

MULTIVECTORAL? REALISTIC APPROACH TO UZBEKISTAN'S RELATIONS
WITH CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

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Abstract: *This analytical article examines Uzbekistan's multivector foreign policy towards the Central Asian neighborhood from a realist point of view, placing at the forefront the pivotal role of water diplomacy in ensuring the survival of the state. The article contrasts the inward-oriented, security-oriented strategy of Islam Karimov with Shavkat Mirziyoyev's outward-oriented, cooperative strategy and illustrates continuity in giving precedence to national interests. The article identifies Uzbekistan's structural water dependence on upstream Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—"energy-poor but water-rich" and "energy-rich but water-poor" respectively—and addresses major regional agreements, including the 1992 Almaty accord, the 1998 Bishkek framework, and recent bilateral agreements over the Kempirabad reservoir and Rogun Dam projects. While such multilateral relations exhibit liberalist traits of cooperation and integration, they are fundamentally based on realist purposes: securing water resources, balancing power imbalances, and providing agricultural and industrial stability. With empirical examples of infrastructure deals and energy-water trade-offs, the article argues that Uzbekistan's foreign policy remains based on self-interest and survival needs in an anarchic, resource-scarce Central Asian world.*

Keywords: *Multivectoral foreign policy; Realism; Water diplomacy; Upstream-downstream resource dependency; State survival; Power asymmetry*

The Republic of Uzbekistan pursues a transparent, mutually beneficial, and cooperative foreign policy that prioritizes the nation's interests as stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan³⁴. Strengthening interregional cooperation and fostering integration of Uzbekistan with the countries of Central Asia remains a priority in Uzbekistan's foreign policy as mentioned in the Foreign Policy Concept. However, Uzbekistan's foreign policy can be divided into two parts based on the periods of two presidents: Islam Karimov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The first and former president, Islam Karimov, as a newly independent state, needed to pursue a more closed policy in the international arena. After a quarter century, Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power and he has followed a multivectoral approach, emphasizing cooperation not only with Central Asian nations but also with major global powers. Uzbekistan's multivectoral foreign policy focuses on maintaining balanced relations with great powers such as Russia, China, and the United States,

³⁴ <https://www.uzbekistan.org.ua/en/foreign-policy.html>

while also treating Central Asian nations as equally significant. It is also worth mentioning that Uzbekistan is a leading country in Central Asia, striving for regional integration. The core driver for these kinds of agreements, resolutions, diplomatic exchanges, and multilateral gatherings is water issues: disputes between upstream and downstream countries, disputes on building water dams or canals and so on. Historically connected nations, after the soviet era, have faced severe tensions with one another on water management. Agriculture-based countries have caused Aral Sea to shrink due to failure in water management. There is a dilemma too, upstream countries are “energy-poor but water-rich” and downstream countries are “energy-rich but water-poor”. While they are not directly and completely poor or rich in resources, they are highly dependent on each other on these factors. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan provide a certain amount of natural gas, electricity and oil, whereas they depend on upstream countries to provide agriculture with water resources. This dependence between nations has played a crucial role as a source of conflict, Tajikistan’s Rogun Hydropower Plant Project is a clear example of this. As tension between energy-deprived upstream countries and water-starved downstream countries grows, water poses a significant threat to regional stability and security. After changing of government in Uzbekistan in 2016, president has realized the necessity of cooperation, as water issues are becoming more and more harsh. But how much is Uzbekistan trying to cooperate? Is Uzbekistan only trying to reengage with Central Asian Republics? From the realist prism, Uzbekistan’s main concern is to survive among landlocked countries. As there is not so much data and papers on this topic, analytical and quantitative research of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy and theoretical descriptions of relations with Central Asian nations, it is important to make a quantitative research to understand and respond the broader disciplinary and regional problems. This report will explore the most important features and aspects of the foreign policy of Uzbekistan from a realist school as a double-landlocked country with Central Asian countries on several crucial water issues.

