



FROM DOUBLY LANDLOCKED TO LAND-LINKED: THE ROLE OF MULTI-VECTORISM IN UZBEKISTAN'S CONNECTIVITY STRATEGY

Hasanboyeva Mumtozbegin Mirodiljon qizi

Student, Registan Private School, Fergana City, Uzbekistan

Phone: +998 90 833 42 49

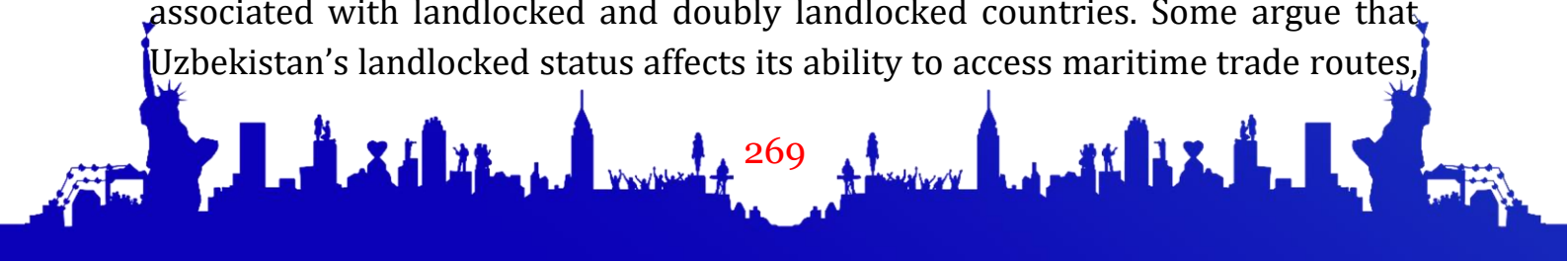
E-mail: xasanboyevadurdona88@gmail.com

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Abstract: As a doubly landlocked country, Uzbekistan has faced several challenges related to restricted connectivity, limited access to global markets, and transportation costs. This article analyzes the role of multi-vectorism in mitigating the effects of Uzbekistan's geographical constraints.(Adilovich,2025). To achieve this, the article adopts a qualitative case-study approach, drawing on sources including government documents, reports from international organizations, and the CKU and UAP connectivity projects. Findings suggest that multi-vectorism can offer several benefits, such as diversifying connectivity, reducing dependence on individual routes, and facilitating access to different international markets. However, it does not eliminate dependence on transit countries and remains subject to geopolitical tensions. Overall, multi-vectorism helps Uzbekistan manage and mitigate, rather than completely eliminate, the geographical disadvantages associated with its double-landlocked position.

Keywords: Uzbekistan; doubly landlocked country; multi-vectorism; geographical constraints;

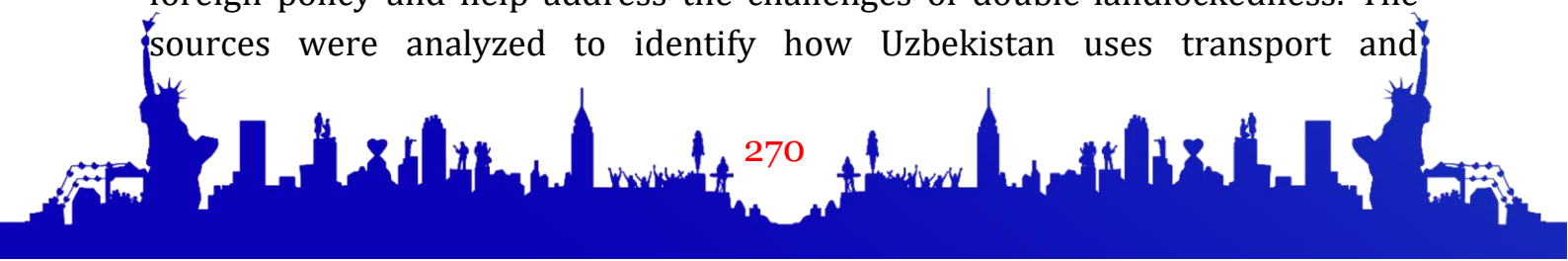
The CKU railway: The UAP railway Uzbekistan is one of only two doubly landlocked countries in the world, meaning that it must cross at least two international borders to reach the ocean or sea.(The Government portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan,2026) This geographical constraint has led to several economic, geopolitical, and logistical consequences, such as dependence on neighboring states, high transportation costs, and a limited access to global markets. However, Uzbekistan has been using a multi-vector policy, which helps to maintain relations with different nations.(Sotiboldiyev,2024) The multi-vector policy refers to a foreign policy strategy in which a state maintains relations with multiple major powers rather than aligning with one bloc. This article analyzes the role of multi-vectorism in mitigating the disadvantages of being doubly landlocked and becoming strategically better connected. Literature review Previous research has identified several economic and logistical challenges associated with landlocked and doubly landlocked countries. Some argue that Uzbekistan's landlocked status affects its ability to access maritime trade routes,





