



FOREIGN POLICY INSTITUTIONS IN UZBEKISTAN: FROM POST- SOVIET FORMATION TO REFORM ERA

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Abstract: *After gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan began to establish its own foreign policy institutions, navigating the post-Soviet regional and global environment. During the early independence years, institutional structures were minimal and decision-making was highly centralized, reflecting the nascent nature of state diplomacy. Under President Islom Karimov, institutions were consolidated, and normative legal frameworks were introduced; however, foreign policy remained largely executive-centered, with limited institutional autonomy. The reform era, beginning in 2016 under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, marked a significant institutional modernization. Uzbekistan strengthened its diplomatic capacity, promoted regional cooperation in Central Asia, diversified international partnerships, and integrated foreign policy objectives into broader economic and strategic planning. The article concludes that Uzbekistan's foreign policy institutions have gradually evolved, balancing modernization and institutional strengthening with the continued dominance of executive decision-making. This transformation enhances Uzbekistan's capacity to pursue an active, diversified, and economically beneficial foreign policy.*

Keywords: Foreign policy, institutional transformation, executive power, Central Asia, diplomatic modernization, policy reform

The period from 1917 to 1991 was a transformative time for Uzbekistan, as the region changed from a traditional society into a centrally controlled Soviet republic. After the October Revolution in 1917, Soviet power was established in Central Asia, and the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was first created. Some local groups resisted this foreign control, forming the Basmachi Revolt. In 1924 - 1925, during the national delimitation of Central Asia, the Uzbek SSR was officially established,¹ bringing political, economic, and social life under the control of Moscow. Political power was highly centralized. The Communist Party controlled all areas of society, leaving local governments with little independence. This centralization led to a totalitarian system with strict political control, limited freedoms, and ideological supervision over social life. Political repression was widespread, especially in 1930 under Stalin. Important intellectuals and cultural figures, like Abdulla Qodiriy, Cho'lpon, and Fitrat, were executed as "*enemies of the people*," which greatly harmed intellectual development and created fear in society. Economic and social policies were transformative but tightly controlled. Forced collectivization merged private farms into state-run farms, restricting personal ownership and causing hardship, including famines in some regions. Cotton became the main economic focus, making Uzbekistan the Soviet Union's key supplier of raw materials. Industrialization developed light industry, machinery, and chemical

¹ Central Asia Program. The Roots Of Uzbekistan: Nation Making In The Early Soviet Union. Url: <https://share.google/20APxmbghdLIBO8Zx>

sectors, but the economy remained under central planning. Cities like Tashkent and Samarkand were modernized with new housing, factories, transport systems, schools, hospitals, and libraries, improving literacy and education. Social and cultural life was closely monitored. Literacy campaigns were implemented, and the writing system changed from *Arabic* to *Latin*, then to *Cyrillic*, which helped improve education but disrupted cultural continuity. Arts, including literature, theater, and cinema, were developed but had to follow socialist realism. Religion was restricted: mosques were closed, religious education banned, and clergy persecuted, though many people continued practicing their traditions in secret. Environmental issues appeared due to state policies. Overuse of water for cotton farming led to the Aral Sea disaster, causing long-term ecological damage. Despite industrial growth and urban development, the economy and environment were controlled from Moscow, limiting local independence. During World War II and after, Tashkent became a safe place for people and enterprises evacuated from the war zones, earning the names "*City of Bread*" and "*City of Friendship of Nations*." Even after Stalin's death in 1953, political centralization continued.² Limited reforms during Gorbachev's era in 1980 increased national awareness and dissatisfaction with environmental, agricultural, and social problems, preparing the ground for independence.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan declared independence and faced the daunting task of building a sovereign state while managing the legacies of the Soviet political and economic system. The early years of independence exposed the structural limitations left by

² Islom Karimov. "Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century: Tradition and Survival"

the Soviet collapse: although the republic had inherited substantial stocks of human, organizational, and physical capital, post-Soviet development in Central Asia overall experienced a decline in the robustness of these assets, reducing the region's capacity for rapid reform and sustainable development.³ Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's first president, articulated the state's primary priorities in his reflections on the country's transition into the twenty-first century. He emphasized that the consolidation of national identity, the maintenance of internal stability, and the strengthening of state institutions were foundational to preventing fragmentation and ensuring long-term survival as an independent nation. According to his view, security concerns – including ethnic tensions, religious radicalization, and corruption – needed to be carefully managed by a powerful and centralized governance structure in order to avert chaos and civil conflict. Under Islom Karimov, Uzbekistan developed a highly centralized authoritarian system. Political power was concentrated in the presidency, with limited room for opposition, pluralistic competition, or democratic accountability. State institutions were designed first to enforce stability and second to manage gradual reform; democratic reforms were subordinated to the priority of preserving order and national unity. In many post-Soviet states, authoritarianism and corruption became the dominant norms of governance, and Uzbekistan under Karimov was no exception. Islom Karimov's own writings reflect this strategic choice: he consistently framed stability as precondition for development and saw strong executive authority as necessary in a multi-ethnic, recently independent state. Rather than rapid transition to Western-style

