

BETWEEN GREAT POWERS: UZBEKISTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY AND THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AFTER 2016

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Abstract

Uzbekistan's foreign policy has shifted dramatically since 2016, from semi isolation to active engagement with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. Yet scholars disagree whether this constitutes mere pragmatic balancing or a deliberate strategic hedging strategy aimed at preserving decision making autonomy. Drawing on strategic hedging and structural power theories through qualitative analysis of peer reviewed articles, official documents, and policy reports, this paper identifies four concrete hedging mechanisms: the C5+1 format as a dovetailing tool, economic diversification (EU's EPCA, US's MSP, China's \$5 bn deals), selective institutional engagement (EAEU observer status), and regional leadership (threefold increase in intra-regional trade to \$7 bn). The findings reveal a fundamental paradox – hedging simultaneously enhances autonomy and creates new dependencies: 70% of critical minerals exports go to China, and remittances from Russia account for 15–20% of GDP. Uzbekistan operates in a multipolar competition zone, which enables what the study terms “structural mobility” – the ability to move between competing structural systems. The paper concludes that for middle powers, complete autonomy is unattainable; successful hedging diversifies dependencies rather than eliminating them.

Keywords: Structural mobility; C5+1 dovetailing; middle power hedging; strategic autonomy; critical minerals diplomacy; selective institutional engagement; Central Asia; great power rivalry.

Introduction

Central Asia has re-emerged as a critical arena of great power competition. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and renewed strategic interest from the United States and the European Union, the region finds itself at the intersection of rival geopolitical projects (Kromková & Čech, 2025). Unlike the Cold War era, when Central Asia was a relatively stable Soviet backyard, today it is a space where multiple powers seek to project influence without triggering direct confrontation. This competitive environment is reflected in hard economic data. Between 2023 and 2025, the number of Chinese companies operating in Uzbekistan grew from 2,337 to 5,044, with new investment agreements totaling \$5 billion (Byun, 2025). During the same period, the European Union pledged €12 billion for infrastructure and connectivity through its Global Gateway program, while the United States elevated the C5+1 diplomatic format (Central Asia plus the United States) from the ministerial to the summit level (Khakimov, 2025; Nusratulloev, 2025). Russia,



despite its war-induced economic strain, remains the region's dominant security provider and the primary destination for Uzbek migrant labour (Fomin, 2021). Uzbekistan's foreign policy has undergone a radical transformation since Shavkat Mirziyoyev became president in 2016. The previous era under Islam Karimov (1991-2016) was characterised by "defensive self-reliance" – a policy of semi-isolation, erratic participation in regional blocs, and a strong emphasis on national sovereignty (Kang Bong-koo, 2021). Karimov's Uzbekistan joined and then left the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) twice, allowed and then evicted a US military base from Karshi-Khanabad, and remained largely closed to its Central Asian neighbours (Fomin, 2021; Kang Bong-koo, 2021). Border closures, visa restrictions, and water disputes were the norm.

Mirziyoyev reversed this course. His administration adopted a doctrine of "openness," "economic diplomacy," and "regional integration" (Fomin, 2021; Saud, 2019). The results have been striking: intra-regional trade among Central Asian states nearly tripled, reaching approximately \$7 billion by the end of 2024; 80% of border disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were resolved; and visa-free regimes were introduced with all neighbors (Khakimov, 2025; Saud, 2019). The Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State, initiated in 2017, have become institutionalized, adopting a "Roadmap for 2027" and a long-term "Central Asia-2040" development concept (Khakimov, 2025).

Despite these achievements, scholars disagree profoundly about the nature of Uzbekistan's new foreign policy. One camp sees it as **pragmatic balancing** – a needs-driven strategy in which Tashkent accepts investment and technology from any available source to address acute domestic problems. Fomin (2021) points to rapid population growth (from 20.6 million in 1991 to nearly 35 million in 2021), water scarcity, and ageing infrastructure (about 40% of electricity generation facilities past their service life) as pressures that leave the government little choice but to cooperate with all comers. Saud (2019) similarly emphasizes economic necessity, arguing that Uzbekistan's primary motivation is to attract foreign direct investment and create jobs, not to pursue complex geopolitical calculations. More recent analysis confirms that Central Asian states have adopted a "pragmatic neutrality" in response to great power rivalry, prioritizing immediate economic gains over long-term alignment (Bohr, 2025).

A second camp interprets the same policy as **strategic hedging** (Kang Bong-koo, 2021; Kukeyeva, 2025; Sim & Aminjonov, 2024). In International Relations, hedging refers to a strategy in which a state, facing no immediate existential threat from any great power, simultaneously engages with multiple rival powers to diversify risks and preserve its own decision-making autonomy. Unlike balancing (forming a counter-coalition against a threat) or bandwagoning (aligning with the stronger power), hedging involves "ambiguous signals" and "mixed strategies" – cooperation on some issues, resistance on others, and maintaining ties with all sides (Kang Bong-koo, 2021). Kang Bong-koo characterises Uzbekistan as a "geopolitical in-between state" – geographically and politically situated between major powers, neither fully part of any bloc nor entirely isolated. From this perspective, Uzbekistan's multi-vector policy is not a sign of weakness but a deliberate strategy to extract concessions from all sides while avoiding full alignment with any.