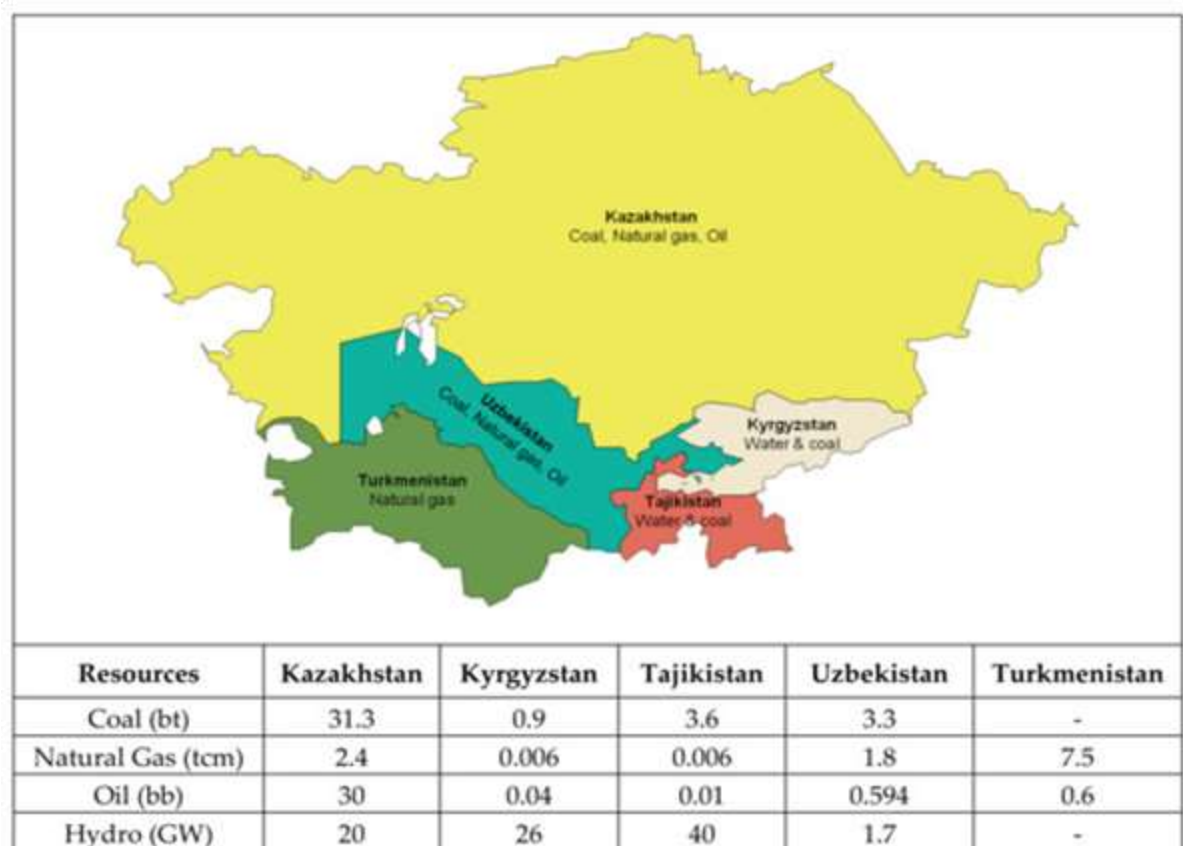
Understandably, Uzbekistan’s treatment of water problems with its Central Asian counterparts can be analysed under the prism of realism, as an approach to international relations that prioritizes the fundamental principle of state-survival. Having landlocked neighbors with no direct access to open sea and being a double landlocked country, Uzbekistan has certain structural weaknesses and particularly regarding access to water resources. This makes it depend on upstream countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in this respect, which in turn influences its foreign policy. Uzbekistan’s moves toward cooperation and integration may well be viewed as liberalist, long for mutual gains and multilateralism; the realist view, however, underlines a quest for survival. For Uzbekistan, water is of extreme significance both for the sector of agriculture and as a stabilizer for industries across the country. It is due to the geographic and hydrologic realities that Uzbekistan’s involvement on water matters is a calculated approach to protect its interests of the state and

