DUAL STRATEGIC POSITIONING: HOW UZBEKISTAN AND SOUTH KOREA NAVIGATE GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION THROUGH BILATERAL PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

This article introduces and develops the concept of "dual strategic positioning" to explain the distinctive resilience and depth of the strategic partnership between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Korea. Existing scholarship treats this relationship primarily as a bilateral development cooperation arrangement or as an instance of Korean middle-power diplomacy. This article argues that neither framing is sufficient. Drawing on political analysis of primary sources, official bilateral declarations, and recent geopolitical developments through 2025, the article demonstrates that the partnership simultaneously functions as an instrument of Korea's supply chain diversification, Indo-Pacific strategy implementation, and middle-power influence projection, and as an instrument of Uzbekistan's sovereign diversification, normative repositioning, and regional leadership ambitions. This dual functionality in which both parties deploy the partnership as a strategic tool for objectives beyond their unilateral reach explains why the relationship has proved resilient across three decades of geopolitical shocks, including Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the resulting acceleration of Central Asian foreign policy diversification. The article contributes an original theoretical concept to the literature on strategic partnerships and middle-power diplomacy, with implications for understanding bilateral cooperation in contested geopolitical regions more broadly.

Keywords: dual strategic positioning; strategic partnership; middle-power diplomacy; Central Asia; Uzbekistan-Korea relations; geopolitical diversification; K-Silk Road; Indo-Pacific strategy; economic statecraft; sovereign diversification.

O'ZBEKISTON VA JANUBIY KOREYA IKKI TOMONLAMA SHERIKLIK ORQALI GEOSIYOSIY RAQOBATNI QANDAY BOSHQARADI: IKKI TOMONLAMA STRATEGIK POZITSIYALASH

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola O'zbekiston Respublikasi va Koreya Respublikasi o'rtasidagi strategik sheriklikning o'ziga xos barqarorligi va chuqurligini tushuntirish maqsadida "ikki tomonlama strategik pozitsiyalash" kontseptsiyasini taklif qiladi va rivojlantiradi. Mavjud adabiyotlarda bu munosabat asosan ikki tomonlama rivojlanish hamkorligi yoki Koreyaning o'rta qudratli davlat diplomatiyasi misoli sifatida ko'rib chiqiladi. Mazkur maqolada ushbu yondashuvlarning ikkalasi ham yetarli emasligi asoslanadi. Birlamchi manbalar, rasmiy ikki tomonlama deklaratsiyalar va 2025-yilgacha bo'lgan so'nggi geosiyosiy voqealar tahlili asosida maqola sheriklikning bir vaqtning o'zida Koreyaning ta'minot zanjirini diversifikatsiya qilish, Hind-Tinch okeani strategiyasini amalga oshirish va o'rta qudratli davlat ta'sirini kuchaytirishning, shuningdek O'zbekistonning suveren diversifikatsiyasi, normativ qayta joylashuvi va mintaqaviy rahbarlik ambitsiyalarining vositasi sifatida faoliyat ko'rsatishini isbotlaydi. Ushbu ikki tomonlama funksionallik har ikki tomon ham sheriklikni

o'z mustaqil imkoniyatlari doirasidan tashqaridagi maqsadlarga erishish uchun strategik vosita sifatida ishlatishi munosabat nima uchun Rossiyaning 2022-yilgi Ukraina bosqinini va Markaziy Osiyoning tashqi siyosat diversifikatsiyasini tezlashtirgan uning oqibatlarini o'z ichiga olgan uch o'n yillik geosiyosiy zarbalarga bardoshli ekanini tushuntiradi.

Kalit so'zlar: ikki tomonlama strategik pozitsiyalash; strategik sheriklik; o'rta qudratli davlat diplomatiyasi; Markaziy Osiyo; O'zbekiston-Koreya munosabatlari; geosiyosiy diversifikatsiya; K-Ipak yo'li; Hind-Tinch okeani strategiyasi.

