFE/RL, 2005).

The period of systematic development of relations followed, with the signing of several bilateral agreements and declarations on the deepening of the (economic) cooperation. Uzbekistan's accession to the CIS Free Trade Area Agreement (CISFTA) in 2013 completed the legal basis of Uzbek-Russian relations (Gadimova, 2014). Uzbekistan and Russia initially started to cooperate closely on economic issues by signing a package of agreements and trade contracts worth billions of USD

(Toktogulov, 2021). A further stimulus for countries to develop their cooperation was provided in 2016 when President Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power (Bowyer, 2018). In total, more than 200 interstate, intergovernmental, and interdepartmental agreements were concluded, including the agreement on the mutual use of the airspace by military aircraft or the Plan for the defence ministries' cooperation (Irgashev, Galimova, 2018). Against the backdrop of war in Ukraine, Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Vladimir Putin signed the Declaration on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, as well as a package of new investment agreements worth 4,6 USD bn in mechanical engineering, chemistry, petrochemistry, and geology (President.uz, 2022).

## 2 The historical evolution of economic relations

The history of relations between Russia and the peoples of Central Asia has roots in ancient times. Attempts to establish diplomatic relations between the Russian state and Central Asia followed the collapse of the Golden Horde. During the early Middle Ages, these connections were carried out indirectly through the nomads and steppe dwellers, who inhabited the "Great Steppe" (Kostetsky, 2008). From artisans and peasants who migrated from Russia, the Uzbek's local population picked up new, previously unknown methods and skills. The advanced members of the Russian intellectuals contributed significantly to the development of science and culture in Uzbekistan. With the Russian conquest of Central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these territories became a source of raw materials for Russia, especially cotton and silk (Morrison, 2021).

Since the 1990s, Uzbekistan and Russia have been promoting their economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation. In 1996, Russia became Uzbekistan's main export and import trading partner. Before (1992-1995) Uzbekistan traded more with Germany, South Korea, Italy, and Japan. Since 1996, Russia has been in the top 5 of Uzbekistan's partners, but its share is declining in the long term (see Table 1).

Russia had been in the first (max. second) position in exports until 2013, when China replaced it, followed by Switzerland in 2015. In imports, Russia steadily maintained its leading position until 2017. As of 2018, China is Uzbekistan's main import partner. Since then, Russia has been in second position, followed by Kazakhstan, South Korea, and Turkey (OEC, 2022). In terms of export decline, it is worth mentioning that in 2015 Russia's share fell below 10%, to 9.26%. In that year, Russia was the 5th main trading partner (such a decline only once in history), with higher shares achieved by Switzerland (30.4%), China (19.6%), Turkey (11.7%), and Kazakhstan (11.1%).

**Table 1.** The evolution of Russia as one of Uzbekistan's key trading partners (average percentage values in 5-year intervals)

	<b>Export</b>	<b>Import</b>
1996-2000	28,26 %	20,58 %
2001-2005	20,6 %	24,12 %
2006-2010	21,54 %	23,88 %
2011-2015	17,73 %	21,84 %
2016-2020	13,24 %	20,02 %

Uzbekistan exports to Russia mainly pure cotton yarn which has been the key crop within Uzbek agriculture. Russia exports to Uzbekistan primarily sawn wood, hot-rolled iron, and refined petroleum. While Uzbekistan does not export any services to Russia, in 2021 Russia exported services to Uzbekistan worth more than 700 USD million (OEC, 2022).—Following China (2.2 USD bn), Russia (2.1 USD bn) is Uzbekistan's main investment partner. Russia is the leader in the number of foreign enterprises in Uzbekistan Russia accounting for up to a fifth (3,151) of the total of 15 801. In recent years cooperation between countries has grown to an unprecedentedly high level. In 2022, the trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Russia grew by 23 %, reaching 9,3 USD bn (see Table 2). Trade with Russia accounts for 18.6% of Uzbek's total foreign trade turnover (Statistics Agency of Uzbekistan, 2023) and the countries plan to increase bilateral trade to 10 USD bn in 2023.

