

COUNTERTERRORISM WITHOUT BORDERS: U.S.–UZBEKISTAN COOPERATION IN THE GLOBAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

In the context of evolving global security challenges, U.S.–Uzbekistan cooperation in counterterrorism has become a key element of regional stability in Central Asia. Rooted in mutual interests and reinforced by geopolitical realities, the partnership focuses on combatting transnational threats such as terrorism, extremism, narcotics trafficking, and human smuggling. Uzbekistan has supported U.S. regional initiatives, including military logistics assistance, capacity-building in border control, and multilateral coordination mechanisms. According to U.S. Department of State reports, Uzbekistan remains a committed partner in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and has strengthened domestic counter-extremism policies. High-level engagements, such as the inaugural C5+1 dialogue and U.S.–Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Dialogue, reflect sustained deepening of strategic alignment between the two countries. Senior-level talks, such as the recent Tashkent meetings (January 2025), point to heightened strategic convergence between the two nations. This paper examines how bilateral programs cross boundaries, placing Uzbekistan within the global counterterrorism cooperation architecture, and placing it as a leading player in post-9/11 regional security diplomacy.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, United States, Security Cooperation, Centra Asia, counter terrorism, regional stability.

The war on terror has reshaped world security relations since the September 11 attacks. Central Asia, hitherto a peripheral region in American foreign policy, became increasingly important as a strategic buffer zone, particularly because of its geographical location close to Afghanistan. Within the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan was an important partner in counterterrorism and regional stabilization. This article discusses the development, extent, and future direction of U.S.–Uzbekistan counterterrorism cooperation within global security.

In 2018 President Donald J. Trump hosted President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan in the White House, this first historic visit was ushered in a new era of strategic partnership between the United States and Uzbekistan. Both President Trump and President Mirziyoyev condemned cowardly terrorist attacks against Afghanistan security forces and innocent civilians, and committed to expanding dialogue to

overcome the challenges facing Afghanistan. President Mirziyoyev pledged steadfast political support to the Government of Afghanistan and discussed the December 2017 visit of Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where the two leaders signed a series of landmark agreements to increase trade and develop critical infrastructure. President Trump recognized the important role that Uzbekistan plays in regional economic development and praised Uzbekistan's efforts to expand the development of trade and commercial ties with Afghanistan. He offered political support and planning consultations regarding Uzbekistan's railroad and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. In addition, Donald Trump acknowledged the United States' long-standing partnership with Uzbekistan in the fight against terrorism. He emphasized that, following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Uzbekistan provided the U.S. with critical logistical support and assisted in driving Al-Qaeda terrorists out of Afghanistan. During the visit, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev confirmed his full support for the U.S. President's South Asia strategy. The discussions included strengthening bilateral cooperation, sharing responsibility, and addressing regional security challenges—particularly Uzbekistan's initiatives aimed at ensuring stability in Afghanistan.

The two leaders condemned extremism and international terrorism, and vowed to strengthen cooperation against these common threats. They also committed to pursue agreements that will enhance interoperability and improve regional security, and noted the importance of strengthening the defense relationship by implementing the first-ever Five-Year Plan of Military Cooperation.

Following 9/11, Uzbekistan granted the U.S. access to the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) airbase, which facilitated military logistics in the Afghan war. The move was a reflection of Uzbekistan's intentions to join the international security arena. Bilateral relations intensified through collaborative exercises, border security assistance, and intelligence cooperation. The U.S. Department of State has always highlighted Uzbekistan's role in countering violent extremism and cross-border threats. As a member of the global coalition to defeat ISIS, Uzbekistan has accepted legislative reform and hosted regional counter-radicalization conferences.

Moreover, U.S.–Uzbekistan signed a Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement in 2016. For over a decade, several Central Asian countries have enabled U.S. logistical support for operations in Afghanistan through multiple transit agreements. The United States has \$79 million in open government-to-government sales cases with the Central Asian states under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system. Uzbekistan is purchasing equipment, valued at \$40 million, for its armed forces through a combination of national funds and Foreign Military Financing (FMF).

U.S.–Uzbekistan security cooperation extends beyond traditional military cooperation. Cooperative work targets the intersection of terrorism, drug trafficking,

and organized crime. Triangular cooperation with Afghanistan, such as anti-drug activity and intelligence sharing, reinforces Uzbekistan's role as a regional security facilitator. Trilateral meetings among Uzbekistan, the U.S., and Afghanistan during a 2020 gave priority to coordination in counter-narcotics and border security.

Recognizing that counterterrorism is not exclusively a military effort, the United States has supported Uzbekistan's initiatives on capacity building for law enforcement, education, and civil society. US-supported programs focus on countering violent extremism (CVE), police development, and community resilience building. Uzbek authorities have initiated religious tolerance classes, enabled through international actors, to challenge extremist narratives. These initiatives are aligned with Uzbekistan's internal modernization program and human rights commitments.

Strategic Dialogues and Institutional Mechanisms

Institutionalized the relationship by means of high-level political consultations between Washington and Tashkent. The Strategic Partnership Dialogue, revived in recent years, is an annual platform for deliberation on defense, governance, and education. Recognizing the serious threats posed by international terrorism, violent extremism, trafficking in persons, and transnational crime to both Uzbekistan and the United States, the two sides encouraged closer cooperation and increased exchanges to promote regional security. As stated in the U.S. State Department report of 2022, the relationship is "evolving from transactional to strategic" with increased emphasis on multilateralism and sustainable development. Security assistance includes training, equipment, and policy advisory mechanisms.

