

"THE ROLE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN QATAR'S FOREIGN POLICY: OPPORTUNITIES AND PRIORITY DIRECTIONS"

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Annotation: This article explores the role and significance of Central Asia in Qatar's foreign policy. In recent years, Qatar has intensified its cooperation with the region's countries, particularly in the fields of energy, investment, and trade. At the same time, diplomatic dialogue and cultural exchanges have been expanding considerably. The study focuses on the main priorities of cooperation, the opportunities available for both sides, and the implications of these processes for regional stability and development.

Keywords: Central Asia, Qatar, Uzbekistan, diplomatic relations, investment, trade and economic cooperation, international relations.

In the current era of globalization, the foreign policy activities of small states are assuming an increasingly significant role in international relations. Their external strategies are often shaped by factors such as economic interests, security concerns, and the pursuit of regional stability. Among such states, Qatar has emerged as an active diplomatic player in the Middle East, gradually attaining a distinctive standing in the international arena through its economic potential and experience in mediation.

One of the defining features of Qatar's foreign policy is its effective utilization of energy resources, the expansion of investment opportunities, and active engagement in the global diplomatic arena. At the same time, Qatar seeks to develop its foreign relations not only with Middle Eastern countries but also with other regions, including Central Asia.

Central Asia holds exceptional geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic significance. The region is rich in natural resources, situated at the crossroads of major transport and communication corridors, and plays a vital role in global security matters. For Qatar, cooperation with Central Asian states presents opportunities to access new markets, implement investment projects, enhance logistical networks, and expand its influence on the international stage.

The relevance of this topic lies in the fact that the Central Asian dimension of Qatar's foreign policy remains insufficiently studied, while at present a new stage of bilateral and multilateral cooperation is emerging. In particular, the prospects for expanding economic, diplomatic, and cultural-humanitarian collaboration with Uzbekistan and other regional states deserve special attention.

In this regard, the present article analyzes the core principles of Qatar's foreign policy, examines the formation and development of its relations with Central Asian states, and highlights - on a theoretical and analytical basis - the role and priority directions of Central Asia in Qatar's external strategy.

Qatar's foreign policy began to take shape after the country gained independence from the United Kingdom on September 3, 1971. Its underlying concept was directed toward consolidating national sovereignty, ensuring economic stability, and enhancing its standing in the international arena. In the immediate post-independence years, Qatar's foreign policy was primarily focused on regional security issues. However, following the accession of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani to the throne in 1995, the state embarked on a more proactive and independent course. From this period onward, Qatar increasingly asserted itself as a small but influential geopolitical actor within the Middle East.

One of the key principles of Qatar's foreign policy is the use of energy resources as an instrument of diplomacy. Since the late 1990s, the country has become one of the world's leading producers and exporters of liquefied natural gas (LNG). According to 2023 data, Qatar accounted for nearly 20 percent of global LNG exports, ranking alongside Australia and the United States as a dominant

supplier. Its energy potential has enabled Qatar to conclude long-term agreements with Japan, South Korea, India, China, and member states of the European Union. For instance, in 2022, QatarEnergy signed a 15-year contract with Germany for LNG supply. Such agreements provide Qatar not only with substantial economic revenues but also with enhanced political leverage in the international arena.

Another principle of Qatar's foreign policy is mediation diplomacy. Doha has frequently been recognized as a "neutral negotiation platform" for resolving international conflicts. For instance, in 2008, under Qatar's mediation, the "Doha Agreement" was signed to end the political crisis in Lebanon. During the 2010s, Qatar also hosted peace talks between the Sudanese government and rebel groups in Darfur. One of the most significant examples of its mediation role was the negotiation process on Afghanistan in 2020–2021, when Qatar facilitated dialogue between the United States and representatives of the Taliban movement. Notably, the U.S.–Taliban agreement signed in Doha in February 2020 considerably enhanced Qatar's international prestige. Furthermore, Qatar has been actively engaged in the Palestinian issue, providing billions of dollars in humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip while positioning itself as a key mediator.

Thus, Qatar's post-independence foreign policy concept, energy diplomacy, and mediation practice together constitute the three main pillars of its external strategy. While the effective use of energy wealth has strengthened the country's economic power, mediation diplomacy has enabled it to gain recognition as an influential and conciliatory actor in international relations, despite its status as a small state. These factors have transformed Qatar into a significant geopolitical hub not only in the Middle East but also on the global stage.

The first stage of diplomatic relations between Qatar and the Central Asian states began to take shape in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For instance, official diplomatic ties between Qatar and Kazakhstan were established in July 1993. Kazakhstan opened its embassy in Doha in May 2007, while Qatar inaugurated its embassy in Astana in October 2016. During this period, as the Middle East and

GCC countries became one of the key directions of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, Qatar likewise viewed Kazakhstan as a promising partner for cooperation.

