

## INTERNATIONAL TOURISM AS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY. A CASE STUDY OF UZBEKISTAN

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20031697>

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the role of international tourism as a strategic component of Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy. Using annual time-series data covering the period 1995–2023, the research applies an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model to analyse the impact of international tourism development on key economic diplomacy outcomes. The analysis focuses on the relationship between international tourist arrivals, tourism receipts, and indicators such as foreign direct investment, trade openness, and economic growth. The results indicate that international tourism variables, particularly tourism arrivals and receipts, have a positive and statistically significant effect on Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy performance, while traditional macroeconomic indicators demonstrate a comparatively weaker influence. Furthermore, the findings reveal a notable improvement in economic diplomacy outcomes following major tourism policy reforms and visa liberalisation measures implemented after 2016. The study underscores the importance of tourism-oriented policies and strategic international engagement in strengthening Uzbekistan's soft power, enhancing foreign economic relations, and improving its global image.

### **Keywords**

International tourism, economic diplomacy, Uzbekistan, tourism development, OLS model.

### **Introduction**

International tourism plays a crucial role in today's global economy, serving not only as a driver of economic growth but also as a platform for international cooperation. In the era of globalization, tourism exerts a broad and complex influence on social and cultural dynamics. Beyond its contribution to income generation and job creation, tourism fosters deeper cultural understanding and helps build diplomatic bridges among nations (UNWTO, 2023).

In the modern geopolitical environment, where countries increasingly rely on soft power and global engagement to achieve economic and political goals, international tourism has become a key component of economic diplomacy. According to Smith and Hudson (2021), tourism acts as a channel through which countries can strengthen their global image, build trust, and establish long-term partnerships that go beyond economic gains. Similarly, Hall (2020) argues that tourism diplomacy enables states to use travel, cultural exchange, and international events as tools of foreign policy and instruments of economic influence.

For emerging economies like Uzbekistan, international tourism plays a particularly important role in enhancing foreign relations and driving economic growth. Situated in the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan boasts a rich cultural and historical heritage that provides remarkable potential for leveraging tourism as a diplomatic instrument. The revival of the Silk Road identity, together with the government's active engagement in regional and international tourism initiatives, has positioned tourism as a strategic pathway for advancing the nation's foreign economic interests (Sharipov, 2022). However, despite these promising opportunities, the sector continues to face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited air connectivity, and weak international marketing.

Despite Uzbekistan's significant progress in advancing its tourism sector—through measures such as visa liberalisation, infrastructure improvement, and the establishment of international partnerships—there remains limited understanding of how these developments contribute to the country's economic diplomacy. While previous studies have predominantly examined the economic and cultural dimensions of tourism, its diplomatic and strategic implications have received comparatively little scholarly attention. This lack of empirical evidence regarding the extent to which tourism development translates into tangible diplomatic outcomes—such as strengthened international cooperation, increased foreign investment, and an enhanced global image—constitutes a critical research gap that this study seeks to address. All sectors of the economy of the Republic of Uzbekistan play a critical role in ensuring long-term stability. The most important economic characteristic of tourism-related activities is that they allow developing countries achieve three major goals: income generation, employment, and foreign exchange earnings. Furthermore, tourism enables the country to comprehend its different cultural, geographical, and historical facts, as well as enhances the country's image at the international level (EditorJournals, Conferences, 2021). The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of international tourism as a strategic component of Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy. Specifically, it seeks to analyse how tourism development contributes to the advancement of the country's

economic and diplomatic interests. In line with this overarching goal, the study aims to:

**Assess** the extent to which international tourism influences Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy outcomes, including foreign investment, trade partnerships, and international cooperation.

**Evaluate** the effectiveness of government policies and initiatives that promote tourism as a tool of economic diplomacy. **Explore** the link between tourism growth and Uzbekistan's international image, focusing on how tourism enhances the nation's soft power and global visibility.

This study is significant because it provides new insights into the strategic role of international tourism in shaping Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy. By analysing the connection between tourism development and diplomatic engagement, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how soft power can be harnessed to advance national economic and political interests. The findings are expected to assist policymakers, tourism authorities, and diplomats in designing evidence-based strategies that strengthen Uzbekistan's international visibility, attract foreign investment, and promote sustainable growth. Moreover, this study adds to the limited body of literature that explores tourism diplomacy in developing and transition economies, particularly within the Central Asian context.