³ Sievers, E., The Post-Soviet Decline of Central Asia: Sustainable Development and Comprehensive Capital.

democracy, the government pursued managed political order, citing the dangers of fragmentation and external influence in an unstable global environment. Central to Islom Karimov's approach was the cultivation of a cohesive national identity rooted in both Uzbekistan's pre-Soviet cultural heritage and the shared experience of independence. In his reflections, Islom Karimov emphasized that revival of spiritual, cultural, and traditional values was critical for social integration – a strategy intended to complement state institutions rather than challenge their authority. The building of a unified Uzbek national identity was thus both symbolic and practical: it served as a legitimating framework for the regime while addressing the social ambiguities left by the Soviet collapse. At the same time, the inherited Soviet bureaucratic apparatus was adapted to fit the new political structures. Ministries, state agencies, and regional administrations remained under strong central control, ensuring that governance across the territory operated uniformly. This highly centralized bureaucratic governance was presented as a source of coherence and resilience in a period of regional uncertainty. Economically, Uzbekistan under Karimov did not adopt rapid liberalization. Rather, the state pursued a cautious transition aimed at preserving social stability. The government maintained significant control over strategic sectors of the economy, particularly in agriculture (with cotton as a central commodity) and state-owned industries inherited from the Soviet era. Uzbekistan's approach was characterized by gradualism: instead of wholesale privatization or rapid market reforms, the government implemented controlled market reforms, metered foreign investment policy, and state oversight of key economic actors. While this strategy helped maintain economic stability in turbulent times, it also limited

opportunities for emergent private sector dynamism and deeper integration with the global economy. On the social front, Islom Karimov's government expanded education, healthcare, and social services, attempting to maintain a level of social welfare inherited from the Soviet system. However, environmental issues, such as the desiccation of the Aral Sea – one of the region's most significant ecological crises – persisted and in some cases worsened. External investment aimed at environmental remediation produced limited benefits, as priority often remained on centralized economic control rather than ecological reform. The period of 1991–2016 in Uzbekistan was defined by a governance model that prioritized stability, national identity, and controlled reform over democratization and rapid economic liberalization. The Karimov era avoided large-scale internal conflict and laid institutional foundations for governance continuity, but it also entrenched authoritarian norms, limited political pluralism, and underutilized the republic's inherited human and organizational capital. These structural features provided both stability and constraint – stable governance in the short term but significant limitations on political evolution and sustainable development in the long term.⁴

After the death of Islam Karimov in 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed the presidency of Uzbekistan, inheriting a highly centralized and authoritarian political system along with a cautiously managed economy and socially controlled environment. Mirziyoyev initiated reforms without destabilizing the political order, aiming to liberalize the economy and society while maintaining the existing authoritarian framework.

⁴ Dadabaev, T. (2015). Identity and Memory in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Uzbekistan's Soviet Past. Routledge. Url: <https://share.google/xqIDO3QruaWzJJTCf>

Uzbekistan's foreign policy under Mirziyoyev has continued the core principles of Karimov's approach, such as military neutrality and prioritizing Central Asia, while adopting a more constructive and cooperative stance with regional and external actors. Mirziyoyev's tenure introduced cautious political liberalization. Uzbekistan remains authoritarian, but the government has reorganized security and administrative structures, opened limited space for public debate, and attempted to reduce the strict personalism of the Karimov era. Old bureaucratic elites have been partially retained but supplemented with new cadres to implement reforms.⁵ The state still retains tight control over political pluralism, but there is now a focus on institutional efficiency, transparency, and merit-based appointments. Economically, Shavkat Mirziyoyev pursued market-oriented reforms aimed at diversifying the economy and reducing dependence on traditional exports such as cotton and natural gas. Policies include liberalizing the currency, attracting foreign investment, modernizing infrastructure, and improving the business climate. Trade relations with neighboring states have been strengthened. Kazakhstan serves as a transit route for Uzbek goods to Russia, while Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan energy cooperation has expanded, including involvement in regional gas pipelines. These initiatives aim to position Uzbekistan as a regional trade hub and improve domestic economic resilience. Social reforms focus on improving governance, public services, and citizen engagement. Education, healthcare, and social welfare programs have been gradually modernized, with a stronger emphasis on e-government, accountability, and

⁵ Schmitz, A. (2020). Uzbekistan's Transformation. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. Url: <https://share.google/SPWXt1fHRoUHAoLF>

professionalization of the civil service. The government has promoted public consultation and greater responsiveness to citizen needs. Political freedoms remain limited, and genuinely independent institutions are still underdeveloped. Uzbekistan maintains neutrality in military alliances and emphasizes regional integration in Central Asia. Diplomatic initiatives include resolving long-standing border and water disputes with neighbors, promoting cross-border trade, and enhancing cooperation in energy and infrastructure projects. The leadership's "*constructive engagement*" has improved relations with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, allowing Uzbekistan to play a more active role in regional affairs. Despite ambitious reforms, Uzbekistan faces structural constraints inherited from previous administrations: a centralized political system, entrenched bureaucracy, limited political pluralism, and regional disparities. Economic modernization is constrained by reliance on natural resource exports and the need for investment in human capital. Social liberalization is cautious, reflecting the government's priority on stability and continuity.⁶ The Mirziyoyev era has introduced significant changes to Uzbekistan's political, economic, and social landscape. While maintaining elements of authoritarian control, the reforms have opened pathways for economic diversification, improved governance, and regional cooperation. Uzbekistan is gradually transitioning toward a more modern, outward-looking state while carefully managing the legacies of Islom Karimov's highly centralized and cautious governance model.

