

UZBEKISTAN AND PAKISTAN: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND ISSUES OF
ACCESS TO THE SEA

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Annotation: This article examines Uzbekistan's access to the sea in the logistics sector, which forms the basis of the elevated cooperation between Uzbekistan and Pakistan to a new strategic stage, from a broad perspective. A comparative analysis of the regional significance of the UAP (Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) railway project and alternative transit trade routes is presented. Furthermore, the article forecasts the impact of the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict that arose in February 2026 on the aforementioned projects based on statistical data.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Pakistan, strategic cooperation, diplomacy, UAP railway (Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan), access to the sea, logistics corridors, alternative corridor routes, regional conflict, transit potential, Afghanistan, Karachi and Gwadar ports, geoeconomic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Long-standing diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Pakistan have entered a new stage, transformed by the general character of interregional connectivity. The cooperation between these two states, located at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, is now stepping into a strategic phase and serves as an important “geopolitical bridge”. This cooperation is of great significance between the regions: by connecting two economic zones and developing trade and infrastructure, it is a vital practical action towards creating a foundation for regional prosperity and stability.

The sustainable future of this movement was secured by a series of historical documents, including the Joint Declaration signed during the visit of the Prime Minister of Pakistan to Uzbekistan on February 26, 2025, which raised bilateral relations to a new level of quality.¹ Today, the diversification of foreign trade routes and minimizing the costs of entering the world market is a priority for Uzbekistan, as it is for many other countries. Due to certification issues and logistics costs, Uzbek goods are sold at higher prices on the world market, with statistics showing a 15-20% increase.²⁻³ For this reason, the signing of the Framework Agreement on July

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Prime minister Shehbaz Sharif's visit to the Republic of Uzbekistan 25-26th February. 2025. URL: <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/prime-minister-muhammad-shehbaz-sharifs-visit-to-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-25-26-february-2025>

² The global logistics challenges - Uzbekistan. ResearchGate (2019)
URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332864161_The_global_logistics_challenges_-_Uzbekistan

³ World Bank Report: “Towards a Prosperous and Inclusive Future”.
URL: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099449406152214754/pdf/IDU0c4d508cd0686d04d500b0440b7819442dbd3.pdf>

17, 2025, and the subsequent launch of the UAP (Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) railway according to it, marks a turning point in creating a regional trade corridor.⁴

However, the border military tensions and the state of “open war” between Afghanistan and Pakistan that emerged in February 2026 are expected to pose a serious threat to the prospects of the geoeconomic projects mentioned above.⁵ The purpose of this article is to assess the impact of regional conflicts on these projects by comparing Uzbekistan’s opportunities for access to the sea through Pakistani ports with alternative routes.

In this article, methods of geoeconomic analysis and comparative-logical analysis were used. Uzbekistan’s access to the sea was compared in terms of distance and costs using the examples of Pakistan, Iran, and Caspian directions. Additionally, a forecasting method was applied based on statistical data from open sources regarding the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict in February 2026.

ECONOMIC COOPERATION

The mutual dialogues during the state visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to Pakistan covered economic, political, socio-legal, and cultural spheres. Among these fields, economic cooperation defined the main character of the meeting. Cooperation in logistics and joint programs were placed at the center. For a landlocked country like Uzbekistan, establishing a strategic partnership in this regard is a political necessity. The stability and longevity of cooperation in the logistics sector, in which both sides have a common interest, will undoubtedly be ensured by many other mutual economic projects.

Such economic initiatives include:

1. The role of the joint intergovernmental commission on trade-economic and scientific-technical cooperation between the two states in trade and commercial development;
2. The commitment of both parties to the Joint Declaration signed following the results of the visit of the Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to the Republic of Uzbekistan on February 26, 2025;
3. Taking prompt necessary measures in accordance with the memorandum of understanding on multimodal transport aimed at developing continuous transit and trade relations between the two partner countries in September 2024;
4. Achieving a trade target of \$2 billion by 2029;⁶

⁴ Gazeta.uz: O‘zbekiston, Afg‘oniston va Pokiston Transafg‘on temiryo‘lining texnik-iqtisodiy asosini ishlab chiqish bo‘yicha bitim imzoladi URL:<https://www.gazeta.uz/oz/2025/07/18/trans-afghan-railway/>

⁵ The Straits Times. Pakistan, Afghan forces clash after days of hostilities. URL:<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/afghanistan-launches-retaliatory-attacks-on-pakistan-border-posts-taliban-says>

⁶ O‘zbekiston Milliy axborot agentligi. O‘zbekiston – Pokiston strategik sherikligi yangi bosqichda. URL:https://uza.uz/oz/posts/ozbekiston-pokiston-strategik-sherikligi-yangi-bosqichda_816671

