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# CONTENTS

WAYS TO EXPAND THE COMPANY’S POSITION IN THE FURNITURE MARKET ..... 6  
**Musayeva Shoira Azimovna**

DIRECTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE ORGANIZATIONAL AND ECONOMIC MECHANISM  
OF MEDICINAL PLANT PROCESSING ..... 11  
**Usmonov Mirgulom Khoshim ogli**

POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN AZERBAIJAN AND UZBEKISTAN: HISTORY, CHALLENGES,  
AND PROSPECTS ..... 17  
**Naila Ramazanova**

CONTENTS

# POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN AZERBAIJAN AND UZBEKISTAN: HISTORY, CHALLENGES, AND PROSPECTS



**Naila Ramazanova**

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**Abstract:** This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the development of political relations between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the present day. It examines the stages of establishing diplomatic ties, the crises of mutual understanding during the 1990s, the normalization of relations under President Heydar Aliyev, and the strategic rapprochement observed in the post-pandemic period. Special attention is given to Uzbekistan's peace-promoting neutral stance on the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and its consistent support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The article concludes that a stable model of cooperation based on Turkic solidarity and mutual benefit has been formed, becoming an important factor in regional security and integration.

**Key words:** Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, foreign policy, Karabakh, Turkic states, diplomacy, international relations, strategic partnership.

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu maqolada Ozarbayjon va O'zbekiston o'rtasidagi siyosiy munosabatlarning Sovet Ittifoqi parchalanishidan to hozirgi kungacha bo'lgan rivojlanish jarayoni har tomonlama tahlil qilinadi. Unda diplomatik aloqalarning shakllanish bosqichlari, 1990-yillardagi o'zaro tushunmovchilik inqirozlari, Prezident Heydar Aliyev davrida munosabatlarning normallasuvi hamda pandemiyadan keyingi davrda kuzatilgan strategik yaqinlashuv jarayonlari batafsil yoritilgan. Ayniqsa, Armaniston–Ozarbayjon mojarosiga nisbatan O'zbekistonning tinchlikni ilgari suruvchi neytral pozitsiyasi va Ozarbayjonning hududiy yaxlitligini qo'llab-quvvatlashi alohida tahlil etilgan. Maqolada xulosa sifatida ta'kidlanishicha, turkiy birdamlik va o'zaro manfaat asosida barqaror hamkorlik modeli shakllangan bo'lib, u mintaqaviy xavfsizlik va integratsiyaning muhim omiliga aylanmoqda.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Ozarbayjon, O'zbekiston, tashqi siyosat, Qarabog', turkiy davlatlar, diplomatiya, xalqaro munosabatlar, strategik hamkorlik.

**Аннотация:** В статье представлен всесторонний анализ развития политических отношений между Азербайджаном и Узбекистаном с момента распада Советского Союза до наших дней. Рассматриваются этапы установления дипломатических связей, кризисы взаимопонимания 1990-х годов, нормализация отношений в период президентства Гейдара Алиева, а также стратегическое сближение в постпандемийный период. Особое внимание уделено миролюбивой нейтральной позиции Узбекистана в контексте армяно-азербайджанского конфликта и его последовательной поддержке территориальной целостности Азербайджана. В заключение подчеркивается, что на основе тюркской солидарности и взаимной выгоды сформировалась устойчивая модель сотрудничества, ставшая важным фактором региональной безопасности и интеграции.

**Ключевые слова:** Азербайджан, Узбекистан, внешняя политика, Карабах, тюркские государства, дипломатия, международные отношения, стратегическое партнерство.

## INTRODUCTION

Political relations between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan represent one of the most dynamically developing partnerships in the post-Soviet space. The cooperation between these two Turkic nations—bound by deep historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious ties—has evolved through several distinct stages, from initial diplomatic recognition to the establishment of strategic partnership mechanisms. Since the early 1990s, both countries have sought to strengthen mutual understanding and coordinate their foreign policy priorities within regional and international organizations, including the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the United Nations (UN), and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).

Despite their geographical distance, Baku and Tashkent share a common vision of regional stability, economic integration, and the preservation of cultural unity among Turkic peoples. In recent years, political dialogue between the two states has intensified significantly. This is primarily driven by shared interests in regional security, energy cooperation, and the strengthening of transport connectivity. High-level visits, the signing of numerous bilateral agreements, and the growing synchronization of national development strategies have elevated bilateral cooperation to a new stage.

