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Multivectoral? A Quantitative Analysis of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Communication at the United Nations

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Abstract The objective of this article is to assess Uzbekistan's foreign policy against old and new trends after the election of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. By criticising the validity of the concept of multivectorism, this article supports the hypothesis of Uzbekistani foreign policy and interests being reimagined and reshaped by engagement with domestic, and external actors. After a reflection on the role of language and ideas in political analysis, I will employ a Structural Topic Model to test the hypothesis empirically. The findings will support the hypothesis and the use of big data to provide a less biased analysis of foreign policy trends.

Keywords Uzbekistan. Central Asia. Foreign policy. Language. Ideas. Multivectorism. Self-reliance. Constructivism. Document analysis. Structural topic model. Quantitative methods. United Nations.

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1 Introduction

Foreign policy in Islam Karimov's Uzbekistan is a very debated subject in the field of Eurasian studies due to its many peculiarities, such as the fluctuations between the Russian and Western spheres of influence or its protectionist economic policies. The election of a new President in Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, allows us for the first time to review Karimov's foreign policy from a comparative point of view. The objective of this article is to review the literature on Uzbekistani foreign policy and to assess it empirically against old and new trends and developments in Uzbekistan. This project is part of the preliminary research for a larger PhD project on China's relations with Uzbekistan, hence the questions discussed in the article arise from enhancing the relevance of the Asian vector in Uzbekistani foreign policy, and therefore the research attempts to critique the existing literature in hindsight considering new developments. The analysis will start from drawing a timeline of events in Uzbekistani foreign policy, to then underline the main analytical concepts used in the literature to explain them, such as 'multivectorism', discussed in two of its conceptualisations, as balancing and as co-alignment (Contessi 2015), and defensive self-reliance as theorised by Fazendeiro (2015a; 2015b; 2017). This research investigates whether these concepts are useful to explain Uzbekistani foreign policy throughout the years by testing them against the country's reaction to changing international, regional and domestic environments in the context of the United Nations.

Taking from Fazendeiro's (2015b) conception of a set of 'rules' that would characterise the country's spirit of self-reliance, and that are "out in the open, whether in speeches, public works, laws or practices, and are either formal or informal 'models' that shape action" (Fazendeiro 2015b, 486), I focused on political communication and I operationalised a list of themes that could represent the concepts of self-reliance and multivectorism and looked for examples of them in the documents produced by Uzbekistan at the United Nations. The objective is to assess the ability of these concepts to explain the totality of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, by supporting empirically a constructivist logic in Uzbekistani foreign policy in which interests are reimagined and reshaped by engagement with domestic, regional and international actors (Dadabaev 2016). The findings underline the instances that led to the theorisation of the two concepts, such as Uzbekistan's assertive language in terms of human rights or terrorism but find clear instances of change in discourse over time, relegating many of these aspects to specific contexts and timeframes such as the participation of the country to the War on Terror or the aftermath of the Andijan incident. This research advocates for attention and further in-depth research on the processes that led to the outcomes analysed in the timeline and document analysis.

Finally, the research also provides a reflection on the role of language and ideas in political analysis as a function of identity building, a very relevant theme in the literature on Uzbekistan's foreign policy. The second enquiry in this article questions whether and how Uzbekistan's self-representation in multilateral fora can measure and account for change in the 'rules' of Uzbekistani foreign policy making, which raises a further methodological question on whether an analysis of political communication can provide valid empirical tests to political concepts. The strategy to answer the substantial and methodological questions is to employ an innovative machine learning method, the Structural Topic Model, to analyse Uzbekistan's political communication at the United Nations between the War on Terror and the Global Pandemic (2001-2021). The findings will support the use of big (textual) data to provide a less biased analysis of foreign policy trends. However, the source of documents, the United Nations, seems to skew the findings of this research in that it does not give a complete image of Uzbekistan's foreign communication with lack of bilateral political and trade relations, it depicts a very UN-centred communication in terms of multilateral cooperation and gives an exaggerated attention to UN-related topics such as torture or human rights violations. Hence, the findings call for further research using a different source of documents coming from domestic foreign policy institutions.

2 Multivectoral? Uzbek Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

I will start by detailing a timeline of Uzbekistani foreign policy and related events that will be used as a temporal guide for the document analysis. I will then review related analyses in the literature on Uzbekistani foreign policy during Karimov. Furthermore, the review of scholarly literature will be completed by analysing views on change and continuities in Uzbekistani foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev. The findings from the literature review will lead to my research questions, which will be discussed in the final section.

2.1 The Uzbekistani Exception: Islam Karimov's Foreign Policy

When the USSR was dissolved at the end of 1991, the former president of the Uzbek Socialist Republic, Islam Karimov, remained as head of the state and started a process of nation-building and consolidation of power (Ruiz-Ramas, Morales Hernández 2021). In the early years of independence, the country maintained a diverse set of relations with foreign powers. Uzbekistan in 1992 joined the Commonwealth

of Independent States and signed the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty (CSTO) – which will become an organisation (CSTO 2022). Another important vector centred mainly on South Korea, one of the few foreign investors in the 1990s (Hanks 2000) and an important source of inspiration in terms of economic policy (Spechler 2000). Finally, the Western vector saw the country joining NATO Partnership for Peace in 1994 (Ahmad 2008; Cottey 2012; Tolipov 2006). However, this balanced approach would not last long.

The core of geopolitical repositioning happened after 1996 when the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, becoming a direct threat to the secular majority-Muslim Central Asian republics (Primbetov, Mukashev 2016) with important global implications, such as the US or China enhancing their presence in the region (Nichol 2010; Zhao 2006). Focusing on the latter, Afghanistan led the Shanghai Five border settlement framework to evolve into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, a multilateral institution that originally included China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Russia and Uzbekistan (India and Pakistan joined in 2017). China and the US represent new directions of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, at a time in which Uzbekistan had left the Russian-led CSTO in 1999 as an attempt to decouple from Russia as a security provider (Jardine, Lemon 2020).

9/11 and the war in Afghanistan represented another big change. Uzbekistan, together with Kyrgyzstan, offered a military base at the Karshi-Khanabad airport to the US-led alliance during the War on Terror (Pikalov 2014). The US-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership (Purnell 2005) and Uzbekistani support of the war in Iraq in 2003, an outlier in the region (Najibullah 2003), supported the view of Uzbekistan joining the Western sphere of influence. Yet, the colour revolutions throughout Eurasia and the shift in US security policy to human rights and the Freedom Agenda (see Hassan, Hammond 2011) contributed to a further shift in Uzbekistani foreign policy. In May 2005, political demonstrations in Andijan led to state intervention causing the death of hundreds of people (Kendzior 2015). The Uzbekistani government framed it as an organised coup attempt by terrorists and criminals (Megoran 2008), while independent researchers depicted it as repression (Kendzior 2015). In any case, Andijan gave the last blow to US-Uzbekistan cooperation. The US had already started to criticise Uzbekistan's human rights record in 2004, when it cut aid to the country (D.R. Spechler, M.C. Spechler 2010), and critiques became even stronger after Andijan (Sullivan 2019).

