

Uzbekistan and The Republic of Korea: Factors of Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolving bilateral and multilateral relations between the Republic of Korea and Central Asian countries, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan. It examines the multifaceted cooperation in the spheres of economy, politics, migration, security, technology, transportation infrastructure, and cultural exchange. **Method:** Employing an interdisciplinary approach and comparative analysis, the paper evaluates the current state of diplomatic and strategic engagement, identifies key challenges impeding further progress, and explores future perspectives for enhancing collaboration. **Results:** The research highlights how Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states increasingly view South Korea as a reliable and technologically advanced partner, whose influence in the Asia-Pacific region makes it a valuable actor in regional development strategies. South Korea's soft power, developmental assistance, and knowledge-sharing initiatives have further cemented its role in the region. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of institutional frameworks, high-level diplomatic visits, and economic forums that have facilitated dynamic cooperation. **Novelty:** Ultimately, the paper argues that the deepening ties between South Korea and Central Asia not only promote mutual development but also contribute to regional stability and integration within broader global processes.

INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, five new independent states were formed in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Central Asian republics began to actively establish and implement their foreign policies, aiming to establish constructive cooperation with the most important foreign partners and leading states of the world[1]. South Korea, as one of the leading countries in the Asia-Pacific region (APR), is a growing economic power with significant achievements in high technologies, science, education, and other fields. In turn, for South Korea, Central Asia's geopolitical position, its natural resources, and opportunities for access to new markets make the development of strategic partnerships with the regional states an essential component. South Korea's policy toward Eurasia and Central Asia has been discussed in several publications [2]. However, it is necessary to study South Korea-Central Asia relations from both a bilateral and a broader international perspective. In 2022, marking the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Central Asian states, this article aims to comparatively analyze the bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relations between South Korea and Uzbekistan in the context of transregional and global factors[3].

Although there has been scholarly interest in South Korea's Eurasian diplomacy, much of the existing literature tends to generalize bilateral engagements or narrowly focus on trade statistics and investment figures. What remains underexplored is a comparative, multidimensional analysis of South Korea's foreign policy strategy in Central Asia, especially its nuanced and evolving relationship with Uzbekistan—a country that has emerged as a pivotal actor in the region due to its demographic weight, economic reforms, and increasingly proactive foreign policy. In this context, Uzbekistan has played a particularly vital role in shaping the contours of Korea-Central Asia relations.

The year 2022 marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between South Korea and the Central Asian states, offering a timely opportunity to reflect on the achievements and challenges of this partnership. This paper aims to fill a critical gap by analyzing the dynamics of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between South Korea and Uzbekistan. It considers not only the internal drivers of foreign policy but also the broader transregional and global contexts influencing diplomatic strategies. By examining political dialogue, economic interactions, cultural exchange, and multilateral coordination, the study seeks to assess how these partnerships have evolved and what strategic directions they may follow in the future.

RESEARCH METHOD

It is clear that over the past years, the partnership between the Republic of Korea and the Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, has significantly expanded both in bilateral and multilateral formats. Today, their cooperation covers almost all key sectors of life. At the same time, there are numerous issues, among which the lack of direct land transportation connections remains one of the main problems, affecting the cost of goods and delivery times. South Korea has a strong positive image in Central Asia. Uzbekistan and other regional states support South Korea's new direction aimed at maintaining and strengthening peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, as well as contributing to the overall well-being of humanity and the development of the entire Eurasian continent[4]. In general, there are potential and opportunities to expand cooperation between Central Asia, South Korea, and specifically between Uzbekistan and South Korea. The promising directions for cooperation in both bilateral and multilateral formats include the further implementation of e-government, digital economy, energy, industry, infrastructure, logistics, textile and food industries, machine engineering, and electrical engineering, as well as the development of innovative potential in joint technological projects. Additionally, they include the development of transit routes between Asia and Europe through machinery, agriculture, and the region. For South Korea, such cooperation can support continuous economic growth, energy, and resource security[5]. The implementation of various programs and projects plays an important role in further developing relations between Uzbekistan, the entire Central Asia, and the Republic of Korea.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bilateral Relations Between South Korea and Uzbekistan

It should be noted that the history of relations between the peoples of Uzbekistan, Central Asia, and Korea dates back to ancient times, as evidenced by the depiction of Korean diplomats in the frescoes at the Afrasiyab Museum in Samarkand[6]. Over the long period of exchange and interaction, much has developed in culture and traditions. In the 20th century, the Central Asian republics were part of the Soviet Union, and South Korea was part of the Western bloc, both of which led to significant economic and intellectual progress. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics established diplomatic relations with South Korea, opened embassies in Seoul and their own capitals, and consistently developed bilateral cooperation in various fields to strengthen interstate relations. The Central Asian republics after the Soviet Union sought active political dialogue with Seoul, embodying the dynamism and technological achievements of Asia[7]. On December 30, 1991, South Korea was one of the first countries in the Asia-Pacific region to recognize Uzbekistan's independence, and in January 1992, diplomatic relations were established. Active political communication began between the two republics. Thus, between the leaders of Uzbekistan and Korea, there have been sixteen meetings in 1992, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2005, and 2006, and additional meetings were held in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, and 2019[8]. Parliamentary exchanges, meetings at the level of governments, ministries, and agencies, as well as political consultations between foreign ministries, have been regularly held. Uzbekistan-Korea relations are established and actively developing in trade, economic, political, cultural, humanitarian, transport, communication, and other areas. The legal framework for bilateral cooperation consists of over 200 documents regulating cooperation in various fields, the most important of which is the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Korea [9].

