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UZBEKISTAN-IRAN COOPERATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD: KEY DIRECTIONS, CONTRIBUTING FACTORS, AND PRACTICAL OUTCOMES

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Annotation. This thesis examines the qualitatively new stage in relations between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran during 2021-2023. The analysis centres on the Uzbek President's official visit to Iran in June 2023 and the comprehensive package of documents adopted as its result. Drawing on primary sources, the study reviews five priority directions of bilateral cooperation: political–diplomatic dialogue, trade and economic ties, science and innovation, transport and transit connectivity, and security. The findings indicate that cooperation is shifting from an episodic character towards a strategic and institutional level. The opening of the Iran House of Innovation and Technology in Tashkent and the Trans-Afghanistan railway project are assessed as practical embodiments of this new stage.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Iran, bilateral relations, regional cooperation, economic diplomacy, science and innovation, transport corridors, Trans-Afghanistan railway, Chabahar port, security.

Introduction

In the foreign policy of Central Asian states, deepening multifaceted cooperation with major neighbouring countries has acquired strategic importance. In this regard, relations between Uzbekistan and Iran occupy a special place, grounded in deep historical, cultural, and civilisational proximity. Although official interstate relations between the two countries were established in 1992, for a long period they remained largely confined to the economic and cultural-humanitarian spheres and developed at relatively low intensity.

The foreign-policy reforms implemented in Uzbekistan since 2017, together with the principle of "open and pragmatic neighbourhood", imparted new quality and dynamism to bilateral ties. The most vivid expression of this trend was the high-level official visit of the President of Uzbekistan to Iran in June 2023 [4]. During the visit, the leaders of the two states held talks in an expanded format [2] and adopted a package of documents aimed at developing comprehensive cooperation [5].

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the new stage of Uzbekistan-Iran relations in 2021–2023, identifying its main directions, driving factors, and prospects on the basis of primary sources. The relevance of the topic is directly linked to the new strategy of Uzbekistan's foreign policy oriented towards regional connectivity, and its study contributes to understanding the broader geopolitical and geo-economic transformation of Central Asia. In particular, the study seeks to answer which spheres of cooperation became priorities in this period, what features distinguish this stage qualitatively from previous ones, and how the regional geopolitical context influenced the rapprochement of the two states.

Research Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative analytical methodology, with document analysis as its principal method. The source base comprises several types of materials: official state documents and statements (the website of the President of Uzbekistan [2; 5] and materials of the Uzbek Embassy in Iran [6; 11]); reports of Iranian and international news agencies - IRNA, Tasnim, TASS, and Tehran Times [3; 4; 9; 10; 12; 13]; and specialised publications on transport-infrastructure projects [14; 16]. Descriptive-analytical and historical-comparative approaches were applied, comparing the current state of relations with their historical development, including the initial treaty foundations of 1992. To mitigate the limitation of relying on open-press sources, official statements were systematically cross-checked against independent agency reports.

Analysis and Results

Intensification of political-diplomatic dialogue. The new stage was manifested above all in an unprecedented intensification of high-level political dialogue. The June 2023 visit began with direct talks between the two leaders and continued with expanded official negotiations [2]. The resulting package of documents covered trade-economic, transport, scientific, cultural, and other spheres [5]. The parties discussed the prospects for developing bilateral practical cooperation and expressed the intention to elevate relations to a strategic level [11]. The visit can be assessed as a logical continuation of Uzbekistan's multi-vector yet result-oriented foreign policy [4].

Trade and economic cooperation. Economic cooperation formed the central core of the new stage. During the visit, the two states signed a number of economic agreements [1]. To stimulate business ties, the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) organised an Iran-Uzbekistan business forum [3]. The parties also agreed to consider establishing free economic zones in order to promote mutual trade and investment [12]. The two economies are largely complementary: Uzbekistan is rich in agricultural products and raw materials, whereas Iran possesses potential in engineering and technological goods. However, the practical growth of trade remains directly tied to banking and financial constraints and to the international sanctions regime. Nevertheless, the initiative to create free economic zones represents an important step towards placing cooperation on a stable institutional footing rather than on episodic transactions.

Science, innovation, and technology cooperation. One of the most distinctive and promising directions was cooperation in science, innovation, and technology. During the visit, the Uzbek President toured an exhibition of Iran's scientific and technological achievements [6]. The most important practical result was the opening of the Iran House of Innovation and Technology in Tashkent in June 2023 [7; 8]. This institution serves as a permanent platform for technology transfer and joint research. In historical comparison, this is significant: in 1992 scientific-technical cooperation began within a single memorandum combined with economy and industry, in the form of "institutional minimalism"; by 2023 it had acquired an independent, specialised, and permanent institutional form. The establishment of such a permanent institution allows cooperation to rest on a stable organisational basis rather than on situational contacts, and it accords with Uzbekistan's national goals of innovative development and the formation of a digital economy.

Transport and transit connectivity. Since both states have limited direct access to sea routes, connectivity and transit corridors are of strategic importance to them. The largest project is the Trans-Afghanistan railway, an agreement on which was signed in July 2023 [14], linking Uzbekistan through Afghanistan to southern seaports. The possibility of connecting this route to Iranian infrastructure expanded with the inauguration of the Khaf–Herat railway in 2020 [15]. In addition, Iran's Chabahar port is being considered as an alternative outlet to the Indian Ocean, with a trilateral working group of India, Iran, and Uzbekistan operating on its joint use [16]. Taken together, these projects can significantly strengthen Uzbekistan's transit potential within the North-South corridor. These routes are multilateral in character and combine the interests of several regional states, although their realisation remains tied to the security situation in Afghanistan and to the attraction of large-scale investment.

Security and the regional context. Bilateral rapprochement cannot be separated from regional geopolitical changes. The change of power in Afghanistan in 2021 and the withdrawal of international forces brought regional security to the forefront [9]. Under these conditions, Uzbekistan and Iran share common interests in stabilising Afghanistan and countering terrorism and cross-border threats; this factor underpinned the joint security cooperation document signed in March 2022 [13]. Moreover, the termination of the UN arms embargo on Iran in 2020 [10] and the expansion of the country's participation in regional organisations created additional opportunities for cooperation.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that Uzbekistan-Iran relations rose to a qualitatively new stage in 2021-2023. This stage is distinguished by several features. First, cooperation moved from episodic, low-intensity ties to a comprehensive, multi-sectoral, and institutional level, as evidenced by the package of documents adopted during the June 2023 visit. Second, science and innovation emerged as a new, specialised direction, with the Iran House of Innovation and Technology in Tashkent as its institutional embodiment. Third, the transport-transit direction - the Trans-Afghanistan railway and Chabahar port - became a strategic factor binding the two states geo-economically. Fourth, regional security issues, especially the Afghan factor, served as an important driving force of rapprochement.

In historical comparison, the scientific-technical cooperation that began in 1992 within a single combined memorandum acquired an independent institutional form by 2023, confirming the continuous yet gradually deepening nature of bilateral relations. At the same time, the practical effectiveness of this cooperation remains dependent on regional stability, the international sanctions regime, and the financing of transport infrastructure. The experience of 2021-2023 shows that regional cooperation can yield significant results in a relatively short period when political will and institutional mechanisms are aligned. Future research could usefully focus on an empirical assessment of the degree to which the 2023 package of documents has been implemented in practice and on the dynamics of bilateral trade indicators.

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