ДВОЙНОЕ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОЕ ПОЗИЦИОНИРОВАНИЕ: КАК УЗБЕКИСТАН И ЮЖНАЯ КОРЕЯ УПРАВЛЯЮТ ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ КОНКУРЕНЦИЕЙ ПОСРЕДСТВОМ ДВУСТОРОННЕГО ПАРТНЁРСТВА

Аннотация

В данной статье предлагается и разрабатывается концепция «двойного стратегического позиционирования» для объяснения характерной устойчивости и глубины стратегического партнёрства между Республикой Узбекистан и Республикой Корея. В существующей литературе это партнёрство рассматривается главным образом как двустороннее соглашение о сотрудничестве в области развития или как проявление дипломатии Кореи как государства средней силы. В настоящей статье утверждается, что ни один из этих подходов не является достаточным. На основе анализа первичных источников, официальных двусторонних деклараций и последних геополитических событий до 2025 года в статье демонстрируется, что партнёрство одновременно служит инструментом диверсификации цепочек поставок Кореи, реализации её стратегии Индо-Тихоокеанского региона и проецирования влияния как государства средней силы, а также инструментом суверенной диверсификации Узбекистана, нормативного репозиционирования и его региональных лидерских амбиций.

Ключевые слова: двойное стратегическое позиционирование; стратегическое партнёрство; дипломатия государства средней силы; Центральная Азия; отношения Узбекистан-Корея; геополитическая диверсификация; К-Шёлковый путь.

Introduction

The strategic partnership between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Korea is, by most measurable indicators, a diplomatic success story. Over thirty-three years, it has grown from a modest diplomatic recognition in December 1991 into a relationship encompassing more than 200 bilateral agreements, cumulative Korean investment exceeding USD 7.5 billion, annual bilateral trade of USD 2.5 billion, and official development assistance surpassing USD 2.4 billion.[1] Korea has designated Uzbekistan as its only 'Special Strategic Partner' in Central Asia. The partnership has survived the Daewoo corporate collapse of 1999, the Karimov era's periodic isolationism, the COVID-19 pandemic, and two Korean presidential transitions in under two years. By any reasonable benchmark, it is a relationship that works.

Yet the existing literature has not adequately explained why. Two dominant explanatory frameworks circulate in the scholarship. The first treats the relationship as a bilateral development cooperation arrangement - an instance of Korean ODA provision in which Seoul deploys its developmental experience to support Uzbek institutional modernization. The second treats it as an expression of Korean middle-power diplomacy - a deliberate strategy by Seoul to leverage technical expertise and institutional credibility to project influence in a region where great powers compete.[2] Both frameworks capture something real. Neither is sufficient.

The development cooperation framing understates Uzbekistan's agency. Tashkent is not simply receiving Korean assistance; it is actively constructing a specific kind of external relationship with Korea that serves Uzbek strategic objectives that have nothing to do with the content of individual ODA projects. The middle-power diplomacy framing understates the bilateral relationship's structural significance: Korea's engagement with Uzbekistan is not merely one expression of a general diplomatic strategy but a relationship whose specific institutional depth and geopolitical location make it uniquely valuable within Korea's foreign policy architecture.

This article argues that a third framework is necessary - and offers one. The concept of "dual strategic positioning" holds that the Uzbekistan-Korea partnership simultaneously functions as a strategic instrument for both parties, serving objectives that each could not achieve through its unilateral capabilities alone. The partnership's resilience is not the product of shared interests in any simple sense; it is the product of a structural alignment between two distinctive strategic positioning projects that happen to be mutually reinforcing. Understanding this dual functionality is the key to explaining both the relationship's durability and its growing strategic significance in the post-2022 geopolitical environment.

The article proceeds in four steps. The first section reviews the existing literature and identifies its gaps. The second develops the "dual strategic positioning" concept analytically. The third applies it to the empirical record of Uzbekistan-Korea relations, with particular attention to the 2021–2025 period. The fourth draws out the theoretical and policy implications of the analysis.

