

## Challenges and Prospects of Cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and International Actors in Countering New Synthetic Narcotic Substances

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### Abstract

This study examines the development of cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and international organizations and foreign countries in the area of controlling new synthetic narcotic substances (NSNS) and combating their illegal trafficking. The rapid proliferation of synthetic drugs presents unprecedented legal, public health, and security challenges globally, and Uzbekistan, as both a transit and increasingly a consumer country, faces specific and pressing vulnerabilities requiring a comprehensive international response. Using a qualitative research design based on doctrinal and comparative legal analysis, the study reviews binding international conventions, regional institutional frameworks, bilateral agreements, and national legislation. Findings reveal that while Uzbekistan has made meaningful progress in aligning its legal system with international drug control norms and in engaging with bodies such as the UNODC, SCO, CIS, and CSTO, significant gaps remain in early warning systems, analogue scheduling legislation, forensic infrastructure, and cross-border data sharing. The study recommends legislative modernization, enhanced multilateral coordination, forensic capacity investment, and integrated demand reduction programming as the principal priorities for strengthening Uzbekistan's response to the NSNS threat.

**Keywords:** Narcotic Substances, Uzbekistan, International Cooperation, Drug Trafficking, UNODC, Legal Framework, Drug Control Policy, Central Asia

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## **I. Introduction**

The global landscape of narcotic substances has undergone a dramatic and accelerating transformation over the past two decades, driven largely by the rapid emergence and proliferation of new synthetic narcotic substances (NSNS). Unlike traditional plant-based drugs such as heroin and cocaine, NSNS encompassing synthetic cathinones, synthetic cannabinoids, novel synthetic opioids, designer benzodiazepines, and a wide array of other chemically engineered compounds are specifically designed to mimic or exceed the psychoactive effects of controlled substances while often evading existing legal restrictions. Their production requires no agricultural cultivation, no specific climate zone, and no complex supply chain of natural precursors, making them substantially easier to manufacture in diverse geographic settings and significantly more difficult to detect using conventional border and customs control methodologies. The global illicit drug market generates revenues exceeding USD 500 billion annually, and NSNS account for a rapidly growing and increasingly dominant share of this trade, with the UNODC Global SMART Program monitoring more than 1,100 distinct new psychoactive substances as of 2022. This alarming trend has catalyzed urgent responses from national governments, regional bodies, and international organizations across the world.

Uzbekistan, strategically located at the crossroads of the major drug trafficking corridors leading from Afghanistan historically the world's largest illicit opium producer through Central Asia toward Russia, Eastern Europe, and beyond, occupies a position of acute strategic sensitivity in the global narcotics landscape. The country has historically contended with the trafficking of opiates, heroin, and cannabis resin, and its law enforcement agencies have developed institutional knowledge and international partnerships centered on these traditional substances. However, the emergence of NSNS has introduced a qualitatively new dimension of challenge that these traditional frameworks are ill-equipped to address. Domestic consumption of synthetic drugs has been documented with increasing frequency across Uzbekistan's major urban centers, straining healthcare systems, rehabilitation infrastructure, and law enforcement agencies that were designed and resourced primarily to respond to traditional narcotic substances. Simultaneously, Uzbekistan's expanding trade networks, growing parcel and courier services, and increasingly open borders create additional pathways that can be exploited by transnational criminal organizations trafficking in synthetic substances sourced from clandestine laboratories in East and Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and beyond.

Despite growing recognition at the governmental and international level of the threat posed by NSNS, academic and policy literature specifically addressing Uzbekistan's international cooperation in this domain remains notably sparse. Most existing scholarship focuses broadly on Central Asian drug trafficking as a regional security issue, or examines NSNS as a global public health and law enforcement phenomenon, without providing a detailed and systematic examination of the specific

legal, institutional, and diplomatic mechanisms through which Uzbekistan engages with the international community on NSNS specifically (Felbab-Brown, 2017; Paoli et al., 2009). There is limited published analysis of the bilateral and multilateral agreements that structure Uzbekistan's cooperative efforts, the degree to which its domestic legislation aligns with international standards and best practices in NSNS control, the operational effectiveness of joint operations and intelligence sharing arrangements, and the capacity gaps that constrain the translation of international commitments into domestic enforcement outcomes. This gap in the literature is consequential, as it impedes both academic understanding and evidence-based policymaking at the national, regional, and international levels.

The international legal architecture addressing NSNS is itself complex, layered, and continuously evolving. The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances collectively constitute the bedrock of the international drug control system and impose binding obligations on state parties including Uzbekistan (United Nations, 1988). However, these instruments were conceived and negotiated well before the NSNS phenomenon reached its current scale, velocity, and chemical diversity. The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) have developed supplementary mechanisms including the Early Warning Advisory system on new psychoactive substances and Project ION targeting the postal and express mail distribution of NSNS but scheduling and control decisions at the international level require extensive scientific review and intergovernmental consensus processes that can span years. This temporal gap between the emergence of a new substance on illicit markets and its formal placement under international control creates legal vacuums of precisely the type that sophisticated criminal organizations systematically exploit.

