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THE IMPACT OF FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS ON UZBEKISTAN'S TEXTILE INDUSTRY: A PANEL DATA ANALYSIS, 2017–2023



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Abstract. This study examines the impact of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and partner-country macroeconomic conditions on the performance of Uzbekistan's textile industry between 2017 and 2022. Using a balanced panel dataset of 72 observations covering six major trading partners—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—the study applies Fixed Effects (FE) and Random Effects (RE) panel regression models, with the Hausman test used to select the preferred specification. Trade data were obtained from the UN Comtrade database (HS codes 50–63), macroeconomic indicators from the World Bank's World Development Indicators, and FTA status was coded as a dummy variable based on the CIS Free Trade Area Agreement (2012) and the Uzbekistan–China Economic and Trade Cooperation Framework (2018). The Fixed Effects results show that FTAs have a positive and statistically significant effect on both textile exports ($\beta = 0.213$, $p < 0.05$) and imports ($\beta = 0.178$, $p < 0.10$), corresponding to an approximately 21 percent increase in exports during FTA-active years. Partner-country GDP growth is positively associated with trade performance, while inflation has a statistically significant negative effect; exchange-rate movements are statistically insignificant. The models explain a substantial share of the variation in trade flows ($R^2 = 0.73$ for exports; $R^2 = 0.68$ for imports). The findings are consistent with the predictions of Comparative Advantage Theory, the Gravity Model, and New Trade Theory and suggest that Uzbekistan's trade liberalization strategy has contributed to export growth and industrial upgrading. Policy recommendations include expanding the FTA network, promoting macroeconomic stability among partner countries, and investing in customs and logistics infrastructure to sustain the gains from trade liberalization.

Keywords: Free Trade Agreements; Textile Industry; Uzbekistan; Panel Data; Export Performance; Trade Liberalization

Аннотация. В данном исследовании рассматривается влияние соглашений о свободной торговле (ССТ) и макроэкономических условий стран-партнёров на показатели текстильной промышленности Узбекистана в период с 2017 по 2022 год. На основе сбалансированной панельной выборки, включающей 72 наблюдения по шести основным торговым партнёрам — Китаю, России, Казахстану, Кыргызской Республике, Таджикистану и Туркменистану, — в исследовании применяются панельные регрессионные модели с фиксированными эффектами (FE) и случайными эффектами (RE), а для

выбора предпочтительной спецификации используется тест Хаусмана. Данные о торговле получены из базы данных UN Comtrade (коды ТН ВЭД 50–63), макроэкономические показатели — из базы World Development Indicators Всемирного банка, а статус ССТ представлен в виде фиктивной переменной на основе Соглашения о зоне свободной торговли СНГ (2012 г.) и Рамочного соглашения об экономическом и торговом сотрудничестве между Узбекистаном и Китаем (2018 г.). Результаты модели с фиксированными эффектами показывают, что ССТ оказывают положительное и статистически значимое влияние как на экспорт текстильной продукции ($\beta = 0,213$; $p < 0,05$), так и на её импорт ($\beta = 0,178$; $p < 0,10$), что соответствует приблизительно 21-процентному увеличению экспорта в годы действия ССТ. Рост ВВП стран-партнёров положительно связан с показателями торговли, тогда как инфляция оказывает статистически значимое отрицательное влияние; изменения обменного курса являются статистически незначимыми. Модели объясняют существенную долю вариации торговых потоков ($R^2 = 0,73$ для экспорта; $R^2 = 0,68$ для импорта). Полученные результаты согласуются с положениями теории сравнительных преимуществ, гравитационной модели международной торговли и новой теории торговли и свидетельствуют о положительном вкладе стратегии торговой либерализации Узбекистана в рост экспорта и технологическое развитие промышленности. В качестве практических рекомендаций предлагаются расширение сети соглашений о свободной торговле, содействие макроэкономической стабильности во взаимодействии со странами-партнёрами, а также дальнейшее развитие таможенной и логистической инфраструктуры для устойчивого использования преимуществ торговой либерализации.

Ключевые слова: соглашения о свободной торговле; текстильная промышленность; Узбекистан; панельные данные; экспортные показатели; либерализация торговли.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Uzbekistan's textile industry has evolved from a raw cotton exporter into a rapidly industrializing textile and apparel hub. The sector now contributes more than 10 percent of national GDP and employs close to one million workers (Kim & Park, 2019), reflecting the government's broader post-2016 strategy of export diversification and trade liberalization. As part of this shift toward open regionalism, Uzbekistan has signed a series of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and cooperation frameworks, most notably the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Free Trade Area Agreement (2012) and the Uzbekistan–China Economic and Trade Cooperation Framework (2018).

