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Research Article

UZBEKISTAN'S REGIONAL TURN: COMPARING KARIMOV AND
MIRZIYOYEV'S APPROACHES TO CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

The late 2010s signaled a decisive shift in Uzbekistan's political trajectory, as the country adopted a new approach to Central Asian regionalism. This study compares the Karimov and Mirziyoyev presidencies to show how changes in foreign policy discourse encapsulates broader transformations in governance, identity, and national priorities. Particular attention is given to their contrasting leadership styles and approaches to regional integration. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study traces key narratives in the foreign policy discourse of both leaders. While there are notable similarities in their rhetoric, especially regarding Central Asia's shared identity and Uzbekistan's role in regional integration, the findings highlight significant differences in practice. Whereas Karimov prioritized sovereignty over engagement with multilateral structures, Mirziyoyev emphasized multilateral cooperation while simultaneously addressing domestic challenges.

Keywords: Regionalism, Central Asia, Identity, Sovereignty, Multilateralism.

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INTRODUCTION

Central Asian regional connectivity has re-emerged as a prominent theme on both policy and academic agendas. Despite its growing significance, however, remains tempered by persistent structural impediments that continue to constrain deeper institutional consolidation (Buranelli, 2021; Moldashev & Qoraboyev, 2018; Tolipov, 2024). The resumption of the Central Asian Leaders' Consultative Meetings in 2018 reflects a renewed effort to advance state-driven regionalism, thereby establishing a forum for regularized dialogue on security, geopolitical realignments, and development initiatives. Scholars and experts have interpreted this move both as a pragmatic confidence-building mechanism amid geopolitical turbulence and as a nascent step toward greater regional institutionalization in a region historically characterized by informality and bilateralism. Within this context, Uzbekistan, is centrally located in Central Asia: it borders all other Central Asian states, also shares a short southern border with Afghanistan. The country plays a pivotal role, with Tashkent has been seeking to leverage its centrality to advance a regionalist agenda that balances sovereignty concerns with the imperatives of multilateral engagement.

Under the presidency of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan showed a marked preference for bilateral arrangements over multilateral engagement. Unlike Turkmenistan, which adopted a policy of permanent neutrality, Uzbekistan remained selectively engaged, it was among the last states to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), later withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and persistently refused to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This cautious approach reflected Karimov's emphasis on the principle of *mustaqillik* (self-reliance), particularly in the economic sphere, according to Fazendeiro (2017), this principle ensured Uzbekistan's political, economic, and cultural autonomy and its equal status within the international system. This skepticism toward multilateral structures was not merely a matter of personal disposition but also reflected a broader structural reality: as Kushkumbaev (2022) notes, multilateral frameworks operating in Central Asia tend to duplicate functions and, when confronted with concrete conflicts, offer only diplomatic statements rather than effective resolution mechanisms. Instead, Uzbekistan pursued bilateral relations with its Central Asian neighbors and participated in regional dialogue platforms such as the CA+ format with Japan, Korea, the United States, and other external partners. According to the memoirs of Joseph A. Presel, a former U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, President Karimov maintained strained relations with fellow Central Asian leaders from the outset of his tenure. Karimov dismissed Kyrgyz President Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akayev as "only a physicist" rather than a true politician, showed little regard for Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov, and was engaged in a rivalry with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, particularly over relations with the United States (Presel, 2020).

In contrast, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who assumed power in 2016, made significant adjustments to Uzbekistan's foreign policy, steering the country toward greater openness and cooperation and placing Central Asia at the forefront of this reorientation, with particular emphasis on energy and transport projects (Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). As Buranelli (2021: 13) defines "regionalism" as a "specific logic of order based on a set of goals, rules, and institutions aimed at fostering cooperation and advanced coordination between states and societies in a limited and well-defined geographical area". In the context of Central Asia, this concept includes efforts

by states to construct joint economic, security, and diplomatic frameworks to address shared challenges and opportunities. Yet there is a broad consensus in the literature that such regionalism remains weak and largely ineffective in Central Asia. Persistent mistrust, unresolved disputes, and underlying rivalries among regional actors continue to undermine the prospects for meaningful institutionalization (Buranelli, 2021).

Using open coding in a content analysis of presidential speeches, this study explores how Uzbekistan's foreign policy agendas and discursive emphases under Karimov and Mirziyoyev reflect evolving attitudes toward regionalism in Central Asia. By tracing these patterns, the study underscores the key divergences in the leaders' approaches. Quantitative content analysis and expert interviews were also used to triangulate the findings obtained through open coding of the presidential speeches. Accordingly, this study addresses the following central research question: "How has Uzbekistan's approach to regionalism shifted from isolation under Islam Karimov to proactive engagement under Shavkat Mirziyoyev, as reflected in official foreign policy discourse?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

In the post-Soviet context, presidential discourse has been a key determinant of foreign policy orientation. In Central Asia, the collapse of the USSR left regionalist efforts fragmented amid limited institutional trust and cooperation. While regionalism presupposes cooperation grounded in shared goals, norms, and institutions, post-Soviet Central Asia struggled to achieve such alignment in its formative years. Divergent national identities, alongside competing conceptions of sovereignty and cooperation, profoundly influenced regional relations and strategic decision-making. A constructivist approach is particularly relevant, because it highlights how identity narratives and shared meanings shape foreign policy in ways that cannot be explained solely by material factors (Wendt, 1999: 24–25). Within this framework, leadership rhetoric emerges as a primary tool for shaping and communicating perceptions of a state's international orientation (Rakhimov, 2018; Silvan, 2020). Thus, adopting this theoretical framework enables an examination of how discourse shapes the formulation and evolution of Uzbekistan's foreign policy across different administrations.

Existing studies of leadership discourse illustrate how rhetorical strategies shape foreign policy orientations and broader political narratives. For example, Fayaz and Khan (2021) highlight the sharp contrasts between Barack Obama and Donald Trump, demonstrating how their divergent personalities and leadership styles translated into distinct foreign policy doctrines. Pérez (2023) similarly contrasts the presidencies of Lula da Silva and Jair Bolsonaro, revealing how Brazil's foreign policy discourse shifted from a focus on the Global South to an orientation toward the Global North, with this shift being legitimized through appeals to Christian values and conservative nationalism. Similarly, Jalalian Daghigh and Abdul Rahim (2020) examine contrasting approaches to political discourse on Muslim minorities by analyzing speeches by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and U.S. President Donald Trump. Their findings reveal that Trump tended to frame Muslims as a security threat, whereas Ardern portrayed Muslims as victims and underscored multiculturalism as a cornerstone of social cohesion.