The new US behaviour led to the expulsion of US troops from the country, and redirection towards Russia through re-joining the CSTO. At the time, analysts were stressing the Russo-Chinese role in pushing Uzbekistan and its neighbours further away from Western partners (Rothacher 2008). The role of the SCO was hyped as it was used as a platform for asking US military to leave Central Asia,

even if the inauguration of the Tashkent-based SCO Regional Anti-terrorist Structure already in 2003 signals that Uzbekistan had never really left that vector of regional cooperation, even during its honeymoon period with the US.

Yet again change was behind the corner. In 2008 the Obama administration rekindled relations with Uzbekistan, due to the necessity of supporting a Northern Distribution Network for sending supplies to Afghanistan (Cooley 2012; Ziegler 2013). In parallel, in 2011 the US State Department presented a new Central Asia strategy, the 'New Silk Road' (Laruelle 2015), to connect Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan to spread stability in the country and to diversify Central Asian trade routes. Symbolic of the rapprochement are the visits by Secretary of State Clinton to Uzbekistan in December 2010 and October 2011 (US Department of State 2022) and the US lifting the ban on FMF[1] (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2012).

While relations with the US were improving, the Russian vector proved to be unsustainable for the country that ended its participation to the CSTO in 2012 (Laruelle 2012) and rekindled its military neutrality in its New Foreign Policy Concept. A central development at the time was the importance the Asian vector, as China's rise as a global power and its announcement of China's pivot to Eurasia, the Belt and Road Initiative from Kazakhstan in 2013, changed the regional geoeconomic system permanently.

2.1.1 Domestic Drivers: Gradual Liberalisation, Self-reliance, and Identity

The domestic side of the literature on Uzbekistan's foreign policy focuses on national identity-building (Carlisle 1991; Olcott 1994; Fumagalli 2017), economic self-reliance (Fazendeiro 2015a) and regime survival (Anceschi 2010; Cooley 2012; Collins 2014). The early literature focuses on the nationalistic character of the creation of its external image, collocating the birth of nationalism amongst the native intelligentsia of the Uzbek Socialist Republic in the 1980s (Olcott 1994; Carlisle 1991). Also, Olcott (1994) characterised the early foreign policy of Central Asian countries along three ethno-cultural lines: Turkic/Persian heritage, Islam and Asianness.

The first steps of economic reforms in Uzbekistan seemed to take inspiration from the Asian ethnic line (Olcott 1994; Spechler 2000). Uzbekistan's economic policy after independence was gradual and avoided any shock therapy towards free market, maintaining a pivotal role of the state (Gidadhubli 2005; Paramonov et al. 2006; Ru-

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[1] Foreign Military Financing.

ziev, Ghosh, Dow 2007). Yusupov provided a bleak overall assessment of Karimov's economic policy, which led to "extremely low level of economic efficiency and economic growth rates, high unemployment and external labour migration, and rampant corruption" (2020, 53).

A more elite-centred narrative still speaks of issues of state identity or economy but sees the latter as tools for regime survival (Anceschi 2010). The discussion here focuses on existence threats for the Uzbekistani regime by elevating domestic elite structures and competitions to a fundamental role to shape and reshape relations with foreign powers (Anceschi 2010; Cooley 2012; Collins 2014). This programme of research directly feeds into the literature on the neopatrimonial character of Central Asian regime.

2.1.2 International Drivers: Multivectoral Pragmatism and Political Independence

A larger chunk of the literature focuses on international drivers of Uzbekistani foreign policy, which can be divided in political and relational. As apparent from Fumagalli's (2017) review, at an international level Karimov's political driver seems to be national independence. The latter is characterised as 'non-alignment' and is designed around either an ideological sense of 'self-reliance', *mustaqillik* (Anceschi, Paramonov 2020; Fazendeiro 2015a), or as a function of pragmatic national interest to maximise gains (Karrar 2009; Pikalov 2014). The concept of (defensive) self-reliance is described by Fazendeiro (2017) as a recognition of an autonomous role in the international arena, very much connected to international prestige and equality (*tenglik*). The concept was opposed by the author to interest-driven rational analyses that only account for stable rational objectives as a guide for foreign policy (see above discussions on regime survival or economic development) based on a zero-sum logic of consequences. To this logic, Fazendeiro opposes a logic of appropriateness, the compatibility with some rules that are "general prescriptions for action" (2015b, 487), such as mercantilism, the promotion of the manufacturing sector, self-sufficiency and control in the economic side or pursuit of equality, focus on bilateral relations, assertive defence of the country's image and reluctance to embrace expansionist agendas from a more political side (Fazendeiro 2017).

The relational side of the picture is linked to Karimov's fluctuant foreign relations (expulsion of US troops and joining/leaving Russian-led initiatives; Fazendeiro 2015b). Dadabaev proposes a constructivist explanation for Uzbekistani foreign policy focused on the "constraints of the international environment that shaped the Uzbekistani state's identity and thus led to it constructing internal and foreign policy responses to it" (2019, 901). Asiryan (2019) instead character-

ises this proclivity to change as part of the 'multivectoral' essence of Karimov's policy, a predisposition often attributed to Central Asian leaders. Contessi (2015) provides an excellent discussion of the concept of multivectorism and characterises it as 'co-alignment'. After critiquing the ideas of multivectorism as simple balancing between different foreign powers, the author starts from Blank's (2010) definition of the concept as aiming "explicitly to play major powers against one another and raise the price of cooperation" (Contessi 2015, 301) and expands it into four different policy areas: autonomy from great powers, mitigating normative postures, diversifying route for natural resources and integration into global markets. Finally, another interest-driven approach follows from similar instances analysed in the domestic drivers and proposes to atomise both the state and its interests, refocussing on a plurality of transnational elites that negotiate their power dynamics in competition and collaboration with each other with a focus on foreign elites (Izquierdo-Brichs 2021).