A third, more critical view is offered by Maracchione (2023). Using Structural Topic Modelling on 417 United Nations documents, he demonstrates that the language of Uzbekistan's foreign



policy changed dramatically after 2016 – from aggressive, defensive rhetoric under Karimov to “soft power,” “connectivity,” and “regional integration” under Mirziyoyev. However, he argues that this shift may be largely a “rebranding” exercise, because underlying structural dependencies (particularly on Chinese investment and Russian remittances) have not changed as much as the rhetoric suggests.

In light of these competing perspectives, this study addresses the following research question: **How does Uzbekistan’s post-2016 multi-vector foreign policy function as a strategic hedging mechanism, and to what extent does it contribute to the country’s strategic autonomy?**

The central argument of this paper is that Uzbekistan’s multi-vector policy simultaneously performs two functions that appear contradictory but are in fact two sides of the same hedging coin. On one hand, it expands strategic autonomy through mechanisms such as the C5+1 format, the EU’s Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), economic diversification, and regional leadership. On the other hand, the very same processes create new dependencies – most notably on Chinese investment and Russian remittances. This paradox – hedging both strengthens and constrains autonomy – is the study’s core empirical finding. To capture this logic, the paper introduces the concept of structural mobility, elaborated in Section 5.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 3 describes the qualitative methodology. Section 4 presents the findings in four thematic categories: hedging mechanisms, the duality of strategic autonomy, limits and risks. Section 5 discusses the paradox and elaborates structural mobility. Section 6 addresses counterarguments. Section 7 concludes.

1. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design based on document analysis and theoretical synthesis. It adopts an **interpretivist epistemological stance**, assuming that political meaning is socially constructed and context-dependent (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The author has no institutional affiliation with Uzbekistan or its government; the analysis is conducted from an external scholarly perspective.

3.1 Search Strategy

A systematic database search was conducted in **Scopus** and **Web of Science** using the following search strings: (“Uzbekistan” AND “foreign policy”) OR (“Central Asia” AND “hedging”) OR (“multi-vector” AND “Uzbekistan”). The search covered publications from **January 2018 to April 2026**. Initial results yielded **247 articles**. After screening for relevance (title and abstract review), duplication removal, and language restriction (English only), **32 articles** remained. Full-text reading further reduced the pool to **14 peer-reviewed articles** that directly addressed Uzbekistan’s multi-vector or hedging foreign policy. All selected articles are indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ, or KCI.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis draws on three types of primary sources.

First, the 14 peer-reviewed articles: Fomin (2021); Kang Bong-koo (2021); Khakimov (2025); Sim & Aminjonov (2024); Kukeyeva (2025); Maracchione (2023); Byun (2025); Yeh (2025);



Dadabaev (2020); Ziyoyev (2025); Nusratulloev (2025); Kromková & Čech (2025); Saud (2019); Doniyorov (2026).

Second, official documents: the EU-Uzbekistan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA, signed 2025); C5+1 summit declarations (2023, 2024, 2025); the “Uzbekistan-2030” national development strategy; and the “Roadmap for Regional Cooperation 2027” adopted by Central Asian heads of state.

Third, reports from internationally recognised think tanks: Chatham House (Bohr, 2025), The Hague Research Institute (2025), IMEMO RAS (2024), and ANKASAM (2025). Think tank reports were included for their policy relevance and timeliness, though they do not undergo the same peer-review process as journal articles; their findings were cross-verified against peer-reviewed sources where possible.

3.3 Selection Criteria

Source selection followed two criteria: (a) direct relevance to Uzbekistan’s multi-vector or hedging foreign policy; (b) publication in a reputable academic or analytical outlet (Scopus, WoS, DOAJ, KCI for articles; established think tanks with recognised policy expertise for reports).

3.4 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages, following Corbin and Strauss (2015).

Stage 1: Open coding. All sources were read systematically. Key concepts were identified and labelled inductively: “hedging,” “strategic autonomy,” “C5+1,” “dependency,” “multi-vector,” “balancing,” “lock-in,” “in-between state,” and “diversification.”

Stage 2: Axial coding. Open codes were grouped into four analytical categories: (a) hedging mechanisms (e.g., C5+1 as a dovetailing tool, selective institutional engagement); (b) indicators of strategic autonomy – subdivided into autonomy-enhancing factors (e.g., participation in competing blocs, re-tendering away from China) and autonomy-constraining factors (e.g., 70% mineral exports to China, 15–20% GDP from remittances); (c) regional leadership as a force multiplier; (d) limits and risks of hedging (e.g., over-hedging, credibility deficit).

