



PAKISTAN-UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Prime Minister Imran Khan paid an official visit to Uzbekistan on July 15-16, 2021, at the invitation of Mr Shavkat Mirziyoyev, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Bilateral relations between Pakistan and Uzbekistan go way back to the very creation of the state of Uzbekistan. Pakistan was among the first countries in 1991 to recognise the independence of Uzbekistan and establish diplomatic relations.

After Uzbekistan's independence in the early 1990s, it was destined to be partners with Pakistan. Their (Pakistan and Uzbekistan) similar demographic configurations, shared religion and historical connections (between Farghana Valley and the Indian sub-continent) provide a strong impetus for the establishment of durable and cordial bilateral relations between the two countries.

The geographical locations of Pakistan and Uzbekistan are another factor that can help in enhancing bilateral relations between both countries. Both states are located at the cusps of their respective regions and can act as connecting points between the (natural) resource-rich Central Asian region and the agricultural heartland region of South Asia. The historically famous Farghana valley in Uzbekistan has always remained a commercial transit hub in the past which contributed immensely to the economic progress and development of the entire Asian continent.

However, bilateral relations in the first decade of the twenty-first century moved considerably slow due to the surge of terrorism around the globe. The situation was further marred by the international financial crises of 2008, which reduced the economic exchanges between both the developing countries. But, bilateral relations between Pakistan and Uzbekistan are finally taking off

and moving forward with a positive trajectory and PM Khan's recent visit to Uzbekistan was a testament to this.

During PM Khan's visit to Uzbekistan, leaders of both countries exchanged pleasantries on the 30 years of friendly diplomatic relations.

In their meetings, Prime Minister Imran Khan and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed several MoUs and agreed to strengthen bilateral relations and mutual interests to enhance and cooperate in multiple sectors including trade, energy, education, science and technology and cultural exchanges.

The MoUs signed during PM Imran's visit to Tashkent included:

1. Agreement on Transit Trade (AUPTT).
2. Cooperation in the field of Military Education.
3. Protocol on the Exchange of Pre-arrival Information on Goods moved across the State Border.
4. Simplification of Visa Procedures for Businessmen and Tourist Groups.
5. MoU between Foreign Service Academy of Pakistan and University of World Economy and Diplomacy of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan.
6. Cultural Exchange Programme 2021-2026.¹

Both leaders welcomed the signing of agreements in diverse areas and expected that relationship between Pakistan and Uzbekistan will reach new heights, which will further strengthen their bilateral relationship.

The leaders underlined to establish cooperation in the tourism sector and recognised spiritual/Ziyarat tourism. The two leaders discussed the situation related to the COVID-19 and agreed to build further cooperation in this regard.

They expressed their satisfaction on strategic partnership and mutual ties, which are further complemented by a shared religion and cultural history. Prime Minister Imran Khan emphasised the significance of structured engagement between Uzbekistan and Pakistan under the rubric of five pillars of Pakistan's "Vision Central Asia" policy, for instance, connectivity, trade and investment,

¹ "Pakistan, Uzbekistan set up Strategic Partnership, *The Express Tribune*, July 15, 2021.

energy and security and defence and people-to-people contacts.² “The Prime Minister also outlined his vision of ‘Naya’ Pakistan embedded in values of social justice, education for all, peace, prosperity and economic development of the people.” Leaders of both countries also stressed supporting each other on international forums on mutual interests such as in the UN, SCO, OIC and ECO and committed to counter Islamophobia and violations of human rights.

Addressing a joint press conference with Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in Tashkent, Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that Pakistan including Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkey and Tajikistan will play its role and facilitate to bring peace in Afghanistan.³ He further stated that Pakistan as a neighbour is concerned for Afghanistan as it has been suffering from instability and war for the last 40 years. President Uzbekistan appreciated the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan’s peace and contribution to social development.

Two leaders were of the view that the SCO has taken an important place in regional and international organisations and playing a significant role in promoting security, stability and sustainable development of the region. Two countries agreed to support SCO initiatives and interaction.⁴

Prime Minister of Pakistan appreciated Uzbekistan’s endeavours for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and socio-economic reconstruction of Afghanistan through different important projects, the main one of which is the construction of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway, as a significant initiative to establish a rail link from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea through Afghanistan and the Pakistani seaports of Karachi, Gwadar and Bin Qasim. Leaders of both countries recognised the immense potential of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for benefit of the entire Central Asian region and beyond entailing greater connectivity and trade linkages through a network of transport, fibre optic cable, energy pipelines and investment opportunities in its SEZs.

The leadership of the countries agreed that economic activity through trade is the key priority and agreed to establish direct business ties between chambers of commerce and industry and the private sector. They also agreed to make the visa process simple including enhancing trade volume

² “Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan Emphasised Significance of Structured Engagement between Uzbekistan and Pakistan under the Rubric of Five Pillars of Pakistan’s ‘Vision Central Asia,’” Joint Declaration on the Establishment of Strategic Partnership between The Republic of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 16, 2021, <http://mofa.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Pakistan-Uzbekistan-Joint-Declaration-22.pdf>

³ Syed Irfan Raza, “Pakistan-Uzbekistan Pledge to Boost Ties in all Sector,” *Dawn*, July 16, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1635305/pakistan-uzbekistan-pledge-to-boost-ties-in-all-sectors>

⁴ Ibid.

and expansion of businesses. They hailed the resumption of direct flights between Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

Both leaders agreed on exchange programmes and cooperation between the universities and research institutes for joint research, the establishment of libraries and museums between the two countries.

By welcoming the declaration of March 15, both countries supported and appreciated the efforts of the OIC. They also vowed to join hands to work towards the designation of this day by the UN General assembly as the “International Day to Combat Islamophobia.”

Largely, the visit of PM Imran Khan was very successful. This visit will help promote trade and tourism of both countries and will be helpful for Pakistan to fulfil its energy needs from Central Asian states. This cooperation will further enhance Pakistan’s strategic significance and will make it an important hub for trans-continental commercial activity that will give an unprecedented boost to the economy.

Moreover, enhanced cooperation between Pakistan and Uzbekistan will complement the North-South connectivity especially with regards to the CPEC.

Pakistan’s geo-strategic location provides the country with a significant advantage as it is the convergence point of three main geo-economically important regions namely South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. Pakistan offers the shortest route to the Indian Ocean to all the landlocked countries of Central Asia alongside Western China. Its three main ports, Karachi port, Qasim port and the newly built Gwadar port along the Arabian Sea ensure direct connectivity and access to the Middle Eastern and African markets.

Pakistan’s significance for regional connectivity is recognised by all the regional and extra-regional countries, including the Central Asian Republics. They consider Pakistan as an emerging commercial transit hub that provides the connection for several trade corridors of cooperation among all three regions in the fields of energy, trade, transportation, tourism and science and technology.

In this age of globalisation where the world is now making a swift transition from geopolitics to geo-economics, it is the right time for Pakistan to capitalise on the opportunities offered to it for improving its economy and establishes strong communication links that will ultimately aid in regional cohesion and cooperation in a time when economic interdependence is the norm. And in this regard, PM Imran Khan’s visit to Uzbekistan was an extremely significant development that successfully achieved the target of communicating Pakistan’s geo-economics vision and further

solidifying bilateral relations with the friendly country of Uzbekistan. This has also sent a positive message to the rest of the Central Asian Republics about Pakistan's policy for the region that is grounded in economic cooperation, development and connectivity.