



# De-securitizing the “Silk Road”: Uzbekistan’s cooperation agenda with Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea in the post-Karimov era

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## Abstract

This article argues that Uzbekistan’s cooperation agenda with Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea demonstrates clear signs of breaking with the Karimov-era security-driven agenda for cooperation in favor of de-securitization. This article uses a comparative analysis of the engagement of Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea with Uzbekistan through an analysis of the shifting political discourses in Uzbekistan and these states, statistics regarding their interaction, and an analysis of the economic road maps of their engagement from 2015 onward. This timeframe is attributed particular importance in this article, as it symbolizes the new opening of Uzbekistan toward these four states after the death of its dictatorial President Islam Karimov. In terms of the narrative, this article will first explore the problem of the securitization of the Central Asian region and the cooperation agenda. The article then discusses the motivations of Uzbekistan and its cooperation counterparts in pursuing closer ties. This discussion will then be followed by an analysis of how the new leadership in Uzbekistan re-evaluated its past behavior to address its post- and neocolonial challenges and the cooperation agendas with Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan.

## Keywords

China, cooperation agenda, Japan, Korea, Russia, Silk Road, Uzbekistan

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## Introduction

The history of cooperation between Central Asian (CA) states and their American, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean counterparts has been influenced by their security agendas (e.g., Allison, 2008). In the case of Russia, such cooperation can be related to perceived common defense threats that materialized in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (so-called Tashkent treaty of 1992), which is responsible for the coordination and maintenance of joint defense capabilities. Alternatively, it could also be linked to regime survival and style of governance as is often analyzed in the cases of Eurasian cooperation schemes (Libman & Obydenkova, 2018; Libman & Vinokurov, 2018). Cooperation has also been related to jointly combating the threats of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism exemplified by Russian military support for border protection with Afghanistan as well as its

military presence in the region (for securitization of Afghanistan, see Dadabaev, 2019a). In the case of China, the security agenda has been the first and foremost important issue in resolving territorial disputes. This approach has spilled over into a larger cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and countermeasures against Islamic fundamentalism and extremism (de Haas, 2016). Japanese security-related support has been mostly related to technical assistance in border controls, the provision

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of Official Development Assistance (ODA) aid for customs inspections, and drug traffic controls.

In addition to such clear cases of cooperation in the area of security, for certain countries with questionable democratic practices (on regionalism and security in Eurasia, see Vinokurov & Libman, 2017), such as Karimov-era Uzbekistan, cooperation with the United States (Akbarzadeh, 2005), Russia (de Haas, 2017), China (Ambrosio, 2008), Japan, and Korea has always had inexplicit security connotations, which are related to the fact that cooperation with these states was convenient for the political (in this case, Karimov) administration and ensured its survival due to technical assistance or through ODA and economic support (Collins, 2009).

However, with the death of Islam Karimov and the change in governmental priorities in Uzbekistan, the cooperation agenda with the aforementioned states has also changed. For a long time, the relations of these states with Uzbekistan have been held hostage to the security issues and the survival of Karimov's style of governance under the pretext of the preservation of stability and security throughout the region (for problematization of this issue, Nourzhanov, 2009, pp. 85–104). The media portrayals of the regional wars for water and other resources between regional states or Islamic terrorists that have come to power as a result of Karimov falling from power only added strength to those who argued for supporting his securitized cooperation agenda.

What is the cooperation agenda of new Uzbek President Mirziyoev in the post-Karimov era? How did this agenda evolve, and what is the logic behind it? What are the factors that motivate post-Karimov government in Uzbekistan to seek cooperation partnerships with Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan? What are the propitiative areas and how were these decided upon?

This article argues that Uzbekistan's cooperation agenda with Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea demonstrates clear signs of breaking with the Karimov-era security-driven agenda for cooperation in favor of de-securitization. In general terms, the "security-driven agenda" often refers to the "developments that threaten the sovereignty or independence of a state in a particularly rapid or dramatic fashion, and deprive it of the capacity to manage by itself" (Wæver, 1995). However, under the Karimov administration, it has been operationalized in line with "the survival of the system and its elites" (Wæver, 1995). And because "something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so" (Wæver, 1995), the cooperation agenda under Karimov administration has always been framed with the focus on the political survival of Karimov and his system of governance. Desecurization, referred to in this article, does not simply imply a move away from isolationism of Karimov's years. Rather, post-Karimov de-securitization needs to be understood and termed in line with Wæver's call for "the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere"

(Buzan et al., 1997, p. 4). Therefore, this article uses a comparative analysis of the engagement of Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea with Uzbekistan through an analysis of the shifting political discourses in Uzbekistan and these states, statistics regarding their interaction, and an analysis of the economic road maps of their engagement 2016 onward. This timeframe is attributed particular importance in this article as it symbolizes the new opening of Uzbekistan toward these four states after the death of its dictatorial President Islam Karimov.

The choice of Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea is guided by several factors. First, although these states are the most relevant actors for developmental policies in the CA region, their coverage rarely goes beyond general discursive descriptions. To fill this gap, this article aims to detail the latest statistics of their engagement in Uzbekistan and provide the details of their latest projects in the format of cooperation maps. Second, except for Russia, these states are among Uzbekistan's largest trade partners from so-called "far-abroad" or countries outside the former Soviet bloc, as seen from Table 1. These are also the largest exporting countries to Uzbekistan and major markets for its products. It would not be an exaggeration to say that these are the states whose cooperation shapes Uzbekistan's long-term perspectives in the post-Karimov era.

In addition, the interactions of these states with Uzbekistan not only will shape bilateral relations but also will have detrimental impacts on their relations with other CA states. To some extent, the intentions of these states with respect to Uzbekistan also provide clues about their motivations in engaging other CA states.

Third, relations between Uzbekistan and these four powerful states demonstrate the way domestic changes affect the regional and international behavior of states and, therefore, present a better understanding of how power transitions from a dictatorship toward more liberal domestic policies can change countries' international behavior. These insights are both important for understanding Uzbekistan's behavior and for understanding the behavior of other regional and post-Soviet states in their transition from dictatorships to liberal regimes.

Fourth, de-securitization of cooperation agenda, as defined above, does not necessarily result in higher intensity of cooperation (as demonstrated by the case of Uzbek–Japanese cooperation below). But it certainly results in the larger number of external partners for Uzbekistan with the focus on the functionality of such cooperation as opposed to political framing, symbolism, or political reasoning for it. In this sense, this article hypothesizes that Uzbekistan's cooperation agenda demonstrates the increasing dominance of functionalist rhetoric over securitization one.