2.2 Change and Continuities: Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2016-21)

After Karimov's death in 2016, Uzbekistani Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President. His leadership has been characterised by reforms in many aspects of the Uzbekistani state and economy. I will not describe the reforms in detail, but these included economic liberalisation with a loosening of the role of the state in the economy, with privatisations and relaxation of state monopolies (Bodio 2020; Hug 2020; Kangas 2018). At the same time, reforms tackled social issues like forced labour, media freedom, corruption and judicial independence (Asiryan 2019; Hug 2020). Even if many problems remain such as limits on freedom of speech (Radio Azattyq 2022), LGBTQ+ and women rights (Gordeyeva 2021; Hug 2020), or repression of political demonstrations (Lillis 2022), some improvement has been recognised even by long-term critics of the Uzbekistani government (see Cotton Campaign 2022).

The debate on Uzbekistan's post-2016 foreign policy presents very diverse positions. Starting from change, an interesting new addition in the literature is Mirziyoyev's focus on soft power. Fazendeiro writes that the new President has "prioritised dialogue over confrontation in the region, spoken of connectivity" (2018), and compares his approach with Karimov's reliance on a more traditional idea of hard power. In this context, geopolitical considerations leave the stage to economic cooperation in Mirziyoyev's foreign policy (Dadabaev 2019). Regional cooperation, resolution of decennial conflicts with other Central Asian countries, and prominent involvement in the debate on Afghanistan's security are also quoted as new foreign policy trends (Anceschi, Paramonov 2020; Hug 2020), together with the im-

provement of relations with external powers. Yet, there is no agreement on whether the main beneficiaries are Russia, China (Anceschi, Paramonov 2020) or any foreign partner (Hug 2020; Weitz 2018).

Yet, if Fazendeiro (2018) sees soft power as a novel approach, he agrees with Weitz (2018) in arguing that it is more a change of tactics than of substance. For example, Central Asia and Afghanistan had already been relevant topics in Karimov's foreign policy (Fazendeiro 2018; Toktogulov 2022; Weitz 2018). Toktogulov (2022) and Weitz (2018) also underline how Mirziyoyev's foreign policy is based on Karimov's and particularly on his 2012 Foreign Policy Concept, whose regional focus and military neutrality represent central pillars of new President's external policies.

2.3   Discussion and Research Questions

In order to critique the literature on Uzbekistani foreign policy, I will focus on the concepts of defensive self-reliance and multivectorism, which both provide pertinent explanations for the development of Uzbekistan foreign policy. This subsection will discuss the analytical strengths and weaknesses of both approaches to then build my research questions. Starting from multivectorism, if we define the concept as mere balancing relations between great powers, the latter struggles at describing Karimov's foreign policy shifts. A pragmatic characterisation works much better for other Central Asian republics. Its fluctuant foreign policy make Uzbekistan stand out at least amongst SCO member states, as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan followed a more linear path in their security dependence on Russia through stable participation in the CSTO, amicable relations with the United States and economic dependence on both Russia and China. Uzbekistan's fluctuations between the US and Russia hardly looked like pragmatic balancing, where supposedly multivectoral Uzbekistan kept losing vectors (USA and Russia as the best examples). Yet, if we define multivectorism in the way Contessi (2015) conceptualised it, then these fluctuations might be part of the strategy to play great powers against each other in a bid to pursue Uzbekistan's own set of interests.

Fazendeiro's (2015b; 2017) discussion on self-reliance follows up from an economic-centred vision connected to Islam Karimov's early policies of self-sufficiency to avoid overreliance on foreign partners. At the same time Karimov's reluctance to accept universalist/expansionist discourses is described as an important political instance of political self-reliance (Fazendeiro 2017). Both these examples fit very well with some part of Karimov's practice and discourse and particularly with the early protectionism and the uneasiness with participation to alliances (see CSTO) or relations with normative powers (US).

At the same time, as admitted by the same author, some policies do not match with the so-called 'rules' of self-reliance. The decision to join (twice) the CSTO even if short-lived does imply the decision of joining a military alliance, and the acceptance of the military presence of the United States and therefore the political and logistical support of a series of military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, mostly conducted in the name of exporting 'freedom' (see G.W. Bush 'freedom agenda', The White House 2008), weakens the ideational side of the concept and seems more to support the interest-driven discussions connected to regime survival.

At the same time, both analyses fail to account for one aspect, namely the Asian vector of Uzbekistan's foreign policy and particularly bilateral and multilateral relations with China. Relations with South Korea and China did not present the same characteristics as relations with other foreign powers. If Seoul has been a close partner since independence, China grew from being a peripheral actor to becoming Uzbekistan's main trade and strategic partner (Dadabaev 2018). Also, in a context of extreme changes in Karimov's foreign policy, China managed to secure Uzbekistan's continued participation to the SCO and for the country to host its Regional Antiterrorist Structure. If these developments act as counterarguments for the bilateral focus of self-reliance, the characteristics of relations at both multilateral and bilateral level with China seem to support the importance of contextual facts in Uzbekistan's relations with great powers, where China's approach seems to lead to a partnership more stable than others. Interest-driven discussions such as those connected to survival of elite networks and multivectorism are not well equipped to capture the variety of contexts and process that produce actions and reactions in Uzbekistan's policy.

The introduction of a comparative term, given by the President Mirziyoyev's foreign policy, provides a test for the strength of these two concepts trying to avoid the selective biases that produced the shortcomings analysed above. Starting from these reflections and specifically from the inability of one characterisation to describe the entire timeframe of Uzbekistan's foreign policy, the article will adopt a more constructivist position. In particular, I support the hypothesis of Uzbekistani foreign policy being reimagined and reshaped by engagement with domestic, regional and international actors (Dadabaev 2016). As will be described in the next section, I take from the concept or 'rules' exposed by Fazendeiro (2015b) and focus on the processes of construction and reconstruction of the latter in discussion with other alternative dispositions such as multivectorism and their focus on rational interests.

The questions I want to answer are substantive and methodological. The substantive question (Q1) investigates empirically whether multivectorism or self-reliance are consistently able to explain Uz-

bekistani foreign policy throughout the years by testing the country's reaction to a changes international environment focusing on the timeline above. The methodological question (Q2) inquires whether the innovative quantitative analysis methods described in the next paragraph can offer good empirical tests for ideational change in Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

3 Ideas and Identity: Political Communication as Data

This section will outline the methodological strategy for this research. I will start by discussing my ontological and epistemological positioning, which falls into the realm of constructivism, whose focus is on change and adaptation of actors' interests, values, and ideas in the international system. Actors in this analysis will mostly be states in both their unitary and pluralist depictions. Furthermore, starting by the theoretical collocation of this research, I will describe my attempt to provide a less biased analysis of political ideas. Finally, I will outline my data collection strategy and methods.