thereby losing out on opportunities in industries related to the sea such as fishing and coastal tourism. (Iswardhana,2026). Others highlight constraints that landlocked countries face such as longer transit times, reliance on neighboring states and high transportation costs which collectively weaken their integration into international value chains (Adilovich,2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that geographical isolation can create significant constraints on international trade and connectivity. Existing scholarship on Uzbekistan's foreign policy frequently characterizes its approach as multi-vector, involving engagement with multiple majors and regional partners. Some scholars emphasize that Uzbekistan pursues a balanced foreign policy, refraining from aligning with one bloc. (Sotiboldiyev, 2024) Recent news also demonstrates that Uzbekistan will continue to pursue multi-vector, measured and balanced foreign policy. (gazeta.uz,2026) Overall, the literature suggests that Uzbekistan pursues and will continue to pursue a multi-vector policy, balancing relations with major powers. Recent studies have examined major connectivity projects involving Uzbekistan, particularly the CKU and UAP railway projects. Studies of CKU highlights that the CKU railway serves as a key link for transit and commerce, integrating with existing international transport networks. (The Times of Central Asia,2026). Research on UAP emphasizes that the UAP project provides Central Asian countries with access to Pakistani seaports, connecting Uzbekistan and Pakistan via Afghanistan. (Yakubov, 2026). These studies generally identify potential connectivity benefits, which facilitates access to international markets. The existing scholarship has examined Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy, the constraints associated with its double-landlocked geography, and individual connectivity initiatives. However, less attention appears to have been given to examining these connectivity projects specifically as practical instruments through which Uzbekistan's multi-vector strategy can mitigate the consequences of double-landlockedness. This article addresses this gap by examining the relationship between Uzbekistan's multi-vector strategy and connectivity projects, focusing on the CKU and UAP railway projects as examples of efforts to mitigate the geographical constraints associated with double-landlockedness.

This article uses a qualitative case-study approach based on evidence from government documents, academic literature, and reports from international organizations. The study examines selected connectivity projects involving Uzbekistan to understand how they contribute to the country's multi-vector foreign policy and help address the challenges of double-landlockedness. The sources were analyzed to identify how Uzbekistan uses transport and