**Table 2.** Share of Uzbekistan's main trade partners in 2022

Export			Import		
Russia	15,9 %	3,1 USD bn	China	20,9 %	6,4 USD bn
China	13 %	2,5 USD bn	Russia	20,2 %	6,2 USD bn
Turkey	7,8 %	1,5 USD bn	Kazakhstan	10,6 %	3,3 USD bn
Kazakhstan	7,1 %	1,4 USD bn	South Korea	7,5 %	2,3 USD bn
Kirgizstan	5,1 %	0,99 USD bn	Turkey	5,6 %	1,7 USD bn

### 3 Current state

The Ukrainian crisis has left Uzbekistan in an extremely vulnerable position due to its trade dependence with Russia. Uzbekistan supports the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine and does not recognize the separatist republics or the annexation of Crimea by Russia (Kamilov, 2022). Uzbekistan's position on the Ukrainian crisis is pragmatic. Supporting Russia's actions in Ukraine does not correspond to the national interests of the country, and such support would threaten Uzbekistan's respected international status (Ismailkhodzhaev, 2022).

Despite these assumptions, cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia continues at the highest level, including regular calls, attendance of the Uzbek President at Russia's Victory Day military parade on 9 May 2023, and meeting with the Russian president or Russian resolute support for changes to the Constitution of Uzbekistan (President.uz, 2023). The government of Uzbekistan follows Russian authoritarian patterns. Similar narratives are evident, particularly in terms of emphasizing a powerful and decisive leader and stressing that challenging times call for a strong national president capable of guiding the nation.

Both countries face ongoing challenges, such as the lack of a truly independent electoral commission, the continued dominance of the ruling party, or the difficulty of building a functioning market economy. The most recent Uzbek referendum provides an analogy to the 2020 changes to the Russian constitution guaranteeing Vladimir Putin's rule until 2036. After voters overwhelmingly approved the constitutional changes in a tightly controlled referendum, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev will be able to remain in power until 2040 (Reuters, 2023). The referendum was held

at a time when the country deals with the aftermath of a particularly harsh winter characterized by fuel shortages, growing poverty, and rampant corruption. The constitutional changes undermined the already limited democratic process.

### 3.1 Drivers of cooperation

Russia is an important economic ally, with deep trade and investment connections with Uzbekistan. Providing security aid to Uzbekistan is another important aspect of bilateral cooperation regarding the terrorist threats or the situation in Afghanistan. With Central Asia's role as a crutch for Russia, and with Uzbekistan aware of Russia's role as a critical player in regional politics, it is more pragmatic to keep favourable relations with Moscow. To a large extent, the current level of relations and cooperation also reflects the historical and cultural ties between the states.

The long rule of Islam Kasimov left a controversial legacy in bilateral cooperation, with his relationship with Vladimir Putin reaching a peak of friendliness only in the last years of his rule. The death of President Karimov was followed by substantial warming of Uzbek-Russian relations, with high-level visits (see Table 3.) and the signing of several agreements (President.uz, 2023). The country desperately needed foreign partners to diversify its economy and strengthen its military. China and Russia have engaged in this task. New Uzbek leadership under Shavkat Mirziyoyev has placed a greater emphasis on building mutually beneficial ties with Russia than under Kasimov, whose approach was more cautious and reserved (Hedlund, 2019).

**Table 3.** Mirziyoyev's visits to Russia and neighbouring states since taking office

	Russia	Kazakhstan	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Afghanistan
State visit	1	1	1	1	1	-
Working visit	5	6	4	2	2	-

#### *Countering religious extremism and terrorism*

Uzbekistan and Russia have both experienced incidents of religious extremism and terrorism in the past, and they continue to face these threats. Uzbekistan has been particularly concerned about the threat of Islamic extremism, which has led the country to pursue a rather isolationist foreign policy.

Over the last few years, however, the country has begun to be more pragmatic on this issue, aware that an effective fight against these threats in the region must be coordinated. There is still a desire to deepen cooperation with Russia in sharing intelligence, anti-money laundering, or strengthening security forces. Also, greater respect for the rule of law and human rights is essential for both countries, as abuses can fuel grievances. As both states are officially secular and guarantee freedom of religion, the differences in religious affiliation between Uzbekistan and Russia have minimal impacts on successful cooperation.

### 3.2 Potential threats

In the long term, challenges and limitations of cooperation may be posed by Russia's historical dominance in the region, as well as Uzbekistan's effort for greater economic diversification or the competition between Russia and China over greater economic

influence in Uzbekistan and presence in Central Asia. The Uzbek attempts to move away from Russian influence and from being involved in Russian business networks bring more scepticism to the future of bilateral relations.

