

**Poverty, Income Inequality, International Trade, Economic Integration and International labour Migration in Post-Colonial Central Asia and South Asia: The Cases of Uzbekistan (USSR) and Pakistan (UK)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*When comparing Uzbekistan (a former Soviet republic, independent since 1991) and Pakistan (a former British colony, independent since 1947), this study draws on a pool of five low-income ex-colonies from each empire and focuses on real GDP per capita and years of independence, selecting Uzbekistan and Pakistan because both rank low on the development scale yet maintain relatively close ties with Russia and the UK, respectively. Using standard techniques—trend analysis, cross-tabulations, and period decompositions—the paper measures poverty and inequality, finding that 14.5% of Uzbekistan’s population lives on less than \$3.65 a day with a Gini coefficient of 0.35, compared with 4.9% in extreme poverty and a Gini of 0.31 in Pakistan; these outcomes are driven largely by economic shocks, agricultural dependence, unemployment, and elite capture. Social funds and cash transfers have produced some positive effects, but aid policies and trade imbalances associated with the former colonizers (Russia and the UK) have, in important respects, exacerbated vulnerabilities. Foreign trade accounts for roughly 25–30% of GDP in both countries: Uzbekistan exports gold and cotton to Russia valued at about \$9.2 billion, while Pakistan sends roughly \$1.5 billion in textiles to the UK. Regional integration has delivered gains—Uzbekistan through closer links with the Eurasian Economic Union and Pakistan via increased trade within South Asian frameworks—but these strategies also carry dependency risks, and historical ties (economic unions and the Commonwealth) have shaped the terms of integration. Finally, labour migration is a major channel of income: remittances amount to roughly 10% of Uzbekistan’s GDP from Russia and about 7% of Pakistan’s GDP from the UK and Gulf states, driven by higher wages abroad and migrant networks. inclusive*

*well-being.*

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan; Pakistan; poverty; inequality; migration; trade

**Introduction and Country Profiles**

Five least developed colonies of Russian Empire		
Colonies	Real GDP per capita in US \$(2024)	Year of Independence
1. Kyrgyzstan	1391.2	1991
2. Tajikistan	1496.3	1991
3. Ukraine	2219	1991
4. Moldova	3872.5	1991
5. Uzbekistan	3890.4	1991

Five least developed colonies of British Empire		
Colonies	Real GDP per capita in US \$(2024)	Year of Independence
1. Mozambique	603.6	1975
2. Uganda	986.8	1962
3. Tanzania	1120.8	1961
4. Zambia	1346.3	1964
5. Pakistan	1643.7	1947

(World Bank, 2025; The world factbook, 2021)

Uzbekistan and Pakistan are two countries with almost lowest rates of real GDP per capita among other former colonies of the USSR and the British Empire (The World Bank, 2025), which emerged from their colonizers’ rule in 1991 and 1947 respectively (The World Factbook, 2021). This report examines the impact of colonial history on the development of Uzbekistan and Pakistan, focusing on their post- independence socio-economic strategies, ongoing political relations with their former colonizers and overall economic performance of both countries in global market.

During the Soviet period Uzbekistan functioned as part of the centrally planned economy, as supplier of raw materials - mainly cotton - in vertical production complex. This monocultural dependency due to ignoring republic’s local interests shrank aggregate economic and scientific potential and created long-term environmental, socio-economic and structural consequences (Alimardonov, 2021). Modern Pakistan was formerly a part of British India until gaining independence in 1947. Its colonial experience under British rule despite following different model – capitalism - faced identical devastating effects on country’s trajectory such as increase of death rates with decline in life expectancy, squeezed purchasing power of ordinary Indians, frequent famines, de-industrialization, drain of resources, unpaid-for exports to Britain, abusing

colony as a market for British industrial products deliberately restricting industrialization to avoid competition with British producers (Siddiqui, 2024).