In terms of the narrative of this article, this article will first explore the problem of the securitization of the CA region and the cooperation agenda. The article then discusses the motivations of Uzbekistan and its cooperation

**Table 1.** Top 20 countries with the highest trade volumes with Uzbekistan (in millions of US dollars).

Countries	Volume of trade	Exports	Imports	Percentage of total trade	Rate of growth (%)
China	576.1	252.0	324.1	17.2	168.1
Russia	429.7	170.1	259.6	12.8	99.0
Kazakhstan	250.3	78.4	171.9	7.5	133.8
South Korea	246.1	5.5	240.7	7.3	2.6
Turkey	154.6	78.6	76.0	4.6	165.6
Belarus	45.3	2.5	42.9	1.4	124.0
Turkmenistan	42.7	5.0	37.7	1.3	3.3
Germany	39.7	2.5	37.2	1.2	91.0
Lithuania	37.6	1.8	35.9	1.1	169.5
Japan	35.9	1.2	34.7	1.1	6.2
India	32.3	0.9	31.4	1.0	161.7
Ukraine	30.5	6.8	23.7	0.9	100.6
France	30.0	24.6	5.5	0.9	4.5
Latvia	30.0	2.5	27.5	0.9	85.7
Afghanistan	29.6	29.4	0.2	0.9	51.0
Tajikistan	27.2	17.2	10.0	0.8	140.8
Brazil	26.1	0.0	26.1	0.8	23.8
Kyrgyzstan	26.1	20.8	5.3	0.8	131.7
The United States	24.2	1.1	23.1	0.7	2.5
Iran	21.5	9.6	9.6	0.6	141.2

Source: The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. <https://stat.uz/ru/press-tsentr/novosti-komiteta/5428-vneshnetorgovyi-oborot-respubliki-uzbekistan-3>

counterparts in pursuing closer ties. This discussion will then be followed by an analysis of how new leadership in Uzbekistan re-evaluated its past behavior to address its post and neocolonial challenges and cooperation agenda with Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan.

### Securitization of Central Asia and the cooperation agenda

The issue of securitization of discourse regarding the CA region has long been the subject of inquiry among political scientists and international relations scholars (Lemon, 2018). There are several identifiable traits in such research. The most general trend is studies that overemphasize the potential and real threats related to CA societies while silencing the voices that emphasize political and security-related stability and socioeconomic potential (on this, see Koch, 2018, pp. 13–30; Lemon & Thibault, 2018, pp. 137–159). Thematically, such studies tend to problematize the issues that CA states face in terms of threats, not only to the stability of these states and the region but also to the regions and states outside of CA (for critical engagement with such literature, see Heathershaw & Thompson, 2005, pp. 1–4; also Horsman, 2005, pp. 199–213). Thus, for the most part, the securitization of discourse leads to the creation of the attitude in which these states are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of relations with other states (for critical analysis of securitization of discourse, see Heathershaw & Megoran,

2011, pp. 589–612). The governmental structures of these states are then treated as immature, irrelevant, and “under-developed,” while their states are termed “weak” or even “failed.” Accordingly, such treatment then leads to the assumption that CA engagement with other regional players needs to focus on “assisting” these states to become “normal,” while such “assistance” in fact implies the “mentorship” or “handling” of these states by their more “developed” partners.

Although a critical approach toward these assumptions is appropriate, this article focuses on the notion of the securitization and de-securitization of the cooperation agenda along the so-called Silk Road from a different perspective (Buzan et al., 1997; Wæver, 1995; and as an example, see Dadabaev, 2019c). This study emphasizes the pattern in which the cooperation agenda between Russia, China, and other powerful states relates to and has frequently been hijacked by framing of issues solely or primarily related to the survival of the political regime of a particular CA state (Wæver, 1995). A good example of this is Uzbekistan during the years of the Karimov rule when regime’ security and survival concerns dominated political agenda of the government (Fumagalli, 2017, pp. 3–19). In addition, such a cooperation agenda is often related not only to the survival strategies of smaller CA states but also to the political legitimacy, neocolonial ambitions, or goals of economic dominance of larger states, such as Russia, China, South Korea, or Japan (Dadabaev, 2018a). Frequently, these states

(Uzbekistan in particular but also Turkmenistan) attempted to achieve self-reliance in most vulnerable sectors of their economies as a tool to achieve economic growth without compromising security and survival of the political regime (Fazendeiro, 2017b).

This article develops its argument about the de-securitization of the cooperation agenda between Uzbekistan and its counterparts from a constructivist perspective (for similar studies regarding 2017 cooperation road plans, see Dadabaev, 2019c). This article argues that interstate cooperation and the setting of the cooperation agenda are the outcomes of social construction affected by several factors: imagination (of which the notion of “security” is part of, how actors see the “self” and others and how they act), communication (how states and governments appeal to certain norms to justify their actions), and constraints (as defined by norms that motivate and demotivate states with regard to certain actions) (Dadabaev, 2020a). As explained below, these are the three processes that Uzbekistan and its larger counterparts, Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan, engaged in differently during the Karimov rule in Uzbekistan and the post-Karimov years (on changes of Uzbek foreign policy in post-Karimov era, see Dadabaev, 2018c, pp. 162–175).

### **Motivations as discursive narrative for a cooperation agenda**

There are factors that influence the process of reshaping the cooperation agenda of Uzbekistan with other states. The first among these is changing the domestic policy, which, in line with the constructivist logic above, reflects the critical re-evaluation of Uzbekistan’s post-independence path toward development. Such re-evaluation has caused a changing perception of “self” and “others” with Karimov’s rhetoric often dividing partners into binary division of unfriendly “them” and “our friends.” Re-evaluation of the necessity of such framing by President Mirziyoev resulted in the launch of the reform process, resulting in the opening up of the country, the liberalization of economic life and certain political reforms. The second factor, which relates to the first factor in a cause-and-effect relationship, is the change in the regional environment, which has been the result of a new Uzbek policy. Consequently, in regional CA politics, the discourse of competition has shifted to a narrative about the importance of cooperation and even sovereignty sharing. This change has led to the partial resolution of long-standing conflicts between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and has furthered the cooperation agenda between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In addition, the first elements of regional sovereignty sharing initiatives have appeared in the form of a Silk Road visa initiative, recognizing Uzbek or Kazakh entry visas as valid for entry into the other country. It is the first prototype of the CA version of the European Schengen visa regime.

The third consequence of the change in domestic Uzbek policy and the re-evaluation of the previous Uzbek “self” is the drastic change in the Uzbek narrative regarding Afghanistan. Karimov’s regime securitized any discussions regarding cooperation with Afghanistan mainly due to his perception that Afghanistan which hosted anti-Karimov Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and other Islamic radicals who Karimov regarded as his primary enemies and being the source of threats to his government. Although the security has not changed much in Afghanistan (see Dadabaev, 2020b), the post-Karimov Uzbek administration focuses on desecuritizing its policy regarding Afghanistan by promoting return of families of former Uzbek militants back to Uzbekistan. In economic terms, the new Uzbek government frames Afghanistan as a prospective market for Uzbek goods, services, and infrastructure development projects, allowing Uzbekistan’s access to the seas. This focus led to the Tashkent conference and round of talks among the warring Afghan parties and bilateral meetings with the Afghan president in Uzbekistan. Although Karimov also supported the active role of Uzbekistan in the resolution of the Afghan conflict, his concern was more related to his insecurity regarding a spillover of instability into Uzbekistan. The new president believes that insecurity in Afghanistan can only be resolved through economic development, while Uzbekistan can utilize Afghanistan as a launch pad for its own economic growth.

