

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST ANALYSIS OF COMPREHENSIVE CHINESE- UZBEK RELATIONS (2017-2023)

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ABSTRACT	KEY WORDS
<p>The article reviews Chinese-Uzbek relations, focusing on distinct spheres of cooperation, namely economic, cultural, security along with the participation in international organizations. By using the constructivist framework, the study highlights the way shared identities and social constructs have shaped bilateral relations. Through the analysis of statistics, official agreements and historical exchanges this article sets a goal to showcase profound ways in which constructivism has influenced the dynamics of Chinese-Uzbek relations. The research explores the evolving nature of cooperation in the areas provided and emphasizes the strategic significance of partnership in light of regional stability and mutual prosperity.</p>	<p>BRI, China and Uzbekistan Trade and Cooperation Zone, SCO, Han Dynasty, Zhang Qian, Timurid Empire, Tang Dynasty, The Strategic Partnership Agreement (1998), Hu Jintao, Confucius Institute in Tashkent, China-Uzbekistan Youth Exchange Program, UN.</p>

Introduction

From the Silk Road connections of ancient times, the intriguing relations between China and Uzbekistan in international relations have graduated to a modern strategic partnership that incorporates economic, cultural, and security dimensions. The bilateral relationship has changed profoundly since Uzbekistan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, reflecting changes in the balance of power in Central Asia and the expanded influence of China across the Eurasian continent. This current research therefore explains how legacies from the past, cultural links, and contemporary interests in geopolitics come together to explain this complex relationship between these two countries, especially with respect to their partnership and how it influences regional stability and development. The relevance of the research is also especially well-timed against the background of unprecedented changes that Central Asia has been going through, with China's BRI and a shift in the dynamics of great power competition. Uzbekistan is of strategic importance to China because it is the most populous country in Central Asia and also has historically played a major cultural and commercial role. Moreover, the recent acceleration of economic cooperation, as evinced by the \$14 billion bilateral trade by 2023, and the creation of the China-Uzbekistan Trade and Cooperation Zone in 2017, points to the timeliness of the analysis.

The main research question that this paper addresses is: How do constructed identities and shared norms shape the evolution of China-Uzbekistan relations, and what implications does this have for

regional dynamics? In the comprehensive answering of this central question, the following subsidiary questions have to be taken into consideration: First, how do historical and cultural ties influence contemporary diplomatic relations? What are economic interests and initiatives, such as BRI, in the advance of the two countries' cooperation, and what is their significance? What is the role and impact of security-related interests and concerns for regional stability? And finally, within this framework, what implications are there for how Uzbekistan will balance its relationships with other major powers, mainly Russia and the United States?

Theoretically, this research is based on the constructivist approach, by which social constructs, identity, and international norms set a state's behavior. This conceptual approach allows for an in-depth analysis of how the self-view of both countries and their mutually developed understanding influence their respective diplomatic strategies. The research combines historical analysis, examination of diplomatic documents, analysis of economic data, and assessment of cultural exchange programs within a mixed-methods approach. Special attention is paid to how both nations construct their interests and identities through bilateral interactions and multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The relationship between China and Uzbekistan is important to understand for several reasons: it shows how middle powers navigate their relations with rising global powers in an increasingly multipolar world, how China extends its influence in Central Asia, which bears upon China's foreign policy strategy, and helps explain the shifting dynamics of regional integration and cooperation in Central Asia - a region whose strategic importance is growing.

Without the systematic analysis of this bilateral relationship, there would be major gaps in the understanding of various critical issues: the nature of the change in power relations in Central Asia, the effectiveness of China's strategies for diplomatic and economic engagement, and the role of historical and cultural ties in modern international relations. Policymakers, in the absence of such analysis, would lack important insights necessary to deal with the complex dynamics of Central Asian geopolitics effectively.

The paper is organized into five major sections. The second section, after this introduction, presents the historical context and theoretical framework, discussing how the evolution of China-Uzbekistan relations reflects aspects of international relations theory, in particular, constructivism. The third section discusses economic cooperation and encompasses trade patterns, investment flows, and the influence of BRI. The fourth section discusses security cooperation and cultural exchange in order to explore how these elements complement the economic links. The last section synthesizes findings and discusses implications for regional dynamics and international relations theory.

