

AFGHANISTAN - UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS AFTER 2021: STRATEGIC PRAGMATISM IN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract. Afghanistan remains an important factor for Central Asia not only in terms of security but also in the context of the region's connectivity and development. Furthermore, it is crucial to examine the economic potential of bilateral relations between Afghanistan and the region. One key focus of this study is relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Geography, trade, and regional political factors contribute to the historically important and strategically significant relationship between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, the nature of the Afghan economy and politics, as well as Afghanistan's interactions with its neighbor, have fundamentally changed. One focus of this study is an analysis of the development of economic and political relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan in the areas of trade and infrastructure development, as well as the political strategies aimed at achieving these goals. The study employs a qualitative approach to analyze key factors and challenges in bilateral cooperation, drawing on official agreements, policy documents, news, and academic sources. The results show that although Uzbekistan is actively developing economic interactions, particularly in the transport and energy sectors, long-term stability and cooperation with Afghanistan are limited by political uncertainty in the country.

Keywords: Afghanistan-Uzbekistan relations, economic cooperation, regional connectivity, Central Asia..

2021 ЖЫЛДАН КЕЙІНГІ АУҒАНСТАН-ӨЗБЕКСТАН ҚАТЫНАСТАРЫ: ЭКОНОМИКАЛЫҚ ЖӘНЕ САЯСИ ӨЗАРА ІС-ҚИМЫЛДАҒЫ СТРАТЕГИЯЛЫҚ ПРАГМАТИЗМ

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Андатпа. Ауғанстан Орталық Азия үшін қауіпсіздік тұрғысынан ғана емес, сонымен қатар аймақ үшін байланыс пен даму контекстінде маңызды фактор болып қала береді. Сонымен қатар, Ауғанстан мен аймақ елдері арасындағы екіжақты қарым-қатынастардың экономикалық әлеуетін зерттеу өте маңызды. Зерттеу үшін маңызды жағдайлардың бірі Ауғанстан мен Өзбекстан арасындағы қарым-қатынас болып табылады. География, сауда және аймақтық саяси факторлар Ауғанстан мен Өзбекстанның бір-бірімен тарихи маңызды және стратегиялық маңызды қарым-қатынасына ықпал етеді. 2021 жылы Ауғанстанда тәліптер билікке оралғаннан бері ауған экономикасы мен саясатының сипаты және Ауғанстанның көршімен қарым-қатынасы түбегейлі өзгерді. Оның мүдделерінің бірі Ауғанстан мен Өзбекстан арасындағы сауда және инфрақұрылымдық даму саласындағы экономикалық және саяси қарым-қатынастардың даму үдерісін және осы мақсаттарға жетудегі саяси стратегияларды талдау болып табылады. Зерттеу ресми келісімдерді, бағдарламалық құжаттарды, жаңалықтарды және ғылыми дереккөздерді пайдалана отырып, екіжақты ынтымақтастықтың негізгі драйверлері мен қиындықтарын талдау үшін сапалы зерттеу әдісін пайдаланады. Нәтижелер Өзбекстанның экономикалық, әсіресе көлік және энергетика секторларында белсенді түрде араласу үдерісін жүргізіп жатқанына қарамастан, Ауғанстандағы саяси белгісіздіктерге байланысты Ауғанстанмен ұзақ мерзімді тұрақтылық пен ынтымақтастық шектелгенін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: *Ауғанстан-Өзбекстан қатынастары, экономикалық ынтымақтастық, аймақтық байланыс, Орталық Азия.*

АФГАНО-УЗБЕКСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ В ПЕРИОД ПОСЛЕ 2021 ГОДА: СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИЙ ПРАГМАТИЗМ В СФЕРЕ ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОГО И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА

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Аннотация. Афганистан остается важным фактором для Центральной Азии не только с точки зрения безопасности, но и в контексте взаимосвязанности и развития региона. Наряду с этим крайне важно изучить экономический потенциал двусторонних отношений между Афганистаном и странами региона. Одним из важных объектов исследования являются отношения между Афганистаном и Узбекистаном. География, торговля и региональные политические факторы способствуют исторически важным и стратегически значимым отношениям между Афганистаном и Узбекистаном. С момента возвращения Талибана к власти в Афганистане в 2021 году характер афганской экономики и политики, а также взаимодействие Афганистана с соседним государством коренным образом изменились. Одним из направлений исследования является анализ процесса развития экономических и политических отношений между Афганистаном и Узбекистаном в области торговли и развития инфраструктуры, а также политических стратегий, направленных на достижение этих целей. В исследовании используется качественный подход к анализу ключевых факторов и проблем двустороннего сотрудничества с использованием официальных соглашений, политических документов, новостных и научных источников. Результаты показывают, что, хотя Узбекистан активно развивает экономическое взаимодействие, особенно в транспортном и энергетическом секторах, долгосрочная стабильность и сотрудничество с Афганистаном ограничены политической неопределенностью в этой стране.

Ключевые слова: афгано-узбекские отношения, экономическое сотрудничество, региональная взаимосвязанность, Центральная Азия.

Introduction

With the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the neighboring states were confronted with a fundamental strategic dilemma, forcing them to readjust their foreign policy in the face of such extreme uncertainty. Dilemma case of Uzbekistan, which borders Afghanistan at an unstable 137-kilometer stretch and whose history is deeply linked to that of Afghanistan, the Dilemma was especially acute: how to balance the interests of the nation without giving an unacceptable regime.

This paper holds that the post-2021 strategy of Uzbekistan is a paradigm of strategic pragmatism: a philosophy, a view, an overlay of national interests in observation, economic connectivity, energy exports, and border control instead of ideological orientation, which is achieved in direct, transactional relations with the de facto authorities of the Taliban [4, p.17–23, 6, 24].

This paper argues that Uzbekistan's post 2021 strategy represents a distinct paradigm of strategic pragmatism: a doctrine characterized by a focus on observable national interests economic connectivity, energy exports, and border security over ideological alignment, pursued through direct, transactional relations with

the Taliban's de facto authorities [4,P.17"- 23,6,24,44]. Rather than isolating Afghanistan, Tashkent has sought to transform its southern neighbor into a critical corridor for trade and transit while simultaneously attempting to contain security externalities through calibrated engagement [6,27,33,41].

This contemporary policy is not an isolated phenomenon but the outcome of a gradual historical evolution. Under President Islam Karimov, a doctrine of defensive isolationism cast Afghanistan primarily as a source of non traditional security threats, including religious extremism, narcotics trafficking, and cross border instability [16,25]. Since 2016, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Tashkent has increasingly redefined Afghanistan as a strategic corridor towards South Asian markets, anchored in flagship infrastructure projects such as the Hairatan–Mazar i Sharif railway and the proposed Trans Afghan corridor [6,7,27,41].

It is on this background that the article poses the question: has the strategic pragmatism of Uzbekistan shaped the course of economic and political relationships with Afghanistan since the Taliban came back to power in 2021? It provides a conceptually informed and empirically based examination of one of the most important bilateral relations in Central Asia that presents the combination of economic tools (trade, infrastructure, energy exports) and diplomatic ambiguity in dealing with a non-recognized regime. [3,p.45"- 62,23,37,44].

The article first situates the case within the existing scholarly literature on Afghanistan–Uzbekistan relations, economic connectivity, and regional security, tracing the emergence of strategic pragmatism as a distinct pattern in post 2021 interactions [3,16,33,37,46]. It then outlines the qualitative research design, which combines documentary analysis with elite interviews. Subsequently, it presents empirical findings on economic cooperation (trade, infrastructure, energy) and political diplomatic engagement [6,14,27,41,44]. Finally, the discussion synthesizes these findings to assess the resilience and limitations of strategic pragmatism as a foreign policy doctrine under conditions of sanctions, non recognition, and shifting regional power dynamics, and draws implications for the future of regional connectivity and stability [18,p.113"- 137,31,33,41].

