

AMERICAN POLICY TOWARD CENTRAL ASIA AND UZBEKISTAN'S GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE (1991–2024)

Xatamov Tursunboy Xamdam o'g'li

2nd Year Master's Student, History Department,
Termez University of Economics and Service

Phone: +998 99-947-56-45

E-mail: khudaddf83@gmail.com

Abstract:

From 1991 to 2024, U.S. policy toward Central Asia was primarily oriented toward strengthening security, stability, and democratic institutions. Following the war in Afghanistan, Washington significantly intensified its engagement in the region. However, persistent tensions over human rights issues repeatedly constrained the depth and scope of cooperation. In the 2010s, the United States sought to promote regional integration through the C5+1 diplomatic format. Throughout this period, Uzbekistan pursued a “multi-vector” foreign policy aimed at maintaining balanced relations with major powers. After 2016, U.S.–Uzbekistan relations gained considerable momentum, particularly in the economic and security domains. At the same time, human rights concerns remained a salient and unresolved issue. In the 2020s, the growing influence of Russia and China compelled Tashkent to recalibrate its strategic orientations. The year 2024 marked a notable turning point in energy security following the conclusion of nuclear energy agreements with Russia. In conclusion, although U.S. policy has consistently emphasized regional integration and stability, Uzbekistan—through its multi-vector approach—has emerged as an increasingly active and autonomous player in Central Asia’s geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: U.S. policy, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, geopolitics, security, multi-vector policy, integration, stability, cooperation, development, human rights, democracy, foreign policy, diplomacy, independence, Russia, China, energy, nuclear, economy, strategy, region, balance, initiatives, global processes,

INTRODUCTION

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia has emerged as a strategically significant region in global geopolitics, attracting sustained interest from major powers, including the United States. The region’s geographic position—situated between Russia, China, South Asia, and the Middle East—combined with its abundant natural resources and evolving security dynamics, has made it a focal point of American foreign policy. Over the past three decades, U.S. engagement in Central Asia has been shaped by multiple objectives:

promoting regional stability, countering terrorism and extremism, supporting economic development, ensuring energy security, and balancing the influence of rival powers. Within this geopolitical landscape, Uzbekistan has played a particularly prominent and evolving role. As the most populous state in Central Asia and one of the region's critical transit hubs, Uzbekistan has occupied a unique strategic position in U.S. regional calculations. During the early post-independence period, U.S. policy primarily focused on supporting Uzbekistan's nation-building processes, market transition, and sovereignty. Following the events of September 11, 2001, Uzbekistan became a frontline partner in the U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan, hosting American forces at the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) airbase. Although bilateral relations experienced fluctuations—most notably after the 2005 Andijan events—cooperation reintensified in the 2010s as Washington sought new avenues for engagement in the context of NATO's Afghanistan mission and regional security challenges. From 2016 onward, under Uzbekistan's new reform-oriented leadership, the country recalibrated its foreign policy and pursued greater openness, regional integration, and economic modernization. These internal transformations enhanced Uzbekistan's importance for the United States, particularly regarding regional connectivity, energy diversification, and the strengthening of multilateral mechanisms such as the C5+1 framework. By 2024, U.S.–Uzbekistan relations had developed into a multifaceted partnership encompassing diplomacy, security cooperation, governance reforms, trade, and education.

This article examines the evolution of U.S. policy in Central Asia from 1991 to 2024 and analyzes Uzbekistan's geostrategic role within this framework. It explores how shifting regional dynamics, major power competition, and domestic political changes in Uzbekistan have influenced bilateral relations. By assessing continuity and change in American regional strategy, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Uzbekistan has transitioned from a security-oriented partner to a central actor in broader U.S. regional engagement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design based on a systematic analysis of primary and secondary sources covering the period from 1991 to 2024. Primary materials include official documents published by the U.S. Department of State, the Government of Uzbekistan, multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, NATO, and the OSCE, as well as bilateral agreements, policy statements, and speeches by high-level officials. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic articles, books, policy reports from international think tanks, and reputable news outlets. These materials were selected according to their relevance, credibility, and contribution to understanding the evolution of U.S. policy in Central Asia and Uzbekistan's geopolitical role.