However, these relations have not been without challenges. At certain periods in history, differences in foreign policy orientations, limitations in transport and logistics infrastructure, and competition for regional influence have occasionally led to pauses in cooperation. Nevertheless, in the context of globalization and the evolving balance of geopolitical power in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, both nations have come to reappraise the strategic importance of deepening their alliance.

This article analyzes the historical evolution of Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan political relations, examines the key factors that have influenced their development, and evaluates the prospects for future cooperation. The study emphasizes that bilateral political trust, economic pragmatism, and shared cultural identity form the essential foundation for building a sustainable and mutually beneficial partnership between the two countries in the 21st century.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE SUBJECT

Scholarly literature devoted to the political relations between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan emphasizes the deep historical, cultural, and linguistic bonds between the two Turkic republics as the fundamental factor shaping their modern model of cooperation. Ilgar Saidov, in his study “Uzbek–Azerbaijani Relations” (Caucasus Studies, 2021), notes that the roots of cooperation long predate the post-Soviet period, resting on centuries of cultural proximity, shared Islamic heritage, and mutual political interests. According to Saidov, this common historical identity provided a stable foundation for the establishment of diplomatic relations and the signing of strategic agreements during the 1990s and early 2000s.

The director of the AIR Center in Baku, Farhad Mammadov, emphasizes that the evolution of bilateral ties has passed through several stages — beginning with symbolic cultural cooperation and later transforming into a pragmatic political and economic partnership. In his work “Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan Sign the Treaty on Allied Relations” (AIR Center Policy Paper, 2024), Mammadov characterizes the period from 2022 to 2024 as a qualitatively new phase of cooperation — one marked by alliance-level coordination in foreign policy, trade, and security. He argues that this transformation is directly linked to the geopolitical reconfiguration of Eurasia and the growing strategic significance of Turkic integration structures.

The regional dimension of this partnership has been thoroughly analyzed by Kamola Makhmudova in her article “The Role of Uzbekistan in Strengthening the Organization of Turkic States” (Central Asian Journal of International Studies, 2023). Makhmudova asserts that Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan have emerged as “bridge nations” within the Turkic world, connecting the South Caucasus and Central Asia. She concludes that their cooperation contributes to the institutional consolidation of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Furthermore, she highlights transport connectivity and digital integration as new and promising directions for joint political engagement.

Issues of economic and energy diplomacy are explored by Nargiz Abbasova in her work “Azerbaijan’s Relations with Central Asian Turkic States and Energy Diplomacy” (ResearchGate, 2024). Abbasova argues that Azerbaijan’s energy infrastructure and transport corridors function as key instruments of political influence and interdependence within the Turkic region. She demonstrates that Baku’s pragmatic use of the Trans-Caspian route fosters mutual political trust with Tashkent, which, in turn, seeks to diversify its energy partnerships and logistical capabilities.

From a governance perspective, Luca Anceschi, in his book “Central Asia and the Caucasus in Global Politics” (Routledge, 2022), draws attention to the structural similarities of both states’ political systems — namely, strong presidentialism. He argues that while such leadership-driven governance enables swift

alignment at the executive level, it also limits institutional transparency and civic participation. Similarly, Paul Stronski (Carnegie Endowment, 2023) observes that Uzbekistan's traditionally cautious multivector diplomacy has, in recent years, evolved toward more active regional engagement, particularly with Baku, as part of an effort to balance the influence of major external powers such as Russia and China.

Among forward-looking studies, Bruce Pannier's analysis for RFE/RL (2023) holds special significance. Pannier highlights new opportunities for Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan cooperation in infrastructure, trade, and education, noting that both countries are increasingly aligning their development strategies within the framework of the “Middle Corridor” initiative.

In general, the body of existing scholarship unanimously indicates that the long-term partnership between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan is grounded in political trust, strategic complementarity, and cultural solidarity. Consequently, the bilateral relations of these two nations represent not only a model of regional cooperation, but also a viable framework for a stable strategic alliance in the broader global context.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is based on a qualitative analysis of academic literature, official documents, and policy reports related to Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan relations. Comparative and historical methods were used to examine the evolution of political cooperation, while analytical and content analysis techniques were applied to evaluate data from government statements, treaties, and international organizations' reports.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a historic turning point for the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. After decades under Soviet domination, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan gained independence and embarked on redefining their foreign policy strategies. In this process, the strengthening of Turkic identity, the preservation of sovereignty, and the development of regional cooperation were identified as key directions. Within this context, the establishment and evolution of Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan bilateral relations emerged as one of the most stable trajectories in post-Soviet diplomacy.

