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# Uzbekistan: Background and Issues for Congress

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## Uzbekistan: Background and Issues for Congress

Uzbekistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia. Because it has the largest population in the region (approximately 36 million) and is the only country that borders all four other Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), many analysts see Uzbekistan as a potential regional leader. The country also shares a border with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan became independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and was ruled until 2016 by President Islam Karimov, a former high-level Soviet official. Karimov maintained relatively isolationist foreign and economic policies that emphasized self-sufficiency, and international observers considered his rule authoritarian and highly repressive. Following Karimov's death in 2016, his successor, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, embarked on a wide-ranging reform program emphasizing goals of modernizing and liberalizing the economy, easing political repression, addressing human rights concerns, and attracting increased foreign investment.

Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has reengaged with the international community, leading to significantly improved relations with the United States and transforming regional dynamics within Central Asia. The U.S. government has praised Uzbekistan's ongoing reform efforts, but continues to raise concerns about human rights and political freedoms. U.S. policymakers have identified Uzbekistan as a key partner in addressing regional threats such as illegal narcotics, terrorism, and violent extremism. The government of Uzbekistan previously positioned itself as an intermediary between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, Uzbekistan has maintained a pragmatic stance toward the Taliban, a position some analysts see as intended to prioritize Uzbekistan's security. Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 arguably has placed Uzbekistan in a difficult position economically and diplomatically. Uzbekistan has avoided endorsing Russian aggression and has expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Some analysts and U.S. officials contend that the shifting geopolitical situation resulting from the war in Ukraine creates new opportunities for expanding U.S.-Uzbekistan relations. Some Members of Congress express interest in expanding U.S. engagement with Uzbekistan on trade, democratic reforms, human rights, and security cooperation.

Potential areas of opportunity for expanding U.S. relations with Uzbekistan and congressional action include the following:

- **Trade.** Trade between the United States and Uzbekistan remains limited and is governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), the so-called Jackson-Vanik amendment, which denies permanent normal trade relations to certain former nonmarket economies. Exempting a given country from Jackson-Vanik requires Congress to pass relevant legislation. The Biden Administration supports repealing Jackson-Vanik applicability for Uzbekistan.
- **Human rights.** Some Members of Congress have noted Uzbekistan's progress on human rights, while also highlighting ongoing human rights concerns.
- **Security cooperation.** Some analysts and U.S. officials see new opportunities for expanding security cooperation between the United States and Uzbekistan in light of the war in Ukraine.
- **Energy.** Although Uzbekistan is a natural gas producer, the country's export potential is hampered by domestic energy crises resulting from high demand coupled with infrastructural deficiencies.
- **Regional connectivity.** Promoting regional connectivity has long been a U.S. policy priority in Central Asia, in part to strengthen regional countries' economic and political sovereignty. Some analysts suggest that regional connectivity in Central Asia has taken on added significance in light of the war in Ukraine as Central Asian governments seek to diversify their economic and security relationships.

## Contents

Overview .....	1
Domestic Political Background.....	2
Human Rights.....	4
Economy.....	6
Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy.....	6
Bilateral Relations with the United States.....	6
Security Cooperation .....	7
U.S.-Uzbekistan Trade.....	8
U.S. Foreign Assistance to Uzbekistan.....	8
Regional Relations .....	9
Relations with Afghanistan .....	9
Terrorism and Violent Extremism .....	11
Relations with Russia and Implications of the War in Ukraine.....	12
Relations with China .....	13
Issues for Congress.....	14
Trade .....	14
Human Rights.....	15
Security Cooperation.....	15
Energy .....	16
Regional Connectivity.....	17

## Figures

Figure 1. Map of Uzbekistan.....	1
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## Tables

Table 1. Uzbekistan: Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes.....	5
Table 2. U.S. Foreign Assistance to Uzbekistan.....	9

## Contacts

Author Information.....	17
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## Overview

In the wake of a 2016 leadership transition, Uzbekistan's government embarked on a wide-ranging reform program. Uzbekistan has since reengaged with the international community following years of relative isolationism, leading to significantly improved relations with the United States. U.S. officials have praised Uzbekistan's ongoing reform efforts, but continue to raise concerns about human rights and political freedoms.<sup>1</sup> Constitutional changes introduced following an April 2023 referendum and a subsequent July 2023 snap election raise the prospect of the country's current leader remaining in office until 2037. The United States and Uzbekistan cooperate on political and civil society issues, in developing economic relations, and in addressing regional threats such as illegal narcotics, trafficking in persons, terrorism, and violent extremism.<sup>2</sup> Some analysts describe Uzbekistan as a potential regional leader in Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> Uzbekistan has the largest population in the region and is the only country that borders all four other Central Asian states (see **Figure 1**). The country also shares a border with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is slightly larger than California, and the majority of the country's population of approximately 36.2 million is Uzbek (83.8%), with Tajik (4.8%), Kazakh (2.5%), Russian (2.3%), Karakalpak (2.2%), and Tatar (1.5%) minorities, among others.<sup>4</sup> Most of Uzbekistan's inhabitants are Muslim (88% according to U.S. government estimates, and 96% according to the government of Uzbekistan), almost exclusively Sunni; about 2.2% of the population is Russian Orthodox.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1. Map of Uzbekistan**



**Source:** Graphic created by CRS.

**Notes:** "Karakalpakstan," an alternate form of "Qoraqalpog'iston," is used in the text of this report.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Navbahor Imamova, "U.S.-Uzbekistan: Strategic Partnership, Continuity, and Mirziyoyev's Challenges," *Amerika Ovozi*, November 22, 2020; Nike Ching and Navbahor Imamova, "Blinken Welcomes Reforms in Uzbekistan Visit," *VOA News*, March 1, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Uzbekistan: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," February 28, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Nathan Hutson and Marsha McGraw Olive, "Uzbekistan Rising as Central Asian Integration Catalyst," *Eurasianet*, February 8, 2021; Wilder Alejandro Sanchez, "Will an Ascendant Uzbekistan Challenge Kazakhstan's Leadership in Central Asia?" *Geopolitical Monitor*, June 4, 2018; Timur Toktonaliev, "Could Uzbekistan Lead Central Asia?" *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, November 22, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Population estimate as of April 1, 2023, from the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, available at <https://stat.uz/en/>. Ethnic breakdown estimated as of 2017, from the CIA World Factbook.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan*, May 15, 2023.

## Domestic Political Background

From 1991 to 2016, Uzbekistan, formerly a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, was led by President Islam Karimov, a former high-level Soviet official. International observers considered his rule authoritarian and highly repressive.<sup>6</sup> Karimov's economic policies emphasized national self-sufficiency, and his government pursued a largely isolationist foreign policy. After his death, Karimov was succeeded by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who had served as prime minister under Karimov for 13 years and won a December 2016 presidential election that international observers criticized as "devoid of genuine competition."<sup>7</sup> Mirziyoyev subsequently embarked on an ambitious reform program, aiming to transform Uzbekistan by modernizing and liberalizing the economy, addressing human rights concerns, and reengaging with the international community. He won reelection to a second five-year term in October 2021. The Election Observation Mission from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted "significant procedural irregularities" in that election and concluded "that recent reforms, which have gradually introduced welcome improvements, have not yet resulted in a genuinely pluralistic environment."<sup>8</sup>