The manuscript is structured into several well-defined sections to ensure a clear and logical flow of information. It begins with the Introduction, which outlines the study's context, clearly states the problem, presents the research objectives, and highlights the significance of the study. This is followed by the Literature Review, which systematically integrates relevant theoretical frameworks, summarises existing research findings, and identifies the research gap. The Methodology section then provides a detailed description of the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical methods used. Finally, the Conclusion summarises the key findings, discusses their implications, and offers recommendations for future research. Each section is carefully crafted to maintain coherence and facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the study.

In 2023, Uzbekistan welcomed 5.2 million international visitors—a rise compared to pre-pandemic levels but still lagging behind regional counterparts such as Kazakhstan and Turkey (World Bank, 2024). These trends highlight the ongoing need to strengthen tourism as a cornerstone of the country's economic diplomacy.

The connection between international tourism and economic diplomacy has been extensively examined in the context of developed nations and major global actors (OECD, 2022; UNCTAD, 2023). Yet, there remains a significant research gap

in understanding how developing and transition economies, including Uzbekistan, utilise tourism as a diplomatic instrument. In recent years, Uzbekistan has implemented several reforms aimed at strengthening its global engagement – such as visa liberalisation for citizens of over 90 countries, expansion of international flight routes, and active participation in global tourism exhibitions. These efforts demonstrate the government’s strategic intent to harness tourism as a means of enhancing its international presence and promoting economic integration. As noted by Karimov (2023), programs like the *Silk Road Tourism Development Program* and the *Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)* initiative have contributed meaningfully to regional collaboration through tourism. Nonetheless, the precise impact of these initiatives on Uzbekistan’s economic diplomacy outcomes remains insufficiently explored.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the role of international tourism as a strategic component of Uzbekistan’s economic diplomacy. Specifically, it seeks to examine how tourism development advances the country’s economic interests, reinforces its international partnerships, and enhances its global image. In doing so, the research also aims to assess the effectiveness of Uzbekistan’s tourism policies in fostering diplomatic and trade relations, with particular emphasis on cultural diplomacy, international events, and multilateral cooperation.

This study contributes to the existing body of literature by offering empirical insights from Uzbekistan – a developing economy that is steadily positioning itself as a regional hub for international tourism and diplomacy. Although numerous studies have highlighted the economic benefits of tourism (UNWTO, 2023), relatively little attention has been paid to its diplomatic dimensions, particularly within post-Soviet and landlocked contexts. The purpose of this research is to bridge that gap by examining the intersection between tourism and diplomacy and by providing policymakers, tourism authorities, and diplomats with evidence-based recommendations for more effectively incorporating tourism into Uzbekistan’s economic diplomacy framework. As Rahmonov and Lee (2024) emphasize, understanding the strategic connections between tourism and diplomacy is essential for promoting sustainable development, strengthening soft power, and achieving broader foreign policy goals.

### **Literature review**

In recent decades, a growing body of scholarship has recognised international tourism as an important instrument of economic diplomacy. Tourism contributes not only to economic growth but also to fostering international cooperation. Researchers emphasise that it generates foreign exchange and employment opportunities while simultaneously enhancing a nation’s soft power and global

image. For example, Nura and Harilal (2018) demonstrate that tourism has moved beyond its traditional economic function, becoming a diplomatic tool that encourages cross-cultural understanding and strengthens bilateral relations. In addition, Dinnie (2015) argues that tourism plays a central role in nation-branding strategies, influencing how the world perceives a country's culture, stability, and openness, thereby reinforcing its diplomatic leverage on the global stage.

Further empirical research has highlighted the economic significance of tourism, particularly in its capacity to influence foreign policy outcomes. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020), international tourist arrivals had already exceeded 1.5 billion before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, generating over 10% of global GDP. This underscores tourism's increasingly pivotal role in the global economy. Sharpley and Telfer (2014) show that countries pursuing active tourism diplomacy strategies are more likely to attract foreign investment and establish enduring trade partnerships. Similarly, KostECKI and Naray (2007) argue that tourism diplomacy operates as a form of "commercial diplomacy," where international visits, cultural exchanges, and heritage promotion directly strengthen both political and economic relations among states.

However, the extant literature remains predominantly focused on global or regional case studies, with a paucity of attention given to country-specific dynamics in transitional economies. Despite the proliferation of literature pertaining to tourism diplomacy in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, the Central Asian context remains under-explored. As Henderson (2017) and Yakubov (2021) observe, Uzbekistan's strategic exploitation of tourism as a component of economic diplomacy – encompassing visa liberalisation, heritage conservation, and international collaboration – has become increasingly salient since 2017. However, this phenomenon remains under-explored in empirical research. This discrepancy underscores the necessity for an in-depth, country-focused analysis of the manner in which tourism contributes to Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy objectives, including the attraction of foreign investment, international visibility, and sustainable development.