This article proceeds from the premise that the challenge of NSNS control for Uzbekistan cannot be resolved through domestic action alone, and that effective international cooperation is an essential and indeed indispensable component of any adequate national response strategy. The research question guiding this study is: How is the Republic of Uzbekistan developing its cooperation with international organizations and foreign countries in the field of controlling new synthetic narcotic substances and combating their illegal trafficking, and what are the principal challenges, gaps, and opportunities in this domain? This question is both timely and strategically significant, as Uzbekistan's success in navigating this challenge has implications not only for the health and security of its own population but for regional stability across Central Asia and for the broader integrity and effectiveness of the international drug control system. The study aims to examine the existing international and national legal frameworks, analyze institutional and bilateral mechanisms of engagement, identify operational and legal gaps, and propose recommendations for strengthening the cooperative architecture. The research employs a qualitative, doctrinal, and comparative methodology drawing on official legal instruments, policy

documents, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship.

The significance of this research also extends to its methodological contribution. By systematically examining the interface between international legal obligations, regional organizational frameworks, bilateral diplomatic arrangements, and domestic legislative and enforcement capacity in a specific Central Asian context, this study contributes to the broader scholarly project of understanding how mid-sized developing states navigate the complex demands of international drug control governance. The experience of Uzbekistan, as a country with a serious and growing NSNS problem, an active international engagement profile, but also significant domestic capacity constraints, offers insights applicable across the Central Asian region and beyond. The study's findings may also inform the programmatic priorities of international organizations operating in the region, including UNODC, the SCO, and bilateral development agencies, as they consider how best to direct technical and financial assistance for drug control capacity building in Uzbekistan and neighboring states.

## **II. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design integrating doctrinal legal analysis with comparative policy analysis. The doctrinal approach is methodologically appropriate because the core subject matter involves the interpretation, evaluation, and comparison of legal instruments international conventions and protocols, bilateral treaties and agreements, regional organizational frameworks, and national legislation that together constitute the legal and institutional framework for NSNS control and international cooperation (van Hoecke, 2011). Doctrinal legal analysis treats these instruments as authoritative texts whose meaning, scope, and interrelationships must be established through systematic textual interpretation, informed by the principles of treaty interpretation codified in Articles 31–33 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969). This approach enables a rigorous assessment of what international obligations Uzbekistan has assumed, what those obligations require in practice, and where existing instruments fail to provide adequate guidance or coverage in relation to the specific characteristics of NSNS.

Comparative policy analysis is layered onto the doctrinal foundation to assess how Uzbekistan's legislative and institutional approaches align with, or diverge from, those adopted by analogous states facing similar challenges, and to identify models of good practice that might be adapted for application in the Uzbek context. The states selected for comparative reference include Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as regional neighbors with shared strategic vulnerabilities, Russia as the dominant regional power with extensive NSNS-related experience, China as the primary global source country for NSNS precursor chemicals and as Uzbekistan's major SCO partner, and the United Kingdom as a country that has implemented particularly innovative legislative solutions to the NSNS definitional challenge. The selection of these comparators is

justified by their relevance to Uzbekistan's situation and the availability of accessible legal and policy documentation in their respective languages. The comparative analysis is not intended to produce a systematic ranking or evaluation of national systems, but rather to identify transferable lessons and contextually appropriate models for Uzbekistan's policy development.

The sample for this research consists of primary and secondary sources selected using purposive criteria oriented toward the most authoritative, recent, and relevant available documentation. Primary sources include the core United Nations drug control conventions and their associated commentaries, UNODC World Drug Reports and technical guidance documents, INCB Annual Reports and technical publications, the legislation of Uzbekistan pertaining to narcotic substances and related criminal justice provisions, cooperation agreements concluded under the SCO and CIS frameworks, relevant bilateral treaties, and official reports of Uzbekistan's national drug control authority. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed scholarly articles in law, criminology, public health, and international relations journals, institutional working papers, and policy analyses published primarily within the last decade, with preference given to the most recent five years to ensure contemporary relevance in a rapidly evolving field. Sources published in English, Russian, and Uzbek were consulted, ensuring comprehensive coverage across the relevant linguistic domains.

Data collection was conducted through systematic review of publicly available official texts accessible via the websites of the United Nations Office at Geneva, UNODC, INCB, SCO Secretariat, CIS Executive Committee, the Legislative Chamber of Uzbekistan, and the national legal information systems of comparator states. Academic literature was gathered through searches of Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and specialized legal databases. Inclusion criteria for academic sources required peer-review status, direct relevance to one or more of the study's core themes, and publication after 2013. Where highly relevant scholarship predating this threshold was identified particularly foundational works on international drug control law exceptions were made on grounds of scholarly significance. Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes, regulatory patterns, implementation challenges, and institutional gaps across the documentary corpus. The doctrinal component involved close textual interpretation of legal provisions, assessed against their drafting history and the interpretive guidance provided by international bodies and leading academic commentators.