U.S. officials and other international observers have noted continuing positive reforms in Uzbekistan since 2016.<sup>9</sup> One longtime observer describes the overall changes in Uzbekistan as "remarkable," particularly with regard to increased openness, improved governance, and decreased repression.<sup>10</sup> U.S. officials have voiced support for these ongoing reforms.<sup>11</sup> Reform remains a top-down, centralized process, however, leading to skepticism among some analysts as to the extent to which the government is willing to democratize.<sup>12</sup> Analysts also note less progress in areas such as the privatization of state assets, the decentralization of political power, and combatting corruption.<sup>13</sup> Following a meeting with Mirziyoyev in Tashkent in March, 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, "We applauded the [reform] steps that had been taken. I noted as well the importance of not only having a strong vision but of fully implementing it. And of course, that remains an important work in progress."<sup>14</sup> U.S. government officials and other

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, "Uzbekistan: Authoritarian President Karimov Reported Dead: Legacy Is Quarter Century of Ruthless Repression," Human Rights Watch, September 2, 2016; Casey Michel, "Uzbekistan's Karimov Leaves Behind a Legacy of Repression, Slavery, and Kleptocracy," *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> OSCE ODIHR, *Uzbekistan, Early Presidential Election, 4 December 2016: Final Report*, March 22, 2017, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> OSCE ODIHR, *Republic of Uzbekistan, Presidential Election, October 24, 2021: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, April 22, 2022, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov," February 3, 2020; Navbahor Imamova, "U.S.-Uzbekistan: Strategic Partnership, Continuity, and Mirziyoyev's Challenges," *Amerika Ovozi*, November 22, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Navbahor Imamova, "Where Freedoms Are Expanding—Slowly," *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Nike Ching and Navbahor Imamova, "Blinken Welcomes Reforms in Uzbekistan Visit," *VOA News*, March 1, 2023; U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "Remarks by Ambassador Alice Wells," February 27, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Fred Harrison, "Uzbekistan Is Being Transformed, but Where Are the Democratic Reforms?" *BNE Intellinews*, January 6, 2021; Dilmira Matyakubowa, "There Won't Be Political Reform in Uzbekistan. Here's Why," *The Diplomat*, December 22, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Ivailo Izvorski, "High Expectations in Uzbekistan," Brookings Institution, February 8, 2022; Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, "Uzbekistan Reform Agenda Shows Signs of Slowing," *Financial Times*, September 9, 2021; Fred Harrison, "Uzbekistan Is Being Transformed, but Where Are the Democratic Reforms?" *BNE Intellinews*, January 6, 2021; Dilmira Matyakubowa, "There Won't Be Political Reform in Uzbekistan. Here's Why," *The Diplomat*, December 22, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Nike Ching and Navbahor Imamova, "Blinken Welcomes Reforms in Uzbekistan Visit," *VOA News*, March 1, 2023.

observers continue to express concerns about human rights and political freedoms.<sup>15</sup> Freedom House classifies Uzbekistan as “not free,” assessing that the country “remains an authoritarian state with few signs of democratization.”<sup>16</sup>

Uzbekistan’s centralized government structure grants the executive branch extensive powers, with the president exercising significant control over the legislature and the judiciary. The bicameral legislature (*Oliy Majlis*) has historically provided neither an effective check on the executive nor a venue for genuine political debate. Its role has expanded somewhat under Mirziyoyev, who, upon assuming the presidency, urged more oversight over the executive and greater initiative from parliament.<sup>17</sup> The country held its first post-Karimov parliamentary elections in December 2019 under the slogan “New Uzbekistan—New Elections.” According to international observers, the elections took place in an atmosphere of unprecedented openness and engagement with voters but did not demonstrate genuine competitiveness.<sup>18</sup> The composition of parliament remained largely unchanged, and the five parties that hold seats are generally pro-government. Although no party has an outright majority, Mirziyoyev’s Liberal Democratic Party won a plurality of seats (53 of 150). In 2020, legislative amendments expanded the oversight powers of the *Oliy Majlis*, and the new parliament has engaged in some increased debate on policy issues.<sup>19</sup> Freedom House assesses, however, that the parliament has “remained quiescent and failed to raise serious objections to any initiatives raised by the president.”<sup>20</sup>

Following his 2021 reelection, Mirziyoyev raised the possibility of constitutional changes, in a move some analysts saw as intended to evade the two-term limit on the presidency.<sup>21</sup> When a new draft constitution was published for public comment in June 2022, officials presented the proposed changes as intended to strengthen Uzbekistan’s institutions and expand social welfare programs.<sup>22</sup> Some of the proposed provisions would have changed the political status of Karakalpakstan, a sparsely populated region in western Uzbekistan that accounts for about 40% of Uzbekistan’s territory and about 5% of the population, by weakening its nominal autonomy. This spurred large-scale protests that turned violent in July 2022, leaving at least 21 people killed

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Laurence Fletcher, “Uzbekistan Fails to Address Human Rights Violations,” *Financial Times*, September 9, 2021; Navbahor Imamova, “Uzbekistan Reform Pace Questioned as Presidential Election Approaches,” *Voice of America*, May 26, 2021; Steve Swerdlow, “Uzbekistan Needs a Navruz for Human Rights,” March 1, 2021; U.S. Department of State, *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan*, March 20, 2023; Brawley Benson, “Uzbekistan’s Reformist President Makes a U-Turn,” *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023: Uzbekistan*.

<sup>17</sup> “Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Oliy Majlis,” December 28, 2018, available at <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/address-president-republic-uzbekistan-shavkat-mirziyoyev-oliy-majlis-0>.

<sup>18</sup> OSCE ODIHR, *Uzbekistan, Parliamentary Elections, 22 December 2019: Final Report*, May 13, 2020; OSCE ODIHR, “Important Progress in Election Legislation Could Not Offset Lack of Real Contest in Uzbekistan’s Parliamentary Elections, International Observers Say,” December 23, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Oleg Zamanov, “Olii Mazhlis poluchil pravo provodit’ rassledovaniia” [Oliy Majlis received the right to conduct investigations], *Norma*, August 11, 2020; Catherine Putz, “Checking in on Uzbekistan’s Political Progress in 2020: An Interview with Farkhod Tolipov,” *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2022: Uzbekistan*.

<sup>21</sup> “Where Is Uzbekistan’s Constitutional Reform Heading?” *Eurasianet*, May 24, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> “Uzbekistan: Constitutional Reforms Open Way for Mirziyoyev to Retain Power,” *Eurasianet*, June 21, 2022.



and a further 243 injured.<sup>23</sup> In the wake of this unrest, President Mirziyoyev announced that the articles of the extant constitution concerning Karakalpakstan would remain unchanged.<sup>24</sup>

A new constitution approved in an April 30, 2023, referendum extended the presidential term from five years to seven, potentially allowing Mirziyoyev to stay in power until 2037.<sup>25</sup> The new constitution also introduced changes that address some popular grievances, including by bolstering property rights, and criminal justice reforms such as banning the death penalty.<sup>26</sup> Uzbek officials state that the constitutional changes will serve to strengthen human rights protections, improve social services, and make the government more accountable to its citizens.<sup>27</sup> Critics argue, however, that the new constitution does not bolster the rule of law and serves primarily to strengthen Mirziyoyev.<sup>28</sup> One scholar contends that, “the referendum was conducted by the regime for the regime” as a form of “authoritarian modernization.”<sup>29</sup> After the new constitution went into force on May 1, Mirziyoyev secured 87% of the vote in a snap presidential election held on July 9. OSCE observers determined that the election “took place in a constrained political environment that was lacking genuine political alternatives” and noted “serious irregularities.”<sup>30</sup> In light of the constitutional referendum and snap election, one expert concluded, “any hope of political reforms, especially allowing genuine opposition parties or independent candidates to participate, seems dead, for now.”<sup>31</sup>