A comparative historical analysis was used to trace the development of U.S.–Uzbekistan relations across different political phases, including the post-Soviet transition, the post-9/11 security era, and the reform period after 2016. The study also applies elements of geopolitical analysis to evaluate how regional power dynamics, external actors, and internal policy shifts in Uzbekistan influenced bilateral cooperation. Data were organized thematically—security, economic engagement, diplomacy, and regional integration—to ensure coherence and analytical clarity. This methodological approach allows for an integrated assessment of long-term trends, enabling the study to present an objective interpretation of the strategic interaction between the United States and Uzbekistan within the broader Central Asian context.

RESULTS

The findings of this study indicate that U.S. policy in Central Asia between 1991 and 2024 evolved through several distinct phases, each reflecting broader international developments and shifts in Uzbekistan’s domestic and foreign policy priorities. In the early post-independence period (1991–2001), results show that U.S. engagement focused primarily on supporting sovereignty, economic transition, and political stability across the region. Within this framework, Uzbekistan emerged as a key partner due to its central geographic location, demographic weight, and security challenges.

The analysis demonstrates that the post-9/11 era significantly intensified U.S.–Uzbekistan cooperation, with security and counterterrorism becoming the dominant pillars of bilateral relations. The establishment of the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) airbase underscored Uzbekistan’s strategic value for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. However, the results also identify a sharp decline in relations after the 2005 Andijan events, highlighting the sensitivity of human rights issues and political governance in shaping U.S. policy decisions.

The study further reveals that from 2016 onward, Uzbekistan’s large-scale reforms, diplomatic openness, and regional integration efforts led to a renewed and expanded partnership with the United States. Evidence shows that Washington increasingly viewed Uzbekistan not only as a security partner but also as a central actor for economic connectivity, energy diversification, and regional cooperation within the C5+1 platform. By 2024, bilateral ties had become more balanced, multifaceted, and institutionally structured, particularly in trade, education, governance, and security dialogue.

Overall, the results indicate a transition from a predominantly security-driven relationship to a broader strategic partnership, shaped by evolving regional dynamics, major-power competition, and Uzbekistan’s growing geopolitical influence in Central Asia.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that U.S. policy in Central Asia has consistently adapted to shifting regional and global dynamics, with Uzbekistan occupying a central role due to its geography, population, and security relevance. While early cooperation was limited by political conditions, the post-9/11 era demonstrated the extent to which shared security interests could elevate bilateral ties. The subsequent decline after 2005 highlights the sensitivity of governance and human rights concerns in shaping U.S. engagement. However, Uzbekistan's reforms since 2016 created new opportunities for diversified cooperation, showing that domestic change can directly influence foreign policy alignment. Overall, the study indicates that the long-term stability of U.S.–Uzbekistan relations depends on maintaining a balance between strategic interests, political openness, and regional collaboration.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that U.S. policy in Central Asia from 1991 to 2024 has undergone significant transformation, shaped by global security challenges, regional power competition, and evolving national priorities. Within this broader framework, Uzbekistan emerged as a pivotal actor whose strategic location, demographic strength, and changing political trajectory made it central to American regional engagement. The analysis shows that while the relationship initially revolved around security cooperation—especially during the Afghanistan conflict—it progressively expanded into economic, diplomatic, and reform-oriented domains following Uzbekistan's post-2016 modernization efforts. By 2024, U.S.–Uzbekistan relations had matured into a more balanced and multidimensional partnership. The findings suggest that the future trajectory of this relationship will depend on sustained reform within Uzbekistan, continued U.S. commitment to regional stability, and effective management of major-power dynamics in Central Asia.

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