

CHINA'S REGIONAL TOURISM STRATEGIES AND THE PROSPECTS FOR UZBEKISTAN'S GEOECONOMIC INTEGRATION

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Abstract: China's expanding regional tourism strategies—encompassing policy initiatives under the Belt and Road framework, visa facilitation, and outbound investment—are increasingly shaping Central Asia's economic landscape. This article analyzes how China's tourism outreach can serve as a catalyst for Uzbekistan's geoeconomic integration. We review recent developments such as visa-free travel agreements, surging Chinese tourist flows into Central Asia, and joint tourism promotion campaigns. Using a comparative approach with relevant data, we discuss the implications for Uzbekistan's economy and regional connectivity. The findings indicate that China's tourism-driven diplomacy and infrastructure investments may significantly boost Uzbekistan's tourism sector and broader economic linkages, while also highlighting the need for sustainable and balanced integration. We conclude that leveraging China's tourism strategies offers promising opportunities for Uzbekistan to deepen its regional geoeconomic ties, provided that challenges of dependency and cultural preservation are managed.

Keywords: Regional trade agreements, USMCA, geo-economic integration, economic diversification, New Uzbekistan, trade policy.

Introduction

China's rise as a major global tourism stakeholder has profound implications for its neighbors. In recent years, **China's regional tourism strategies** have become an integral part of its foreign policy toolkit, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2013, the BRI aims to enhance connectivity through infrastructure, trade, and cultural cooperation¹. Tourism, as a form of people-to-people exchange, is explicitly recognized as a component of BRI's vision . By promoting tourist flows along ancient Silk Road routes, China not only spurs economic activity but also strengthens diplomatic ties. At the same time, **Uzbekistan**, a key Central Asian nation historically situated on the Silk Road, has undertaken significant economic reforms and visa liberalizations to open up to global tourism . Tapping into China's enormous tourism market could accelerate Uzbekistan's **geoeconomic integration**—i.e. its integration into regional economic networks and value chains—as tourism growth often brings investments in infrastructure, services, and greater connectivity. This introduction sets the stage for analyzing how China's tourism initiatives and Uzbekistan's integration efforts converge, and why this intersection is strategically important. Key questions include: How is China pursuing regional tourism cooperation? What benefits and risks do these strategies pose for Uzbekistan's economic

¹ The Belt and Road Initiative's impact on tourism and heritage along the Silk Roads: A systematic literature review and future research agenda.

positioning? And how can Uzbekistan leverage tourism to strengthen its role in regional development?

Literature review

China's Tourism Strategies under BRI: Academic studies underscore that one aim of the Belt and Road Initiative is to boost tourism among participating countries by reviving Silk Road routes . Researchers such as Dayoub et al. (2024) note that the BRI's focus on infrastructure and cultural exchange has "significant implications for infrastructure development, tourism, and local communities along the Silk Roads". The initiative has led to new tourism products, heritage site investments, and easier cross-border travel, though it also raises challenges like ensuring sustainable practices and equitable benefit-sharing. Chinese policymakers view tourism as a tool for "connectivity" and **people-to-people bonds**, often referring to tourism as a "connector for global inclusive development" that can accelerate related industries. Conferences like the World Tourism Cities Federation's summit on "One Belt One Road: Development of Tourism Corridor and City Hub" (2017) have stressed cooperation to develop **Silk Road tourism corridors** . In practice, China has increased tourism cooperation agreements, cultural exchange programs, and promotional campaigns with neighboring countries. For example, China has designated themed tourism years (such as the "Year of Kazakhstan Tourism in China 2024" and "Tourism Year of Uzbekistan in China 2024) to spotlight Central Asian destinations to Chinese travelers ². These initiatives align with scholarly observations that tourism is used by China as part of its soft power and regional diplomacy, fostering goodwill and economic ties simultaneously.