## Human Rights

International organizations have lauded Uzbekistan’s progress on human rights since 2016, but some observers continue to raise concerns. The International Labour Organization determined in 2021 that reforms had eradicated systemic forced and child labor in the harvesting of cotton, previously a major human rights concern in Uzbekistan.<sup>32</sup> In 2022, the Cotton Campaign ended its call for a global boycott of cotton from Uzbekistan, citing Uzbekistan’s “historic achievement” in ending systemic, state-sponsored forced labor in the cotton sector.<sup>33</sup> Some analysts assess that

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Putz, “Unrest in Central Asia: The Trouble in Karakalpakstan,” *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2022; Ildar Daminov, “Karakalpak Protests Reflect the Shattered Promise of Mirziyoyev’s ‘New Uzbekistan,’” *The Diplomat*, July 5, 2022; “Uzbekistan: Authorities Close Consultation on Constitutional Reform,” *Eurasianet*, August 1, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> “Uzbekistan President Backtracks on Constitution to Defuse Karakalpakstan Tension,” *Eurasianet*, July 2, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Constitutional experts in Uzbekistan determined that the change in term length effectively nullified Mirziyoyev’s first two terms. Karimov similarly evaded the two-term limit by changing the length of presidential terms from seven years to five. See Catherine Putz, “Karimov, Uzbekistan’s Perpetual President,” *The Diplomat*, April 11, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Pannier, “Uzbekistan’s New Constitution May Be Worth the Paper It’s Written On,” *bne Intellinews*, April 13, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Eldor Tulykakov, “Uzbekistan’s New Constitution, Civil Servants, and Social Protection,” SETA, May 4, 2023; Nuriddin Ismoilov, “Uzbekistan’s Revised Constitution Can Support Democratic Transition,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 29, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Umida Niyazova, “Uzbekistan’s Improved Constitutional Rights Are Meaningless,” *Nikkei Asia*, May 8, 2023; Navbahor Imamova, “Uzbek Ballot Promises Freedom, Justice, but Some Have Doubts,” *VOA News*, April 28, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Navbahor Imamova, “New Uzbekistan Constitution: Genuine Reform or Authoritarian Makeover?” *VOA News*, May 4, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> OSCE ODIHR, *Uzbekistan, Early Presidential Election, 9 July 2023: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, July 10, 2023, pp. 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Pannier, “Central Asia in Focus: No Change in Uzbekistan Until at Least 2037,” *RFE/RL*, July 11, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> “Uzbek Cotton Is Free from Systemic Child Labour and Forced Labour,” International Labour Organization, March 1, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> “Cotton Campaign Ends Its Call for a Global Boycott of Cotton from Uzbekistan,” Cotton Campaign, March 10, 2022. Previously, 331 brands and retailers had signed the Cotton Campaign’s Uzbek Cotton Pledge Against Forced (continued...)

Uzbekistan’s media and civil society operate more freely now than under Karimov, but still face constraints.<sup>34</sup> Some outside observers and journalists within Uzbekistan argue that the space for free expression has constricted after an initial period of opening following Mirziyoyev’s ascension to the presidency.<sup>35</sup> The Mirziyoyev government has eased barriers to registration for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), but both local and international organizations face bureaucratic obstacles.<sup>36</sup> No new political parties have been allowed to register, and all existing parties support the government.<sup>37</sup> The Uzbek state strictly controls and monitors religious practices, and unregistered religious activity is criminalized.<sup>38</sup> An amended law on religion signed by President Mirziyoyev in July 2021 eased some restrictions, but drew criticism from religious freedom advocates for maintaining registration requirements and other elements of government control over religious life.<sup>39</sup>

In December 2020, the State Department removed Uzbekistan from its Special Watch List of countries that engage in severe violations of religious freedom. The Department had previously designated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern from 2006 to 2017, and placed it on the Special Watch List in 2018 and 2019.<sup>40</sup> In its 2023 Annual Report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom noted that religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan “trended slightly positively” in 2022 but recommended that the State Department return Uzbekistan to the Special Watch List in light of continuing violations of religious freedom.<sup>41</sup>

**Table I. Uzbekistan: Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes**

Issue	Index	2016 Status/Rank	2022/2023 Status/Rank
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World	Not Free (Score: 3/100)	Not Free (Score: 12/100)
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index	166 <sup>th</sup> of 180 Countries	137 <sup>th</sup> of 180 Countries
Economic Freedom	Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom	Repressed (166 <sup>th</sup> of 178 Countries)	Mostly Unfree (109 <sup>th</sup> of 176 Countries)

Labor, committing to not knowingly sourcing cotton from Uzbekistan until the elimination of forced labor was independently verified by the International Labour Organization and the Cotton Campaign.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Navbahor Imamova, “Uzbek Leader to Seek New Term Under Reform Constitution,” *VOA News*, May 12, 2023; *Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2022: Uzbekistan*; Bruce Pannier, “The Making of Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan,” *The Diplomat*, October 1, 2021; Navbahor Imamova, “Uzbeks Still Await Promised Human Rights Reforms,” *Voice of America*, May 21, 2021; Navbahor Imamova, “Where Freedoms Are Expanding—Slowly,” *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Navbahor Imamova, “Uzbek Leader to Seek New Term Under Reform Constitution,” *VOA News*, May 12, 2023; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, *Uzbekistan: President’s Broken Promises Puts Journalists and Bloggers at Risk*, June 20, 2023; Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2022: Uzbekistan*.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Department of State, *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan*, March 20, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce Pannier, “New Uzbek Opposition Party Runs into the Same Wall as Its Predecessors,” *RFE/RL*, March 24, 2021; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023: Uzbekistan*, March 2023.

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan*, May 15, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Felix Corley and Mushfig Bayram, “UZBEKISTAN: President to Sign Restrictive New Religion Law?” *Forum 18*, July 5, 2021; “Uzbekistan Disappoints with Secretively Adopted Religion Law,” *Eurasianet*, July 7, 2021. See also: European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) and OSCE ODIHR, *Uzbekistan: Joint Opinion on the Draft Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,”* Venice Commission Opinion No. 998/2020, OSCE/ODIHR Opinion No. FORB-UZB/387/2020, October 12, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan*, May 12, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, April 2023, p. 68.



Issue	Index	2016 Status/Rank	2022/2023 Status/Rank
Perceptions of Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index	156 <sup>th</sup> of 168 Countries	126 <sup>th</sup> of 180 Countries
Rule of Law	World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index	93 <sup>rd</sup> of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions	78 <sup>th</sup> of 140 Countries and Jurisdictions

**Source:** Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016* and *Freedom in the World 2023*; Reporters Without Borders, *2016 World Press Freedom Index* and *2023 World Press Freedom Index*; The Heritage Foundation, *2016 Index of Economic Freedom* and *2023 Index of Economic Freedom*; Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016* and *Corruption Perceptions Index 2022*; World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2016* and *Rule of Law Index 2022*.