The paper, therefore, via the structured analysis undertaken, is located at the interface of scholarly inquiry into, as well as policy formulation concerning, China's engagement with the Central Asian states and broader implications for regional stability and development, drawing special emphasis upon constructed identities and shared interests that underpin international relations.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Sino-Uzbek relations calls for a careful selection of basic theoretical frameworks that could, in particular, be useful in capturing the complication of the bilateral relations between them. Against this backdrop, the paper then considers two prominent approaches in the area, namely post-structuralism and constructivism. The respective comparative strengths and weaknesses of each approach are then analyzed against explaining the nature of their dynamics.

Post-structuralism emphasizing the deconstruction of language, meaning and identity provides a nuanced lens for understanding international relations. First, the post-structural approach more often focuses on discourse while negating material factors. This would strongly fall short in applying a discursive analysis where economic interests, trade agreements, and geopolitical strategies are between China and Uzbekistan. For example, the Belt and Road Initiative manifests the very physical form that China's economic longings about Central Asia take-an issue hardly captured by purely discursively framed approaches. The material level of this interaction becomes an important point that needs attention in such dynamic analysis.

It also tends to relegate the question of power in the relations between states to the periphery. In the case of Sino-Uzbek relations, this is manifested by the economic leverages that China has to influence the decisions and policies of Uzbekistan. A post-structuralist approach may fall short of explaining how this power actually functions in practical ways, while concentrating on the fluid nature of identities and overlooking the concrete influences of power relations.

Furthermore, the contextual limitations of post-structuralism are seen in trying to understand the historical and cultural links between China and Uzbekistan. The close historic relations along the Silk Road and contemporary cultural flows will be important to their relations, but these facets might be obscured by overreliance on discourse about abstract levels. Also, post-structuralism neglects the states' agency as a rational actor all too often.

This proactive agency in managing its relations with China, Russia, and Western countries is probably what Uzbekistan's diplomacy would be undertaking, which a post-structuralist perspective would fail to grasp. The lack of focus on agency is probably what restricts the theory in explanation. Finally, the excessively theoretical framework of post-structuralism is bound to lead to a divorce of interpretation from the real-world implications. Practical aspects, such as concrete diplomatic negotiations or economic agreements, are very important for understanding the intricacies of Chinese-Uzbek relations, yet they sometimes get generalized in such a way as to mask their importance.

In contrast, constructivism provides a better prism through which to assess Chinese-Uzbek relations. As a theory, constructivism explains the role of social constructs, identities, and the importance of international norms. It provides a balanced approach by integrating both material and ideational factors. The theory postulates that states are influenced not just by their material interests but also by the identities and interests developed through interactions¹.

More detailed understanding of how China and Uzbekistan perceive one another and how such perceptions are entailed in their foreign policy approaches is given by constructivism. Constructivism can address the said aspects to the historical and cultural relations due to the Silk Road, mutual interests in security and economic development. This theory also emphasizes the role of states acknowledging that Uzbekistan actively manages its relationship with China while balancing ties with other powers.

In addition, constructivism's emphasis on the evolution of identities and norms closely corresponds with the dynamic nature of international relations in Central Asia. It might explain how such emerging narratives and identity both China and Uzbekistan have been building in the light of regional and global restructuring processes.

In sum, while post-structuralism may be rich in insight into the complexity of meaning and identity, it is less effective in attempting to explain Chinese-Uzbek relations because it does not deal with

¹ International Affairs Forum. (n.d.). Constructivism in international relations. International Affairs Forum.

material realities, power dynamics, and agency. Constructivism, though integrative, offers wider frameworks that encompass the nuances effectively in these interactions, which makes it more suitable for analysis in this context.

Historical Background

The connections between China and Uzbekistan go far deeper than the Silk Road, a route of trade exchange and cultural interaction that was initiated several centuries ago. This network of pathways used to exchange goods on land linked China all the way to the Mediterranean during the times when it was possible, including silk, spices, and precious metals, along with ideas and cultural practices. During the Han Dynasty-from 206 BCE to 220 CE-Chinese envoys like Zhang Qian laid routes and developed trade relations with Central Asian cultures². In the 8th century the region turned into a center for the spread of Islam and a fusion of Persian, Arab and Turkic cultures. The Timurid Empire (1370-1506) based in Samarkand, enriched the cultural framework, fostering interactions between Chinese and Uzbek merchants³. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the development of trade relations gave Chinese merchants and diplomats an opportunity to form a link directly with Central Asia⁴.