3.1 Communication as Data: Theory, Ideas, and Methodology

This research is based on a constructivist position that considers interests and values as socially constructed, "expressed, acted upon and revised" (Hay 2002, 20), where ideas acquire a causal role independent from material interests, in a dialectical relation with the latter (Hay 2002). I start by employing the concept of 'rules' as building bricks of what Fazendeiro (2015b) calls the 'spirit' of self-reliance (see above). The latter are considered to be "out in the open, whether in speeches, public works, laws or practices, and are either formal or informal 'models' that shape action" (Fazendeiro 2015b, 486), as opposed to the individual preferences of elites that shape interests which tend to be private and not accessible. Yet, although flexible in theory, these rules seem to be considered constant driving forces in Uzbekistani discourse and practice coming from local preferences of elite members.

Starting from Fazendeiro's precious theorisation, I take Dadabaev's constructivist focus on change, instead of continuity, as a base for this research, which states that interests and values need to be situated in space and time as they are not fixed. The attention to social construction elevates ideas to a central role, assigning them a causal role independent from material interests (Hay 2002; Parsons 2010). This by itself does not mean that material issues should be left out of the picture, but that there is a dialectical relation between the role of ideas and the role of material interests as one influences the

other (Hay 2002). Specifically, ideas can have material outcomes, while the material situation can help shape ideas about the environment actor find themselves into. This research also takes from the focus on identity, very much present in the literature on Uzbekistan's foreign policy and focuses on how Uzbekistan's self-representation in multilateral fora can measure and account for change in 'rules' of Uzbekistani foreign policy making.

A quantitative analysis offers the possibility to work on a larger number of sources and to obtain a less biased selection of moments of change, tackling some limitations of qualitative inquiry, namely researchers' prejudices in coding (Barusch, Gringeri, George 2011) and data collection/sampling (Frost 1989; Hu et al. 2019). I will start by identifying a set of thematic variables coming from the literature supporting the concepts of multivectorism and self-reliance and try to find evidence for them in Uzbekistani communication at the United Nations. Communication at the UN is consistently utilised in studies on political communication and foreign policy (see Baturo, Dasandi, Mikhaylov 2017; Hill and Smith 2000; Jordaan 2017; Mushtaq et al. 2021), particularly after the introduction of innovative quantitative methods like the one I am using in this paper, that allow to overcome many of the criticisms connected with the analysis of content through frequentist measures.

Table 1 synthesizes a set of variables that I will be looking at to measure to what extent the concepts underlying multivectorism and self-sufficiency can be found in Uzbekistani multilateral self-representation at the United Nations **[tab. 1]**. As multivectorism was theorised by Contessi (2015) in a relational sense, issues such as sovereignty or regime survival can be accounted for in terms of the variation of relevance of foreign powers in political communication or the importance and tone of discussions on human rights and related issues (e.g. torture or judicial reforms). The economic side of the typical characteristics of multivectorism can be accounted for in terms of mention of infrastructure projects, energy cooperation, connectivity and international economic cooperation.

I operationalised self-sufficiency through both its political and economic characteristics which will be measured through the relevance of discussions on non-alignment, antimilitarism, mercantilism and focus on technology transfer. At the same time another couple of instances that Fazendeiro (2017) lists as characteristics of Uzbekistan's foreign policy are used as instances of self-reliance to be found in Uzbekistan's communication. The first is the predominance of bilateral relations which will be accounted for positively in terms with the relevance of bilateral partners in discourse and negatively with the relevance of multilateral platforms. Finally, the resistance to expansionism will be connected to issues of human rights, religion, panturkism and Eurasianism.

Table 1 Variables operationalised from the literature

Multivectorism (Contessi 2015)		Self-sufficiency (Fazendeiro 2015b; 2017)	
Variables	**Example measures**	**Variables**	**Example measures**
Autonomy/sovereignty	Relations with great powers	Economic self-sufficiency	Mercantilism, support for the manufacturing sector
Regime Survival	Human rights discourse	Political self-sufficiency	Non-alignment, illiberal policies, control, stability
Natural resources trade	Infrastructure projects, energy cooperation	Bilateral relations	Relevance of partners/ multilateral organisation
Economic integration	Connectivity, trade agreements	Reluctance for expansionism	Universalism, religion, panturkism, Eurasianism

3.2 Data

The data for the research consists in 417 documents representing all Uzbekistan's contributions at the United Nations between 2001 and 2021 (War on Terror to Global Pandemic). The documents have been manually scraped from the United Nations Digital Library by searching the word 'Uzbekistan' in the search box and selecting those documents that represented direct Uzbekistani communications such as letters, speeches, and selected reports. Multinational resolutions, legal documents, and periodic reports to UN committees have been excluded due to their lack of direct ideological content or their excessive length that reduced comparability.

3.3 The Structural Topic Model

The Structural Topic Model (STM) is a machine learning method whose scope is to find latent topics from texts (Roberts et al. 2014). It is an unsupervised method in that it infers topics (themes) from correlation between words rather than having the researcher assuming them at the beginning (Roberts et al. 2014; Roberts, Stewart, Tingley 2019; Pinto 2019). The peculiarity of the STM is that it gives the possibility to include a set of covariates that can measure the effect of some circumstances on the prevalence and the content of topics (Combei, Giannetti 2020; Roberts, Stewart, Tingley 2019). Furthermore, it can measure topic proportions in each document to analyse which documents are the most relevant to a topic.

   Following Bagozzi and Berliner (2018) the covariates include the day of publication, the source (UN institution), together with a few political variables. The domestic variables are related to who the President was at the time of publication and to whether the document was signed by the President or not. The international variables sig-

nal participation in the War on Terror, the CSTO and log trade with China, Russia and the United States, as measures of the variables described above.

The documents were loaded on the software R, paired with the covariates above, and pre-processed (Combei 2019). A further step was that of model selection, where the important task was choosing the number of topics (Roberts et al. 2014). There is no right number of topics, however a list of statistical and interpretative tests based on semantic cohesion (exclusivity and co-occurrence of words-topics) helped us selecting 20 as the correct number of topics (Combei 2019). After that, I estimated the topics and their content, together with the effect of covariates on topic prevalence and content through a logistic regression (for formulas see Roberts et al. 2014).

4 Uzbekistan's Communication at the United Nations (2001-21)

This empirical section will start with an overview of the topics estimated by the STM. I started by labelling the 20 topics, to then group them in thematic clusters. Furthermore, I divided clusters in three macro categories related to human rights, politics and security, and economics and sustainability. The latter will be analysed in-depth in three related sections through a description of the content of the various topics and the effect of covariates on both their prevalence and content.