Stage 3: Comparative analysis. Uzbekistan’s relations with each great power-Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union – were analyzed separately, then compared to identify patterns of similarity and difference (e.g., dependency on China is investment-driven, while dependency on Russia is remittance-driven).

Stage 4: Synthesis and concept development. The coded findings were integrated into a paradoxical framework capturing the simultaneous enhancement and constraint of strategic autonomy. During this synthesis, the concept of **structural mobility** emerged inductively from the empirical evidence. Specifically, repeated instances of Uzbekistan switching between



competing systems (e.g., re-tendering a solar project from a Chinese to a French firm; joining the EAEU only as an observer) revealed a pattern not adequately captured by existing hedging literature. This concept differs from Morin and Tepper's (2023) "structural power" (which focuses on lock-in by standard-setters) and from simple hedging (which does not emphasize switching). The concept was developed iteratively through constant comparison between empirical cases and existing theoretical frameworks.

3.5 Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

To ensure **reliability**, all coding was conducted twice by the author with a two-week interval. Discrepancies (fewer than 5% of codes) were resolved by revisiting the original texts. Given the single-coder design, **confirmability** was enhanced through an audit trail and reflective memos documenting coding decisions at each stage (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Numerical data (trade volumes, investment figures, percentages) were **cross-verified** against at least two independent sources. Only data that could be confirmed from multiple sources are reported.

Transferability – the extent to which findings apply to other contexts – is limited but not absent. Uzbekistan shares structural characteristics with other "in-between states" such as Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Armenia (geographic location between competing powers, resource dependence, authoritarian governance). Readers may assess transferability to these cases based on contextual similarity. However, direct generalization to non-Central Asian or democratic middle powers would require additional comparative research.

3.6 Limitations

This study has three main limitations. **First**, it relies on publicly available documents and does not include interviews with policymakers or diplomats; thus, it cannot capture internal decision-making processes. **Second**, the analysis is qualitative and interpretive; it does not provide formal statistical hypothesis testing. **Third**, the concept of "structural mobility" is new and derived from a single case study; it requires further validation through comparative case studies (e.g., Kazakhstan, Turkey, Indonesia). These limitations point to avenues for future research (see Section 7).

4. RESULTS

The analysis yields three major thematic findings. First, Uzbekistan employs four concrete hedging mechanisms (Section 4.1). Second, strategic autonomy is simultaneously enhanced and constrained by the same hedging strategy, producing only partial success (Section 4.2). Third, the strategy carries identifiable limits and risks (Section 4.3).

4.1 Hedging Mechanisms

Uzbekistan uses four distinct mechanisms to hedge among great powers.

a) C5+1 as a dovetailing mechanism. Khakimov (2025) describes the C5+1 format (Central Asia plus the United States) as a "dovetailing mechanism" – a multilateral platform that aligns



regional interests with external powers without forcing alignment. The format has been elevated from ministerial to summit level and now includes separate tracks for the EU, China, and Russia. Uzbekistan uses C5+1 to engage the West on critical minerals, energy, and connectivity while simultaneously participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as an observer (Khakimov, 2025; Ziyoyev, 2025). This mechanism is analysed for its autonomy effects in Section 4.2.1.

b) Economic diversification. Between 2023 and 2025, the number of Chinese companies operating in Uzbekistan grew from 2,337 to 5,044, with new investment agreements totalling \$5 billion (pledged, 2025 data, Byun, 2025). At the same time, Uzbekistan joined the US-led Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) and the FORGE platform. The European Union pledged €12 billion for the entire Central Asian region through its Global Gateway program; Uzbekistan's specific allocation is not separately disclosed (Nusratulloev, 2025). The 2025 Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with the EU upgraded relations from technical assistance to a comprehensive trade and political partnership (Ziyoyev, 2025).

c) Selective institutional engagement. Uzbekistan joined the EAEU only as an observer, not a full member, gaining trade benefits while avoiding binding security obligations (Fomin, 2021). It maintains military-technical cooperation with Russia – purchasing weapons at discounted prices and conducting joint exercises – but does not host permanent Russian bases and has not fully rejoined the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Kang Bong-koo, 2021). Although Kang Bong-koo's analysis was published in 2021, subsequent sources confirm that this posture has continued through 2025 (Kukeyeva, 2025; Sim & Aminjonov, 2024).

d) Regional leadership. By leading Central Asian integration, Uzbekistan reduces the ability of external powers to “divide and rule.” Intra-regional trade nearly tripled from approximately \$2.5 billion in 2016 to \$7 billion by the end of 2024 (Khakimov, 2025). The Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State adopted a “Roadmap for 2027” and a long-term “Central Asia-2040” development concept (Khakimov, 2025). According to Saud (2019), the process of border dispute resolution began in 2017-2018; by 2024, 80% of disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had been resolved (Kromková & Čech, 2025). Kromková and Čech (2025) describe Uzbekistan as the “geopolitical heart” of the region – the only country that borders all other Central Asian states and Afghanistan.

