

## UZBEKISTAN AND SOUTH KOREA: ACTIVITIES OF BILATERAL ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL RELATIONS (2019-2023)

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**Annotation:** *The article aims to analyze bilateral and multilateral relations between Uzbekistan and the Republic of South Korea regarding economics, politics, migration, security, technology, transport, and cultural exchange.*

**Keywords:** *diplomatic relations, agreements and memorandums, economic cooperation, educational and cultural centers, prospects.*

**Annotatsiya;** *Maqolada O'zbekiston va Janubiy Koreya Respublikasi o'rtasida bilan iqtisodiyot, siyosat, migratsiya, xavfsizlik, texnologiya, transport aloqalari va madaniy almashinuv sohasidagi ikki tomonlama va ko'p tomonlama munosabatlarni tahlil qilish, yoritib ber maqsad qilingan.*

**Kalit so'zlar:** *diplomatik aloqalar, kelishuv va memorandumlar, iqtisodiy hamkorlik, ta'lim va madaniy markazlar, kelajak istiqbollari.*

**Аннотация:** *Целью статьи является анализ двусторонних и многосторонних отношений между Узбекистаном и Республикой Южная Корея в сферах экономики, политики, миграции, безопасности, технологий, транспорта и культурного обмена.*

**Ключевые слова:** *дипломатические отношения, соглашения и меморандумы, экономическое сотрудничество, образовательные и культурные центры, перспективы.*

### INTRODUCTION

Current global development trends show that globalization is increasingly becoming more comprehensive, impacting the development of nearly all nations, and countries and regions are becoming more interconnected. In such conditions, developing mutually beneficial and equitable bilateral and multilateral relations with the world's leading nations is a crucial factor in ensuring the stability and sustainable development of Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan.

In recent years, Uzbekistan's role in international relations, especially Central Asia, has significantly increased. The Ukrainian crisis has further amplified the region's importance. Moreover, Uzbekistan's active and open diplomacy has strengthened Tashkent's regional and international influence.





Due to its strategic location at the crossroads of major trade and transport routes, Uzbekistan is recognized as a valuable participant in international relations. This position makes the country very well-suited for regional and global cooperation, as well as trade and economic integration. The growing need for alternative energy routes and secure transport corridors emphasizes the importance of Uzbekistan's infrastructure and its potential to connect Central Asia with global markets. As a result, this situation has sparked new interest and connections with various international organizations in Uzbekistan. This trend peaked in 2023.


This year, Tashkent continued its policy of openness, actively engaging in dialogue with countries worldwide and participating in international organizations and initiatives. Uzbekistan played a constructive role by hosting various international conferences, fostering dialogue, and strengthening mutual understanding among countries. This active diplomacy further solidified Tashkent's reputation as a reliable and influential partner both within the region and beyond. Uzbekistan's foreign policy in 2024 has been marked by a multi-faceted approach, distinguished by the emergence of three key trends that shaped its diplomatic landscape.

The relations between Uzbekistan and South Korea are characterized by a multi-faceted partnership with strong diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, following Uzbekistan's independence from the Soviet Union, both countries have closely cooperated to develop active and mutually beneficial relations. This article aims to study the continuity and breadth of Uzbekistan-South Korea cooperation and highlight the main areas of collaboration that contribute to its robustness. South Korea's policy towards Eurasia and South Korea-Central Asia relations have been discussed in several publications (Askarov, 2019; Dadabaev and Soipov, 2020; Do, 2020; Fedorovskiy, 2019; Fumagalli, 2016; Ho and Rusetskaya, 201; Karavaev, 201). Tisheyar, 2019; Khan, 2021; Lee, 2019; Muratalieva, 2019; Rahimov, 2020, pp. 327-407; Shin, 2018).

### **Diplomatic Relations and Strategic Partnership Between Uzbekistan and South Korea (2019-2023)**

Diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and South Korea were officially established in 1992. This marked the beginning of a new era in bilateral relations, with both countries expressing a strong commitment to expanding cooperation. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations, high-level exchanges, including





state visits and meetings between government officials, laid the foundation for collaboration in various sectors.

In the early years, the relationship primarily focused on political dialogue and mutual understanding of each other's regional and international positions. South Korea recognized Uzbekistan's strategic importance in Central Asia, given its geopolitical location and economic potential. Likewise, Uzbekistan regarded South Korea as a valuable partner in its efforts to modernize its economy and infrastructure.

Over the years, diplomatic relations deepened, and numerous agreements and memorandums covering a wide range of areas—ranging from trade and investment to education and technology—were signed between the two countries. These agreements served as the legal basis for cooperation and facilitated the implementation of joint projects and initiatives.

