

UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION: CASE STUDY OF CENTRAL-SOUTH ASIA

When countries modernize their economies, they tend to change their societies and eventually their political systems to be more inclusive, open, democratic, and accountable. In this aspect, analyzing different means to revitalize 'Central and South Asia Regional Connectivity' is imperative.

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Regional cooperation is a key catchword in contemporary geo-economic and political discourse. With a persistent evolution in international affairs and global politics, various patterns have emerged, i.e., multiple modernities, civilizational outlooks, and regionalism. Among these concepts, 'regionalism' or 'regionalization' has brought new developments in international relations or global politics. In this aspect, the modern values and transforming trends in this world order have enabled states to shed the traditional notion of a clash of civilizations and move towards cooperation or dialogue to resolve common challenges with a shared approach.

Regional cooperation is significant for the socio-economic development of any state. The world has become more multipolar. Dysfunctional and orthodox ways of divergence are replaced with advanced trends of cooperation, and assistance. The multiplex civilizational patterns, innovative ideas, economic alignment and constructive engagements have encouraged countries to find avenues for joint ventures. This integration offers a rationale coherence for upgrading and revising the world's narratives and policies to match the pace with the time. Likewise, the global structural reforms have paved the way for the states to indulge in multilateral integration in various aspects.

When countries modernize their economies, they tend to change their societies and eventually their political systems to be more inclusive, open, democratic, and accountable. In this aspect, analyzing different means to revitalize 'Central and South Asia Regional Connectivity' is imperative. This grand idea was proposed by the Pres-

ident of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2021. The world is amid common threats ranging from regional conflicts, social disruptions to the Covid-19 pandemic and other environmental challenges. These global issues call for shared solutions through cooperation among states. Therefore, the idea aims to deepen economic cooperation in Central Asia by reaching South Asia, especially Pakistan. Both regions have historically been closely linked in economic, social, cultural, and religious dimensions. In this context, the paper highlights major contours of regional cooperation by analyzing the case study of South and Central Asia. The study also provides an in-depth analysis of the contemporary regional outlook (Central-South Asia) and existing potential among the regional partners in multiple domains that could harness connectivity in the future.

Central-South Asia: Regional Outlook and Historical Background

The 21st century has many key determinants as it is arguably the most revolutionary age in history. The pace and scope of the transformation have never been this great. Now, countries are moving towards cooperation and wider integration through economic connectivity in the multipolar world, pursuing their common goals. Therefore, it is important to consider the complex balance sheet involving challenges and opportunities to access different aspects of security in the Central and South Asian regions.

Central Asia has remained the hub of the world's at-



tention in economic and cultural terms. One of the primary reasons for this region's progress was the Old Silk Road that has made it the center of excellence, art, famous cuisine, innovation, spiritual land, and exceptional cultural norms. The wonderful architecture of Tashkent, Samarkand, Khiva and Bukhara reflect the ancient and varied nature of Central Asian historical heritage.

Central-South Asia had been interconnected with experience of spiritual emancipation, religious pilgrims, united as one entity under Abbasids and then the great Ameer Taimoor. Islam and the religious legacy traveled from Central Asia to South Asia/Sub Continent. In the 9th and 10th centuries, Islam developed rapidly mainly due to the Arab and Persian trades who traveled through the old Silk Road.¹ By the end of the 19th century, both regions of Central Asia or the Sub-Continent (today known as the South Asian region) were under the colonial rule of the British and Soviet empires. Unfortunately, the connectivity between both regions was broken in the 19th century and many obstacles came. However, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, major developments took place in the region.

First, the colonial rule ended in Central and South Asia.

Second, with the disintegration of the Soviets Union (USSR) in 1991, five Central Asian states (Uzbekistan,

Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan) emerged as independent, sovereign nations. The policy reforms have paved the way for these countries to modernize their economies. The governments have moderated the needed structural adjustment by adopting the strategy of gradual transition to market economy.

Third, in 2013, China announced its exceptional Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) for inclusive economic development and connected countries worldwide to work to build a community with a shared future.

Fourth, building blocks for cooperation among Central and South Asian countries to revive the centuries-old historical relationships were begun to be set.