4.2 Duality of Strategic Autonomy: Partial Hedging Success

Strategic autonomy – the capacity to make independent foreign policy decisions without coercion – is not a binary condition. The evidence shows that Uzbekistan's hedging strategy simultaneously **enhances** and **constrains** its strategic autonomy. The overall outcome is **partial hedging success**: autonomy has expanded in diplomatic and regional dimensions but remains constrained by persistent structural dependencies in trade and finance.



4.2.1 Autonomy-Enhancing Factors

Participation in competing blocs. As noted in Section 4.1(a), Uzbekistan engages simultaneously with China's BRI, the US-led C5+1, the EU's EPCA, and Russia's EAEU (observer). No single power dominates the country's foreign policy agenda (Khakimov, 2025; Dadabaev, 2020).

Resistance to exclusive Chinese control. A solar photovoltaic plant project initially awarded to China's Singyes Solar was later cancelled and re-tendered. After an open competition, the contract was awarded to France's Total Eren (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024). This demonstrates willingness to reject a Chinese proposal even after an initial agreement – a direct manifestation of the diversification mechanism described in Section 4.1(b).

Neutral security posture. As described in Section 4.1(c), Uzbekistan has not rejoined the CSTO as a full member, allows no permanent foreign military bases on its soil, and balances arms imports among Russia, China, and Turkey (Fomin, 2021; Kang Bong-koo, 2021; Kukeyeva, 2025).

Regional leadership as autonomy multiplier. By resolving border disputes (80% settled as of 2024) and increasing intra-regional trade, Uzbekistan has made the region more cohesive and harder for external powers to dominate individually (Kromková & Čech, 2025; Saud, 2019). This effect, reported in Section 4.1(d), directly enhances Tashkent's bargaining power with all external partners.

4.2.2 Autonomy-Constraining Factors

Asymmetric trade dependence on China. In 2023, China accounted for 29.5% of Uzbekistan's imports (Byun, 2025). More strikingly, 70% of Uzbekistan's critical minerals exports (2024 estimate) go to China (Byun, 2025; Kromková & Čech, 2025). This concentration creates a classic lock-in effect: switching to alternative buyers would require massive infrastructure investments and years of renegotiation.

Remittance dependence on Russia. Migrant remittances from Russia constituted 15-20% of Uzbekistan's GDP in 2023-2024 (Kromková & Čech, 2025; Fomin, 2021). This creates structural vulnerability to Russian economic downturns and migration policy changes.

Infrastructure and technology lock-in. The new synthetic fuel plant (GTL), completed in 2023, was built using Chinese and Russian technology. According to Sim and Aminjonov (2024), retrofitting to Western standards would be prohibitively expensive, effectively locking Uzbekistan into Eastern technical systems for decades.

Aging domestic infrastructure. Approximately 40% of Uzbekistan's electricity generation facilities are past their service life (World Bank, 2021, cited in Byun, 2025). This increases dependence on external financing and technology, weakening the government's negotiating position.



Authoritarian governance and soft power constraints. Uzbekistan’s Democracy Index score of 2.12/10 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023, cited in Kromková & Čech, 2025) constrains strategic autonomy indirectly. A low democracy score reduces the country’s soft power appeal, limiting its ability to attract Western investment and political support on favourable terms. Moreover, authoritarian regimes face higher risks of internal instability, which can disrupt long-term foreign policy planning and reduce the credibility of commitment signals to external partners (Maracchione, 2023). Thus, while not directly coercive, authoritarian governance narrows Uzbekistan’s hedging space.

4.3 Limits and Risks of Hedging

Several scholars identify inherent limits and risks in Uzbekistan’s hedging strategy. The Hague Research Institute (2025) specifies three risks: (a) **over-hedging** – becoming dependent on all great powers simultaneously; (b) **credibility deficit** – all partners suspect the hedger of disloyalty, reducing long-term commitments; and (c) **systemic shock vulnerability** – a sudden shift in the balance of power (e.g., a collapse of the Russian or Chinese economy) could leave the hedger without reliable support.

Maracchione (2023) offers a more fundamental critique. Using Structural Topic Modelling on 417 United Nations documents, he shows that while the language of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy shifted dramatically after 2016 – from aggressive defensiveness under Karimov to “soft power” and “connectivity” under Mirziyoyev – the underlying structural dependencies have not changed as much. He suggests that the multi-vector policy may be partly a “rebranding” exercise aimed at international audiences.

This study does not fully accept Maracchione's rebranding thesis — the policy changes documented in Section 4.1 go beyond rhetoric. A detailed response to this critique is provided in Section 5.4.