Literature Review

The study of strategic partnerships has long been characterized by the tension between realist accounts, which treat partnerships as instrumental alignments driven by the distribution of power and threat, and liberal accounts, which emphasize the role of institutional frameworks and interdependence in sustaining cooperation. Waltz's foundational structural realism holds that states form alignments to balance against threats in an anarchic system;[3] Walt's balance-of-threat theory refines this by incorporating perceptions of aggressive intent alongside material capability.[4] Keohane and Nye's complex interdependence framework shifts attention from structural pressures to the functional role of institutions in enabling cooperation across multiple issue areas, even in the absence of a hegemonic enforcer.[5] Neither tradition, however, provides the tools for understanding why partnerships between a democratic middle power and a reforming developmental state might exhibit the particular pattern of resilience and adaptive depth that characterizes the Uzbekistan-Korea relationship.

The constructivist tradition offers more traction on the ideational dimensions of the partnership. Wendt's argument that international relations are socially constructed that state identities and interests are constituted through interaction rather than given by the structure of the system[6] and Finnemore and Sikkink's norm cascade framework, which traces how international norms are promoted, adopted, and internalised,[7] both illuminate the way in which Korean developmental norms and governance models have been actively diffused through the partnership and selectively adopted within Uzbekistan's own reform trajectory. Katzenstein's work on the culture of national security adds the insight that states' strategic dispositions are powerfully shaped by normative frameworks that define appropriate developmental models.[8]

The middle-power theory literature provides the most direct scholarly context for understanding Korea's strategic logic. Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal's foundational contribution defined middle powers by behavioural characteristics rather than positional ranking, identifying multilateralism, coalition-building, and niche diplomacy as their

characteristic strategic repertoire.[9] Kim's analysis of Korea's middle-power diplomacy and alliance management demonstrates that Seoul deploys its bilateral strategic partnerships as building blocks in a broader network construction strategy.[10] Lee and Kim's edited volume on Korea's middle-power diplomacy confirms this pattern, showing how Korea leverages institutional partnerships to compensate for its structural limitations relative to great powers.[11]

In the literature on Uzbekistan-Korea relations specifically, Dadabaev's comparative study of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean engagement in Uzbekistan provides the most systematic empirical treatment, identifying Korea's "niche differentiation" strategy as the mechanism through which it carves out space in a region dominated by Chinese economic scale and residual Russian institutional presence.[12] Rakhimov's article in the Journal of Eurasian Studies situates the relationship within the broader competition among external powers for influence in Central Asia.[13] Yoon's analysis of the upgrading of Korea-Uzbekistan relations traces the diplomatic milestones through which the relationship achieved its current Special Strategic Partnership designation.[14] Varpahovskis's critical assessment questions whether Korea genuinely exercises middle-power diplomacy toward Central Asia or whether its engagement remains primarily commercial and instrumental.[15]

The gap that this article addresses is the absence, in all of these accounts, of a framework that takes Uzbekistan's strategic agency seriously and that models the partnership as a relationship in which both parties are simultaneously pursuing distinctive strategic objectives. Existing frameworks are implicitly asymmetric: they explain what Korea gets from the relationship, or what Uzbekistan receives, but not why the structural alignment between what each party needs from the other generates the specific combination of resilience, normative depth, and adaptive capacity that the partnership displays. The 'dual strategic positioning' concept fills this gap.

Analytical Framework: Dual Strategic Positioning

The concept of "dual strategic positioning" begins from a simple but analytically productive observation: a bilateral partnership can serve as a strategic instrument for both parties simultaneously, where each party's strategic objectives are structurally complementary to the other's, even when those objectives are entirely distinct. This is not the same as saying that both parties benefit from the partnership that is true of virtually any sustained bilateral relationship. The claim is stronger: that the partnership's specific institutional architecture, normative content, and diplomatic profile are explicable as the joint product of two distinct strategic positioning projects whose requirements happen to be mutually reinforcing.