Literature Review

The complex and multifaceted relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan are established on the principles of geographical position, vulnerability, and strategic opportunities, and Afghanistan remains a bottleneck and a key aspect of the foreign policy calculus of Tashkent [46]. Bilateral relations have been recalibrated in the last five years, and particularly after the Taliban came back into power in 2021. As noted by the literature, the foreign policy of Tashkent is pragmatic and interest-driven which is based on economic connectivity, infrastructure development, and prudent security co-operation. This approach, which is sometimes known as strategic pragmatism, puts a stronger weight on the practical advantages, such as the export of trade and energy, and leaves the political legitimacy of the Taliban [4, P. 17–23; 24]. The review presented below consolidates the latest discussions in academic literature, policy reports, and media reports, and is twofold, focusing on the economy as well as the political aspect of this changing bilateral relationship.

The literature on the relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan is dominated by the economic aspect of relations, with analysts stating that trade and infrastructure are the pillars of bilateral interaction.

The literature is unanimous about the fact that bilateral trade has been asymmetrical and resilient. From 2021 to 2024, the volumes of trade surpassed over one billion dollars per year as Uzbekistan exported electricity, wheat, construction materials, and manufactured goods, and imported tiny amounts of goods [44, 21]. Such an advantage provides Tashkent with considerable dividends since Afghanistan will have to be economically dependent on the supply of Uzbekistan [33].

On the one hand, as few researchers claim that this arrangement is stabilizing the frail economy in Afghanistan, on the other hand, there is the potential of resentment and dependency [45]. As a tool to diversify the Afghan exports and minimize the asymmetry, the Preferential Trade Agreement offered in 2023 was presented, but the overall implementation of the tool remains restricted [44].

The policy interest in infrastructure, which is the current policy area of Uzbekistan, was also the issue of active discussion in the previous decade. The Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif railway was built with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank, and since 2011, it has been one of the most significant arteries in the transportation of goods and humanitarian aid, with the operation and maintenance contract with the Uzbek company Sogdiana Trans being renewed to 2025-2026, which again confirms its central role in bilateral trade [5,6,7, 49, 50]. The interest in extending this network has not diminished: in February 2025, the governments of Uzbekistan and the Taliban declared their intention to extend the existing line to Herat, and the Tashkent government pledged to fund the project and send experts to carry out the feasibility study and conduct preliminary survey and planning, but the actual construction will not start until the feasibility research is complete [7,14, 51]. Nonetheless, the Trans-Afghan Railway project which is to connect Termez with Pakistan through Afghanistan land and in turn Central Asia with South Asian markets captures more academic attention [27,41,23]. Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed a tripartite framework agreement in July 2025 to prepare a joint feasibility study to remain a corridor between Termez and the Kharlachi border crossing, and Tashkent ratified the relevant intergovernmental agreement and appointed its Ministry of Transport as the implementing authority in February 2026 [14,41,23, 47, 48].

This project is something that is being increasingly discussed in the literature, not merely as a commercial project but as a geopolitical route that, by doing so, would make Uzbekistan less reliant on the routes that are controlled by Russia and allow it to avoid relying on Iranian transit opportunities. The trilateral agreements, visits by different ministers, and the recent passage of the feasibility study have all been quoted as indications that Tashkent is resolute in spite of the political uncertainty in Afghanistan [1,14,23].

The similar investments in the extractive industries, like the Totti-Mardan gas field agreement, also demonstrate the desire of Uzbekistan to establish its presence in Afghanistan economically [29]. These programs reflect the policy of strategic pragmatism, in which economic interests act as instruments of action and function as insurance against chaos.

The exports of electricity are one of the sectors that are critical sectors. Considering that Afghanistan relies on imported electricity for its power supply, Uzbekistan provides over 50 percent of the imports that energize major urban areas and its institutions [44]. According to scholars, such dependence offers leverage and responsibility to Uzbekistan since interruptions of supply, due to the unpaid Afghan bills or security attacks, may be destabilizing [22].

Therefore, the economic literature describes a two-fold story, as the involvement of Uzbekistan expands life lines to Afghanistan and solidifies the position of Tashkent as a regional center, the asymmetric system of trade and investment raises long-term questions of sustainability. In addition to economics, the political literature also focuses on the pragmatic calculus of Uzbekistan in its attempts to manoeuvre within an unstable regional environment. Uzbekistan is directly vulnerable to the threats of cross-border terrorism due to the length of its border with Afghanistan (137 km). Security problems that originate in the north of Afghanistan have been a major worry among analysts in the region since the Taliban overthrew the government [25]. Recent sources in the [22] and in [17] state that the threats of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and remnants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are quite significant.

