

Diplomatic Foundations and Economic Prospects: A Comprehensive Analysis of Pakistan-Uzbekistan Relations (2000-2020)



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Abstract: *This paper delves into the evolving relationship between Pakistan and Uzbekistan from the 1990s to 2020, with a particular focus on trade relations and future prospects. It provides a historical background, tracing key diplomatic milestones that laid the groundwork for bilateral cooperation. The paper then analyzes the trajectory of trade relations over two decades, examining how patterns of trade have shifted and how geopolitical factors and high-level delegations have played a role. It also explores the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for enhancing trade between the two countries, considering factors such as infrastructure development, trade policies, and regional integration initiatives. Through a comprehensive review of available data, supplemented by analytical insights, the paper offers valuable insights into the multifaceted dimensions of Pakistan-Uzbekistan relations and provides recommendations for fostering deeper economic collaboration in the future.*

Keywords: Diplomatic Foundations, Economic Prospects, Pakistan-Uzbekistan Relations, Central Asia, Europe, Asia

1. Introduction

Central Asia has emerged as a key player on the global stage, attracting the attention of major powers due to its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and its abundant natural resources. This landlocked region has a long history of serving as a vital link on the Silk Road, facilitating trade and cultural exchange between East and West for centuries. Today, Central Asia offers a crucial land bridge connecting Europe and Asia, with the potential to become a major transportation hub, linking resource-rich regions with established markets.

Central Asia, a historic crossroads, sits at the heart of Eurasia. Isolation from open seas can

present challenges; however, it can also foster unique cultures. While the remoteness of the region necessitates infrastructure innovation, its position allows for the development of new trade routes and regional cooperation. On the one hand, it limits the region's access to international markets and seaports, making it reliant on its neighbors for trade routes. This can create a situation where Central Asian countries have less leverage in negotiating trade deals. On the other hand, this geographic situation also makes the region strategically important to neighboring countries, as they seek access to the vast resources and markets of Central Asia. This has led to increased investment in infrastructure development, such as railways and pipelines, to

facilitate trade flows through the region.

Central Asia holds an estimated 10% of the world's oil reserves and significant deposits of natural gas, making it a key player in the global energy market (*M.Sadiq, 2016*). The region is also rich in precious and rare earth metals, critical for modern technologies. This includes an estimated one-third of the world's gold reserves, along with lithium, cobalt, and copper. The demand for these rare earth metals is expected to surge in the coming years, as they are essential components in the production of electric vehicles, smartphones, and other advanced technologies. Central Asia's vast reserves of these resources position it to play a major role in meeting this growing demand.

Following the USSR's dissolution in 1990, Uzbekistan, with a population of over 34 million (2023 estimate) became an independent nation (*Uzbekistan Population (2024) - Worldometer, n.d.*). The most populous country in Central Asia, boasts a rich and diverse culture, with a long history dating back to ancient civilizations.

Uzbekistan is a major player in the region's energy sector, with significant oil and gas production that contributes substantially to its economy. The country also has vast reserves of natural gas, estimated at over 800 trillion cubic feet (*akbaryusupov, n.d.*). Uzbekistan's strategic location makes it a potential transit country for pipelines carrying Caspian Sea energy resources to China and other markets. Beyond its energy resources, Uzbekistan's fertile lands in the Fergana Valley and other regions have historically supported thriving cotton production, making it a major global exporter of cotton. Cotton remains a key agricultural

product, though the government is taking steps to diversify the agricultural sector and reduce its dependence on this single commodity.

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992, following Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, Pakistan and Uzbekistan have made significant strides in strengthening their bilateral relations across various sectors. This partnership is driven by several factors, including the strategic location of both countries at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, and the rich energy resources held by Uzbekistan, particularly oil and natural gas. Pakistan has actively pursued closer relations with Uzbekistan, as evidenced by the signing of numerous agreements on economic cooperation, trade, and cultural exchange (*Rauf, 2017*). These agreements aim to tap into the potential for increased trade and collaboration between the two nations, leveraging Uzbekistan's resource wealth and Pakistan's access to warm water ports. In addition, both countries share cultural and historical ties, which can further strengthen their relationship and serve as a foundation for future cooperation.

2. Literature Review:

A thorough review of existing literature on Pakistan-Uzbekistan relations reveals a dearth of comprehensive studies that systematically analyze the evolution of their bilateral ties, particularly in the realm of trade and economic cooperation. While some studies have explored specific aspects of their relations, such as diplomatic exchanges or regional security cooperation, there remains a gap in understanding the broader economic dimensions of their relationship. Existing literature often

lacks empirical data and analytical frameworks to assess the trends and patterns in bilateral trade and to identify the underlying factors shaping.

"Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Challenges to Stability and Progress" by Islam Karimov. This study by the President of Uzbekistan focuses on the unique opportunities and challenges that Uzbekistan faces as it enters the 21st century. Historically under the control of Tsarist Russia and later the Soviet Communist Empire, Uzbekistan's vast natural resources have often been exploited for their raw materials. However, the country's strategic location and abundance of valuable minerals, agricultural products, and advanced infrastructure present the potential for active participation in global economic relations. Moreover, Uzbekistan's position as a bridge between the West and East further enhances its prospects for foreign economic development.

"The End of the Great Game" by Hasan Sadiq illuminates Pakistan's integral role within the Central Asian sphere in literary reflections on this dynamic geopolitical tapestry. In the course of the war on terror, Sadiq's narrative paints a vivid picture of Pakistan's strategic maneuverings, particularly in the context of Uzbekistan's alignment with the United States. The alignment not only generated economic ties but also laid the foundation for a burgeoning Pak-Uzbek relationship, strengthened by shared Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) objectives and a collective resolve to combat regional instability.

Similarly, The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad has published an issue brief on *"Pakistan-Uzbekistan Relations."* A good

overview of the historical relations between the two countries, areas of cooperation, and potential future ties can be found in this document (*Pakistan-Uzbekistan Relations*, 2021). There are several articles on "The Diplomat" that analyze specific aspects of the Uzbekistan-Pakistan relations, such as trade routes and regional stability (*Uzbekistan-Pakistan Relations – The Diplomat*, n.d.). "Strengthening Pakistan-Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations through Parliamentary Friendship Group", The purpose of this press release is to highlight ongoing initiatives aimed at enhancing cooperation in multiple sectors (*Strengthening Pakistan-Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations through Parliamentary Friendship Group*, n.d.).

In his book, *"Pakistan - Uzbekistan: Finding Common Grounds,"* Ambassador Furkat A. Sidikov demonstrates the deep ties that bind these two nations, which are rooted not only in geopolitical pragmatism but also in cultural affinities and linguistic sibling-ship. The imperative of nurturing this burgeoning partnership is underscored by Sidikov's call for deeper state-to-state, government-to-government, and person-to-person relations.

Moreover, the article *"Uzbekistan Prioritizes Pakistani Over Iranian Ports"* by Umida Hashimova illuminates the strategic calculus that underpins Uzbekistan's quest for access to Pakistani seaports. A new era of cooperation has begun between Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, promising to shorten transportation routes and create economic opportunities of unprecedented scale. By pivoting towards Pakistani ports, Uzbekistan sets the stage for a profound shift in regional connectivity and commerce.

Additionally, the researcher reviewed data and reports about Pakistan-Uzbekistan trade relations published by the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). A number of reports are available on the IMF's website that provide insight into potential areas for mutual cooperation between Pakistan and Uzbekistan's economies.

3. Historical Context and Early Relations (1990S):

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s marked a turning point for Central Asia. The region, which had been under Soviet control for decades, witnessed the emergence of several newly independent states, including Uzbekistan. Pakistan, a South Asian nation with historical and cultural ties to Central Asia, was quick to recognize the new republics. This recognition stemmed from a desire to expand Pakistan's political and economic influence in the region, but also from a sense of kinship. Islam is the dominant religion in both Pakistan and Uzbekistan, and the two countries share some historical and cultural influences. For example, both countries were once part of the Mughal Empire, a Muslim empire that ruled much of South Asia from the 16th to the 18th centuries. This shared heritage laid the groundwork for a more natural and collaborative relationship between Pakistan and Uzbekistan compared to the relationships that some other countries sought to establish in Central Asia.

Located at the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan stands out as the region's geographic and demographic center. It shares a close relationship with Pakistan, rooted in their common history, religion, and culture.

Diplomatic ties were officially established in 1992, solidifying this bond. This relationship has blossomed into strong economic cooperation, making Uzbekistan Pakistan's largest trading partner in Central Asia. Notably, Uzbekistan is the first Central Asian country to sign a bilateral Transit Trade Agreement (UPTTA) and a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with Pakistan (*Central Asia, n.d.*).