4.1 Topics of Communication: An Overview

Following Combei (2019), I analysed the most common words per each topic and read the main documents related to each topic to find their labels **[tab. 2]**. To simplify the analysis, I grouped topics containing similar instances in six qualitative clusters.

Table 2 Topics and labels

Topic 1	Torture and inhumane treatment
Topic 2	Economic development and reforms
Topic 3	Climate change protocols and conventions
Topic 4	International fight against the drying of the Aral Sea
Topic 5	Fight against transnational drug trafficking
Topic 6	Human rights abuses and related justifications
Topic 7	Comments on application of UN conventions on climate, social rights, and health

Topic 8	Andijan: political and religious freedom, terrorism
Topic 9	International Security: anti-nuclear proliferation, WMD, terrorism
Topic 10	Human Rights Committee: Children and Women's rights
Topic 11	Uzbek measures to counter terrorism and support for ISAF mission
Topic 12	Human and children trafficking
Topic 13	Judicial reforms: death penalty, processes, torture
Topic 14	Children and mothers' rights – measures
Topic 15	Peacebuilding, and religious cooperation: peace process in Afghanistan, Islamic cooperation, Israel-Palestine conflict
Topic 16	Elections, communication of procedures and results
Topic 17	Climate change and technology to build capabilities
Topic 18	Human Rights Committee, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, political stability, and ethnic unity
Topic 19	Human Rights: the role of civil society
Topic 20	Liberalisation of judicial sector, judicial reform, abolition of death penalty

Cluster 1 and 2 are related to human rights, where the cluster 1 (topics 1, 6, 13 and 20) relates to respect of human rights in the Uzbek judicial system, and cluster 2 focuses mostly on children and women's rights (10, 12, 14). Moving to security issues, Clusters 3 (topics 8, 16, 18, 19) and 6 (topics 5, 9, 11, 15) relate to domestic and international security respectively. The remaining clusters 4 (topics 2, 17) and 5 (topics 3, 4, 7) relate to economic reform and sustainability. In the next three sections I will discuss the clusters by grouping theme thematically. For an overview of the most important words per each topic please refer the figure to below [fig. 1].
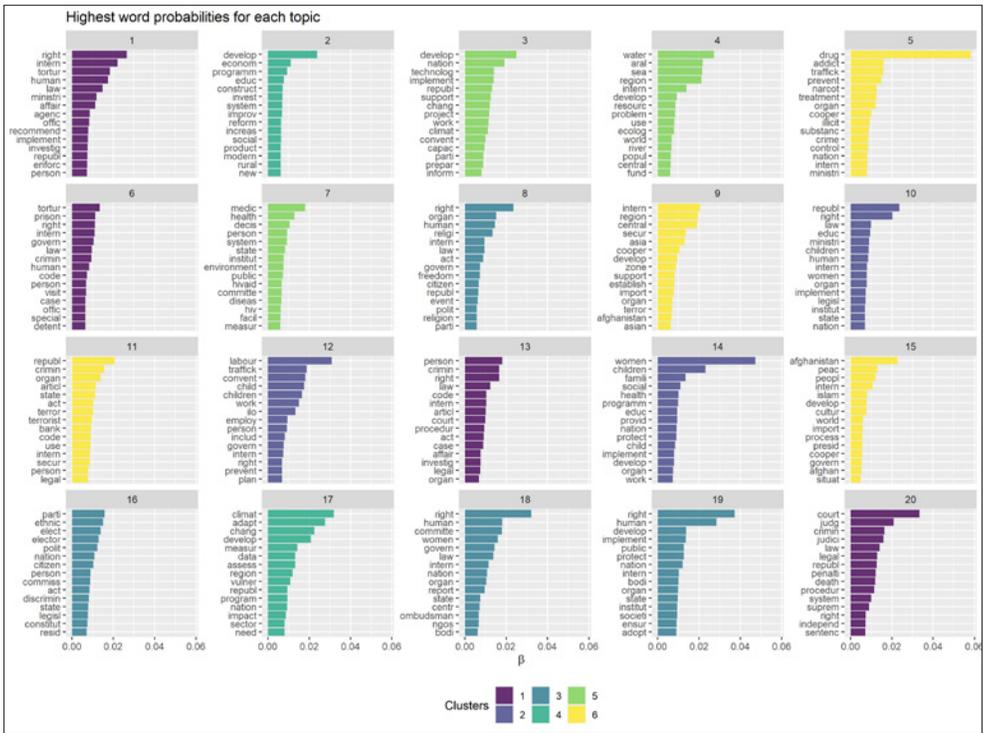
4.2 Human Rights and Judicial System: Uzbekistan and the Un Committees

The analysis of the clusters related to human rights is the least relevant in terms of thematic prevalence, as it contains topics related to the most common working areas at the UN. The first cluster contains four topics, two related to torture (topic 1) and generally to human rights abuses (topic 6), and two related to the reform of the judicial sector (topics 13 and 20). Topic 1 on torture, mostly contains documents written in the early 2000s, but spans throughout the timeframe. Examples are descriptions of the 2003 legislation against torture in Uzbekistan, and comments on the visit by UN Rapporteur to the country. A comparison using the variable *karipres* (whether Karimov was President when the article was published) [fig. 2] shows that language on torture during Karimov (until 2016) seems to be more focused on state initiative, while during Mirziyoyev the interest is on criminal investigations, in line with a more executive character of Mirziyoyev's Uzbeki-

stan. Topic 6 contains more general comments on human rights abuses at UN committees, more prevalent in the earlier days. The other two topics on judicial reforms contain information and letters to Committees on the topic of judicial reforms. Examples of themes would be the abolition of death penalty or the independence of the judiciary. Both the topics remain stable throughout the timeline.

Figure 2 Effect of content variable *karipres* (whether Karimov was President at publication) on topic 1

The second cluster is related to women and children's rights. Topic 10 contains broad descriptions of the countries policies on the matter that touch a long list of issues like education, human trafficking, child labour, gender equality or forced marriage. Human trafficking is the main theme of topic 12, more relevant in earlier dates. Topic 14 is related to more practical measures to protect women and children's rights such as the declarations, plans of action or symposiums. The last two topics are prevalent throughout.