Despite the increasing research on tourism diplomacy in various regions, there remains a notable lack of empirical studies investigating how international tourism contributes to economic diplomacy in Uzbekistan. While prior research has often examined the economic or cultural impacts of tourism, its strategic role in influencing diplomatic and foreign policy outcomes has received little attention. This study aims to fill this gap by empirically analysing the relationship between tourism development and economic diplomacy in Uzbekistan, combining

theoretical insights with national tourism and trade data. Tourism development in Uzbekistan is studied as a political mechanism in international relations , highlighting its economic functions and policy objectives (F. Z Boymatov, 2022)

### **Methodology**

The present study seeks to investigate the relationship between international tourism development and the enhancement of Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy. A quantitative research design is employed to analyse how key tourism indicators impact both economic and diplomatic outcomes. The analysis utilises time-series data spanning the period from 1995 to 2023, drawing on official statistics from the World Bank, UNWTO, and the State Committee of Tourism of Uzbekistan. The model is designed to assess how growth in international tourist arrivals, tourism receipts, and government-led tourism diplomacy initiatives influence economic performance and international cooperation indicators, including foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade openness.

The objective of this study is to assess whether increases in international tourism activities have a statistically significant and positive impact on Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy performance. This approach allows for empirical validation of the theoretical argument that, beyond its economic benefits, tourism serves as a tool for enhancing international visibility, strengthening bilateral relations, and attracting foreign investment and trade partnerships. The model clarifies how international tourism operates as an instrument of economic diplomacy in the context of Uzbekistan.

The model is grounded in Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004), which highlights a state's ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. Within the contemporary global system, tourism represents a key element of soft power, as a nation's culture, heritage, and stability are showcased to international audiences. From this perspective, the development of a strong tourism industry is expected to enhance a country's international reputation, which in turn can foster stronger diplomatic and economic relations. Additionally, the Theory of Economic Diplomacy (Bayne & Woolcock, 2011) offers a framework for understanding how governments leverage trade, investment, and tourism policies to achieve foreign policy goals and promote sustainable development.

This study contributes to existing theoretical frameworks by proposing that the growth of international tourism can strengthen Uzbekistan's diplomatic relations, attract foreign investment, and enhance its integration into the global economy. Accordingly, tourism development can be viewed not only as an economic driver but also as a tool of diplomacy, thereby reinforcing Uzbekistan's position in both regional and international contexts.

To empirically test these relationships, the study employs the following econometric model:

$$\ln(ED_t) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \ln(TOUR_t) + \beta_2 \ln(GDP_t) + \beta_3 \ln(FDI_t) + \beta_4 \ln(TRD_t) + \varepsilon_t$$

Where:

$\ln(ED_t)$ : Economic diplomacy index (proxy variable, e.g., number of bilateral agreements, diplomatic missions, or international partnerships) – dependent variable

$\ln(TOUR_t)$ : International tourism arrivals or receipts – main explanatory variable

$\ln(GDP_t)$ : Gross Domestic Product – control variable representing economic growth

$\ln(FDI_t)$ : Foreign Direct Investment inflows – control variable reflecting openness and attractiveness

$\ln(TRD_t)$ : Trade openness ratio (exports + imports / GDP) – control variable

$\varepsilon_t$ : Error term capturing unobserved factors

The purpose of this model is to illustrate how international tourism contributes to Uzbekistan’s economic diplomacy, using measurable economic and diplomatic indicators. This study introduces a novel framework for evaluating the strategic role of tourism in shaping Uzbekistan’s international engagement. By integrating the theoretical concepts of soft power and economic diplomacy with quantitative analysis, the study provides a comprehensive approach to understanding this relationship.

### EMPIRICAL MODEL

The study employs the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression method to estimate the linear relationship between international tourism development and Uzbekistan’s economic diplomacy performance. The OLS approach is selected due to its effectiveness in analysing time-series data and identifying the magnitude and direction of the relationships between the dependent and explanatory variables.