Alongside the consolidation of diplomatic relations, high-level visits marked the development of bilateral ties. In May 1997, Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister K. Tokayev visited Qatar, followed by an official visit of Qatari Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani to Kazakhstan in April 1998. In April 1999, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani paid his first visit to Kazakhstan, during which Qatar allocated USD 6.8 million to support the construction of the new capital, Astana (Embassy of Qatar in Kazakhstan).

In January 2014, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited Kazakhstan, where the two countries signed agreements on taxation, as well as memoranda in the fields of energy and investment. A more recent visit took place on 7 June 2023, when Sheikh Tamim Al Thani met with President Tokayev in Astana to discuss multiple avenues of cooperation, including Qatar's participation in the Astana International Forum (Astana Times, 2024). Furthermore, Qatar's financial contributions to Kazakhstan - including investments worth approximately USD 35 million in healthcare facilities, schools, and social infrastructure - have further strengthened bilateral relations.

Diplomatic relations between Qatar and Uzbekistan have also developed steadily. Official ties were established on 27 November 1997. In June 2023, at the invitation of the President of Uzbekistan, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani paid his first official state visit to the country. During the meeting held in Samarkand, the parties discussed avenues for enhancing strategic potential in energy, tourism, agriculture, transport, and logistics. They also signed investment agreements worth USD 12 billion, representing Qatar's largest investments in Uzbekistan (Uzbekistan.org, 2023).

Subsequently, on 2 October 2023, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Sheikh Tamim met in Doha, where they agreed to develop a "road map" aimed at expanding political dialogue, trade and economic cooperation, as well as scientific,

cultural, and humanitarian ties. Moreover, in September 2022, on the sidelines of the SCO Summit, Qatar obtained the status of “Dialogue Partner,” and on 7 May 2023, Qatar inaugurated its diplomatic mission in Tashkent.

Intergovernmental cooperation has also expanded with major projects in energy, transport, logistics, and agriculture. One of the most significant initiatives includes collaboration with Nebras Power on the planned construction of a 1,600 MW thermal power plant in Syrdarya region (Nebras Power, 2022).

Relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also been gradually consolidated. At the beginning of 2023, as part of a Central Asian tour initiated outside Uzbekistan, a Qatari delegation led by Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In Bishkek, 13 cooperation agreements were signed, including in the field of military collaboration. During the visit to Dushanbe, 15 documents were concluded, covering areas such as hydropower, agriculture, and tourism. Notably, in Tajikistan, the official opening ceremony of the Central Cathedral Mosque of Dushanbe - largely financed by Qatar - was held; approximately 70% of the construction costs of this mosque were covered by Qatari funding.

Relations with Turkmenistan have similarly been strengthened through diplomatic infrastructure. Qatar opened its embassy in Ashgabat in 1996, and during the official visit of the President of Turkmenistan to Doha in March 2023, a new embassy building was inaugurated. On this occasion, the heads of state held discussions on expanding bilateral cooperation, thereby reinforcing the political foundation of their relations.

In relations between Central Asia and Qatar, steady growth is observed through reciprocal diplomatic visits, the opening of embassies, and high-level meetings. Economic volumes, investment participation, and political trust with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the establishment of new cooperation formats with Tajikistan and

Kyrgyzstan, and the expansion of diplomatic infrastructure with Turkmenistan serve as clear examples of this trend. These developments confirm that Qatar's foreign policy in Central Asia constitutes a distinctive and consistent direction.

Trade and economic cooperation between Qatar and the Central Asian states is developing dynamically, and recent large-scale initiatives and practical agreements are taking this process to a new stage. For instance, in order to expand economic ties with Kazakhstan, a meeting was held on July 3, 2023, in Astana between Murat Karimsakov, Chairman of the International Chamber of Commerce of Kazakhstan, and Ahmad Mohammed Al-Sayed, Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in charge of foreign trade. Subsequently, major investment programs were discussed - Qatar plans to invest approximately USD 20 billion into the Kazakh economy, covering such key sectors as energy, agriculture, telecommunications, finance, construction, logistics, high technology, and the green economy.

In 2023, the trade turnover amounted to USD 9.9 million, with Kazakhstan exporting meat and livestock products worth USD 5.6 million to Qatar. The overall export potential is estimated at USD 240 million.

Trade and economic relations with Uzbekistan have also begun to revive. On February 26, 2025, Deputy Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Uzbekistan, D. Kurbanov, met with Sheikh Khalifa bin Jassim Al-Thani, Chairman of the Qatar Chamber of Commerce. During the meeting, issues such as expanding trade and economic cooperation, attracting investment, facilitating business exchanges, and organizing delegation visits were discussed.