Even if the prevalence of these topics does not say much about Uzbekistan's interest in raising these issues, as the source of the documents, the UN, skews discourse around these themes, the qualitative side of how the topics are tackled by the Uzbekistani government is still relevant to the analysis. The findings from the analysis of the visualisation in figure 2 support what Fazendeiro (2017) describes as the tendency of the Uzbekistani government to defend actions from the state, specifically in terms of the use of torture in the country **[fig. 2]**. Yet, at the same time, it does show how Mirziyoyev's focus on the same topic is less clear cut and shows some shifting focus in terms of reform

and change, which seems to contradict both the idea of staunch defence of the state (or at least of past behaviour of the Uzbekistani government) and the idea of regime survival as protection from ideologies that can promote change and instability. Furthermore, the topics on judicial reform seem to underline a reference to reforms and change also during Karimov's times as the topics are relevant throughout. Finally, although the topic of human rights is present after the election of Mirziyoyev, the expectation would be that it would become much more relevant during a more liberal government, but this is not the case.

4.3 International and Domestic Politics and Security: Framing of Political Opposition, Terrorism, and Crime

I will now move to discuss political and security topics. As for domestic topics, topic 8 on Andijan, religious freedom and terrorism allows us to discuss empirically the most controversial moment of Uzbekistan's history. The topic as expected contains very strong wording in response to reports and debates at the UN on the country's handling on the Andijan protests. Firstly, two of the prevalence variables, which measure whether Uzbekistan was hosting US military in its own territory (*wot*) or was part of the CSTO (*csto*) when the document was published have statistically significant effects depicting the enhanced probability of Uzbekistan discussing this during the time of its alliance with Russia (2005-2012) **[fig. 3]**.

Furthermore, we find that the language used here represents a strong denunciation of ill will from Western countries as exemplified by these remarks at the General Assembly: "Various of the comments made by the United Kingdom (on behalf of the European Union), the United States of America and Canada were based on allegations and rumours, in an attempt to manipulate human rights standards for their own ends" (Vohidov 2005). The latter does not only represent a different interpretation of what happens, but a depiction of Western countries as voluntarily using the human rights discourse for their own ends. This characterisation is less than pragmatic and surely detrimental to a relevant foreign policy vector for the country. Again, Karimov's reaction seems not to fall into a strategic calculation, but towards a confrontational ideological positioning.

This last finding emphasises the lack of relevance of multivectorism conceived as a balanced relation with great powers to bargain better deals but supports both the idea of regime survival in the way that Contessi (2015) conceptualises it and the reluctance to accept universal concepts as connected to self-reliance. However, the fact that this more assertive topic, which does not only contain documents on Andijan, but also on issues that were at stake during those protests (rights to protest, extremism, religious freedom), is very much
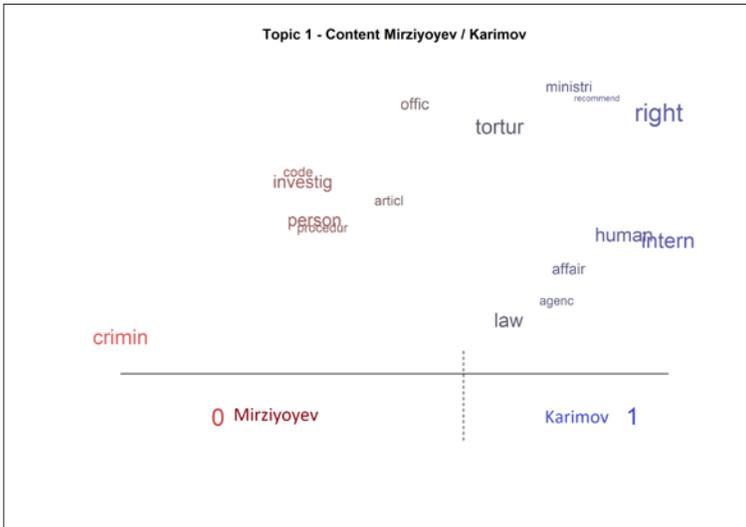
prevalent at times in which Uzbekistan is part of the CSTO and less during the country's honeymoon with the US [fig. 3] shows that the assertive tone was not consistently relevant over time.

The other three topics are related to elections (topic 16, prevalent at every electoral round), human rights and ethnic issues (topic 18) and civil society, corruption (topic 19). Topic 19 stands out here as it is characterised by a more reformist language and is more prevalent during the late 2010s (late Karimov, early Mirziyoyev) and includes several contributions at the General Assembly. The topic shows the willingness of the government to engage in these discussions at the UN, which implies an enhanced interest by Uzbekistan to work in multilateral forums. The importance of multilateral forums for Uzbekistan can also be proved by the country's joining the UN Human Rights Council for the first time in history in 2021 (Uzbekistan's mission to the UN 2020). If Fazendeiro (2018) refers to change during Mirziyoyev as cosmetic, we need to add that the environment in which Uzbekistan acts has changed towards a stronger multilateral engagement.

Moving to international security, topic 5 on the international fight against drug trafficking is the only pretty stable item of discussion in Uzbekistani communication at the UN. On the contrary, topic 9, a

general topic on international security, has a very significant change of prevalence over time. Figure 4 shows how the topic becomes more relevant over time [fig. 4]. The significance during Mirziyoyev's tenure supports the idea of enhanced Uzbekistani regional and international leadership in security issues after 2016.
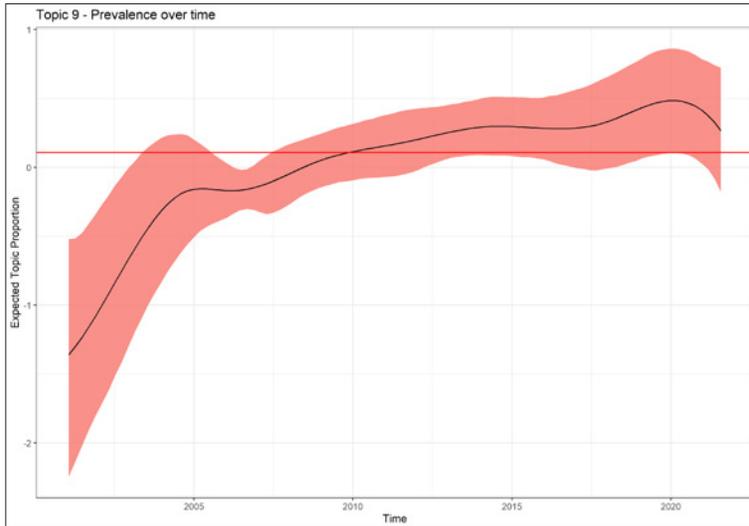
Figure 4   Prevalence for topic 9 – international security – over time