Uzbekistan's Geoeconomic Integration and Tourism: Uzbekistan, especially since the 2016 leadership transition, is frequently cited as pursuing a policy of openness and regional integration. The term **geoeconomic integration** in this context refers to Uzbekistan's efforts to weave itself into the fabric of regional economic systems, balancing relationships with major powers through economic cooperation. Literature on Central Asian development (e.g., CABAR.asia analyses) highlights that China views Uzbekistan as a "priority trade and economic partner" in Central Asia due to its market size, resources, and strategic location ³. Uzbekistan's reforms have included diversifying trade partnerships, joining international agreements, and crucially, developing tourism as a strategic sector. Mirziyoyev's government designated tourism a priority and massively expanded visa-free entry (from only 9 countries in 2017 to 95 countries by 2023) . This policy shift led to unprecedented growth in tourist arrivals, seen as vital for Uzbekistan's integration into global markets. Scholars point out that tourism ties not only bring in revenue and investment but also link into broader geoeconomic goals: improved infrastructure (airports, roads), enhanced country branding, and partnerships with institutions like the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the Silk Road Program. Furthermore, Uzbekistan's active participation in BRI is viewed domestically as an "external driving force" for development ⁴ , and tourism is one area where this manifests through Chinese investments and visitor flows. However, literature also cautions about challenges: overreliance on one country's tourists or capital can create vulnerabilities, and a balance must be struck between economic gains and cultural preservation . This review thus situates our study at the intersection of BRI-

² Uzbekistan: 2024 Tourism Year of Uzbekistan in China opens, eyeing enhanced people-to-people exchanges.

³ China and Uzbekistan: Investments, Projects, and Areas of Cooperation. <https://cabar.asia/>

⁴ Uzbekistan seeking new path to progress and prosperity with China.

driven tourism expansion and Uzbekistan's quest for deeper geoeconomic integration in Central Asia.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, analytical approach grounded in a **review of policy documents, tourism statistics, and secondary research**. We synthesized information from reputable sources including international organizations (e.g. UNWTO, World Bank), government releases, and academic studies. Tourism data (e.g. international arrival numbers, Chinese tourist flows) were drawn from official statistics and reports, and are visualized in graph form to illustrate trends. For instance, we use data from Uzbekistan's State Committee for Tourism and UNWTO to plot the growth of foreign arrivals over time, and data from news and government sources to compare Chinese tourist numbers before and after key policy changes. We also analyzed Chinese and Uzbek government communications (such as joint statements and agreements) to understand strategic intent. In terms of **analysis**, we employ a comparative lens: comparing China's tourism engagement strategies across Central Asian countries and examining how Uzbekistan's measures align or differ. The **Findings and Discussion** section integrates these data and comparisons, interpreting their implications through theories of geoeconomics and regional development. By combining quantitative indicators (e.g. tourist numbers, growth rates) with qualitative insights (policy context, literature perspectives), we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. This method allows us to trace cause-effect linkages—such as how a visa policy change correlates with tourist influx—and to critically evaluate the prospects of Uzbekistan's integration in light of China's regional tourism push. All sources are cited to maintain academic rigor, and visualizations are provided to aid clarity.

Findings and discussion

Tourism as a Driver of Uzbekistan's Integration: Uzbekistan has experienced a dramatic rise in international tourism in the past decade, which in turn has bolstered its regional economic links. Key reforms, notably visa liberalization and infrastructure upgrades, have led to a fivefold increase in tourist arrivals within just a few years. International tourist arrivals in Uzbekistan climbed from about 1 million in 2016 to 6.7 million in 2019, before a pandemic-induced drop and then a strong recovery by 2023 (reaching ~7.2 million visitors). This trajectory, shown in the figure above, reflects Uzbekistan's deliberate strategy to open up and attract travelers as part of its economic modernization.

