



**THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE GULF REGION IN UZBEKISTAN'S  
GEOPOLITICS**

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**Annotation:** This article highlights the strategic opportunities and goals of Uzbekistan in relation to the Gulf countries, joint cooperation projects, regionally implemented initiatives, recent meetings and the decisions made within their framework, as well as the objectives and content of the planned projects.

**Keywords:** Investments, bilateral cooperation, trade turnover, ACWA Power, religious cooperation, diplomatic relations, “Uzbekistanis” forum, secure transport and logistics corridor, visa-free zone.

**Introduction:** The Gulf Arab states, Iran, and Iraq, which have traditionally been Uzbekistan’s partner countries, have established close and friendly relations with our country since the early years of independence. The states that make up the globally powerful "Arab Six" — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain — are significant not only because of their dominance in oil and gas reserves but also for their role as donors to many developing countries around the world. Furthermore, these states are the main founders and vital driving forces of international intergovernmental organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Islamic Development Bank. Due to economic, energy, and geopolitical factors, the Gulf region holds strategic importance for Uzbekistan. Being a landlocked country in Central Asia, Uzbekistan considers the Persian Gulf as a key economic partner for trade and investment. Moreover, the Persian Gulf countries are major suppliers of energy resources, and ensuring stable energy imports is very important for Uzbekistan’s economy. Geopolitically, the stability of the Persian Gulf region is connected to regional security — any disturbances in the region could affect Uzbekistan. Collaborative efforts and diplomatic relations with the Persian Gulf offer Uzbekistan the opportunity to overcome geopolitical challenges and contribute to regional stability. The Persian Gulf region plays a decisive role in shaping Uzbekistan's geopolitical and economic strategies. Uzbekistan’s strategy to access the South passes precisely through this region. Especially, the projects implemented with Saudi Arabia in recent years are of great significance. The high level of bilateral cooperation and the role of the two countries’ leaders in developing partnership relations are specifically emphasized. The opening of the Qatari embassy in Tashkent this year is clear evidence of the development of cooperation with Qatar.

**Method of Analysis:** This article uses the Event analysis method.

**Results:** A general approach to cooperation with the Persian Gulf countries provides Uzbekistan with opportunities to expand its capabilities in economic, energy, and security sectors. Geopolitically, the Persian Gulf provides Uzbekistan with access to global freight corridors, improves its geopolitical standing, and expands opportunities for trade and economic cooperation.

At the same time, cooperation with the Gulf helps Uzbekistan diversify its agriculture- and extractive industry-based economy by integrating into global trade networks. Uzbekistan can attract investment from the Persian Gulf countries to support its infrastructure projects, energy, and other key sectors. It is known that Uzbekistan has established legal foundations for mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the Gulf Arab states in the fields of economy, investment, finance, tourism, transport communications, and green economy, including within the frameworks of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Islamic Development Bank. Uzbekistan has signed around 100 international agreements with these countries.

As stipulated in Decree No. PF-158 signed by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on September 11, 2023, as part of the “Uzbekistan – 2030” Strategy, cooperation with the Gulf countries is of great importance in achieving goals such as deepening Uzbekistan’s integration into global transport-logistics networks, increasing the potential of the national transport system, transitioning to a “green economy,” significantly increasing the use of renewable energy, and ensuring uninterrupted energy supply to economic sectors and the population (PF-158, 2023, p.19, 20).

Recent negotiations on investment cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan confirm Riyadh’s strategy of financially supporting infrastructure projects of local governments in Central Asia and providing humanitarian assistance (Giuliano Bifulchi, 29.03.2023, Geopolitical Report). On March 26, 2023, Deputy Minister of Investments, Industry and Trade of Uzbekistan Oybek Hamrayev held an online meeting with Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Minister of Investment Muhammad al-Hasan to discuss the implementation of investment cooperation between the two countries. The negotiators exchanged views on implementing several joint projects and on upcoming business meetings and roundtables involving representatives of the business communities of both countries.

On one hand, Uzbekistan needs to diversify its economy and attract foreign investors, while Saudi Arabia can support Tashkent’s strategy. On the other hand, recent talks emphasized Saudi Arabia’s efforts to expand its presence and strategy in Uzbekistan and, by extension, in Central Asia. As Central Asia plays a strategic role on the Eurasian chessboard and is becoming a link and logistics hub between Europe and Asia, Riyadh has strengthened cooperation with local governments. Earlier, on March 13, 2023, in Riyadh, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah, received the Special Representative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Foreign Policy Abdulaziz Kamilov. During the meeting, the parties reviewed bilateral relations and ways to develop and strengthen them in all areas, discussed regional and international developments, and addressed the activation of joint and multilateral coordination.