The last two topics are related to Afghanistan and show a difference between Karimov's and Mirziyoyev's approach to the issue. Topic 11, counterterrorism and the ISAF mission, reacts very well to the selected variables. The topic contains reports and legislation on counterterrorism at domestic level, and comments around 9/11 and its consequences. The variable *karipres* produces an interesting effect at content level [fig. 5], where Karimov's language is more focused on terrorism, crime and the role of the state, and Mirziyoyev's on international cooperation (OIC, Palestinian, council, resolution are common words). As is clear from figure 5, there is not much content overlap [fig. 5].
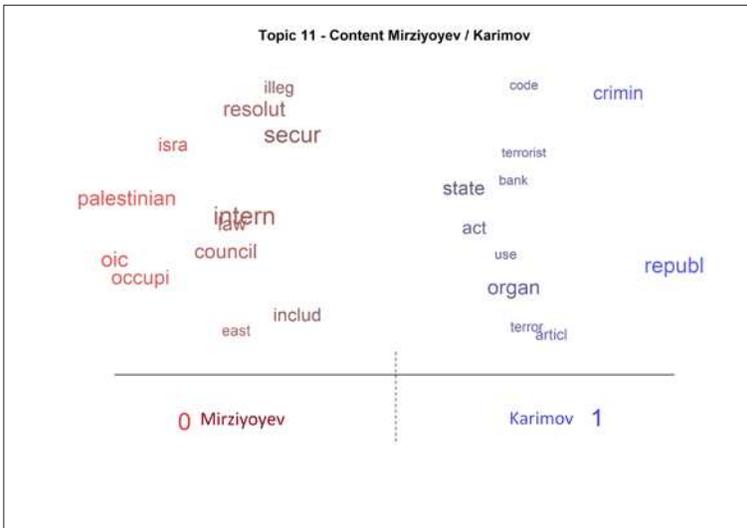
Figure 5   Effect of content variable *karipres* (whether Karimov was President at publication) on topic 11

The last security related topic, topic 15 shows a soft approach to international security, Afghanistan, and the issue of religion extremism. The focus is on peacebuilding, religious cooperation, the peace process in Afghanistan, Islamic cooperation, and the Israel-Palestine conflict. The topic contains mostly documents published during Mirziyoyev's tenure and represent the new face of Uzbekistan in the security domain. It is to be noted that many documents come from the UN Security Council, again supporting stronger Uzbekistani international involvement.

These findings connect with the discussion on Fazendeiro's theorisation in terms of the preference of Uzbekistan's elites for avoiding universalising concepts such as Islamism, panturkism or Eurasianism. If the theorisation holds for Karimov's discourse, it does not during Mirziyoyev as the focus on the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation as a forum for conflict resolution contradicts it. Finally, Uzbekistan's participation to the UN Security Council is another instance of multilateral engagement.

4.4 Isolation and Adaptation: Economic Transition, Resilience, Reform and Sustainability

The last section will focus on the clusters on economic and environmental themes. Cluster 4 contains a topic on economic reforms and one on the social aspects of measures to fight climate change. Notwithstanding the narrative of Uzbekistan's illiberal economic policies during Karimov and the wave of liberal reforms after 2016, topic 2 on economic reforms does not particularly vary in prevalence during Mirziyoyev's presidency. Also, differently from the Afghan issue, the model does not produce two separate topics for Karimov's and Mirziyoyev's economic discourse, signalling some continuity in the country' economic language. However, an analysis of the effect of the variable *karipres* at content level shows some differences in the wording used by the two Presidents. As visible from figure 6, some words are in common, but many are further away such as 'reform', much more relevant for Mirziyoyev, or 'bank', 'product[ion]', 'sport' and 'educ[ation]', more relevant for Karimov **[fig. 6]**. A qualitative review found that the related documents during Karimov times are already focused on reforms and were published mostly during the early 2010s, when Uzbekistan was opening up after a period of isolation. However, while documents under Karimov still depict a positive image of economic development in the 1990s and 2000s, the discourse under Mirziyoyev is mostly focused on change, symbolised by the word 'reform'. The main finding is that discussions on economic reform and connectivity were already present during Karimov, which move the country away from self-sufficiency, at least in terms of discourse. Topic 17 belongs to this cluster mostly for its economic relevance but does not share the prevalence of topic 2. It is mostly related to climate-change related reforms and measures in response to international agreements.
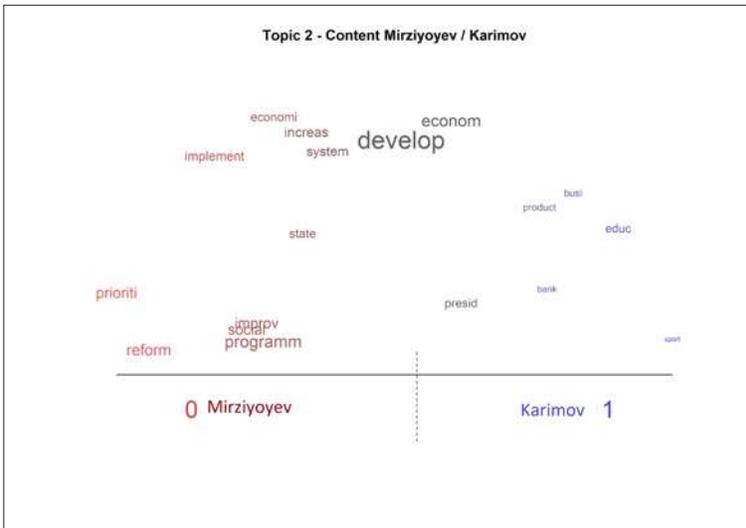
Figure 6 Effect of content variable *karipres* (whether Karimov was President at publication) on topic 2

The last cluster deals with climate change and sustainability. While topic one contains discussions and reactions to climate change protocols such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), topics 4 and 7 have a stronger thematic connotation. Topic 4 stands out as it contains comments and declarations on cooperation for the fight against the drying of the Aral Sea, interestingly more prevalent during Karimov representing an aspect of his regional engagement. Topic 7 mostly deals with environmental discussions and health-related reports. This last topic intervenes in the debate on change between Karimov's and Mirziyoyev's approach to regional cooperation by supporting the idea of Uzbekistan's regional engagement as predating the death of Islam Karimov.

5 Conclusions and Discussion

The empirical findings support several of my substantial reasonings from the literature review: changing patterns in foreign policy already during Karimov and some qualitative change between Karimov and Mirziyoyev, and my critique of multivectorism and self-reliance. Yet, the shortcomings of the research design call for more research on a series of issues such as bilateral relations with foreign partners, which were an important part of how I operationalised concepts in table 1. I will now focus on each of these issues and provide an assessment of the methodological limitations of this research and areas for further inquiry.