These insights underscore the crucial role of leadership discourse in constructing identity narratives, a phenomenon also evident in Uzbekistan's political communication. The comparison aligns with the constructivist assumption that language functions as a constitutive force in foreign policy formation. Within the Uzbek context, this perspective illuminates how the rhetorical strategies of Karimov and Mirziyoyev have defined notions of national identity and positioned the state within the region, marking a transition from a predominantly inward-focused approach to greater regional engagement.

Literature on Islam Karimov's Foreign Policy

The process of identity construction in Uzbekistan had direct implications for its foreign policy. As Kobilov (2025) notes, President Mirziyoyev faced the challenge of "mending strained relations" with regional counterparts inherited from Karimov's tenure. Mirziyoyev frequently voiced dissatisfaction with the ineffectiveness of regional agreements (Rakhimov, 2018), reflecting his intent to reposition Uzbekistan within the regional order. By contrast, Weitz (2018) highlights Karimov's restrictive policies toward Eurasian multilateral frameworks. Consistently skeptical of regional organizations, Karimov pursued a deliberate strategy of distancing Uzbekistan from its neighbors, often criticizing such bodies regardless of whether Uzbekistan formally participated in them.

Karimov's reluctance to pursue regional integration was partly rooted in his rivalry with Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev (Kazhenova, 2024). Although both leaders supported bilateral consultations, relations between them remained strained due to competition for regional leadership (Rakhimov, 2018). While Karimov initially endorsed the idea of a more consolidated Central Asia, he was later unable to resolve his disagreements with Nazarbayev, particularly over Kazakhstan's participation in various integration projects (Marat, 2008, as cited in Kazhenova, 2024). As a result, the EU-inspired idea of Central Asian integration quickly faded.

Uzbekistan, together with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, co-founded the Central Asian Union in 1994. After Tajikistan joined, the organization was restructured as the Central Asian Economic Community. The body eventually became the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), broadening its agenda to encompass economic integration and counter-terrorism. Yet enduring rivalries, especially between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, undermined cohesion and led to Uzbekistan's eventual exit.

Karimov's overall approach to regional engagement was marked by caution and a strong emphasis on security. His foreign policy emphasized the need to combat religious extremism (Mesheryakov, 2012, as cited in Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019), and Karimov was hesitant to rely on the conflict-resolution mechanisms of the Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS) in Central Asia, preferring to engage with international organizations such as the United Nations. However, it is important to recognize that characterizing Karimov's foreign policy as merely isolationist oversimplifies the issue. As Fazendeiro (2017) points out, his approach represented "defensive self-reliance", a strategic decision based on perceived threats rather than a fundamental rejection of external engagement. Karimov collaborates with international actors, particularly the United States, in the aftermath of 9/11 when such cooperation aligned with his domestic security goals. What distinguished his approach was not an explicit rejection of cooperation but rather the conditions under which collaboration was considered

acceptable: the maintenance of full sovereignty was critical, and any multilateral commitments had to be reversible. As a result, this analysis employs the term “isolationism” as a shorthand description for Karimov’s dominant regional orientation, while acknowledging its limits in providing a complete picture.

Literature on Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s Foreign Policy

After assuming office in 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev launched a comprehensive reform agenda aimed at liberalizing Uzbekistan’s economy and steering it toward a market-oriented model. His administration prioritized enhancing financial intermediation, modernizing the banking system, and increasing investment in education to develop a skilled workforce (Ruziev, 2021). Saud (2018) further underscores that Mirziyoyev’s long tenure as Prime Minister, beginning in 2003, had revealed to him numerous limitations of the Karimov administration (particularly in foreign policy) thereby shaping his subsequent prioritization of enhanced regional engagement and stability in Central Asia. After Mirziyoyev assumed the presidency, Uzbekistan underwent a transition in focus from the Karimov era’s rhetoric of asserting regional primacy to a problem-solving perspective toward the broader Central Asian region. In terms of security thinking, the competitive rhetoric was reconstructed into a narrative highlighting cooperation and shared sovereignty (Dadabaev, 2021, as cited in Dadabaev & Umarov, 2025).

Shavkat Mirziyoyev introduced a new approach to addressing many regional issues, including the management of regional water resources. Efforts to address water resource issues, including those associated with the Rogun Dam project, began during Karimov’s tenure. However, disagreements between Uzbekistan and its neighbors over water resources and territorial issues during Karimov’s presidency only worsened relations, resulting in the disruption of gas supplies and rail transit to Tajikistan. In contrast, since 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev has introduced a mechanism for informal regional consultations with other Central Asian leaders, prioritizing cooperation, mutually beneficial arrangements, and the consideration of neighbors’ concerns. This helped revive discussions of the Rogun Dam project in a more amicable manner. In 2018, Tajik President Rahmon made his first visit to Uzbekistan (Dadabaev et al., 2023).

Regional problem-solving increasingly involved intergovernmental cooperation and received greater media attention, illustrating Uzbekistan’s evolving regional policy. This was complemented by intensified interaction among Central Asian leaders through mechanisms such as the “Central Asia + 1” dialogue format (Moldashev & Qoraboyev, 2018). The first consultative meeting of the Central Asian heads of state was held in Astana on March 15, 2018, and the second meeting took place in Tashkent on November 29, 2019. The format was subsequently institutionalized as a regular regional dialogue platform for discussing pressing issues of regional cooperation. These meetings aimed to build trust among the countries in the region and to create a platform for open dialogue and joint decision-making among neighboring states (Dadabaev et al., 2023). In May 2018, during his visit to Washington, Mirziyoyev described the C5+1 framework as marking a new phase in strategic cooperation between Central Asia and the United States (Tolipov, 2024).

In the same year, Mirziyoyev restructured the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, criticizing its performance and defining three central objectives: attracting foreign investment, coordinating trade and economic activities, and promoting

tourism. These goals mirrored his broader domestic reform agenda, which focused on market liberalization, improvements in business conditions, and institutional modernization, including legislative and judicial reforms (Kobilov, 2023). Thus, Mirziyoyev's priorities represented both continuity and change: while retaining the economic focus of the Karimov era, the president placed greater emphasis on enhancing production capacity and advancing good-neighborly relations (Dadabaev, 2018).

Constructivist perspectives emphasize how leaders' political rhetoric evolves in relation to national identity, thereby demonstrating how a state's values and self-perceptions shape its external relations (Rakhimov, 2018; Silvan, 2020). A vivid illustration of this shift appears in President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's 2024 address at the Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia. In this speech, Mirziyoyev emphasized the strengthening of regional ties with Uzbekistan's Central Asian neighbors, Uzbekistan's commitment to economic integration and diplomatic engagement, and the region's shared cultural and historical heritage. These rhetorical choices demonstrate a conscious effort to reframe Uzbekistan as an active regional participant and to reaffirm its regional identity (Mirziyoyev, 2024).