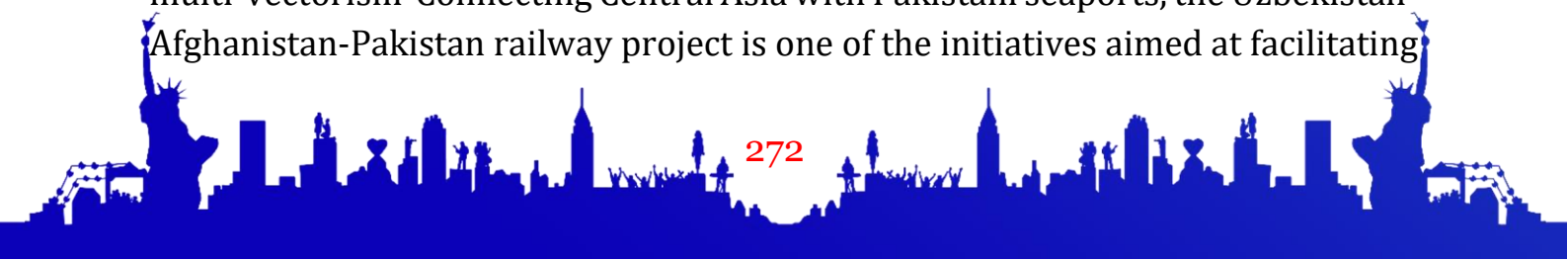
connectivity initiatives to diversify its routes and partnerships. The article also considers the opportunities and limitations of multi-vectorism in reducing the effects of geographical constraints. By examining specific connectivity projects, the study connects Uzbekistan's foreign policy strategy with practical efforts to overcome its geographical challenges. Uzbekistan's Geographical Challenge As one of the world's only doubly landlocked countries, Uzbekistan has faced multiple challenges, including complicated trade routes, transportation costs, and restricted connectivity. One piece of evidence is that in 2014, Uzbekistan ranked 129th in the World Bank Logistics Performance Index, underscoring its logistical fragility. (World Bank, 2026) Logistical performance is important because it directly influences how quickly, cheaply and efficiently a country can move its goods. Furthermore, maritime transport is critical for global trade, as more than 80% of trade by volume is transported by sea, meaning that landlocked countries often pay higher transport costs than coastal countries. (World Bank, Brown et al., 2021) Therefore, Uzbekistan faces several obstacles to accessing international markets, connectivity and transport costs because of its geographical constraint. Multi-vectorism as Uzbekistan's response Uzbekistan pursues a multi-vector foreign policy, cooperating with major powers as well as neighboring states. Pikalov characterizes Uzbekistan's foreign policy as multi-vector and argues that it seeks to maximize the benefits different alliances can offer. (Aleksandr Pikalov, 2014). This strategy can be useful for connectivity as the country can cooperate with different nations to build different transport routes and corridors, for example. This, in turn, reduces dependence on one route or transit country and offers more access to international markets. However, there are some limitations associated with financial costs of infrastructure, security problems and geopolitical tensions. Therefore, multi-vectorism helps Uzbekistan manage geographical constraints, but it can not completely eliminate them. The CKU and UAP railway projects provide examples through which Uzbekistan's multi-vector approach to connectivity can be examined. The CKU Railway: Multi-vectorism and Geographical constraints

The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway is an important connectivity project for commerce and transit. The construction of the CKU railway began in late December 2024 in the Jalal Abad region of the Kyrgyz Republic. (Kaktus Media, 2024c). According to an agreement, the railway in the Kyrgyz Republic will follow a combined route connecting Kashgar, Torugart, Makmal, Jalal-Abad, and Andijan (Kaktus Media, 2024a). The project could benefit Uzbekistan by improving access to international markets for exports such as





metals, cotton, and energy resources, potentially contributing to increased trade. (NEWS CENTRAL ASIA, 2025) As Uzbekistan aims to turn itself into a logistics hub connecting East Asia, Central Asia and routes leading south and west, the CKU could contribute to this objective. (Kodirjon Eshonkulov, 2026). According to Uzbekistan's president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the launch of this important infrastructure project is a historical event that can help strengthen transport connectivity. The President of Uzbekistan also stated that the railway could be the shortest ground "shoulder" connecting China with our region, potentially making it possible to gain access through the promising Trans-Afghan Corridor to South Asian and Middle Eastern markets (PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN, 2024) This statement demonstrates Uzbekistan's expectations that the CKU railway will provide an additional connection toward South Asian and Middle Eastern markets. Uzbekistan is collaborating with neighboring countries and one of the major powers China to build a railway that could offer benefits in terms of trade and connectivity. This could be an example of multi-vector foreign policy that Uzbekistan is pursuing to reduce geographical challenges. The CKU project represents cooperation with China and Kyrgyzstan to create an additional connectivity route. However, the project might face some challenges, including financial constraints, dependence on transit countries and geopolitical tensions. The project is estimated at about \$8 billion, which creates financing pressure, particularly for Kyrgyzstan (OECD, 2025) This demonstrates that the project can provide substantial benefits, but it requires significant funding and investment, which can be particularly difficult for developing countries. This indicates that better connectivity alone can not solve geographical constraints. Adequate funding is therefore necessary to translate connectivity plans into practice. Moreover, the CKU railway passes through Kyrgyzstan before reaching Uzbekistan (PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN, 2024) As the railway passes through Kyrgyzstan, the project can not completely reduce dependence on transit states. This illustrates why multi-vectorism does not guarantee the elimination of all geographical barriers, although it can help mitigate their effects. The project also faces geopolitical challenges. The project faced disagreements over route selection and other political considerations. (cacianalyst.org, 2025). This demonstrates that adopting multi-vectorism also requires careful balancing of relationships as political disagreements can make the decision-making process more difficult. The UAP railway as an example of multi-vectorism Connecting Central Asia with Pakistani seaports, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway project is one of the initiatives aimed at facilitating