Following the restoration of its independence on October 18, 1991, Azerbaijan clearly defined the priorities of its foreign policy, placing particular emphasis on relations with Turkic states. In 1992, after joining the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Azerbaijan actively expanded its diplomatic engagement with countries bound by common historical, cultural, and ethnic ties.

From a geopolitical perspective, Azerbaijan plays a crucial role as an energy and transport hub linking East and West. Located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe and bordering the Caspian Sea, the country holds strategic importance in regional energy and logistics policy. In turn, Uzbekistan, as the most populous state in Central Asia, occupies a key position due to its transit routes, resource potential, and historical-cultural continuity.

Situated in the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan possesses ancient traditions of statehood. The Uzbek people—named after Uzbek Khan of the Golden Horde—managed to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity despite Mongol and later imperial conquests. Today, with a population exceeding 38 million, Uzbekistan is rich in natural gas, oil, gold, and uranium. Its natural gas reserves are estimated at over 2.4 trillion cubic meters, placing the country among Eurasia's leading energy producers.

Historically, Uzbekistan's territory served as a key segment of the Silk Road. The cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva were not only major trading centers but also renowned hubs of Islamic scholarship, culture, and education. These historical and cultural parallels bring Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan closer, as Azerbaijan too historically stood at the crossroads of civilizations and trade.

The human factor has also played a significant role in fostering mutual understanding. During the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s, thousands of Azerbaijanis found refuge in Uzbekistan. Today, according to official data, more than 60,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis reside in Uzbekistan. Many of them actively contribute to the country's academic, cultural, and business spheres, serving as an informal “cultural bridge” between the two nations [4, p. 5; 11, pp. 158–159].

The roots of Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan relations trace back several centuries — to the Seljuk, Khwarezmian, and Timurid periods. These historical interactions laid the groundwork for modern cooperation. During the Soviet era, although both republics existed under a unified political structure, they maintained bilateral contact through cultural exchanges and limited inter-republic agreements.

Even before the formal collapse of the Soviet Union, in October 1990, an Azerbaijani delegation visited Tashkent and signed an intergovernmental agreement on economic, scientific-technical, and cultural

cooperation with the Uzbek SSR, covering the years 1991–1995 and beyond [13]. This initiative laid an early legal foundation for cooperation between the soon-to-be independent states.

Uzbekistan declared state sovereignty on June 20, 1991, and full independence on September 1, which was later confirmed by a referendum on December 29. With its vast industrial and energy potential and its strategic location in Central Asia, Uzbekistan recognized the importance of building strong international partnerships. Azerbaijan, as a Caspian nation with similar development ambitions, became a natural ally.

Following Azerbaijan's declaration of independence on October 18, 1991, an official government delegation was dispatched to Uzbekistan on October 19. As a result, two important documents were signed:

The "Agreement on the Principles of Interstate Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Uzbekistan," and

The "Agreement on the Principles of Trade and Economic Cooperation for 1992."

These agreements reflected a mutual understanding on key political and economic issues. Both Azerbaijani and Uzbek leaders emphasized that historical ties would continue to strengthen in the new geopolitical reality. At the joint press conference, it was announced that the intergovernmental agreement would be valid for five years, ratified in Baku, and would enter into force upon the exchange of ratification documents [12, p. 289].

Thus, the foundation of bilateral cooperation between the two nations was established even before formal independence, while the Soviet Union still officially existed.

In the early 1990s, both Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan shared common goals: consolidating sovereignty, implementing economic reforms, and ensuring political stability. However, due to political crises — especially those occurring in Azerbaijan — the implementation of the signed agreements was delayed [7, pp. 134–135].

With Heydar Aliyev's return to power in 1993, the normalization of relations with Uzbekistan became one of the top priorities of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. A significant role in this process was played by the Summits of Turkic-Speaking States, the first of which was held in Ankara in 1992 at Turkey's initiative, and the second in Istanbul in 1994. During the Istanbul summit, Aliyev openly apologized for earlier diplomatic tensions and expressed his readiness to strengthen bilateral cooperation [2].

On May 27, 1996, the First President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, paid his first official visit to Baku, marking a major turning point in bilateral relations. During the negotiations, 18 documents were signed, including the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation, which laid the legal foundation for a new stage of relations [3, pp. 32–33].

During this period, Uzbekistan adopted a clear and firm stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, strongly supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. At a joint press conference, President Islam Karimov explicitly stated: "There cannot be two Armenian states in the South Caucasus," thereby reaffirming Uzbekistan's political solidarity with Baku [15, p. 202].