Uzbekistan's recent pivot toward regional cooperation highlights the increasing economic importance of Central Asia within its national development strategy (Kobilov, 2023; Saud, 2018). This policy shift aligns with broader trends in economic diplomacy, as Tashkent seeks to leverage its strategic position as a transit hub linking Europe and Asia to strengthen regional connectivity and expand trade (Weitz, 2018). Scholars emphasize that Uzbekistan's shift from politically driven regionalism to economically oriented regionalism marks a significant transformation, reflecting a sustained commitment to liberalizing trade and attracting investment (Saud, 2018).

Constructivist theory posits that state behavior is shaped by identity, which is continuously (re)constructed through social interaction and political discourse. Presidential rhetoric thus becomes central to shaping how a state understands itself and its place in the international arena (Hansen, 2006; Wendt, 1999). In this regard, Mirziyoyev's discourse exemplifies this process by redefining Uzbekistan's identity in terms of regional cooperation and its reliability as an international partner (Silvan, 2020). The analysis shows that language operates as a constitutive force, actively shaping and legitimizing foreign policy rather than merely reflecting it (Rakhimov, 2018).

Despite growing academic interest in Central Asia, analyses of Uzbekistan's foreign policy have largely emphasized institutional mechanisms rather than discursive dimensions. As a result, comparative studies examining presidential rhetoric as a driver of regional policy remain scarce. The use of constructivist and discourse-analytic approaches in Central Asian foreign policy scholarship also remains limited. This study contributes to filling that gap by arguing that Uzbekistan's foreign policy discourse has shifted from Karimov's bilateralism to Mirziyoyev's integrative multilateralism.

Accordingly, this comparative case study seeks to analyze the evolution of Uzbekistan's political discourse on Central Asian regionalism under the leadership of Islam Karimov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Utilizing a corpus of thirty presidential speeches, the study applies qualitative content analysis within

a constructivist framework to trace how official rhetoric has articulated and reframed key themes of sovereignty, national identity, and regional cooperation. To enhance the robustness of the analysis, quantitative text-mining techniques and expert interviews were also employed, allowing for methodological triangulation and validation of the qualitative findings.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a comparative case study design to examine the evolution of Uzbekistan's approach to regionalism, tracing the country's trajectory from isolation under its first president, Islam Karimov, to proactive engagement with Central Asian neighbors under Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Through a systematic comparison of political discourse and foreign policy orientations during the two presidencies, the analysis uncovers both elements of continuity and significant shifts in Uzbekistan's regional outlook. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how leadership-driven narratives have shaped the country's regional identity and strategic positioning within Central Asia (Halperin & Heath, 2020).

This study primarily employs qualitative content analysis of government documents, press releases, and presidential speeches by Islam Karimov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The dataset covers the period from Uzbekistan's independence in 1991 through 2025 and was examined using an inductive approach with open coding techniques. The flexibility of open coding, owing to the absence of predefined categories, makes it well-suited for discourse-based textual analysis. Following Bengtsson's (2016) four-stage model (decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation) thirty presidential speeches were analyzed: fifteen by Karimov and fifteen by Mirziyoyev. These presidential speeches are listed in the References and constitute the primary textual corpus analyzed in this study. Video-recorded speeches were transcribed and translated into English. The presidential speeches were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling, whereby documents were chosen based on their relevance to the study's research objectives, which focus on regionalism and Uzbekistan's foreign policy. The purposive sampling approach may introduce selection bias as the sample does not include all presidential speeches delivered during the period under examination.

Possible selection bias was mitigated by applying consistent inclusion criteria, maintaining near-equal corpus sizes, and selecting speeches from different years and political contexts within each presidency to cover a broad range of official discourse on regional affairs. Selection was guided by three criteria: the speech contained substantial material relevant to the research objectives, including discussions of foreign policy, regional cooperation, and relations with neighboring states; it was delivered at politically significant moments, such as state visits, regional summits, international forums, and major domestic policy events; and complete transcripts or recordings suitable for transcription and analysis were available. The representativeness of the sample was strengthened by selecting speeches from different years and phases of each presidency, ensuring that the selected speeches were not concentrated on a single issue, political event, or phase of leadership. The balanced inclusion of fifteen speeches by each president supports comparability between the two administrations. Relevant excerpts reflecting positions on regionalism, foreign policy priorities, and ideological framing were coded using labels such as "border security," "economic cooperation," and "national sovereignty." Coding and data management were conducted

in Atlas.ti to ensure analytical consistency and transparency. Using Atlas.ti's code management tools allowed for iterative review and refinement of category definitions across the corpora. To ensure coding consistency, all four authors participated in the coding process jointly, with disagreements and ambiguous segments resolved through discussion and consensus before the compilation stage. This collaborative effort reduced the risk of individual interpretive bias and preserved consistency across the corpora.

Analyzing the coded categories and their frequencies helped trace the evolution of Uzbekistan's policy narrative from an inward-looking focus on self-reliance to a more outward-oriented emphasis on Central Asian cooperation. This approach is well suited to the study, as it enables the identification of fine-grained variations in rhetoric.

Most similar systems design (MSSD) was employed to analyze Uzbekistan's foreign policy shifts under Presidents Karimov and Mirziyoyev (Halperin & Heath, 2020). Although both leaders operated under nearly identical systemic conditions (authoritarian governance, the same geographic position, and shared security concerns) their approaches to regional engagement diverged significantly. To capture these differences, the study incorporated quantitative analysis using the Yoshikoder software and visualization tools provided by OpenAI. To evaluate comparability, total word counts were verified for both corpora. The Karimov corpus comprised 22,072 words across 15 speeches, and the Mirziyoyev corpus 21,726 across 15 speeches, a slight difference of less than 2%. Given the nearly equivalent sizes of the two corpora, raw frequency counts provide a reliable basis for cross-presidential comparison without requiring further normalization. Neither corpus is disproportionately larger in a way that would systematically bias the results.

Triangulation was applied to strengthen the validity of the findings by combining multiple sources and methods (Rolfe, 2006, as cited in Bengtsson, 2016). In addition to content analysis, expert interviews were conducted. One respondent, an anonymous academic specializing in Central Asian affairs, provided independent validation of the findings. A second respondent, Eldaniz Gusseinov, a foreign policy analyst and co-founder of Nightingale Intelligence, agreed to participate and authorized the use of his name.