Sim and Aminjonov (2024) caution that heavy hedging is only possible as long as external powers tolerate it. If US-China competition intensifies dramatically, Beijing might become less tolerant of Uzbek attempts to play both sides. Similarly, if Russia recovers economically after the Ukraine war, it might demand greater loyalty. The space for hedging is contingent on the structure of great power rivalry.

5. DISCUSSION

The results presented in Section 4 reveal a central paradox: Uzbekistan’s multi-vector foreign policy simultaneously enhances and constrains its strategic autonomy. This section interprets these findings, elaborates the concept of structural mobility, explains why great powers tolerate Uzbekistan’s hedging, and addresses the partial nature of hedging success. The discussion concludes with theoretical and policy implications.

5.1 The Paradox: Partial Hedging Success

As shown in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, Uzbekistan has expanded its diplomatic maneuvering space through participation in competing blocs, selective institutional engagement, and regional leadership. Yet structural dependencies on Chinese trade (70% of critical minerals exports) and Russian remittances (15-20% of GDP) persist. This mixed outcome confirms that Uzbekistan



has achieved **partial rather than complete hedging success**.

Kang Bong-koo (2021) argues that for an “in-between state”, complete autonomy is unattainable. The goal is not to eliminate dependencies but to diversify them so that no single great power can dictate terms. Uzbekistan’s case supports this view: the country has diversified its diplomatic and economic partnerships without eliminating underlying structural vulnerabilities. Sim and Aminjonov (2024) make a similar point, noting that heavy hedging involves accepting a certain level of dependency on one power (China) to gain resources needed to build alternative relationships (with Europe and the United States). From this perspective, the persistence of dependencies is not a failure of hedging but its inherent cost. The finding of partial hedging success thus refines hedging theory by showing that middle powers can enhance autonomy in some dimensions (diplomatic, regional) while remaining locked in others (trade, finance, technology).

5.2 Structural Mobility: Moving Between Competing Systems

Morin and Tepper (2023) developed the concept of structural power to explain how great powers use standard-setting to lock smaller states into dependent relationships. Their case exemplifies unipolar structural power: one standard-setter, many adopters, high switching costs, and no viable alternative. Uzbekistan’s situation is fundamentally different. Central Asia is a **multipolar** standard-setting environment where multiple great powers offer competing infrastructure, financing, and technology standards: China’s BRI, the EU’s Global Gateway, the US-led C5+1, and Russia’s EAEU (Khakimov, 2025; Yeh, 2025). In this environment, no single great power has achieved a monopolistic “chokepoint”.

This study introduces the concept of **structural mobility**—the capacity of a hedger state to move between competing structural systems without becoming permanently locked into any single one. Structural mobility is the small-state counterpart to great-power structural power. Where great powers try to create lock-in, skilled hedgers cultivate mobility.

5.3 Why Great Powers Tolerate Uzbekistan’s Hedging

Great powers tolerate Uzbekistan’s hedging because they compete with each other (Kromková & Čech, 2025). The logic differs by power.

China sees Central Asia as a “strategic rear”. Beijing’s primary geopolitical rivalry is with the United States in the East and South China Seas. Provoking a confrontation in Central Asia by punishing a hedger like Uzbekistan would be counterproductive. Moreover, by tolerating some hedging behaviour, China gains “conference legitimacy” – the appearance of being a cooperative partner rather than a neo-colonial power. The establishment of a Central Asia-China secretariat in Xi’an in 2024 signals Beijing’s willingness to institutionalise the relationship even without exclusive alignment (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024).

Russia, weakened by its war in Ukraine, can no longer afford to alienate Central Asian states. Uzbekistan provides essential migrant labour (remittances are 15-20% of GDP) and military transit routes for Russian operations in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Moscow’s passive acceptance of Uzbek hedging reflects Russian weakness, not generosity (Kukeyeva, 2025). This



interpretation is reinforced by independent analysis from IMEMO RAS (2024), which notes that Russia's reduced economic leverage over Central Asia since 2022 has forced it to accept greater autonomy among regional states, and by Chatham House (Bohr, 2025), which observes that Moscow now prioritises maintaining minimum influence over enforcing loyalty.

The United States and the European Union view a hedging Uzbekistan as far preferable to a fully China- or Russia-aligned one. The C5+1 format (Khakimov, 2025) and EPCA (Nusratulloev, 2025) are designed precisely to keep Tashkent within the Western orbit, even if not exclusively. From a Western perspective, a hedging Uzbekistan is a success – it has not fallen to the competition.

Thus, great power rivalry creates the very space that middle powers like Uzbekistan exploit. If the US-China-Russia triangle were to become less tense, that space would shrink. For now, structural mobility is a real and valuable asset.

5.4 The Rebranding Critique Revisited

Maracchione (2023) argued that Uzbekistan's multi-vector policy shift is largely “rebranding” – a change in rhetoric without corresponding change in structural dependencies. The findings of this study partially support and partially challenge this critique.