5. Joint management of economic and industrial zones in developing industrial cooperation aimed at exporting goods to third countries.⁷

The biggest issue is logistics. The main purpose of the state visit was to further expand the UAP (Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) railway project, for which a Framework Agreement was signed on July 17, 2025,⁸ as a major part of the strategic cooperation for a regional corridor, and to bring this to the significant issue of access to a seaport. As a result of the mutual agreements reached in this regard, Pakistan expressed its readiness to allow Uzbekistan to use its seaports and to provide a road network meeting international standards to support transit requirements. This, in turn, for the landlocked state of Uzbekistan, is not just the ability to use ports, but a vital gateway to the Arabian Sea through the ports of Karachi⁹ and Gwadar¹⁰.

At this point, while explaining how important access to the sea is for Uzbekistan and what the interests of both sides will be, it is necessary to address the question: “Why specifically through Pakistan”. Trading via water (sea, ocean) serves to significantly reduce the cost of the product. Currently, statistical centers have determined that the cost of Uzbek goods is 15-20% higher on the world market precisely due to limited access to the sea and high logistics costs.

The issue of time is also of great importance. Under the current agreement, as a result of Uzbekistan’s direct access to the ocean through the Pakistani port, the time in the product logistics process is expected to be cut in half, allowing Uzbekistan to enter large markets such as Africa and South Asia without major obstacles.¹¹ In general, today Uzbekistan’s exports are mainly tied to northern routes and Russia.¹² The implementation of the above agreement will significantly free the country from land-based logistical dependence; that is, the availability of various shipping routes in today’s global and conflictual era ensures more long-term and stable economic development without various barriers.

Furthermore, the opening of this route is not just about sending or carrying cargo; if this route works effectively, the transportation of goods by northern and neighboring countries precisely through the territory of Uzbekistan will bring huge transit profits (billions of dollars) to the state budget. The UAP railway is the primary factor in reaching the Pakistani port. The benefits that Pakistan and Afghanistan will achieve from this process are as follows: Afghanistan’s transformation from a conflict-ridden state into an economic transit country will

⁷ Joint Declaration on the Outcomes of the State Visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. URL:<https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/joint-declaration-on-the-outcomes-of-the-state-visit-of-the-president-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-to-the-islamic-republic-of-pakistan>

⁸ Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan Railway Agreement: Strategic Assessment.

URL:<https://www.specialeurasia.com/> . <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/07/23/uzbek-afghan-pakistan-railway/>

⁹ **Karachi** is a strategic megapolis located on the coast of the Arabian Sea in southern Pakistan, in the western part of the Indus River delta. Due to its geographical location, this natural deep-water port provides direct access to the Gulf of Oman and the northern basin of the Indian Ocean, serving as the closest and shortest southern gateway (logistics terminal) to the world market for Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan.

¹⁰ **Gwadar** is one of the world's largest natural deep-water ports, situated at the junction of the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. This port serves for Uzbekistan not only as a route to the sea but also as a strategic logistics hub that opens the door to the Middle East and Africa markets.

¹¹ file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/392_396_Muhayyo_Xabibullayeva.pdf

¹²The World Bank. Central Asia’s Connectivity: Challenges and Opportunities.

URL:<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099449406152214754/idu0c4d508cd0686d04d500b0440b7819442dbd3>

be the greatest pillar for its survival as an independent state in the future. Additionally, it will develop in terms of internal logistics and infrastructure, providing employment for a large part of the population in this process. Pakistan, for its part, is likely to gain a geopolitical advantage as the state connecting Central Asia to the ocean through the UAP railway and the ports of Karachi and Gwadar. Through this, it can enter the large market of Central Asia and meet its needs for rich raw materials through convenient and cheap logistics. As net income, transit fees through competition between Pakistani ports will result in large revenues for the country.

Why was Pakistan chosen specifically when Uzbekistan has the opportunity to exit via Turkmenistan-Iran and through Kazakhstan to the Caspian Sea¹³?. When viewed analytically, access to the Caspian Sea does not bring the expected benefit to the state's economy. The Caspian is considered a closed basin, and to reach the ocean from there, it is required to pass through several canals belonging to the Russian Federation;¹⁴ political situations may not ensure that this route remains permanently open; furthermore, when the air temperature drops, the freezing of this route can cause major logistical problems. On the other hand, there is an opportunity to reach the Black Sea¹⁵ and trade quickly with Europe via the Caspian Sea and the Caucasian states, but this does not cover the economic goal—the costs on this route are expensive, resulting in a sharp increase in the product's price; the purpose of opening a sea trade route is not just to exchange goods, but to carry out exports quickly, cheaply, and conveniently. The aforementioned Caucasian route does not change economic indicators for the better.