Tashkent, in turn, has followed a policy that can be termed as engagement to contain. The Border Management and Security Agreement between the Taliban administration and Uzbekistan is reviewed as a cooperation of trust less than a means to guarantee the communication channels and minimize the chances of unwinding [22]. Analysts believe that Uzbekistan can buy Taliban cooperation using economic resources, i.e., to provide a source of electricity, trade, investments in return for agreeing to secure the borders and guarantees against terrorism [38, p. 1-28, 39].

But there are considerable weaknesses to this model. The fragile capability of the Taliban and their disputed dominion of military outfits make security assurances dubious. Cross-border incidents continue to be intermittent yet never-ending, which indicates the vulnerability of the Uzbekistan security policy [17].

Bilateral relations are also characterized by diplomatic aspect, which is characterized by calculated ambiguity by scholars. Uzbekistan is a place where high-ranking negotiations and regional conferences are arranged, but the recognition of the Taliban regime is strictly avoided on the level of formality [42, 31]. In this stance, Tashkent can protect its national interests without violation of the international rules of non-recognition.

Regarding the greater geopolitical picture, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan's policies overlap with the great power politics. Analysts note that Tashkent is conducting a balancing act between Chinese ambitions as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Russian security concerns, and Western anxieties about dealing with the Taliban [16, P.; 22–39]. Some reports warn that with the possibility of Afghanistan joining bigger regional connectivity networks [41], the Uzbekistan region might increase its status as a transit center or lose its influence as an avoidable route.

Another emerging topic that is of the literature is the non-traditional security risks, especially water politics. The construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal by the Taliban that redirects the water flow of the Amu Darya is being increasingly framed as a geopolitical matter with immediate implications for the agriculture of Uzbekistan [18, P. 113–137, 9]. Researchers observe that water wars are more likely to hit national interests than trade or electricity wars and can turn out to be intractable to pragmatic bargaining. This advancement depicts the boundaries of economic involvement in controlling the underlying resource rivalry.

Literature has significant gaps, even though attention on the subject increases. First, most of the analyses focus on the economic, security, and diplomatic aspect in their isolation with no overall conceptualization of strategic pragmatism. Second, most research are based on foreign interpretations such as government reports,

international reports, and media, but there is limited representation of Afghan views. Inclusion of the opinion of Taliban officials, local Afghan businesses, and civil society actors is rarely included, creating a poor image of bilateral dynamics. More recent academic activity has started to shift this way. Anvar, Rahimov, and Sattorov combine trade and security aspects [3, P. 45–62], and [23] puts the Trans-Afghan railway in the context of the general trends of regional geopolitics. Nevertheless, systematic bilateral-level analysis is not common.

The increase in the post-2021 literature covering Afghanistan-Uzbekistan relations cites the emergence of a distinctive dynamic of strategic pragmatism, which should be comprehended in conjunction with the contemporary Taliban campaign of diplomatic and economic expansion into Central Asia [37], with Tashkent striking a balance between economic drive and political risk and political prudence and security imperative. Trade, infrastructure, and energy exports centralize the power of Uzbekistan economically and reveal asymmetries. Politically, diplomatic ambiguity and transactional security cooperation enables engagement to be made without recognition, but still vulnerable to emerge, especially with the emergence of non-traditional threats such as water politics.

The progress of the last 2 years proves the possibility and vulnerability. In the case of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan provides a lifeline of electricity, trade, and connections projects. In the case of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan is seen as its way to South Asia and a continuing source of insecurity. However, the survival of this practical model is questionable. The future academic work should include the Afghan view and formulate combined models to represent the economic, security, and diplomatic components of this multifaceted bilateral relationship.

Research Problem

This paper will look at the way Afghanistan and Uzbekistan have reset their bilateral relationship after the Taliban came back to power in 2021. Although Uzbekistan has been practicing a policy of strategic pragmatism with a balance between economic interactions and careful political observation, the success, and the restrictiveness of such a policy have not been studied thoroughly. This dynamic is essential in understanding both bilateral relations and the implications that the whole region faces regarding stability and connectivity.