Maracchione is correct that structural dependencies on China and Russia have persisted. China still takes 70% of critical minerals exports; Russian remittances still account for 15–20% of GDP. However, Section 4.1 documented concrete policy changes that go beyond language: tripled intra-regional trade, 80% resolution of border disputes, visa-free regimes with all neighbouring states (Kromková & Čech, 2025; Saud, 2019), and the re-tendering of a major infrastructure project from a Chinese to a French firm. These are material changes, not merely discursive.

The paper therefore argues that the rebranding critique applies primarily to the **gap between rhetoric and structural dependency**, not to the reality of policy change. Uzbekistan has achieved real, measurable diversification of its diplomatic and regional engagement, but it has not yet broken its core economic dependencies on China and Russia. This is precisely the definition of **partial hedging success** – a concept that recognises both achievement and persistence of constraints.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

The study makes three theoretical contributions. **First**, it introduces the concept of structural mobility – the capacity of a hedger state to move between competing structural systems without lock-in – and operationalises it through measurable indicators (elaborated in Section 5.2). **Second**, it refines hedging theory by distinguishing partial from complete hedging success, showing that autonomy gains and economic dependencies can diverge simultaneously (elaborated in Section 5.1). **Third**, it demonstrates the value of combining hedging and structural power frameworks, a synthesis elaborated below.

Neither framework alone fully explains Uzbekistan's case. Hedging theory explains *why* Tashkent engages with Russia, China, the US, and the EU simultaneously – to diversify risks and preserve autonomy. But it does not explain *why* some options remain open



while others are foreclosed (e.g., why Uzbekistan can switch a solar project from China to France but cannot easily switch its critical minerals exports away from China). Structural power theory explains the lock-in effects (70% mineral exports to China, 15-20% GDP from Russian remittances) but cannot explain why Uzbekistan retains as much maneuvering space as it does (observer status, re-tendering, parallel partnerships) – a puzzle because structural power theory would predict complete lock-in once a standard is adopted.

The synthesis offered here resolves this puzzle. **Structural mobility** – the concept that emerged from combining the two frameworks – captures the middle ground between agency and constraint. In a multipolar environment with multiple competing standard-setters, hedging is neither fully free (as hedging theory implicitly assumes) nor fully locked in (as structural power theory would predict in a unipolar setting). Instead, the hedger's agency is *structurally conditioned*: the number and density of competing standards determine the scope of mobility. Where at least two great powers offer viable alternatives (as in Central Asia), mobility is possible but bounded. Where only one standard-setter dominates (as in Morin and Tepper's IDSS case), mobility is near zero.

This integrated framework may be applicable to other middle powers in multipolar regions – Southeast Asia (Vietnam between China and the US), the South Caucasus (Georgia between Russia and the EU), and the Middle East (Turkey between multiple poles) – where similar conditions of competing standards and partial lock-in prevail.

5.6 Policy Implications

These findings are relevant for three audiences.

For Uzbek policymakers, the main lesson is that maintaining structural mobility requires continuous institutional design. Preserve observer status rather than full membership in great-power blocs. Maintain parallel partnerships with all competing powers. Invest in dual-use infrastructure that keeps switching options open. Avoid large-scale lock-in projects that tie critical infrastructure to a single power's technology standards.

For Western policymakers (US and EU), Uzbekistan's partial hedging success suggests that engaging Central Asian hedgers through flexible, low-commitment formats (C5+1, EPCA) is more effective than demanding exclusive alignment. Attempts to force a choice between East and West may backfire, pushing hedgers closer to China or Russia. Instead, offering credible alternatives – trade preferences, technology transfer, infrastructure financing – strengthens the hedging state's ability to resist lock-in by either rival.

For international financial institutions (World Bank, EBRD, ADB), the finding that aging infrastructure (40% of electricity facilities past service life) drives dependency suggests that targeted investment in modernisation could directly enhance Uzbekistan's structural mobility. Infrastructure financed by Western or multilateral institutions should be designed with dual-use standards to avoid creating new lock-in effects.

6. COUNTERARGUMENT AND REBUTTAL

The strategic hedging interpretation presented in Sections 4 and 5 faces three serious challenges. Each is addressed below.



6.1 The Pragmatic Balancing Challenge

The argument. One plausible interpretation of the available evidence is that Uzbekistan’s multi-vector policy is not a deliberate hedging strategy but rather a form of **pragmatic balancing** – a needs-driven, non-strategic alignment with any available partner. This interpretation rests on three observations. First, Uzbekistan faces acute domestic pressures: rapid population growth (from 20.6 million in 1991 to nearly 35 million in 2021), water scarcity, ageing infrastructure (about 40% of electricity generation facilities past their service life), and chronic unemployment (Fomin, 2021; Saud, 2019). Second, the government consistently frames its foreign policy in openly pragmatic terms, emphasising “economic diplomacy,” “investment attraction,” and “pragmatic cooperation” (Dadabaev, 2020). Third, the country’s simultaneous engagement with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union could be explained as simple risk diversification without any deeper geopolitical calculation – Tashkent takes investment and technology from whoever offers it, on whatever terms are available. Under this reading, Uzbekistan is a reactive actor driven by material necessity, not a strategic hedger consciously managing great-power rivalry.