Additionally, both sides noted the necessity of meeting obligations and provisions under UN Security Council Resolution 2396 to counter terrorist travel. The United States announced it intends to provide over \$9 million in assistance this year to combat transnational organized crime and promote rule-of-law and anti-corruption initiatives. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan and discussed concrete steps to promote a meaningful reconciliation process. Uzbekistan emphasized its ongoing efforts to enhance economic, trade, educational, and cultural ties with Afghanistan and increase its connectivity with Central Asia, and both sides reaffirmed their support for outcomes from the May 27, 2020, U.S.-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Trilateral Meeting and subsequent working groups. The United States and Uzbekistan also reaffirmed their shared interest in advancing multilateral cooperation throughout the region, including through the C5+1 framework.

[U.S. policy on Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban to power: counterterrorism partnership with Uzbekistan.](#)

The first phase or approach was marked by the continuation of the fight against international terrorism, albeit outside the framework of direct military presence in the

country. The Biden administration announced the end of the war in Afghanistan, yet counterterrorism operations persisted. A notable example of this approach was the 2022 elimination of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on Afghan soil. Thus, Afghanistan's relevance in the U.S. foreign policy agenda was predominantly defined through the prism of counterterrorism.

In the process of re-establishing U.S.-Afghanistan relations, Uzbekistan can serve as a platform for mediation. Undoubtedly, following numerous accusations against the Taliban, the United States cannot fully restore ties with the movement. This process will require time, mediation, and multilateral formats. In this context, the format of U.S.-Uzbekistan cooperation may gain increased significance.

Firstly, the United States and Uzbekistan are strategic partners.

Secondly, both countries have prior experience cooperating on Afghan issues. During the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan provided an airbase. When American forces withdrew, the U.S. left behind part of its military equipment – specifically, 22 airplanes and 24 helicopters, most of which are still located in Uzbekistan, reflecting a level of trust between the two sides.

Thirdly, when the Trump administration demanded the return of U.S. military equipment from the Taliban and was met with refusal, Uzbekistan handed over seven Black Hawk helicopters that had been left on its territory. In doing so, Uzbekistan assisted the Trump administration in demonstrating to its electorate that the repatriation of U.S. military assets from Afghanistan was underway, thereby helping to preserve its political reputation.

Fourthly, Uzbekistan and the United States share similar views on Afghanistan. Both nations regard it as part of Central Asia and link security and stability to prospects for economic development. This commitment was reaffirmed by the President of Uzbekistan at the first “Central Asia – European Union” summit held in April 2025, where he emphasized the need for Afghanistan's active participation in major economic initiatives.

Fifthly, Uzbekistan is currently one of Afghanistan's two closest partners, along with China. This diplomatic advantage could be valuable for the United States in the context of the Afghan issue.

Thus, Uzbekistan stands out as one of the United States' potential partners in restoring ties with Afghanistan. Tashkent's position is grounded in the necessity of a coordinated international approach to Afghanistan. In this regard, Uzbekistan would welcome Washington's initiatives related to this country.

Uzbekistan continued its active role in the C5+1 regional CVE and FTF framework through virtual and hybrid CVE, repatriation, and R&R meetings and workshops; through online youth resilience building; and through community leader and R&R care provider training.

International and Regional Cooperation: Uzbekistan's multilateral CT/CVE engagements included the following (with organizer[s] in parentheses):

- The ministerial conference on developing a Joint Plan of Action for the implementation of the Global Counterterrorism Strategy in Central Asia (GOU, UN)
- The Counterterrorism cooperation roadmap (UNOCT)
- Third-country nationals returned from Syria and Iraq project (UNOCT, the UN Counterterrorism Center, UNICEF)
- The assessment, training plan, and conference on gender-sensitive approaches to the R&R of FTFs and their family members (the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, UNODC, UNICEF)
- The Strategic Concept Workshop (NATO)
- The Cross-Border and Cross-Sector Dialogue for Tolerance and Peace in Central Asia project (UNOCT, EU)
- The Countering Trafficking of Afghan Narcotics and Synthetic Drugs in Uzbekistan through the Establishment of Interagency Mobile Teams project (UNODC)
- Law Enforcement in Central Asia and Border Management in Central Asia programs (EU)
- The Enhancing Border Management and Security in Response to Terrorism Threats in Central Asia program (UNODC)
- The 17th Conference of the Central Asian Border Management Initiative (UNODC, OSCE)
- The 36th EAG Plenary Meeting (GOU, EAG)
- The Legalization of the Proceeds of Criminal Activities and Financing of Terrorism international conference (EAG, OSCE)

Through the SCO Regional Antiterrorist Structure (RATS SCO) framework, Uzbekistan participated in regional CT activities — including the Manesar Antiterror 2022 joint exercise hosted by the National Security Guard of India. Uzbekistan established a joint security commission with Iran to counter terrorism, “extremism,” and other transnational organized crimes. It also joined the first Central Asia-India Meeting of Secretaries of Security Councils. Uzbekistani law enforcement cooperates on terrorism detection and investigation with foreign countries.

U.S.–Uzbekistan counterterror partnership is an instance of a developing bilateral relationship in accordance with shared strategic interests and shared security concerns. From airbase logistics assistance to collective counter-extremism operations, the partnership has adjusted to meet new geopolitics. As threats persist in crossing borders, Uzbekistan's proactive engagement in international counterterror efforts

illustrates its new status as an actor in regional security. Increased cooperation offers both countries a strategic advantage in addressing future challenges within the global security architecture.

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