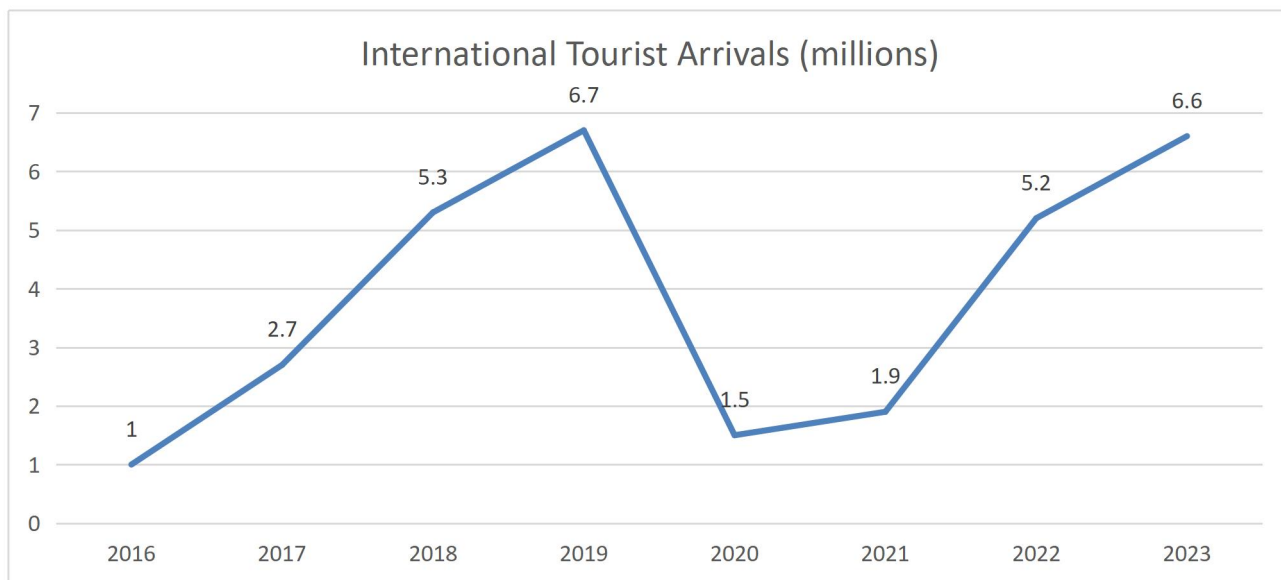


Figure 1. International Tourist Arrivals in Uzbekistan (2016–2023).⁵

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s government moved swiftly to expand visa-free access (to citizens of 95 countries by 2023, up from just 9 countries in 2017)⁶. This policy shift unlocked pent-up travel demand, particularly from neighboring states and Asia. The tourism boom has geoeconomic significance: it has prompted foreign investment in hotels, airports, and services in Uzbekistan, often through regional partnerships. For example, Chinese companies see tourism infrastructure as a promising investment area in Uzbekistan, viewing the country as “highly attractive for tourists” and a “blue ocean” market for development . The surge in visitors also strengthens transport links – more flights, better roads – effectively integrating Uzbekistan more deeply with the region. By 2022, tourism had become a significant export sector for Uzbekistan, directly contributing about 2.5% to GDP in pre-pandemic years and poised to grow further . Moreover, a large portion of Uzbekistan’s tourists come from within Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, etc.), reflecting how tourism ties reinforce regional connectivity. In short, Uzbekistan’s recent tourism expansion has not only brought economic gains but also advanced its **geoeconomic integration** by connecting it with regional markets, labor (tourism employment), and capital. However, the country still faces challenges in maximizing this sector – such as improving payment systems, training skilled hospitality workers, and spreading tourist flows beyond traditional cities – which require sustained cooperation with partners including China.

China’s Outbound Tourism and Central Asia: China’s emergence as one of the world’s largest outbound tourism markets is a major opportunity for Central Asian economies. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese tourists numbered in the tens of millions globally each year, spending lavishly and seeking new destinations. Central Asia historically attracted only a small fraction of these Chinese travelers, but this is changing due to targeted strategies. **Visa policy is a critical tool in China’s regional tourism strategy.** In 2023, China and Kazakhstan enacted a

⁵ Uzbekistan Tourism Industry Statistics.

⁶ Tourism Doing Business in Uzbekistan.

mutual visa-free regime (allowing Chinese tourists 30 days visa-free in Kazakhstan), and Uzbekistan unilaterally allowed Chinese citizens 10 days visa-free (as of 2021) . These policies immediately made Central Asia more accessible. The impact was dramatic in Kazakhstan: about 217,000 Chinese tourists visited Kazakhstan in 2023, a twelvefold increase from the previous year⁷. This reflects both post-pandemic pent-up demand and the effectiveness of visa waivers. Uzbekistan is likewise seeing a rebound of Chinese visitors. In 2019, before the pandemic, roughly **62,000 Chinese tourists** visited Uzbekistan ⁸. Travel disruptions brought that number down to near zero in 2020–2022. With China’s relaxation of outbound travel in late 2022 and Uzbekistan’s visa-free entry, Chinese tourist arrivals have resurged – around 57,700 Chinese tourists came in the first 10 months of 2024, a 63% increase over the previous year . The figure below compares Chinese tourist arrivals in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan before and after the recent visa policy changes. Kazakhstan’s numbers surged from an estimated ~18,000 in 2022 to 217,000 in 2023, while Uzbekistan went from essentially zero (due to pandemic restrictions) to about 58,000 in 2023 .

