

**THE HISTORY OF TRADE AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION BETWEEN  
UZBEKISTAN AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES (1991–2025)**

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**Abstract:** Following its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan embarked on a multifaceted foreign economic policy aimed at diversification beyond traditional post-Soviet partners. Southeast Asian countries, with their dynamic economies, export-oriented models, and experiences in modernization, emerged as valuable counterparts in this strategy. This article analyzes the historical evolution of trade and economic cooperation between Uzbekistan and key Southeast Asian nations primarily Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand from 1991 to 2025. It traces the transition from initial diplomatic engagement and modest trade volumes in the 1990s, through gradual institutionalization in the 2000s, to accelerated growth under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's administration after 2016. The analysis highlights key sectors such as textiles, agriculture, electronics, pharmaceuticals, tourism, and investment, alongside mechanisms including bilateral agreements, joint commissions, and participation in broader connectivity initiatives. Despite challenges like geographical distance, logistical barriers, and global disruptions, bilateral trade turnover has shown consistent upward trends, reaching notable figures by the mid-2020s. This cooperation reflects Uzbekistan's broader goals of economic modernization, market diversification, and integration into global value chains, while Southeast Asian partners view Uzbekistan as a gateway to Central Asia. The period culminates in enhanced strategic partnerships, with prospects for deeper integration through frameworks like ASEAN dialogue mechanisms. This historical trajectory underscores the role of pragmatic diplomacy and mutual economic complementarity in fostering resilient South-South cooperation.

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, trade cooperation, economic diversification, Vietnam-Uzbekistan relations, Malaysia-Uzbekistan partnership, Singapore investment, post-independence foreign policy, Central Asia connectivity.

After gaining independence in 1991, the Republic of Uzbekistan inherited a Soviet-era economy heavily oriented toward raw material exports and intra-Union supply chains. The dissolution of the USSR necessitated urgent reorientation of external economic ties. In this context, Southeast Asian countries presented attractive models of rapid industrialization, export-led growth, and pragmatic development strategies that resonated with Uzbekistan's leadership. Diplomatic relations were swiftly established with major ASEAN members: Vietnam in January 1992, followed by Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and others in the early 1990s. These initial steps laid the groundwork for economic engagement, though actual trade volumes remained limited during the turbulent transition decade due to structural adjustments, payment issues, and logistical complexities across vast distances. Early cooperation focused on traditional Uzbek exports such as cotton, fertilizers, and minerals, exchanged for Southeast Asian consumer goods, electronics, and light industrial products. Vietnam quickly emerged as a consistent partner, drawing on shared experiences of post-socialist transformation and historical ties from the Soviet era. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, bilateral

agreements on trade, investment protection, and avoidance of double taxation were signed with several Southeast Asian states, providing a legal foundation for expansion. Singapore distinguished itself as an early leader in trade turnover among ASEAN countries, serving not only as a direct partner but also as a hub for re-exports and financial services. Malaysian companies explored opportunities in infrastructure and halal industries, leveraging cultural affinities as Muslim-majority nations.

The 2000s witnessed institutionalization of ties through intergovernmental commissions on trade and economic cooperation. Uzbekistan actively studied Southeast Asian development experiences, particularly Singapore's efficient governance and Malaysia's Vision 2020 industrialization model, adapting elements to its own context of gradual market reforms. Trade volumes grew modestly but steadily. For instance, Singapore remained the largest Southeast Asian trading partner in the mid-2000s with annual turnover exceeding 70-80 million USD, driven by machinery, chemicals, and services. Vietnam's relations deepened through imports of Uzbek cotton and chemicals in exchange for electronics, textiles, and foodstuffs. Joint ventures began appearing in pharmaceuticals and agro-processing, albeit on a small scale. Indonesia and Thailand followed with growing interest in energy, agriculture, and tourism. Geographical distance and reliance on transit routes via China or sea-land combinations posed persistent challenges. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan's strategic location at the heart of Central Asia positioned it as a potential gateway for Southeast Asian businesses seeking entry into emerging Eurasian markets. Under President Islam Karimov, foreign policy maintained a balanced, multi-vector approach that included cautious engagement with Asian tigers while prioritizing sovereignty and self-reliance. Cultural and educational exchanges, including scholarships and business forums, complemented economic efforts and built human capital links.