## Economy

Uzbekistan is a lower-middle-income country with significant natural resources and relatively well-developed infrastructure. Major exports include cotton, natural gas, uranium, and gold. The country is the world’s seventh-largest producer of cotton, and the Uzbek government is moving to transition from raw cotton exports to textile production. Uzbekistan has sizeable natural gas reserves; the primary destination for its natural gas exports is China, although the majority of production is consumed domestically. Uzbekistan has experienced domestic energy crises in recent winters due to increased domestic demand combined with infrastructural deficiencies, prompting the government to consider importing gas from Russia.<sup>42</sup> Uzbekistan is the world’s seventh-largest uranium supplier and has concluded long-term supply agreements with various countries, including the United States, China, India, and Japan. According to Russian government figures, there were more than 4.5 million Uzbek labor migrants in Russia in 2021; the actual number may be higher.<sup>43</sup> Remittances, which come primarily from Russia, were equivalent to about 21% of GDP in 2022 according to World Bank estimates, up from 13% in 2021.<sup>44</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on Uzbekistan’s economy, which faced pressure due to lower exports, lower natural gas prices and export volumes, decreased remittances, and domestic economic disruption. The World Bank estimates that Uzbekistan’s GDP expansion slowed to 2.0% in 2020 (down from 5.7% growth in 2019), and rebounded to 7.4% growth in 2021, slowing—partly due to the war in Ukraine—to 5.7% in 2022 and a projected 5.5% in 2023.<sup>45</sup>

## Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy

### Bilateral Relations with the United States

After experiencing a sharp decline in 2005 (see “Security Cooperation” below), U.S. relations with Uzbekistan have improved markedly since 2016, reflecting the country’s broader pursuit of international ties. President Mirziyoyev traveled to Washington, DC, in 2018, the first official

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Putz, “What’s the Status of Plans to Export Russian Gas to Uzbekistan,” *The Diplomat*, June 8, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Farangis Najibullah, “Central Asia Takes Economic Hit from Russian War in Ukraine Sooner Than Expected,” *RFE/RL*, March 1, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Eung Ju Kim, “Remittances to Europe and Central Asia Post a Strong Growth,” World Bank, September 1, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, June 2022, p. 105; World Bank, *Sluggish Growth, Rising Risks: Europe and Central Asia Economic Update*, Fall 2023, pp. 85-86; World Bank, “The World Bank in Uzbekistan: Overview,” available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uzbekistan/overview#economy>.

visit by an Uzbek president to the United States since 2002; he lauded the “new era of the strategic partnership” between the two countries.<sup>46</sup> During a March 2023 trip to Tashkent, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that U.S.-Uzbekistan relations have “grown much closer in recent years,” adding, “across all of my engagements here, what I come away with is a mutual and enthusiastic commitment to strengthening that partnership even further.”<sup>47</sup> The Biden Administration’s strategy for Uzbekistan states, “U.S. strategic priorities in the region and our interest in a broader and deeper bilateral relationship with Uzbekistan are stronger than ever.”<sup>48</sup>

In the assessment of the Biden Administration, “Uzbekistan over the past five years has become a catalyst for dialogue and economic integration, both among the five Central Asian states and between Central Asia and South Asia,” whereas the country had previously represented “the main obstacle to regional cooperation during its first 25 years of independence.”<sup>49</sup> According to Trump Administration officials in speaking in 2019, Uzbekistan’s reengagement with its neighbors invigorated the U.S.-led C5+1 framework, which was established in 2015 and which provides a high-level forum for the United States and the five Central Asian countries to discuss regional issues.<sup>50</sup> The most recent C5+1 Ministerial took place in February, 2023, in Astana, Kazakhstan.<sup>51</sup> In September 2023, President Biden met with his five Central Asian counterparts in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, marking the first-ever C5+1 presidential summit.<sup>52</sup>

## Security Cooperation

From 2001 to 2005, relations between the United States and Uzbekistan were relatively robust, and focused heavily on security cooperation related to U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan. In 2002, during a visit by then-President Karimov to Washington, DC, the two countries signed a Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation. U.S.-Uzbekistan relations experienced a severe downturn in 2005, after government forces killed over 100 unarmed civilians during unrest in the eastern city of Andijon. The government responded to foreign criticism by expelling numerous international NGOs and media organizations, ending the Peace Corps program, and demanding the withdrawal of U.S. forces stationed at the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in support of military operations in Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup> Uzbekistan continued to provide logistical support for NATO forces in Afghanistan by allowing the transit of non-lethal shipments through its territory as part of the Northern Distribution Network, established in 2009. From 2013 to 2017, the NATO Liaison Officer for Central Asia was based in Uzbekistan.<sup>54</sup> Since 2012, Uzbekistan has partnered with Mississippi through the National Guard’s State Partnership Program, developing military-to-military contacts and participating in training in areas such as counterterrorism and disaster preparedness.

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<sup>46</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Trump and President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan Before Bilateral Meeting,” May 16, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability,” March 1, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Uzbekistan*, April 12, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Uzbekistan*, April 12, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Navbahor Imamova, “Uzbekistan Faces Choice Between Closer Ties to US, Russia,” *Voice of America*, December 1, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement on the C5+1 Ministerial in Astana,” March 9, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> The White House, “Readout of President Biden’s Meeting with the C5+1 Leaders at UNGA,” September 19, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> OSCE ODIHR, *Preliminary Findings on the Events in Andijan, Uzbekistan*, May 13, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Office of the NATO Liaison Officer (NLO) in Central Asia (Archived),” May 23, 2017.

In advance of the withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces from Afghanistan in 2021, the Biden Administration reportedly considered whether the United States should seek to reestablish basing arrangements with Uzbekistan or other Central Asian countries.<sup>55</sup> Some analysts dismissed prospects for such agreements as “doubtful” given likely opposition from China and Russia, and the unpopularity of hosting foreign military facilities among the Uzbek public.<sup>56</sup> Other analysts argued that technical assistance, border security, information sharing, and training would be more effective avenues for expanding U.S. security engagement with Central Asian countries.<sup>57</sup> In a June 2022 press interview, Uzbekistan’s Special Representative for Afghanistan stated, “In regard to the question of fighting international terrorism, we are partners of the United States,” but noted, “our military doctrine is that Uzbekistan cannot be part of any military-political blocs. [...] We cannot accept that any military bases or military infrastructure be located on our territory.”<sup>58</sup>

## **U.S.-Uzbekistan Trade**

The value of bilateral trade between the United States and Uzbekistan more than doubled from 2017 to 2018, from approximately \$150 million to \$315 million, and reached \$540 million in 2019.<sup>59</sup> After falling to \$277 million in 2020 because of trade disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, trade between the United States and Uzbekistan grew to \$424.6 million in 2021.<sup>60</sup> Trade relations between the United States and Uzbekistan are governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), the so-called Jackson-Vanik amendment, which denies normal trade relations (NTR) status to some current and former nonmarket economy countries unless they adhere to certain freedom-of-emigration requirements (see “Issues for Congress” below).

## **U.S. Foreign Assistance to Uzbekistan**

U.S. foreign assistance to Uzbekistan currently aims to support the country’s reform efforts while addressing the ongoing consequences in Uzbekistan of sanctions imposed on Russia (see “Relations with Russia and Implications of the War in Ukraine” below) and the expanding influence of China by reducing Uzbekistan’s reliance on Russian and Chinese markets. Assistance to Uzbekistan also includes support for nonproliferation activities and public health programs aimed at combatting global infectious disease threats, as well as support for efforts to expand civil society, strengthen journalistic professionalism, increase judicial independence and professionalism, and develop governance capacity. Aid also is intended to bolster Uzbekistan’s border security and counterterrorism capabilities. The State Department requested \$49 million in assistance to Uzbekistan in FY2024, roughly level with the FY2023 request (\$48.9 million) and the FY2022 allocation (\$47.2 million).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Vivian Salama and Gordon Lubold, “Afghan Pullout Leaves U.S. Looking for Other Places to Station Its Troops,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2021; Bruce Pannier, “Will Central Asia Host U.S. Military Forces Once Again?,” *RFE/RL*, April 23, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Temur Umarov, “Is There a Place for a U.S. Military Base in Central Asia?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 6, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff and Cyrus Newlin, “Don’t Base U.S. Forces in Central Asia,” *War on the Rocks*, June 23, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Karoun Demirjian, “U.S. Works to Scale Up Intelligence Networks in Central Asia,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, “Uzbekistan,” October 2, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *Uzbekistan—Country Commercial Guide*, July 8, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2023, Appendix 2, pp. 187, 339, 647, and Supplementary Tables.