Among the largest joint investment projects is the establishment of "Tashkent Pharma Park," the only innovative scientific and industrial pharmaceutical cluster in Central Asia, the construction of which began in April 2020 in the Tashkent region. This project involves the creation of a Pharmaceutical Engineering University with a research center aimed at training highly qualified personnel in fields such as pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, cosmetology, and other industries<sup>30</sup>.

More than sixty important documents were signed, including a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministry of Employment and Labor of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Human Resources of the Republic of Korea, a Memorandum of Cooperation between the ministries of justice of both countries, a cooperation agreement between the Ministry of Foreign Trade of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy of the Republic of Korea to introduce a National E-Commerce Platform in Uzbekistan, an intergovernmental memorandum on cooperation regarding Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organization, a cooperation program for 2018-2020 between the ministries of foreign affairs of both countries, a Memorandum of Understanding on the Knowledge Sharing Program between the Ministry of Economy of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Strategy and Finance of South Korea, an intergovernmental loan agreement for 2018-2020 on credits from the Economic Development Cooperation Fund, and an agreement on financial cooperation between the Fund for Reconstruction and Development of Uzbekistan and the Export-Import Bank of Korea<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1177/187936652211235>

<sup>31</sup> <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/1275>



## Economic Cooperation and Trade Relations

Economic cooperation is the cornerstone of Uzbekistan-South Korea relations. Bilateral trade has been steadily growing, and South Korea has become one of Uzbekistan's main trading partners. Uzbekistan primarily exports natural resources, textiles, and agricultural products to South Korea, while South Korea exports electronics, machinery, and automobiles to Uzbekistan.

Another important aspect of their economic relationship is investment. South Korean companies are actively involved in various sectors of Uzbekistan's economy, including energy, mining, telecommunications, and infrastructure development. Notable projects include the construction of the Ustyurt Gas Chemical Complex and the involvement of Korean firms in modernizing Uzbekistan's telecommunications infrastructure.

On December 30, 1991, the Republic of Korea became one of the first countries in the Asia-Pacific region to recognize Uzbekistan's independence, and since then, active political dialogue between the two republics has taken place. As a result, high-level meetings between the leaders of Uzbekistan and South Korea took place in 1992, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2005, and 2006, as well as twice in 2008 and 2009, and again in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, and 2019 (Rahimov, 2020)<sup>32</sup>.

Between 2019 and 2023, several important meetings and agreements were signed between the leaders of Uzbekistan and South Korea. These meetings aimed to strengthen strategic partnerships between the two countries and create new opportunities in trade, investment, culture, education, and technology. Below are the key meetings and agreements from those years:

### 1. 2019 – President Mirziyoyev's State Visit to South Korea


In April 2019, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev met with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in Seoul. During this meeting, several important issues related to strengthening strategic cooperation between the two countries were discussed. Agreements were signed in the fields of economy, technology, culture, and education. Notably, documents were signed for collaboration with the South Korean government and companies to implement new technological centers and infrastructure projects in Uzbekistan. Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed the widespread

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<sup>32</sup> Rakhimov, M. (2020). Central Asia-South Korea relations and central asian perspective on Korea's new northern policy in

Alix. In K. Baizakova, J. Nicharapova, & M. Rakhimov (Eds.), *Evaluation and Tasks of new southern and new northern Policies from an Overseas perspective* (pp. 327–407). Korean Institute for Korean Unification.





adoption of Korean technologies in Uzbekistan, especially in the development of e-government, smart cities, and the digital economy<sup>33</sup>.

## 2. 2021 – President Moon Jae-in's State Visit to Uzbekistan

In December 2021, South Korean President Moon Jae-in made a state visit to Uzbekistan. During the talks held in Tashkent, trade, economic, and investment cooperation between the two countries was discussed. During the visit, more than 10 agreements worth over \$3 billion were signed. These agreements mainly focused on the energy, transport infrastructure, agriculture, and technology sectors. New projects in the energy sector were agreed upon, including joint research on green energy and hydrogen technologies<sup>34</sup>.

## 3. 2022 – Uzbekistan-Korea Business Forum

In October 2022, the Uzbekistan-Korea Business Forum was held in Tashkent, attended by representatives from both governments. During this forum, agreements were reached to strengthen ties between the business communities of the two countries and to discuss new investment projects. Agreements worth \$1.7 billion were signed for joint investment projects, primarily in the textile, automotive, and chemical industries<sup>35</sup>.