Internationally, FTAs are widely regarded as instruments that reduce trade barriers, lower transaction costs, and stimulate export competitiveness through economies of scale (Chen et al., 2023). For textile-producing economies such as China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, trade liberalization has been closely associated with export expansion and technological upgrading (Masood et al., 2024; Taha et al., 2025; Jaswal, 2023). Despite Uzbekistan's growing participation in such agreements, the specific quantitative contribution of FTAs to the country's textile trade performance has not yet been fully established. Existing research on Uzbekistan's trade policy tends to be descriptive and economy-wide (Toshpulatova, 2024; Safoev, 2024; Zakirov et al., 2024) rather than sector-specific, leaving open the question of whether the textile sector's growth since 2017 has been driven primarily by trade liberalization or by broader macroeconomic and regional demand dynamics.

This study addresses this research gap by asking: to what extent have FTAs contributed to the growth and competitiveness of Uzbekistan's textile industry between 2017 and 2022, after controlling for partner-country macroeconomic conditions such as GDP growth, inflation, and exchange-rate movements? Using panel data regression, the analysis distinguishes the effect of trade-policy liberalization from broader cyclical and regional influences, thereby providing an empirical basis for trade negotiations, industrial policy, and Uzbekistan's ongoing preparations for World Trade Organization (WTO) accession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis is grounded in four complementary strands of trade theory. Classical Comparative Advantage Theory suggests that liberalization allows countries to specialize according to relative factor costs, which, in the case of Uzbekistan, implies specialization in labor-intensive textile and cotton-based manufacturing. The Heckscher–Ohlin model extends this logic to factor endowments, predicting that Uzbekistan's relatively abundant labor resources and raw cotton supply should support textile export specialization as tariff barriers decline. The Gravity Model of Trade further suggests that bilateral trade volumes are shaped by economic size and growth, implying that partner-country GDP growth should increase demand for Uzbek textile products. Finally, New Trade Theory and Endogenous Growth Theory emphasize increasing returns to scale, technology

transfer, and innovation as channels through which trade openness—including two-way trade in machinery and intermediate inputs—can support long-term industrial competitiveness.

Empirically, several studies support a positive relationship between FTAs and textile trade. Using a gravity-model approach, Chen et al. (2023) found that tariff reductions under agreements such as ASEAN–China and RCEP increased bilateral textile exports by approximately 18 percent. Masood et al. (2024) and Taha et al. (2025) documented similar gains for Pakistan following the Pakistan–China FTA, particularly in higher value-added segments, while Li Yang and Kumarasinghe (2024) showed that RCEP strengthened industrial-chain integration in China’s textile sector. Within the Central Asian context, Umarova (2025) and Toshpulatova (2024) found that CIS-area trade agreements contributed to moderate increases in regional trade flows, while further improvements in institutional and logistics infrastructure, including those related to Uzbekistan’s landlocked geographical position, could enhance their overall effectiveness. Other studies indicate that macroeconomic instability may moderate the benefits of liberalization: Jaswal (2023) reported that inflationary pressures reduced the positive effect of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) on textile trade, a pattern that is broadly consistent with evidence from the CIS region.

Taken together, this literature suggests that FTAs generally contribute to trade expansion, while their effectiveness depends on complementary conditions such as macroeconomic stability, institutional quality, and logistics infrastructure, which are particularly relevant for a transition and landlocked economy such as Uzbekistan. This study builds directly on the existing literature by empirically examining these relationships using sector-specific panel data.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a quantitative, explanatory research design based on a deductive approach: established trade theories are used to generate hypotheses that are subsequently tested using panel data for 2017–2022. The dependent variables are the log-transformed values of Uzbekistan’s textile exports and imports (HS codes 50–63, measured in thousand US dollars), sourced from the UN Comtrade database. The independent variables are an FTA dummy (coded as 1 when an active agreement—the CIS FTA or the Uzbekistan–China framework—applied to a given partner-year, and 0 otherwise) and three partner-country macroeconomic indicators obtained from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators: GDP growth (%), inflation (%), and the exchange rate (local currency units per US dollar).

The panel covers six of Uzbekistan’s principal trading partners—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—over six years, yielding a balanced dataset of 72 observations (6 partners × 6 years × 2 trade flows). The econometric specification is:

$$\ln(\text{Trade}_{ijt}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{FTA}_{jt} + \beta_2 \text{GDP}_{jt} + \beta_3 \text{INF}_{jt} + \beta_4 \text{EXR}_{jt} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ijt}$$

where Trade_{ijt} denotes the export or import value between Uzbekistan (i) and partner country (j) in year (t). Both Fixed Effects (FE) and Random Effects (RE) models were estimated separately for exports and imports, with the Hausman test used to select the preferred specification. The FE model was retained because it controls for time-invariant, country-specific factors, such as geographic distance and institutional characteristics, that could otherwise affect the consistency of the estimates.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 1 reports the Fixed Effects regression results for the export and import models. Both models were estimated using the full balanced panel of 72 observations, with standard errors clustered by partner country (Table 1).

