ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКАЯ И СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ГЕОГРАФИЯ

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GEOGRAPHICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS OF UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

Abstract. *The article analyzes the dynamics of relations of the Republic of Uzbekistan with neighbouring countries of Central Asia in recent years, built on the basis of the updated Concept of foreign policy activities of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The geopolitical, geo-economic and transport and transit opportunities of the unique geographical position of the Republic of Uzbekistan, located in the centre of the geopolitical region of Central Asia, are considered. Attention is focused on changes in the structure of trade and economic relations of the republic with the countries of Central Asia. The relations between Uzbekistan and neighbouring Afghanistan, the history of which is divided into two stages, are separately analyzed, and the dynamics of relations between Uzbekistan and its southern neighbour are studied. The activities of Uzbekistan in integration organizations aimed at improving regional cooperation and strengthening cultural ties were also studied. In conclusion, some proposals are given aimed at further improving good neighbourly relations between the countries of the region.*

Key words: *region, interstate relations, cooperation relations, the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, neighbourly relations, equality, strategy.*

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ГЕОГРАФИЧЕСКИЕ И ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ФАКТОРЫ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ УЗБЕКИСТАНА

Аннотация. *В статье анализируется динамика отношений Республики Узбекистан с соседними странами Центральной Азии в последние годы, строящихся на основе обновлённой Концепции внешнеполитической деятельности Республики Узбекистан. Рассматриваются геополитические, геоэкономические и транспортно-транзитные возможности уникального географического положения Республики Узбекистан, расположенной в центре геополитического региона Центральной Азии. Акцентировано внимание на изменениях в структуре торгово-экономических связей республики со странами Центральной Азии. Отдельно проанализированы взаимоотношения Узбекистана с соседним Афганистаном, история которых поделена на два этапа, изучена динамика взаимоотношений Узбекистана с южным соседом. Также изучена деятельность Узбекистана в интеграционных организациях, нацеленных на совершенствование регионального сотрудничества и укрепление культурных связей. В заключении даны некоторые предложения, направленные на дальнейшее улучшение добрососедских отношений между странами региона.*

Ключевые слова: *регион, межгосударственные отношения, партнерские отношения, принцип невмешательства во внутренние дела, добрососедские отношения, равенство, стратегия.*

Introduction and problem statement. Central Asia, located in the middle of the Eurasian continent, is of unique importance among the regions of the world that are unified in

terms of territorial, economic-social, historical-cultural, and other aspects. In this area, which includes the countries of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the competing interests of the leading global countries intersect. Because the region has huge energy and mineral resources, cultural and civilizational diversity, and, most importantly, human potential and labour resources. At the same time, there is the threat of international terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking, which are located directly near the main source of instability. This ensures that the countries in the region work together and in unity [24]. Taking into account such circumstances, in the future, Central Asia will show a positive pace of joint development. Regional relations are increasing in all spheres. The three most pressing problems in the region – security, state borders, and water use – are being solved on a systematic basis. The adoption by the UN General Assembly of the resolution "Strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability, and sustainable development in the Central Asian region" in June 2018 brought the countries of this region closer together by the world community, and thus their joint efforts – is a clear confirmation that it is recognized that it is capable of solving common problems with actions to ensure security and sustainable development.

Study of the problem. Due to its important geopolitical location, the Central Asian region has been studied scientifically by Western and Eastern experts. In particular, foreign researchers E.Shuler [23], M.Catudal [4], N.Megoran [14], P.Raton [17] and G.Robinson [18] conducted research on the region's geopolitical situation, transnational problems, and enclave/exclave problems. D'Olivier Farran [15], M.Pietkiewicz [16], B.Fazandeiro [6], Y.Rozhkov-Yurievsky [19] and Central Asian experts R.Gabdulhakov [8], A.Aubakirova [3], V.N.Fedorko [7], S.Safoyev [20], S.Alamanov [2], M.Saidov [21], M.Suyunov [22], A.T.Jalilov [9], Sh.Jumakhanov [10, 12], A.M.Toshpulatov [25], and other research and scientific works are important.

