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## Issue Brief

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# PM Nawaz Sharif's Visit to Tajikistan: Prospects of Cooperation

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**Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif paid a visit to Tajikistan from July 6-7, 2017. Prime Minister Sharif met with Tajik President, Emomali Rahmon. With a focus on regional connectivity, trade and energy, Pakistan and Tajikistan agreed to explore new avenues of cooperation by increasing collaboration in economy, defence, security, agriculture and education sectors. Both signed the joint declaration aimed at enhancing connectivity between the two countries and in the region at large. The two leaders also expressed satisfaction on the progress achieved so far in the economic sphere, particularly with regard to the Central Asia-South Asia power (CASA-1000) project, and hoped that it would soon move into the construction phase. As agreed in 2014, the PM Sharif said that two countries needed to take measures to boost bilateral trade to US\$500 million in the next three years.**

Prime Minister Sharif said that the joint working group on trade, investment and transport would be meeting later this month to explore untapped opportunities in the areas. He also announced the opening of commercial section at Pakistan's Embassy in Dushanbe. Prime Minister Sharif said that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would provide new opportunities for enhanced connectivity and integration from Gwadar to Kashgar. It would also provide a road link with Tajikistan and other Central Asian states.

He said Tajikistan's formal accession to the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement among China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan would facilitate regional integration and boost economic development. The two sides also noted close collaboration between their defence forces and measures to counter extremism and terrorism. They decided that the joint working group on combating international terrorism would meet in Dushanbe this month.

Prime Minister Sharif informed the Tajik president about deteriorating situation in occupied Kashmir and said that the international community needed to stand up with oppressed people of Kashmir and reject violations of human rights. President Rahmon, in his press statement said that a continued dialogue would boost ties between the two countries and stressed the need to finalise an agreement on bilateral transit trade at earliest. He expressed hope that Pakistani investors would invest in free trade zones in

Tajikistan. He said that as a land-locked country, Tajikistan was keen to use Pakistani ports for exporting goods to rest of the world.

### **Prospects for Pakistan**

The frequent visit to Central Asian states by Prime Minister Sharif is a good initiative for political engagement with these states, which will prove to be highly beneficial for the foreign policy of the country. It is highly imperative for Pakistan to establish strong contacts with the Central Asian States. The Central Asian States are rich in mineral resources and Pakistan being an energy-starved country needs help from these states to fulfil its energy requirements. The second major factor would be CPEC. China will prefer to get access through Pakistan to Central Asian states and Russia. China recently made huge investments in Central Asian states. To get access, China needs friendly relations with the Central Asian States. Pakistan has already been working on CASA-1000 power project, which will supply hydroelectricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan. And Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran (TAPI) gas pipeline. Both these mega projects will play an important role in the economy of Pakistan and ultimately help in establishing peace and stability in the region.

Pakistan needs direct flights to and from Central Asian states and it will enhance people-to-people contacts. Cultural exchanges with Central Asian states will not only help in establishing cordial relations with these countries but will also help in improving different sectors of Pakistan such as education and tourism. Until and unless there is more interaction with these countries, Pakistan's foreign policy will not be able to become more robust and proactive, which Pakistan is in dire need of at the moment. On the other hand, India has started direct flights to Central Asian states and is also getting a strong foothold in the Central Asian markets. India has realised the significance of Central Asian states economically and strategically. It is about time that Pakistan realises the gravity of the situation and takes sufficient measures, not only to improve its own relations with Central Asian states but also counter the Indian influence as well. Pakistan has a lot of similarities with these states (such as cultural, religious and demographic proximity) and should capitalise on them to improve its relations with Central Asian states.