## 4. 2023 – Ongoing Strategic Partnership Between South Korea and Uzbekistan

In June 2023, a high-level meeting was held in Tashkent, where President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol discussed further deepening strategic cooperation. During this meeting, joint projects and agreements worth \$2.5 billion were signed. These included projects aimed at creating green energy, developing the digital economy, and establishing logistics centers. During the 2023 meeting, Uzbekistan and South Korea also agreed to conduct joint research and projects on semiconductor clusters and smart agriculture<sup>36</sup>.

Both governments have established joint economic committees and business councils to facilitate trade and investments. These platforms allow businesses from both countries to explore opportunities, discuss challenges, and establish cooperation. Additionally, Uzbekistan's participation in the Korea-Central Asia

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/uzbekistan-%E2%80%93-south-korea-new-stage-strategic-partnership>  
[https://www.koreaherald.com/mobile/khpad\\_view.php?ud=20240613050512](https://www.koreaherald.com/mobile/khpad_view.php?ud=20240613050512)

<sup>34</sup> <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/08/23/south-korea-becomes-uzbekistans-5th-largest-trading-partner-with-119bn-trade-volume-in-2024>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/08/30/south-korea-central-asia/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/08/23/south-korea-becomes-uzbekistans-5th-largest-trading-partner-with-119bn-trade-volume-in-2024>



Cooperation Forum has further strengthened economic ties and created a multilateral setting for discussing regional cooperation and development projects.

According to the data of the State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the foreign trade turnover between the two countries amounted to 2.1423 billion US dollars by the end of 2020. Of this, exports accounted for 45.5 million US dollars, while imports amounted to 1.8727 billion US dollars.

In 2023, Uzbekistan traded with 198 countries worldwide. The largest shares of foreign trade turnover were with China (21.9%), Russia (15.8%), Kazakhstan (7%), Turkey (5%), and the Republic of Korea (3.7%). Exports: 24.4 billion US dollars (an increase of 23.8%) Imports: 38.1 billion US dollars (an increase of 24%)<sup>37</sup>.

From 2019 to 2023, trade between South Korea and Central Asian countries saw significant growth. Particularly, Uzbekistan has become South Korea's largest trading partner in Central Asia. In 2023, Uzbekistan's trade turnover with South Korea reached 2.5 billion US dollars, which accounted for more than half of South Korea's trade volume with Central Asian countries<sup>38</sup>.

In 2021, South Korea's exports to Central Asian countries amounted to 5.1 billion US dollars, while imports were 1.6 billion US dollars. The Republic of Korea has especially strengthened its economic relations with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as these countries have become key partners for South Korea's investment projects and infrastructure development. Trade and investment cooperation with Uzbekistan, particularly in agriculture, technology, and energy sectors, has shown strong growth.

#### Trade Turnover between Uzbekistan and South Korea (2019-2023)

Year	Total Trade Volume (billion USD)	Imports from Korea (billion USD)	Exports to Korea (million USD)	Key Industries
2019	1.9	1.88	22	Automobile, Electronics, Industrial Goods, Textiles
2021	2.34	2.30	25	Automobile

<sup>37</sup> <https://uzreport.news/economy/o-zbekiston-2023-yilda-198-ta-mamlakat-bilan-savdo-alogalarini-amalga-oshirgan>

<sup>38</sup> <https://cabar.asia/en/central-asia-and-south-korea-seeking-opportunities-for-increased-cooperation>



				, Electronics, Chemicals
2022	2.5	1.28	17.5	Chemicals, Textiles, Food Products
2023	2.3	1.02	22.6	Automobile , Textiles, Industrial Goods

### Trade turnover between Uzbekistan and South Korea (2019-2023)

The trade turnover reached 1.9 billion USD in 2019. Uzbekistan became one of South Korea's largest trading partners in Central Asia, with trade taking place primarily in the technology, automotive, and electronics sectors.

The trade turnover amounted to 2.14 billion USD in 2020. Exports were 45.5 million USD, and imports were 1.87 billion USD. Compared to other Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan's share remained significant.

In 2021, the trade volume reached 2.3 billion USD. This growth was linked to strengthening economic relations between South Korea and Uzbekistan, with key sectors including technology and energy.

The trade turnover increased to 2.5 billion USD in 2022, marking significant growth compared to 2019. There was a decrease in exports, but an increase in imports<sup>39</sup>.

The trade volume between Uzbekistan and South Korea reached 2.5 billion USD, accounting for more than half of the total trade volume between South Korea and Central Asian countries in 2023.


Trade turnover between South Korea and Central Asian countries:

South Korea's trade volume with Central Asian countries amounted to 5.1 billion USD. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan were the key trading partners for South Korea in 2019.

