**Vision Central Asia**

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Pakistan’s Vision Central Asia is fully reflected in all interactions with the visiting Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his accompanying delegation to Islamabad last week.

Both the signed agreements, the Action Plan and the five Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) were based on the country’s vision for consolidating bonds with the Central Asian states.

Pakistan’s cultural, political, religious and trade relations and linkages with Central Asia are not anything new. Both sides have a lengthy history of mutual interaction and a closer relationship.

When Prime Minister Imran Khan, in his delegation-level talks with President Mirziyoyev, spoke of Pakistan’s plan to make a joint film with Uzbekistan on the life and achievements of Zaheeruddin Babar, the founder of India’s Mogul dynasty, he in fact was referring to this very historic bond of fraternity between the two nations.

Babur belonged to the Farghana region in eastern Uzbekistan, bordering Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Prior to that too, almost all the Turk and Tartar rulers of Afghanistan and the Indian Subcontinent came from Central Asia.

Trans-Afghan Railway Corridor is the easiest, cheapest and safer mode of transportation of cargo between Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

Besides these political roots, the Indian Muslims also had a deep religious affiliation with that region. Samarqand and Bukhara are still revered by the people of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan as sacred seats of Islamic learnings.

Under the patronage of these political and religious relations flourished trade between Central Asia and South Asia. The Silk Road connected the entire eastern world from Kashmir in India and Xinjiang in China up to Eurasian heartland and East Europe.

The proverbial caravanserais, synonymous with Peshawar’s Qissa Khwani Bazaar, were in fact the resting places for trade convoys transporting merchandise between Central Asia and South Asian regions up to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

This closer historic interaction between these two regions received its first setback when Czarist Russia came face to face with India’s British Empire, both of which tried to check each other’s advance and created buffer zones between their territories, causing interceptions between the two people. Later when the Soviet Union brought all the Central Asian republics under its sway, this entire region was totally cut off from the Subcontinent, thus alienating the people of both regions from each other.

The dismantling of the Soviet Union in 1991 once again enabled these republics to declare their sovereignty and establish an independent relationship with all countries of the region and the world.

Searching partners for political, diplomatic, and economic cooperation, the five Central Asian states found their natural allies in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. After all, it is through these three countries that Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan could reach out to the Middle East countries, India and the Far East.

That is why the Central Asian states not only wish to promote bilateral political, economic, cultural, and defence cooperation with these three countries but also to use their soil for making way into the Arabian Sea and the Indian Oceans.

It is not a losing game for Pakistan either. The landlocked Central Asian republics offer a lucrative market for Pakistani goods.

If the Central Asia states can use the Pakistani soil for trade and transit with the outside world, Pakistan can also explore the entire Eurasian heartland for trade and energy cooperation, once it forces its way into these republics.

Pakistan is quite alive to this need. The edifice of its Vision Central Asian is standing on five basic pillars. These include political and diplomatic, trade and investment, energy and connectivity, security and defence, and people-to-people relations.

All these five points were fully highlighted in all interactions between Pakistani and Uzbek officials last week.

The landmark achievement of President Mirziyoyev’s visit to Islamabad was the signing of the Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) by the two countries. Promotion of trade between two nations always requires reciprocal concession and exemptions of duties, besides providing ease of doing business. The PTA will surely guarantee that.

If honestly implemented, the agreement can bring laurels not only to the trading communities of the two countries but will also help cement political, cultural and economic relations between the two countries.

The signing of an agreement for cooperation between the radio and televisions of the two countries is also not of lesser importance. It will lay the foundation of stronger cultural bonds between the two countries, which, on its turn, will pave the way for people-to-people linkages.

Another important MoU was on cooperation between the two countries in railways. A rail-road network is of crucial significance for promoting connectivity and boosting trade and economic relations.

The joint declaration issued after talks between Prime Minister Imran Khan and President Mirziyoyev also ‘acknowledged the role of agreed connectivity corridors, which envisage the expansion of trade links through offering investment opportunities in the transport network, energy pipelines and special economic zones.’

The two sides reaffirmed the important role of the Termez-Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar Trans-Afghan Railway Corridor. They agreed on a roadmap for the purpose, including measures to develop a feasibility study and start construction work on both sides.

Trans-Afghan Railway Corridor is the easiest, cheapest and safer mode of transportation of cargo between Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The corridor will not only promote trade between these two countries but also provide a basis for establishing linkages with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and other countries of South Asia and the Caucasus.

Besides a strong will, which is direly needed for such massive undertakings, there is also a need for strengthening peace and security in Afghanistan. If there is no peace in Afghanistan – or if Kabul is not fully taken on board – no connectivity project between Pakistan and the Central Asian countries is liable to succeed.

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