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Central and South Asia's Regional Connectivity: A Great Initiative of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev



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Regional connectivity is the key mantra in today's economic and political discourse. It is significant for the socio-economic development of any state. The changing dynamics of regional and international political



discourse allow nations to enhance cooperation in multiple fields. The world has become multipolar. Dysfunctional and traditional ways of diversion are replaced with advanced trends of integration, assistance, and cooperative patterns. The multiplex civilizational patterns, innovative ideas, economic alignment and constructive engagements have encouraged countries to find avenues for joint ventures. This integration offers a rationale coherence for upgrading and revising the world's narratives and policies to keep up with the time. Likewise, the global structural reforms have paved the way for the states to indulge in multilateral integration in various aspects.

When countries modernized their economies, they are typically forced to change their societies and eventually their political systems to be more inclusive, democratic, and accountable. In this aspect, the great initiative *“Central and South Asia's Regional Connectivity, identifying challenges and opportunities”* proposed by the President of Uzbekistan His Excellency Shavkat Mirziyoyev is imperative to examine. The concept is given as a broader foreign policy objective of Tashkent in present times. The world is amid challenges ranging from regional conflicts, terrorism and social disruptions to

economic downturns, unequal development and climate change. These global challenges call for a global solution with mutual cooperation among states. Therefore, the idea aims to further deepen economic cooperation in Central Asia, with access to South Asia, which has historically been closely linked to the region in economic, social, cultural, and civilizational dimensions. In this regard, the article highlights the major positive contours of the regional integration between South and Central Asia. The study also elaborates the regional outlook, challenges, and existing potential among the regional partners in multiple domains that could harness connectivity in the future.

The Potential of Central Asian Region: An Overview

The Central Asian region remained the center of the world's attention in economic terms. One of the primary reasons for the region's prosperity was the route of the Old Silk Road that has made the region a hub of ideologies, excellence, art, cuisine, excellence,



innovation, and great cultural norms and values. Furthermore, the exceptional and multicultural architecture of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva demonstrate the ancient and varied nature region's historical heritage. With the unfolding geo-economic and geo-political trends, it is essential to shed the old notions of divergence



and competition and focus on the dialogue of civilization, building a community with a shared future for mankind and regional connectivity arrangements.

For more than a decade now, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are trying to build new equations of cooperation with the South Asian region, mainly with Pakistan. In this aspect, Pakistan and Uzbekistan's relations have been developed strongly in the past couple of years. Uzbekistan is one of the fastest-growing economies in the Central Asian region. Its ambitious implementation of market-orientated policies and structural reforms has provided Pakistan ample opportunities to enhance collaboration in multiple fields. Under the incumbent administration of H.E. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country is emerging significantly as a prominent regional player. The structural policy reforms, gradual transition, political changes, open diplomacy, robust economic & strategic framework, efficient institutional setups, and opening borders for trade have paved the way for the nation to present a model of a more democratic and accountable nation.

Regional Connectivity-Central and South Asia: A Great Initiative of His Excellency Shavkat Mirziyoyev

The initiative of regional connectivity under the visionary leadership of H.E. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev holds great significance in recent times. The cooperation that began with economic assistance can lead to strategic partnership and collaboration in many other fields. Pakistan has a cultural and religious affinity with the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Therefore, in the changing dynamics of regional environment,

enhanced cooperation in economic and strategic domains would result in a win-win game for each party involved. The complex nature of regional networks requires Governments to reach across sectoral boundaries to develop cross-sectoral policies, both at the national and regional levels. To achieve this, they will need to strengthen institutional mechanisms and make better use of existing regional forums. Furthermore, the Uzbek-led initiative must be advocated in the United Nations (UN) for enhanced regional connectivity.