Research Question

The question that guides the article is the following:

What is the way that Uzbekistan has approached strategic pragmatism that has influenced the path of economic and political relations with Afghanistan since the Taliban returned to power in 2021?

Research Gap

In the existing literature, the focus is on the individual characteristics of Uzbekistan pragmatism as a trade development, infrastructure development, including the Trans-Afghan Railway, and the coordination of security. Most analysis, however, treats these variables separately. The absence of detailed works, which integrate economic and political aspects into one paradigm, and clearly associate them with the doctrine of strategic pragmatism. Furthermore, such urgent questions as the prospect of engagement with an unknown regime, how to avoid sanctions and financial limitations, and what it can mean to the traditions of regional diplomacy are not discussed enough.

The proposed research will attempt to fill this gap by offering a combined examination of the interaction of economic cooperation and political pragmatism as mutually reliant instruments of statecraft in the policy of Tashkent on Kabul. This way, it addresses the issue of fragmented accounts by offering a coherent picture of bilateral relations in the unprecedented political conditions.

Methodology

This study will focus on qualitative mixed-methods research to examine the process of recalibration of Afghanistan-Uzbekistan relations after the Taliban came to power in 2021. This method will combine both documentary analysis and interviews with elites, which enables triangulation between the evidence of distinct types and increases the validity of the findings [8, P. 455–476; 11, P. 27–40; 30, p. 210]. The changes in policies, economic programs, and diplomatic approaches were followed with the help of primary and secondary sources, such as governmental materials, reports of international agencies, publications of various think tanks, academic literature, and reliable media. The search took place in Scopus, Web of Science, and official portals during the years 2021–2025 and used such keywords as Uzbekistan-Afghanistan relations, Trans-Afghan Railway, Taliban diplomacy, and Central Asia connectivity. Three semi-structured interviews in Kabul in March 2025 with the senior Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials in charge of Central Asia, South Asia, and Economic Affairs were used to supplement the analysis of the documentary. The interviews were conducted over an average of 50 minutes with the usage of an open-ended protocol, which allowed access to the unofficial information [19, P. 669–672, 15 p. 120]. They were conducted ethically: participants were told the academic objective of the research, they provided their consent, and the level of confidentiality was ensured with the anonymity of interviewees, who were named as Officials. The thematic coding approach [12, P. 77–101] was used to analyze the data, both deductive themes (economic connectivity, pragmatic diplomacy, and security engagement) and inductive themes (as identified by interviews), which included the non-recognition paradox, payment mechanisms based on sanctions, and water politics. Convergences, including those related to a common focus on infrastructure cooperation, and divergences, including the different opinions on the sustainability of bilateral engagement under international sanctions, became possible due to the integration of sources.

Considering the dynamism of infrastructure in the region, the data about significant transport and energy projects (such as the Trans-Afghan railway and cross-border electricity transmission lines) were compared with the official statements and news posts until February 2026 [14, 47, 52].

Findings

The course of Afghanistan-Uzbekistan relations since the Taliban took overpower in 2021 represents a balancing between the discourse of sovereignty in perspective, and opportunity in perspective in Kabul, and the policy of pragmatic engagement in the Uzbekistan perspective. The economic recovery in Afghanistan is still very weak, backed by the end of peace and socio-economic outlook, and the issue still has deep structural weaknesses [40, 44]. Although Uzbekistan has never officially acknowledged the Taliban government, its cooperation on various matters has increased through the three main aspects, namely, economic, political, and

infrastructural. There are more official discourses according to which Afghanistan is a collaborative actor in the development of the region [26, 43]. The documentary discussion and interviews with the elite prove the truth Kabul desires to develop credibility and legitimacy, and Tashkent considers the economic interdependence from the perspective of gaining stability and connectivity to the region.