For the purposes of this article, strategic positioning is defined as the deliberate deployment of a bilateral relationship to advance a state's structural position within the international system its supply chain architecture, its alignment portfolio, its normative associations, and its regional influence footprint in ways that its unilateral capabilities cannot achieve. This definition distinguishes strategic positioning from bilateral interest satisfaction (which concerns the content of specific cooperation programmes) and from alliance formation (which involves formal security commitments). Strategic positioning is about where a state stands in the system relative to its competitors, and how it uses bilateral relationships to improve that standing.

Korea's strategic positioning through the Uzbekistan partnership can be understood across three dimensions. First, supply chain diversification: Korea's semiconductor and battery industries depend on critical minerals rare whose global supply is concentrated in ways that the post-2020 period has revealed to be strategically vulnerable. Uzbekistan holds substantial reserves of precisely these minerals. The K-Silk Road initiative, launched in June

2024, explicitly incorporated critical minerals cooperation as a bilateral priority, alongside a USD 2.6 billion Uzbek national programme targeting 76 mineral projects launched in March 2025.

Second, Indo-Pacific strategy operationalization: Korea's December 2022 Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region committed Seoul to a values-based foreign policy framework aligned with the US-led liberal international order. Central Asia, though geographically outside the Indo-Pacific, has become a domain in which that strategy is expressed through the Minerals Security Partnership and the K-Silk Road's emphasis on digital standards, green energy transition, and institutional governance.

Third, middle-power influence projection: Korea's K-Silk Road initiative and the inaugural Korea-Central Asia Presidential Summit confirmed for Seoul in 2025 elevated Korea's multilateral Central Asian engagement to the same diplomatic tier as the US C5+1, China-C5, and EU-Central Asia summit formats. This is not merely a diplomatic achievement; it is a structural positioning claim- the claim that Korea belongs in the first tier of Central Asian engagement alongside the great powers and the European Union.

Uzbekistan's strategic positioning through the Korea partnership is equally distinctive and equally irreducible to the content of individual cooperation programmes. First, sovereign diversification: Uzbekistan faces structural dependence on Russia (through labour migration remittances, estimated at USD 14.5 billion in 2022, approximately 17% of GDP) and on China (through trade of approximately USD 12 billion annually and the Belt and Road corridor infrastructure). The Korea partnership and, more broadly, the Mirziyoyev government's deliberate cultivation of alternative partnerships with Korea, Germany, the EU, Japan, and the Gulf states is a strategy for reducing structural dependence on any single great power.[17]

Second, normative repositioning: Uzbekistan has, since 2016, been actively repositioning itself from the image of a closed, repressive post-Soviet authoritarian state toward that of a reform-oriented, internationally engaged developmental state. The Korea partnership serves this repositioning by associating Uzbekistan with a democratic, globally respected middle power whose developmental trajectory from one of the world's poorest economies to a technological power in a single generation is explicitly invoked in Uzbekistan's national development strategy documents as a model for Uzbek transformation.

Third, regional leadership ambitions: Uzbekistan has, under Mirziyoyev, been developing a regional leadership role in Central Asia hosting the EU-Central Asia Summit in Tashkent in April 2025, actively facilitating the Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State, and positioning itself as the region's diplomatic gateway. The Korea partnership and Korea's explicit designation of Uzbekistan as the "high-tech hub for Central Asia" reinforces this positioning by giving Uzbekistan a unique bilateral relationship status that no other Central Asian state holds.

The "dual strategic positioning" concept synthesizes these two positioning projects into a single analytical framework. The partnership's resilience is explained not by the depth of shared interests in any single cooperation domain but by the structural complementarity between what Korea needs from Uzbekistan (minerals, Indo-Pacific strategy expression, middle-power summit elevation) and what Uzbekistan needs from Korea (sovereign diversification, normative repositioning, regional leadership validation). Each party's positioning project requires something the other can provide. This structural complementarity generates a self-reinforcing dynamic that sustains the partnership across changes of government, geopolitical shocks, and fluctuations in specific cooperation programmes.