Uzbekistan represented a highly important cultural and commercial center, with such cities as Samarkand and Bukhara. At that particular moment in history, this cross-cultural exchange laid down the background for mutual influences that have survived to be traced even nowadays in their cuisines, architectures, and languages. The spirit of the Silk Road continues to echo in present relations, as both countries contemplate reworking those historic relations into some new initiatives. Such interaction is well reflected in various archaeological sites of Uzbekistan through artefacts found, such as textiles and ceramics, depicting both Chinese and local artistic expressions.

Since its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has pursued the redefinition of foreign relations with China. The official diplomatic relations were finally established in 1992⁵. This marked the beginning of a strategic partnership between them. The Strategic Partnership Agreement laid down in 1998 set the stage for expanding political, economic, and cultural cooperation⁶. This partnership was driven more by the ambitions of economic growth on the part of Uzbekistan and the eagerness of China to secure energy resources and greater involvement in Central Asia.

Early into the 2000s, these regional threats of security and economic instability in the region became relevant again for China and Uzbekistan. The strategic location of Uzbekistan has turned it into a vital player in China's overall Central Asian strategy resulting in efforts to improve connectivity and trade. This 2005 visit to Uzbekistan by Chinese President Hu Jintao showed that confidence, eventually culminating in several agreements after this visit and thus giving a way forward to the beginnings of future cooperation⁷.

² UNESCO. (n.d.). Uzbekistan | Silk Roads Programme

³ Waugh, D. C. (2010). Expedition Magazine | The Silk Roads in History.

⁴ Lumen Learning. (n.d.). Trade under the Tang Dynasty.

⁵ Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the United Kingdom. (2023). Uzbekistan-China: The centuries-old foundations of modern successful cooperation.

⁶ Xiong, G. (2011). Mutual trust and cooperation have an effect on bilateral relationship. China Daily.

⁷ Embassy of the People's Republic of China. (2005). Hu Jintao holds talks with Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

Economic Cooperation

The trade between the two states reached about \$14 billion by 2023, steeply compared to the preceding years.⁸ Such growth enabled different factors, for example: improvement in cooperation under the BRI and among other joint projects.

Besides the BRI, the China-Uzbekistan Trade and Cooperation Zone, established in 2017, has also been highly instrumental in industrial cooperation and facilitating trade. More than 100 Chinese enterprises have been attracted to this zone, thus facilitating technology transfer and creating thousands of jobs in Uzbekistan⁹.

Furthermore, the construction of renewable energy projects such as solar and wind facilities demonstrates the dedication of both countries to sustainable development. By 2023, the renewable energy capacity of Uzbekistan would have been scaled up, and by 2030, one-quarter of the total amount of energy is planned to be derived from renewable sources¹⁰. These are meant not just to meet energy needs but also to be in tune with world trends toward environmentally friendly economies.

The volume of trade and investment has been on a constant rise, reflecting the broader trend in economic integration for mutual benefit. China is turning out to be one of the major trading partners for Uzbekistan, with much-needed capital and technology for modernization, while Uzbekistan is trying to diversify its economy and dependence on traditional markets.

The Analysis of Chinese-Uzbek Relations

National identities are also bound to play their part in shaping diplomatic relations. Uzbekistan, as the leading country in Central Asia, projects its foreign policy and interaction with China. The self-concept and diplomacy of Uzbekistan have deep roots in the historical narrative of being a bridge between East and West. The above identity cements its place in the negotiations and cooperation with the PRC, while Uzbekistan tries to position itself as a regional player able to balance the relationships with several major countries, including the Russian Federation and the United States.

On the other hand, the way China perceives itself as a rising global power influences its approach to Uzbekistan. China sees Uzbekistan as more than just a partner, it is also considered a strategic ally in strengthening China's geopolitical power in Central Asia. The nature of their interactions is shaped by the interplay of countries' identities creating a relationship based on mutual respect and shared aspirations.