**Table 2. U.S. Foreign Assistance to Uzbekistan**

(\$ in thousands)

Account	FY2022 allocation	FY2023 allocation	FY2024 request
Assistance to Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia	31,400	31,400	32,000
Global Health Programs—USAID	10,000	12,000	11,500
International Military Education and Training	318	1,000	500
International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement	5,000	5,000	5,000
Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs	500	500	—
Total	47,218	49,900	49,000

**Source:** U.S. Department of State, FY2024 and FY2023 Congressional Budget Justifications and other State Department budget documents.

## Regional Relations

Upon assuming power, President Mirziyoyev embarked on a “good neighbor” policy, reengaging with the region and declaring Central Asia to be Uzbekistan’s main foreign policy priority.<sup>62</sup> This is a significant shift, as Uzbekistan under Karimov represented “an obstacle to regional integration” and “a knot at the heart of the region,” in the assessment of one longtime observer, due to tense relations with neighboring countries.<sup>63</sup> Mirziyoyev has emphasized “good-neighborliness” as a guiding principle of his government’s approach to regional issues.<sup>64</sup> According to the U.S. State Department, this change in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy after the country’s 2016 leadership transition encouraged regional connectivity.<sup>65</sup> Uzbekistan has moved to normalize and improve previously strained relations with its Central Asian neighbors, resolving border disputes with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and engaging in increased regional outreach. Uzbekistan’s government eased visa restrictions and opened border crossings. In 2018, a meeting between Central Asia’s heads of state took place for the first time in nine years. The summit, held in Kazakhstan, was initiated by Mirziyoyev. Then-U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan Daniel Rosenblum was later quoted in the press as crediting President Mirziyoyev with “dramatically changing the tenor of relations in the region from mutual suspicion to mutual cooperation.”<sup>66</sup>

## Relations with Afghanistan

Under President Mirziyoyev, the government of Uzbekistan sought to position itself as an intermediary between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan’s then-President Ashraf

<sup>62</sup> “Central Asia—The Main Priority of Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy,” *O‘zbekiston Miliy Axborot Agentligi*, August 12, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Bruce Pannier, “Uzbekistan: The Suddenly Good Neighbor,” *RFE/RL*, October 4, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations, “Address by H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the UNGA-72,” September 19, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Uzbekistan*, August 3, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Navbahor Imamova, “Analysis: Will Uzbekistan’s Champion of Reform Stay the Course?” *Voice of America*, August 30, 2020.

Ghani, in line with Uzbekistan's stated aim of facilitating intra-Afghan peace talks.<sup>67</sup> Since the August 2021 collapse of Afghanistan's government, Uzbekistan has pursued high-level engagement with the Taliban, while maintaining that Uzbekistan will not extend recognition to the Taliban government before the international community does.<sup>68</sup> Some analysts describe Uzbekistan's stance toward the Taliban as pragmatic, with the priority of ensuring Uzbekistan's security.<sup>69</sup> Uzbek officials describe the Taliban as "a reality that must be accepted."<sup>70</sup> Although the Taliban have stated that they will not allow the territory of Afghanistan to be used to launch attacks on Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan has faced multiple missile strikes from the territory of Afghanistan since August 2021, at least some of which have been claimed by extremists affiliated with the Islamic State (IS).<sup>71</sup>

Uzbekistan has become a hub for the delivery of international humanitarian aid to Afghanistan thanks to its overland transportation links.<sup>72</sup> Afghanistan imports the majority of its electricity, and Uzbekistan is its main supplier. Due at least in part to international sanctions on the Taliban, Uzbekistan has had difficulty collecting payment for electricity exports.<sup>73</sup> In August 2022, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Energy announced that Afghanistan's national power utility had paid its approximately \$70 million debt for 2021 and was paying current bills on time.<sup>74</sup> Uzbekistan reduced supplies of electricity to Afghanistan in December 2022 in light of its domestic energy crisis. Uzbekistan and Taliban authorities concluded a new agreement on electricity exports to Afghanistan in January 2023.<sup>75</sup> Taliban plans to complete the Qosh Tepa canal, a project that would divert as much as a third of the water from the Amu Darya River—which runs along Afghanistan's border with Uzbekistan and on which the latter depends for agricultural irrigation—may threaten regional water security and strain relations in coming years.<sup>76</sup>

As the Afghan government fell in August 2021, a reported 46 aircraft from the Afghan Air Force crossed into Uzbekistan, carrying some 500 people.<sup>77</sup> The government of Uzbekistan, reportedly

<sup>67</sup> James Durso, "Uzbekistan's Role in Afghan Reconciliation," *The Diplomat*, August 18, 2020; Umida Hashimova, "What Is Uzbekistan's Role in the Afghan Peace Process?" *The Diplomat*, March 11, 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Navbahor Imamova, "Uzbekistan Seeks to Engage Taliban Without Alienating West," *VOA*, May 4, 2022.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Henry Foy, "Taliban Takeover Turns Uzbekistan into Powerbroker," *Financial Times*, September 9, 2021; Muhammad Tahir, "Majlis Podcast: Uzbekistan Walks the Tightrope in Its Policies Toward Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, September 5, 2021; Gavin Helf and Barnak Pazhwak, "Central Asia Prepares for Taliban Takeover," *United States Institute of Peace*, July 20, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Navbahor Imamova, "Uzbekistan Seeks to Engage Taliban Without Alienating West," *VOA*, May 4, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> "Uzbekistan Says Missiles Fired from Afghanistan Damaged Houses," *RFE/RL*, July 5, 2022; Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Khorasan Claims Rocket Attack on Uzbekistan," *Voice of America*, April 18, 2022; Bruce Pannier, *Northern Afghanistan and the New Threat to Central Asia*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 2022.

<sup>72</sup> "Uzbek Border City Becomes Hub for Afghan Aid," *Eurasianet*, October 14, 2021; Iona Allan, "Uzbekistan Steps Up to Support Neighbor Afghanistan At Critical Humanitarian Juncture," *United Nations Sustainable Development Group*, May 31, 2022; "UNHCR and Uzbekistan Provide Winter Assistance for Afghanistan," *UNHCR*, February 8, 2023.