The validity of this research is supported by the exclusive reliance on authoritative, peer-reviewed, and officially published sources, by the systematic and transparent application of consistent analytical criteria, and by triangulation through cross-referencing of key claims across multiple independent sources. Reliability is further strengthened through accurate and complete citation of all sources consulted. The study acknowledges limitations inherent in its reliance on secondary data, including the inaccessibility of classified bilateral intelligence-sharing arrangements

and confidential operational cooperation agreements that may not be reflected in public documentation. Regional variation in the implementation fidelity of international commitments means that formal treaty obligations and actual practice may diverge in ways that cannot be fully captured through documentary analysis alone. The rapidly evolving nature of both the NSNS phenomenon and the policy responses to it means that some findings may require updating as new legislative, operational, or institutional developments emerge. These constraints are offset by the breadth and quality of the sources consulted and by the analytical rigor applied throughout the research process.

### III. Results

#### A. International Legal Framework and Uzbekistan's Treaty Obligations

The legal foundation for Uzbekistan's international cooperation on NSNS rests on a layered architecture of global, regional, and bilateral instruments whose interpretation and interaction constitute the normative framework within which all cooperative activities must be understood. Uzbekistan acceded to all three principal United Nations drug control conventions – the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs as amended by the 1972 Protocol, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances thereby assuming binding obligations to criminalize drug trafficking and related offenses, establish national control mechanisms for scheduled substances and their precursors, provide mutual legal assistance and extradition, and cooperate with international bodies in the implementation and development of the control system (United Nations, 1988). These obligations provide the normative baseline for all of Uzbekistan's bilateral and multilateral engagement on drug control issues, including its engagement on NSNS specifically.

The conventions' scheduling mechanisms, however, constitute a fundamental structural limitation in relation to NSNS. The placement of a new substance under international control requires a formal review process involving the World Health Organization's Expert Committee on Drug Dependence and a decision by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, a process that can take two or more years from initial submission to final scheduling and that requires a substantial evidence base regarding the substance's pharmacological properties, abuse potential, and public health impact. The INCB has consistently noted that this process, while scientifically rigorous, is too slow to keep pace with the emergence of new substances on illicit markets, where hundreds of novel compounds appear annually. The INCB's Early Warning Advisory system, established to provide informal guidance on unscheduled substances, partially compensates for this structural lag but does not create binding legal controls. Uzbekistan's participation in the Early Warning Advisory process, facilitated through its UNODC Country Program, is therefore an important element of its international

engagement even though the Advisory's outputs are not formally binding.

At the regional level, Uzbekistan's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has generated cooperative frameworks of direct relevance to NSNS control. The SCO Anti-Drug Strategy 2021–2025, adopted by heads of state of the member countries including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, China, Pakistan, and India, identifies synthetic drugs as a priority emerging threat and mandates enhanced joint operations, real-time information exchange, coordinated border interdiction, and mutual capacity building among member states. The SCO's Experts Group on Drug Control, which meets periodically to coordinate national policies and plan joint activities, provides a forum for Uzbekistan to engage multilaterally with regional partners on NSNS-related operational and policy issues. The Commonwealth of Independent States Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Drug Trafficking, supplemented by action plans adopted under the CIS Anti-Drug Strategy, establishes additional mechanisms for mutual legal assistance, joint investigation teams, and intelligence sharing among post-Soviet states. The Collective Security Treaty Organization contributes through its annual KANAL multi-country joint operations targeting drug trafficking from Afghanistan, which increasingly incorporate tactical elements designed to intercept synthetic substance shipments in addition to traditional opiates.

Bilaterally, Uzbekistan has concluded cooperation agreements on drug control, law enforcement, and mutual legal assistance with a significant number of states, including the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, the United States of America, the Federal Republic of Germany, Turkey, South Korea, and several Central Asian neighbors. These agreements typically establish frameworks for extradition, mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, joint operations and joint investigation teams, training and capacity building, equipment provision, and intelligence sharing. The United States engagement through the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs has been particularly consequential in terms of equipment provision, forensic laboratory development, and the training of specialized law enforcement personnel in NSNS detection and evidence collection methodologies. Germany's contributions through the GIZ development cooperation agency and the Federal Criminal Police Office have similarly focused on institutional capacity building and the modernization of forensic and investigative methodologies. China's engagement conducted both through the SCO framework and through bilateral channels, reflects shared concerns about synthetic drug flows across the Central Asian corridor and about the diversion of Chinese chemical precursors into illicit NSNS production.

The interaction between the global, regional, and bilateral layers of Uzbekistan's cooperative architecture creates both synergies and coordination challenges. Global standards established through UN conventions and UNODC guidance provide the normative framework within which regional and bilateral arrangements operate, and

compliance with these standards is increasingly used as a benchmark for assessing the quality of national drug control systems by international partners. Regional arrangements through the SCO and CIS provide multilateral operational platforms that bilateral arrangements cannot replicate, given their ability to coordinate simultaneous actions across multiple jurisdictions. Bilateral arrangements, however, provide the most operationally specific, resource-intensive, and technically sophisticated forms of cooperation, particularly in the areas of forensic capacity development and intelligence sharing. The challenge for Uzbekistan is to coordinate these layers effectively so that they reinforce rather than duplicate or contradict one another, which requires strong domestic inter-agency coordination and clear institutional leadership for international engagement.