Transition of Uzbekistan to independence in 1991 did not modify system significantly remaining agriculture, energy and natural resources as dominant sectors under state control. The government, led by Islam Karimov, prioritized gradual reforms – “Uzbek model” – to preserve macroeconomic stability as more favorable to rapid liberalization. While mainly cotton and gold export maintained the economy relatively stable, implementation of new policies such as introduction of national currency, abolition of price control and food supply led to considerable difficulties – hyperinflation and dependency on imported consumption goods. Thus, intensive reforms as reduced imports, rigid monetary and fiscal policies were undertaken to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Despite all obstacles – deprioritized effort to transfer into market economy, failed modification of legislation system, authorities mired in corruption – 1991-2016 period paved the path for further socio-economic and political developments in the country. After 2016, a new era for Uzbekistan began under new President Mirziyayev’s governance, appearing in resuming relations with neighbors (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan) by pursuing collaborative initiatives, liberalizing the currency, improving the tourism extensively, fostering industrialization and integration into the international trade (Jalilov and Nobuhide, 2019). Pakistan, conversely, after independence encountered multidimensional - economic, social and political – crises particularly migration, riots of social groups and its consequences, insufficient infrastructure and economy predominantly consisting of agriculture. Dictatorial regime of liberal Field Marshal Ayub Khan initiated intensive modernization of macro- and microeconomic policies, of all spheres including agriculture and legislation, industrialization, which collectively contributed to notable economic growth. However, in 1971 Pakistan opted for command economy, which ended in partition into Pakistan and Bangladesh, nationalization of private sector, high inflation, war, trade deficit, yet also free education and medicine, increased wages, labor policy and land reforms. Then, attempts to change liberal government into Islamic type were taken. After that, return of democratic regime occurred in Pakistan leading to the loss of economic sovereignty under the directions of IMF and World Bank, high prices, low wage rate, reduced developmental funds, fewer schools, less health facilities, increase in poverty and huge debts. Later, General Pervaiz Musharraf’s new government established multidimensional reforms - in education, medicine, energy supply, taxation and transportation – which further improved country’s economy (Anwar and Ashfaq, 2017).

Both republics are in comprehensive strategic partnership in political, economic, trade fields with their former colonizers. This cooperation reveals in high-level dialogues, investments, remittances and bilateral exchange programs. The Uzbekistan-Russia relations also include free

trade agreement, inter-parliamentary cooperation, cultural ties such as the Declaration on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation (President, 2022). Pakistan and Britain have complex enduring mutual cooperation in social and economic context particularly through the Commonwealth program, the Developing Countries Trading Scheme and the Enhanced Strategic Dialogue (Ministry Of Foreign Affairs Government Of Pakistan, 2025).

Recently, both countries have pursued modernization to overcome historical legacies. Liberalization, attracting foreign investment, addressing corruption, enhancing transparency and intensified foreign relations indicate a gradual shift from a state-centered economy toward a more open and competitive model.

### **Poverty and Income Inequality**

In recent years Uzbekistan demonstrates a strong performance in poverty reduction. 7.5 million people have escaped poverty, and the national poverty rate reduced to 8.9% in 2024 (Sadokat Jalolova, 2025). Poverty eradication would have been even greater if there was not a rising trend of economic disparity in the country. The Gini coefficient increased from 0.31 to 0.35 between 2022 and 2023. (Knight, Pimhidzai and Uochi, 2024). The country remains as an authoritarian state with high level of corruption, deeply rooted in system. Uzbekistan ranks 121st out of 180 countries in the corruption index (Kun.uz, 2025). The other major factors determining poverty include unemployment, low educational levels and weak infrastructure (Babaev, Johnston and Almeida, 2024). Despite the challenges above, the government aims to reduce the national poverty rate to 6% by the end of 2025. In 2024, Uzbekistan launched a new program “From Poverty to Prosperity”, aiming to expand social services, set up registry of poor families and create employment opportunities (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). On one hand, the Soviet Union reduced absolute poverty by expanding education (Chermoukamedov, 1975) and industrialization (Zaripov, 2025), which lifted living standards and social equality. However, Uzbekistan was turned into a cotton colony and mineral supplier, which caused structural inequalities and long-term economic dependence (Nurullayev, 2025).

Pakistan made significant strides in fight against poverty, its rate declined from about 64% in 2001 to 22% by 2018, however COVID-19 pandemic, increasing population, economic instability, rising inflation and floods in 2022 have resulted in the increase of poverty to 25.3 % by 2023-24 (Wieser and Meyer, 2025). But these disasters were not the only triggers of poverty in the country. The main causes lie in the deep-rooted structural weaknesses such as poor governance, consumption-led growth and low investment. (Wieser and Meyer, 2025). In Pakistan, wealth is mostly concentrated in the hands of some elite groups, resulting in significant income and social disparities. The Gini coefficient was equal to about 29% in 2018, in reality

income inequality is much deeper (Burki, 2023). Many households are deprived of basic amenities such as clean water, healthcare and education. Gender inequality further deteriorates unequal distribution of income, with women facing pay gaps and limited work opportunities. (Devdiscourse, 2023). In 2019 “Ehsaas”, the largest anti-poverty program was launched by the government of Pakistan. It has provided financial support to millions of people after COVID-19 crisis through direct cash transfers (Gupta,2024). Pakistan was completely exploited under the rule of British Empire through unfair land systems and deindustrialization. These policies deepened poverty and social inequalities that still affect South Asia today (Jawad and Shabbir, 2025). Uzbekistan is gradually becoming economically stable, making a strong progress in reducing poverty, though income inequality has increased. In contrast, Pakistan continues to face both poverty and income inequality challenges, driven mostly by structural disparities, which slow down the progress in the country.