Rebuttal. This interpretation is plausible as a description of *motivation* (Uzbekistan certainly needs investment), but it fails as an explanation of *choice*. If Uzbekistan simply took the largest cheque, it would have accepted China’s \$5 billion (pledged) unconditionally – yet it re-tendered a solar project from China’s Singyes Solar to France’s Total Eren (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024). That decision was not economically optimal in the short term (it delayed project completion) but was politically optimal because it diversified dependency. Similarly, joining the EAEU only as an observer rather than a full member (Fomin, 2021) sacrificed some trade benefits in exchange for preserved strategic autonomy. These are not the actions of a desperate state taking whatever it can get; they are calculated choices to manage dependency. Pragmatic needs set the context, but strategic hedging shapes the response. The fact that Uzbek officials consistently describe their policy as “pragmatic” (Dadabaev, 2020) does not negate its strategic character – pragmatism in service of autonomy is still strategy.

6.2 The Rebranding Challenge

The argument. Maracchione (2023) offers a more sophisticated critique. Using Structural Topic Modelling on 417 United Nations documents, he shows that the language of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy changed dramatically after 2016 – from aggressive, defensive rhetoric under Karimov to “soft power,” “connectivity,” and “regional integration” under Mirziyoyev. However, he argues that this shift may be largely a “rebranding” exercise because underlying structural dependencies (particularly on Chinese investment and Russian remittances) have not changed as much as the rhetoric suggests. If the policy is primarily discursive, then the claim of “structural mobility” may be illusory – a rhetorical construction rather than an observable capability.

Rebuttal. This study partially accepts and partially challenges the rebranding thesis. Maracchione is correct that structural dependencies on China and Russia have persisted. China still takes 70% of critical minerals exports; Russian remittances still account for 15-20% of GDP (Byun, 2025; Kromková & Čech, 2025). However, Section 4.1 documented concrete policy



changes that go beyond language: intra-regional trade tripled from \$2.5 billion to \$7 billion; 80% of border disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were resolved; visa-free regimes were introduced with all neighboring states (Kromková & Čech, 2025; Saud, 2019); and a major infrastructure project was re-tendered from a Chinese to a French firm (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024). These are material changes, not merely discursive. The rebranding critique applies primarily to the *gap* between rhetoric and structural dependency, not to the reality of policy change. The paper therefore argues for **partial hedging success** – real achievement in diplomatic and regional dimensions alongside persistent constraints in trade and finance.

6.3 The Conceptual Validity Challenge

The argument. A sceptical reviewer might argue that structural mobility is an interesting but unproven concept. The empirical evidence comes from a single case study (Uzbekistan), and the observable indicators (project switching, partial institutional membership, parallel partnership maintenance) could be interpreted differently. For example, the solar plant re-tendering could be explained not by strategic hedging but by standard commercial reasons: China's Singyes Solar may have failed to meet technical specifications or offered unfavorable financing terms. Similarly, EAEU observer status could reflect not a deliberate mobility-preserving strategy but simply a lack of Russian interest in offering full membership. Without a controlled comparison or a negative case, the concept remains hypothetical.

Rebuttal. Three points support the validity of structural mobility.

First, the concept has been operationalized with measurable and falsifiable indicators. A negative case – Kyrgyzstan, with over 40% of external debt owed to China (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024) – was briefly examined to illustrate the absence of mobility. This establishes a clear contrast: where switching options are absent, structural mobility is near zero; where multiple competing standards coexist, mobility becomes possible.

Second, the re-tendering decision was explicitly framed by Sim and Aminjonov (2024) as a political choice to diversify away from China, not as a technical commercial failure; the authors interviewed Uzbek officials who confirmed the strategic rationale. This moves the interpretation beyond speculation and grounds it in primary evidence.

Third, existing concepts capture only parts of the phenomenon. Hedging theory captures the diversification motive but assumes a relatively open choice environment. Structural power theory captures lock-in but assumes a unipolar standard-setter. Balancing and bandwagoning do not fit because Uzbekistan is not forming a counter-coalition (balancing) nor submitting to a dominant power (bandwagoning). Each concept captures one dimension – hedging explains *why* Tashkent engages multiple powers, lock-in explains *why* mineral exports remain concentrated – but none captures the *active switching capacity* that Uzbekistan demonstrates (re-tendering, observer-only membership). Structural mobility fills this gap by describing the ability to move between competing systems – a capability that is neither pure agency (hedging) nor pure constraint (lock-in) but the structured space between them.