The Turkmenistan-Iran route could have been a good way to reach the sea and ocean. The reason is that the Iranian direction is currently a real working route,¹⁶ and reaching a water basin via this path does not require large infrastructure like the UAP railway, as such a path already existed and was in motion. However, the distance to Pakistan is shorter than the Iranian route, and customs duties and transit tariffs are generally high in Turkmenistan and Iran. This also leads to an increase in product costs. At the same time, Turkmenistan has a unique visa system and customs policy, which leads to cargo staying at the border for a long time. Due to the political situation in the world, it is known that Iran is currently under sanctions from the US and Western countries, which creates inconvenience for entrepreneurs.¹⁷ Moreover, it is unknown when this political situation will soften or how much time it will take. For the Republic of Uzbekistan,

¹³ **The Caspian Sea** is the largest landlocked inland body of water on Earth, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Geographically, it serves as the primary logistical transit region in the Western direction for Central Asian countries. It holds strategic importance for transporting Uzbekistan's cargo to European markets via the "Trans-Caspian International Transport Route," bypassing Russia.

¹⁴ Uzbekistan's access to the world ocean via northern waterways primarily depends on Russia's strategic networks, such as the Volga-Don Shipping Canal and the White Sea-Baltic Canal. These artificial waterways are the only internal water corridors connecting the Caspian Sea with the Seas of Azov and the Black Sea (in the south) and the Baltic and White Seas (in the north); for landlocked countries like Uzbekistan, they are characterized by high transit costs and seasonal restrictions (freezing).

¹⁵ **The Black Sea** is an inland sea belonging to the Atlantic Ocean basin, situated between Southern Europe and Asia Minor. For Uzbekistan, this basin is a crucial link in the strategic "Trans-Caucasian" corridor, enabling the transport of national cargo to the world ocean and European Union markets through the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi, bypassing the territory of Russia.

¹⁶ O'zbekiston Respublikasi Transport vazirligi / "Dunyo" AA. O'zbekiston va Eron o'rtasida transport-logistika sohasidagi hamkorlik: Bandar-Abbos portining imkoniyatlari. URL: <https://mintrans.uz/uz/news/ozbekiston-va-eron-transport-hamkorligini-rivojlantirmoqda>

¹⁷ U.S. Department of the Treasury. International Crisis Group. Iran Sanctions: Overview and Implementation. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/iran-sanctions>

which is implementing a systematic and advanced stage of development, waiting for this period is not advisable.

The Indian Ocean can be easily reached through Iran's Chabahar port, a process also supported by India; however, when analyzed politically and economically, it was calculated that the Pakistan route is 700-900 km shorter than the Iran route, is free from sanctions, is fully integrated into the international economic system, and has fewer barriers to market access, giving it a high advantage. Of course, this process is not free from political goals, as the strategic cooperation of countries with an important place in the trade world is vital for Uzbekistan to join the WTO (World Trade Organization) ahead of schedule¹⁸. This was evidenced by the fact that this issue was raised during the dialogue during the visit to Pakistan, and Pakistan approved this and expressed its readiness to support Uzbekistan regarding its swifter admission to the WTO¹⁹.

POLITICAL COOPERATION

(along with cultural, social, and humanitarian spheres)

In addition to economic cooperation, the establishment of people's diplomacy based on historical foundations and various agreements signed regarding political-legal cooperation between the two countries are of significant importance. Large-scale cooperation was built on political solidarity: the mutual parliamentary diplomacy established between the two countries is a clear example of this²⁰. After all, even if strategic cooperation is carried out only through economic relations, it is unlikely to be long-term and strong, as there is also a part where the lines of interest diverge from the point of intersection. In this regard, good and friendly relations between political elites also have their "behind-the-scenes" importance in ensuring the long-term stability of political and cultural solidarity.

According to the published general statement of this visit, this process should be viewed with an analytical eye. In particular, the heads of state noted that they would approve the candidates of their representatives for high positions in the UN as a sign of mutual friendship.²¹ The agreement to take certain measures for institutional and academic cooperation between the two countries allows for the firm preservation of solidarity among future generations. The heritage of the Great Silk Road is of great importance here: loyalty to this heritage is strengthened not only by economic cooperation but also by cultural ties. Ties with deep historical roots will now be restored at a new stage, including cooperation on developing the linguistic connections between the Urdu and Uzbek languages. Developing people's diplomacy between the two countries and organizing cultural festivals and academic exchanges based on this

¹⁸ **WTO (World Trade Organization)** — established on January 1, 1995, in Geneva (Switzerland), it is currently the only global organization regulating international trade rules, uniting 166 member states. Its primary objective is to reduce customs barriers between member states and to legally guarantee the unhindered movement of goods worldwide based on the principle of "freedom of transit."