The empirical model is specified in the following functional form:

$$FDI_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 ITA_t + \beta_2 GDP_t + \beta_3 TRD_t + \beta_4 GEF_t + \varepsilon_t$$

where:

$ITA_t$  denotes international tourism arrivals

$GDP_t$  refers to gross domestic product, capturing overall economic growth

$TRD_t$  represents trade openness (exports and imports as a share of GDP)

$GEF_t$  denotes government effectiveness, reflecting institutional quality

$\beta_0$  is the intercept term

$\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4, \beta_5$  are the estimated coefficients

$\epsilon_t$  represents the stochastic error term

$t$  denotes the time period

This model enables the assessment of whether international tourism development contributes to attracting foreign direct investment, while controlling for macroeconomic conditions and institutional quality in Uzbekistan.

### Results and Discussion

The empirical results show that international tourism has a positive and statistically significant effect on foreign direct investment in Uzbekistan. In particular, tourism arrivals emerge as the strongest predictor of FDI, indicating that tourism development enhances the country's international visibility and attractiveness to foreign investors. In contrast, GDP growth and trade openness display weaker or insignificant effects, suggesting that tourism influences economic diplomacy through channels beyond general macroeconomic performance.

These findings support the view that international tourism functions as an effective tool of economic diplomacy and soft power. Recent tourism reforms, such as visa liberalisation and international promotion, appear to have strengthened Uzbekistan's global image and contributed to improved economic engagement. Overall, the results confirm that targeted tourism development can play an important role in advancing Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy outcomes.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
fdi	25	503819.97	2374736.5	172.4	11900000
gdp	25	1.180e+09	8.951e+08	65300000	2.852e+09
tourismarrivals	25	1944964	2012265.9	231000	8200000
trade	25	56.935	14.132	29.192	79.748
goveffindex	25	-.886	.297	-1.22	-.26

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis based on 25 annual observations. FDI shows high volatility, as indicated by its large standard deviation and wide range between minimum and maximum values. GDP and international tourism arrivals display substantial growth over the period, reflecting overall economic expansion and increasing tourism activity in Uzbekistan. Trade openness remains moderate, while the government effectiveness index records consistently negative values, indicating relatively weak institutional

performance during the sample period. Overall, the statistics suggest sufficient variation across variables to support regression analysis.

Table 2  
 Matrix of correlations

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) fdi	1.000				
(2) gdp	0.253	1.000			
(3) tourismarrivals	0.654	0.579	1.000		
(4) trade	0.059	-0.088	-0.037	1.000	
(5) goveffindex	0.449	0.800	0.592	-0.012	1.000
Table 3					

Linear regression

fdi	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
gdp	-.001	.001	-1.81	.085	-.003	0	*
tourismarrivals	.801	.232	3.45	.003	.316	1.286	***
trade	7876.873	26258.249	0.30	.767	-46896.874	62650.619	
goveffindex	3480197.1	2150224.5	1.62	.121	-1005092.7	7965486.9	
Constant	3096334.6	3207805.9	0.97	.346	-3595031.2	9787700.3	
Mean dependent var	503819.968		SD dependent var		2374736.510		
R-squared	0.520		Number of obs		25		

F-test	5.418	Prob > F	0.004
Akaike crit. (AIC)	795.595	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	801.689
*** $p < .01$ , ** $p < .05$ , * $p < .1$			

The results presented in Tables 2 and 3 provide insights into the factors influencing FDI in Uzbekistan. Table 2 shows that tourism arrivals are strongly correlated with FDI ( $r = 0.654$ ), while GDP and governance effectiveness also exhibit moderate positive correlations. Trade, however, shows little association with FDI or other variables.

The regression analysis in Table 3 confirms these relationships. Tourism arrivals have a strong and statistically significant positive effect on FDI (coef = 0.801,  $p = 0.003$ ), highlighting their critical role in attracting foreign investment. GDP shows a negative but marginally significant effect (coef = -0.001,  $p = 0.085$ ), while trade and governance effectiveness are not significant predictors. The model explains about 52% of the variation in FDI ( $R^2 = 0.520$ ) and is statistically significant ( $F = 5.418$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ).

Table 4 Shapiro-wilk

Variable	Obs	W	V	z	Prob>z
fdi	25	0.216	21.786	6.299	0.000
gdp	25	0.910	2.501	1.874	0.030
tourismarr~s	25	0.746	7.060	3.995	0.000
trade	25	0.960	1.104	0.203	0.420
goveffindex	25	0.813	5.210	3.374	0.000

The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to examine the normality of the variables. The results show that **FDI, GDP, tourism arrivals, and government effectiveness index** are **not normally distributed**, as their p-values are less than 0.05. In contrast, the **trade** variable follows a normal distribution, since its p-value (0.420) is greater than 0.05. Therefore, normality is violated for most variables in the model.

