

# Strengthening the bonds of cooperation

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"I am satisfied with the outcome of the visit, as it has consolidated our political and diplomatic ties which will bolster our trade and economic cooperation to our mutual benefit," President Pervez Musharraf told the media after his visit to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This visit resulted in forging new bonds of friendship with the two Central Asian states.

With Uzbekistan, Pakistan reached an agreement to strengthen cultural ties; steps for combating terrorism and reactivating the joint ministerial commission in order to widen the areas of economic cooperation. Pakistan also offered Uzbekistan its ports of Karachi and Gwader to boost trade with that landlocked country.

With Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan signed a series of agreements for strengthening communication links, encouraging the private sector in trade and relaxing the visa regime. Like Uzbekistan, Pakistan pledged to take joint steps with Kyrgyzstan to deal with the threat of terrorism and provide port facilities for trade purposes. Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan also agreed to establish a working group to look into the technical and financial matters for provision of electricity to Pakistan. The two countries agreed to have a visa-free regime for the holders of diplomatic and official passports, establish cooperation between the two ministries of education. Under the agreement, the Associated Press of Pakistan and the Kyrgyz Kabar news agency will link up.

Enormous activity has taken place in the promotion of Pakistani-Central Asian ties since December 1991, when the Soviet Central Asian republics became independent. There was a lot of euphoria in Pakistan when the Central Asia countries secured independence, with widespread expectations in some circles that the ruptured bonds of religion and culture with the region would be restored. However, most of these expectations were short-lived, as the new Central Asian states pursued a pragmatic course of action in the arena of external relations and decided to diversify their foreign policy options particularly with the Western countries, China, Japan and Korea than giving preference to the Muslim countries of the southern flank, namely Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

Pakistan extended speedy recognition to the newly independent Central Asian republics and a number of delegations (clergy, traders and cultural groups, to name some) went there to seek possibilities of better cooperation. At the same time, the expansion of Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) from three original members (Pakistan, Iran, Turkey) to incorporate seven more countries of West and Central Asia (Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and



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Azerbaijan) further raised hopes and expectations for meaningful cooperation between Pakistan and the new Central Asian states.

The launching of the expanded form of the ECO in November 1992 in Islamabad placed Pakistan in a unique position as it became the only country of South Asia to be a member of the ECO (composed of mainly West and Central Asian countries) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). So far, several agreements on the strengthening of bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and the Central Asian countries have been signed and dozens of high-profile visits have taken place from both sides. But despite the edge enjoyed by Pakistan on forging close relations with the Central Asian countries, compared to India, three important factors proved to be an impediment in the realisation of the expected new era of friendship and cooperation with Central Asia.

First, soon after the independence of the Central Asian countries, the growth and rise of extremist and jihadi elements in Pakistan created a lot of suspicion and to some extent hostility about Pakistan in these countries. Reports of various Islamic extremist groups from Pakistan sneaking into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan resulted in a backward trend in Pakistani-Central Asian ties.

When President Musharraf visited Tashkent on March 6, Uzbek President Islam Karimov said that the Uzbek people "know that people who carried out bloody acts in Uzbekistan are now hiding in Pakistan, and the efforts by President Musharraf's government show real bravery." It is true that after Sept. 11, 2001, Pakistan and various Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan, coordinated their efforts to effectively deal with the menace of terrorism, but damage had already been done during the 1990s because of the activities of the various Islamic extremist groups having links in Pakistan to destabilize the secular regimes in Central Asia.

Second, Pakistan's road to Central Asia is still not smooth because of the fluid situation in Afghanistan, particularly in terms of the fragile political order, the activities of Taliban remnants against coalition and Afghan state forces and the role of warlords.

When the Central Asian republics secured independence from Moscow, there was a feeling in Pakistan for better trade, commercial and cultural relations with their northern neighbours. But hopes for better Pakistani-

Central Asian ties were shattered because of civil war and violence in Afghanistan. As long as Afghanistan remained in a state of chaos, it was difficult for Pakistan to develop communication, trade and commercial linkages with the Central Asian countries.

Therefore, Pakistan is handicapped because of geography and the instable situation in Afghanistan as the lack of its direct access to any Central Asian country puts Islamabad in a difficult situation. The narrow Wakhan Corridor, which is part of Afghanistan, denies Pakistan direct geographical linkage with Tajikistan. Otherwise, had Pakistan been in control of that corridor, its geographical predicament in Central Asia wouldn't have existed. The question of gas and oil pipeline from Central Asia to Pakistan or electricity from Kyrgyzstan would have become a practical possibility had the situation in Afghanistan remained normal.

Third, regardless of the "image problem" which Pakistan has faced in Central Asia or the geographical factor, Pakistani-Central Asian ties would have been strengthened if the agreements, accords, treaties or memorandums of understanding (MoUs) signed between Pakistan and Central Asian states since 1992 would have been implemented. But bureaucratic hurdles in the implementation of most of the bilateral agreements with the Central Asian states resulted in stalemate and stagnation in Pakistani-Central Asian relations. Had this not been the case, the joint commission between Pakistan and Uzbekistan would have remained operational and not reactivated on the occasion of President Musharraf's visit to that Central Asian state.

Strengthening the bonds of friendship and cooperation between Pakistan and Central Asia will require practical measures to ease travel, trade and other restrictions. Merely relaxing visas for diplomats or other officials will not work unless other segments of society like traders, teachers, media people who represent the civil societies of Pakistan and Central Asia are allowed to travel without restrictions.

Most important, a better "image" of Pakistan needs to be created in the Central Asian countries so that the people and governments of that region do not feel suspicious or threatened with regard to their South Asian neighbour. For Pakistan, Central Asia may be a land of opportunities, but this type of thinking may remain wishful unless a better understanding between Pakistan and Central Asia is developed and meaningful interaction at the cultural, economic, educational and business level takes place. Similarly, Pakistan provides numerous opportunities to the landlocked Central Asian countries, thus paving the way for a mutually beneficial relationship between the two.