To complement the content analysis, the research team conducted expert interviews to incorporate additional perspectives and strengthen methodological triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were chosen, as they allow for pre-defined questions while providing sufficient flexibility to encourage open discussion and generate deeper insights into participants' experiences (Halperin & Heath, 2020). The interviews aimed to validate the study's findings against expert perspectives and deepen the analysis.

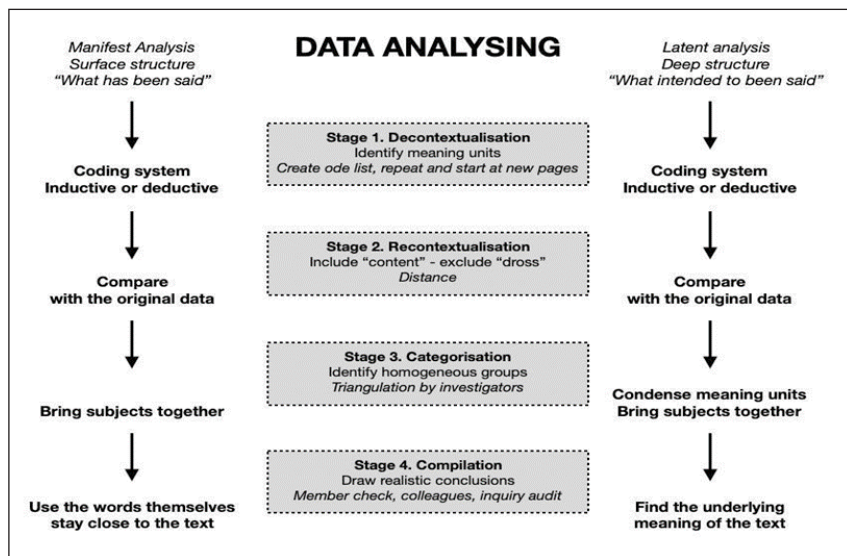
Respondents were selected for their expertise on Uzbekistan and Central Asia, including scholars, professors, think-tank representatives, and foreign policy experts. The respondents were based in Astana, Kazakhstan, and Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Respondents were recruited through the researchers' professional and academic networks via email, LinkedIn, and messaging platforms. All interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical approval requirements: respondents received interview protocols containing a consent form and background information about the research context, topic, and expected duration.

Given the respondents' broad geographic distribution and limited availability, the team adopted a flexible approach to interview formats and scheduling. Inter-

views were conducted either face-to-face or online and lasted between 10 and 35 minutes. As shown in Figure 1, all sessions were recorded with the respondents' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Figure 1

Designing and conducting a qualitative study through content analysis



Source: Bengtsson (2016: 9). Adapted under fair use for educational use

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Karimov's Foreign Policy Discourse

Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's first president, served for 25 years (longer than any subsequent president to date) and played a formative role in defining the foundations of the country's foreign policy. As Expert 1 observed (personal communication, May 2025), Karimov's initial approach to regionalism was relatively proactive, as reflected in slogans such as "Turkestan is our common home." However, this early openness gradually shifted toward an inward-looking posture amid evolving domestic and geopolitical circumstances. Drawing on an analysis of Karimov's public speeches, published writings, and interviews, this study identifies the central narratives and rhetorical strategies that shaped his discourse and, more broadly, reflected Uzbekistan's foreign policy trajectory during his tenure.

A total of 117 meaning units were identified and recontextualized into 27 unique codes, several of which appeared as many as 30 times. These were grouped into seven subcategories and further refined into three core categories: "Collective Efforts in Central Asia," "Uzbek Nation-Building," and "Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Maneuvering." From these, two overarching themes emerged: (1) Security-Centric Regionalism and Sovereignty Preservation and (2) Pragmatic Multilateralism with a Focus on Counterterrorism. The subsequent sections discuss these themes in detail, outlining their significance within Karimov's foreign policy discourse.

Islam Karimov consistently opened his speeches by underscoring the importance of national sovereignty for Uzbekistan and for the "New Independent States" (Karimov, 1998: 29–30). The president framed the protection of sovereignty,

the safeguarding of national interests, and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other independent states as the “entire logic” of his foreign policy (Karimov, 1998: 32). Central to this logic was the pursuit of Uzbekistan’s independent development. Karimov repeatedly stressed that the country would not join any military blocs, arguing that such arrangements belonged to the Cold War era. This recurrent rhetoric signaled his overriding commitment to minimizing external dependencies and prioritizing the state’s internal stability.

As both experts confirmed, this more inward-looking orientation intensified after 2005 (Expert 1, personal communication, May 2025; E. Gusseinov, personal communication, May 2025). A substantial proportion of his speeches also emphasized the theme of Uzbek identity. Codes such as “Identity,” “Cultural Heritage of Uzbekistan,” and “Uzbekistan’s Central Role in Central Asian Regional Leadership” appeared more than thirty times in the data. Through this discourse, Karimov endeavored to articulate a vision of the Uzbek nation that emphasized its defining attributes, cultural legacy, and perceived centrality within the region. Identity construction thus functioned as both a narrative legitimizing sovereignty and a mechanism for fostering national unity and self-awareness.

Karimov approached cooperation with other states and international organizations with marked caution. President Karimov viewed such structures as potential sources of interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. “In our deep conviction, the practice of international relations must recognize the right of every sovereign state, based on its national interests, to determine the extent of its participation in various international structures and collective security agreements, to safeguard its independence and stability” (Karimov, 1998: 37). While acknowledging the importance of addressing sensitive issues such as terrorism and the situation in Afghanistan, Karimov insisted that such challenges be addressed through international institutions in ways that did not compromise national sovereignty. Gusseinov (personal communication, May 2025) notes that Karimov’s leadership style was largely shaped by his perceptions of external threats and concerns over internal legitimacy, particularly after 2005. Although regional cooperation appeared in his rhetoric, it was often secondary, typically discussed only after he had emphasized that Central Asian states were bound by shared history, territory, and peoples. This suggests that regional cooperation was acknowledged but subordinated to the overriding goals of state resilience and independence. Gusseinov further observes that Uzbekistan’s foreign policy priorities were defined by resource constraints and security concerns, which made deeper regional integration a secondary priority relative to safeguarding state stability.

Karimov’s discourse on national self-sufficiency was closely intertwined with references to cooperation with neighboring states. Expert 1 (personal communication, May 2025) highlighted that, while Uzbekistan formally participated in multilateral frameworks, Karimov consistently preferred bilateralism as the most reliable means of managing external relations and sustaining sovereignty. This approach reinforced domestic identity but simultaneously limited Uzbekistan’s international initiatives during the early years of independence. A detailed qualitative analysis of President Karimov’s rhetoric is presented in Table A1 in Appendix A.