This initial step laid the foundation for a growing partnership between the two countries. High-level visits by leaders from both sides played a crucial role in solidifying this relationship. For instance, Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto's visit to Uzbekistan in 1994 and Uzbek President Islam Karimov's reciprocal visit to Pakistan in 1995 marked significant milestones in strengthening bilateral ties (*Fair, 2008*). These visits facilitated discussions on a wide range of issues, including political cooperation, economic collaboration, and regional security. The establishment of joint ministerial commissions further institutionalized the relationship, paving the way for regular dialogue and collaboration on matters of mutual interest.

4. Geopolitical And Economic Landscape (2000-2010):

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed a dynamic interplay of geopolitical and economic factors shaping the relationship between Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Central Asia, with its rich endowment of natural resources, emerged as a focal point for global attention.

According to the United States Geological Survey, Central Asia holds an estimated: 60% of the world's proven reserves of un-concentrated uranium, 10% of the world's oil reserves, and

10% of the world's natural gas reserves. Central Asia is also rich in other minerals, including: Copper, Gold, and rare earth elements (*UNESCO Science Report: The Race against Time for Smarter Development - UNESCO Digital Library*, n.d.). This resource wealth attracted major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, making the region geopolitically significant. Each of these powers sought to assert their influence in Central Asia, shaping its political landscape.

Recognizing the untapped potential of their economies, Pakistan and Uzbekistan have identified areas for mutually beneficial cooperation:

4.1. Pakistan's Focus:

Market Expansion: Pakistan aimed to expand its export markets in Central Asia by leveraging Uzbekistan's growing economy. According to the World Bank, Uzbekistan's GDP grew by an average of 4.2% annually between 1999 and 2000, indicating a promising market for Pakistani exports (*GDP Growth (Annual %) - Uzbekistan / Data*, n.d.).

4.1.1 Raw Material Access:

Uzbekistan's vast cotton production (averaging 1.4 million metric tons of cotton lint annually according to the World Bank from 1999 to 2009) presented a valuable and reliable source of raw material for Pakistan's textile industry, a major economic driver. Pakistan's textile industry consumed an average of 4.2 million metric tons of raw cotton per year during the same period (1999-2000), according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (*COMMODITY MARKET REVIEW 1999-2000*, n.d.). Uzbekistan's cotton production could thus

help Pakistan meet its domestic demand for raw cotton and potentially even establish Pakistan as a cotton trading hub in the region.

4.2 Export Focus: Pakistan Looked To Supply Uzbekistan With:

4.2.1 Machinery

This could include textile machinery to support Uzbekistan's own textile industry. Uzbekistan's textile industry accounted for an estimated 10% of GDP in 1999, according to the World Bank (*Lord, 2005*). Supplying machinery could aid in modernizing this sector.

4.2.2 Textiles

Finished Pakistani textiles could cater to Uzbekistan's domestic market. The World Bank estimates that Uzbekistan's textile and apparel imports reached US\$1.2 billion in 1999, indicating a significant market for Pakistani textiles (*Full Article: Uzbekistan's Development Experiment: An Assessment of Karimov's Economic Legacy*, n.d.).

4.2.3 Telecommunication Equipment

This could support the development of Uzbekistan's telecommunications infrastructure. The number of telephone mainlines per 1,000 people in Uzbekistan in 1999 was 3.9, according to the World Bank, highlighting the need for infrastructure development in this sector (*Uzbekistan - Telephones - Main Lines in Use - Historical Data Graphs per Year*, n.d.). Pakistan, with a more established telecommunications sector (11.4 mainlines per 1,000 people in 1999), could be a valuable partner in this area.

5. Economic Analysis (2000-2020):

Despite initial promise, trade volume between Pakistan and Uzbekistan remained modest. Several factors influenced this outcome. On the one hand, Pakistan held a comparative advantage in pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and textiles. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, possessed a comparative advantage in cotton, agriculture, and metals. This economic complementarity presented an opportunity for mutually beneficial trade. However, logistical challenges emerged due to the political instability in Afghanistan, a key transit route for trade between the two countries.

5.1 Comparative Advantage and Diversification

Pakistan's economic strength lies in its manufacturing and service sectors. The pharmaceutical industry alone contributes over \$6 billion to the GDP, with an average annual contribution of \$6.3 billion from 2015 to 2020 (*Pharmaceutical Industry Of Pakistan And Don Valley | Don Valley Pharma, 2022*). This sector employs around half a million people. The textile industry, another major contributor to the economy, generates over \$25 billion in exports annually. On average, the textile industry contributed \$26.2 billion to Pakistan's exports annually between 2015 and 2020 (*World Bank*).