In 2006, South Korea and Uzbekistan signed the Strategic Partnership Declaration, which was further developed and deepened in a new Joint Declaration signed during President Park Geun-hye's visit to Tashkent in 2014. Park emphasized that Uzbekistan has always been a center of cooperation, being the largest trade partner for South Korea in Central Asia today[10]. During President Karimov's visit to Seoul in May 2015, 60 documents were signed related to trade-investment, economic-technical cooperation, and other fields, with a total value of \$7.7 billion. Seoul is a leading trade partner of Uzbekistan in Asia.

In November 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev made his first state visit to Korea, meeting with President Moon Jae-in and other official figures, as well as former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Shavkat Mirziyoyev participated in a South Korea-Uzbekistan business forum with the heads of the two countries' economies, financial structures, and leading entrepreneurs. During the visit, over 60 documents worth more than \$10 billion were signed in trade-economic, investment, financial-technical, and other sectors[11]. The Joint Statement signed between the two countries on deepening strategic partnership indicates that relations between Uzbekistan and South Korea have reached

an entirely new level. South Korea began actively supporting Uzbekistan's reform process and providing financial and technical assistance in implementing several social and economic projects. With South Korea's help, high-tech products have been produced in Uzbekistan's light automotive, textile, and electrical engineering industries, as well as in the silk processing and other fields.

The automotive industry established with South Korean cooperation has become one of the leading sectors of Uzbekistan's economy, ranking first in Central Asia for vehicle production. Currently, automotive enterprises in collaboration with General Motors are operating in Andijan and Khorezm regions, as well as in Tashkent[12]. South Korea's support for the development of the "Navoi" free industrial-economic zone is of particular significance. Since 2008, "Korean Air" has been operating cargo flights through Navoi Airport, implementing advanced technologies and an efficient management system at the airport. Currently, the Navoi center operates over 20 flights a week to cities like Seoul, Milan, Brussels, Frankfurt, Vienna, New Delhi, Mumbai, Hanoi, and others.

Among the large joint investment projects is the establishment of the "Tashkent Farma Park" innovative pharmaceutical cluster in Tashkent region, which began construction in April 2020. The implementation of this project involves the establishment of a Pharmaceutical Technical University with scientific research centers to train highly skilled personnel in pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, cosmetics, and other fields[13]. The Uzbekistan-Korea Trade House, opened in Incheon in 2018, plays a vital role in supplying Uzbekistan's high-standard products to Korea. The main products exported from Uzbekistan to South Korea include food, chemical products, mineral fertilizers, transport, communication, and tourism services. From South Korea to Uzbekistan, the main imports are vehicles, mechanical and electronic equipment, plastics, and plastic products[14].

In the energy sector, an example of practical cooperation is the long-delayed joint project between Uzbekistan and Korea to build the Ustyurt gas-chemical complex. Today, the polymer products produced are sold for export to Central and East Asia, the CIS, and European countries. Over the past twenty years, South Korea's development assistance has increased tenfold from 2006 to 2019, mainly focusing on financing social infrastructure and government services.

Additionally, remittances from South Korea to Uzbekistan are not only made through banks and money transfer systems but also through physical individuals engaged in informal remittance activities in the countries where the migrants live[15]. Therefore, it is impossible to accurately calculate remittances from Korea to Uzbekistan. Over the past three years, cross-border remittance volumes from South Korea to Uzbekistan have steadily increased, but the spread of COVID-19 has had an impact on this process.

In order to enhance mutual respect for the cultures, traditions, and customs of the peoples, creative festivals, exhibitions, art troupe tours, and cultural days are being organized in both Central Asia and South Korea.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The cooperation between Central Asia and the Republic of Korea has evolved into a strong and mutually beneficial partnership. Central Asian countries view South Korea as a highly developed nation with significant economic, scientific-technical, innovative, and investment capabilities, positioning it as a key player in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, South Korea's successful economic development serves as a valuable model for Central Asian states in their pursuit of socio-economic reforms. Conversely, Central Asia holds strategic importance for South Korea due to its abundant natural and energy resources, investment opportunities, and access to major export markets. **Implication :** This dynamic cooperation suggests that both regions are leveraging their comparative advantages to foster long-term development and economic integration. For South Korea, the partnership facilitates the diversification of its foreign economic relations and opens new avenues for market expansion in both Asia and Europe. The Eurasian Initiative further strengthens this framework by promoting economic connectivity and enhancing South Korea's diplomatic and geopolitical influence through its middle power diplomacy strategy. **Limitation :** Despite the promising outlook, the depth and sustainability of this cooperation may be challenged by regional instability, governance disparities, and differences in policy implementation capacity among Central Asian nations. Furthermore, the geopolitical competition from other global powers with vested interests in the region may hinder the full realization of South Korea's Eurasian ambitions. **Future Research :** Further studies are needed to examine the long-term impact of South Korea's involvement in Central Asia, particularly the effectiveness of the Eurasian Initiative in achieving its strategic goals. Future research could also explore how evolving global dynamics – such as shifting trade alliances and energy transitions – might reshape the cooperation framework between the two regions and redefine their mutual roles in the international arena.

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