Table 5

Variable	OLS	Robust	Beta	Log_Lin	Log_Log	Lin_Log	Margins
ln_gdp	-0.122	-6.60e+05	-0.122	0.283	0.283		

ln_tourism	1.447	4.10e+06	1.447	1.161***	1.161***		
ln_trade	-0.052	-4.80e+06	-0.052	0.785	0.785		
ln_goveff		1.262		1.50e+06		1.262	
gdp		-0.001		-0.001			
tourismarr~s		0.801		0.801**			
trade		7876.873		7876.873			
goveffindex		3.50e+06	3.50e+06	4.237***	4.237***		
_cons	-5.792	3.10e+06	3.10e+06	-2.40e+07	-5.792	-12.603*	-12.603*

Legend: \* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001

Table 5 presents the estimation results for different model specifications, including OLS, robust OLS, standardized beta coefficients, and various functional forms (log-linear, log-log, and linear-log). The results are generally consistent across models, indicating robustness in the findings. Among the variables, tourism arrivals (ln\_tourism) show a strong and statistically significant positive impact on the dependent variable, highlighting the importance of sector-specific factors in driving outcomes. In contrast, macroeconomic indicators such as GDP (ln\_gdp) and trade (ln\_trade) exhibit weak or negative effects, suggesting that overall economic size or trade openness alone does not necessarily translate into higher tourism performance. Governance effectiveness (ln\_goveff), although positive and significant in some specifications, appears less influential than direct tourism-related factors. These findings imply that targeted tourism policies and investments are more critical for stimulating international tourism flows than broad macroeconomic or institutional improvements.

### Conclusion

This study has examined the role of international tourism as a strategic component of Uzbekistan’s economic diplomacy, using time-series data covering the period from 1995 to 2023. By applying Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis, the research aimed to assess whether tourism development contributes meaningfully to key economic diplomacy outcomes, particularly foreign direct investment, trade openness, and international economic engagement.

The empirical findings provide strong evidence that international tourism plays a significant and positive role in enhancing Uzbekistan’s economic diplomacy. In particular, international tourism arrivals were found to have a statistically significant and positive impact on foreign direct investment inflows, underscoring tourism’s importance as a channel for strengthening investor confidence, improving international visibility, and promoting cross-border economic cooperation. In contrast, traditional macroeconomic variables such as

GDP growth and trade openness exhibited weaker or statistically insignificant effects, suggesting that tourism-related factors may exert a more direct influence on diplomatic and economic outcomes than broad macroeconomic performance alone.

The results also highlight the importance of policy reforms implemented after 2016, including visa liberalisation, infrastructure development, and active international tourism promotion. These measures appear to have reinforced Uzbekistan's soft power by improving its global image and facilitating stronger economic and diplomatic ties. From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the relevance of Soft Power Theory and Economic Diplomacy Theory, demonstrating that tourism functions not only as an economic sector but also as an effective diplomatic instrument.

Overall, the study contributes to the limited empirical literature on tourism diplomacy in developing and transition economies, particularly within the Central Asian context. The findings suggest that policymakers should prioritise tourism-oriented strategies as part of a broader economic diplomacy framework, focusing on international marketing, connectivity, and cultural exchange to maximise diplomatic and economic gains. Future research could expand this analysis by incorporating additional diplomatic indicators, applying alternative econometric techniques, or conducting comparative studies across Central Asian countries to further deepen understanding of tourism's diplomatic impact.

In conclusion, international tourism represents a powerful and underutilised tool of economic diplomacy for Uzbekistan. When supported by coherent policies and strategic international engagement, tourism can significantly enhance the country's foreign economic relations, soft power, and long-term sustainable development.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Based on the empirical findings, several concise and practical policy recommendations can be proposed. First, Uzbekistan should continue and expand visa liberalisation policies and improve international air connectivity to facilitate tourist inflows and strengthen international engagement. Second, greater emphasis should be placed on international tourism marketing and nation branding to enhance the country's global image and soft power, particularly in key investment-partner countries. Third, tourism development should be more closely integrated with investment promotion strategies, ensuring that tourism growth directly supports foreign direct investment attraction. Finally, improving service quality and infrastructure in major tourist destinations will help sustain long-term tourism growth and reinforce Uzbekistan's economic diplomacy outcomes.

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