### **B. Institutional Arrangements and Operational Cooperation**

The primary institutional counterpart for Uzbekistan's engagement with the global drug control system is the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, with which a Country Program has been in operation for over a decade, providing technical assistance across the full spectrum of drug supply and demand reduction activities. The current UNODC Country Program for Uzbekistan encompasses legislative reform support, training for law enforcement personnel in investigative techniques and evidence management, forensic laboratory capacity building through equipment provision and staff training, judicial and prosecutorial capacity development, and demand reduction programming including prevention education and treatment services strengthening. Within this broad program, NSNS has increasingly been prioritized as an emerging threat, with UNODC supporting the development of national early warning and monitoring systems, the training of forensic chemists in NSNS identification methodologies, and the integration of Uzbekistan's emerging NSNS data into the global UNODC Early Warning Advisory system. The INCB's Project ION, which targets the use of postal and express mail services for NSNS distribution, has engaged Uzbekistan's customs authorities and State Postal Agency in joint operations and capacity building activities focused on parcel examination and NSNS detection.

The SCO's operational cooperative mechanisms represent the most significant multilateral platform for Uzbekistan's law enforcement cooperation on drug issues, including NSNS. The SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, headquartered in Tashkent, coordinates among member states' law enforcement and security agencies across a range of shared threats including drug trafficking, and its Anti-Drug Working Group provides a standing forum for the coordination of NSNS-related intelligence and operational activities. Annual joint operations such as MERCURY and PAUK, coordinated through the SCO framework, have demonstrated the value of simultaneous synchronized interdiction actions conducted by multiple member states, as trafficking organizations attempting to route shipments around one country's enforcement activities can be intercepted by neighboring states' operations conducted at the same time. These operations have yielded significant seizures of both traditional

and synthetic drugs and have provided valuable intelligence about trafficking networks, laboratory locations, and distribution routes that has informed subsequent enforcement activities. The SCO framework also provides a platform for the joint development of investigative standards and evidence-sharing protocols, which contributes to the interoperability of member states' law enforcement systems.

The CSTO's KANAL joint operations conducted annually in spring and autumn and coordinated among the organization's member states Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan, with Uzbekistan participating as an observer or through bilateral coordination provide additional multilateral interdiction capacity along the northern drug trafficking corridors from Afghanistan. While Uzbekistan's relationship with the CSTO has been characterized by periods of distance and re-engagement, the operational intelligence and coordination benefits of KANAL participation have been recognized by Uzbek law enforcement authorities, and the inclusion of NSNS interdiction components in recent KANAL operational plans reflects growing awareness of synthetic drug trafficking as a distinct threat category requiring specific operational response. Bilateral engagement with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan is particularly intensive given the shared borders, overlapping drug markets, and established criminal networks operating across these territories, and is supplemented by direct inter-agency communication channels and liaison officer arrangements that operate beyond the formal structures of multilateral organizations.

At the domestic institutional level, the Committee for Drug Control under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan serves as the principal coordinating body for national drug policy and for the international cooperation activities associated with drug control. The Committee oversees the implementation of Uzbekistan's international obligations, coordinates the activities of the multiple agencies with drug control responsibilities, represents Uzbekistan in relevant international forums including the CND and INCB, and manages the Country Program relationship with UNODC. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, with its specialized drug control subdivisions, the State Security Service of Uzbekistan, the Prosecutor General's Office, the State Customs Committee, the Ministry of Health and its narcotics treatment and rehabilitation services, and the State Border Guard Service each maintain their own mandates, resources, and bilateral relationships relevant to NSNS control. This multi-agency architecture reflects the cross-cutting nature of the drug control challenge, but creates significant coordination demands domestically and can complicate the coherent representation of Uzbekistan's interests and positions in international forums.

The effectiveness of Uzbekistan's participation in international cooperative mechanisms is conditioned significantly by the availability of adequate domestic forensic, analytical, and information management infrastructure. Joint operations yield seizures that must be analyzed by domestic laboratories to establish the identity and

quantity of substances, generate evidence admissible in domestic prosecutions, and contribute data to international monitoring systems. Intelligence received from foreign partners about specific NSNS must be acted upon by domestic agencies with sufficient technical knowledge to understand its significance and to identify relevant patterns in domestic data. The UNODC and bilateral partner programs have made important contributions to forensic capacity development, but the pace of NSNS emergence continues to outstrip the ability of forensic systems to maintain current reference libraries, validated methodologies, and trained personnel. Addressing these infrastructural gaps is not merely a domestic matter but directly determines the quality and value of Uzbekistan's contributions to the international cooperative architecture in which it participates.

### **C. Legislative Landscape and Identified Gaps**

Uzbekistan's domestic legal framework for drug control is built around the Law on Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursors adopted in 1999 and subsequently amended on multiple occasions, the provisions of the Criminal Code of Uzbekistan establishing offenses and penalties related to drug trafficking, manufacture, possession, and related activities, and a range of subordinate regulatory instruments including Cabinet of Ministers resolutions establishing the national controlled substances list, defining quantities relevant for sentencing purposes, and prescribing the procedures for scheduling reviews. The 1999 Law has been substantively amended to incorporate new substances onto the national controlled substances list as they have been identified by competent authorities and to adjust procedural and enforcement mechanisms. However, the scheduling process remains fundamentally reactive in character, dependent on formal administrative decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers following review and recommendation by the Committee for Drug Control and associated expert bodies, a process whose timeline is measured in months rather than the days or weeks within which a newly identified NSNS can achieve mass market penetration in domestic or regional illicit drug markets.