<sup>73</sup> Joanna Lillis, "Afghanistan in Hock to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for Electricity," *Eurasianet*, May 19, 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Joanna Lillis, "Afghanistan Pays Electricity Debts to Uzbekistan but Still Owes Tajikistan," *Eurasianet*, August 2, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Catherine Putz, "Afghanistan, Uzbekistan Settle New Electricity Agreement amid Winter Shortages," *The Diplomat*, January 4, 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Niginakhon Saida, "The Taliban's New Canal Threatens Water Security in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan," *The Diplomat*, July 5, 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Catherine Putz, "Afghan Forces Flee, Fly to Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2021; Siobhan Hughes and Jessica Donati, "Uzbekistan Warns U.S. That Afghan Pilots and Their Families Can't Stay," *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2021; Jessica Donati and Siobhan Hughes, "Afghan Pilots Who Sought Safety in Uzbekistan Begin U.S. Transfer Under New Agreement," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2021.



facing pressure from the Taliban to return the personnel and their aircraft to Afghanistan, requested that the United States relocate them.<sup>78</sup> In September 2021, those Afghan personnel were transferred from Uzbekistan to a U.S. base in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>79</sup> Uzbek officials have since stated that they consider the aircraft to be U.S. property and have no intention of transferring them to the Taliban.<sup>80</sup> The United States is reportedly considering transferring the aircraft to Uzbekistan in return for counterterrorism assistance.<sup>81</sup>

## Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Terrorist attacks within Uzbekistan are rare, but Uzbek nationals have been involved in international terrorist activity. Government crackdowns drove domestic Islamist extremist groups out of the country in the 1990s, and some Uzbek militants allied themselves with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although other Uzbek nationals have been involved in terrorist attacks abroad, analysts assess that the radicalization of these individuals occurred primarily abroad, often linked to their experiences of discrimination and marginalization as labor migrants in Russia.<sup>82</sup> In 2017, a U.S. permanent resident from Uzbekistan who pledged allegiance to IS killed eight people in a vehicular attack in New York. About 1,500 Uzbek nationals travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for IS; including women and children, the total estimated number of Uzbek citizens associated with IS is 3,000.<sup>83</sup> Uzbekistan was among the first countries to undertake a large-scale repatriation and rehabilitation effort for its IS-affiliated nationals, bringing back over 500 women and children between 2019 and 2021. The United States provided logistical support for some of Uzbekistan's repatriation operations, and the U.S.-funded United States Institute of Peace is supporting rehabilitation programs for repatriated individuals throughout Central Asia. Uzbek foreign fighters remain an international concern due to their ongoing participation in armed groups active in Afghanistan, particularly the IS-affiliated Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).<sup>84</sup> In the wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, ISKP has reportedly increased the production and dissemination of propaganda and recruitment materials targeting Uzbekistan.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Phil Stewart, "Afghan Pilots Start Leaving Uzbekistan for UAE, Despite Taliban Pressure—Source," *Reuters*, September 12, 2021; Siobhan Hughes and Jessica Donati, "Uzbekistan Warns U.S. That Afghan Pilots and Their Families Can't Stay," *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Jessica Donati and Siobhan Hughes, "Afghan Pilots Who Sought Safety in Uzbekistan Begin U.S. Transfer Under New Agreement," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Navbahor Imamova and Jeff Seldin, "Uzbeks Say Aircraft Flown from Afghanistan Are US Property," *VOA*, April 29, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Lara Seligman, "U.S. Looks to Trade Former Afghan Aircraft for Counterterrorism Help in Central Asia," *Politico*, September 19, 2022.

<sup>82</sup> Noah Tucker, *Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses*, USAID, May 4, 2015; Thomas F. Lynch III et al., *The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, October 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Elena Zhirukhina, "Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation," *Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale*, October 3, 2019; Maksim Eniseev, "V Uzbekistane nachalas' reabilitatsiia pribyvshikh iz Sirii 'zhertv obmana,'" *Caravanserai*, June 11, 2019.

<sup>84</sup> U.N. Security Council, *Sixteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat*, S/2023/76, February 1, 2023; Lucas Webber and Bruce Pannier, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's Enduring Influence on IS-Khorasan," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, March 3, 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, "Islamic State in Afghanistan Seeks to Recruit Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz," *Eurasianet*, March 17, 2022; Lucas Webber and Bruce Pannier, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's Enduring Influence on IS-Khorasan," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, March 3, 2023.



## Relations with Russia and Implications of the War in Ukraine

Since Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, the government of Uzbekistan has avoided endorsing Russian aggression and has expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity.<sup>86</sup> On February 26, 2022, following a phone call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and President Mirziyoyev, the latter's spokesman emphasized Uzbekistan's "balanced, neutral position," adding, "Our country traditionally has close, friendly relations with both Russia and Ukraine. We are interested in ensuring peace, stability and sustainable development in our vast region."<sup>87</sup> In a March 17, 2022, speech to Uzbekistan's parliament, then-Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov stated, "The Republic of Uzbekistan recognizes Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. We do not recognize the Luhansk and Donetsk republics," adding that, "taking into account its national interests," Uzbekistan would continue mutual cooperation with both Russia and Ukraine.<sup>88</sup> At the United Nations, Uzbekistan did not cast a vote on the March 2, 2022, resolution condemning Russia's invasion and abstained on subsequent resolutions related to the war.<sup>89</sup> Some analysts see the fact that Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbors did not side with Russia as signaling disapproval of Russia's actions, even if these countries did not vote for the resolutions.<sup>90</sup> Uzbekistan has sent multiple shipments of humanitarian aid to Ukraine. In advance of a March 9, 2022, meeting with Kamilov, Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted that the United States "very much welcome[s] the strong humanitarian support that you've been providing to the Afghans on one hand and now Ukrainians on the other."<sup>91</sup>

Uzbekistan is less economically dependent on Russia than are some of its Central Asian neighbors, but it still has significant ties to Russia, rendering it vulnerable to economic fallout from the conflict in Ukraine and related sanctions. Russia was Uzbekistan's top trading partner in 2021, and has historically served as the primary route for Uzbek exports to reach global markets (a legacy of imperial Russian and Soviet-era railroad networks). As a result, international sanctions on Russia "nearly paralyzed" Uzbek trade in the early days of the conflict.<sup>92</sup> According to Russian government figures, there were more than 4.5 million labor migrants from Uzbekistan registered in Russia in 2021.<sup>93</sup> The World Bank initially projected that remittances to Central Asia would decline sharply in 2022 as a result of the war; it now estimates that remittances from Russia reached record highs in that year, due in part to increased demand for labor and to the

<sup>86</sup> See also CRS Report R47591, *Central Asia: Implications of Russia's War in Ukraine*, coordinated by Maria A. Blackwood.

<sup>87</sup> "Spokesperson for the President Clarifies Uzbekistan's Position on Russian-Ukrainian Conflict," *Kun.uz*, February 26, 2022.

<sup>88</sup> "In Break with Moscow, Uzbeks Won't Recognize Separatist 'Republics' in Ukraine," *RFE/RL*, March 17, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> On A/RES/ES-11/1, "Aggression against Ukraine," Uzbekistan did not vote. On A/RES/ES-11/2, "Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine," A/RES/ES-11/4, "Territorial integrity of Ukraine: Defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations," A/RES/ES-11/5, "Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine," and A/RES/ES-11/6, "Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine," Uzbekistan abstained.

<sup>90</sup> Paul Stronski, "The Common Theme in Central Asia's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 30, 2022; Johan Engvall, "Central Asia Moves Beyond Russia," *Current History* (October 2023), p. 263.

<sup>91</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov Before Their Meeting," March 9, 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, "Uzbekistan Looks South for New Trade Routes," *The Diplomat*, April 1, 2022.

<sup>93</sup> Farangis Najibullah, "Central Asia Takes Economic Hit from Russian War in Ukraine Sooner Than Expected," *RFE/RL*, March 1, 2022.