The fourth point of change is the de-ideologization of the cooperation agenda. Karimov’s cooperation agenda had been overly ideologized, as he sought to partner with only those countries that accepted his own ideology and path toward development. This policy has been explained by Karimov’s government as an attempt to provide for its security, which essentially implied Karimov’s political survival and international and domestic legitimacy (Fumagalli, 2017, pp. 3–19). Thus, as discussed in the sections below, Karimov’s cooperation partners changed depending on the weight of their support with respect to his ideological goals, while in the areas considered to be sensitive, Karimov attempted to achieve so-called “self-reliance” (Fazendeiro, 2017a, pp. 409–427). However, President Mirziyoev de-ideologized the cooperation agenda by seeking alliances where they could be achieved. Thus, Mirziyoev utilizes functionalist approaches to cooperation engagements. This approach shares the logic of David Mitrany’s (1943) approach to regional integration that states that what matters most is “not the government of men but the administration of things” (p. 7). Applying this logic not only to integration but also to bilateral relations, Mirziyoev attempts to facilitate the habit of cooperation and the accumulated agendas of constructive work, which he hopes may eventually bring about more complicated, effective cooperation schemes. In such schemes, Mirziyoev developed a strategy explained below which envisages developmental functions to Uzbek government, which are structurally

close to the roles played by the Japanese and Korean governments in stimulating economic growth in early 1950s to 1970s (for developmental state in Japan, see Johnson, 1982; for Uzbek developmental state, see Dadabaev, 2019b, pp. 893–916). In addition, Mirziyoev's hopes are that even the process of limited cooperation in specified fields, conducted successfully, would have a confidence-building effect. Thus, Uzbekistan has abolished entry visas for a great number of countries, announcing that it would like to attract both tourists and investors into the country. Mirziyoev's hopes partly materialized in the rehabilitation of Uzbekistan in the post-Karimov years in the eyes of the international community. Thus, the international environment surrounding Uzbekistan has also changed significantly, with the majority of its international cooperation partners increasingly regarding it as a country with potential and not of constraints.

### **Re-evaluation of the post-Karimov “self”**

One of the significant factors that caused the change in the domestic and international behavior of Uzbekistan in the post-Karimov years is the process of the re-evaluation of the Uzbek “self” and what it “ought to be.” This process involves not just setting up new goals but, importantly, contrasting the current Uzbek situation with the reasoning of the past domestic and international policies of the Karimov era. In other words, the re-evaluation of the “self” could only be achieved through what the “self” is not, and in the case of Uzbekistan, this process involves the contrasting of past and present “selves.”

From the early years of independence, Karimov's national security and defense agenda was dominated by his understanding of external (mainly from Afghanistan and partly from Tajikistan) and domestic (Islamic extremist) threats, which was informed by Karimov's long career in the Communist party and his personal experiences during the 1992 events in Namangan when local extremist clergy essentially took him hostage and made him temporarily bend to their demands. Such perceived international and domestic threats largely dictated Uzbekistan's cooperation agenda with various states over the entire period of Karimov's rule. In particular, Karimov often explained his policy of cooperation or noncooperation with a certain state based on threats to the independence of Uzbekistan. Karimov pursued close security and defense policies with Russia in the early years of independence, claiming that only Russia could provide security in this region. Karimov was then disillusioned by what he saw as Russian domestic weaknesses and the threat of Russian disintegration into various federal republics. In addition, Russian unilateralism with respect to smaller CA states in the early 1990s (essentially, the eviction of these states from the common currency Rouble zone) and its refusal of any economic

partnership further strengthened his beliefs. The point of no-return with respect to Russia occurred in 1996 when the Taliban launched attacks on the territory of Uzbekistan from within Afghanistan, hitting certain areas of the City of Termez in Uzbekistan. At that time, Karimov felt betrayed by Russian inaction with respect to his request for weaponry and assistance. In economic terms, Karimov warmed up to economic and political engagement with Turkey but was again disappointed by what he considered Turkish support for the Uzbek opposition in exile. As a result, calls for cooperation with Turkey essentially implied a threat to Karimov, which resulted in the purge of Turkish businesses and the end of any humanitarian cooperation with Turkey. Karimov then turned to the United States for possible political support. Karimov regarded the United States as a discursive gate keeper in his relations with financial institutions and other Western states. Karimov believed that, if the United States legitimized his rule and practices, other states would not have a choice but to accept him. Karimov effectively exploited anti-Russian rhetoric in appealing to the United States for support. However, Karimov's flirting with the United States lasted from approximately 1999 to 2005 when he was discouraged by US support for the color revolutions, which Karimov regarded as a threat to his administration and his general vision of Uzbekistan. After the Andijan events, Karimov again switched his international cooperation priorities toward cooperating with Russia and China, which he believed were supporters of the sovereignty of Uzbekistan (which essentially implied that these states would guarantee the survival of the Karimov regime) and that these states shared the same understanding of the path toward development as Uzbekistan and were prepared to contribute to it. Thus, for Karimov, the survival of his regime was connected in a complicated way to his understanding of shared beliefs and values that emphasized stability, the political leadership of the state, and the predominance of collective rights over individual human rights. The major point of constraint that defined the international cooperation agenda for Karimov's regime was his primary concern about being in control of how relations develop, leaving no space for initiative and private entrepreneurial activity. Such a structure of relations ensured his political and physical survival and provided ample opportunities for thriving business opportunities to a limited group of his close family members. However, this approach led to the decay of the Uzbek economy and private economic activity.

However, the change of leadership in Uzbekistan has resulted in a change in the patterns of imagination (resulting in a more critical vision of the “self”), a change in communication (resulting in appeals for modernizing influences from abroad), and a new realization of constraints (understanding the limits of self-reliance and the need for redefining of the economic model). This change has caused a shift of the priorities of the government in Uzbekistan. Although

the issues of developing the industrial base of the country and constructing an economy of export-oriented value-added products were inherited by the current government, the political ideology of the current administration drastically differs from that of the previous government. In addition, the new administration is critical of the past policy of complete economic self-reliance and self-isolation that was pursued by the previous president. This realization comes from the analysis of the previous implementation of this policy when the trade balance with major economic partners always remained negative, as seen in Table 2.

As seen from these figures, the self-reliance and export-oriented model proclaimed by Uzbekistan in the Karimov years did not deliver on its promises. Imports exceeded exports, as indicated by the data for 2015 and 2016, which were the last years of Karimov's rule. When similar data were made public in the past, Karimov simply ignored them or claimed them to be temporary and short-term data. The data did not improve in later years, as the new Mirziyoev administration launched the large-scale process of importing machinery and knowhow and liberalized the financial sector, which initially resulted in more spending and less revenue.

President Mirziyoev emphasizes liberalization and the limited participation of the state in economic activity as the main tools of economic development. Mirziyoev does not subscribe to the notion that state is the main driver of economic growth, which was the pillar of the Karimov regime. Mirziyoev also does not accept the logic that step-by-step liberalization is needed. Instead, President Mirziyoev decentralized decision making regarding various economic zones and opened the way for foreign and domestic capital (which largely remained in the shadows) to actively play roles in economic activities. Mirziyoev also partially liberalized the Uzbek som, which was one of the main obstacles for foreign investors. The liberalization of visa regimes and the loosening of controls over the movement of labor resources (liberalization of residence registration) within the country are also the result of the shift in governmental policy. This change, in turn, resulted in a shift in the rhetoric regarding the developmental agenda of cooperation with major economic partners such as China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea.