The aim and objectives of the work. The purpose and objectives of the research The main goal of this study is to analyze friendly relations with neighbouring countries in recent years based on the main directions of the concept of foreign political activity in the Republic of Uzbekistan.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks were defined in the work and found their solutions in the research process: analysis of the political and geographical location of Uzbekistan; description of trade, economic, and cultural relations of Uzbekistan with neighbouring countries based on the concept of conducting foreign policy; to shed light on the good neighbourly relations that are forming in the Central Asian region from the point of view of Uzbekistan's position; to analyze the strengthening of the geopolitical and geoeconomic position of Uzbekistan as a member of the integration associations.

Materials and methods. The principles of territoriality, historicity, and complexity, as well as cartographic, historical-geographical, comparative, and statistical analysis, were used in the coverage of this article. The main part of the materials related to this topic corresponds to the official statements of government representatives. Also, statistical information was used to help analyze the geopolitical situation of the region.

Results and its discussion. Since ancient times, the Central Asian region has piqued the interest of far and near neighbouring countries. History itself is a witness to the aggressive actions of the ruler of Iran, Darius I, and Alexander the Great, aimed at conquering the territories of Central Asia in the period before Christ. In later periods, the conquest of Central Asia by the Kushans, the attack of the Turkic Khanate on Eastern Turkestan, the conquest of Central Asia by the Arab caliphate at the VII-VIII centuries AD, the invasion of Central Asia by the powerful Mongol Empire led by Genghis Khan in the beginning of the XIII century, and the struggle between Czarist Russia and Great Britain for the region at the end of the 19th century testify to the great geopolitical importance of the region.

So, what are the appealing features of Central Asia that pique the interest of many powers? *First of all,* the region is strategically located at the intersection of the historical "Great

Silk Road" and the trade route from India to the northern countries – Russia and Europe. *Secondly*, Central Asia, with its rich natural resources, has attracted the attention of many rulers since ancient times and has been among the geopolitical interests of the major states of those times. This, in turn, encouraged major countries to take active action in the region by announcing that Central Asia would be included in their geopolitical interests. The area is in the centre of the mainland. After all, according to the pragmatic geopolitical views of Nicholas Spykman, an American scientist and professor of international relations, whoever controls Eurasia will decide the fate of the world. Such approaches, of course, have always increased interest in the region.

Currently, the issues of systematic communication, taking into account the interests of all parties, and the development of mutually beneficial cooperation based on reasonable compromise are supported by all the countries of Central Asia. In this regard, Uzbekistan, located in the centre of the region, is of particular importance.

The Republic of Uzbekistan is an increasingly developing independent state. Its microgeographical location is advantageous due to its borders with all of the region's countries. As a result, the characteristics of Uzbekistan's territorial space and geographical location are crucial in the formulation and implementation of domestic and foreign policy. Currently, the country acts as a link between neighbouring countries. All of this, as well as the republic's integration into the global economy and the attraction of foreign investments, transforms the country into a one-of-a-kind regional centre of mutually beneficial cooperation, transit of goods, and capital [13]. It has established such a foreign policy with the four nuclear powers around it – Russia, China, India, and Pakistan – that it does not follow a foreign policy based on favouring or close military cooperation with any of them. Due to the fact that the Republic of Uzbekistan, as a sovereign state, conducts a policy of close neighbourliness with equal rights and mutually beneficial cooperation in the political, economic, and social spheres, a stable situation has arisen in the country, and Uzbekistan is steadily developing along the path it has chosen. In the last two years, the country's President, Sh.M. Mirziyoev, has made official visits to neighbouring Turkmenistan (April 29, 2021; June 10-11, 2021; October 12, 2022) and Kazakhstan (October 12, 2022). Also, the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Sadir Japarov, came to Uzbekistan on a state visit on March 11 and 12, 2021. These high-level visits have become important in intensifying mutually friendly, close-neighbourly, and beneficial relations between Central Asian countries [11].

It should be noted that in today's socio-political situation in the world, this state of stability can turn into instability at any moment under the influence of internal and external factors [1]. In Afghanistan, which borders the southern regions of Central Asia, the radical change in the political environment beginning in 2021–control of the state administration by representatives of the Taliban movement–will necessitate further improvement in attitudes toward the region's military-political situation. The conflicts in Afghanistan that have lasted for more than forty years have completely destroyed the country's still-underdeveloped economy.