Several states confronting similar challenges have addressed this structural gap by enacting generic or analogue legislation that extends scheduling controls to substances that are chemically similar to or functionally analogous with listed substances, regardless of whether the specific compound has been formally identified and scheduled. The United States Federal Analogue Act of 1986 pioneered this approach within the framework of the federal Controlled Substances Act, providing for the treatment of unscheduled analogue substances as Schedule I controlled substances for purposes of prosecution when intended for human consumption. The United Kingdom's more comprehensive approach through the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 extended prohibition to any substance capable of producing a psychoactive effect in persons who consume it, irrespective of its chemical structure or scheduling status, with specified exemptions for alcohol, tobacco, medicinal products, and other categories. China's 2015 Regulations on the Control of New Psychoactive

Substances provided a hybrid approach, combining expanded scheduled lists with provisions for emergency scheduling by the competent authority and enhanced precursor controls. Each of these models offers transferable lessons, though their direct application in Uzbekistan must account for the characteristics of Uzbekistan's civil law legal tradition and the specific operational context of its drug control system.

Uzbekistan has not yet adopted comprehensive analogue or generic scheduling legislation, and this absence represents one of the most consequential gaps in its NSNS control framework. In the absence of such legislation, law enforcement agencies encountering an unscheduled NSNS face significant legal uncertainty about whether they can arrest and prosecute traffickers, what offenses may be charged, and whether seized substances constitute evidence of criminal activity. This uncertainty can lead to inconsistent enforcement, reluctance by prosecutors to proceed with novel-substance cases due to anticipated evidentiary challenges, and effective legal impunity for distributors of the latest designer drugs for the duration of the scheduling lag. UNODC and INCB technical assistance missions to Uzbekistan have consistently identified legislative modernization in this area as a high-priority recommendation, and the experience of Kazakhstan in implementing analogue scheduling provisions since 2018 provides a directly relevant regional reference point for Uzbek policymakers considering reform options.

The Criminal Code's provisions on drug trafficking establish a graduated sentencing framework calibrated to quantities of substances seized, with increasing penalties for larger quantities. While logical in design for traditional bulk narcotics, this quantity-based framework is poorly calibrated for NSNS, which are commonly active in microgram quantities, sold in forms including powders, liquids, and impregnated paper that complicate weight-based quantity determinations, and distributed in small parcels through postal and courier services that present different interdiction challenges from bulk shipments. The forensic determination of precise quantities of NSNS in complex mixtures, blended products, or carriers requires analytical methodologies and instrumentation that are not uniformly available across Uzbekistan's forensic laboratory network, creating inconsistencies in evidence generation that can affect both the proportionality of prosecutorial decisions and the comparability of national statistics with international datasets. Reforming the sentencing framework to better accommodate the characteristics of NSNS, while maintaining proportionality and due process guarantees, is a dimension of legislative modernization that has received less international attention than the analogue scheduling issue but is equally significant for the operational effectiveness of the control system.

## **IV. Discussion**

### **A. Strengths of Existing Cooperative Arrangements**

Uzbekistan's international cooperation on NSNS benefits from several structural

and institutional strengths that constitute a meaningful and valuable foundation upon which further development can be built. The country's sustained engagement with UNODC through a comprehensive Country Program ensures continuous access to technical assistance, normative guidance, and capacity building support from the leading international authority on drug control policy and operations. Unlike project-based engagement that creates capacity in narrow technical areas for defined periods, the Country Program model provides a sustained partnership relationship that allows for the progressive and coherent development of national capacity across the full spectrum of drug control functions, including the emerging NSNS challenge. The UNODC relationship has been particularly consequential in forensic laboratory development, where phased programs of equipment provision, methodology development, and staff training have materially enhanced the ability of Uzbek forensic services to identify and characterize novel substances, and in judicial and prosecutorial capacity building, where training programs have improved the understanding and handling of drug cases within the justice system.

The regional institutional frameworks in which Uzbekistan participates particularly the SCO Anti-Drug Strategy and its associated operational mechanisms provide legitimate multilateral channels for operational coordination that transcend the limitations of exclusively bilateral arrangements and carry the diplomatic weight of high-level political commitments. The SCO's geographic scope, encompassing approximately 40% of the world's population and covering the entire Central and South Asian drug trafficking corridor from Afghanistan to the major consumer markets of Russia and China, gives its drug control frameworks a strategic relevance that no bilateral arrangement can replicate. The KANAL operations conducted under CSTO auspices have demonstrated in practice the operational value of synchronized multi-country interdiction actions, and the accumulated experience of participating agencies in planning and executing such operations has built institutional capacity that constitutes a durable asset for future cooperation. The diplomatic process of developing, adopting, and implementing the SCO Anti-Drug Strategy also serves a trust-building and norm-harmonization function that complements operational activities, contributing to greater convergence of national approaches and the development of shared understandings of priority threats and appropriate responses.