Furthermore, the establishment of the Uzbekistan–Qatar Business Council in Doha on October 1, 2023 has served as an important mechanism for the systematic development of bilateral relations.

According to a report published by The Peninsula Qatar on November 12, 2024, Uzbekistan expressed its readiness to cooperate with Qatari investors in agriculture, construction materials, tourism, real estate, and other sectors. Although bilateral trade turnover in 2025 remains relatively modest, both sides declared through the press their intention to expand trade volumes. The Prime Minister stated that in 2024 trade reached USD 1.8 million, with plans to further increase this figure in the coming years. In addition, major economic cooperation agreements similar to those signed with Kazakhstan are gradually being established with Uzbekistan as well - for instance, trade, economic, and investment agreements are regularly reviewed and are expanding year by year.

These processes constitute the following key pillars in shaping the Qatar–Central Asia economic cooperation model:

1. **Foreign capital potential and attracted investments** – USD 20 billion investment commitments to Kazakhstan and the institutionalization of trade and investment dialogue with Uzbekistan;
2. **Diversification of export–import structures** – exchange in meat, livestock, energy, agriculture, and other sectors;
3. **Activation of inter-organizational mechanisms** – strengthening of trade and industrial ties through chambers of commerce, business councils, and cooperation forums;
4. **Trade growth strategies** – despite relatively low volumes, the development of continuous mechanisms aimed at increasing flows, such as annual enhancements in partnership levels.

This trade and economic cooperation moves forward as a consistent effort not only to strengthen political but also economic foundations between the countries. Construction projects, energy investments, trade flows, and diplomatic visits

complement each other and unfold in close connection with the political, diplomatic, and economic principles outlined in the above sections.

Economic Cooperation – Energy, Transport-Logistics, and Investments.

Qatar identifies economic cooperation with Central Asia as a strategic priority, demonstrating significant potential in the fields of energy, transport and logistics, as well as investments.

Cooperation with Kazakhstan in the Energy and Infrastructure Sectors.

On March 21, 2024, during negotiations held in Doha between Kazakhstan's Prime Minister Olzhas Bektenov and Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, an agreement was reached to implement strategic investment projects worth \$17.6 billion [Times of Central Asia]. Within this framework, projects include the construction of gas processing plants worth \$5.7 billion, the second line of the Aktobe–Kostanay and Beineu–Bozoi–Shymkent gas pipelines valued at \$7.7 billion, a 1,100 MW combined-cycle gas power plant and a 350 MW hydroelectric power station worth \$2.7 billion, as well as enterprises for deep processing of wheat, peas, and dairy products [Astana Times].

According to another source, on October 10, 2024, Kazakhstan's upper house of parliament ratified this strategic cooperation agreement, under which nine projects will be implemented in the fields of telecommunications, energy, transport, petrochemicals, agriculture, and finance. Under this arrangement, Qatar's investments are projected to reach \$20 billion.

Furthermore, a report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) indicates that in 2024, Kazakhstan attracted a total of \$15.7 billion in investments, of which \$11 billion came from Qatar's UCC Holding. These projects encompass gas processing facilities, a new compressor station, and the development of two additional transit pipelines [Astana Times].

Economic Cooperation with Uzbekistan.

On November 10, 2024, during a meeting in Doha, members of the Qatari Businessmen Association (QBA) were advised to explore investment opportunities in Uzbekistan's agribusiness, energy, and mining sectors, according to Gulf Times.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan's Minister of Investment, Industry, and Trade, Laziz Kudratov, emphasized that in 2023 the country attracted a total of \$22.4 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI). He also set a target of mobilizing \$250 billion in FDI by 2030 [Global Finance Magazine].

Earlier, in May 2023, it had been proposed to establish a joint Uzbekistan–Qatar Business Forum. The aim of this platform was to expand cooperation in two primary directions - particularly in infrastructure, industry, energy, and agriculture.

Cooperation with Tajikistan.

On October 8, 2024, during his visit to Qatar, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan discussed with Qatari officials a range of priority areas for firm economic partnership, including agriculture, transport infrastructure, logistics, civil aviation, and tourism, alongside Uzbekistan.

Within the framework of this visit, the establishment of a Joint Economic and Investment Fund between Qatar and Tajikistan was considered [Embassy of Tajikistan in Qatar, 2024]. The fund is expected to mobilize investments in energy, industry, mining, and logistics sectors.

A representative of the Qatar Businessmen Association (QBA) highlighted that Kyrgyzstan had already invested \$62 million in the first phase of the Diar Dushanbe residential project in Tajikistan [The Peninsula Qatar, 2023].

Cooperation with Turkmenistan

In March 2023, during the visit of the President of Turkmenistan to Qatar, the two states ratified the Agreement on the Promotion and Protection of International Investments. This development is considered an important foundation for expanding investment cooperation.