### **Shifting international cooperation rhetoric**

Another aspect regarding the de-securitization of the cooperation agenda in this region is related to the reaction of the most significant regional actors, such as Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea, with respect to the shifts in the rhetoric in Uzbekistan. There are a few factors that have influenced the narrative regarding the CA region and the maturation of this rhetoric in recent years. The first factor relates to the alternative (with respect to Chinese Belt and

Road Initiative [BRI]) international engagement schemes that existed in the past. With respect to the CA region, the first attempt to exploit the Silk Road as rhetoric has been the attempts in the early 1990s by CA states such as Uzbekistan to place themselves in the center of the economic and infrastructure projects of larger economic and political states. Some states, such as China, regarded these initiatives with a certain degree of skepticism for various reasons that include, but are not limited to, their perception at the time that CA was an area marked by Russian supremacy. In addition, China primarily regarded this area as a buffer zone between its northern territories (Xinjiang) and what it considered to be the potentially destabilizing Muslim, Turkic, and post-Soviet environment of CA (Dadabaev, 2018c). Other states such as Japan responded by initiating Silk Road diplomacy; the first diplomatic initiative recorded under Silk Road brand attempted not only to engage smaller CA states but also to integrate them with larger players such as Russia and China into a model of interactions with Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). While the initial purposes of the Japanese Silk Road diplomacy (1997) have primarily been economic, there is also the idea of engaging with geopolitical rivals and turning the insecurity of each of these states with respect to each other into interdependence and enhanced economic and security arrangements (Hashimoto, 1997). Some other states, such as Russia, although weak in the early 1990s, have responded by initiating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and other Eurasian integration schemes that aimed to motivate participating states to take part in them using securitization logic that suggests that their physical territorial integrity can only be protected if they adhere to the notion of preserving their security, political and defense capabilities. These schemes were not necessarily aimed at China (which had not yet achieved its current magnitude of power) or the United States but were aimed at serving the interests of former Soviet bloc countries in preserving Russia's political presence in this area and the interests of smaller CA states in dealing with regional problems such as the instability caused by the civil war in Tajikistan (1992–1997) and the threats of incursions and extremist influences from Afghanistan. This initiative also built on the Russian victimization self-narrative of Eurasian history in which Russia has been painted as constantly under attack from Mongols (13th century), Europeans in the 18th and 19th centuries, Germans in the years of World War II, and Americans in the following years. Thus, the logic of such regionalization, as proposed by Russia, contrasted with the Silk Road rhetoric of CA states such as Uzbekistan or that of Japanese diplomacy.

In later years, engagements between these states and Uzbekistan have always been related to security concerns and issues. For Uzbekistan, the security concerns that it aimed to resolve through closer engagement with China, Russia, and Japan are diverse and multiple. As emphasized

**Table 2.** Dynamics of the Top 20 countries with the highest trade volumes with Uzbekistan.

Countries	1.2015	1.2016	1.2017	1.2018	1.2019
China	559.8	400.8	258.7	342.7	576.1
Exports	268.4	185.5	124.2	137.2	252.0
Imports	291.5	215.3	134.6	205.5	324.1
Balance	-23.1	-29.8	-10.4	-68.3	-72.2
Russia	344.5	329.5	281.1	434.2	429.7
Exports	101.6	100.2	135.4	107.8	170.1
Imports	243.0	229.2	145.6	326.4	259.6
Balance	-141.4	-129.0	-10.2	218.6	-89.4
Kazakhstan	255.3	100.8	104.7	187.1	250.3
Exports	154.0	21.7	43.5	77.4	78.4
Imports	101.2	79.2	61.2	109.7	171.9
Balance	52.8	-57.5	-17.6	-32.3	-93.5
South Korea	123.5	132.9	80.2	95.5	246.1
Exports	13.5	28.5	9.5	7.3	5.5
Imports	110.1	104.3	70.7	88.2	240.7
Balance	-96.6	-75.8	-61.2	-80.9	-89.4
Turkey	71.7	79.9	78.3	93.3	154.6
Exports	30.3	33.4	48.5	45.5	78.6
Imports	41.4	46.6	29.8	47.8	76.0
Balance	-11.1	-13.2	18.7	-2.3	2.6
Belarus	10.6	7.2	7.9	36.5	45.3
Exports	1.0	0.8	1.5	1.9	2.5
Imports	9.6	6.3	6.4	34.6	42.9
Balance	-8.5	-5.5	-4.8	-32.7	-40.4
Turkmenistan	11.4	11.8	4.6	12.8	42.7
Exports	7.0	6.5	2.9	3.1	5.0
Imports	4.4	5.4	1.7	9.7	37.7
Balance	2.6	1.1	1.2	-6.6	-32.6
Germany	50.3	57.0	22.0	43.6	39.7
Exports	2.7	1.7	1.5	1.7	2.5
Imports	47.6	55.3	20.5	42.0	37.2
Balance	-45.0	-53.5	-19.0	40.3	-34.7
Lithuania	14.3	23.7	17.7	22.2	37.6
Exports	0.4	0.0	0.2	0.5	1.8
Imports	13.9	23.7	17.4	21.7	35.9
Balance	-13.9	-23.7	-17.2	-21.3	-34.1
Japan	18.4	34.5	5.6	5.8	35.9
Exports	0.2	0.6	0.6	1.1	1.2
Imports	18.2	34.0	5.0	4.7	34.7
Balance	-18.0	-33.4	-4.3	-3.6	-33.6
India	25.9	37.6	27.3	20.0	32.3
Exports	4.1	2.4	5.0	2.5	0.9
Imports	21.8	35.2	22.3	17.5	31.4
Balance	-18.0	-33.4	-4.3	-3.6	-33.6
Ukraine	63.8	21.4	15.8	30.3	30.5
Exports	5.2	2.2	4.7	10.1	6.8
Imports	58.6	19.2	11.1	20.2	23.7
Balance	-53.4	-17.0	-6.4	-10.0	-16.9
Latvia	16.7	29.5	15.9	35.0	30.0
Exports	2.9	2.5	6.2	3.0	2.5
Imports	13.9	26.9	9.7	32.0	27.5
Balance	-11.0	-24.4	-3.6	-29.0	-24.9

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued)

Countries	1.2015	1.2016	1.2017	1.2018	1.2019
Brazil	40.8	29.0	25.9	1.1	26.1
Exports	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Imports	40.4	29.0	25.9	1.1	26.1
Balance	-40.1	-29.0	-25.9	-1.1	-26.1
The United States	13.2	17.8	14.3	9.8	24.2
Exports	1.1	1.7	1.0	1.0	1.1
Imports	12.1	16.2	13.3	8.8	23.1
Balance	-11.0	-14.5	-12.4	-7.8	-22.0
Iran	50.6	35.8	38.5	15.2	21.5
Exports	46.4	29.8	35.3	10.5	9.6
Imports	4.2	5.9	3.2	4.7	11.9
Balance	42.2	23.9	32.2	5.9	-2.3
Tajikistan	12.9	13.1	17.5	19.3	27.2
Exports	12.4	11.6	13.5	17.6	17.2
Imports	0.5	1.5	4.0	1.7	10.0
Balance	11.9	10.1	9.5	15.9	7.2