posterity. From this point of view, multivectoral approach towards water diplomacy in the case of Uzbekistan is not aimed at creating only a positive image but also considered efforts to read and influence regional power relations successfully. It can also be seen from the foregoing analysis that by engaging in active cooperation with upstream countries Uzbekistan tries to manage risks to its water security. For instance, such issues that include; agreements on water usage, infrastructure projects, and energy-water trade-offs constitute realistic strategies for water security. Such actions show that important strategic directions and measures are being taken in Uzbekistan to adjust the policies with realism, which holds that the main objective of a state is its survival in an anarchic international system. However, the supplementation of this realist outlook with the notion of everyday practice does not have to be seen as something 'wrong' or 'bad' with negative connotations. Since Uzbekistan deals with key survival-driven policies in water resources management, we examined that its action is rational and inevitable due to environmental and geopolitical pressures. Its interconnection with upstream states such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular forces it to seek diplomatic and rational bargaining to achieve good results. It is possible to cooperate with other countries while keeping the certain interests of Uzbekistan in focus because this way the actions of the country are oriented on the efficiency and sustainability. In other words, Uzbekistan in its water diplomacy illustrates the concept of realism. The state is interested in its survival and protection in the context of a challenging neighborhood. Its positive message to neighbors in a multivectoral foreign policy becomes a tool to this end, guaranteeing that the relations are productive and beneficial given severe critical resource issues.



In August 2012, the Oliy Majlis (OM) – the parliament of Uzbekistan – approved a new Concept on the Foreign Policy Activity of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's latest Concept on Foreign Policy Activity is not an entirely new

document governing the foreign policy of the nation. The initial legislative law in this area was enacted in 1996, five years following the country's independence, and was titled the Law "On Principles of Foreign Policy." The previous law allowed for the establishment of foreign military bases within Uzbekistan; the new Concept forbids it. The earlier law did not rule out Uzbekistan's potential involvement in international peacekeeping missions; the new Concept does. However, the former law did not highlight Central Asia as a key focus of Uzbekistan's foreign policy; the new Concept specifically addresses it. That means, Uzbekistan even under Islam Karimov's administration really tried to cooperate and integrate more with Central Asian states, then Shavkat Mirziyoyev somehow has continued and made it happen Islam Karimov's priority in foreign policy as mentioned in the Foreign Policy Concept (2016 changed?).



The Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan reached an agreement on water allocation in the region during the 1992 Almaty meeting, maintaining the existing water quotas mostly unchanged despite the creation of new national borders and emerging regional issues. The Agreement established key principles that align with international standards, including: equal rights to use and responsibility of the State concerning transboundary water resources; the requirement to adhere to the established procedures and regulations for the use and protection of transboundary

water resources; and the duty to refrain from actions that could adversely impact the interests of other Parties or cause them harm, among others³⁵, etc.

All Central Asian countries have progressed by creating this Agreement to establish a collaborative Central Asian water management system through the formation of the Interstate Council for the Aral Sea basin and the Commission focused on socio-economic development, scientific, technical, and environmental cooperation, with The Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC) being placed under the authority of this new organization. Contracting parties recognized as common objectives: ensuring rational usage of the limited land and water resources of the Aral Sea basin in order to ensure the necessary social and economic development and well-being of their people, working out and implementing the coordinated social and economic development strategy that would meet the requirements of environmental safety for the people in the region³⁶.

The 1998 Bishkek Agreement between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan established a framework for the cooperative management of the Syr Darya Basin's water and energy resources. It emphasized good-neighborly relations, equitable use of resources for irrigation, power generation, and flood control, and adherence to international law. The agreement also highlighted the importance of environmental protection, sustainable practices, and addressing the Aral Sea crisis, while recognizing the shared benefits of jointly operating the Naryn-Syr Darya Cascade reservoirs. It aimed to promote regional development, social welfare, and ecological safety through coordinated and efficient resource use³⁷.

On ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic on joint management of water resources of the Andijan (Kempirabad) reservoir (Bishkek, November 3, 2022)

On November 3, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan Vladimir Norov left for the neighboring Kyrgyz Republic where he met the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan Jeenbek Kulubaev. Two ministers signed several documents, the most important of which addressed the prospects of the Kempirabad water storage facility and the demarcation of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border³⁸. The Kempirabad reservoir also known as the Andijan reservoir in Uzbekistan has become a subject of controversy among the opposition in Kyrgyzstan. To curb voices of opposition and to stop protests linked to the agreement, which has been signed with Uzbekistan shortly before, the Kyrgyz authorities arrested over 20 politicians, ex-diplomats, activists,

³⁵ Agreement on cooperation in joint management, use and protection of water resources of inter-state sources (Almaty agreement, 1992), art 2/3/4.

³⁶ Agreement on joint action to address the problem of the Aral Sea and surrounding areas, environmental improvement and ensuring socio-economic development of the Aral Sea region (1993), art.1

³⁷ Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan on use of hydro-electric resources of river basin Syr Darya of March 17, 1998. <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=4041>

³⁸ Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic on joint management of water resources of the Andijan (Kempirabad) reservoir (Bishkek, November 3, 2022), Tashkent, November 30, 2022, No. LRU-805

and journalists, who became the members of the newly established “Kempirabad Defense Committee” on October 23. The authorities of Bishkek state these people planned to provoke large-scale protests. The water management agreement was also approved on October 31, but Aidarbekov Almazbek, Adakhan Madumarov, Nurzhigit Kadyrbekov left the committee leaving the meeting before the latter. Both agreements were signed on November 2 by the foreign ministers. Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev is expected to visit to Kyrgyzstan soon to put the final stamp of approval on the agreements. Under the new border agreement, Kyrgyzstan will exchange the territory of the Kempir-Abad reservoir — 4,485 hectares — with Uzbekistan for 19,000 hectares of land elsewhere along the border in the Osh and Jalal-Abad regions. Kyrgyzstan, as head of the State Committee for National Security Kamchybek Tashiev pointed out, will come away with more land after the agreement.

The relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on the Rogun Dam project have shifted to a new level. The Rogun Dam has faced complete opposition from Uzbekistan in the past claiming that it will decrease the flow of water for their agriculture. However, the recent diplomatic nature of the relationship, has seen the two parties adopt a diplomatic approach. The projects to build two Ha publicity and power plants on the Tajik left bank of the Zarafshan River were discussed and agreed between the two presidents in June 2021 when President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan visited Tajikistan. These projects are with the capacities of 140 MW and 135 MW, and they are planned for providing electric power to Uzbekistan. In addition, financial agreements in June 2024, the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the Government of Tajikistan signed financing agreements for the Rogun Hydropower Plant Project worth of US\$150 million. As it stands, this development is synonymous with the importance of the project in increasing Tajikistan’s energy security and the opportunities to develop a regional project. These events signify improvement in the relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan concerning the developments of the hydroelectricity projects for the significance of cooperation in the region³⁹.

Although Uzbekistan’s concerns share features of liberalism including cooperation and multilateralism, the actions deliver realist intentions. The fact is that interactions between Uzbekistan and upstream countries are not based on the preconditions of integration or mutual beneficial, but on the sharing of water required for survival. This is in harmony with Morgenthau where he argued that politics is played by interest, rather than principles⁴⁰. For instance, the multivectoral policy in the case of Uzbekistan makes it possess more influence when engaging in bargaining with other regional actors in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and other regional actors. This analytical perspective is quite realistic and can be best described with the proactive realist paradigm stating that states strive to achieve the maximum possible

³⁹ <https://www.isdb.org/news/isdb-and-tajikistan-consolidate-cooperation-in-hydropower-sector-with-us150-million-financing-agreement>

⁴⁰ Morgenthau, H. J. (2005). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace* (7th ed., revised by K. W. Thompson & W. D. Clinton). McGraw-Hill Education.