As a result of the war that has been going on for several years, a new system of governance has been formed in Afghanistan, which is adjacent to the southern regions of Central Asia. The interests of the countries of Central Asia are compatible with the joint creation of international transport corridors and international transport infrastructure in the region, which helps to reduce transport costs in the delivery of export products from the countries of the region to world markets. The aggravation of the political situation in Afghanistan may delay the achievement of these goals. In this regard, it is appropriate to analyse the relations between independent Uzbekistan and Afghanistan in two stages.

1. The government of Afghanistan is under the administration of the republic.

2. Afghanistan's government is in the process of forming the government of the "Taliban" movement and the administration of the emirate.

The first stage. The long-term war in Afghanistan between the government and the "Taliban" movement became the main obstacle for the Central Asian countries to open new

transport communications that would allow access to ports in "warm seas" and, in this way, to integrate into the world economy [11]. In this regard, the Tashkent conference on Afghanistan was held in March 2018. The "Tashkent Declaration", which was adopted at the end of the conference and expressed the unanimous position of all its participants, became a unique programme for establishing peace in Afghanistan. It was after this conference that international efforts aimed at starting the negotiation process with the participation of all political forces in Afghanistan, including the Taliban movement, became more active. As a result of finding peace in Afghanistan, one of the "pain points" not only in Central Asia but also in the world will be eliminated. Because, in addition to having a terrorist and extremist "function", it is also a centre of the drug business. Taking the aforementioned circumstances into consideration, the region's countries have been working diligently to improve the situation in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's bilateral cooperation on the Afghanistan issue, in particular, can be seen in the following:

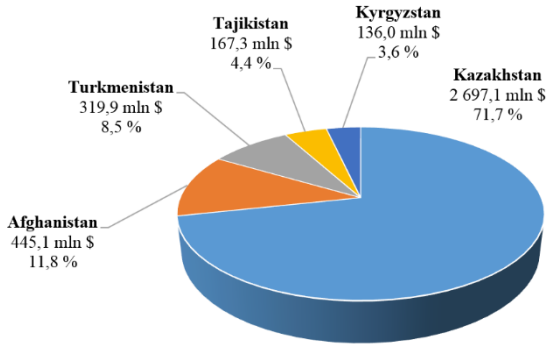
• Implementation of the construction project of the 260 km long "Surkhan – Puli-Khumri" power transmission line from Surkhandarya region to Puli-Khumri, Boghlan region of Afghanistan;

• Implementation of the joint project on the construction of the Mazari Sharif – Herat railway line;

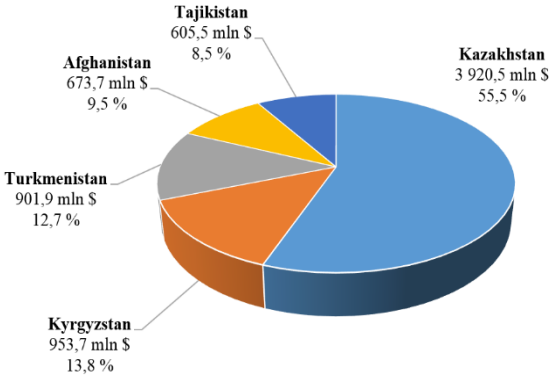
• Opening of the "Uzbek-Afghan" educational centre in Termez;

• Establishment of cooperative joint ventures with the participation of Afghan capital, etc.

As a result of the strengthening of mutual cooperation, relations with Afghanistan have also accelerated, and in 2021, foreign trade increased by 151.4% compared to 2015 (Figure 1).



Foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan with neighbouring countries in 2015 (Total: 3 765,4 mln $)



Foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan with neighbouring countries in 2021 (Total: 7 055,3 mln $)

Fig. 1. Foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan with neighbouring countries (2015-2021)

In general, Uzbekistan-Afghanistan relations were dynamically changed at this stage. As a result of the principle of "New Uzbekistan–New Neighbourhood," in the last five years, relations had steadily improved. For example, in 2015, the foreign trade turnover of Uzbekistan with Afghanistan amounted to 445.1 million dollars, and in 2021, this indicator reached 673.7 million dollars, etc.

The second stage. For more than two decades (since October 2001), US troops have been stationed in Afghanistan under the pretense of "regional security." During this period, there have been constant power struggles between the American-backed Afghan government and religious-fundamentalist groups. After many years of effort and excessive socio-economic spending, finally, on April 14, 2021, US President Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan starting May 1, 2021.