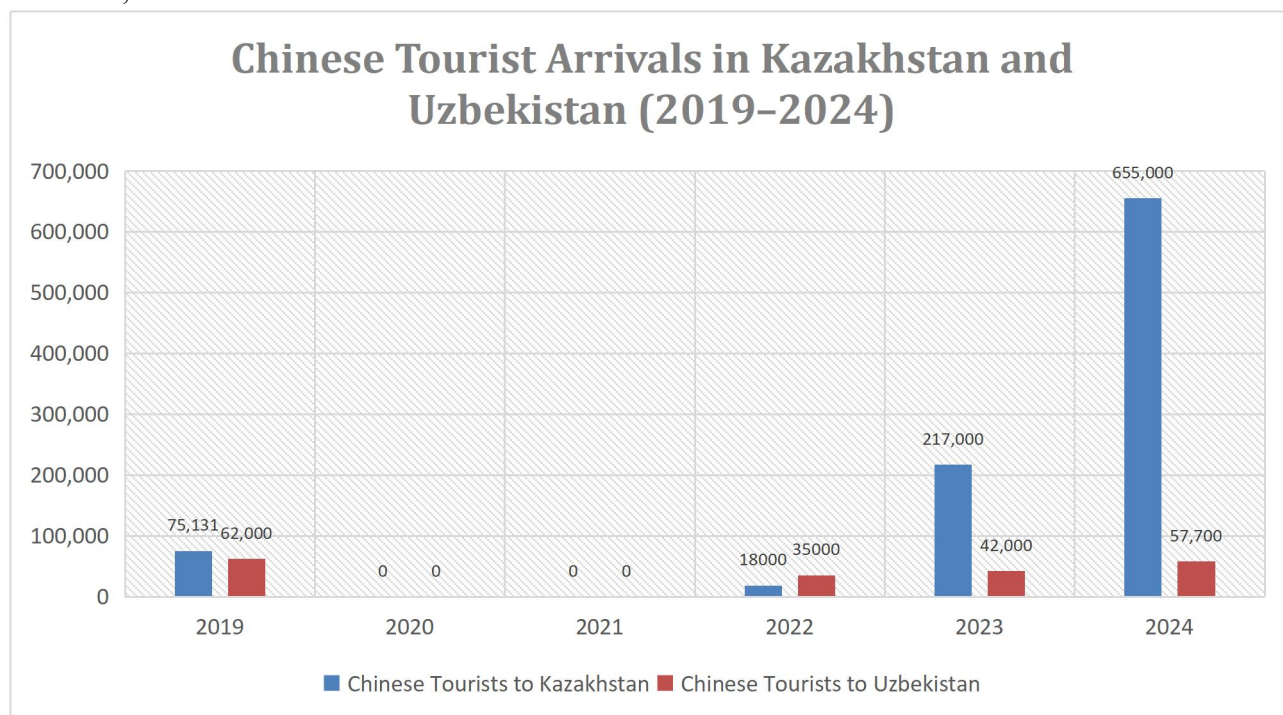


Figure 2. Chinese Tourist Arrivals in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (2019–2024)⁹

This comparison highlights how proactive engagement by China – through bilateral agreements and tourism promotions – can redirect massive tourist flows to the region. For Uzbekistan, Chinese tourists represent a high-value segment (given their higher average spending and interest in historical Silk Road sites). There is strong Chinese interest in Central Asia’s “hidden gems,” such as the ancient cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Chinese travel platforms report over 300% year-on-year increases in Chinese bookings to Central Asia in early 2024 , driven by millennials and Gen Z travelers seeking off-the-beaten-path experiences. Cultural affinity also

⁷ Hidden gems of Central Asia captivate Chinese tourists. www.chinadaily.com.cn

⁸ <https://kun.uz/en/97923309#:~:text=In%202019%2C%2061,98%20thousand%20people%20in%202020>