Empirical Application: The Partnership through 2021-2025

The analytical purchase of the "dual strategic positioning" concept is best demonstrated through its application to the empirical record of Uzbekistan-Korea relations during the 2021-2025 period the most geopolitically turbulent and strategically consequential phase of the relationship's history.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the defining geopolitical shock of this period for Central Asia. The invasion created structural incentives for Uzbek foreign policy diversification by demonstrating that Russia was willing to use large-scale military force to revise post-Soviet borders, by triggering Western sanctions that disrupted Central Asia's financial and trade connectivity with Russia, and by generating global supply chain disruptions that elevated the strategic value of alternative sourcing and transit arrangements. Dadabaev and Sonoda's analysis of Central Asian states' responses describes this as "strategic silence": calibrated positioning that avoids explicit condemnation while creating space for accelerated external diversification.[18]

Korea's response to the post-2022 environment was equally consequential. The December 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy committed Seoul to an unambiguous alignment with the US-led liberal international order, ending the strategic ambiguity of the Moon Jae-in era. The Ballbach analysis at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik describes this as the most significant Korean foreign policy reorientation in a generation.[19] In the Central Asian context, this reorientation translated directly into the K-Silk Road: Korea's first-ever comprehensive regional strategy, launched during President Yoon Suk-Yeol's June 2024 three-nation Central Asian tour, which produced more than eighty bilateral agreements and positioned Uzbekistan explicitly as Korea's primary partner for the region's technological and institutional transformation.

The June 2024 Yoon-Mirziyoyev summit illustrates the dual strategic positioning dynamic with particular clarity. The summit confirmed bilateral trade at USD 2.5 billion, Korean investment stock at USD 7.5 billion, and produced new cooperation frameworks in critical minerals processing, green hydrogen, digital economy, and high-speed rail, the latter through a USD 196 million Hyundai Rotem order.[20] From Korea's perspective, the summit advanced all three dimensions of its strategic positioning project: it generated concrete critical minerals cooperation commitments, expressed the Indo-Pacific strategy through the K-Silk Road framework, and secured Uzbekistan's participation in the inaugural Korea-Central Asia Presidential Summit in Seoul. From Uzbekistan's perspective, the summit simultaneously advanced Tashkent's diversification away from Russian and Chinese economic dependence, reinforced its normative association with a democratic middle power, and validated its claim to function as the region's diplomatic and technological gateway.

The institutional continuity of the partnership through the turbulent Korean domestic politics of 2024-2025 provides perhaps the clearest evidence for the dual strategic positioning concept. President Yoon's December 2024 martial law declaration and subsequent impeachment introduced significant uncertainty into Korean foreign policy. Yet the Korea-Uzbekistan relationship including the K-Silk Road commitments and the presidential summit survived the transition to the Lee Jae-Myung administration. As the Korea Times reported in September 2025, both governments moved swiftly to reaffirm the Special Strategic Partnership and advance the bilateral agenda.[21] This continuity reflects precisely the structural complementarity that the dual strategic positioning concept predicts: the partnership serves objectives that are sufficiently important to both parties that they transcend the domestic political cycles of either.

The post-2022 critical minerals agenda illustrates the dynamic from a different angle. Uzbekistan's USD 2.6 billion national programme to develop critical mineral deposits, launched in March 2025, was accompanied by bilateral negotiations with multiple external

partners for processing technology, EDCF financing, and long-term supply agreements. From Uzbekistan's perspective, this competitive multilateralization of its minerals agenda is itself a sovereign diversification strategy: by cultivating multiple competing partners for its mineral assets, Tashkent maximizes its bargaining leverage and avoids the kind of structural dependence that single-partner arrangements create. Korea's positioning as a Minerals Security Partnership member makes it a particularly attractive partner for Uzbekistan's diversification agenda, independently of the bilateral relationship's history.