Uzbekistan's bilateral relationships with major Western partners particularly the United States, Germany, and to a growing extent France and Japan provide access to sophisticated technical assistance, advanced equipment, and intelligence resources that multilateral organizations operating with more limited and broadly distributed resources cannot fully substitute. The DEA's engagement in forensic laboratory upgrades and the training of specialized investigative personnel has introduced internationally validated methodologies and professional standards into Uzbekistan's drug enforcement system that have demonstrable value for NSNS cases, where the ability to rapidly identify novel substances and generate court-admissible evidence is critical. Germany's GIZ-supported programs have contributed to the development of

Uzbekistan's demand reduction and treatment infrastructure, addressing the public health dimension of NSNS alongside the law enforcement focus of other bilateral partnerships. The cumulative effect of these bilateral relationships, maintained and developed over two decades of engagement, has generated a degree of institutional familiarity, professional trust, and interoperability between Uzbek agencies and their foreign counterparts that represents a significant and undervalued cooperative asset.

### **B. Challenges and Structural Gaps in Cooperation**

Despite the genuine strengths of Uzbekistan's cooperative architecture, the analysis reveals several significant challenges and structural gaps that materially limit its effectiveness in addressing the NSNS threat specifically. The most fundamental is the pace mismatch between the emergence of new substances on illicit markets and the legal and institutional machinery available to respond to them at both the international and national levels. This mismatch is not unique to Uzbekistan it affects all participants in the international drug control system but it is particularly consequential for a country whose geographic location ensures that novel trafficking trends and new substances emerging in primary markets reach its territory with minimal delay. International scheduling processes can take two or more years from initial identification to formal placement of a substance under convention control. National scheduling processes, while potentially faster, are still subject to bureaucratic timelines that typically measure months rather than days. The absence of any provision for emergency or provisional scheduling in Uzbekistan's current legislation means that the full duration of this delay is legally unmitigated, creating extended windows of impunity that organized criminal networks are well positioned to exploit.

Information sharing, while structured through multiple bilateral and multilateral channels, remains constrained in practice by classification policies, concerns about protecting sources and methods, sensitivities about compromising ongoing investigations, and the technical limitations of national data management systems that are not fully interoperable with those of partner agencies and organizations. Uzbekistan's law enforcement and intelligence agencies maintain bilateral information sharing relationships with numerous foreign counterparts, but these are largely non-standardized and operate through different channels for different partners, meaning that intelligence received from one source cannot readily be cross-referenced against information from another without explicit authorization and time-consuming manual coordination. The absence of a regional real-time NSNS monitoring and intelligence sharing platform analogous to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction's Early Warning System or Europol's OSRIS reporting mechanism means that Central Asian states' collective situational awareness of the NSNS threat environment develops more slowly than the threat itself. Establishing or acceding to such a platform, potentially under SCO or UNODC auspices, would represent a qualitative enhancement of the region's cooperative capacity that could not be achieved through incremental improvement of existing bilateral channels alone.

The control of chemical precursors used in NSNS production constitutes a distinct and particularly challenging dimension of the cooperative agenda. Synthetic drugs are manufactured from chemicals that may be entirely legal industrial compounds many NSNS are synthesized from common pharmaceutical or industrial precursors not included in any international control schedule or that are obtained through the diversion of legitimately traded chemicals from their intended uses. The chemical diversity of NSNS, and the ability of clandestine chemists to substitute alternative precursors when established pathways are monitored, means that precursor control strategies quickly become obsolete unless they are continuously updated and applied with sophisticated understanding of synthetic chemistry. The INCB's Project Prism and Project Cohesion provide international frameworks for coordinating precursor control efforts among states, but their effective implementation requires domestic chemical import registration and monitoring systems of a sophistication not yet fully achieved across Central Asian states. Uzbekistan's engagement with precursor control frameworks is conditioned on the effectiveness of cooperation with China, India, and other major chemical-producing countries, where the primary diversions from legitimate commerce to illicit NSNS production occur, and on the technical capacity of Uzbek customs and border control agencies to identify suspicious consignments of precursor chemicals.

Capacity asymmetries among Uzbekistan's bilateral and multilateral partners create additional coordination challenges that are sometimes under acknowledged in policy discussions. While Uzbekistan's relationships with UNODC, the United States, and Germany benefit from the technical and financial resources of these partners, cooperation with some regional neighbors in the SCO and CIS frameworks involves partners with similar or lesser capacities, meaning that the benefits of cooperation are less one-sidedly distributed in these relationships than in North-South partnerships. Sustainability of capacity built with international support is a recognized concern: training and equipment provided through project-based cooperation creates capabilities that may not be maintained after project completion without sustained budget allocations and institutional embedding. The most successful cooperative arrangements have recognized this sustainability challenge explicitly and designed their interventions accordingly, with institutional support components alongside technical transfer activities. Ensuring that internationally supported capacity development is reflected in permanent budget lines and organizational structures, rather than remaining dependent on continued external financing, is a governance challenge that Uzbekistan shares with many partner states.