After the withdrawal of the American army from Afghanistan for the specified period, the "Taliban" movement in Afghanistan began to occupy the territories of the country one after

another. Despite strong opposition from the official government, the balance of power began to shift rapidly. Of course, the Taliban's lightning-fast attacks have left the Afghan government and the international community in the lurch. No one expected Kabul to fall before the withdrawal of American troops and its allies was completed. Officially, on August 15, 2021, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan "collapsed" and the country was almost completely taken over by the Taliban. On September 6, the last unoccupied territory, Panjshir, was captured, and Afghanistan was completely under the control of the "Taliban".

At the first press conference on August 17, 2021, the representative of the Taliban emphasised that they are fighting for the creation of a state governed by Islamic Sharia, that they will not interfere with neighbouring countries, that they will not try to take revenge on anyone, and that women's rights in Sharia will be protected.

As mentioned, since the third quarter of 2021, the situation in Afghanistan bordering Uzbekistan has completely changed. But taking into account that such a situation may happen someday, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries have balanced the geopolitical situation based on twenty years of experience.

Uzbekistan has always paid great attention to the issue of establishing peace in Afghanistan. In particular, the First President of the country, I.A. Karimov, always came up with initiatives to establish peace and provide humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and even emphasised that this issue should be approached more seriously from the podium of the UN Security Council. In the later period, this issue became the centre of attention. For example, it is noteworthy that on August 27, 2021, the President of Uzbekistan, Sh.M. Mirziyoev, mentioned the following regarding the peace talks with the Taliban representatives in 2018: "We held talks with the Taliban two years ago, and when no other country did this, I spoke with them. I gave an assignment on communication. Their leader in Doha, Mr. Birodar, promised that not a single shot would be fired on the side of Uzbekistan. It is natural for us to communicate with them because they keep their promises. We need the peace of our people. I will talk to any side, no matter who it is, for the sake of the peace of our people. Our analyses two years ago indicated that such a situation would occur in Afghanistan". This relationship, based on the principle of "New Uzbekistan – New Neighbourhood," serves as a basis for establishing positive geopolitical and geoeconomic relations with the new Afghan government– the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

On the basis of new relations, the member of the negotiation group of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the press secretary of the political office of the "Taliban" movement, Mukhammad Suhail Shahin, sent a congratulatory letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the independence of Uzbekistan on behalf of his leadership: "We sincerely congratulate the leadership and people of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Independence Day. We want to establish effective and friendly relations with neighbouring Uzbekistan. We confirm our interest in continuing the implementation of infrastructure projects in Afghanistan with the participation of Uzbekistan, in particular the construction of railways and electricity transmission networks," the letter says. This is the most correct and beneficial way for both parties.

After all, the strengthening of general security and stability creates favourable conditions for the construction of roads and railways, pipelines transporting natural resources, and the development of regional and transregional trade. As a result, Uzbekistan will be able to access the Indian Ocean in the direction "Termiz – Herat – Karachi".

It should be noted that the government of Uzbekistan has adopted the concept of foreign political activity of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which consists of the following main aspects, in order to maintain a stable situation in the region [5]. Including:

1. "The Republic of Uzbekistan reserves the right to form alliances, enter into commonwealths and other interstate structures, as well as withdraw from them, in accordance with the highest interests of the state, the people, its well-being and security, the priorities of

the country's modernization, the current national legislation, and accepted international obligations;

2. The Republic of Uzbekistan shall take political, economic, and other measures to prevent its involvement in military conflicts and tense situations in neighbouring countries and shall not allow foreign military bases and facilities to be placed on its territory.

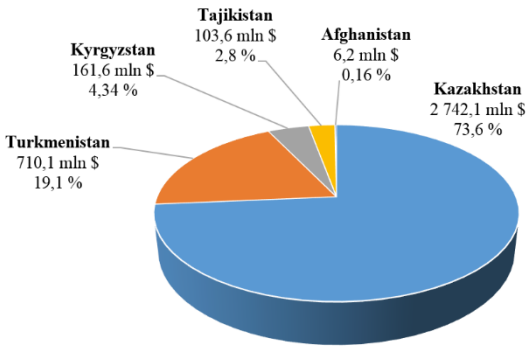
3. Uzbekistan pursues a pacifist policy, does not participate in military-political blocs, and reserves the right to withdraw from any interstate structures if they become military-political blocs.