Interregional Cooperation: Reviving Ancient Contacts between South and Central Asia

In the 21st century, socioeconomic and political dynamics of the regions have been changed. The world has entered into an era of geoeconomics transformation, which brings both challenges and new opportunities. The initiative of South and Central Asian regional cooperation by Shavkat Mirziyoyev has emerged as a significant factor in reinvigorating centuries-old traditional and cultural linkages between countries. Compared to the Karimov regime, the most noticeable paradigm change with Pres-

ident Mirziyoyev is in his Central Asian regional and neighborhood policy. In this aspect, Pakistan-Uzbekistan relations are touching new heights of collaboration.

Pakistan and Uzbekistan enjoy cordial relations and for more than a decade, bilateral ties have been strengthening via multilateral collaboration and persistent diplomatic engagements. Imam Bukhari and Imam Naqshbandi have a large following in Pakistan. Their interpretation of history, heroes, aspirations for the future and our outlook for the region are the same. Thus, a new journey towards regional cooperation and peace has stimulated mutual cooperation in a number of fields. In this regard, certain aspects are necessary to highlight for regional alignments and multilateral dialogue process amid cooperation with extra-regional partners:

- Enhanced collaboration between allied/partner countries;
- Regional unity and a holistic framework of cooperation to counter hostilities and common challenges;
- The amalgamation of enhanced cooperation with other regional countries and goodwill;
- Broader regional alliances and accepting culture diversities;
- Joint ventures and enhanced academic cooperation.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev: A Visionary Statesman

Presently, President Mirziyoyev has emerged as one of the most popular leaders in the realm of international politics. In this transformative time, the potential rise of Uzbekistan within and outside Central Asia has been witnessed due to the startling nature of his policies. Mirziyoyev's successful conduct of statecraft and dynamic policy approach have made Uzbekistan an important country in the region. 'Renaissance' is a French word that means to be reborn. The Uzbek concept 'Uigonish Davri' (evolutionary period or Renaissance) is a synonym for this term. Under the concept 'Uigonish Davri,' the new Uzbekistan's reforms are worth mentioning and praising. The 'Uigonish Davri' is amid the new paradigm shift that Uzbekistan has taken to play a full-fledged and pro-active role in the uplifting of the economy, maintaining and promoting regional peace and stability.

The grand idea of reviving Central-South Asian cooperation proposed by President Mirziyoyev is a clear manifestation that Uzbekistan has opened its border for

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wider regional integration. The idea of connectivity encapsulates wider aspects, i.e., economic growth and revival of cultural and humanitarian relations. It will further strengthen friendship and confidence, ensuring the security of cross-border infrastructure and formulating effective policies for countering common threats. In general, by promoting socio-economic, energy, transport and communication projects and enhancing trade ties, Uzbekistan seeks to establish the transformative link between Central and South Asia.

Pakistan, as a good ally, appreciates and supports this exceptional initiative. In this context, Pakistan is ready to enhance its cooperation in multiple fields to curtail the differences, bring regional peace, promote friendly relations, enhance cultural integration, unity, and combat common challenges.

10-Point Agenda: A Roadmap for Central-South Asian Cooperation

The international conference titled "Central and South Asia: Regional Interconnectedness. Challenges and Opportunities" was successfully held in Tashkent in 2021. President Mirziyoyev provided significant ten-point agenda to enhance regional cooperation and combat challenges. The details of the ten-points agenda are as follows:

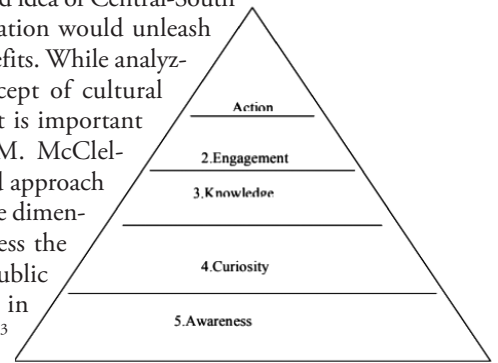
- i. Expansion of scientific, cultural, and humanitarian exchanges;
- ii. Strengthening peace and friendship, trust, and good-neighbourliness;
- iii. Building an open and constructive policy to meet the common interests of all countries of Central and South Asia;
- iv. Strengthening trade, investment, and economic expansion between the two regions;

- v. Building a transport and logistics infrastructure that will effectively and safely connect Central and South Asia. In this regard, the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway is to become a key element of the entire architecture of the interconnectedness of regions;
- vi. To develop specific measures to implement digital connectivity in trade, transit, and border crossing to adopt a Joint Action Strategy;
- vii. Measures to strengthen security and stability in the region to combat terrorism and extremism;
- viii. Environmental protection and the development of a green economy;
- ix. To develop a single platform for stimulating tourism industries;
- x. Reinvigorating cooperation in the fields of joint research and exchange programs and introducing an easy visa regime for scientists and researchers.