### **C. Comparative Perspectives and Lessons from Regional Experience**

Comparative analysis of NSNS control approaches in states with broadly analogous challenges to Uzbekistan illuminates both the range of available policy options and the contextual factors that determine their applicability and effectiveness. Kazakhstan, which shares Uzbekistan's Central Asian geographic and institutional

context, has in recent years enacted analogue scheduling legislation enabling prosecutors to charge traffickers dealing in unscheduled NSNS with the same offenses applicable to scheduled substance trafficking, provided that the chemical or pharmacological similarity of the unscheduled substance to a listed substance can be established. This legislative innovation has been implemented through amendments to the Law on Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursors and the Criminal Code, with supporting technical guidance developed jointly with UNODC on the standards of evidence required to demonstrate analogue status. Early operational experience suggests that the analogue provisions have reduced the scheduling lag problem for prosecution, though challenges remain in forensic evidence generation and in the consistency of judicial interpretation. The Kazakhstani experience is the most directly relevant regional comparator for Uzbekistan given the similarity of the two countries' legal systems, institutional structures, and drug market exposures.

Russia's approach to NSNS reflects the scale and severity of its domestic synthetic drug problem, which has made the country a significant driver of international policy discussions. Russia has developed extensive legal and institutional mechanisms for NSNS control, including frequent updating of national scheduling lists to incorporate new substances, expanded precursor control lists, enhanced penalties for NSNS trafficking, and the development of specialized forensic capabilities in the Federal Center for Forensic Expertise and regional laboratories. Russia's engagement in international and regional cooperative frameworks particularly the SCO, CIS, and CSTO brings substantial operational resources and institutional weight, but also reflects national perspectives on drug control that emphasize enforcement over harm reduction and that have at times been in tension with internationally promoted evidence-based public health approaches. Understanding the characteristics and priorities of Russia's engagement with Central Asian drug control frameworks is essential context for Uzbekistan as it navigates its own cooperative relationships, as Russia's preferences and capabilities significantly shape the design and implementation of regional collective mechanisms.

China's role in the NSNS challenge facing Uzbekistan is simultaneously that of a cooperative partner and a source of the substances and precursors that constitute the primary threat. China's domestic NSNS manufacturing industry, largely operating through legitimate chemical and pharmaceutical companies that produce controlled substance analogues for export to illicit markets in North America, Europe, and increasingly Central Asia, is the principal source of the synthetic drugs reaching Uzbekistan and its neighbors. China has responded to domestic and international pressure on this issue by implementing increasingly comprehensive regulatory controls over NSNS production and export, including the 2015 Regulations on the Control of New Psychoactive Substances, the 2019 blanket ban on fentanyl analogues (predating comparable action by the United States), and regular additions to national scheduling lists. China's engagement with Uzbekistan on NSNS through the SCO framework and bilateral law enforcement cooperation channels reflects genuine shared

concern about the regional security implications of synthetic drug trafficking, and has yielded intelligence sharing and joint operational activities that have made substantive contributions to interdiction outcomes.

#### **D. Policy Implications and Recommendations**

The synthesis of findings from the preceding analysis generates a set of policy implications with significance for Uzbekistan's national drug control strategy, its engagement with regional and international cooperative frameworks, and the programmatic priorities of international organizations and bilateral partners supporting NSNS control capacity in Central Asia. At the most fundamental level, the research confirms the essential and irreplaceable role of international cooperation in Uzbekistan's NSNS response, given the transnational character of the phenomenon and the impossibility of addressing it through unilateral domestic action alone. This overarching finding supports continued and deepened engagement across all dimensions of the cooperative architecture global, regional, and bilateral with a particular emphasis on areas where the current architecture exhibits the most significant gaps relative to the demands of the NSNS threat.

Legislative modernization is the most urgently needed domestic reform for strengthening the legal foundation of Uzbekistan's international cooperation. The adoption of analogue or generic scheduling provisions, drawing on the experience of Kazakhstan and the comparative models reviewed in this study, would eliminate the most significant legal vulnerability in the current system the scheduling lag and provide prosecutors and law enforcement agencies with clear legal authority to act against NSNS trafficking without waiting for the completion of formal scheduling processes. This reform should be accompanied by provisions for emergency or provisional scheduling by ministerial decision, valid for a defined period pending formal legislative action, to provide additional temporal flexibility. The reform process should be developed in close consultation with UNODC and INCB to ensure compatibility with international obligations and with the approaches of key bilateral partners, and should include detailed implementing guidance on the standards of evidence required to invoke analogue provisions in prosecution.

Investment in forensic laboratory capacity, with a specific focus on NSNS identification and quantification, is a complementary priority that determines whether enhanced legal authorities translate into effective enforcement outcomes. The development of a national reference standard library for NSNS, maintained and continuously updated through cooperation with UNODC's Laboratory and Scientific Section and with bilateral partners' forensic agencies, would significantly enhance the reliability and consistency of substance identification across the forensic laboratory network. Standardized protocols for the examination of postal and courier parcels suspected to contain NSNS, aligned with INCB Project ION operational methodologies, would improve the efficiency and legal robustness of border interdiction. A national quality assurance program for forensic drug analysis,

supported by participation in international proficiency testing exercises, would provide ongoing verification of analytical performance and identify capability gaps requiring targeted remediation.