Source: The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. <https://stat.uz/ru/press-tsentr/novosti-komiteta/5428-vneshnetorgovyj-oborot-respubliki-uzbekistan-3>

above, Uzbek President Karimov mentioned the Silk Road potential of his country to his Chinese counterparts back in 1994 when he met the Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng in Tashkent. Karimov's suggestion of using Uzbekistan to construct transportation infrastructure between China and Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan, the project that received development in recent years after the death of Karimov, was related to the attempt to decolonize Uzbek transportation unfractured and access to markets of goods and services which at the time were mainly focused on Russia (Dadabaev, 2018a). The Chinese resentment at the time was related to China's perception of Central Asia as a region generating more security-related problems, such as possibly being a support base for the separatist movement in Xingiang as well as a launch pad for the activities of religious extremists. In addition, relations with Russia and Chinese territorial disputes with other CA states were of primary importance. However, with the resolution of territorial issues and the strengthening of Chinese economic power as well as the weakening of Russia's position in this region, China came to champion Silk Road connectivity. While China established the SCO, the international identity of this organization has been too closely linked to security issues, thus requiring a conceptual departure from it. In addition, Russia has also left the idea of preserving common space under the branding of CIS and moved toward the economically dominated agenda of the Eurasian engagement scheme, which also caused the Chinese to respond through the BRI, which has a global component but also created the Chinese image of economic contribution to the development of the CA region. This approach is

related to the neo-colonizing power of China, which is increasingly apparent in the smaller CA states that are dominated by China within the SCO.

The Japanese Eurasian (Silk Road) diplomacy and related rhetoric, which were championed by Prime Minister Hashimoto in 1997 (Hashimoto, 1997; Murashkin, 2015), later also shifted from an attempt to more closely integrate China, Russia, CA, and Japan into an interdependent system toward a Japanese region-building initiative (Uyama, 2003, 2015). In doing so, Japan emphasized the necessity of strengthening the capacity of smaller CA states in dealing with the economic and political challenges of post-independence through a CA plus Japan initiative. This approach was meant to solidify Japan's standing in this region and serve as a competitive advantage with respect to other major states such as China. Importantly, this initiative was presented as a forum for regional CA states to discuss their plans and seek assistance from Japan, which offered an alternative to the perceived neocolonial ambitions of the Chinese and Russian initiatives.

### **Problem-solving norm generation and the cooperation agenda in the post-Karimov years**

President Karimov always emphasized the need for problem-solving cooperation schemes with Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan. However, in all of these initiatives, the issue of the preservation of power was his primary concern. In fact, Karimov's balancing of the influences of various great powers, which was credited by various analysts, needs to be understood as an attempt to balance these states not to achieve problem solving on behalf of Uzbekistan but rather for the purpose of stabilizing Karimov's own grip on power, which was then presented to the public as benefiting Uzbekistan and the region in general. However, with the death of Karimov and the change in power, Uzbekistan has shifted to a policy of functionalist engagement with various states, prioritizing the problem-solving principle as opposed to preserving the structure constructed under the Karimov regime. This shift is also connected to the task of legitimizing the new president in the eyes of the population. In contrast to Karimov's presidency, the current administration depoliticized and de-ideologized its cooperation agenda, which is a departure from the previous Uzbek policy. This current government has achieved this change by releasing political prisoners, reforming its national security service, opening a dialog with international nongovernmental organizations regarding human rights, and liberalizing domestic media coverage.

It would be naïve to suggest that the new government in Uzbekistan is not concerned about the preservation of power. However, President Mirziyoev has a different conception of the way to legitimize the goals of his administration in the eyes of the population. President Mirziyoev defines his

priorities as limiting state participation in the economic structure and attracting foreign investments without regard for the political ideologies of those countries prepared to invest in Uzbekistan, targeting CA states, Russia, China, and Afghanistan as the primary markets for produced goods and services, as well as using Uzbekistan's abundant human resources in reconstructing the country's economic base.

As shown in Table 3, Russia, China, South Korea, and countries in the CA region are among the major Uzbek export destinations for fruits and vegetables.

The same tendency to emphasize Russia, China, Turkey, and the CA region can be seen in the dynamics of the Uzbek textile exports, as indicated in Table 4. However, the difference between the export of vegetables/fruits and that of textiles is that Uzbekistan attempts to move away from exporting raw cotton toward increasing the share of its exports in processed textile and textile products. In terms of markets, Russia has been the traditional market for Uzbekistan's cotton exports, joining China, Turkey, and other major producers of textile products. As seen in the road maps of economic cooperation, the tendency toward increasing the domestic processing of raw cotton indicates the strengthening of the country as Uzbekistan imports machinery for such production from China, Russia, and other countries.

Although President Karimov emphasized industrialization in his policy, his efforts to allow for foreign participation in the economy were timid and limited due to his belief that an increased dependence on foreign countries would eventually result in the corrosion of the basis for his controls over the country's economy and politics. Thus, Karimov's concern was more about the preservation of his political system than the issue of problem solving. Because the new president does not have any political agenda, his main priorities lie in the sphere of economic growth, which is then connected to an increase in living standards and a decrease in governmental participation in the economy. Mirziyoev's administration defines weakening governmental controls, allowing foreign ownership of the economy, promoting entrepreneurship, strengthening e-governance, and simplifying various procedures as the way to accomplish these goals. As is informed by Table 5, China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan are among the top countries serving as major countries from which Uzbekistan imports its goods and services to accomplish the goals above. However, the traditional security concerns in choosing these partners do not play as significant roles as they did before. The current administration attributes greater importance to the contribution of these countries to problem solving in particular areas, which can also be connected to the notion of providing a wider interpretation of human security.

As seen from above, Uzbekistan's economically larger partners have reacted to the changes in Uzbekistan by also shifting away from dealing with security-related issues

**Table 3.** Geography of exports of fruits and vegetables from Uzbekistan for January 2019.

Countries	2018			2019		
	Thousands of tons	Millions of US dollars	Percentage	Thousands of tons	Millions of US dollars	Percentage
Kazakhstan	19.1	10.7	36.1	19.5	8.5	23.5
Russia	3.1	2.2	7.5	6.9	4.5	12.4
Kyrgyzstan	2.3	0.9	2.9	4.1	4.2	11.6
Pakistan	1.2	0.8	2.6	5.4	3.8	10.6
China	1.2	1.1	3.7	5.4	3.2	9.0
Afghanistan	5.5	4.5	15.0	3.5	2.5	6.9
Ukraine	0.6	0.5	1.8	8.0	1.4	3.9
Turkey	1.7	1.7	5.8	2.0	1.4	3.8
Iran	1.4	1.2	3.9	1.4	1.0	2.8
Turkmenistan	0.2	0.2	0.7	6.2	0.8	2.3
Azerbaijan	0.3	0.4	1.3	0.6	0.6	1.6
Belarus	0.4	0.5	1.6	0.8	0.4	1.2
Germany	0.1	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.4	1.1
Iraq	0.5	0.5	1.8	1.4	0.4	1.0
Poland	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.8	0.3	0.9
UAE	1.5	1.1	3.5	0.5	0.3	0.8
Others	4.8	3.3	11.0	8.2	2.3	6.6