Uzbekistan, on the other hand, has a comparative advantage in its natural resources. Copper exports contribute significantly to Uzbekistan's economy, with an estimated value of over \$4 billion in 2020. Cotton production remains a cornerstone of Uzbekistan's agriculture, with the country ranking as the world's sixth largest cotton producer and third largest cotton exporter (*Cotton Production by*

Country Worldwide 2022/2023, n.d.). According to the World Bank, Uzbekistan produced an average of 1.1 million metric tons of cotton lint per year from 2015 to 2020 (*Akin, 2024*).

5.2 Trade Patterns:

Trade between Pakistan and Uzbekistan has been inconsistent, with fluctuations in exports from Uzbekistan. In 2016, Uzbekistan's trade deficit with Pakistan was \$0.15 million, with imports and exports standing at \$3.38 million and \$3.22 million respectively (*"Country Series," n.d.*). While trade has increased since then, the overall volume remains low compared to potential. Pakistan's potential exports to Uzbekistan are estimated at \$9.14 million, while potential imports from Uzbekistan are significantly higher at \$6.98 billion.

5.3 Trade Balance:

Pakistan enjoys a trade surplus with Uzbekistan. This surplus has been growing in recent years 2016-2020. Pakistan's exports to Uzbekistan grew exponentially by 78% from 2016 to 2020, reaching over US\$25 million in 2020 (*Uzbekistan (UZB) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners, n.d.*). In comparison, imports grew in a relatively steady manner by 31%, reaching US\$9 million in 2020.

5.4 Pakistan's Exports:

Pakistan's exports to Uzbekistan are dominated by a few key products. Pharmaceutical products, fruits, and vegetables constitute over 80% of the total exports (*Uzbekistan (UZB) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners, n.d.*). These top products have seen significant growth, with exports of only the top 10 products increasing by

over US\$18 million (at HS 06 level) since 2015.

5.5 Uzbekistan's Exports:

Major exports from Uzbekistan to Pakistan include cotton, plastics, salts and minerals, and vegetables (*Uzbekistan Exports to Pakistan - 2024 Data 2025 Forecast 2017-2022 Historical*, n.d.).

5.6 Pakistan's Imports:

Pakistan's imports from Uzbekistan are more diversified than its exports. Major imports include beans and legumes, zinc, cotton yarn, salt, vegetables, silk, and machinery. While Pakistan enjoys a trade surplus, imports from Uzbekistan have also shown some growth, increasing by approximately US\$5 million since 2018 (*Pakistan (PAK) and Uzbekistan (UZB) Trade*, n.d.).

5.7 Key Points:

Despite the trade surplus, there's significant potential to diversify both import and export products between Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The substantial growth (78% increase from 2016-2020) in Pakistani exports suggests potential for further trade expansion.

6. Logistical Bottlenecks

A major obstacle to increased trade between Pakistan and Uzbekistan has been the lack of efficient transportation infrastructure. The most direct route for trade between the two countries is through Afghanistan. However, political instability and security concerns in Afghanistan have made this route unreliable and expensive. This has hampered the movement of goods and discouraged potential traders.

7. Recommendations:

Following are recommendations to improve Pakistan-Uzbekistan relations and foster greater economic cooperation:

7.1 Address Infrastructure Gaps:

As a first step towards strengthening economic ties, critical infrastructure gaps must be addressed. Currently, there are no direct flights between Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Establishing them could significantly reduce travel time, estimated to be around 8-10 hours with layovers. This would incentivize business travel and tourism, potentially increasing trade by an estimated 15-20% according to studies on the impact of air connectivity on trade, such as a report by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) titled "Air Connectivity: Why it matters and how to support growth" (Air Connectivity: why it matters and how to support growth). Improved domestic rail infrastructure in Pakistan would not only benefit its own economy but also act as a transit hub for trade with Central Asia, including Uzbekistan. Estimates suggest this could increase trade volumes by as much as 40% within the region, according to a report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) titled "*Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program: 20 Years of Building Connections, Delivering Results*" (guido, 2021).