5.1 Results of Empirical Tests

Much of the findings revolve around change and therefore the test that this research provides regards the robustness of concepts in the literature to explain aspects of Uzbekistani foreign policy over time. A first important theme that came to the fore in different forms is that of human rights. As reported above, it is not particularly relevant to discuss the prevalence of the topic over time as the source of the documents (the UN) skews the result. Yet, the tone of discussions around themes related to human rights is relevant to test the importance of regime survival as depicted in the literature on multivectorism, and the reluctance towards expansionist policies and strong defence of the country's image in self-reliance. Topic 8 on Andijan, religious freedom and terrorism is particularly relevant in the discussion. A qualitative analysis of the topic supports the literature as the tone used by the Uzbekistani representative at the UN in the documents contained in the topic and published in the aftermath of Andijan show a strong defence of the country's reputation and a hard stance against the use of universal human rights by Western power for their own aims.

At the same time however, the quantitative analysis shows that the topic became much more relevant when Uzbekistan was a member of the CSTO and less when it was engaged in the War on Terror. The strong language on human rights seemed therefore a characteristic of a very specific moment in time. This finding is supported by the different tone on the topics 13 and 20 on judicial reform, which shows to an extent Uzbekistan's compliance with human rights discourse and connected reforms to review the standards of the Uzbekistani judiciary system. Another instance that weakens the concepts from the literature is related to Karimov's supposed preference for bilateral cooperation. The topics on sustainability and environmental challenges act as an important reminder of the relevance of context in the construction of policy and discourse around specific topics and the regional multilateral focus in terms of possible solutions.

The relative importance of the bilateral and multilateral sides of Uzbekistan's foreign policy are also an important subject of the second dimension of change underlined by my findings, which is connected to the evolution of discourse between Mirziyoyev's and Karimov's foreign policy. Starting from multilateralism, topic 11 and topic 15 on security and Afghanistan show that the language used by Mirziyoyev is more connected to international cooperation to deal with security issues than it was in the past. The presence of 'OIC' in the most relevant words for topic 11 during Mirziyoyev is particularly relevant to counter the argument on the bilateral focus of Uzbekistan's spirit of self-reliance underlined by Fazendeiro (2017). Moreover, connected to the other theme of the previous paragraph, another challenging

dimension for the concepts connected to Uzbekistan's assertiveness in human-rights-related issues is represented by topic 1 on torture. If during the times of Karimov the language connected to the theme seemed to be focused on the role of the state and the law, during Mirziyoyev it seems to shift towards the failures of institutions, with words such as 'investigation' coming to the fore.

Two substantive findings originate from these discussions. Firstly, starting from findings from the vast literature on elites in Uzbekistan, we can assume that Uzbekistani elites have not changed dramatically throughout the years and that many elite members during Mirziyoyev, including Mirziyoyev himself, have been part of the country elites before the death of the first President. Hence, the numerous instances of change in foreign policy discourse challenge the stability of some of the concepts that have been described as underlying bricks of Uzbekistan's interests in the case of multivectorism and of Uzbekistan's spirit of (defensive) self-reliance in Fazendeiro's seminal work. The first concept, based on ontological and epistemological concepts close to realism is intrinsically challenged by change, which is embraced by this research following Dadabaev's theoretical contribution. The concept of self-reliance instead lacks a focus on the processes and contexts that produced the very many aspects of Uzbekistani foreign policy underlined in the characterisation of defensive self-reliance. Finally, if change between Karimov's and Mirziyoyev's international discourse can be better justified as both research agendas were taking place before the death of President Karimov, findings internal to Karimov's regime as more impacting. Yet, as we will see in the limitations of this research, some important aspects of both concepts need further qualitative and quantitative research to produce a better test.

5.2 The Methodological Question: Strengths and Limitations of the Research Design

When employing innovative methods and hence an innovative design, it is always necessary to discuss its positive and negative implications. The covariates utilised in this STM model, which worked in many other instances in the literature, did not produce strong effects in this specific model, particularly on the prevalence side. This is not to say that the result was not interesting all the same. The lack of statistical significance of the time-related variables in most topics can be attributed to a limitation coming from the source of the documents, the United Nations, whose themes are very standardised. Furthermore, the relatively small sample size of 417 documents and the scarcity of documents in the earlier years (2001-2004) have also impacted statistical significance. The reason for this is Uzbekistan's

smaller involvement to the UN in the earlier dates as compared to later years. The small sample is an issue only for the effect of prevalence variables, but not much in terms of topics and content. The effect of the covariates such as *karipres* and *wto/csto* at content level were interesting for my analysis and the themes showed a promising way of sourcing unsupervised, less biased empirical evidence for analysis on foreign policy.

As briefly mentioned above and underlined throughout the article, the source of the documents, the United Nations, renders overall thematic prevalence less interesting (see importance of human rights). This is true also for what is missing. In particular, bilateral issues and hence the relevance of bilateral meetings, agreement, trade cannot be well measured through discourses at the UN. At the same time, the context of publication of the documents misses out some multilateral and regional focus of Uzbekistan's foreign policy (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and other aspects of regional cooperation). Hence, the limitations of this research are not very much connected to the choice of method per se, but mostly to the data selection. Also, we will see in the discussion how tackling the issues described in this section can lead us to improving analytical strength and to produce new and less biased research on Uzbekistan's foreign relations through better data selection, engagement through fieldwork and focus on specific instances lacking in previous research.

5.3 Discussion: Areas for Further Research

The first methodological teaching is that sourcing data only from the UN can skew the thematic connotation of political communication. Hence, I took the hint and planned further analysis on communication from domestic foreign affairs institutions, which provided an excellent source to complement the still very relevant findings in this article. Just as a reference, in the same timeframe, the Uzbekistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs has produced around 30,000 documents, compared to the 417 at the UN, with a normal distribution over the years.

As for the substantial findings, there are two issues that are left to further research. Firstly, a data collection based on different sources could help us to expand my inquiry on the concept of self-reliance by giving more information on Uzbekistani bilateral and multilateral relation. Secondly, change in thematic connotations need to be analysed in-depth through engagement with the elites that produced the documents. This is true particularly for those vectors of Uzbekistani foreign policy that received less attention in the past, such as the Asian vector and particularly relations with China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, whose exceptionality was not captured

by previous research, and was not accounted for by this analysis. Relations between China, the SCO and Uzbekistan are the subject of a further qualitative research project that was conducted in Uzbekistan in spring 2022.

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