Strategic Implications and Theoretical Contributions

The "dual strategic positioning" concept carries several implications for both scholarship and policy. For scholarship, it contributes an original analytical framework that is generalizable beyond the Uzbekistan-Korea case. The structural complementarity between democratic middle powers' positioning objectives (supply chain diversification, global standards influence, multilateral influence projection) and reforming developmental states' positioning objectives (sovereign diversification, normative repositioning, regional leadership validation) is not unique to this bilateral relationship. Similar dynamics can be identified in Korea's partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia, and several Gulf states, and in Japan's bilateral partnerships with Central Asian and Southeast Asian states. The dual strategic positioning framework offers a more parsimonious and empirically grounded explanation of these partnerships' resilience than either interest-based or norm-diffusion accounts alone.

For the middle-power diplomacy literature, the concept deepens the understanding of how middle powers leverage bilateral partnerships. Existing frameworks, from Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal's coalition-building model to Kim's network construction approach, focus primarily on what middle powers do with their partnerships how they aggregate influence, project norms, and build institutional credibility. The dual strategic positioning concept adds a structural dimension: middle powers do not merely deploy partnerships as diplomatic instruments; they select partners whose own strategic positioning requirements are structurally complementary to their own, thereby creating partnerships whose self-reinforcing dynamics generate resilience that no instrumentally designed cooperation programme could achieve.

For the literature on Central Asian international relations, the concept provides a framework for understanding why some external partnerships with Central Asian states prove more durable than others. Murtazashvili and Umarov's 2024 Carnegie Endowment analysis documents Central Asia's growing strategic confidence and its active cultivation of diverse external partnerships.[22] The dual strategic positioning framework suggests that the external partnerships most likely to achieve durability are those in which the external partner's positioning requirements are structurally complementary to the Central Asian state's own diversification, normative repositioning, and regional leadership aspirations.

For policymakers, the concept has immediate implications. In Seoul, it suggests that Korea's Central Asian engagement should be evaluated not primarily by the volume of ODA disbursed or trade generated but by the degree to which the partnership advances Korea's structural positioning objectives - supply chain diversification, Indo-Pacific strategy expression, and middle-power summit elevation. By this metric, the Korea-Uzbekistan relationship is performing well, but the institutional architecture supporting it creates vulnerabilities that strategic prioritization should address. In Tashkent, the concept suggests that the Uzbek government should recognize the structural complementarity that underpins the Korea partnership as a diplomatic asset to be actively managed, not merely received. Uzbekistan's cultivation of multiple competing external partners for its mineral assets, its WTO accession process, and its regional leadership ambitions collectively create the

structural conditions that make the Korea partnership valuable and maintaining those conditions requires deliberate foreign policy investment.

Conclusion

This article has introduced and developed the concept of "dual strategic positioning" as an original analytical framework for understanding why the strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and Korea has proved resilient across three decades of geopolitical change, and why its significance is growing rather than diminishing in the post-2022 environment. The framework holds that the partnership simultaneously functions as a strategic instrument for both parties, advancing Korean supply chain diversification, Indo-Pacific strategy implementation, and middle-power influence projection on one side, and Uzbek sovereign diversification, normative repositioning, and regional leadership validation on the other. The structural complementarity between these two positioning projects is the primary source of the partnership's durability.

The empirical application to the 2021-2025 period confirms the framework's analytical purchase. Russia's invasion of Ukraine accelerated precisely the structural conditions that make the bilateral positioning complementarity most salient. The June 2024 K-Silk Road launch, the Yoon-Mirziyoyev summit, and the partnership's survival of Korea's 2024–2025 domestic political crisis all reflect the structural logic the framework predicts.

The concept of dual strategic positioning contributes to three bodies of literature: the theory of strategic partnerships, the middle-power diplomacy literature, and the study of Central Asian international relations. Its generalizability beyond the Uzbekistan–Korea case to other bilateral partnerships between democratic middle powers and reforming developmental states suggests that it addresses a genuine gap in how the field conceptualizes bilateral resilience in contested geopolitical regions. Future research should test the framework against comparable cases- Korea-Vietnam, Japan-Uzbekistan, Germany-Kazakhstan to assess its scope conditions and its predictive limits.

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