Since ensuring security in the country is a top priority for the Uzbek government, in the context of the war in Ukraine there is no guarantee that Russia could provide large-scale military assistance to Uzbekistan. Despite the vague political statements, the performance of the Russian military in Ukraine so far has certainly shattered much of the confidence the Uzbek government had in Russia as the most popular ally.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan should remain aware of the instances of Russian chauvinism affecting Uzbekistan's approach towards Russia in the past. Russian President Vladimir Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum claimed that the former Soviet Union is historical Russia, but he has always respected the processes of sovereignization in the post-Soviet space (Putin, 2022). Kazakh President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev attending the forum and sitting beside him did not oppose it. This could be used as a model situation for a more comprehensive reflection on the Uzbek approach toward Russia.

## **4 Debt relief (Case study)**

Debt relief was a powerful tool within Uzbek-Russian relations. As it helped to ease financial burdens and promote the economic growth of Uzbekistan by facilitating trade and investments, but at the same time, it also brought tension over terms of treaties and mistrust between countries by attempts to exert control over Uzbekistan's policy and to increase Russia's influence in Central Asia region.

In 2014, Russia provided debt relief to Uzbekistan forgiving nearly all of the Uzbek debt (864 USD million, 97%). The State Duma passed the law cancelling "mutual financial claims and obligations" between Russia and Uzbekistan in 2016 (Federal Law No. 83-FZ, 2016). This move led to Russia waiving the debt repayment worth around 900 million USD, thus requiring Uzbekistan to only pay 25 USD million to Russia. Furthermore, it prompted Uzbekistan to consider joining a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) under Russian leadership. According to Russian officials, as of 1 November 2014, Uzbekistan's debt amounted to 889.3 USD million including 500.6 USD million in principal and 388.7 USD million in interest, all of which was overdue (Ozodlik, 2016). Negotiations on mutual financial claims had been ongoing since the end of the millennium and both parties had to make difficult compromises to sign the agreement.

### **4.1 Aim of the Debt Relief**

Against a backdrop of serious challenges for Russia, including the crisis in Ukraine, the free-fall of the ruble, and lower oil prices, the country offered a generous dose of debt forgiveness to keep Uzbekistan close. Russia considered Uzbekistan, the largest country (by population) in Central Asia, as one of its priority partners in the region (Zavrazhin, 2014). Debt relief was aimed to boost the relations between Russia and Uzbekistan with mutual long-term benefits (Sorbello, 2014).

For the poor Central Asian republic, the debt relief was compared to the annual revenue from the sale of its cotton harvest which has long been a strategic centrepiece of Uzbek's economy. The decision was made in the context of Russia's broader efforts to strengthen its economic ties with Central Asia and to counterbalance West and China's growing influence in the region (Pradhan, 2017). Russia's debt relief may have been an attempt to sway Uzbekistan's decision in favour of closer ties with Russia as well as to promote the formation of the EEU at a time when the EU was also increasingly interested in cooperation with Uzbekistan.

## 4.2 History of the Debt

The debt relief covered loans from the former Soviet Union, mostly related to infrastructure projects. The history of the debt dates back to the collapse of the Soviet Union when Uzbekistan and other former republics were pushed out of the common ruble zone and received Russian goods and equipment in instalments (Volosevich, 2016). Uzbekistan's parliament decided not to acknowledge the debt as a single public debt, leading to disagreements with Russia.

After the debt reconciliation in the early 2000s, Uzbekistan owed Russia about 550 USD million, and talks of debt restructuring followed. However, Russia demanded that the obligations be fulfilled, leading to Uzbekistan's refusal to pay the bill. Uzbekistan's leadership expected to write off this debt since Russia has already forgiven larger debts to Afghanistan or Angola (Kurtov, 2010).

## 4.3 Implications

**Uzbekistan:** The relief of Uzbekistan's debt provided much-needed financial assistance to the country, reducing its external debt burden and freeing up resources for domestic investment and social spending. As a result, there could be an increase in investment in Uzbekistan, improvements in living standards for citizens, and a more stable economy. The debt relief also encouraged more Russian businesses to invest in Uzbekistan, and it opened new lines of credit for the two countries to pursue, including the sale of arms and military technology (TASS, 2014).