Mirziyoyev’s Foreign Policy Discourse

Under Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s leadership, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy has shifted toward openness and multilateral engagement, contrasting with Islam Karimov’s

isolationist approach. Expert 1 (personal communication, May 2025) noted that this pragmatic shift has been widely welcomed across the region and beyond. Mirziyoyev's speeches frequently emphasized trade, energy, and transport connectivity, all of which are inherently tied to regional cooperation. In his 2017 UN General Assembly address, he identified Central Asia as Uzbekistan's main foreign policy priority (Mirziyoyev, 2017).

A qualitative content analysis of 15 of Mirziyoyev's speeches was conducted using Atlas.ti, identifying 59 quotations related to regional integration and common challenges. Expert 1 highlighted that this rhetorical openness translated into tangible outcomes such as the revival of regional consultations, the advancement of infrastructure projects such as Kambarata-1, and the expansion of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The coding process produced 28 distinct codes, grouped into six subcategories and three overarching categories: "Economy and Ecology," "Regional Unity Fundamentals," and "Strategic Security and Afghan Integration." From these, two overarching themes emerged: (1) Strategic Connectivity and Ecological Responsibility and (2) Fostering Regional Cohesion through Cultural Heritage and Social Empowerment.

The first theme, "Strategic Connectivity and Ecological Responsibility in Regional Policy," encompasses codes related to economic integration within Central Asia, the development of transport and transit corridors, and Afghanistan's role as a strategic partner linking Central and South Asia. These issues appeared over thirty times across Mirziyoyev's speeches, underscoring their centrality in his foreign policy discourse. Afghanistan emerged as the most frequently referenced country, with Mirziyoyev repeatedly urging both Central Asian states and the broader international community to support efforts to achieve a peace settlement, strengthen counterterrorism cooperation, and combat drug trafficking. Both experts emphasized Afghanistan's pivotal position in Uzbekistan's regional policy under Mirziyoyev (Expert 1, personal communication, May 2025; E. Gusseinov, personal communication, May 2025). As Expert 1 noted, Uzbekistan's stance toward Afghanistan was grounded in a consistent policy logic that viewed regional stability as inseparable from Afghanistan's successful integration into the broader Central Asian framework.

Mirziyoyev's foreign policy reflects an approach grounded in *realpolitik*: Uzbekistan seeks constructive regional engagement while recognizing the importance of Afghanistan's sizeable ethnic Uzbek community (Expert 1, personal communication, May 2025; E. Gusseinov, personal communication, May 2025). The president frequently underscores the interdependence of Afghan and Central Asian security and positions Afghanistan as a key partner in trade and connectivity projects such as the Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran–Oman and Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan–China corridors. Bilateral relations deepened after President Ashraf Ghani's December 2017 visit to Tashkent, the first such visit in sixteen years, the visit resulted in a trade agreement. Environmental cooperation also features prominently in this theme, with water management and the Aral Sea crisis remaining priorities, particularly in Uzbekistan's relations with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the upstream states along the region's main rivers (Silvan, 2020).

The second theme, "Fostering Regional Cohesion through Cultural Heritage and Social Empowerment," captures Mirziyoyev's emphasis on shared culture, history, and identity as the foundation for regional cooperation. His "good-neighborliness" agenda maintains Uzbekistan's long-standing emphasis on

sovereignty while advancing multilateral engagement; Uzbekistan's decision to remain outside the Eurasian Economic Union despite Russian pressure (Silvan, 2020). As detailed in Table B1 in Appendix B, beyond the cultural dimension, Mirziyoyev's rhetoric also emphasizes social inclusion, particularly the empowerment of young people and women through regional initiatives such as the 2023 Central Asian Youth Forum held in Uzbekistan.

WORD-FREQUENCY ANALYSIS FINDINGS

To complement the qualitative content analysis, a quantitative word-frequency analysis was conducted on thirty presidential speeches delivered by Islam Karimov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Seven overarching thematic categories were developed based on recurring lexical patterns identified across the corpus.

The first category, Central Asia and Afghanistan, encompassed terms such as "Afghanistan," "border," "security," "cooperation," "regional," "Central Asia," "peace," "connectivity," "neighbor," "instability," "drug trafficking," "Taliban," and "partnership," reflecting discourse on transboundary security and regional interdependence.

The second category, Security Measures, captured the language of securitization through terms such as "terrorism," "terrorist," "extremism," "radical," "threat," "stability," "fight," "danger," "international terrorism," "law enforcement," and "preventive," emphasizing a persistent focus on combating transnational threats.

The third category, Central Asian Regionalism, centered on regional cooperation, incorporating terms such as "unity," "integration," "neighbors," "regional security," "shared history," "joint efforts," "mutual interest," and "regional initiative."

The fourth category, Uzbek Multilateralism, reflected Uzbekistan's expanding diplomatic engagement through terms such as "multilateral," "dialogue," "international organization," "United Nations," "OSCE," "diplomacy," "equal partnership," "constructive," and "global."

The fifth category, Geopolitical and Economic Dynamics, represented the economic dimension of presidential discourse, featuring terms such as "investment," "economy," "economic cooperation," "development," "infrastructure," "energy," "natural resources," "strategy," "foreign policy," "geopolitical," "trade," and "transport."

The sixth category, Uzbek Identity, was characterized by national and cultural markers such as "Uzbekistan," "Uzbek," "heritage," "nation," "identity," "language," "traditions," "culture," "history," "spirituality," "people," and "values," underscoring identity-building narratives.

The seventh category, Uzbek Sovereignty, captured discourse on political autonomy, incorporating terms such as "sovereignty," "independence," "territorial integrity," "constitution," "self-determination," "national interest," "internal affairs," "statehood," "autonomy," "decision-making," and "law."