The responses to the interview with top officials of the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be summarized with three common themes in the strategic discourse of Kabul: the concept of sovereignty, opportunity, and legitimacy. Authorities stressed that they were focused on working towards sovereignty and a lack of interventions, where neighbors were assured that they wanted Afghanistan not to export insecurity: I will make any effort I can to ensure no threat, and no danger from Afghanistan to its neighbors or any other country (Interview, Central Asia Desk Director, 2025). Meanwhile, Kabul is selling itself as an economic prospect by claiming that the pullout of the Western forces has left room to enable the regional natural integration (Interview, South Asia Desk Director, 2025). Lastly, there is the element of the government promoting domestic legitimacy, a quality of emphasis on land control, and a drop in corruption: "The government in power now also has full authority and sovereignty over the territory of the country... the corruption that has always been fashionable, has now ceased to exist" (Interview, 2025). The combination of these themes is an effort to reinvent Afghanistan from a pariah state to a partner to work with in the region, and these efforts are in line with Uzbekistan's quest to find serious ways to interact.

The bilateral cooperation has acquired economic relations as its principal foundation. Trade volumes amounted to above USD 1 billion per year since 2021, with the Uzbek exports of electricity, petroleum, wheat, and construction items leading the show, and the exports of the Afghan country, mostly dried fruits and herbs, being among the limited volumes [45, 21, 13]. In addition to this official trade, there are substantial unofficial or "underground" trade networks that have existed outside the formal economy and continue to be an integral part of cross-border economies [20, P. 135–154].

As one of the ways to decrease this disparity, Uzbekistan launched a Preferential Trade Agreement, which reduced the tariffs on Afghan goods [44]. Termez Cargo Center nearly appears to be an assertively multipurpose customs and trans-modal transport hub [34], and the Afghan officials perceive it as a signal of the importance of more comprehensive integration across the region (Interview, Economic Affairs Director, 2025). Tashkent has made balanced decisions in terms of diversification, since it has been investing in pharmaceuticals, cement, and food processing, yet sanctions and a cash-based economy in Afghanistan are significant limitations [44]. Afghanistan has a long-term potential of mineral wealth such as copper, lithium, and iron ore, into which the strategic calculus is added.

Figure 1. Planned Route and Key Termini of the Trans-Afghan Railway [14]



The infrastructure projects provide the basis of pragmatic interdependence. The Trans-Afghan railway line in question that will connect Termez to Pakistan via the Afghan country has been institutionalized by a tripartite framework agreement on the joint feasibility study and agreement on the intergovernmental agreement on its implementation between Uzbekistan and 2025 and 2026, respectively and, assuming implementation as proposed, is estimated to cut several days off transit between South and Central Asia [14,27,41]. Moreover, literature places emphasis on the synergy of utilizing digital ICT infrastructure in the deployment of such transport corridors in order to develop smart pathways that have maximum economic and development potential [41]. Energy cooperation also provides a greater level of interdependence: Uzbekistan provides a significant part of the imported electricity in Afghanistan on long-term contracts, which were prolonged to 2025 and once more in 2026, in addition to the financial package of energy projects till 2027 [18,44, 52, 53, 54]. There are plans to build the 500 kV transmission line, Surkhan-Pul-e-Khumri, and to develop the main Afghan substations, which will allow importing a level of 1 GW of electricity in Uzbekistan [18,29,44, 52, 53]. An illustration of the strengthening of energy relations is the USD 100 million yearly investment in the Totti-Mardan gas field in Afghanistan that Uzbekistan has agreed to invest in 2025 [29]. However, there are some barriers to growth, such as imbalances in trade, sanctions, a weak banking system in Afghanistan [35] and security issues, bottlenecks in the infrastructure, and competition with Pakistan and Iran [38]. This risk of Uzbekistan losing its leverage as Afghanistan may enter the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could also provide Afghanistan with alternative southern outlets [33, 31]. However, governments of both countries have stated that they want to grow their trade to USD 3 billion, and the power of economic pragmatism can be seen [31]. The major pragmatic approach on the part of Uzbekistan has been during engagement without recognition. Tashkent has established itself as a bridge, and one illustration is the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan in 2022 that encouraged conditional cooperation [42]. As stated, border security, counter-extremism, and connectivity remain the priorities of the country, which analysts indicate are the fundamental factors that make Tashkent still pursue