level of security within the context of anarchy. Geographical conditions put Uzbekistan at a disadvantaged within the central Asian region. Tajikistan is a double-landlocked country, which means it has no direct control over water bodies and depends on Kyrgyzstan and another upper-stream neighbor, Tajikistan, for water supplies that are so crucial to agriculture and industries. These dependencies increase its susceptibility to external pressures, and therefore, water security is a survival issue for Uzbekistan. The relation between Central Asian states is also defined by the fact that the distribution of resources is flawed in the region. Whereas upstream states are prolific in water but energy scarce, downstream states like Uzbekistan are energetic but water scarce. Such imbalance has been always escalating conflicts due to water related issues such as the construction of Rogun Dam in Tajikistan and Kempirabad Reservoir (Andijan Reservoir) in the territory of Kyrgyzstan. And agreements or other treaties between Uzbekistan and neighbor countries can resonate with foundational ideas of the realist school of international relations: The emphasis on power contest and acquisition and self-serving behavior of the states was brought out vividly by Thucydides in the Peloponnesian War; Leadership not just with records of history, but also in approach to governance, was an essential emphasis in *The Prince* by Machiavelli based on which he insisted that states must focus on prioritizing security and interests of nation; Likewise, in *Leviathan* Hobbes defined the so called “state of nature” as the state of war of everyone against everybody, with the purpose of self-preservation. In *World Politics*, Morgenthau often regarded as the father of modern realism, articulated six principles in *Politics Among Nations*, emphasizing that political actions are governed by interest defined in terms of power. All these ideas have their echoes in Uzbekistan’s foreign policy, including its attitude towards the water question. The actions by the state support the realist idea of state self-interest and state survival in organizing their foreign policy, given that the region for which they are formulating policies is a scarce resource environment. As mentioned above, Uzbekistan is highly dependent on other neighbor countries on several aspects, especially on water issues. Another clear example to show Uzbekistan’s realistic policy can be Uzbekistan’s resistance to Tajik government building Rogun Dam, citing concerns over water flow reductions affecting its agriculture. Uzbek government was strictly against this construction because they were afraid of sharp water scarcity and potential risk of flooding or destruction of the dam as Rogun Dam is being expected to become world’s largest dam in the modern history. For Uzbekistan, water is not simply a resource, or a mere key factor of production, but it is an element, which secures the state existence. The production of food has a large share in the country’s GDP, and given that many of the products produced, for instance, cotton requires water, it is clear that water security is paramount. Realism is the theory that expects that countries in such a position will pursue rational political approaches to keep their stakes safe. This kind of bilateralism is apparent in the relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where,

official and bilateral agreements about water sharing and infrastructural cooperation convey a message of cooperation but are actively in the service of government of Uzbekistan's security interests. On the basis of the geopolitical orientations of Shavkat Mirziyoyev's foreign policy, which is aimed at integration and cooperation, the policy is characterized as liberalist. However, from a realist perspective, this policy serves as a tool to navigate regional power dynamics and mitigate threats. By maintaining balanced relations with global powers like Russia, China, and the United States, while simultaneously engaging with Central Asian neighbors, Uzbekistan diversifies its dependencies and reduces vulnerability to coercion by any single actor. For instance, Uzbekistan's evolving relationship with Tajikistan over the Rogun Dam illustrates this realist pragmatism. Initially opposed to the project due to fears of reduced water flow, Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev shifted to a more diplomatic approach, supporting bilateral energy projects on the Zarafshan River. This pivot reflects a calculated effort to manage the power imbalance with Tajikistan while securing mutual benefits.

In summary, one can observe that Uzbekistan's water diplomacy is the ideal example of the realism theory at work. As much as it is restricted by geographical factors and resource endowments the nation's policies reflect a survival strategy. Though its multivectoral approach seems to stem from liberalist paradigm on the outside, in fact, the approach is realist on the inside to respond to the regional capabilities and gain access to vital resources. Subsequently, through calculated cooperation with the upstream neighbors and using the multilateral forums, Uzbekistan prove that the anatomy of its foreign policy continues to be defined by the two cardinal principles of 'survival and self-interest'. Thus, it supports realism in relation to international relations and especially in the context of the central Asia – a region that is characterized by the shortage of resources. Moreover, this realist approach does not necessarily carry negative connotations. Uzbekistan's focus on survival-driven policies in water management reflects a rational and necessary response to its environmental and geopolitical realities.

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