A qualitative shift occurred after 2016 with the election of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, whose administration prioritized economic liberalization, foreign investment attraction, and regional openness. This "New Uzbekistan" policy aligned well with Southeast Asian partners' interests. Trade barriers were reduced, visa regimes simplified, and investment climate improved through tax incentives, special economic zones, and legal reforms. Bilateral trade with Southeast Asian countries accelerated markedly. Vietnam's trade turnover, for example, saw sustained growth, reaching over 200 million USD by 2024, with Vietnamese exports of electronics and consumer goods complementing Uzbek pharmaceuticals and agricultural products. Malaysia strengthened cooperation in halal certification, palm oil processing, and Islamic finance, areas where mutual expertise proved valuable. Singapore expanded its role beyond trade to investment in technology parks, logistics, and financial services, capitalizing on Uzbekistan's digitalization drive. Indonesian and Thai firms showed interest in textiles, tourism infrastructure, and food processing. High-level visits proliferated, resulting in dozens of memoranda and contracts. Participation in international forums facilitated broader dialogue, with Uzbekistan accrediting ambassadors to ASEAN and expressing interest in closer institutional ties, including accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia by 2025. Key sectors driving cooperation included textiles and garments, where Uzbekistan's cotton base combined with Southeast Asian manufacturing and marketing expertise; agriculture and food processing, encompassing fruits, vegetables, and seafood trade; pharmaceuticals and healthcare, leveraging both sides' strengths in generic medicines and traditional remedies; renewable energy and infrastructure, attracting investments in solar and transport projects; and tourism, with growing flows of visitors facilitated by improved air

connectivity. Investment flows, though starting from a low base, diversified into joint ventures and greenfield projects. Southeast Asian capital contributed to Uzbekistan's industrialization goals, while Uzbek firms explored opportunities in ASEAN markets for processed goods.

Global events tested resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains in 2020-2022, prompting both sides to accelerate digital trade and diversify logistics. Geopolitical shifts, including heightened great-power competition, reinforced Uzbekistan's diversification strategy, elevating Southeast Asia as a vital non-traditional partner. By the mid-2020s, cumulative trade turnover with major Southeast Asian countries had multiplied several times compared to the early 2000s, though it still represented a modest share of Uzbekistan's overall foreign trade, indicating substantial untapped potential. Connectivity initiatives played a supportive role. Alignment with China's Belt and Road Initiative improved overland and multimodal routes linking Central Asia to Southeast Asian ports. Uzbekistan's reforms toward WTO accession further harmonized standards and facilitated deeper integration. Educational and technical cooperation expanded through joint programs in engineering, IT, and business management, creating a skilled workforce attuned to Asian markets.

The evolution from 1991 to 2025 illustrates a transition from symbolic post-independence diplomacy to substantive economic partnership. Early limitations of volume and scope gave way to structured, multi-sectoral engagement driven by complementarity: Uzbekistan's resource base, young population, and reform momentum meeting Southeast Asia's capital, technology, and global market access. Challenges persist, including logistical costs, regulatory harmonization, and competition from larger players like China and Russia. Yet, the trajectory demonstrates the effectiveness of pragmatic, interest-based cooperation in building long-term resilience. Looking ahead, sustained growth appears likely through enhanced free trade discussions, joint industrial parks, digital economy collaboration, and fuller integration into Eurasian-ASEAN connectivity frameworks. This partnership not only supports Uzbekistan's modernization and export diversification but also contributes to a more balanced, multipolar global economic architecture, exemplifying successful South-South cooperation in the 21st century.

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