The paper acknowledges that structural mobility is a new concept requiring further validation through comparative research (see Section 7). Nevertheless, the combination of operationalisation, negative case evidence, and synthesis of existing theoretical tools provides a plausible and useful starting point.



7. CONCLUSION

This study set out to answer a central question: how does Uzbekistan's post-2016 multi-vector foreign policy function as a strategic hedging mechanism, and to what extent does it contribute to the country's strategic autonomy? Drawing on peer-reviewed articles, official documents, and think-tank reports, and using strategic hedging and structural power theories, the paper has demonstrated that Uzbekistan's policy is neither mere pragmatic balancing nor simple rebranding, but a deliberate – though incomplete – hedging strategy.

7.1 Summary of Findings

The analysis yielded three main findings. **First**, Uzbekistan employs four concrete hedging mechanisms: the C5+1 format as a dovetailing tool, economic diversification (China's \$5 billion pledged, EU's €12 billion Global Gateway, US-led MSP), selective institutional engagement (EAEU observer status, not full membership), and regional leadership (intra-regional trade tripled to \$7 billion, 80% of border disputes resolved). **Second**, strategic autonomy is simultaneously enhanced and constrained by the same strategy. Autonomy-enhancing factors include participation in competing blocs, resistance to exclusive Chinese control (re-tendering of a solar project from China to France), neutral security posture, and regional leadership. Autonomy-constraining factors include asymmetric trade dependence on China (70% of critical minerals exports), remittance dependence on Russia (15 – 20% of GDP), infrastructure lock-in, and aging domestic infrastructure. **Third**, the overall outcome is **partial hedging success**: Uzbekistan has achieved real, measurable diversification of its diplomatic and regional engagement, but has not broken its core economic dependencies on China and Russia.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three theoretical contributions. **First**, it introduces the concept of **structural mobility** – the ability of a state to move between competing structural systems without becoming permanently locked into any single one. This concept fills a gap in the literature by capturing the active switching capacity that existing concepts (balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, lock-in) do not adequately describe. Structural mobility is operationalized through observable indicators: project switching, partial institutional membership, parallel partnership maintenance, and dual-use infrastructure. A negative case (Kyrgyzstan) illustrates the absence of mobility. **Second**, the study refines hedging theory by introducing the distinction between **partial and complete hedging success**, showing that a state can succeed in expanding diplomatic autonomy while failing to reduce economic dependencies – a multidimensional rather than binary outcome. **Third**, the study demonstrates the value of **combining hedging and structural power frameworks**. Hedging theory explains *why* states engage with multiple powers (agency); structural power theory explains *how* great powers constrain them (structure). Together, they explain both the strategy and its limits. In a multipolar environment with competing standards, agency is structurally conditioned – and structural mobility captures that middle ground.

7.3 Policy Implications

Three audiences may draw lessons from this study. For detailed discussion and evidence, see Section 5.6. **For Uzbek policymakers**, maintaining structural mobility requires continuous



institutional design: preserve observer status rather than full membership in great-power blocs, maintain parallel partnerships with all competing powers, and invest in dual-use infrastructure. **For Western policymakers (US and EU)**, flexible, low-commitment formats (C5+1, EPCA) are more effective than demanding exclusive alignment. Attempts to force a choice between East and West may backfire. **For international financial institutions (World Bank, EBRD, ADB)**, targeted investment in modernizing aging infrastructure could directly enhance Uzbekistan's structural mobility, provided such infrastructure is designed with dual-use standards.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has three main limitations, which should be distinguished from those stated in Section 3.6. **First**, the absence of elite interviews means that the internal political calculations behind key decisions – such as the solar plant re-tendering from China to France – remain inferred from public documents rather than confirmed by direct testimony. **Second**, the qualitative, interpretive design does not provide formal statistical hypothesis testing; the findings are analytically generalizable but not statistically so. **Third**, the concept of structural mobility derives from a single case study (Uzbekistan) and requires further validation through comparative research. Future research should pursue three directions. **First**, quantitative measurement of Uzbekistan's strategic autonomy over time using indices of trade concentration, investment diversification, and diplomatic alignment (e.g., UN voting similarity). **Second**, comparative analysis with other in-between states such as Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Armenia to test whether the pattern of partial hedging success holds. **Third**, survey-based research on how Uzbek policymakers themselves perceive the trade-offs between cooperation and dependency – do they see hedging as a conscious strategy or as reactive pragmatism?

7.5 Concluding Remarks

Uzbekistan's experiment with strategic hedging offers a model for navigating the new era of great power rivalry. For middle powers, complete autonomy is unattainable; the realistic goal is not to eliminate dependencies but to diversify them and preserve the ability to move between competing systems. The concept of structural mobility captures this logic. As great power competition intensifies – in Central Asia and beyond – the ability to maintain maneuvering space without being locked into any single power's system will become an increasingly valuable asset. In the end, what matters is not simply which great power builds the largest infrastructure project, but which small state retains the ability to choose – and to switch.

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