The volume of bilateral trade between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan reached 95 million USD in the first half of 2022, which is a significant increase considering that in 2019, the trade turnover barely exceeded 17 million USD (Giuliano Bifulchi, 2023, Geopolitical Report). Also, in January of this year in Tashkent, a groundbreaking ceremony was held for a thermal power plant with a 1500 MW steam-gas facility in Sirdaryo, and investment agreements were signed between the company “ACWA Power” and the Ministry of Investment and Foreign Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan for the construction of two wind power plants with a total capacity of 1000 MW in the Navoi and Bukhara regions. These projects aim to provide uninterrupted electricity supply to Uzbekistan's national energy system. Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Investment, Khalid Al-Falih, emphasized the need for direct import and export relations between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, noting that the majority of trade between the two countries currently goes through Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

Earlier, the Saudi Development Fund announced an investment of 50 million USD in several projects, including the construction of a hospital in Tashkent. Agreements have also been signed between the two countries in the areas of agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure development. Additionally, shared religious, cultural, and historical features can serve as a strong foundation for diplomatic relations and people-to-people ties. The Kingdom has also allocated scholarships for Central Asian students to study in Saudi Arabia, which has helped strengthen interpersonal relations. However, geographic distance may pose challenges in terms of logistics and connectivity.

The GulfCA Corporation, established in the United States by Uzbeks, will act as an intermediary to attract investment and business projects worth 10 billion USD from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf—particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar—by 2030 (UzReport.news, 20.08.2023). This was announced by Alisher Jumanov, founder of GulfCA and organizer of several successful investment banks in 22 countries, during the “Uzbekistanis” forum held in London.

“For several years now, our team has aimed to attract investment to our region,, especially to our homeland, Uzbekistan, and to bring major international companies into these markets. Over the past few months, we have communicated with finance professionals originally from Uzbekistan who are working in different parts of the world, and we have finally decided to launch this initiative, utilizing the potential of specialists from Central Asia and Uzbekistan who operate globally,” said Jumanov in his presentation at the “Uzbekistanis” forum (UzReport.news, 20.08.2023). On June 7, 2023, in Samarkand, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, met with the Emir of Qatar and signed 15 documents aimed at developing cooperation (mfa.uz, 07.06.2023). During the meeting, it was emphasized that a “comprehensive partnership” is developing between the two countries in various sectors. The leaders also agreed to increase the volume of trade between their nations. The President of Uzbekistan expressed confidence that this first high-level visit in the history of diplomatic relations would mark a new phase in bilateral cooperation and elevate it to the level of comprehensive partnership.

“We see Qatar not only as a promising partner in the Middle East but in the entire Arab-Muslim world. In recent years, thanks to our dialogue, we have made real progress in bilateral relations,” President Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated in his speech (mfa.uz, 07.06.2023).

“I am pleased to see all of you today at the first high-level summit of the 'Gulf Arab States – Central Asia.' We had long awaited this historic meeting in the beautiful and unique city of Jeddah, the symbolic gateway to the sacred city of Mecca.

The peoples of Central Asia and the Gulf region have long been connected by close trade relations, shared values and traditions, and most importantly, by our holy religion of Islam. We proudly recall the invaluable contributions of our great scholars and ancestors to the development of historical ties between the lands of Transoxiana (also referred to as Mawarannahr in classic Islamic sources) and Arabia. One such figure is the great hadith scholar Imam Bukhari, known as 'the leader of all muhaddiths.' It is a source of pride that two of the six greatest hadith scholars of the Muslim world were born and raised in our region, and that ancient Bukhara gained fame under the name 'Qubbatul Islam’”, said President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in his speech (president.uz, 19.07.2023).

In August 2020, a bilateral video conference was organized to develop relations between Oman and Uzbekistan (Oman and Uzbekistan... 19.08.2020). At the same time, there is a transport corridor connecting Uzbekistan with Oman and providing Uzbekistan with access to the sea, while also potentially opening the Central Asian market to the Gulf Arab states—this is the “Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran–Oman” transport corridor. The Ministry of Investments,

Industry and Trade of Uzbekistan signed export contracts with firms from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to supply products worth more than 73 million USD. Uzbekistan exports raw cotton, silk, and agricultural products to the UAE, as well as mechanical and electrical equipment, coffee, tea, furniture, plastic and rubber goods, vehicles, clothing, and sports equipment.