### **International Trade**

In the 2023-24 fiscal year, Pakistan's exports were US\$30.67 billion and imports were US\$54.79 billion, totaling US\$85.46 billion (Uroos et al., 2024). Exports included textiles (US\$16.65 billion, 54.3%, including knitwear US\$4.41 billion), readymade garments (US\$3.56 billion), bedwear and towels (US\$3.86 billion), and rice (US\$3.93 billion, 12.8%, basmati US\$0.88 billion, non-basmati US\$3.05 billion) (Uroos et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2023). Ali et al. (2024) estimated trade to make up 22.9% of Pakistan’s US\$373.07 billion GDP.

According to Sultanova et al. (2024), Uzbekistan’s exports crossed US\$21.017 billion and imports US\$36.660 billion border in 2023, adding up to US\$57.677 billion. Gold (the most dominant one in recent years), natural gas, refined copper, and cotton products were the top 4 exports in Uzbekistan. Haq and Golestan (2024) reported trade being approximately 65% of Uzbekistan’s GDP. They argued trade-to- GDP ratio has fluctuated over the past years: rose above 80% in 2008, decreased below 30% in 2016 due to restrictions, and stabilized around 65% by 2023.

In comparison with Uzbekistan, Pakistan’s larger exports (US\$30.67 billion vs. Uzbekistan's US\$21.017 billion) show a relatively smaller economic share (22.9% vs. around 65% trade-to-GDP), which makes it vulnerable to manufacturing shocks in textiles - taking 54.3% of all exports - and rice (Uroos et al., 2024). Sultanova et al (2024) argues while Uzbekistan’s commodity boosts its economy, it is still vulnerable to price shocks in gold, gas, and metals, facilitating mining and energy sector engagement: showing direct need for heterogeneity to reduce economic risks. Both countries lack diversification, with Pakistan’s textiles and rice taking up over 67% of exports, Uzbekistan’s gold alone is a major portion, but recent policies in Uzbekistan are planning to expand non-commodity exports (Sultanova et al., 2024; Ahmad et al.,

2023; Haq and Golestan, 2024).

UK imports from Pakistan were £2.6 billion (Department for Business & Trade, 2025). Uzbekistan traded \$9.88 billion with Russia, which is about 15.8% of its overall foreign trade, reflecting strong regional ties amid efforts to join broader economic blocs like BRICS (Pueppke et al, 2024; Bobur and Sardorbek, 2024).

According to Gnutzmann-Mkrtchyan and Van Damme (2020), Pakistan involved in WTO cases like DS486, EU countervailing measures on polyethylene terephthalate, and DS538, anti-dumping on polypropylene film. Makhmudov (2024) reported Uzbekistan facing few WTO issues, but regional tensions continue to amid legal and economic reforms for membership.

### **Economic Integration**

**Importance of Economic Integration in each country:** Uzbekistan is strengthening cooperation with other countries. For instance, on October 24, 2025, it signed Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with EU, which covers trade, investment and other important areas (European Council, 2025). Besides this, Uzbekistan is planning to join World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2026 (European Commission, 2025). Pakistan, after the economic crises of 2022-2024, is showing signs of recovery as a result of reforms. Now, in order to restore the economy, the country should strengthen exports and attract foreign investment. The China-Pakistan Economic Cooperation (CPEC) project, implemented by Pakistan, could play a significant role in reviving its economy by improving infrastructure and expanding exports (WITS Data 2018; Britannica, 2019). Both countries are benefiting from cooperation with other countries.

**Advantages and Disadvantages:** Uzbekistan has gained many advantages from economic integration. After Uzbekistan become a GSP+ beneficiary country of EU on April 10, 2021, tariffs were removed from 2/3 of the exported goods to EU. As a result. from 6200 imported goods, 66% were duty-free. In addition, Uzbekistan's exports increased from 93 million euros (2019) to 450 million euros (2022) (EEAS, 2024). This economic integration has improved relations between EU and Uzbekistan and led to grow of Uzbekistan's economy. On April 20, 2015, China and Pakistan launched CPEC project and China started investing in Pakistan's infrastructure especially in energy sector. However, the country is largely depending on foreign investment. Despite the fact that Uzbekistan's average annual per capita economic growth rate 2010-2022 was 4.2%, country's economic largely depends on capital investment (World Bank Group,2025). In 2016, China invested 46 billion to Pakistan and 35 billion of that went to energy sector, because Pakistan suffered from systemic issues that resulted in annual losses of \$6 billion (Salikuddin et, al., 2019; Yihan, 2024). These investments helped Pakistan's economy grow.