For Uzbekistan, the concession was acknowledging obligations for all previously received loans. Before, they only recognized a 43.1 USD million debt and claimed a stake in the former Soviet Union's Diamond Fund, valued at 1-2 USD bn. Uzbekistan also withdrew its claims to the "internal currency debt" of the former USSR (Federal Law No. 83-FZ, 2016). However, it could be argued that Russia sought foreign policy success following its isolation due to its failed policy towards Ukraine. Despite concerns about Uzbekistan's President Karimov being unreliable, Russia met the need to find a new ally.

**Russia:** The debt relief could be seen as a goodwill gesture that strengthened the ties between the two countries maintained its influence in the region and demonstrated Russian willingness to support its allies. Nevertheless, the debt relief led to a loss of revenue from debt repayment, which was a setback for Russian suppliers of goods and other commodities, who had hoped to one day repay their debts. The amount of debt relief was consistent with the Russian practice of recent years. For example, Vietnam was forgiven most of its debt (9.5 USD bn out of 11 USD bn),

Ethiopia (4.8 USD bn), Mongolia (11 USD bn, Iraq (22 USD bn), and Cuba was forgiven 90 % of its debt (30 USD bn) in 2014 (WSJ, 2014).

**Benefits for Russia:** At a tough time for Russia's economy, the debt relief provided significant benefits for the country including:

- removal of the obstacle to normalization of the Russian-Uzbek relations
- the elimination of the threat of legal proceedings: Uzbekistan was the only CIS state that officially stated that it would be expedient to take the issue of its financial claims against Russia to court
- the renouncing Uzbekistan's claims to the assets of the Diamond Fund
- 25 million USD for the Russian budget within a month (Volojevich, 2016)
- improved Russia's and Putin's images, at least at the regional level

## 5 Conclusion

Over the past 30 years, relations between Uzbekistan and Russia have gone through several phases of development and countries have maintained a mostly positive relationship. The parties have managed to avoid mutual grievances in the context of shared Soviet past and Russian superiority complex. This approach has facilitated the formation of allied relations and mutually beneficial partnerships, as well as the growth of cooperation in several sectors, from the economy to education.

In academic literature, Russian-Uzbek relations are described as complex, often emphasizing the historical and cultural context in which the Soviet legacy plays a significant role. This article agrees with a certain level of historical interconnectedness but also points to Uzbek's road to pragmatism. Although the existing literature mainly focuses on close cooperation in areas such as defense, security, and regional stability, and emphasizes the economic interdependence between the two countries, this article highlights the limits of Uzbek's loyalty to Moscow. The war in Ukraine has imposed many constraints and is likely to be a watershed moment in Uzbek-Russian relations. Uzbek's president views the invasion of Ukraine through the prism of his own interests, the most important of which is the preservation of his own regime. Uzbekistan must prove what is its main priority — to ensure the country's survival by pursuing cautious foreign policy, to accelerate its slip from Russia's orbit while finding the best place for itself in the international system, or to remain firmly entrenched in Soviet-era linkages.

Further cooperation with Russia will continue as long as it brings benefits to Uzbekistan and does not risk its reputation. Concerning cooperation in the field of energy and transport infrastructure, business networks, or educational programs, both leaders are also keen to maintain the status quo.

The article also demonstrates that even financial support for Uzbekistan does not guarantee Russia's long-term and unproblematic support. It can be assumed that in the long run, Uzbekistan's efforts for greater "independence" not only in the Central Asia region, but also internationally, will increase to secure the country's interests. Whether and how far Russia will fit into this scenario is questionable.

Although the Soviet stereotypes in the mindset and leadership of the state, which have not yet been overcome, e.g. relation to the opposition, the continuity of the secular state, or the perception of social inequalities in the country (Horak, 2005), may play in favour of maintaining and deepening Uzbek-Russian cooperation, at the same time they do not guarantee the sustainability of pragmatic bilateral relations in the long run.

A collegial relationship with Russia, whose international isolation has deepened markedly in the past months, cannot be based on post-Soviet enthusiasm only but must be constantly driven by the positive results of bilateral cooperation in all strategic sectors. While further Uzbek-Russian cooperation is not a priori impossible, a change in Uzbekistan's position as a regional leader may occur from the moment when Russia demonstrates all its commitments to Uzbekistan only verbally, and in practice, the positive effects of loyalty to Russia begin to fade from the Uzbek economy. At least so long as the current Uzbek and Russian leaderships are in power, it is difficult to see when or whether this moment will come.

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