regional connectivity. Officials from Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan signed an agreement to prepare a feasibility study in 2025.(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan,2025) On the one hand, the UAP railway project might raise security concerns. This is mainly because Afghanistan continues to face insurgent threats from ISKP, and ongoing security threats in Pakistan, including attacks by the TTP and Balochistan separatists, possibly posing risks to infrastructure and supply lines.(SpecialEurasia 2025) Like the CKU railway project, the UAP railway project also faces significant financial challenges as the estimated cost of the project is around \$4.8-7 billion. (Asma Siddiq, 2025). While the project can offer several advantages, including access to global markets, the implementation of the project requires significant funding and security measures. Uzbekistan is cooperating with Afghanistan and Pakistan, creating a potential southern route toward Pakistani seaports and therefore diversifying its connectivity beyond its existing routes.This illustrates how Uzbekistan's engagement with different regional partners can help it manage the constraints of double-landlockedness. On the other hand, once security problems are handled and consensus is reached, the project can enhance trade and logistics efficiency, and promote regional infrastructure integration.The UAP railway project is aimed at reducing cargo transit time by up to 5 days and transportation costs by over 40%, improving trade efficiency. Additionally, this overland route is intended to provide the shortest path connecting Central Asia with the ports of Pakistan, providing strategic access to the Arabian Sea (Asma Siddiq, 2025) Collaboration with Pakistan and Afghanistan to build another route also shows that Uzbekistan is adopting multi-vectorism to facilitate access to global markets and diversify connectivity.

There are both limitations and potential advantages of adopting a multi-vector foreign policy as a way of reducing geographical challenges. Multiple partnerships with different countries such as China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan can enable the country to diversify its connectivity. Several projects like the CKU railway project and the UAP railway project can potentially reduce reliance on individual routes and provide better access to international markets. For instance, the UAP railway project can help the country reach Pakistani seaports and the Arabian Sea more easily and quickly, reducing travel time and costs.The CKU and UAP railway projects demonstrate that Uzbekistan is pursuing connectivity in different geographical directions, rather than relying on one route. Despite these potential benefits, multi-vectorism has some limits. When Uzbekistan faces disagreements between different partners, for example, it may





slow down the process of making decisions and make it challenging for the country to balance relations with multiple nations. The fact that Uzbekistan remains dependent on transit countries illustrates that multi-vectorism can not entirely eliminate reliance on other transit states. When it comes to projects, the countries need to secure significant funding to actually implement these projects. Both the CKU railway and the UAP railway projects might create financial challenges for the countries involved. The CKU and UAP projects demonstrate two different geographical directions of Uzbekistan's connectivity strategy. While the CKU railway is intended to strengthen connections with China and East Asian markets, the UAP railway could provide a southern route toward Pakistani seaports and the Arabian Sea. Taken together, these projects demonstrate that Uzbekistan's multi-vector approach is not limited to cooperation with one particular power or geographical direction. Instead, it allows the country to pursue multiple connectivity options through different partners. However, the two cases also reveal a common limitation: neither project completely removes Uzbekistan's dependence on transit countries. The CKU route requires transit through Kyrgyzstan, while the UAP route would depend on Afghanistan before reaching Pakistan. Therefore, the comparison suggests that multi-vectorism can diversify Uzbekistan's connectivity and expand its access to international markets, but it cannot completely overcome the structural constraints of double-landlockedness.

In conclusion, multi-vectorism plays a significant role in mitigating the consequences of being doubly landlocked. It helps Uzbekistan to access international markets, build partnerships, and reduce dependence on individual routes. The CKU and UAP projects demonstrate that Uzbekistan maintains relations with different nations, including major powers, neighboring states. Having both southern and eastern routes shows that Uzbekistan does not need to depend on a single route. However, these benefits are constrained by financial constraints, security concerns, and geopolitical tensions. Therefore, multi-vectorism should not be understood as a way to eliminate Uzbekistan's geographical constraints completely, but as a strategy that allows Uzbekistan to manage them..

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