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Uzbekistan consistently maintained its support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Although the country generally pursued a policy of neutrality in regional disputes, President Karimov repeatedly emphasized in his speeches that recognizing the self-proclaimed "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" was unacceptable. At a press conference in 2010, he made a firm declaration: "Uzbekistan considers Nagorno-Karabakh an integral part of Azerbaijan" [18].

With the election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the President of Uzbekistan in 2016, a new era began in the country's foreign policy. He launched a policy of "opening the country to the world", adopting an active approach to expanding international relations. This course of action also brought cooperation with Azerbaijan to a qualitatively new level. In 2018, President Mirziyoyev once again reaffirmed Uzbekistan's consistent position on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, emphasizing the importance of strict adherence to international law, including the relevant UN Security Council resolutions [19].

Following the Second Karabakh War in 2020, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's visit to the liberated territories of Azerbaijan carried profound symbolic significance. In 2023, during his visit to the city of Fuzuli, he took part in the opening ceremony of a school built with Uzbekistan's financial support. This event was not only a humanitarian gesture but also a clear political signal reaffirming Uzbekistan's practical support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

During the same visit, the two countries signed an agreement establishing the High-Level Interstate Council, which today serves as the institutional foundation of bilateral cooperation. Both sides confirmed their readiness to deepen collaboration in the fields of energy, transport, education, agriculture, and defense [20; 21].

At present, one of the central pillars of political and economic relations between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan is their joint participation in major regional transport initiatives. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor) and the prospective Zangezur Corridor are viewed not only as alternative logistical routes to the northern and southern directions but also as strategic mechanisms that strengthen economic integration among Turkic states.

Uzbekistan has expressed strong interest in utilizing Azerbaijan's infrastructure — in particular, the Alat Port, railway system, and aviation network — to enhance its export potential and expand transit routes [10, p. 84].

Both countries are active members of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Within the framework of this organization, issues such as digital trade, energy cooperation, food security, and sustainable logistics have become top priorities. During 2023–2024, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan repeatedly expressed coordinated positions on key geo-economic priorities, including the acceleration of digital integration and the transition to green energy [19].

The humanitarian cooperation between the two countries extends far beyond traditional cultural exchanges. Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan work closely within the framework of UNESCO to promote the protection of Turkic historical and cultural heritage and to organize joint archaeological and ethnographic expeditions.

Since 2019, bilateral academic exchange programs have been successfully implemented between Baku State University and the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, as well as between the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan and the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan (ANAS) [4, p. 5].

In addition, Uzbek students have received scholarships and grants to pursue higher education in Azerbaijan, particularly in fields such as oil and gas engineering, information technology, and international relations.

One of the most symbolically significant humanitarian initiatives has been the construction of a school in Fuzuli financed by Uzbekistan. This project, representing the brotherly solidarity of the two nations, carries not only political importance but also humanitarian meaning, reflecting Uzbekistan's willingness to contribute to the post-war reconstruction of Karabakh [20].

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the current stage, bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have transcended the framework of a simple political alliance and are evolving into a stable strategic axis within the region. Both nations are jointly advancing an agenda centered on economic diversification, sustainable development, and modernization. The growth of trade turnover, technological cooperation in agriculture, expansion of the digital economy, and the transition to green energy represent the main directions of the next phase of their partnership [21].

Supported by strong political will and broad public consensus, both governments are creating favorable conditions for the formation of a sustainable Turkic political and economic cluster. This objective is especially relevant amid global instability and the ongoing transformation of the international security system. The dynamics of cooperation between Baku and Tashkent demonstrate that bilateral relations will continue to deepen on the basis of pragmatism, mutual benefit, and shared historical-cultural values [3, p. 33].

Against the backdrop of transformations across the Eurasian space and the growing significance of the Turkic factor, the Azerbaijan–Uzbekistan partnership is increasingly taking on the characteristics of a strategic alliance. Common interests, historical and cultural proximity, and alignment on major international issues make this cooperation a key component of the regional security architecture.

In recent years, the relationship between the two countries has entered a qualitatively new stage — where declarative statements have been replaced by the practical implementation of joint projects. In particular, Uzbekistan's active participation in Azerbaijan's logistics initiatives, such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), is opening new horizons for economic integration.

Thus, the diplomatic efforts initiated in the 1990s have today evolved into a stable, institutionalized model of interstate cooperation founded on the principles of trust, mutual advantage, and respect for sovereignty.

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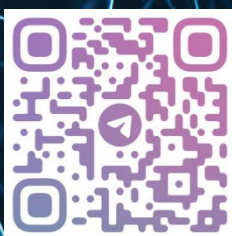
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