the policy of engagement despite the political risks [32]. A prime example of this approach is the 2022 Border Management and Security Agreement, which created a permanent institution for the previously informal counter-terrorism cooperation [22]; the 2022 Electricity Trade Agreement provided a secure electricity supply to Afghanistan [44] as well as; the 2023 Transit Agreement ensured that Afghanistan could reach both Europe and Central Asia via Hairatan [36]. The practice of creating formal agreements regarding cooperation continued through 2024 when the two countries signed five new agreements to develop and increase their economic and logistic ties [2]. Nevertheless, Tashkent is always on the alert. This is conditioned by the security threats of the ISIS-K and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan [13], environmental tensions between the Qosh Tepa Canal and its influence on the Amu Darya [18, P. 113–137], as well as great-power tensions between China, Russia, and the United States [13]. Irrespective of the mentioned obstacles, Uzbekistan still considers the process of economic integration as the most efficient tool to rely upon to cement the stability and ensure its role as a regional center [6]. Combined, they can be interpreted as an intertwining of the Afghan stories and Uzbek reality. Kabul aims to convey the message of its independence, reliability, and economic feasibility, and Tashkent interprets it by action in the form of business, energy, and infrastructure. The two parties have realized the strategic value of interdependence, but their interaction is limited by sanctions, asymmetrical trade relationships, local rivalry, and emerging water confrontations. Finally, the resilience of the relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan is also shaped by the possibility of resisting such pressures in the form of pragmatic cooperation. Even though this will be enhanced by economic interdependence, structural asymmetry, and the management of regional competition will have to be addressed in the long term to lead to stability.

Discussion

It is proven that since 2021, the distinguishing feature that are the distinguishing feature of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan relations is defined neither by the direct recognition of the Taliban regime nor by its total denial. Rather, Uzbekistan has entrenched a culture of strategic pragmatism, an adaptive multidimensional policy consisting of maximizing short-term economic and military benefits by carefully seeking to stabilize the region. This trend is not only logically consistent but is a fundamentally weak course, as it will be conditioned by external contingencies that Tashkent can do nothing about.

Strategic pragmatism is the most viable one in the case of economics. Political uncertainty [45] and flagship projects, such as the Trans-Afghan Railway, the investment involving the Totti-Mardan gas field, improved in 2025 [29], did not affect the bilateral trade volumes that went above USD 1.5 billion in 2024. By these enterprises, they transcend well past the business justification of developing a consolidated power, which is brought about by geopolitical practices of consolidating power. This course of plan may be discussed as aligned with the broader literature that identifies with the application of economics as the primary instrument of foreign policy of the Uzbekistan phenomenon [44, 6, 29, 33]. The dependence has been created by Tashkent by supplying nearly 60 percent of the power, fuel, and in Afghanistan, and the Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) has strengthened the

dependence by offering mannequins to Kabul, which carry with them the status of a still closer member of the economic space of Uzbekistan. But such a concession is quite unequal. The balance of trade reflects significant asymmetry, with approximately USD 855.9 million in Uzbek exports compared to USD 28.3 million in Afghan exports in 2024, which highlights a pronounced asymmetry in trade and raises questions about the long-term sustainability and political perception of such an arrangement [55]. As much as the Taliban government is mounting a facade of a mutually rewarding relationship, the asymmetry that persists does not make it possible to sustain goodwill, which may generate resentment in Afghanistan.

Security is the second and the most contradictory of the pillars of strategic pragmatism. Uzbekistan has coordinated efforts with Kabul to prevent threats that are born on the Afghan soil, although it is skeptical about Taliban commitments. The Taliban government views Afghanistan as threatening and disrespectful of its neighbors (Interview, Central Asia Desk Director, 2025), despite Tashkent adopting the cautious mantra of trust but verify. It was institutionalized with the 2022 Border Management and Security Agreement, but it shows the vulnerability of Taliban commitments by cross-border ISIS-K attacks to Uzbekistan [17]. Analysts support this skepticism: collaboration of the security companies is not pegged on trust, but on another need [22, 10]. It is what amounts to a policy of security commodification, and in such a scheme, economic engagement is provided as a reward to counterterrorism cooperation, which is a tactic that is mentioned to be central to the Tashkent policy in regional security [39]. The bet, however, is risky- should the Taliban be unable to check extremist action, the collapse of the security philosophy of Uzbekistan can happen. It is what makes the process of security engagement in the pragmatism of Tashkent the most perilous aspect.