Table 1. Fixed Effects Regression Results for Textile Exports and Imports (2017–2022)

Variable	Export Model (ln)	Import Model (ln)	Expected Sign
FTA Dummy	0.213 (0.041)**	0.178 (0.091)*	+
GDP Growth (%)	0.062 (0.028)**	0.045 (0.032)**	+
Inflation (%)	−0.037 (0.009)***	−0.028 (0.013)**	−
Exchange Rate (LCU/USD)	0.00009 (0.0002)	−0.00012 (0.0003)	±
Constant	12.217	11.534	—
R-squared	0.73	0.68	—
Observations	72	72	—

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), $p < 0.01$ (***).

The FTA dummy is positive and statistically significant in both models, indicating that textile exports were approximately 21 percent higher ($\beta = 0.213$, $p < 0.05$) and imports approximately 18 percent higher ($\beta = 0.178$, $p < 0.10$) during years in which an FTA was active, holding other factors constant. This result is consistent with the predictions of Comparative Advantage Theory and the Gravity Model, according to which lower tariff and non-tariff barriers expand specialization and trade volumes, and it closely mirrors the approximately 18 percent export gain that Chen et al. (2023) attribute to tariff reductions under ASEAN–China and RCEP.

Partner-country GDP growth is positive and significant in both models: a one-percentage-point increase in partner-country GDP growth is associated with approximately a 6.2 percent increase in exports and a 4.5 percent increase in imports, in line with the predictions of the Gravity Model and comparable findings for the RCEP region (Li Yang & Kumarasinghe, 2024). This indicates that Uzbekistan's textile trade remains closely linked to the business cycles of its major trading partners, particularly China, Kazakhstan, and Russia.

Inflation in partner countries shows a negative and highly significant relationship with both exports (–3.7 percent per one-percentage-point increase) and imports (–2.8 percent), consistent with the view that macroeconomic instability may weaken purchasing power and trade activity—a pattern also reported by Toshpulatova (2024) and Umarova (2025) for the CIS region and by Jaswal (2023) for South Asia's SAFTA. The exchange-rate coefficient has the theoretically expected sign but is statistically insignificant in both models, plausibly reflecting the prevalence of US-dollar-denominated contracts and long-term FTA-based trading relationships that may reduce firms' exposure to short-term currency fluctuations.

The models explain a substantial share of the variation in trade flows, with R^2 values of 0.73 for exports and 0.68 for imports. Taken together, the results indicate that Uzbekistan's engagement with FTAs—combined with favorable partner-country growth and a stable inflation environment—has been an important factor in textile trade expansion, while also supporting imports of machinery and intermediate inputs that contribute to industrial upgrading, consistent with New Trade Theory and Endogenous Growth Theory.

These findings have several policy implications. First, because FTAs show a positive effect on exports, Uzbekistan may continue to deepen its FTA network, including with emerging markets such as Turkey, South Korea, and ASEAN member states, while further streamlining customs procedures to reduce transaction costs. Second, since partner-country GDP growth strongly influences trade outcomes, diversifying export destinations beyond China and Russia—toward economies such as Indonesia, Malaysia, or India—could help reduce exposure to partner-specific economic fluctuations. Third, given the negative effect of inflation, strengthening macroeconomic cooperation with trading partners through regional platforms, alongside maintaining domestic price stability, may enhance the effectiveness of existing agreements. Finally, because FTAs also support imports of textile machinery and intermediate inputs, complementary investment in domestic textile clusters, technology transfer, customs efficiency, and transport infrastructure, including the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan corridor, is important for translating trade liberalization into sustainable industrial competitiveness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to determine whether Free Trade Agreements contributed to the growth and competitiveness of Uzbekistan's textile industry between 2017 and 2022. Using a balanced panel of 72 observations across six major trading partners and a Fixed Effects specification selected through the Hausman test, the analysis provides robust evidence that FTAs significantly increase both textile exports and imports, that partner-country GDP growth reinforces this effect, and that inflation in partner economies may constrain trade performance, while exchange-rate movements play a limited direct role. These results support the study's hypotheses and are consistent with the predictions of Comparative Advantage Theory, the Gravity Model, and New Trade Theory.

The findings suggest that Uzbekistan's trade liberalization strategy has contributed positively to textile-sector growth and industrial upgrading, while the extent of these benefits depends on complementary macroeconomic stability and institutional efficiency. The study is limited by its focus on six trading partners, a six-year time frame, and aggregate HS-code trade data. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the country and time coverage, incorporating firm-level data, and including institutional and logistics-related variables. Overall, the results support continued and deeper FTA engagement, combined with macroeconomic coordination and industrial-upgrading policies, as an important strategy for sustaining and strengthening the competitiveness of Uzbekistan's textile trade.

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