Source: The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. <https://stat.uz/ru/press-tsentr/novosti-komiteta/5428-vneshnetorgovyj-oborot-respubliki-uzbekistan-3>

**Table 4.** Dynamics of textile exports (million USD).

Countries	1.2015	1.2016	1.2017	1.2018	1.2019
Russia	26.1	26.5	44.3	44.6	44.0
China	18.1	19.0	19.5	23.0	33.3
Turkey	4.0	3.9	4.8	13.2	7.6
Kyrgyzstan	1.0	1.8	3.8	4.1	5.2
Kazakhstan	4.0	1.6	2.7	2.9	2.8
Iran	2.0	1.7	2.4	0.8	2.3
Bangladesh	–	0.2	1.0	2.5	2.1
Poland	0.8	0.5	1.7	2.1	1.7
Belarus	0.7	0.8	1.0	1.1	1.7
Ukraine	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.7	1.5
Italy	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.9
Germany	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.4	0.7
Vietnam	–	0.0	0.1	–	0.5
Azerbaijan	–	–	0.0	0.3	0.5
Egypt	0.0	–	–	–	0.4
South Korea	2.5	2.4	4.4	2.9	0.4
Pakistan	–	0.6	0.1	0.0	0.4
Tajikistan	–	–	0.1	0.4	0.3

Source: The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. <https://stat.uz/ru/press-tsentr/novosti-komiteta/5428-vneshnetorgovyj-oborot-respubliki-uzbekistan-3>

toward issue-specific, mostly functionalist approaches to pursuing interactions. According to the intergovernmental cooperation road maps, most of the projects that are planned to be implemented are the result of deliberation and inter-governmental cooperation.

## Postcolonialism and neocolonialism as cooperation constraints

As outlined above, there are two features of Uzbekistan's post-independence foreign policy that continue to serve as constraints in shaping its relations not only with Russia and China but also with other states (for dilemmas of Eurasian states, see Akchurina & Della Sala, 2018). These two features are Uzbekistan's handling of the postcolonial ambitions of Russia, which formerly dominated the country, and the increasingly neocolonial tendencies of China's CA policies. In contrast to Karimov, who aimed to shift loyalties from one state to another in addressing similar concerns, Mirziyoyev prioritizes functionalist cooperation, preferring an issue-specific focus for bilateral relations. In relations with Russia, post-Karimov Uzbekistan aims to maximize its gains from Russian technological advances, such as the peaceful use of nuclear power, the construction of its first nuclear power plant, or the establishment of specialized training institutions in Uzbekistan. At the same time, the cooperation agenda with Russia does not feature Uzbekistan's entry into the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

The latest visit of President Putin to Uzbekistan in October 2018 is a good example. Putin visited Uzbekistan accompanied by 18 heads of federal regions of Russia, which was the sixth meeting between the Uzbek and Russian leaders in the 2 years since Mirziyoyev came to power. Among many projects, Putin and Mirziyoyev launched the construction of the first nuclear power plant in

**Table 5.** Volume of the 20 major partner countries regarding the import of goods and services for January.

Countries	Million USD		Growth rate, %		Rank	
	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019
China	205.5	324.1	152.7	157.7	1	1
Russia	326.4	259.6	224.1	79.5	2	2
South Korea	88.2	240.7	124.7	272.8	4	3
Kazakhstan	109.7	171.9	179.4	156.7	3	4
Turkey	47.8	76.0	160.4	158.9	5	5
Belarus	34.6	42.9	544.3	123.8	8	6
Turkmenistan	9.7	37.7	562.0	388.7	6	7
Germany	42.0	37.2	204.4	88.7	12	8
Lithuania	21.7	35.9	124.8	164.9	9	9
Japan	4.7	34.7	95.3	735.5	14	10
India	17.5	31.4	78.4	179.7	11	11
Latvia	32.0	27.5	328.2	85.9	7	12
Brazil	1.1	26.1	4.2	23.8	15	13
Ukraine	20.2	23.7	181.9	117.6	16	14
The United States	8.8	23.1	65.8	2.6	20	15
Italy	7.1	15.8	76.4	2.2	19	16
Iran	4.7	11.9	148.3	2.5	10	17
Tajikistan	1.7	10.0	42.4	5.9	17	18
Great Britain	5.6	9.6	169.5	169.7	18	19
Switzerland	7.0	7.5	85.2	107.3	13	20

Source: The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. <https://stat.uz/ru/press-tsentr/novosti-komiteta/5428-vneshnetorgovjy-oborot-respubliki-uzbekistan-3>

Uzbekistan and Central Asia by RosAtom, which will be completed by 2028. Trade levels have grown by 30% from 2017 to 2018, making Russia one of Uzbekistan's two top trading partners, on par with China. More than 80 high-level visits between the two countries have been reported between 2017 and 2018, signifying the paramount place of Russia in this region's diplomatic ties.

This visit produced an unprecedented number of 785 bilateral agreements and the signing of memoranda signed regarding a net amount of \$27 billion. Of these agreements, 600 are contracts regarding trade and the economy, reaching \$1.76 billion. Putin's visit also resulted in agreements on the creation of 79 Uzbek-Russian joint ventures, 23 trading houses, and 20 logistic centers in Uzbekistan. These agreements relate to developing the Uzbek mining sector, developing natural gas exploration, assisting in setting up an Uzbek outer-space exploration agency for commercial purposes, setting up assembly lines for Russian machinery and armaments, and training Uzbek specialists in the areas in which Russia has a competitive advantage. Putin's visit to Uzbekistan, which was also attended by 80 university presidents, resulted in agreements on opening several campuses of these institutions in Uzbekistan. One significant advantage that Russia has over China, Korea, and Japan, which also attempts to engage Uzbekistan in cooperative educational engagements, is the Russian language. Despite

the general decline in its usage, the Russian language continues to serve as the technical language that is widely used and often preferred in various industrial sectors in Uzbekistan.

Russia also regards participation in such projects as contributing to its influence in this region because it had been denied such opportunities by the previous president of Uzbekistan. The Russian leadership believes that such cooperation can, in the future, spill over into other fields and eventually draw Uzbekistan into the EEU and other Russia-led institutions. However, this is not a position shared by Uzbekistan.

At the same time, the postcolonial legacy of Uzbekistan has met the new reality of growing Chinese economic power in Uzbekistan in recent years, which has sometimes been termed neocolonial (for details, see Dadabaev, 2019d). The Uzbek government aims to utilize its strategic partnership with China to partly replace Russia in many large-scale projects, such as transportation infrastructure construction and energy resource development. China also represents an attractive market for Uzbek mineral resources, decolonizing the structure of Uzbek exports, which are often held hostage to Russian energy resource transportation infrastructure. China is also attractive in terms of potential technology transfer, as indicated in the next section on China's roadmaps and agendas. However, Mirziyoev displays awareness of the dangers of an overreliance on China, which may result in Uzbekistan "jumping from a Russian frying pan into the Chinese fire." To address potential Chinese economic neocolonialism, Uzbekistan also strives to develop a vibrant cooperation agenda with Japan and South Korea, creating a patchwork of economic partnerships and counterweights to Russian postcolonial ambitions and Chinese neocolonial dreams.

