

## INTERNATIONAL IMAGE OF CENTRAL ASIA AND UZBEKISTAN

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### Abstract

The article examines the international image of Central Asia and Uzbekistan in the context of contemporary transformations in world politics and regional development. Particular 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 paper analyzes the changing international perception of Central Asia: from earlier stereotypes associated with closed political systems, raw-material dependence, transport isolation and geopolitical rivalry among major powers, toward 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

It is no secret that in the twenty-first century, the power 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 mass media. This is because 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 connected with the security of Afghanistan.” However, in recent years the international image of this region has been changing fundamentally. Under current conditions, Central Asia is increasingly entering the global agenda in terms of transport and communication corridors, energy, water security, the 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, diplomatic approaches aimed at improving relations not only with neighboring states but also with countries around the world, economic liberalization, and the policy of promoting tourism and cultural heritage all contribute to the rethinking and renewal of Uzbekistan's international image. From this, one may conclude that the improvement and strengthening of Uzbekistan's



image also means the improvement and strengthening of the image of the entire region. Investors, partners, international organizations and rating agencies make their assessments and forecasts based on the common characteristics of the region.

In order to discuss or analyze the strengthening international image of the region, it is first necessary to understand the essence of international image itself.

International image is the general perception, evaluation and symbolic representation of a state or region that is formed in the external world and in the consciousness of the international community. It is usually shaped on the basis of the following factors:

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

Second, economic stability and development, the investment climate and 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 conscience, the fight against corruption and the rule of law.

All these factors are among the main conditions for improving and strengthening the international image of a state, people, nation and region.

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

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

In international perception, Central Asia has long been associated with several stereotypes: some states, such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, were seen as having closed political systems; the region was often viewed through the prism of resource-dependent economies, water and border conflicts, Afghanistan-related security problems, transport isolation caused by the lack of access to the sea, and the rivalry of major powers, particularly in relation to Kazakhstan. Some countries were also perceived as dependent on the export of raw materials; in other words, their economies were considered heavily dependent on natural resources, as in the case of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. However, such stereotypes did not fully reflect the real potential of the region.

Today, the international image of Central Asia is changing dynamically 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 between 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 gaining special importance as a source of energy and raw materials, also 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 turning the region into a strategically important space.

Third, Central Asia is characterized by steady demographic growth and a young human capital base, connected with national and traditional features. 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 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 states, despite the many difficulties currently emerging in international relations as a result of conflicts and the sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union against Russia and its partners.

Fifth, Central Asia is now increasingly viewed in the international arena as an independent subject. It is known that on April 4, 2025, the first summit of the leaders of the European Union and the 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 dynamism of their relations and confirms the importance of the region for global development.

The International Image of Uzbekistan

Speaking about the international image of Uzbekistan, it is necessary to emphasize that the country is confidently moving along the path of dynamic integration and cooperation, primarily with its neighboring states.

One of the key factors shaping the country's international image is the fact that Uzbekistan is located in the central geographic part of Central Asia and is the only state that borders all the countries of the region. This factor turns Uzbekistan 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 images.

The first is the image of an opening state carrying out reforms.

Since 2017, economic liberalization, currency convertibility, customs and tax reforms, the modernization of public administration, and the activation of mechanisms for working with foreign investors have 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; however, the development of the private sector, job creation, infrastructure strengthening and deeper integration into global trade remain urgent tasks.

The second is the image of an initiator of regional cooperation.

Uzbekistan has intensified dialogue with all neighboring states on issues of borders, transport, trade, water and energy cooperation, and security. This policy has become an important turning point in the country's international image: Uzbekistan has moved from a formerly relatively



closed and cautious policy toward a course of regional openness and initiative. Today, these initiatives are positively welcomed 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 is reported that in 2024 the number of foreign tourists visiting Uzbekistan reached 8.2 million people. 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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