



STRENGTHENING OF INDIA- UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS

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Mesmerizing rendition of Gujarati *Bhajan*, *Vaishnava jan to tene kahiye je*, by a young Uzbek singer to welcome Indian Minister of External Affairs, Mrs. Sushma Swaraj¹ is one example of the multiple cultural affinities that Uzbekistan has with India and how treasured these cultural affinities are by the Uzbek people. Overwhelmed by her experience in Tashkent, Mrs Swaraj stated that “Love and respect for Indian culture is visible everywhere in Uzbekistan..... In Russia and Uzbekistan, even if the people knew or did not know the names of government leaders, they always knew Raj Kapoor, which is a household name in both countries”.² Clearly, such appreciation shows a deep and strong cultural and historical connect between the two countries. Undoubtedly, Indian Film and Television Industry has made a tremendous contribution in facilitating warm and closer people-to-people ties between India and Uzbekistan. Nonetheless, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), has also contributed significantly in furthering and strengthening

India’s soft power there.

Similarly, as a part of the Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s visit to India 30th September-1st October 2018, a number of cultural events were organised in New Delhi. For example- a month long exhibition showcasing ancient Uzbek manuscripts under the title “Dialogue of Cultures” was opened in New Delhi’s National Museum³, a delegation of Uzbek academicians visited Jamia Millia Islamia University, the only university in India where Uzbek language is taught, and exchanged their notes⁴ and a presentation on the book titled “Cultural heritage of Uzbekistan in the world’s treasures” was held in the Lal Bahadur Shastri memorial complex, Delhi. Clearly, these initiatives add a new dimension to the cultural diplomacy between the two countries. Though close cultural and spiritual ties are not a new phenomenon between India and Uzbekistan, but these fresh moves will help in taking the relationship into a new level. A new level where

cultural diplomacy can be pursued for achieving political ends.

In this context, organising series of cultural events in New Delhi in September, 2018, showcasing shared legacy and deep cultural connect between the people of India and Uzbekistan, ahead of Uzbek President's India visit (September-October,2018) set the stage to work in close collaboration on the various issues of mutual interest. During President Mirziyoyev's visit seventeen agreements were signed ranging from cooperation on security issues, defence, space, nuclear energy, trade and investment, pharmaceutical, science and technology, information technology, cultural and educational sectors etc. Of course, among these an important and notable area of cooperation is Defence. Joint military training exercises in the area of counter-terrorism, cooperation in the field of military education and military medicine, joint working group to support and sustain enhanced, mutually-beneficial defence related activities and decision to set up a Defence Wing at the embassy of Uzbekistan in New Delhi fit the pattern to jointly confront the challenges posed by religious extremism, terrorism and separatism in the region.

The cordiality also brought out the need to enhance efforts and diversify bilateral trade. Hence, an annual bilateral trade target of \$1billion, to be achieved by 2020 was set up. Issues related to tariff reduction, implementation of large-scale projects in free economic zones,

setting up of Indo-Uzbek Business Council to intensify economic dialogue, creation of an expert group to conduct joint feasibility study for India-Uzbekistan Preferential Trade Agreement, to encourage their business communities, companies and enterprise to participate in exhibitions, trade fairs, business forums in India as well in Uzbekistan etc. were given utmost importance.⁵ Such measures are pertinent to ensure higher scale of economic cooperation in this partnership. In fact, the exchange of Business Delegations between the two countries has seen a remarkable increase in last couple of years.⁶ Uzbek President's visit was also preceded by a large business delegation from Uzbekistan and Indian Minister of Commerce Mr. Suresh Prabhu led a delegation to Tashkent in August 2018. Clearly, there is a particular thrust on business and commerce between the two countries.

Further, such bilateral cooperation can be translated into closer cooperation at the regional level also. For instance, after joining Ashgabat Agreement⁷, India and Uzbekistan are working more closely on developing transport corridors to boost their bilateral trade. Uzbekistan played a very important role in getting India into Ashgabat agreement that would complement India's maritime link with Oman via the Duqm port.⁸ Further, Uzbekistan is contributing by building a rail-road from Termez on Uzbek-Afghan border to Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan that will be further extended to Sheberghan, Maymana and then Herat and from here, the

doubly land-locked Uzbekistan will be one step closer to the sea –i.e. Chabahar Port- via Afghan-Iranian rail projects.⁹ These rail-road construction projects in Afghanistan, undertaken by Uzbekistan compliments India's participation in the Chabahar Port project. Such convergence of interest will surely help in strengthening India- Uzbek relations. Furthermore, all these initiatives would synchronize with India's efforts to implement International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) for enhancing connectivity. INSTC, which is considered as India's gateway to expand trade and investment links with Central Asian republics and Eurasia- is a multi- modal transportation route that links Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran and onwards to northern Europe via St. Petersburg in Russia. Although Uzbekistan is not a part of this project but possibility of joining it, was reportedly, expressed by the Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Mr. Sukhrob Kholmuradov.¹⁰ These initiatives, which are inching towards reality, make an important pillar of bilateral and multilateral engagement. These will not only promote economic linkages but will also help in strengthening people-to-people contacts as these corridors will provide an easy access to people to get connected. Here, it must be taken into account that main variable of any connectivity project is the 'route'. The concept of route is both "a geographical as well as a political idea", both "an end and a means" to create access.¹¹