## Mapping cooperation agendas

The diversification of Uzbekistan's functionalist relationship with other countries is presented in the road maps of cooperation—most of these economic projects are being implemented on a bilateral basis—which it drafted collaboratively with China, South Korea, and Japan, as detailed below.

For instance, the economic cooperation roadmap between China and Uzbekistan was signed during the 11–13 May 2017 visit of Mirziyoev to China. The roadmap consists of 11 intergovernmental agreements, 1 intermunicipal agreement, and economic contracts totaling \$22.8 billion. Of the 76 agreements, memoranda, and protocols signed, 35 were agreements of various types (between the governments or agencies or framework agreements), 31 were memoranda (including notes of meetings that focused on particular projects, with the general budget allocation of these projects already decided), and 10 were protocols (discussions of intent for particular enterprises). The largest infrastructure-related agreements focused on the joint

production of synthetic fuel (\$3.7 billion), investments in Uzbekistan's oil industry (\$2.6 billion), investments in new projects (\$2 billion), cooperation agreements for the construction of energy generation plants (\$679 million), railroad infrastructure development agreements (\$520 million), and an agreement on the Tashkent–Osh road construction project (\$220 million). In terms of establishing manufacturing lines, agreements were reached to facilitate the establishment of facilities for cement (\$153 million in Andijan and \$100 million in Tashkent), textiles (\$200 million), electric appliances (\$139 million), metal goods (\$115 million), and glass goods (\$83 million). Of the memoranda and protocols, some are being realized in established production facilities. The majority of these projects represent attempts to establish production and infrastructure-related facilities to enable Uzbekistan to produce goods not only for its large yet still limited internal market but also for exports.

The economic cooperation roadmaps with South Korea were signed during the visit of the president of Uzbekistan in 22–25 November 2017. These roadmaps were updated to their 2018 versions as an outcome of the South Korean foreign minister's visit in April 2018. These roadmaps include 4 more intergovernmental framework agreements, 18 inter-agency agreements between various ministries and agencies, and contracts between the state and private companies. In total, 64 agreements totaling \$10 billion have been signed, including contracts for direct foreign investment into Uzbekistan in the amount of \$4 billion. These agreements also included 24 contracts for the export of goods from Uzbekistan to Korea for \$231 million (for South Korean strategy, see The Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation, n.d.).

In the Japanese case, the economic cooperation roadmaps have not been signed as an outcome of a visit by the Japanese prime minister or the new Uzbek president. The last time the Japanese PM (Shinzo Abe with PM Koizumi visiting Uzbekistan in 2006) visited Uzbekistan was in 2015 when Karimov was president. Since then, Uzbekistan has shifted its foreign policy, as reflected in the roadmaps concluded in 2017 and corrected in 2018 in line with the work of the economic cooperation committee. The Intergovernmental Committee on Economic Cooperation between Japan and CA is composed of the Japanese minister of foreign affairs, the Japan Association for Trade with Russia & NIS (ROTOBO), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Trade Chamber, and representatives of Japanese corporations.

The 2017 economic cooperation roadmaps largely consisted of agreements on the facilitation of visits of the leaders of both countries and on holding various educational and economic forums. The corrections made in 2018 included more details and estimates. The 2018 roadmaps included 12 intergovernmental and interagency agreements that largely referred to the facilitation of visits by leaders, exchanges of various ministries (social welfare, defense,

emergency, etc.) and cooperation in setting an agenda for regular sessions of the CA plus Japan dialog forum.

The largest progress has been made with respect to economic cooperation, which implies not only the participation of public corporations but also, importantly, private companies. Out of 32 field trade and economic agreements between Japan and Uzbekistan, 12 largely refer to organizational issues to facilitate various forums and assist in connecting Japanese businesses with interested local parties. These agreements include opening trading houses, establishing the representation of labor migration agencies in both countries (as increasing labor migration to Japan is an important issue for Uzbekistan), and organizing economic forums in both Japan and Uzbekistan to popularize available opportunities among the representatives of the business communities of both countries. The remaining 36 agreements, for the first time, refer to companies and projects, with the direct participation of interested Japanese companies, including agreements on exploiting the tourism potential of Uzbekistan by Japanese tourists. In addition to abolishing entry visas for Japanese tourists, the agreements include the participation of Uzbekistan in Japanese tourism exhibitions, cooperation in decreasing the costs of flights between the two countries (as Uzbekistan Airways operates direct flights to and from Tokyo several times a week), and the establishment of sister-city relationships between Tashkent and Nagoya, Samarkand and Nara, Angren and Maizuru, and Rishtan and Tomioka. Each of these ties required the development of roadmaps for subnational diplomacy. In terms of energy resources, contracts have been signed regarding the modernization of small dams, the modernization of energy generation facilities in Tashkent, and studies of the potential for uranium excavation in the Navoi region in cooperation with JOGMEG. In terms of production facilities, agreements on cooperation in constructing pharmaceutical plants in cooperation with the Japanese Association of Pharmaceutical Producers, the construction of medicine production plants under contract with Shimizu (\$69 million), the construction of chemical production plants with Navoiazot (\$986 million), and the modernization of truck assembly plants with Isuzu (for the new generation 700P trucks, which meet the Euro 4-5 standards) have been signed. Finally, the traditional area of Japanese strength has been allocating educational grants and facilitating educational exchanges, which feature significantly in the roadmaps and are covered by 15 agreements.

### **The triumph of functionalist norms over securitization rhetoric?**

The cooperation agenda within the roadmaps above is the result of the pattern of interaction between the states. Such cooperation also demonstrates a relationship between the frequency and outcomes of the visits of leaders. The Chinese heads of state and government are frequent visitors to Uzbekistan, sometimes visiting several times per year. In

addition, the leaders of the two countries meet at events related to the SCO and BRI in China and elsewhere. Such frequency leads to deeper discussions on various issues, contributing to the increasing number of projects in the economic cooperation roadmaps. The leaders of Korea and Uzbekistan do not meet as frequently; they have met 15 times since 1992 either annually or biannually depending on the agenda. These less frequent meetings result in a less ambitious but still significant agenda for cooperation (for details of South Korean New Asia initiative see Fumagalli, 2012). Although the volume of contracts is not as high as that between China and Uzbekistan, the project spectrum is broader. The leaders of Japan and Uzbekistan meet only once every several years. Japan's leaders have visited CA and Uzbekistan only twice since the collapse of the USSR. Uzbek leaders visited Japan three times. Although the number of high official meetings is greater at the level of the CA plus Japan initiative, the process of preparing economic cooperation roadmaps intensifies at the time of the visits of heads of state. The spectrum of areas covered by agreements is rather limited and primarily focuses on the interaction between the governments, leaving much potential for further development.