⁹ Travel and Tour World – Uzbekistan Welcomes 6.5 Million Visitors. Travel and Tour World – Kazakhstan Sees 50% Surge in Chinese Tourism.

plays a role: shared Silk Road heritage, historical figures like Xuanzang and Zhang Qian, and the allure of experiencing authentic Silk Road culture draw Chinese visitors to Uzbekistan . These trends suggest that China’s tourism diplomacy – combining policy (e.g. visa facilitation) and promotion (e.g. social media marketing of Silk Road heritage) – is effectively integrating Central Asia into Chinese tourists’ mental map, which in turn integrates Central Asian economies (like Uzbekistan’s) with China’s consumer base.

Bilateral Initiatives and Economic Implications: Beyond raw tourist numbers, China and Uzbekistan are deepening institutional cooperation in tourism. In December 2024, the two countries signed a new **bilateral visa-free agreement for 30 days** of travel, expanding on the earlier unilateral Uzbek 10-day visa waiver . This reciprocal agreement is expected to further ease travel for business and leisure, symbolizing a high level of trust and opening the door for larger tour group exchanges. Additionally, China and Uzbekistan have established memoranda of understanding on tourism development . High-level visits often feature discussions on cultural and people-to-people exchanges; for instance, at the 2023 China-Central Asia Summit in Xi’an, tourism was highlighted as a key area of cooperation . The **economic implications** for Uzbekistan’s geoeconomics are multi-fold. First, increased Chinese tourism brings in foreign exchange and can help offset Uzbekistan’s trade deficits with China by earning tourism revenue (effectively an export of services). According to Uzbekistan’s Statistics Agency, by late 2024 China became the leading source of non-CIS foreign visitors , reflecting a diversification of Uzbekistan’s tourism markets away from solely its immediate neighbors. Second, Chinese investment often follows tourism interest. We see Chinese enterprises starting to explore opportunities in Uzbekistan’s hospitality sector, such as plans to build new hotels in historic cities and invest in travel services ¹⁰. This aligns with analysis that Chinese companies view Uzbekistan’s tourism sector as a “winning ticket” and are keen on projects like resorts and theme parks in the longer term . Such investments contribute to Uzbekistan’s infrastructure and job creation, further knitting the country’s economy with regional capital flows. Third, tourism growth has spillover effects in transportation and connectivity. For example, to accommodate rising demand, the number of weekly flights between Chinese and Uzbek cities tripled from 18 to 54 by late 2024 . Planned rail projects, such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, though primarily for freight, will likely also facilitate easier movement of people (including tourists) once operational . Improved connectivity cements Uzbekistan’s vision of transforming from a “landlocked to land-linked” country , enhancing its geoeconomic position as a transit hub. Finally, at a regional level, Uzbekistan’s active courting of Chinese tourism can be seen as part of a strategy to balance influences of great powers. As noted by observers, Chinese economic engagement (tourism, trade, investment) in Central Asia provides a counterweight to historical dependence on Russia . Geoeconomically, this means Uzbekistan gains more autonomy and leverage by diversifying partnerships. The **challenge** will be ensuring that tourism growth is sustainable and that Uzbekistan retains cultural and economic sovereignty. A sudden overreliance on Chinese tourists or debt-funded projects (a concern raised by some analysts) could expose Uzbekistan to external shocks or undue influence. Therefore, Uzbekistan appears to be pursuing a careful approach: welcoming Chinese tourists and capital as a boost to integration, while engaging with multiple partners (e.g. continuing to attract Western, Gulf, and other Asian tourists) to maintain a balanced portfolio.

¹⁰ Uzbekistan: 2024 Tourism Year of Uzbekistan in China opens, eyeing enhanced people-to-people exchanges. By Global Times.