Uzbekistan's recent efforts to position itself as a hub for trade and investment in Central Asia are in line with China's broader goals in the region. By promoting itself as a central player Uzbekistan seeks to attract foreign investment and boost its economic profile aligning with China's goal of expanding Belt and Road network. The cooperation between China and Uzbekistan is predominantly based on constructed interests involving economic development and regional stability. For both states, economic growth is in priority as shown in their collaborative projects. Mutual norms consisting of non-interference in internal affairs as well as respect for sovereignty are the factors facilitating partnership. These norms are particularly important in a region where historical grievances and power dynamics often make diplomatic relations more complex.

⁸ Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Malaysia. (2024). Infographics: Uzbekistan's trade with China in 2023.

⁹ Khitakhunov, A. (n.d.). Economic cooperation between Uzbekistan and China. Eurasian Research Institute.

¹⁰ International Energy Agency. (2022). A solar energy roadmap for Uzbekistan by 2030: Solar energy policy in Uzbekistan: A roadmap.

For instance, Uzbekistan's emphasis on sovereignty rhymes with the Chinese principle of non-interference, hence setting an appropriate environment for cooperation. Convergence of interests and norms in this respect underlines how constructivism provides the framework through which to understand the dynamics of their relationship beyond mere transactional interactions.

Indeed, recognizing mutual benefit did pave the way for a better dialogue between the two countries. Various bilateral committees and working groups are instrumental in the maintenance of continued discussions on trade, security, and cultural exchange¹¹. This represents their commitment to the building of a relationship based on constructively defined interests favoring the long-term objectives of the two countries.

The Influence of External Actors

Russia and the United States have a significant influence on the identities and interests of both China and Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's historical ties with Russia form a complex landscape as the country navigates its relationships with both China and Russia. The influence of China in Central Asia inspires Uzbekistan to be strategic, using a balance of relations with Russia while continuing further cooperation with China. For example, this sensitive balance is manifested in the very participation of Uzbekistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. While China and Russia are in the driving seat of the SCO, Uzbekistan attempts to use this multilateral platform to express its interests and strengthen its regional position. This scenario illustrates how external factors determine the identity and interests of countries supporting constructivist perspective on Chinese-Uzbek relations.

In addition, the United States' interest in Central Asia introduces another layer of complication. As the United States' target is to offset China's influence in the region, Uzbekistan's task consists of carefully navigating its relationships with all three states. This strategic positioning enables Uzbekistan to maximize its leverage and guarantee that it can extract the maximum advantages from its partnerships.

Case Studies

Cultural Cooperation

The foundation of the China-Uzbekistan relationship has been cultural cooperation, relying on common historical ties and aiming at the development of mutual understanding. Such a partnership has been strengthened through numerous measures that would help facilitate cultural exchange, educational collaboration, and artistic cooperation.

Among such initiatives, one of the most popular is the Confucius Institute in Tashkent, which opened in 2017. It serves as a place where both the Chinese language and cultural traditions are taught in Uzbekistan. By 2023, it has taken more than 1000 students in classes of the language with programs from beginner to advanced¹². Besides the language classes, the Institute runs various cultural workshops, shows Chinese movies, and even culinary master classes that allow students to get acquainted with the culinary art. Various events are organized, such as gatherings of the Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival, which all join the participants together in a community of appreciation. These events are avenues for cultural exchange, whereby the Uzbek people get the chance to experience traditional Chinese music, dances, and food.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2023, November 21). The first foreign ministers' strategic dialogue between China and Uzbekistan is held in Beijing.

¹² Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies. (n.d.). Uzbek-Chinese Institute of Confucius.

The next urgent element in the cultural sphere has become the youth exchange programs. Projects within the China-Uzbekistan Youth Exchange Program develop plans on the exchange of students for enabling the young generation to study in each other's countries. In 2023, under this program, 300 Uzbek students were given a chance to travel to China whereas Chinese students have taken a part in internships and cultural immersion experience in Uzbekistan¹³.

Security Cooperation

Security is also the point of cooperation between states taking into account the rising risks in the face of globalization. Both countries encounter shared security threats such as terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking particularly from groups namely the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) Their joint initiatives especially under the framework of SCO are directed to address these challenges and maintain regional stability.