Russian ruble's appreciation against the U.S. dollar.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, the cost of sending remittances from Russia has increased significantly due to international sanctions.<sup>95</sup> Labor migrants from Uzbekistan are increasingly seeking alternative destinations, such as Kazakhstan and the United Kingdom.<sup>96</sup>

In June 2022, the U.S. Department of Commerce included Uzbekistan on a list of countries that serve as “common transshipment points through which restricted or controlled exports have been known to pass before reaching destinations in Russia or Belarus.”<sup>97</sup> The State Department concurrently designated an Uzbekistan-based company for “actively support[ing]” efforts by a Russian entity specializing in procuring foreign items for Russia’s defense industry to evade U.S. sanctions.<sup>98</sup> Alisher Usmanov, an Uzbekistan-born Russian billionaire, was designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in March 2022 for his involvement in the technology sector of the Russian economy.<sup>99</sup> Usmanov reportedly maintains close ties with Uzbekistan’s government.<sup>100</sup> In April 2023, Treasury revoked the general license that had authorized transactions involving entities in which Usmanov holds at least a 50% stake and that are not included on Treasury’s Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List; Treasury also designated a number of entities and individuals tied to Usmanov.<sup>101</sup> The State Department concurrently designated a number of companies tied to Usmanov, including an Uzbekistan-based cement producer.<sup>102</sup> Also in April 2023, the Department of Commerce added two Uzbekistan-based companies to the Entity List, imposing export restrictions on transactions involving those companies.<sup>103</sup>

## Relations with China

While Russia has traditionally been Uzbekistan’s main trade partner, China has expanded its economic presence in recent years and took the top spot from 2015 to 2020. In 2021, Uzbekistan’s bilateral trade with Russia and China equaled \$7.5 billion and \$7.4 billion,

<sup>94</sup> Dilip Ratha et al., “Remittances Brave Global Headwinds,” World Bank Migration and Development Brief 37, November 2022, pp. 7, 32; Dilip Ratha and Eung Ju Kim, “Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Implications for Remittance Flows to Ukraine and Central Asia,” KNOMAD Policy Brief 17, March 4, 2022, p. 3.

<sup>95</sup> World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, June 2023, p. 63.

<sup>96</sup> Sher Khashimov, “By Sending Migrants to Ukraine, the Kremlin Is Damaging Ties with Central Asia,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2023; Farangis Najibullah, “Happy to Be in Britain, Central Asian Migrants Want More Work to Cover Expenses,” *RFE/RL*, August 20, 2022; Farangis Najibullah, “Central Asian Migrant Workers Choosing Kazakhstan over Russia Despite Lower Pay,” *RFE/RL*, June 3, 2021.

<sup>97</sup> U.S. Treasury, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, “FinCEN and the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security Urge Increased Vigilance for Potential Russian and Belarusian Export Control Evasion Attempts,” June 28, 2022.

<sup>98</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Targeting Russia’s War Machine, Sanctions Evaders, Military Units Credibly Implicated in Human Rights Abuses, and Russian Federation Officials Involved in Suppression of Dissent,” June 28, 2022.

<sup>99</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Russians Bankrolling Putin and Russia-Backed Influence Actors,” March 3, 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Catherine Putz, “New Ukraine Sanctions Target Business Interests of Russian-Uzbek Billionaire Usmanov,” *The Diplomat*, April 14, 2023.

<sup>101</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Targets Russian Financial Facilitators and Sanctions Evaders Around the World,” April 12, 2023.

<sup>102</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Further Curbing Russia’s Efforts to Evade Sanctions and Perpetuate Its War against Ukraine,” April 12, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Department of Commerce, “Additions and Revisions of Entities to the Entity List,” 88 *Federal Register* 23332-23340, April 17, 2023. On the Entity List, see CRS In Focus IF11154, *Export Controls: Key Challenges*, by Christopher A. Casey.

respectively.<sup>104</sup> Some analysts have speculated that China's economic engagement with Uzbekistan will increase in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's aggression in Ukraine, particularly as landlocked Uzbekistan seeks to expand its access to global trade routes.<sup>105</sup> China's President Xi Jinping traveled to Uzbekistan in September 2022 as part of his first foreign trip since January 2020. During the trip, Xi indicated China's willingness to strengthen cooperation within the "China+Central Asia" ("C+C5") mechanism. In May 2023, China held the first in-person C+C5 Summit in Xi'an, China, bringing together Xi and the five Central Asian presidents.<sup>106</sup> Some observers see the summit as evidence that China is increasingly challenging Russia's influence in Central Asia in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>107</sup>

## Issues for Congress

### Trade

U.S. trade with Uzbekistan is governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), the so-called Jackson-Vanik amendment. This section denies normal trade relations (NTR) status to some current and former nonmarket economy countries unless they adhere to certain freedom-of-emigration requirements. These requirements were initially aimed at promoting free emigration from the Soviet Union and were prompted by Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration. Since 1992, Uzbekistan has received temporary NTR status under a provision of the amendment that allows the President to extend NTR status to a country affected by the amendment by determining that the country is not in violation of the amendment's provisions, subject to annual review. A complete lifting of the Jackson-Vanik requirements would require Congress to pass relevant legislation.<sup>108</sup> Legislation that would have exempted Uzbekistan was introduced in previous Congresses but did not make it out of committee.<sup>109</sup> The Biden Administration supports lifting Jackson-Vanik for Uzbekistan.<sup>110</sup> H.R. 1755, introduced in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, would authorize

<sup>104</sup> Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, "China and Uzbekistan: An Emerging Development Partnership?" *The Diplomat*, May 13, 2022.

<sup>105</sup> Bradley Jardine, "Russia's War in Ukraine Spells Disaster for Neighboring Central Asia," *Time*, March 10, 2022; Joanna Lillis, "Uzbekistan Confirms Plan to Sign Deal on New Railroad from China," *Eurasianet*, August 3, 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Foreign Ministry of the PRC, "外交部长秦刚就中国外交政策和对外关系回答中外记者提问" ("Foreign Minister Qin Gang Answers Questions from Chinese and Foreign Journalists on China's Foreign Policy and External Relations"), March 7, 2023. Xi and his Central Asian counterparts attended a virtual summit in 2022 marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and the five Central Asian countries.

<sup>107</sup> "Xi Invites C. Asian Leaders to First Summit in China," *Agence France Presse*, March 21, 2023.

<sup>108</sup> Congress has passed legislation authorizing the President to determine that Jackson-Vanik should no longer apply to Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Georgia, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mongolia, the PRC, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, and Vietnam; those countries (and, in the case of Czechoslovakia, its successor states) all received permanent NTR (PNTR) status. Jackson-Vanik applied de facto to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as constituent republics of the Soviet Union. Because the United States did not recognize their forcible incorporation into the USSR during World War II, Congress terminated the applicability of Jackson-Vanik to these three countries after the restoration of their independence in 1991. Russia's NTR status was suspended in response to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. See 19 U.S.C. §2434. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment continues to apply to Uzbekistan, and its Central Asian neighbors Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cuba, and North Korea. Like Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan receive conditional NTR status, subject to annual review. Belarus previously received temporary NTR status under the waiver provision, but it was suspended in response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Cuba and North Korea do not receive NTR status.

<sup>109</sup> These bills include: 117<sup>th</sup> Congress: H.R. 1913, H.R. 9322; 114<sup>th</sup> Congress: H.R. 3400; 107<sup>th</sup> Congress: H.R. 3979.

<sup>110</sup> "Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Central Asia," *Congressional Quarterly*, March 8, 2023.

the President to determine that Jackson-Vanik should no longer apply to Uzbekistan and to extend permanent normal trade relations to that country.