Data-Driven Insights: The patterns observed suggest a strong correlation between policy measures and tourist behavior in this Sino-Uzbek context. The **visa regime changes** stand out as a turning point. It is evident that when Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan removed visa barriers, Chinese tourist arrivals jumped correspondingly . This implies that further streamlining travel (such as introducing e-visas or longer stays) could yield additional growth. Another insight is the importance of **promotion and branding**. Chinese tourists in surveys have cited Central Asia’s historical mystique and novelty as reasons for their interest . Uzbekistan’s tourism authorities, in designating 2024 as “Tourism Year of Uzbekistan in China,” acknowledge the need to actively market their destinations in Chinese media . Early results seem promising: Chinese social media promotion of Silk Road cities and cultural heritage has contributed to growing curiosity and demand . This indicates that geoeconomic integration via tourism is not automatic; it requires Uzbekistan to be visible and attractive in the Chinese market. Additionally, data from the World Bank and UNWTO show that tourism has become one of Uzbekistan’s major service export earners in 2022-2023 . If Chinese visitor numbers approach the ambitious target of 1 million annually in the coming years (as Uzbek officials hope) , tourism could significantly alter Uzbekistan’s economic landscape, infusing rural areas with income (through community-based tourism) and fostering new SMEs. However, **equity and sustainability** issues must be managed: the inflow of tourists should benefit local communities and not just foreign investors or a domestic elite. The literature warns of pitfalls like cultural commodification or environmental strain if tourism grows too fast . Uzbekistan’s strategy, as gleaned from plans, includes training local guides (including Mandarin speakers), developing diverse tourism offerings (ecotourism, gastronomic tourism), and improving regional transport which all bode well for inclusive growth. In summary, the findings illustrate that China’s regional tourism push is a powerful engine that can accelerate Uzbekistan’s geoeconomic integration. Tangible benefits are already being realized in terms of visitor revenues, infrastructure, and connectivity. Yet, maximizing these benefits requires strategic planning on Uzbekistan’s part to ensure that increased Chinese tourism complements the country’s long-term development goals and does not create new dependencies or cultural frictions.

Conclusion

China’s regional tourism strategies and the prospects for Uzbekistan’s geoeconomic integration are closely intertwined. This study finds that **China’s promotion of Silk Road tourism and its outbound travel facilitation act as catalysts** for economic integration in Central Asia, with Uzbekistan standing to gain substantially. Recent developments – from the China-Uzbekistan 30-day visa-free agreement to surging Chinese visitor numbers post-pandemic – demonstrate how policy decisions translate into economic outcomes. For Uzbekistan, leveraging China’s vast tourist market aligns with its vision of becoming a regional hub and shedding its former isolation. Tourism is not merely a recreational industry; in this context, it is a form of geoeconomic statecraft. By attracting Chinese tourists, Uzbekistan earns income, secures new investments, and builds soft power links that reinforce its partnerships within BRI and other regional frameworks (such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s tourism cooperation initiatives). The **prospects ahead are largely positive**. Both governments have expressed strong commitment to deepening tourism ties, evident in Uzbekistan’s goal to host 1 million Chinese tourists in the future and expand direct flights to Chinese cities . If managed well, such influx can accelerate Uzbekistan’s service sector growth and integration into Asia’s economic corridors. Moreover, tourism can pave the way for broader trade and cultural exchange, helping Uzbekistan integrate not just economically but also socially with the region under the ethos of the ancient Silk Road.

However, this trajectory is not without caveats. Uzbekistan must balance the benefits of Chinese tourism with **risk management**: diversifying its tourism base to avoid overdependence on one country, ensuring that local businesses and communities reap the rewards (to prevent a perception of neo-colonial economic patterns), and maintaining control over cultural narratives and heritage conservation as tourist numbers climb. It will also be important for Uzbekistan to coordinate with neighbors to create multi-destination circuits attractive to long-haul travelers (for instance, joint Silk Road tour packages covering Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and beyond), thereby solidifying regional integration. China's regional tourism strategy, for its part, will likely continue to encourage outbound travel as a means of extending influence and goodwill. As long as Uzbekistan can align its interests with this strategy, a symbiotic relationship can develop: China's tourists and capital help transform Uzbekistan into a regional connectivity hub , while Uzbekistan offers China a stable and friendly destination along the Belt and Road. In conclusion, tourism is emerging as a potent avenue for geoeconomic integration between China and Uzbekistan, adding an **"economic and human dimension"** to the infrastructural links forged by the BRI. The coming years will be crucial in translating these early gains into sustainable development. By continuing an academic and policy dialogue on these trends, stakeholders can ensure that the growth of tourism strengthens regional prosperity and understanding, truly echoing the spirit of the Silk Road in the 21st century.

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