In 2021 the trade volume reached 6.7 billion USD. South Korean exports to Central Asia amounted to 5.1 billion USD, while imports totaled 1.6 billion USD. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were South Korea's main partners in Central Asia.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/uzbekistan-%E2%80%93-south-korea-new-stage-strategic-partnership>





In 2023 the trade volume with Central Asian countries reached 6.4 billion USD. Uzbekistan remained South Korea's largest trading partner during this period, accounting for more than half of South Korea's trade with Central Asia.

#### Main trade directions

Exports and Imports: Trade between Uzbekistan and South Korea primarily involved industrial products, electronics, technology, and agricultural products.

Investment projects: Cooperation between South Korea and Uzbekistan was especially important in infrastructure, technology, and energy investment projects.

These indicators reflect the year-on-year growth of trade relations between Central Asian countries, particularly between Uzbekistan and South Korea<sup>40</sup>.

#### Cultural Exchanges and Educational Programs

Since 1992, the Korean Education Center has been operating in Tashkent. Korean language is taught at seven higher education institutions and in 48 schools and lyceums in Uzbekistan. Local universities cooperate with more than 45 Korean universities, research institutes, and production organizations. In Uzbekistan, the branches of Korea's Puchon and Yoju universities, as well as the Korea International University in Fergana, are actively operating. On February 1, 2021, a branch of Ajou University was also opened. In Tashkent, a preschool education institution, School No. 324, operates under the Korean methodology<sup>41</sup>.

Currently, Korean Language and Culture Centers operate in Uzbekistan's leading higher educational institutions, including the Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, and the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. Across the country, Korean language is taught in 12 universities and 28 schools and lyceums. In 2012, in Tashkent, and in 2016, in Samarkand, Uzbek-Korean Education Centers were established with the grant support of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). Within the framework of the Korean government's assistance programs, an Eastern Studies electronic library was created at the Tashkent State Pedagogical University and the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies in cooperation with KOICA. Additionally, on September 1, 2014, the Seoul Park was opened in the territory of Tashkent's "Bobur" Park. Today, the Korea House of Culture and Arts also continues its activities.


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<sup>40</sup> <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/08/23/south-korea-becomes-uzbekistans-5th-largest-trading-partner-with-119bn-trade-volume-in-2024> Republic of Korea, MOFA. (2013). Remarks by president Park geun-hye at international Conference on global cooperation in the era of Eurasia". <http://www.mofa.go.kr/webmodule/tsboard/template/read/engreadboard.jsp?typeID=12&boardid=14195&seqno=312966>

<sup>41</sup> <https://review.uz/uz/post/ozbekiston-va-koreya-respublikasi-ortasidagi-hamkorlik-natijalari>







Cultural relations between Uzbekistan and South Korea have developed through various festivals and events. In 2020, Korea Culture Days were celebrated in Uzbekistan, featuring performances of Korean dances, music, and screenings of Korean films. Such events aim to strengthen cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Student exchange programs have also grown between 2019 and 2023, with the number of Uzbek students studying in Korea increasing. Currently, more than 11,000 Uzbek students are studying at Korean universities<sup>42</sup>.

Every year, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Uzbekistan jointly organize the “Korean Culture Week” in the country. As part of the week, a Korean film night, master classes by traditional Korean handicraft artists, art and photo exhibitions, a Korean song and oratory contest, and Korean fashion shows are held<sup>43</sup>.

South Korea also provides scholarships to Uzbek students, such as the "Korean Government Scholarship Program" (GKS), KNU, Samsung Global Hope Scholarship Program, and KAIST. These scholarships cover bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. In addition, there are programs aimed at learning the Korean language and culture. Through these programs, Uzbek students have the opportunity to enhance their Korean language skills and gain a deeper understanding of Korean culture.

### **Future Prospects and Challenges**

During President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s second visit to South Korea, a significant number of documents were signed. The focus of the visit was on cooperation in the areas of the "green" economy, digitization, high technologies, education, and healthcare. South Korea is one of Uzbekistan’s key strategic partners. The cooperation between the two countries is based on economic interests. South Korea, as one of the leading countries, contributes to Uzbekistan’s economy with its investments and technology. The implementation of a high-tech system in Uzbekistan relies heavily on South Korean expertise.


