**Uzbekistan-Pakistan connectivity**

[**Jai Kumar Dhirani**](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/jai-kumar-dhirani)

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The world contemporarily witnessed an establishment of new strategic partnership and ties between two significant countries of their respective regions, namely Pakistan from South Asia and Uzbekistan from Central Asia. Prime Minister Imran Khan’s two-day (July 15-16) visit to Uzbekistan on the invitation of President Mirziyoyev paved the way for this. Prime Minister Imran Khan and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev after holding wide ranging bilateral talks, signed the Joint Declaration on the Establishment of Strategic Partnership between, with a focus on increased cooperation in the areas of trade and economy.

Historically, relations between the two states were established when the republic of Uzbekistan became independent following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Pakistan was one of the first countries to recognise the independence of Uzbekistan, though relations between the two countries were initially strained by the situation in Afghanistan which both countries border. However, relations have improved after the fall of the Taliban, and the death of Uzbek president Islam Karimov, and subsequent deepening of Uzbek outreach to regional countries under his successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Both countries have a cordial and deepening relationship as the two countries’ interests in Afghanistan have become aligned.

[US cutting staff at Kabul Embassy to 'core diplomatic presence'](https://nation.com.pk/13-Aug-2021/us-cutting-staff-at-kabul-embassy-to-core-diplomatic-presence)

Pakistan and Uzbekistan are members of different international forums including the United Nations, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Pakistan-Uzbekistan Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC) held on a regular basis. While the trade between both countries is increasing, rising threefold between 2018 and 2019, bilateral trade in 2018 was low at $90 million on account of difficulties in transit across war torn Afghanistan. The first direct flights between the countries began in 2018 between Tashkent and Lahore launched by Uzbekistan Airways, and are endeavouring their best to further increase trade, strategic partnership and cooperation between the two countries.

Pakistan, to quench its thirst for energy and multiple markets for exports through central Asia, endeavoured its best to get the easy access of it through Afghanistan by the agreement namely Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). It not only allowed Pakistan to use the route of Afghanistan to reach central Asia but also allowed a landlocked Afghanistan to reach Arabian sea from Pakistan. Pakistan also paved the way for Afghanistan’s access to Wagah border for trade with India. However, in recent years, Afghanistan insisted that India be included in their bilateral transit trade as a condition for allowing Pakistan access to Central Asia, even threatening to cut off the agreement if it was not reciprocated. Pakistan’s tensions with India alongside keeping in mind the weak infrastructure of Afghanistan and the war-like situation in Afghanistan made such an arrangement difficult. Therefore, this situation prompted Pakistan to find an alternative route to reach Central Asia as Pakistan was well aware that peace in Afghanistan is not possible in the near future due to major powers’ interests there.

[PM to inaugurate new 66 NADRA offices today](https://nation.com.pk/13-Aug-2021/pm-to-inaugurate-new-66-nadra-offices-today)

The Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) is a transit trade deal between China, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan for facilitating transit traffic and trade. In February 2017, Tajikistan expressed interest in joining the deal. A similar desire to join the agreement was expressed by Uzbekistan in recent times. The road project under this agreement provides the shortest route of Arabian sea Central Asia while bypassing Afghanistan through the Karakoram Highway which connects Gilgit-Baltistan to China’s Xinjiang region and further on to Central Asia.

Uzbekistan, a landlocked Central Asian country, is not far behind in expressing its desire to acquire the shortest route of Arabian sea through Pakistan’s Karachi and Gwadar port. The geostrategic location of Arabian Sea is that it is bounded to the west by the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, to the north by Iran and Pakistan, to the east by India, and to the south by the remainder of the Indian Ocean. To the north the Gulf of Oman connects the sea with the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz. To the west the Gulf of Aden connects it with the Red Sea via the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Uzbekistan, which currently relies on Iranian seaport of Bandar Abbas for external trade, is exploring other options and is prioritising Pakistani ports because of short distance, being more economical and due to some political considerations. The cost of transporting a container from Tashkent to Karachi would be approximately $1,400-$1,600, while on the Tashkent-Bandar-Abbas route it is $2,600-$3,000.

[Soldier martyred, terrorist killed in South Waziristan: ISPR](https://nation.com.pk/13-Aug-2021/soldier-martyred-terrorist-killed-in-south-waziristan-ispr)

Earlier, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan signed a roadmap for the construction of almost 600km of Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway line in Tashkent in February. The project, which is expected to take five years for completion at an estimated cost of $4.8 billion, enjoys the backing of international lending agencies including the World Bank. PM Imran Khan welcomed the proposed Trans-Afghan railway project and underscored Pakistan’s commitment to support all efforts for the earliest realisation of this important connectivity project.

Pakistan must develop close trade and economic relations with Russia through Central Asia and also facilitate the road and railway infrastructure needed to connect Russian export hubs. Islamabad needs to form new alliances with its Central Asian partners based on quantifiable interest. Wise decision making will make the country a hub of economic activities or roundabout for regional trade by providing links in the form of ports, pipelines, land routes, to facilitate at domestic, regional and even at the global level.