◆ Furthermore, Turkmenistan announced its intention for Qatar to become one of the major financial partners in the TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) gas pipeline project. source

◆ In March 2025, during a meeting held in Doha, the parties went as far as to discuss cooperation in the fields of energy, investment, and transport, including the Serhetabat–Herat section of the TAPI project.

◆ Qatar was initially a member of the Ashgabat Agreement, signed in 2011. Although it withdrew from participation in 2013, this still highlights Qatar's strategic focus on the transport and logistics sector. Source

Cooperation with Kyrgyzstan

In June 2023, during an interview with QNA, the Chairman of the National Investment Agency of Kyrgyzstan emphasized Qatar's growing interest in the fields of aviation, energy, construction, and real estate.

◆ At the same time, Kyrgyzstan is exploring opportunities for the export of bio-supplements and natural products - including fruits, meat, and forestry products - to Qatar, which could provide Qatar with a reliable source of high-quality imports.

Cultural and Humanitarian Sphere: Education, Sports, Culture, and Religious-Educational Projects

In its foreign policy towards Central Asia, Qatar prioritizes not only economic and political interests but also cultural and humanitarian diplomacy. Within this framework, Qatar actively implements its “soft power” strategy.

Education Sector – Established in 1997, Education City has become a global hub of education. The complex currently hosts branches of leading U.S. and U.K. universities, such as Georgetown University, Carnegie Mellon University, and UCL Qatar. This platform is also open to youth from Central Asia, with students from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan currently studying there. For Qatar, this represents an opportunity to help shape the region's future elites and foster long-term cooperation.

Healthcare and Education Projects – Qatar has also engaged in humanitarian and socially oriented initiatives in Central Asia. For instance, in 2017 Qatar allocated 35 million USD to support the construction of two maternity hospitals in Almaty and a school in Astana. (Source: Tengrinews.kz, January 16, 2017)

Culture and Sports – Qatar consistently emphasizes the development of cultural and sports cooperation with Central Asian countries. For instance, during the 2022 FIFA World Cup [FIFA official site, Qatar 2022 volunteering platform], volunteers from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan actively participated, highlighting expanding ties through sports diplomacy. Moreover, Qatar has promoted collaboration with Central Asian youth through sports scholarships and football academies, creating new opportunities for engagement.

Religious and Educational Projects – Through non-governmental organizations such as Qatar Charity and the Sheikh Eid Foundation, Qatar has funded a number of socio-religious initiatives in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. These projects include the construction of mosques, schools, and cultural centers, strengthening Qatar's religious-educational influence in the region.

Qatar's increasing foreign policy activism in recent years - particularly its efforts to expand relations with Central Asian countries - demonstrates its emergence as a new geopolitical and geoeconomic actor in the region. Between 2012 and 2023, Qatar opened embassies in all Central Asian states, thereby consolidating diplomatic relations on an institutional basis. This process is directly linked to the three pillars of Qatar's foreign policy: energy exports, mediation diplomacy, and economic partnership.

For Central Asian countries, cooperation with Qatar offers opportunities to attract foreign investment, expand transport and logistics capacities, implement joint projects in the energy sector, and strengthen their international standing. At the same time, it is crucial for the countries of the region to pursue a balanced approach, aligning Qatar's interests with their own national priorities.

Thus, the intensification of ties between Qatar and Central Asia holds strategic significance for the region, creating new opportunities in terms of regional security, sustainable development, and participation in a multipolar international system.

The analysis demonstrates that Qatar's growing presence in Central Asia is not merely limited to economic investment and humanitarian initiatives, but reflects a broader strategic effort to diversify its foreign policy beyond the Middle East. Through energy diplomacy, mediation, and large-scale investments, Qatar seeks to strengthen its influence in a region traditionally dominated by major powers such as Russia and China. Unlike these actors, Qatar employs a combination of soft power instruments – including cultural, educational, and religious projects – which enables it to position itself as a complementary rather than confrontational partner.

At the same time, Qatar's initiatives intersect with the interests of Turkey and Iran, both of which also emphasize cultural and religious affinity with Central Asia. While Turkey promotes pan-Turkic cooperation and Iran relies on historical and religious ties, Qatar frames its engagement around financial capacity, mediation reputation, and global connectivity. This diversification allows Central Asian states to benefit from an expanded network of partnerships, while reducing over-dependence on traditional actors.

However, Qatar's long-term role in the region will depend on its ability to maintain a balanced approach that respects local priorities, ensures tangible benefits for Central Asian economies, and avoids perceptions of external overreach. If managed effectively, Qatar's involvement could contribute to a more multipolar balance in Central Asia, supporting the region's aspirations for sustainable development, security, and international diversification.

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