SCO carried out a combined series of exercises called "Peace Mission 2023" in the territory of Russia where both countries took part. Working out strategies against terrorists, providing for border security, humanitarian aid, and much else-a true test for military contingents from China and Uzbekistan, plus representatives of the other SCO members¹⁴. Security cooperation between China and Uzbekistan is not confined to purely bilateral initiatives; both sides have actively taken part in regional discussions aimed at consolidating stability in Central Asia. Both nations have supported the peace processes in Afghanistan, well aware of the spillover consequences of instability onto their own borders. In the previous year, China and Uzbekistan co-hosted a security conference that convened regional stakeholders to discuss collaborative approaches against terrorism and drug trafficking.

Participation in the United Nations

Within the UN, China and Uzbekistan work together on a range of global issues comprising development, security and climate change. As a UN member, Uzbekistan has aligned its' policy with that of China's positions on several critical matters like counter-terrorism and regional stability. China supports Uzbekistan's initiatives in the UN aimed at promoting sustainable development goals (SDGs) and fostering cooperation in Central Asia¹⁵.

Both countries stand for a multipolar world and underline respect for national sovereignty flowing from their common statements and resolutions in the UN. Their cooperation includes peacekeeping; each of these countries makes its contribution to international peacemaking activities. This in turn increases their engagement with the UN, strengthening thereby their commitment to multilateralism and cementing their diplomatic relationship, which further cements the constructed identities of both states as responsible members of the international community.

Conclusion

The Sino-Uzbek relationship viewed through the prism of constructivism rests on a combination of identity and constructed interests built upon shared norms. Equally convoluted in both ways, their history from the long-standing Silk Road up to today is a base from which they interact with one

¹³ UzReport. (2023). Over 300 Uzbek students to study at Chinese universities.

¹⁴ Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (2022, August 26). Joint communique of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Defense Ministers' Meeting (24 August 2022, Tashkent).

¹⁵ Yunusova, Z. (2024). Current state and prospects for the development of Uzbek-Chinese relations of comprehensive strategic partnership. Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Republic of Kazakhstan.

another. This historical context not only calls for mutual respect but also determines their diplomatic approach: both nations attach great importance to cultural and economic cooperation.

The Uzbek identity positions Uzbekistan as a regional leader in Central Asia, at the same time guiding its foreign policy toward active engagement with China, combined with balancing in respect to other powers, most notably Russia and the United States. It may be regarded as a form of strategic maneuvering that reflects an invoked constructed identity intended for use by Uzbekistan in its pursuits of sovereignty and maximization of geopolitical leverage.

Meanwhile, the status of China as an emerging global player shapes its approach to Central Asia, within which Uzbekistan is considered a very important partner in the Belt and Road Initiative. This is not just about an economic project; instead, this is a very wide-ranging narrative of development goals that appeal to the aspirations for modernization and economic diversification of Uzbekistan. Mutual interests in these relations are to be seen in increasing trade volumes and the establishment of jointly administered economic zones—in other words, constructed interests translating into real dividends.

However, challenges remain unresolved at present, especially over the issue of regional security in which instability in Afghanistan, including an extremist threat, is so strong that a need has arisen for a collective response. The joint military exercises of China and Uzbekistan, as well as participation in multilateral forums, epitomize that both countries view the imperatives of addressing these concerns as binding. This is a strategic imperative and one in which the constructed norms of mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference that both nations have come to embrace are strongly reinforced.

Meanwhile, the prospects for further cooperation in areas of renewable energies and technology transfer are promising. Both countries are increasingly aware of the need for sustainability and economic resilience, with interests rapidly changing around the global economy to greener economics. It thus seems that a joint commitment is reflected in topical challenges while the partnership widens and is adaptive to future change.

Overall, constructivism thus provides a crystal-clear framework of analysis through which Chinese-Uzbek relations indicate excitedly how aspects of identity and common norms inform interaction. In this respect, the two countries interact unceasingly engage in an endless process of convolutions of their partnership, cultural understanding, integration of economies, and putting joint efforts on security. The fluctuating nature of this relationship within the evolving geopolitical dynamics does call for further research to enable both nations to understand effective ways of using their constructed identities and histories to meet the challenges of an open world.

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