Role of Uzbekistan in Socio-economic Reconstruction of Afghanistan: Regional Outlook

In the 21st century, potential rise of Uzbekistan within and outside Central Asia has been witnessed due to the startling policies of His Excellency Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The remarkable efforts of the incumbent



leadership of Uzbekistan have led to the implementation of inclusive socio-economic development in the region and beyond. Uzbekistan's active role under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) umbrella cannot be overlooked. The country has facilitated Afghan interests in the SCO. During President's recent speech at the SCO videoconference summit, he said:



“……...we are in favor of the soonest possible elaboration and adoption of a plan of practical actions to assist the social and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan within the framework of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group. New prospects for all SCO countries are opening up through the initiatives of transport corridors that would help restore Afghanistan to its historic role as a bridge connecting the Central and South Asia.”¹

Uzbekistan’s growing energy requirements and need for strong strategic allies have also played an important role in easing relations with significant regional powers. The politics Middle East, South, and Central Asia converge at depicting the region as an arena of great power politics with a huge involvement of extra-regional powers. The presence of the US-India nexus and the daunting situation of the Afghan conflict has limited the economic and regional alignments between CARs and Pakistan. Afghanistan’s socio-economic connectivity is dreadful and have ripple impacts on the adjacent countries. Therefore, CARs and Pakistan strongly consider peace in Afghanistan as a prerequisite of any economic activity, regional integration, and enhancing people-to-people contacts. Therefore, H.E. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s unprecedented rise to the helm of political affairs has placed the country on the status of prominent stakeholder in the Afghan peace process. Uzbekistan leaves no stone unturned to find solutions for the common regional issues, resolving the decades-long Afghan conflict and socio-economic reconstruction of Afghanistan.

¹“President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's Speech at the SCO Videoconference Summit.” president.uz. Ўзбекистон Республикаси Президенти, November 10, 2020. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/3936>

H.E. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has played a dynamic and supportive role in the socio-economic reconstruction in Afghanistan during recent years. His visionary policies and efforts have changed the region's view of Afghanistan and resulted in recognition of Afghanistan as part of Central Asia. In this aspect, the Tashkent Declaration of March 2018 also facilitated the negotiations. Moreover, it increased and initiated CARs in the intra-Afghan negotiation process.



Uzbekistan's trade ratio in Afghanistan has grown to 7.4% in recent years, while Afghanistan's share has gone up to 1.5%. It has been targeted that by 2023 the indicators of mutual trade between both countries would be increased up to \$2billion.²The adoption of such plans and projects has already begun. Uzbekistan can be the gateway for exports and imports via the Termez Cargo Center (rail and road) and Navoi International Airport. This will ensure Afghanistan has alternatives to Southern transport routes via Pakistan's Karachi- Gwadar ports and Chabahar port in Iran.

² Why is it important to involve Afghanistan in the Central Asian economy? *Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Malaysia*, February 19, 2021. https://uzbekembassy.com.my/eng/news_press/economy/why_is_it_important_to_involve_afghanistan_in_the_central_asian_economy.html

Moreover, in February 2021, Uzbekistan hosted the first trilateral meeting among Uzbekistan-Afghanistan and Pakistan to construct the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway. In the meeting, a consensus was developed on the



need to build an Afghan transportation route. Uzbekistan's rail and road networks are being modernized as part of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program sponsored by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Afghanistan is also a beneficiary of CAREC-sponsored upgrades in infrastructure connectivity. It has been benefitted from Uzbekistan's expertise in railroad modernization with the construction of a link from Hairatan, on the Uzbek-Afghan border, to Mazar-i-Sharif, a major city in Northern Afghanistan. The line that ends at Mazar-i-Sharif may be extended to Herat, in Northwest Afghanistan, and further to Iran. This connection will enable shipments between Central Asia and ports on the Persian Gulf. The upcoming international conference in July 2021 titled '*Central Asia and South Asia: Regional Interconnectedness, Challenges and Opportunities*' in Tashkent will provide more valuable practical solutions for greater regional connectivity.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan is playing a constructive role in regional and international economic and political spheres. Its positive efforts as a prominent stakeholder in the Afghan peace process are remarkable. The idea of Central-South Asian connectivity encompasses broader paradigms, i.e., trade and transport connectivity for sustainable growth, the revival of cultural and humanitarian ties as a way to strengthen friendship and confidence, analyzing regional security challenges, ensuring the security of cross-border infrastructure, and devising strong policies to counter future menaces. Therefore, the initiative of enhancing connectivity and integration among regional partners, advocated by His Excellency Shavkat Mirziyoyev, will lay an important foundation for changing the regional dynamics of cooperation. Pakistan as a good ally strongly appreciates and welcome this Uzbek-led initiative and is ready to cooperation with Uzbekistan in multiple dimensions to resolve the difference, bring regional peace and tackle common challenges.