The abovementioned assertions clearly depict a broader paradigm of new Uzbekistan's efforts to reinvigorate regional linkages. Thus, the ten-point agenda must be taken as an umbrella approach for joint ventures.

Prospects under Regional Integration

The grand idea of Central-South Asian integration would unleash cultural benefits. While analyzing the concept of cultural diplomacy, it is important to refer to M. McClellan's pyramid approach (based on five dimensions) to assess the benefits of public diplomacy in recent times.³



The top of the pyramid can be understood under the auspicious of international laws, strategic alliance formation, organizations or trade agreements. The top-down approach then requires a two-stage flow of information. This pattern takes to the next level of developing knowledge through projecting a state's soft image, facilitating exchange programs, building academic linkages, promoting R&D, and establishing cultural hubs. This leads to the search for information about the country, i.e., knowing the language, traditions, norms, etc. The pyramid's foundation is consciousness/awareness about the country, i.e., media awareness, international status, role in regional or international platforms, global outreach, programs etc. The approach reflects the general structural hierarchy of



building relationships or developing cultural connections with states. These factors are also imperative to counter common menaces with a forward-looking spirit between countries.

The pyramid approach can be best explained by applying it to the case study of Central-South Asian inter-connectivity. From enhancing awareness to the practical implementation of a set of guidelines, South and Central countries can indulge in a win-win game.

Pakistan and Central Asian Countries: Assessing Benefits of Broader Alignment

Central Asian countries ambitious implementation of market orientated economic policies and reforms has provided Pakistan and the neighboring states great opportunity to collaborate in various dimensions. In this context, it is pertinent to discuss the structural economic indicators of Central Asia that has made the region to diversify its economic patterns along with it. There are many policy imperatives for the region that can provide feasible diplomatic and economic connectivity options. Central Asian Republics are geo-strategically connected with Pakistan, Afghanistan, China (particularly Xinjiang), Iran and Turkey. Unfortunately, due to security related conditions in Afghanistan, cooperation has been limited. Nonetheless, the way for the landlocked region to adopt the policy of openness and integrate more with neighboring states has been paved with the idea of Central-South Asian cooperation.

On the other hand, the BRI and China-Pakistan Economic Corridors (CPEC) have also pushed Pakistan for enhanced economic engagement with regional states. These projects of inclusive economic growth will open many doors for joint collaboration. Academic coopera-

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tion, enhancing the spheres of trade, business, investment and entrepreneurship, diversifying energy routes, improving security architecture and physical infrastructure are the possible fields of partnership. Pakistan is also a member of the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), which with the collaboration of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), will allow or offer many projects of strategic collaboration in the region.

Conclusion

The above analysis intended to give a comprehensive analysis of regional cooperation by taking Central-South Asia as a case study by discussing the role of Uzbekistan. The study also highlighted the benefits of Pakistan and Central Asian cooperation. It can be seen that Central Asian and South Asian countries can increase people-to-people contacts and revive the centuries-old historical ties. In a nutshell, there is huge untapped potential lies in both regions. By operationalizing all the above-mentioned options, Central- South Asia could explore new ventures for economic cooperation, political integration, mutual trust & respect and lead the multilateral partnership to an unprecedented level.

Endnotes

- 1 Baloch, Muhammad Saad. (2018). Historical and Cultural Linkages Between Pakistan and Central Asia.
- 2 Taimur Akram, Khalid, (2021): *The Dynamic Role of Uzbekistan for Interregional Cooperation between Central and South Asia*, Center for Global & Strategic Studies (CGSS), Islamabad: <https://cgss.com.pk/paper/pdf/The-Dynamic-Role-of-Uzbekistan-for-Interregional-Cooperation-between-Central-and-South-Asia.pdf> : 26th July 2021.
- 3 Mc Clellan M., Public Diplomacy in the Context of Traditional Diplomacy. www.publicdiplomacy.org/45.htm, (23.04.2005)