4. In accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Law "On Defence," and the Military Doctrine, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Uzbekistan are created only for the purpose of protecting the sovereignty of the state and the integrity of the country's territory, preserving the peaceful life and safety of the population, and do not participate in peacekeeping operations abroad".

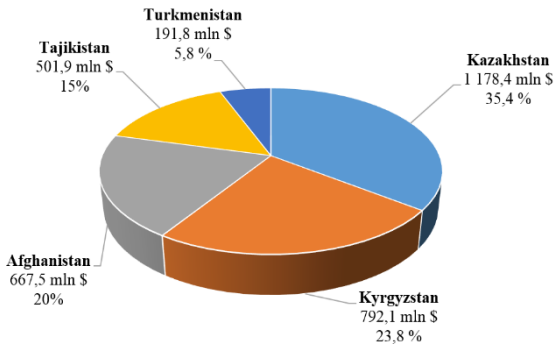
Uzbekistan is focusing on improving the economic and social situation by ensuring regional integrity, strengthening neighbourly relations, and accelerating international relations. Especially in the second decade of the 21st century, high indicators of trade with neighbouring countries were achieved. For the first time, cooperation between inter-regional and border regions was established, and mutual relations at all levels became active. At this point, the President of the country, Sh.M. Mirziyoev, said: “In 2017, we found solutions to many sensitive issues such as joint use of water resources with our neighbours, demarcation of borders, opening of crossing points, restoration, and expansion of transport traffic”. In particular, the exclave/enclave, and other problematic border areas between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the unfinished delimitation work with Tajikistan, are being positively resolved.

Trade and economic relations have also become significantly more active. Uzbekistan's trade with Central Asian countries has almost doubled. All countries in the region are benefiting from the growing pace of cooperation. For example, according to the data of 2021, Kazakhstan has the largest share (55.5%) in foreign trade with neighbouring countries, while Tajikistan's indicators in this regard (8.5%) are slightly lower (Figure 1). In addition, if we look at the internal composition of the foreign trade turnover of countries, export and import relations have different indicators (Figure 2).

The strengthening of regional cooperation is an objective, stable, and irreversible trend. In addition, Uzbekistan is strengthening its macroeconomic and geopolitical positions. As an equal member of the Commonwealth of Independent States, it has gained great opportunities for the development of trade and economic relations, the implementation of joint projects in various sectors, the realisation of transport, communication, and transit potential, the strengthening of security, and the expansion of cultural and humanitarian exchanges.



Import of goods and services of the Republic of Uzbekistan with neighbouring countries (Total: 3 723,6 mln $)



Export of goods and services of the Republic of Uzbekistan with neighbouring countries (Total: 3 331,7 mln $)

Fig. 2. Composition of Uzbekistan's foreign trade turnover with neighbouring countries in terms of exports and imports (2021)

In addition, his chairmanship of the next summit of the CIS countries in 2020 played a major role in strengthening the country's geopolitical situation.

Uzbekistan has been a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation since 2001. Many problems have been solved through this cooperation in terms of strengthening peace and neighbourly relations, a joint fight against terrorism and extremism, also economic and security issues, and the country has become part of a unique geopolitical integrity on the continent. For example, as a result of the next SCO summit being held in Samarkand on September 15-16, 2022, issues to be resolved were also considered, and a total of 44 documents–agreements, concepts, programmes, and other decisions–were adopted. This was a record indicator in the history of the organisation. At the summit, the state of cooperation in important areas of SCO activity and prospects for its development were discussed. The Samarkand Declaration of the SCO Council of Heads of State was the main final document of the event.

At the Samarkand summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation member states, in order to implement the concept of strengthening the SCO's interdependence and creating efficient transport corridors, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Sh.M. Mirziyoev, proposed to establish an interregional interdependence centre in Tashkent with the support of the United Nations [9]. He also regarded the signing of the tripartite agreement on the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway as a historic event, and he urged support for the most strategically important project, the railway corridor “Termiz-Mazari Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar”. It was noted that all promising projects in the field of transport and communications can be discussed next year within the framework of the SCO's first transport forum in Uzbekistan.