A diplomatic policy is an extremely sensitive component of the given strategy. Uzbekistan has made it easy to integrate Afghanistan into the regional trade blocs, such as the SCO, and hold meetings, such as that of the Tashkent conference on Afghanistan, a country that is not ready to give official recognition to the activities of Pakistan. This uncertainty, created by counting, gives Tashkent the potential to create a balance between the international norms, pressures of great powers, and national interests. But Kabul is exasperated at this flank. This recognition, according to the Taliban officials, is the last stage of achieving the target of more intensive cooperation. This is one of the factors that contributed to the prolonged monetary crisis in Afghanistan, which is enhanced by sanctions. However, when it comes to Uzbekistan, however, ambiguity proves to be strategic insulation, as the country manages to emerge a winner in the aspect of diplomatic capital without the been required reputational cost. Such a halfway covenant, as [3, P. 45–62] added, comes across as an indicator of pragmatism; on the contrary, it places Tashkent at a more prominent position as an actor in the region. Nonetheless, the upper floor of this model is self-evident: penalties and banking restrictions impose restrictions on the level of integration, leading to the inconsistencies allegedly inside the Uzbekistan policy.

Combined, all three elements, the economic, security, and diplomatic aspects, form a soothing yet dangerous doctrine of practical realism in a strategic context. Economics offers Uzbekistan unequal bargaining; cooperation on security is the

rationale behind those economic investments, though concomitantly with evidence of the Taliban making deliveries [39]; or diplomatic muddiness that allows them to engage without going to international boundaries. Nonetheless, there are few outer influences on which architecture is exposed. Four scenarios are especially destabilizing: a potential water conflict over the Qosh Tepa Canal that can set Tashkent against Kabul in spite of the attempts to engage; the prospect of the inclusion of Afghanistan into CPEC that threatens to relocate the trade southward and diminishes the leverage of Uzbekistan; the narrow possibility of the Taliban to provide and employ the services they are unlikely to integrate finance internationally; and the international sanctions regime that has not been resolved yet. The Uzbekistan strategic pragmatism can thus be termed as a strategized gamble. It is based on the belief that Afghanistan will be stable enough to conduct the trade, only to be isolated enough to be perpetually reliant on Tashkent. Even though this gamble has provided short-term benefits, its future sustainability in the long term is uncertain. The viability of the model depends not only on the internal stability of Afghanistan, but also on the development of regional tensions and world power balance beyond the control of Uzbekistan.

Conclusion

In this study, the authors analyzed how Uzbekistan has applied strategic pragmatism in its relations with Afghanistan since 2021. The analysis reveals a bilateral relationship emerging from the interplay of Afghan narratives and Uzbek strategies.

On the Afghan side, the Taliban crafts a discourse of sovereign power, the absence of external threats, and friendly relations with regional partners for shared prosperity. This discourse aims to gain external legitimacy and economic participation.

On the Uzbek side, selective engagement is predicated on the principles of strategic pragmatism. Tashkent welcomes opportunities that can benefit it, such as facilitating trade expansion, investing in infrastructure, and the ability to minimize risks through border strengthening and careful recognition diplomacy.

The result is a relationship characterized by strong economic integration and low levels of political trust. Trade, electricity, and transit corridors have become tools allowing Uzbekistan to influence Afghanistan's stability while simultaneously securing its own security. However, this strategy is plagued by structural contradictions: it seeks permanent integration without full recognition, permanence without trust, and a guarantee of security for an unreliable ally.

Thus, Uzbekistan's policy is a risky but prudent gamble. Its success will depend on factors largely beyond Tashkent's control: the Taliban government's ability to govern the country, the water conflict, the ambitions of China and other regional actors, and international sanctions. If these processes exert a negative influence, the structure of pragmatism could collapse, leaving Uzbekistan in danger.

Nevertheless, the situation between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan offers several important lessons for international relations. It illustrates how states (using Uzbekistan as an example) can use pragmatic, multilateral missions to negotiate with unstable neighbors, pursuing economic and security interests while also exercising diplomatic restraint. Regardless of the success or failure of this process and relationship, it could

become a key example of strategic pragmatism in promoting regional connectivity and stability.

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