⁶ Toktogulov, B. (2021). Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy under Mirziyoyev: Change or Continuity? Eurasian Research Journal (ERJ), 4(1), 49–67.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan inherited a foreign policy apparatus that had functioned primarily as a subordinate structure within the centralized Soviet system. Independent diplomatic institutions had to be built almost from scratch. In the early years of independence, the country lacked a comprehensive strategic framework defining foreign policy priorities. The adoption of the first Law on the Basic Principles of Foreign Policy in 1996 marked an important institutional milestone. It provided a formal legal basis for diplomatic activity and articulated principles such as sovereignty, non-alignment, and non-interference. However, despite the establishment of formal structures – including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic missions abroad – decision-making processes remained highly centralized within the executive branch. During this foundational period, institutional capacity was limited. Foreign policy largely reflected the political leadership's strategic vision rather than institutionalized procedures. Parliamentary involvement in foreign affairs was minimal, and mechanisms for inter-agency coordination were still developing. Thus, while legal frameworks began to emerge, institutional consolidation remained incomplete. Under the presidency of Islom Karimov, foreign policy institutions became more consolidated but remained firmly executive-dominated. The adoption of the 2012 Foreign Policy Concept introduced clearer strategic guidelines, including the principle of maintaining equidistance from major powers and avoiding participation in military alliances. This document signaled a move toward greater formalization of foreign policy doctrine. Nevertheless, institutional authority continued to be concentrated in the presidency. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs functioned primarily as an implementing body rather than

an autonomous strategic actor. Parliamentary diplomacy and multi-actor participation in foreign policy formulation remained limited. The system exhibited characteristics of a hyper-presidential model, where institutional development occurred within the framework of strong centralized control. Although normative documents and legal instruments expanded during this period, they largely codified the executive's strategic approach rather than creating independent institutional checks or pluralistic decision-making mechanisms. Institutionalization progressed, but within a tightly controlled structure. A significant transformation occurred after 2016 with the rise of Shavkat Mirziyoyev.⁷ This period marked not only a shift in foreign policy orientation but also a reconfiguration of institutional practices. The reform agenda emphasized regional cooperation, economic diplomacy, and diversification of international partnerships. One of the defining features of this era has been the integration of foreign policy priorities into broader national development strategies, including the "*Strategy for the Development of New Uzbekistan (2022–2026)*."⁸ Unlike previous periods, foreign policy objectives were embedded within long-term strategic planning documents, indicating a higher degree of institutional coherence. The reform era has also witnessed expanded diplomatic engagement, particularly with neighboring Central Asian states. Institutional mechanisms for regional dialogue and cooperation have been strengthened, reversing earlier patterns of isolation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other state institutions have assumed a more active role in implementing structured

⁷ Kazimir, L. A. Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Development: The New Benchmarks.

⁸ Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026 - Climate Change Laws of the World. Url: <https://share.google/CD4b85Mt7IxCvgcsn>

diplomatic initiatives, while economic diplomacy and multilateral participation have become central components of state policy. However, despite these changes, the presidency continues to play a dominant coordinating role in foreign policy. The transformation has therefore reflected institutional modernization and increased functionality rather than a full redistribution of decision-making authority. Across the three periods, Uzbekistan's foreign policy institutions have evolved from nascent post-Soviet structures to a more formalized and strategically integrated system. The early independence period focused on building foundational legal frameworks. The Karimov era consolidated these structures under strong executive control. The Mirziyoyev period introduced greater institutional activation, strategic planning, and regional engagement. Yet, the trajectory suggests continuity alongside change. While institutional capacity, legal clarity, and diplomatic engagement have expanded, the core decision-making model remains predominantly presidential. The transformation since 1991 can thus be characterized as a gradual institutionalization of foreign policy mechanisms within an executive-led system, rather than a fundamental shift toward institutional pluralism.

In conclusion, Uzbekistan's foreign policy institutions have gradually evolved, strengthening structural and normative frameworks and expanding institutional capacity. Firstly, the Soviet legacy provided newly independent Uzbekistan with a minimal institutional foundation, establishing the initial structures for foreign policy operations. Secondly, during Islom Karimov's presidency, foreign policy institutions were consolidated, but decision-making remained heavily centralized within the presidency; strategic documents such as the 2012 Foreign Policy

Concept formalized the state's approach, yet institutional autonomy beyond the executive remained limited. Thirdly, under Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's foreign policy institutions experienced modernization: legal frameworks were reinforced, strategic concepts were elaborated, and mechanisms for regional cooperation were developed. Nevertheless, the presidency continues to hold a dominant coordinating role in foreign policy.

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