Nevertheless, large investments and loans from China under CPEC are making Pakistan economically dependent on China.

**Gain and losses:** Before Uzbekistan became EU's GSP+ beneficiary, country saved 2.5 million euros due to lower tariffs. Then, in 2022 Uzbekistan saved 28 million euros (EEAS, 2024). Export rate also increased by 384% in 2019-2022. However, economic integration can shift economic structure towards more advantaged sectors, which can lead job losses or economic decline in less competitive sectors (Eureporter, 2025). After launching CPEC project, the situation in Pakistan stabilized and FDI increased, especially from China (Maryam et.al, 2022). However, Pakistan's debt from China is increasing and if Pakistan cannot repay, there is a risk that China can take some key assets such as Gwadar, as it happened with Sri Lanka (Brookings, 2020).

### **International Labor Migration**

**Importance of labor migration:** Due to high number of people seeking jobs and low number of jobs available in the market of both countries, labor migration is significant for both Uzbekistan and Pakistan. The remittances coming from migrants is currently a major source contributing to GDPs of both nations, at the rate of almost 10% and 14 % respectively in 2024, according to World Bank. Apart from that, human capital development is also another crucial point in labor migration. Since the quality of education in those developing countries remains relatively low, individuals gain experience and knowledge from more developed countries.

**Reasons:** The major reasons for fleeing out of the country in both nations is low number of low-skilled jobs available in the employment market and high numbers of workers being low-skilled: 95% of migrants of Uzbekistan are low-skilled as of Kun.uz (2025). Similarly, semi-skilled employment abroad is significant motive for Pakistani migrants as the country cannot meet the demand in that sector: half of the migrants were registered as unskilled workers according to economic survey of Pakistan (2024-25). Furthermore, due to domestic job market squeeze, citizens of Uzbekistan seek jobs elsewhere. According to The Diplomat (2024), annually 650k students graduate while only 300k jobs are created in the market, which forces young students to migrate. In contrast, social networks are second major cause of migration in Pakistan: approximately one fifth of migrants responded "relatives/friends are there" depending on destination (Pakistan: survey on drivers of migration, 2020).

**Destinations:** Historically, Russia was the main destination for Uzbek migrants because of relatively easier regulations and geographical location. However, following the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and sanctions against the invader which led to weaker Russian currency, the employment figures dropped in Russia which led to fewer migrants choosing this destination.

Having stated that, estimated 57% of migrants still choose Russia, followed by 10% opting for Kazakhstan and remaining for other parts of the world, according to World Bank (2025). The whole different situation can be observed in Pakistan's case. Major destinations are so called "gulf states" in Middle East. The number made just over half of overall migrants from 2020-2024, most of whom choosing the UAE and Saudi Arabia, mainly due to higher salaries according to Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment. The second most common destination is Europe, the UK with almost one fourth of the total number of Pakistani immigrants choosing that country in the same period, followed by North America with 8% of workers.

### **Conclusion**

When looking at the vastly different paths of post-independence Uzbekistan and Pakistan, we can see that the colonial and external legacies they inherited have created very real, lasting issues, however, the choices they made in the early years of their nationhood are what set them on their very different development trajectories, Uzbekistan's steady, commodity-linked growth, in contrast to Pakistan's economic volatility and gaping inequality.

Well-known transmission channels such as trade composition, migration, remittances and integration policies have a significant hand in explaining how these past conditions affect the countries' present vulnerabilities. The main contribution of this study is practical, in that it zeroes in on the mechanisms behind the nations' economic disparities, instead of simply chronicling them, it shows policymakers exactly what levers they can turn to alleviate fragility and exclusion.

Countries should diversify their exports, strengthen the value of their supply chains, provide targeted welfare measures to their people, and craft integration plans that guarantee protection to their most vulnerable industries, and it highlights that market opening and investments must go hand in hand with measures that protect income distribution. Future analysis could be made more convincing through a combination of techniques such as testing the causal chain through econometric analysis, micro-economic impact evaluations, case studies and simulation policies so that we can calculate the real impact of these policies on welfare and the tax coffers and fine tune the measures that are proposed.

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