The quantitative analysis was conducted using the Yoshikoder platform, which facilitated the systematic measurement and comparison of word frequencies across the corpus of thirty presidential speeches. The results revealed notable thematic divergences between the two leaders. The most prominent categories in Islam Karimov's discourse were Uzbek Identity (201 mentions) and Security Measures (167 mentions), indicating a focus on nation-building and

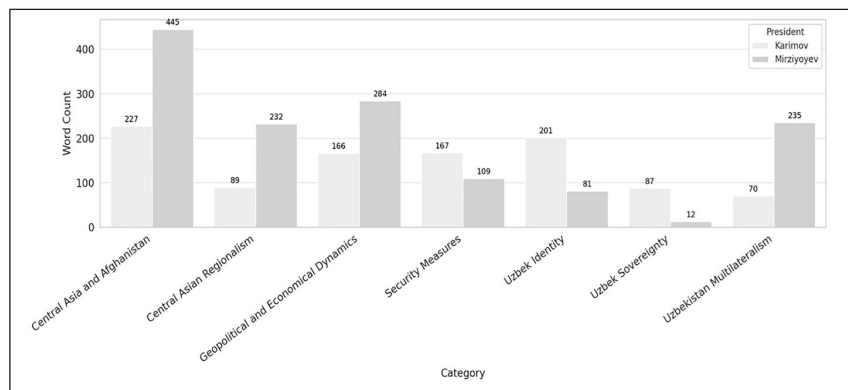
securitization. In contrast, these categories appeared nearly half as frequently in Mirziyoyev's speeches. Conversely, Mirziyoyev placed substantially greater emphasis on the categories Central Asia and Afghanistan (445 mentions) and Uzbek Multilateralism (235 mentions), which appeared in Karimov's speeches at roughly half these frequencies, reflecting his administration's stronger orientation toward regional engagement and international cooperation, areas that Karimov addressed with roughly half the frequency.

The quantitative results reinforce the qualitative findings: Karimov's rhetoric persistently prioritized internal identity construction and the preservation of national sovereignty, while Mirziyoyev's discourse marked a decisive shift toward regional engagement and multilateral cooperation. This contrast illustrates the broader transformation in Uzbekistan's foreign policy narrative from inward-focused nation-building to outward-oriented regionalism. Figure 2 illustrates the comparative frequency distribution of the seven thematic categories across the speeches of both presidents, highlighting the divergent emphases that characterize their respective discursive strategies.

It is essential to acknowledge that the context of Afghanistan differed substantially under the two presidencies. During Karimov's tenure, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan's southern neighbor, experienced protracted civil conflict and chronic instability, which shaped Tashkent's security-centered discourse. In contrast, particularly following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Mirziyoyev engaged with Afghanistan's de facto authorities, which exercised broad territorial and administrative control across the country. By 2024, UN reporting and analysis by the International Crisis Group indicated a degree of relative stability, while also noting continuing security challenges and the absence of formal international recognition (UN Security Council, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024). This contextual shift helps explain the differing rhetorical emphases: Karimov referred to Afghanistan primarily through the lens of security threats, whereas Mirziyoyev framed it as a potential partner in regional integration and economic reconstruction, reflecting the transformed geopolitical environment.

Figure 2

Quantitative analysis via word frequency comparison in presidential speeches (1991–2025)



Note: Frequencies reflect seven thematic categories identified through quantitative coding.

Source: Compiled by the authors

CONCLUSION

This qualitative analysis reinforces the constructivist premise that state identity and interests are socially constructed through interaction and articulated in political discourse, with language functioning as a central instrument for legitimizing policy choices. As Hopf (1998) contends, a state's identity determines its preferences and priorities, shaping its foreign relations according to the identities it ascribes to other actors within the international system.

The findings show that Karimov's political rhetoric to frame Uzbekistan's national identity around the principles of sovereignty and self-sufficiency while warning against the dangers of foreign influence. His discourse focused heavily on security, independence, and counterterrorism, which were the most frequent themes identified in the quantitative analysis. While some researchers, such as Fazendeiro (2017), have warned against interpreting Karimov's foreign policy as mere isolationism and have instead highlighted moments of selective collaboration with Western allies and international organizations, the discursive analysis in this study indicates that such collaboration tended to be instrumental and consistently subordinated to the primary goal of safeguarding sovereignty. Thus, the distinction between Karimov's conditional, security-oriented pragmatism and Mirziyoyev's deeply rooted multilateralism remains analytically relevant. In contrast, Mirziyoyev's discourse redefined national identity through the lens of good-neighborliness and regional cooperation, portraying them as essential for ensuring economic growth and regional stability.

Despite his emphasis on openness and regional cooperation, Mirziyoyev continued to underscore sovereignty and Uzbek national identity as foundational pillars of foreign policy. His cooperative rhetoric was translated into concrete initiatives, including the revival of the Central Asian Heads of State Consultative Meetings, active participation in the C5+1 platform, and the establishment of regional forums promoting economic development, inclusivity, and the empowerment of youth and women.

Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of how presidential discourse shapes Uzbekistan's foreign policy orientation within a constructivist framework and demonstrates that shifts in rhetoric correspond to broader transformations in identity and strategic priorities. At the same time, it identifies promising directions for future research, including comparative analyses across other Central Asian states and longitudinal studies of evolving regional narratives.

Ethical Commission Approval

Ethical Commission's report was submitted to the journal. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Maqsut Narikbayev University. All interview participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided informed consent to participate. Where anonymity was requested or required, identifying information was withheld.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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Appendix A

Table A1

Karimov's speeches (1991–2016) analyzed by open-coding technique

Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Code	Sub-Category	Category	Theme
The people of Uzbekistan are very hospitable, and we would like each of you, our distinguished guests, to experience this personally (Karimov, 2014).	Very Hospitable People of Uzbekistan.	Identity			
For nearly three thousand years, Samarkand has been a crossroads of civilizations and cultures. Ancient yet eternally young, Samarkand is widely known throughout the world as a majestic city with a distinctive Eastern character, a rich history, and extraordinary surviving monuments of the past. It is hardly accidental that Samarkand, along with Rome, is famed throughout the world as the “eternal city” (Karimov, 2014).	Samarkand's global renown as the “eternal city” parallels Rome's enduring cultural legacy.	Cultural Heritage of Uzbekistan			
As for the concept of “Central Asian states”, which emerged in Tashkent in January, it reflects an objective and natural process. The peoples living in this region are united by a common history, culture, language, and religion. The historical roots of our peoples are so closely intertwined, and their present-day realities are so similar, that only by working together in close cooperation, we will find ways out of the recent crisis. Together, we will also consider how to use our natural resources, this is an entirely natural process. It is no coincidence that I spoke about Tashkent as a city with a special status. Accordingly, it is quite logical that it was chosen as the region's information center, from which timely information would be disseminated worldwide. I hope this will also be of interest to you. There is another reason for the increased attention to Uzbekistan. The fact is that our republic occupies a central position in Central Asia. The future of the region largely depends on Uzbekistan. The development path chosen by the Uzbek people will determine the likelihood that our neighboring countries will choose the same path. This, in turn, imposes a special responsibility on each of us (Karimov, 1996: 97-98).	Karimov underscores the cultural and historical unity of Central Asia, frames Uzbekistan as the core driver of regional development, and emphasizes Tashkent's symbolic and strategic leadership role.	Uzbek Identity	Uzbek Identity	Uzbek Nation Building	

The years of the Great Patriotic War. Some argued that this was not a matter of arithmetic or accounting. I believe, first, that such remarks are tactless and, second, that they are incorrect. And the fact that our friend Atambayev, Almaz, is here, seems to be reproaching someone for trying to forget something else, this is also an inappropriate remark in itself, which will not bring anything good except one thing, I am very pleased with your opinion, we have known for a long time. Therefore, I repeat that I consider it inappropriate to reproach others over these matters or to moralize about them (Karimov, 2015).