The estimated cost of this “Termiz - Mazari Sharif - Kabul - Peshawar” trans-Afghan railway project is 5 billion US dollars. The 600-kilometre-long railway will connect Central Asian countries to Pakistan's major seaports.

After the project is fully implemented, it is expected that cargo transportation from Pakistan to Uzbekistan will take 3-5 days instead of 35 days and that the cost of transportation of one standard cargo container will decrease by almost three times. At the same time, the volume of freight on this route can reach 10 million tonnes.

It should be said that in many regions of the world, it is no secret that the activities of integrated associations formed between countries with similar cultures and economic structures are accelerating. In this regard, it is appropriate to cite NAFTA, the EU, etc. The Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking countries in Asia is one such platform.

This organisation was established on October 3, 2009, in the city of Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan, and initially, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan were its members. In the following years, relations with these countries were strengthened. High-level visits were made. The main goal of this organisation is to strengthen trust and relations between friendly countries, to develop cooperation in trade-economics, transport, energy, tourism, and cultural-humanitarian fields, and to coordinate efforts to ensure peace and security in the region, and Uzbekistan is also interested in such integrity. On September 14, it ratified the Nakhichevan Agreement on the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking Countries, and on October 15, 2019, it participated in the seventh summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking Countries held in Baku for the first time as a full member. In this regard, joint technology parks, start-up innovation companies, venture funds, a joint investment fund, and Turkish states put forward the initiative to jointly establish trading houses. On November 11 and 12, 2021, the eighth summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking Countries (Turkish Council) was held in Istanbul. A decision was made to rename the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking countries "the Organisation of Turkic States."

In November 2022, the first meeting of the Organization of Turkic States was held in Samarkand, and more than 10 documents were signed during the summit. Including:

declaration of the Samarkand Summit of the Organization of Turkic States;

protocol to the Nakhichevan Agreement on the Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking Countries;

the decision to establish a Turkish investment fund for short periods;

agreement on the simplification of customs corridors;

agreement on the transportation of goods in mixed vehicles;

decision on the adoption of the strategy of the Organization of Turkic States for 2022–2026;

decision on the adoption of the strategy of simplification of trade procedures.

As can be seen, during the strengthening of interstate relations, problems related to the countries will be considered and solved together.

Also, one of the unique aspects of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the world level is its promotion of the principles of inter-ethnic harmony and inter-religious tolerance. For example, in Uzbekistan, primary attention is paid to strengthening a friendly environment between representatives of different nationalities and religious denominations.

In this regard, the broad support of 193 countries for the resolution "Enlightenment and religious tolerance" put forward by Uzbekistan at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2017 is a great source of pride and honor given by the world community to the efforts of Uzbekistan [24].

In addition, in the seventh paragraph of the decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026," it is noteworthy that the issues of strengthening the country's security and defense potential and conducting an open, pragmatic, and active foreign policy are put at the centre of attention.

To solve political and socioeconomic problems and achieve economic development, Uzbekistan, which is nuclear-free and advancing in its support for neighbourhood policy, should first strengthen its geostrategic position in Central Asia, which is rich in internal opportunities. It is desirable to increase various exportable products for the world economy.

Conclusions. Based on the above analysis, it can be said that the Central Asian countries should be able to protect their national interests as equal subjects in international relations and should follow specific directions of foreign policy in order not to lose balance in relations with active and powerful countries in the region. will be for this:

First of all, the path chosen by the Central Asian countries in the political, economic, social, and legal spheres should be based on the principles of democracy, an open market, humanitarianism, and respect for human rights.

Secondly, Central Asian countries need to solve various territorial problems in the region by diplomatic means. The fact that such relations are resolved positively and warmly in the following years is helping to shape the region as a more integrated and common geopolitical space.

Thirdly, the Central Asian countries must implement their potential more effectively in trade-economic, transport-communication, cultural-humanitarian, security, and stability issues, based on the principles of good neighbourliness and mutually beneficial cooperation.

In conclusion, it should be said that the countries of Central Asia, in particular the Republic of Uzbekistan, have sufficient resources and strategic opportunities. In this regard, the joint and effective use of existing opportunities serves as a basis for the social, economic, and political development of the countries of the region and also creates an important basis for the region becoming one of the most important geopolitical regions of the world.

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