SDGs as Statecraft:

How Tashkent Is Rewriting Its Development Brand at the UN

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Uzbekistan has turned the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from a technocratic checklist into a diplomatic asset. By pairing parliamentary oversight with data-driven progress reviews and sizable macro buffers, Tashkent now presents the SDGs as both a domestic delivery agenda and an investable foreign policy brand. The promise is compelling; credibility, however, will rest on precise definitions (especially for poverty) and transparent monitoring that outside audiences can verify.

Since 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's government has liberalized the foreign-exchange regime, simplified taxes, and opened the banking system—moves that underpin a new narrative of state capacity and "delivery." Tashkent then exported that narrative to New York. In December 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted—at Uzbekistan's initiative—a resolution elevating the role of parliaments in accelerating the SDGs, signaling that governance (the *how*) would be as central as goals (the *what*). That framing travels well in diplomatic settings because it links budgets, audits, and outcomes.

The numbers now provide officials with a portable tool to use. In the latest SDG Index**,** Uzbekistan ranks 62nd out of 167 **countries** with a score of 73.1, reflecting broad, albeit uneven, gains across targets. The government has also subjected itself to scrutiny by presenting two Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2020 and 2023—an uncommon cadence designed to invite peer review. Moreover, macro buffers are particularly powerful for a lower-middle-income economy: foreign-exchange and gold reserves surpassed $50 billion in August 2025, providing fiscal room to protect social programs against shocks.

Tashkent's most politically resonant claim is on poverty. Officials say the national poverty rate fell to 8.9% in 2024 and is expected to drop to 6% by the end of 2025**,** with 7.5 million people lifted out of poverty since 2016. Those figures are plausible given growth and transfers—but they raise methodological questions that matter for credibility. On the World Bank's $3.65/day (2017 PPP) lower-middle-income line, poverty in Uzbekistan was about 5% in 2022, implying that the national line is set higher and tracks a different welfare standard. The government only formalized a survey-based national methodology in 2021**;** by that measure, poverty reportedly fell from 17% (2021) to 11% (2023)**.** Publishing the microdata and methods behind these estimates—ideally via an externally reviewed, annual **"**Poverty and Shared Prosperity—Uzbekistan**"** report—would turn an attractive claim into a verifiable fact, making it easier for partners to tie finance to measurable outcomes.

Why does the SDG framing work? Because it depoliticizes cooperation. Legislatures in the loop signal domestic accountability; SDG tagging signals purpose; and audited indicators offer measurable results. Multilateral lenders and bilateral partners can then justify support on non-geopolitical grounds. Japan, for instance, approved a ¥37 billion ($246 m) JICA program loan in 2024 to back reforms and protect vulnerable groups, explicitly linking the finance to social outcomes.

The European Union’s programming likewise aligns with governance, green transition, and connectivity, channeling Global Gateway resources toward renewables and transport links. Perhaps most visible to investors, Saudi Arabia’s ACWA Power has committed more than $13 billion across 19 Uzbek projects, making Uzbekistan its largest market after Saudi Arabia—an endorsement of bankable PPAs and long-term demand for clean power.

The headwinds are real. Global FDI fell 11% in 2024 and could weaken again in 2025 amid tariff wars and fragmentation, according to a UNCTAD warning—conditions that typically affect frontier and emerging markets first. Regional supply-side issues also pose challenges: slower commodity output and softer external demand can dampen growth in Central Asia. At the same time, downturns in Russia or China would put pressure on remittances and exports. Over-promising under these conditions would erode the very brand Uzbekistan has built.

<u>What would seal the deal</u>

1) Definition discipline and disclosure. Lock a standard poverty dashboard that reports—side-by-side—the national line and the $3.65/day metric, with confidence intervals and methodological notes. Commit to open microdata (with privacy safeguards) and invite university consortia to replicate estimates annually. This lowers perceived risk for budget-support and results-based financing.

2) Bankable green pipeline. Finalize a **national green-finance taxonomy** aligned to international standards and publish a rolling list of taxonomy-eligible projects (solar, grid, efficient irrigation, waste-to-energy) with standardized PPAs and predictable VAT/refund timelines. Given the size of Uzbekistan's climate-investment gap, mobilizing private capital at scale will depend on the standardization and clarity of contractual arrangements.

3) Parliamentary muscle memory. Use the 2022 UNGA resolution as a template for an annual SDG hearing in parliament that ties appropriations to verified outcomes (e.g., poverty exits, learning gains, renewable capacity additions). Done well, this turns statecraft into a repeatable institutional process rather than a single political moment.

All in all, Tashkent has discovered a form of SDG statecraft that suits a geopolitically cautious, investment-seeking middle-income aspirant: govern visibly, measure relentlessly, and translate reforms into investable signals. The strategy is working—witness improved SDG standing, frequent VNRs, and large-scale clean-energy deals. But staying power will come from three prosaic virtues: definitions, disclosure, and disciplined execution. Nail those, and Uzbekistan’s SDG brand will be more than a talking point at the UN—it will be a durable pathway to growth and resilience at home.