Also, these projects will help Afghanistan to integrate into the regional system of transport connectivity. Afghanistan is an important component of land connectivity between India and Uzbekistan. Therefore, mutual involvement in infrastructural development projects and working together to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan is another point of convergence between India and Uzbekistan. During President Mirziyoyev's visit, both the leaders pledged to cooperate with each other in addressing the Afghan crisis and favoured an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process.¹²

All the above-mentioned factors provide a strong foundation to take the relationship between the two to the next level. Uzbekistan is keen to expand its cooperation with India in as many areas as possible¹³. "It sees India as one of its key partner not only in Asia but globally as well"¹⁴. The recent Uzbek President's visit to India and exchange of frequent high-level visits from both the sides, in the past couple of years, has helped in cementing the ties. For India, relationship with Uzbekistan is not only important on bilateral terms but for its overall Central Asia strategy. By complementing its soft power with economic and security architecture, Uzbekistan may emerge as an important ally for India.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

¹ External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj paid an official visit to Uzbekistan on 4-5 August, 2018, "Visit of External Affairs Minister to Uzbekistan, <https://mea.gov.in/press-release-htm?dtl/30240/visit+of+External+Affairs+Minister+to+Uzbekistan>, 08 August, 2018, accessed on 26 September, 2018

² "Love, respect for Indian culture visible in Uzbekistan: Swaraj", <https://www.aninews/news/world/asia/love-respect-for-indian-culture-visible-in-uzbekistan-swaraj201808051307510002/>, 05 August, 2018, accessed on 26 September, 2018

³ "India-Uzbekistan: Dialogue of Cultures exhibition inaugurated in Delhi", http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/india-uzbekistan-dialogue-of-cultures-exhibition-inaugurated-in-delhi-118092501169_1.html, 25 September, 2018, accessed on 27 September, 2018

⁴ "Team of Uzbek academicians visits JMI", *The Pioneer*, 26 September, 2018, <http://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/state-editions/team-of-uzbek-academicians-visits-jmi.html>, accessed on 27 September, 2018

⁵ "India, Uzbekistan to cement economic ties", *Times of India*, 27 September, 2018, <http://timesofindia.com/business/india-business/india-uzbekistan-to-cement-economic-ties/articleshow/65979721.cms>, accessed on 22 October, 2018

⁶ Amiti Sen, "Prabhu to visit Uzbekistan to promote trade, economic ties", *The Hindu*, 15 August, 2018, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/prabhu-to-visit-uzbekistan-to-promote-trade-economic-ties/article24697784.ece>, accessed on 23 October, 2018

⁷ Ashgabat Agreement is a multi-modal international transport and transit corridor agreement. Originally it was signed by Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran Oman and Qatar in 2011, but Qatar withdrew from it in 2013 and later Kazakhstan and Pakistan joined it. India also became a party to this agreement in February, 2018. The agreement was signed with an objective to facilitate connectivity, trade and transport of goods between Central Asia and Gulf countries. India's accession to it will enable India to utilise this corridor to facilitate our trade and commercial interaction with the Eurasian region.

⁸ Dipanjan Roy Choudhury, "Uzbekistan seeks to be India's all-weather ally in Central Asia", *The Economic Times*, 26 March, 2018

⁹ Catherine Putz, "Ghani and Mirziyoyev Meet, Renew Afghan-Uzbek Ties", *The Diplomat*, 06 December, 2017, <http://the-diplomat.com/2017/12/ghani-and-mirziyoyev-meet-renew-afghan-uzbek-ties/>, accessed on 21 December, 2017

¹⁰ Fikret Dolukhanov, "Uzbekistan may join North-South transport corridor", 16 August, 2018, <https://en.trend.az/business/economy/2941224.html>, accessed on 24 October, 2018

¹¹ Mahnaz Z. Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals: The Politics of Access in the Borderlands of Asia*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 1989), p.2.

¹² "India-Uzbekistan Joint Statement during State Visit of President of Uzbekistan to India (September 30- October 01, 2018)", *Ministry of External Affairs*, 01 October, 2018, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/30454/IndiaUzbekistan_joint_statement_during_state_visit_of_President_of_Uzbekistan_to_India_September_30_October_01_2018, accessed on 17 October, 2018

¹³ "Uzbekistan-India partnership is an important factor for regional stability: Ilkhomjon Nematov", 24 September, 2018, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/uzbekistan-india-partnership-is-an-important-factor-for-regional-stability-ilkomjon-nematov/articleshow/65935459.cms>, accessed on 25 September, 2018

¹⁴ Ibid