At the regional level, Uzbekistan is well positioned to take a proactive role in advocating within the SCO and CIS frameworks for the establishment of a Central Asian NSNS early warning and information sharing system. Such a system, modeled on the EMCDDA's Early Warning System architecture but adapted to the Central Asian institutional and technical context, would provide member states with real-time intelligence about emerging substances, trafficking patterns, and criminal network developments relevant to NSNS. A dedicated secretariat or coordination hub, potentially hosted within an existing regional organization or UNODC's Regional Office for Central Asia in Tashkent, would provide the analytical and administrative infrastructure necessary to aggregate, analyze, and disseminate intelligence from national monitoring points. Uzbekistan's geographic position, institutional infrastructure, and established UNODC relationships make it a natural candidate to play a leadership role in such an initiative, and its sponsorship would contribute positively to its broader regional standing.

The integration of demand reduction, public health, and social development dimensions into the cooperative framework deserves greater attention than it has historically received in discussions of NSNS control, which have tended to focus disproportionately on law enforcement and supply reduction. International evidence consistently demonstrates that supply reduction measures alone, without complementary demand reduction interventions; produce at best temporary and localized impacts on drug use prevalence, as consumers shift to alternative substances or sources when preferred drugs become unavailable. Uzbekistan's cooperation with UNODC and bilateral health sector partners on demand reduction programming should be expanded better resourced, and more systematically integrated with the law enforcement dimensions of international cooperation. The development of evidence-based national treatment protocols for NSNS-related disorders, drawing on the growing but still limited international clinical evidence base for novel substance addiction treatment, would both improve domestic public health outcomes and contribute to the development of the clinical knowledge about specific substances that informs international scheduling and control decisions.

### **Conclusion**

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of the development of cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and international organizations and foreign countries in the field of controlling new synthetic narcotic substances and combating their illegal trafficking. The analysis has demonstrated that Uzbekistan has constructed a substantial and multidimensional network of international cooperative relationships that encompasses binding multilateral treaty obligations, regional

organizational frameworks of operational and normative significance, and bilateral partnerships providing technical assistance, capacity building, intelligence sharing, and joint operational resources. These arrangements collectively constitute a meaningful infrastructure for international engagement on drug control issues that reflects Uzbekistan's genuine commitment to its international obligations and its recognition of the importance of cooperative responses to transnational security challenges. The country's participation in global bodies such as the CND and INCB, its engagement with UNODC through a comprehensive Country Program, and its active involvement in the SCO and CIS cooperative mechanisms represent assets of enduring strategic value.

The research has also identified a series of significant gaps and challenges in the existing cooperative architecture that limit its effectiveness specifically in relation to the NSNS threat. The most consequential of these is the absence of analogue or generic scheduling legislation that would allow timely legal responses to unscheduled NSNS without the delays inherent in conventional scheduling procedures. Forensic laboratory capacity, while developing, has not yet fully kept pace with the pace of NSNS emergence, creating evidentiary gaps that constrain prosecution effectiveness. Information sharing mechanisms, though multiple, are fragmented, non-standardized, and operate in ways that prevent effective cross-referencing across different partner channels. The absence of a regional real-time early warning system for NSNS leaves Central Asian states with a slower and less comprehensive intelligence picture than the threat environment demands. These gaps are not insurmountable, and the comparative evidence from Kazakhstan, Russia, China, and European states demonstrates that effective solutions are available and have been successfully implemented in analogous contexts.

The principal recommendations emerging from this study legislative modernization through the adoption of analogue scheduling provisions, strategic investment in forensic laboratory capacity and national NSNS reference systems, leadership in the development of a Central Asian NSNS early warning and intelligence sharing platform, and expanded integration of demand reduction and public health programming into the cooperative framework together constitute a coherent and mutually reinforcing reform agenda. Individually, each of these measures would produce improvements in Uzbekistan's NSNS control capacity; collectively, they would represent a qualitative transformation of the national and regional response capability. Implementation will require sustained political will, adequate domestic budget allocations, and continued international technical and financial support, but the building blocks for success are present in Uzbekistan's existing institutional infrastructure, established international relationships, and documented commitment to reform.

The broader significance of this study's findings extends beyond Uzbekistan's national context. Central Asia's position as a corridor linking the world's most

productive illicit drug manufacturing region with major consumer markets in Russia, Europe, and China means that the effectiveness of NSNS control in the region has direct implications for global drug market dynamics and for the resilience of the international drug control system as a whole. The challenges identified in this study the scheduling lag, forensic capacity gaps, fragmented information sharing, and inadequate demand reduction programming are not unique to Uzbekistan but are shared to varying degrees by all Central Asian states and by many other developing countries participating in the international drug control system. The recommendations proposed here are broadly applicable across the region and may inform the strategic priorities of international organizations developing assistance programs for Central Asian states. Future research should examine the operational effectiveness of specific cooperative programs through rigorous outcome evaluation, assess the impact of legislative reforms where implemented, and explore the perspectives of frontline practitioners on the practical utility and limitations of existing cooperative arrangements. As NSNS continue to evolve in chemical diversity, distribution methodology, and geographic reach, the adaptive capacity of international cooperative frameworks will be the decisive determinant of their long-term effectiveness.

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