A roundtable discussion was held at the Central Asia International Institute on the topic “Arab States of the Gulf – Central Asia: Priorities and Prospects” (Luke Coffey, 21.07.2023, Now is the...). The event was attended by officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, representatives from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and the Sultanate of Oman, as well as public and political figures. Participants discussed the outcomes of the first summit between the Gulf Cooperation Council and Central Asian countries held in Jeddah on July 19–20. Uzbekistan’s leadership emphasized the importance of developing comprehensive cooperation in the political sphere through various formats (M. Mirhamidova, 25.07.2023, Gulf...). It was proposed to explore the development of a multilateral agreement on Friendship, Interregional Connectivity, and Cooperation to bring the brotherly nations and peoples even closer together.

The second area of focus is cooperation in high technology and investments. The President of Uzbekistan noted the necessity of creating cooperation platforms and working mechanisms in areas such as innovation, artificial intelligence, the green economy, digitalization, smart agriculture, nanotechnology, and biotechnology.

The third direction involves strengthening trade and transport connectivity. Our national leader emphasized the urgency of establishing a free trade regime with the Gulf states, harmonizing technical regulations, and developing e-commerce. In this regard, a proposal was made to develop and adopt a multilateral trade agreement.

The fourth area pertains to environmental and climate change issues. The importance of launching a joint international research program based on the newly established University for Environmental and Climate Change Studies in Central Asia was highlighted.

Participants’ attention was also drawn to the fifth area—tourism. It was proposed to create a single visa-free tourism zone titled “Gulf–Central Asia,” develop modern tourism clusters targeting tourists, increase the number of joint tourism products, and hold a forum for leading tourism operators of both regions in Khiva, which has been declared the Tourism Capital of the Islamic World for 2024.

It was especially notable that the summit participants supported Uzbekistan’s proposal to host the next high-level meeting within the format “Central Asia – Gulf Cooperation Council” in the city of Samarkand.

**Discussion:** Central Asia is situated at a decisive geopolitical crossroads, and Uzbekistan lies at the heart of the region. Muslims, Christians, and Jews—alongside Turkic, Slavic, and Persian peoples—have lived together for centuries on these vast steppes. Located between Europe and Asia, Central Asia sits between two major energy-consuming markets. For millennia, the region served as one of the main routes of East-West trade across the Eurasian landmass. Today, billions of dollars are being invested to connect the region with the rest of the world. Like the rumble of wheels on rails, new and modernized roads, pipelines, fiber-optic cables, and railway lines are being built to link Central Asia with East Asia, Europe, and South Asia. There is also potential to develop new ties with the Middle East. At last week’s summit in Jeddah, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Central Asian states agreed on a Joint Action Plan for Strategic

Dialogue and Cooperation (Luke Coffey, 2023, Now is the...). Covering the period from 2023 to 2027, the plan opens up opportunities for deepening economic, trade, security, and cultural relations on both sides. Looking ahead, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council could take four key steps to enhance relations with Central Asian republics:

First, the GCC should appoint a Special Envoy for Central Asia. This person would serve as the primary interlocutor for the Gulf states in the region and devote the time and effort necessary to build personal relationships across Central Asia. This would help maintain continuity between GCC-C5 summits.

Secondly, Gulf policymakers must resist the temptation to view the five Central Asian republics as a single bloc. The region consists of five independent territories and sovereign states. While they may share certain aspects of a common history, each of them maintains its own unique identity, culture, and global outlook. Therefore, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) may pursue closer cooperation with some Central Asian republics more than with others. Policymakers must bear this in mind when formulating policies for the region.

Thirdly, the GCC must prioritize connectivity between the two regions. The "Dry Canal Corridor" project, which aims to establish a link between the southern Gulf coast of Iraq and Turkish ports by 2038, is already in progress. With creative and ambitious thinking, the Gulf states could leverage this project to bypass Russia and Iran, and connect with the Central Asian markets via Turkey through the tested trade route of the Middle Corridor, which passes through the South Caucasus. Air connectivity between the regions should also be implemented.

Fourthly, the GCC should consult and, when necessary, coordinate with Turkey. In recent years, Turkey's economic, cultural, and security influence has grown across Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are Turkic in terms of culture and language, which explains their close ties with Turkey. These four Central Asian countries are also members of the Organization of Turkic States. It is worth considering a summit between this organization and the GCC. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's tour across the Gulf just days before the GCC-C5 summit was either a fortunate geopolitical coincidence or a sign of strategic foresight by Gulf policymakers.

The next GCC-C5 summit will take place next year in Uzbekistan's city of Samarkand. The ties between the Arab world and Samarkand date back centuries. When the famous 10th-century Arab geographer and writer Ibn Hawqal visited Samarkand in the year 977 CE, he wrote: "Wherever you look in the city, you see beautiful places and feel comfort and pleasure." Holding the next meeting in Central Asia is not only appropriate but also historically and symbolically significant. As one of the most important cities along the ancient Silk Road, Samarkand represents both the glorious past and the promising future of Central Asia.

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