Karimov, in a sarcastic undertone, indirectly criticizes Atambayev's remarks on historical memory, calling them tactless and unhelpful to regional dialogue.

Ironical
Dismissal of
Historical
Narrative
Critique

Uzbek
Sovereignty

Uzbek
Nation
Building

Today, as the newly independent states of the post-Soviet space consolidate their national sovereignty and pursue democratic reforms, they need the international community's assistance and support to implement these reforms and accelerate their integration into international political, economic, and financial structures. By this, ladies and gentlemen, not only material and financial assistance, but, above all, moral and political support for our sovereignty and independent path of development (Karimov, 1995, cited in YT video, 2020).

Post-Soviet states require international assistance to reform and integrate globally.

State
Sovereignty

The path to global security lies in ensuring regional security, in other words, we believe that the path to globalization runs through regionalism. Only by fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among states in specific regions especially those currently labeled "hot spots" can we chart a course toward peace and stability worldwide. (Karimov, 1995, cited in YT video, 2020).	Global Security through Regional Security.	Global Security		
First, let us note that the integration of Central Asian peoples is not a dream or a future project; it is a fact and a reality that only requires organizational, legal, and political frameworks (Karimov, 1998: 240).	Regional integration already exists. It needs formal frameworks.	Regional Cooperation	Realms of CA Regional Cooperation	Collective Efforts of Central Asia
Uzbekistan attaches great significance to strengthening cooperation on security issues among NATO member states and Central Asian countries (Karimov, 2002).	Uzbekistan prioritizes enhanced security cooperation between NATO and Central Asian states.	Regional Security		
Central Asian states, despite their socio-political, ethnic, and cultural diversity collectively create favorable conditions for confronting external security threats and to ensure the region's sustainable development, thereby shaping it into an area of security and stability (Karimov, 1998: 29).	Diverse Central Asian states jointly bolster security and a development.	Regional Stability		
Only an approach based on maintaining both internal and external balance is acceptable today as a means of ensuring the region's stable and sustainable development and preventing conflicts, given that Central Asia is a nexus of political, economic, military, transport, and environmental issues (Karimov, 1998: 33).	Maintaining and supporting both: external and internal balances can ensure the stable development of CA.	Regional Development	Realms of CA Regional Cooperation	Collective Efforts of Central Asia
Furthermore, we face common security threats such as desiccation of the Aral Sea; trafficking in narcotics and weapons; terrorism and religious fundamentalism; the risk of escalating tensions and instability emanating from Afghanistan; and other factors (Karimov, 1998: 241).	Shared threats (Aral crisis, trafficking, extremism, Afghan instability) affect the region.	Regional Problems		

Owing to the joint efforts of member states and observer nations, we have continued to work together to maintain peace and security in the region and to combat terrorism ... and other challenges and threats arising amid growing confrontation and tensions in different parts of the world (Karimov, 2014).	SCO members and observers jointly uphold regional security and combat terrorism etc.	Collective Action Against Terrorism		
Only by fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among states in specific regions, especially those currently labeled "hot spots" can we chart a course toward peace and stability worldwide (Karimov, 1995, cited in YT video, 2020).	Peace and global stability depend on regional cooperation and mutual understanding in conflict zones.	Conflict Prevention	Anti-Terrorism Measures	Anti-Terrorism Measures
It is important to grasp and assess the uniqueness of the era in which we live and to understand the historical significance, for both the present and the future, of the profound changes that have recently reshaped the world's geopolitical structure and map (Karimov, 1998: 29).	The uniqueness of our era and recent geopolitical shifts must be understood for their present and future significance.	Geopolitical Changes	Geopolitical and Economic Dynamics	Pragmatic Multilateralism Focusing on Counter-Terrorism
At the turn of the twenty-first century, newly independent states, facing enormous internal and external challenges, sought solutions by relying on their own resources while seeking the active involvement of the international community (Karimov, 1998: 58).	New independent states balance reliance on their own resources with active engagement of the global community.	Relying on Resources		Uzbekistan Foreign Policy Maneuvre
I would like to emphasize that Uzbekistan is interested in expanding cooperation with all international organizations and financial institutions, as well as with foreign banks and companies, scientists and experts, in carrying out this task: radically transforming rural areas, gradually improving the rural population's standard and quality of living, and bringing its living standards closer to those of developed countries (Karimov, 2013).	Uzbekistan seeks to expand cooperation with global organizations and experts to transform villages and raise rural living standards.	International Cooperation	Early Uzbekistan Multilateralism	

The second alternative I mentioned is that the CIS will remain in the same amorphous form in which it exists today. Of course, some people like this, but I, for example, do not. It seems to me that we should not meet merely to talk, make various statements and, as they say, "make fun". You know, it is now very fashionable to use the CIS platform to announce yet another high-profile initiative. To put forward an initiative merely for its own sake. They then spend considerable time using their journalists to publicize on television how impressively the statesman spoke and what critical remarks he made, and so on. But it turns out that this merely repeated what had already been said hundreds of times (Karimov, 2005: 201-202).

Karimov criticizes the CIS for being ineffective and mocks leaders who use it for self-promotion and performative initiatives without substance.

CIS Future and Superficial Initiatives

Early Uzbekistan Multilateralism

Uzbekistan Foreign Policy Maneuvre

Pragmatic Multilateralism Focusing on Counter-Terrorism

Note: This table presents the meaning units, codes, categories, and overarching themes identified in President Islam Karimov's speeches (1991–2016) through open coding within a qualitative content analysis framework. All codes and categories were generated inductively to reflect recurring patterns in state rhetoric.

