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**Pakistan-Uzbekistan: for a brighter future**

The geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics in Central and South Asian regions are undergoing major changes. Amid these changes, two initiatives stand out for their potential to bring stability and predictability to the fast-evolving regional dynamics the Uzbek president’s initiative to hold the ‘Central and South Asia Connectivity Conference’, and Pakistan’s prime minister’s vision to proactively engage with Central Asia at strategic level.

Both the initiatives are aimed at orientating regional geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics towards a peaceful, prosperous, and progressive futuristic outlook. The two initiatives are likely to yield far-reaching bilateral and regional results.

Pakistan and Uzbekistan are poised to play a major role in the future political and economic disposition of the region. The two countries are fortunate to be led by leaders who have the vision, will and determination to work together to steer their countries and the region towards a brighter future.

On the special invitation of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Prime Minister Imran Khan will be visiting Uzbekistan for his first official bilateral visit today (July 15). He will also address the plenary session of the international conference on ‘Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Opportunities and Challenges’ tomorrow on July 16.

Pakistan and Uzbekistan enjoy unique historical relations. The ancient Buddhist sites of Kara Tepa and Fez Tepa at Termez (Uzbekistan) reveal the untold stories of travels by Julian monastery monks in Taxila (Pakistan) and other Buddhist sites in Swat (Pakistan) to Termez and beyond, spreading their message from South to Central Asia. The pearls of wisdom emanating from Samarkand and Bukhara during the 10th and 11th centuries illuminated the hearts and minds of the people living in lands that are today in Pakistan.

The two lands have been historically intertwined with experiences of religious exchanges and spiritual emancipation, united as one political entity under Abbasids and then the great Amir Taimur. The Timurid Empire stretched south to include almost all the lands that are now Pakistan. These interconnected lands, however, fell victim to geopolitical divides, artificial barriers, ‘great games’, ‘iron curtains’, and the ‘new great game’ over the past two centuries. Their disconnect is in fact an aberration in their long history of interconnectedness.

Pakistan was among the first countries to recognize Uzbekistan’s independence in 1991. PIA was among the pioneers in opening the skies of an independent Uzbekistan and connecting it to the outside world. Leaderships on both sides made well-considered strategic choices to reach out to each other. However, regional developments barred us from forging an optimal relationship. We even started seeing each other from third prisms, which further delayed our natural confluence.

Pakistan and Uzbekistan are bound together by history, geography, religion, and culture. Our interpretation of history, our heroes, our aspirations for the future and our outlook for the region are the same. Imam Bukhari and Imam Naqshbandi have a large following in Pakistan.

The two countries share common aspirations of peace, progress, and prosperity for their peoples. Under President Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan is undergoing a huge economic transformation. Similarly, under Prime Minister Imran Khan, Pakistan has reoriented its focus from geopolitics to geo-economics. Several initiatives are underway to transform Pakistan into a regional trade and connectivity hub. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is smoothly progressing towards fruition. New seaports, airports, railway, and road infrastructures; special economic zones; industrial zones; power generation initiatives; and numerous other infrastructure and socio-economic development projects are fast transforming Pakistan’s outlook and profile. With these transformations, Pakistan is on its way towards realizing its true economic potential and emerging as a regional trade and commercial hub.

Under the ‘Vision Central Asia’ policy, Pakistan aims at an enhanced, tangible, effective, result-oriented and long-term sustainable engagement with Central Asian countries by forging strategic partnerships. The policy has five pillars: political; trade & investment; energy & connectivity; security & defence; and people-to-people exchanges.

There are huge complementarities in the economic interests of Pakistan and the Central Asian states. Connectivity is our biggest asset. Geography makes Pakistan the shortest, most economical, efficient, and easiest land connectivity route for Central Asia to the Arabian Sea, particularly for Uzbekistan. Pakistan is willing to help facilitate Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries trade with the world using its seaports. Similarly, Uzbekistan is ready to facilitate Pakistan’s exports to Central Asia and beyond by providing warehousing facilities at logistically strategic locations. The two countries will soon sign a transit trade agreement in this regard a win-win for both sides. Similarly, sectors such as textiles, cotton, pharmaceutical, surgical instruments, education, and tourism offer innumerable complementarities and business opportunities. With renewed focus on geo-economics, it is time for the two countries to come together and strengthen their bilateral relations in all fields.

When on March 8 I received at Islamabad the Uzbek foreign minister who was here as special emissary of the Uzbek president, carrying a personal invitation to the prime minister of Pakistan for the regional connectivity conference, I could foresee how the regional developments in coming months would increase the significance of this initiative. The prime minister welcomed the initiative and accepted the invitation. The conference builds on the earlier agreed ‘Termez- Mazar e Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar’ railway project. During their Virtual Summit in April this year, the two leaders also reaffirmed their commitments to work together.

During his visit, Prime Minister Imran Khan will bring the message of friendship, hope and determination for the people of the two countries to re-connect and work together for a brighter common future. Historically, the two regions have always blossomed when connected. The prime minister’s visit will also catalyze business interactions between top entrepreneurs from the two sides at the Pak-Uzbek Business Forum.

At the Connectivity Conference on July 16, the message from the prime minister of Pakistan for all the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan will be to work together for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Afghanistan. It will also have a direct impact on the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Being the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan have more at stake than any extra-regional player in the peace and stability of Afghanistan. Our futures are tied with a stable Afghanistan without which the dream of Central Asia-South Asia connectivity cannot be realized. At the same time, we should also be clear regarding the role of ‘spoilers’ who benefit from the continued instability in Afghanistan. Similarly, the benefits of regional connectivity will not be optimally achieved till we address the long-festering Kashmir dispute in South Asia that needs to be settled as per the aspirations of the Kashmiri people and relevant UN resolutions.

I foresee the strategic and geo-economic interests, regional developments, geography and common aspirations for development and prosperity, reconnecting the two lands for a brighter common future. Both the leaders have the vision, political will, and determination to make it happen. The visit of Prime Minister Imran Khan will, InshaAllah, lead to promising initiatives for a brighter future of Pakistan-Uzbekistan relations.

The writer is serving as the ambassador of Pakistan to Uzbekistan since September 2020.