7.2 Promote Business Linkages:

In order to promote business links between the two countries, regular meetings between the Chambers of Commerce and Industry are essential. Pakistani and Uzbek businesses would benefit from these meetings as it would provide a platform for collaboration, joint ventures, and

increased trade between the two countries. According to a study regular business meetings can lead to a 10-15% increase in bilateral trade between participating countries through better networking and information sharing among businesses (*Doner & Schneider, 2000*). This translates to significant growth in commerce between Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

7.3 Explore Joint Ventures:

The Uzbek government has already successfully entered into joint ventures with Pakistani companies (*Khan, 04:58:35+05:00*). A significant boost to economic cooperation can be achieved by encouraging the creation of more joint ventures in areas of mutual interest. In this way, existing positive experiences will be leveraged and the road to further collaboration will be paved.

7.4 Diversify Energy Sources:

Pakistan faces chronic energy shortages, relying heavily on imports to meet its growing demand (*Ibrahim et al., 2022*). Uzbekistan, on the other hand, boasts significant hydrocarbon reserves, estimated at around 600 billion cubic meters of natural gas and 10 billion tons of oil equivalent in recoverable resources (*75, 2022*). In light of Uzbekistan's abundant energy resources, Pakistan and Uzbekistan may be able to collaborate in the oil and gas industries. In addition to ensuring a stable and secure energy supply, this diversification would be beneficial to both countries.

7.5 Explore Mineral and Metal Resources:

There are significant reserves of minerals and metal resources in both Pakistan and Uzbekistan. It is possible to unlock mutually

beneficial opportunities in mineral exploration by encouraging collaboration. As a result, both countries would be able to expand their economic activities and tap into new resources.

7.6 Strengthen Cooperation in Priority Sectors:

There has already been an agreement between Pakistan and Uzbekistan to collaborate in a number of sectors, including water, electricity, agriculture, leather, textiles, tourism, and pharmaceuticals. A more integrated and mutually beneficial economic relationship will be achieved by strengthening cooperation in these priority sectors.

7.7 Focus On Regional Stability:

A stable Afghanistan is critical for developing railway communications and fostering regional stability. There is a need for Pakistan and Uzbekistan to work together in order to restore peace in Afghanistan. By doing so, a more secure environment will be created for regional integration and economic cooperation.

7.8 Enhance People-to-People Ties:

In addition to strengthening economic ties between Pakistan and Uzbekistan, it is equally important to foster social and cultural contacts between the two countries. In this regard, student exchange programs, cultural events, and tourism initiatives could be considered.

7.9 Address Security Concerns:

There is a common concern about transnational terrorism shared by Pakistan and Uzbekistan. In order to combat this threat, both countries can learn from past successes, such as the destruction of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) strongholds.

7.10 Strengthen Military Cooperation:

Joint Military Commissions between Pakistan and Uzbekistan are already functioning well as platforms for security cooperation. As a result of continued collaboration through this commission, military ties will be strengthened and regional security will be promoted.

7.11 Explore Alternative Energy Sources:

The energy shortage in Uzbekistan may make it advantageous to explore the possibility of collaborating on renewable energy sources such as solar energy. Uzbekistan would benefit from the availability of a clean and sustainable energy source, and Pakistan would be positioned as a partner in the country's energy transition.

In this order, practical measures are prioritized to improve trade and economic ties, followed by actions to address regional instability and security concerns. In addition to highlighting ongoing positive collaborations, it suggests new areas for further exploration.

8. CONCLUSION:

In the year 2020, Uzbekistan was ranked as the 79th biggest economy in terms of GDP and 77th in terms of its total exports and Its GDP per capita was listed as 155th globally. Building on a foundation laid in the 2000s, Pakistan and Uzbekistan have recognized the potential for a powerful economic partnership. While initial trade focused on Pakistan's manufactured goods like machinery, textiles, and telecommunication equipment, and Uzbekistan's position as a major cotton producer, the full potential remains untapped. Despite a modest trade volume that averaged around \$125 million annually for Pakistan's exports and \$110 million for

Uzbekistan's exports between 2015 and 2020, and an imbalance favoring Uzbekistan, logistical improvements and a growing desire for collaboration offer a bright future.

Recognizing the limitations imposed by past trade imbalances and logistical challenges, particularly the instability in Afghanistan, a key transit route, both nations are actively working towards solutions. The establishment of efficient transit routes, potentially including a railway connection through Afghanistan, and the strengthening of economic ties through free trade agreements and joint ventures are key steps in this direction. By leveraging their geographical proximity, cultural ties, and shared history, Uzbekistan and Pakistan can solidify a truly impactful partnership that fosters economic prosperity and regional stability. This partnership holds the potential to overcome past limitations and translate their complementary economies – Pakistan's developing manufacturing sector and Uzbekistan's abundant resources – into a dynamic trade relationship that benefits both nations.

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