Source: Compiled by the authors

Appendix B

Table B1
Analysis of Mirziyoyev's speeches (2016–2025) with the use of open-coding technique

Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Code	Sub-Category	Category	Theme
Afghanistan's security is Uzbekistan's security and a linchpin of stability and prosperity throughout the broader region of Central and South Asia (Mirziyoyev, 2018).	Afghanistan's security is key to Uzbekistan's and regional stability.	Afghanistan and regional security			
We see Afghanistan as an integral part of Central Asia. The Tashkent High-Level Conference on Afghanistan in March 2018 marked a new stage in mobilizing of the international community's efforts to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. We fully support the peace talks among the Afghan political forces that were launched in Doha in September of this year. We express hope that these talks will help bring peace and stability to long-suffering Afghanistan (Mirziyoyev, 2018).	Uzbekistan views Afghanistan as part of Central Asia and supports its peace process and regional economic integration through major infrastructure projects.	Afghanistan is integral part of Central Asia	Afghanistan Integration and Security Management in CA	Strategic Security and Afghan Integration	Strategic Integration and Environmental Adaptation in Central Asia
To involve Afghanistan more fully in regional economic integration, we have begun implementing major infrastructure projects such as the Surkhan–Puli Khumri power line and the construction of a railway from Mazar-i-Sharif to the seaports on the Indian Ocean (Mirziyoyev, 2020).	Uzbekistan advances Afghanistan's economic integration via key infrastructure initiatives.	Economic Reconstruction of Afghanistan			
In recent years, we have made significant progress in consolidating regional cooperation in Central Asia. This allows us to move toward the next objective: establishing closer ties with other regions of the world (Mirziyoyev, 2021).	Strengthened cooperation in CA enables broader engagement with other regions.	CA External Connectivity	Economic and Infrastructure Integration	Economy and Ecology	

First, the current realities require us to take bold steps to form a new model of economic cooperation in Central Asia. It is important to identify new sources of growth and new drivers of our long-term development. It is necessary to increase intraregional trade. To transition to a fully functioning free trade regime, it is important to eliminate existing barriers (Mirziyoyev, 2021).	CA needs a new economic model promoting growth, trade, and barrier removal.	Regional Economic Integration		
We support the development of transport corridors providing access to Turkey and European countries, through the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman and Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China routes, as well as routes through Azerbaijan. Moreover, the construction of the newly proposed Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway is of great importance for integrating Afghanistan into the broader region and for ensuring sustainable development (Mirziyoyev, 2021).	Uzbekistan promotes regional transport links to enhance connectivity while integrating Afghanistan.	Regional Transport Connectivity	Economic and Infrastructure Integration	Economy and Ecology
We stand ready for reasonable compromises with the countries of Central Asia on all issues without exception (Mirziyoyev, 2017).	Willingness to make reasonable compromises with all CA states.	Reasonable Compromises		Strategic Integration and Environmental Adaptation in Central Asia
It is necessary to expand the scale of cooperation and take all possible measures to mitigate the consequences of the Aral Sea crisis. We also support the development of the regional program "Green Agenda for Central Asia", which would help our countries adapt to climate change and promote the large-scale adoption of resource-saving technologies (Mirziyoyev, 2021).	Uzbekistan urges regional action on the Aral Sea crisis consequences and climate change.	Regional Environmentalism	Environmental Sustainability	

We share a common history, religion, culture and traditions. Located in the heart of Eurasia, the region serves as a bridge linking Europe and the Middle East, South and East Asia and borders major states as Russia and China. The future of our region, with a total population of more than 70 million people, is shaped by every state in Central Asia. We firmly believe that the willingness and sincere desire to cooperate, as well as the responsibility of all Central Asian countries for our common future, constitute both a solid foundation for and a guarantee of the region's sustainable development and prosperity (Mirziyoyev, 2017).	The nations of CA bound by longstanding cultural and historical ties, recognize a collective identity that shapes their mutual responsibility for the region's future.	Collective Identity and Shared Regional Future	
The peoples of our region are linked by millennia-old bonds of brotherhood and good neighborliness (Mirziyoyev, 2017).	The peoples of CA have long-standing ties of brotherhood and neighborly relations.	Brotherhood and Good-Neighborliness	CA Identity and Shared Heritage
As is well-known, the ancient cultural and rich spiritual heritage of our region is of global importance. We are ready to hold the International Forum "Central Asia at the Crossroads of World Civilizations" in the ancient city of Khiva in 2021 in cooperation with UNESCO (Mirziyoyev, 2020).	CA cultural and spiritual heritage is globally significant. Hence, Uzbekistan seeks to highlight this through international cooperation.	Central Asia Cultural Heritage	Regional Unity Fundamentals Collective Identity and Social Capital in Central Asian Integration
Today, we can confidently speak of the emergence of a region-wide identity (Mirziyoyev, 2024).	Regional identity is arising in CA.	Regional Identity	
We welcome the further development of the Women Caucus's in Central Asia and the extension of contacts to advance global gender-equality goals (Mirziyoyev, 2021).	Uzbekistan supports strengthening the Women's Caucus to promote gender equality in CA.	Women Empowerment in CA	Social Challenges of CA
To this end, we propose to hold a Central Asian Youth Forum in Uzbekistan next year, which will be a significant step toward establishing a platform to strengthen trust and friendship among our countries (Mirziyoyev, 2021).	Uzbekistan proposes a Youth Forum to strengthen regional trust and friendship.	Youth Engagement in CA	

The role of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia in the formation of a new political atmosphere cannot be overemphasized (Mirziyoyev, 2021).	Central Asian consultative meetings foster a new regional political climate.	Consultative Meetings			
While maintaining its non-aligned status, Uzbekistan is open to dialogue. We are interested in expanding cooperation with all partners in the name of peace, progress and prosperity. (Mirziyoyev, 2017).	Uzbekistan stays non-aligned but open to broad cooperation.	Non-aligned Uzbekistan			
Today, Uzbekistan considers Central Asia the main priority of its foreign policy. This is a conscious choice. Located at the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is keenly interested in seeing the region to become a zone of stability, sustainable development and good-neighborliness. A peaceful and economically prosperous Central Asia is our most important goal and key task. Uzbekistan is determined to engage in dialogue, pursue constructive interaction and strengthen good-neighborly relations (Mirziyoyev, 2017).	Uzbekistan prioritizes CA in its foreign policy, aiming to foster stability, development, and good-neighborly relations.	CA Cooperation as Conscious Choice and Foreign Policy Priority	Uzbek Regional Policy	Regional Unity Fundamentals	Collective Identity and Social Capital in Central Asian Integration

Note. This table summarizes the meaning units, codes, categories, and themes derived from President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's speeches (2016–2025) through open coding within a qualitative content analysis framework. Codes and categories were developed inductively to reflect strategic and security-related identified in the speeches.

Source: Compiled by the authors