**A step forward in Uzbekistan-Pakistan relations**

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Prime Minister of Pakistan and President of Uzbekistan recently had first virtual summit recently in a bid to build bilateral cooperation in diverse sectors. Both leaders met on the sidelines of the 19th meeting of the Council of Heads of States of SCO member states in Bishkek 2019 and later during the BRI Forum in Beijing again in 2019. Due to the threatening surge in COVID-19 in the region, instead of visit, this special arrangements was made to speed the process of collaboration and actions on the matters of bilateral nature. This high level virtual summit was culmination of the series of important consultation held recently between the high officials from both sides. Recently Foreign Minister Kamilov of Uzbekistan was in Islamabad for bilateral consultation were held with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan Shah Mehmood Qureshi. Later the Adviser to the Prime Minister on Commerce and Investment, Mr. Razzak Dawood made a visit to Tashkent to finalize the collaboration on trade, commerce and investment including finalizing the discussions especially on Trans-Afghan Railway project that was recently agreed by Pakistan initiated by Uzbekistan. This is a significant development in fostering forward the opportunities to build trade, economic and people to people contacts. Even prior to these territory level of meetings, there were several rounds on finalizing the modalities for deliberations at the level of officers and important bureaucratic structures. During this Summit between both leaders, there were discussion and agreement on finalizing the mutually agreed areas of work especially in the political dimension, trade, security, defense and educational and cultural domains. Important agreement have been inked during this meeting including mutual cooperation in the defense cooperation, conformity assessment of products, standardization, metrology and technical assistance and significantly agriculture cooperation. Through the strong bonds of the past three decades of diplomatic relationship, these bilateral dialogues of high levels and also on the sidelines of international and regional meetings, have helped the warmth to continue.

During this virtual meeting, Prime Minister Imran Khan and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev had discussion in the candid and friendly manner underscored not only bilateral but also the multilateral issues also. There was discussions on the rise in the extremism especially the Islamophobia in the world and how both states can play their constructive role in inter-faith harmony. One of the important agenda point was on the Trans-Afghan Railway Line Project, a project of the century, agreed by Pakistan-Afghanistan and Uzbekistan to construct a railway connection between the countries from Tashkent to Mazar e Sharif and Kabul in Afghanistan towards Peshawar in Pakistan. From Peshawar onwards, this project will connect to the CPEC route towards Gwadar and onwards to the global markets. This is 573 KM long World Bank funded project has the estimated cost of around 4.8 bn USD. Considering this important connectivity project between Pakistan and Uzbekistan may result in the trade between neighbor to more than 90 billion USD with proven potential to grow regionally and later globally. Putting emphasis on building regional connectivity, Uzbekistan is also hosting Central Asia-South Asia Connectivity Conference scheduled to be in July this, where Pakistan will be participating to play its important role. Pakistan and Uzbekistan, while having historical presence on the ancient Silk Route, now eager to build their sound presence in togetherness on the new emerging realities of the region especially in economic development plans.

Both leaders had detailed discussion on continue with the momentum of having continues high level meetings and exchanges as these will help to move the bilateral relations to higher pace. There was an urge to enhance the process to finalize the Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) and Transit Trade Agreement (TTA) between the states to further build the trade relations, which are currently very low despite huge potential. Both sides are also developing solid foundations for the security and defense cooperation along with improving the education linkages, cultural and tourism relations. Pakistan is now shifting its focus from merely geostrategic to geo-economics. Pakistan is realizing that there is a strong need to put emphasis on economic and build its industrial capacity and transform the entire system of income. With the vision of Imran Khan to end poverty in the country is through the transformation of lives by equipping the young people with new skills and inviting international investment in the country. This can only be possible, once we will increase our capacity of the local trader and equip them also to handle the international joint ventures details and technicalities. There is a strong need for Pakistan to invest further on its corporate agriculture farming as this can be another step towards building our capacity and increase our exports towards Central Asian region.

Pakistan and Uzbekistan relations are built on mutual trust, interest and there is a strong reaffirmation towards supporting each other at all the regional and international forums. One important common denominator is Afghanistan and the ongoing situation that will appear after the US forces withdrawal from the country. Both Uzbekistan and Pakistan share similarity of interest in Afghanistan and consider that there should be lasting solution to the Afghan conflict through Afghan led and owned peace process. Both states consider that there should be economic support to Afghans through trade and development regional initiatives. The railway project is a step in similar direction. Pakistan through its geostrategic location can provide easy access to both Uzbekistan and Afghanistan link towards seaports from both Gwadar and Karachi. Uzbekistan and Pakistan share borders with Afghanistan. The incumbent President of Uzbekistan is a visionary leader as the country is going through its economic and industrial modernization, there is an urge to support Afghanistan too. President of Uzbekistan has proposed the establishment of the Regional Centre for the Development of Transport and Communications in order to help deepen the regional integration process through better transport networks. While on the other hand, Pakistan is playing its important role in supporting regional peace process for Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and Uzbekistan realized that the stable Afghanistan is in the best interest of the region as unless there is a sustainable lasting peace in Afghanistan there cannot be any regional integration reality.

With Pakistan’s growing transformation and upbeat in building stronger relations with Central Asian States especially Uzbekistan is a welcome development. Pakistan needs to continue diversify and have stronger and robust mutual cooperation with Uzbekistan especially while there are no irritants or any challenge existing between the two countries of the region. Through stronger cooperation between Pakistan and Uzbekistan, there will be a better chance for the region to have the lasting prosperity.

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