The Biden Administration seeks to address the economic impacts in Central Asia of the war in Ukraine through the Economic Resilience in Central Asia Initiative (ERICEN), launched in September 2022. Using \$50 million in FY2022 and FY2023 funding, ERICEN aims to diversify trade routes, increase shipping capacity, and enhance trans-Caspian infrastructure, in addition to bolstering the private sector (including by facilitating the movement of Western multinational companies to Central Asia) and providing training and education opportunities.<sup>111</sup> In the assessment of one analyst, despite its small scale, “ERICEN lays the groundwork for prosperous trade relations and business partnerships” and “can emphasize U.S. comparative advantages in terms of international standards that bring greater long-term benefits” as compared to Chinese investment.<sup>112</sup> Others have criticized ERICEN as too modest in size, with one scholar terming it “not a very serious gesture” due to the fact that “\$50 million is insignificant compared to what other powers are bringing in.”<sup>113</sup> Congress could consider whether to appropriate additional funding for the initiative. Some Members of Congress have expressed interest in expanding U.S. economic engagement with Uzbekistan, and assisting Uzbekistan in diversifying its trade relationships away from Russia.<sup>114</sup>

## Human Rights

Some Members of Congress have noted Uzbekistan’s progress on human rights since 2016. For example, Senator Bob Menendez named Uzbekistan’s successful efforts to eradicate forced labor in the cotton industry as an example illustrating that “respect for human rights is not only a moral imperative but will create an environment more conducive to economic investment and prosperity.”<sup>115</sup> At the same time, some Members of Congress have drawn attention to ongoing human rights concerns in Uzbekistan, including the criminalization of homosexuality, violence against protestors in Karakalpakstan, limits on free speech and media freedoms, and the lack of substantial progress toward political liberalization.<sup>116</sup>

## Security Cooperation

In March 2023 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu stated that the war in Ukraine has created new opportunities for security cooperation between the United States and Central Asia, noting Central Asian countries’ desires

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<sup>111</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Economic Resilience in Central Asia Initiative,” February 28, 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Haley Nelson, “The U.S. Confronts China’s Long Game in Central Asia: How the U.S. Is Addressing the Implications of China’s BRI,” Caspian Policy Center, March 6, 2023.

<sup>113</sup> Navbahor Imamova, “Blinken’s Central Asia Visit Raises Questions on US Role, Assistance,” *VOA News*, March 2, 2023.

<sup>114</sup> See, for example, “House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia Holds Hearing on Fiscal Year 2024 Budget for South and Central Asian Affairs,” CQ Congressional Transcripts, July 13, 2023.

<sup>115</sup> “Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Pending Nominations,” CQ Congressional Transcripts, March 15, 2023.

<sup>116</sup> “Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Central Asia,” CQ Congressional Transcripts, March 8, 2023; “House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia and Nonproliferation Holds Hearing on US Engagement in Central Asia,” CQ Congressional Transcripts, September 14, 2022; Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Chairman Menendez, Senate Dems Call for Heightened Focus on Human Rights at Upcoming Dialogue with Uzbekistan,” December 6, 2021.

to diversify the sourcing of their defense equipment away from Russia as well as the success of the National Guard's State Partnership Program in the region.<sup>117</sup> Some scholars and U.S. officials have identified training and professional military education as areas of opportunity for expanding security cooperation between the United States and Central Asian countries.<sup>118</sup>

Proposed versions of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, S. 2226 and H.R. 2670, passed in the Senate and the House, respectively, would authorize support to the government of Uzbekistan “for purposes of supporting and enhancing efforts of the armed forces of Uzbekistan to increase security and sustain increased security along the border of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.”

## Energy

Promoting energy security within Central Asia, including by supporting a transition to renewable energy sources, is a stated goal of U.S. policy in the region.<sup>119</sup> Congress could consider whether existing programs are effective, and whether and how they should potentially be expanded. Although it is a gas producer, Uzbekistan has experienced domestic energy crises in recent winters due to increased domestic demand combined with infrastructural deficiencies. In May 2023, a Pennsylvania-based company signed a \$1 billion investment agreement with Uzbekistan to acquire and operate a natural gas processing facility in the country.<sup>120</sup> In October 2023, Uzbekistan began importing natural gas from Russia for the first time, a measure geared toward alleviating winter energy shortages.<sup>121</sup>

The U.S. Department of Commerce describes renewable technologies and grid modernization projects as areas of opportunity for U.S. companies in Uzbekistan.<sup>122</sup> In the assessment of the International Energy Agency, “Uzbekistan’s considerable [renewable energy source] potential could spur significant development of a green, environmentally friendly economy.”<sup>123</sup> Uzbekistan’s solar energy potential is estimated at almost four times the country’s primary energy consumption.<sup>124</sup> In 2021, the government of Uzbekistan declared its commitment to reaching a renewable energy target of 25% by 2030, and Uzbekistan has initiated solar energy projects with Chinese, European, and Gulf investors.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Erica Marat, “China’s Expanding Military Education Diplomacy in Central Asia,” PONARS Eurasia, April 19, 2021; Karoun Demirjian, “U.S. Works to Scale Up Intelligence Networks in Central Asia,” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2022.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview),” February 5, 2020, and U.S. Agency for International Development, “USAID Power Central Asia,” at <https://www.usaid.gov/central-asia-regional/fact-sheets/usaid-power-central-asia>.

<sup>120</sup> “Air Products Signs \$1 Billion Deal for Processing Facility in Uzbekistan,” Reuters, May 25, 2023; Air Products, “Air Products to Acquire, Own and Operate Industrial Gas Complex at Uzbekneftegaz’s Advanced Gas-to-Liquids Facility in Uzbekistan for US\$1 Billion,” press release, May 25, 2023.

<sup>121</sup> Vladimir Afanasiev, “Russia Begins Exporting Gas to Uzbekistan in Drive to Expand Regional Influence,” *Upstream*, October 9, 2023; Bruce Pannier, “Central Asia in Focus: Russia Starts Shipping Gas to Uzbekistan,” *RFE/RL*, October 11, 2023.

<sup>122</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, “Uzbekistan—Renewable Energy,” available at <https://www.trade.gov/energy-resource-guide-uzbekistan-renewable-energy>.

<sup>123</sup> International Energy Agency, *Uzbekistan Energy Profile*, April 2020.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Niva Yau, “Chinese Solar Investments in Central Asia: A Snapshot,” *Eurasianet*, October 15, 2020; Asian (continued...)



## Regional Connectivity

Promoting regional connectivity has long been a U.S. policy priority in Central Asia, and the United States has funded projects promoting regional cooperation in a range of areas. Since 2015, U.S. bilateral relationships in the region have been complemented by the C5+1 diplomatic platform, which provides a forum for the United States and the five Central Asian countries to address common challenges they face in areas such as security, economic connectivity, and environmental vulnerabilities. Uzbekistan’s Ambassador in Washington stated, “the U.S. has played a significant role in promoting dialogue and cooperation among the Central Asian nations through initiatives such as the C5+1,” adding, “we encourage the U.S. to bolster this mechanism.”<sup>126</sup>

Some analysts suggest that regional connectivity in Central Asia has taken on added significance in light of the war in Ukraine. In his March 2023 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu stated that furthering regional connectivity would grant Central Asian countries “options that enable them to stand firm in the face of malign influence.”<sup>127</sup> For instance, in this view, greater regional connectivity could bolster Central Asia’s energy security and decrease its dependence on Russian natural gas, as well as facilitate trade via routes that bypass Russia. Congress could consider how Central Asian regional connectivity aligns with broader U.S. interests in light of the war, and how U.S. programs could support connectivity within Central Asia in a new geopolitical context. Congress could consider, for instance, whether or not to appropriate additional funding for the Biden Administration’s ERICEN initiative in order to bolster connectivity within Central Asia.

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<sup>126</sup> Navbahor Imamova, “Central Asia Diplomats Call for Closer Ties with US,” *Voice of America*, June 25, 2023.

<sup>127</sup> “Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Central Asia,” *Congressional Quarterly*, March 8, 2023.



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