¹⁹ A New Stage of Strategic Rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Pakistan: Key Outcomes of the Summit of the Two Countries' Leaders. URL:<https://isrs.uz/en/yangiliklar/novyj-etap-strategiceskogo-sblizenia-uzbekistana-i-pakistana-klucevye-itogi-sammita-liderov-dvuh-stran>

²⁰ The Diplomatic Insight. Pakistan, Uzbekistan Vow to Strengthen Parliamentary Cooperation. URL:<https://thediomaticinsight.com/pak-uzbekistan-vow-parliamentary-cooperation/>

²¹ A New Stage of Strategic Rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Pakistan: Key Outcomes of the Summit of the Two Countries' Leaders. URL:<https://isrs.uz/en/yangiliklar/novyj-etap-strategiceskogo-sblizenia-uzbekistana-i-pakistana-klucevye-itogi-sammita-liderov-dvuh-stran>

relationship will allow for the long-term preservation of brotherhood in the global era. The attention of the heads of state directed towards the Baburid heritage is also a clear example of cultural diplomacy.²²

Important global and geopolitical events are taking place in the world arena today. While cooperation between Uzbekistan and Pakistan is rising to a new level, the political positions expressed by the heads of state during the dialogue at the meeting showed that they are not indifferent to political processes. First of all, global problems such as terrorism, extremism, and separatism, which have been among the most difficult issues for ages, did not escape the attention of the heads of state within the framework of cooperation. In this regard, both states agreed to oppose these phenomena together: both countries assessed opposing such alien ideas as both a human and a political requirement. Similarly, both sides demonstrated the same political positions regarding an independent Palestinian state.²³

According to the latest reports, in the wake of events that occurred in a short time, Pakistan carried out several airstrikes on Afghanistan²⁴, while the “Taliban” government stated that at least 18 people, including women and children, were killed. Islamabad stated that the attacks targeted seven militant camps and shelters near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and were launched after recent attacks in Pakistan. Afghanistan condemned the attacks, saying they targeted several civilian homes and a religious school. The Taliban Ministry of Defense reported that the attacks were directed at civilian settlements in Nangarhor and Paktika provinces, claiming dozens of lives.²⁵ In response, on February 26, 2026, the “Taliban” government announced that it had launched an operation to strike Pakistan army positions in the border area of the two countries earlier this week, deploying heavy weapons and mass fire systems to the border area.²⁶⁻²⁷ In a short period, Afghanistan captured 12 Pakistan army posts in the border area. Pakistan military forces also began an immediate military response. In this process, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a joint appearance at the Knesset, announced their absolute support for the “Taliban” government in the fight against cross-border terrorism.²⁸

CONCLUSION

It is known that Uzbekistan’s access to the sea depends on the UAP railway passing through the territories of two countries: Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to the Framework Agreement signed in July 2025, it was determined that the railway would pass through

²² DUNYO.ENG. State visit of the President of Uzbekistan to Pakistan strengthens powerful impetus for elevating the strategic partnership between the two countries to a new level.

URL:<https://dunyo.info/en/news/gosudarstvennyy-visit-prezidenta-uzbekistana-v-pakistan-dal-moshchnyy>

²³ Joint Declaration on the Outcomes of the State Visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. URL:<https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/joint-declaration-on-the-outcomes-of-the-state-visit-of-the-president-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-to-the-islamic-republic-of-pakistan>

²⁴ URL:https://t.me/gorizont_uz

²⁵ BBC. URL:<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdxgln3gnd6o>

²⁶ The Economic Times. URL:<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/afghan-military-attacks-pakistan-after-deadly-strikes/articleshow/128822002.cms?from=mdr>

²⁷ ALJAZEERA. ‘Open war’: Pakistan and Afghanistan’s Taliban claim major casualties.

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²⁸ https://t.me/gorizont_uz

Afghanistan; however, if the conflict currently taking place takes a serious turn and continues rapidly, naturally, Afghanistan, considering the conflict with Pakistan, may delay the construction of the railway or cancel the contract entirely. As a result, there is a possibility that Uzbekistan's most convenient and financially viable route to the sea will be closed.

Preventing this situation will occur through the peaceful resolution of the military conflicts between the two states. In such a case, the joint project will be implemented, albeit later than the final deadline; however, if this expectation does not occur, Uzbekistan will be forced to consider the second route to the sea — the Turkmenistan-Iran route. According to statistical data, access to the sea via the Turkmenistan-Iran route is long, financially more expensive than the first (Afghanistan-Pakistan) route, and is not politically stable for Uzbekistan. Therefore, the probability of Uzbekistan using the second route is nearly impossible.

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