According to political scientist Farhod Tolipov, it is wrong to say that the cooperation between Uzbekistan and South Korea is solely based on economic interests. He said: “South Korea is one of the most advanced countries in the world, and this advancement is based on high technology, efficiency, and the ‘green’ economy, which we are focusing on. Korea adopted the ‘green’ economy path a

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<sup>42</sup> [https://www.koreaherald.com/mobile/khpad\\_view.php?ud=20240613050512](https://www.koreaherald.com/mobile/khpad_view.php?ud=20240613050512)

<sup>43</sup> <https://kun.uz/30440510>





long time ago and has successfully implemented it. This issue is now of great relevance for Uzbekistan as well. President Mirziyoyev is not raising the issue of the ‘green’ economy without reason, as this is the path chosen by the developed world. In this context, South Korea’s experience is very important for Uzbekistan, especially considering the efficiency of this experience”<sup>44</sup>.

The political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation between Uzbekistan and South Korea, along with efforts to deepen relations through “people’s diplomacy,” have ensured the consistency of bilateral relations. As a result of the strengthening trade-economic and investment relations between our countries, the trade turnover has doubled over the last six years, reaching 2.3 billion USD in 2022<sup>45</sup>.

In the future, relations between Uzbekistan and South Korea are poised for further development. Both countries have expressed interest in expanding cooperation in new areas such as healthcare, digital technologies, and renewable energy. However, to ensure the sustainable development of this cooperation, challenges such as geopolitical tensions, trade barriers, continuous cultural exchange, and the need for mutual understanding must be addressed.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the relationship between Uzbekistan and South Korea is a dynamic and multifaceted partnership built on mutual respect and cooperation. As ties in various sectors continue to strengthen, both nations can look forward to a future of prosperity and closer friendship.

From 2019 to 2023, the meetings and agreements signed between Uzbekistan and South Korea significantly strengthened the strategic partnership between the two countries. These agreements mainly focused on creating new opportunities in the economic, technological, and energy sectors, playing an important role in introducing Korean technologies and investments in Uzbekistan.


Over the past thirty years, the areas of partnership between the Republic of Korea and Uzbekistan have expanded significantly within both bilateral and multilateral frameworks. However, it is important to note that the absence of direct land transport links between the two countries complicates their cooperation, affecting the cost and delivery times of transported goods. Therefore, it would be beneficial to consider measures aimed at addressing such shortcomings.

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<sup>44</sup> [Mirziyoyevning Janubiy Koreyaga tashrifidan nimalar kutilyapti? \(amerikaovozi.com\)](https://amerikaovozi.com/mirziyoyevning-janubiy-koreyaga-tashrifidan-nimalar-kutilyapti/)

<sup>45</sup> <https://senat.uz/international-cooperation/post-487>





The development of transport and logistics relations between the two countries will create good opportunities. This will also provide an opportunity to increase broadcasting, the exchange of transport means, and the strengthening of trade relations.

As economic relations develop, trade, investments, and innovations between the two countries will further strengthen economic relations by creating new jobs, facilitating technology exchange, and merging or pooling economic organizations.

For the new administration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, promising areas of cooperation with South Korea include expanding collaboration in the fields of energy, transport, and logistics, as well as implementing new projects in mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, textiles, and infrastructure development. Moreover, South Korea's experience in democratic transition, economic diversification, human capital, education, and scientific fields could be beneficial for Uzbekistan. Agreements on enhancing bilateral cooperation to assist Uzbekistan in joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) are also a priority in the Uzbekistan-Korea partnership.

Thus, we have concluded that South Korea has succeeded in creating a national model of "soft power" that can compete with the "soft power" of countries like Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The presence of corporations in the country that produce high-tech products, from smartphones to cars, has elevated the South Korean brand to unprecedented heights. By introducing modern technologies and innovations, Korea has managed to preserve its traditional charm, culture, and customs.

Therefore, South Korea's foreign policy in Central Asian countries (including Uzbekistan) has been highly effective. South Korea was able to quickly and successfully implement this policy due to several factors:

- First, in the 1990s, Russia significantly weakened its influence in the Central Asian republics, leading to growing interest from Japan and South Korea in cooperating with these countries.

- Second, as for South Korea, there is a strong Korean diaspora in Uzbekistan, which serves not only as a living bridge between the two countries but also as an active element in the development of bilateral relations.

- Third, South Korea has created an image of itself as a technologically advanced country, a leader in solving global issues, and a pioneer in economic and democratic progress. This resonates with Central Asian countries. The popularity of Korean culture and sports, the successful operation of human resource



development centers, and active humanitarian exchanges reflect the interest of the region's population in "the country of Korea."

At the same time, it should be noted that despite all the positive results of "soft power" policies in this region, several unresolved issues remain, including the problem of population employment. In Central Asian countries, unemployment rates range from 40% to 83%, which contributes to high levels of labor migration, particularly to Russia. Both Japan and South Korea have achieved great results through the effective implementation of soft power policies.

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