There are different areas in which China, South Korea, and Japan aim to distinguish their own engagements with Uzbekistan. The Chinese approach indicated in the roadmaps is to exploit China's competitive advantage in being geographically close to this energy resource-endowed region and being technologically advanced by exporting its machinery for Uzbekistan's further industrialization. China also aims to use its abundant financial resources to fund projects that primarily benefit its corporate interests while also having a positive impact on Uzbekistan's developmental strategy for 2017–2021.

In contrast, the Japanese roadmaps emphasize a commitment to developing Uzbekistan and strengthening its human capital development and capacity to address local economic problems. However, the problem is that the roadmaps do not clearly demonstrate how the Japanese corporate community and taxpayers benefit from their engagement through the implementation of the roadmaps. The roadmaps of 2018 also attempt to demonstrate that Japan benefits from labor resources, tourism potential, and assembly plants constructed in Uzbekistan. Such corrections can be regarded as a maturation of the Japanese policy in this region and a movement toward a more pragmatic agenda.

The Korean roadmaps combine the pragmatism seen in the Chinese maps and the emotional attachment to developing Uzbekistan seen in the Japanese maps. On one hand, the roadmaps clearly aim to benefit the Korean business community, as demonstrated by the number of projects and the spectrum of areas covered by those roadmaps. On the other hand, the roadmaps include a great deal of human capital development, such as establishing many educational institutions, supporting human resource development programs for the Uzbek bureaucracy, supporting the increase of Uzbek nationals in international organizations, providing knowhow to establish

digital trade platforms, and providing knowhow for entry into the World Trade Organization. These components demonstrate Korea's interest in benefiting from the opportunities in the Uzbek economy while contributing to certain areas in which it has significant experience.

In addition to such intergovernmental framework agreements, a few agreements on the exchange of expertise were signed by various ministries and state agencies. In particular, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Economy and Korea's Ministry of Strategy and Finance signed a memorandum on the exchange of knowledge regarding the evaluation and selection of goals for development. Also, several ministries and governmental agencies appointed Korean nationals to official positions within the Uzbek government. Although similar appointments were made under President Karimov (for instance, Kim Nam Seok was named Deputy Information Technology and Communications Minister of Uzbekistan in 2013–2016), the number of such appointments and their intensity has increased dramatically with the presidency of Mirziyoev and his visit to South Korea in 2017. For example, a Korean national (Jung Seong Choi) has been appointed to the position of the deputy director general of the Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan for the Development of Capital Markets to develop a roadmap for the development of a securities market in Uzbekistan. Another example is the appointment of the president of the Korean Institute for Personnel Development Kim Yong Se as an adviser to the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations of the Republic of Uzbekistan. This appointment aims to resolve legal and logistical problems related to the increasing labor migration from Uzbekistan to South Korea, which, in June 2017, accounted for 55,000 people and is sometimes problematic. The Ministry of Healthcare of Uzbekistan also appointed Vice Chairman of the Korean Hospitals Association, Professor of the Chonnam National University Yun Tek Rim, as adviser to the Minister of Health of Uzbekistan. In addition, in February 2019, Dong Wook Lee was appointed Deputy Minister of Health of the Republic of Uzbekistan and Adviser to the Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan on social development. These appointments symbolize the fact that Uzbekistan regards South Korea not merely as an economic partner but also as a source of modernization for various sectors of its economy and society.

The Chinese economic cooperation roadmaps demonstrate the highest volume of contracts and agreements and mainly exist in three areas: energy, infrastructure development, and manufacturing. The Korean roadmaps do not match the Chinese maps in number, but the spectrum of projects and areas of cooperation of the Korean maps are greater. The main actors in the Korean–Uzbek economic cooperation maps are a large number of smaller enterprises, while the Chinese roadmaps are dominated by larger enterprises working in the fields of energy and infrastructure development. This finding can be explained by differences in the economic structures of China and Korea. The Japanese–Uzbek road maps are dominated by cooperation between the governments and framework agreements.

Although the Chinese–Uzbek economic cooperation roadmaps are focused on the promotion of economic cooperation, cooperation in the humanitarian field is very limited. In contrast, the Korean and Japanese cooperation roadmaps include many initiatives related to humanitarian cooperation. A significant number of the projects initiated by Korea relate to the establishment of universities, research institutions, and research facilities. Similarly, the Japanese roadmaps relate to grants for educational activities and education-related projects by JICA. These roadmaps might not necessarily lead to immediate income generation, but they contribute importantly to human capacity development in Uzbekistan, increasing economic potential.

In the Chinese case, the government plays the role of both the facilitator and executor of many agreements. In the Korean case, private corporate enterprises lead the way in fostering cooperation. In addition, the increased intensification of private economic activity in the country encourages the government to intensify its involvement. Japanese involvement demonstrates a different pattern in which public governmental institutions and developmental assistance agencies lead the way in establishing cooperation (for differences of these engagements see, Dadabaev, 2018b). However, at this stage, such governmental activity does not necessarily translate into private enterprise involvement. This issue was somewhat improved in the 2018 economic roadmaps of Japan–Uzbek cooperation.

## Conclusion

There are few conclusions that can be drawn based on the coverage above. The first conclusion is that there have been changes in various areas of Uzbek domestic policy with respect to cooperation with foreign partners. Uzbek foreign policy behavior with the change of government needs to be understood and explained by the variety of factors which include domestic identity concerns (dictatorship of the previous president which actually led to almost extermination of the vision of Uzbek “self” as an intellectual center of Central Asia while turning the whole nation into a cheap labor force having to travel to Russia to make living), interest in extending economic ties in its neighborhood (CA as its primary concern), and external environment (having to face Russia and China in its immediate neighborhood). In this sense, liberalization of domestic economic and political spheres, de-ideologization of cooperation, and de-securitization of cooperation agenda with various countries is considered to be the first and vital task by Mirziyoev in achieving his goals of revitalizing economic and political potential of Uzbekistan.

The second point here is that these changes in domestic policies have affected Uzbekistan’s international behavior, including its relations with Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan. The changes in the newly more liberal identity (which appeared as a result of death of Karimov and absence of the need to sustain his political regime and provide for his political survival) of Uzbekistan have affected its imagining of

how it needs to pursue its integration into the international community. This change has motivated the government to more aggressively guide in areas of propitiation, thus “rehabilitating” Uzbekistan’s foreign policy from the securitization of its agenda. This change has encouraged cooperation with these four states in which each state seeks to exploit their competitive advantages and adapt to the changes in the domestic policies in Uzbekistan.

As a result, Uzbekistan’s cooperation agenda with Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea demonstrate a departure from a closed structure of cooperation when the primary concern of the former president was the preservation of his power. In contrast, there is a new emerging functionalist norm of cooperative behavior between Uzbekistan and its larger partners that focuses on issue-specific cooperation rather than larger schemes.

As outlined above, Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea play the most relevant and important roles in shaping Uzbek international behavior since the death of Karimov. The successes and failures of cooperation between Uzbekistan and these states will to a great extent affect the areas and formats of Uzbekistani cooperation with other states. In addition, Uzbekistan’s experience will send a message to other states in the CA region in terms of what their behavior should and should not be.

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