



India's strategic partnership with Uzbekistan challenge and opportunities

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Abstract: India and Uzbekistan have a long history of cultural relations and whereas more recently the strategic partnership has been further entrenched. This study surveys the trajectory, present standing, and prospect of relations between the two countries against the backdrop of geopolitical changes in Central Asia. Uzbekistan is at the centre of an Indian pivot in support of other growing initiatives—such as the Connect Central Asia Policy and the International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC), being more significant in relation to regional connectivity, energy security, and counter-terrorism cooperation. The other areas of cooperation may include trade, defence, education, and digital technology. The authors point out that absence of direct access routes and geopolitical competition from China and Russia, as well as institutional limitations, continue to hinder these opportunities. Using a qualitative method of inquiry, research draws on academic literature, policy papers, and government reports to address strategic alignments and gaps. Cooperative opportunities in renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, and soft-power diplomacy are also considered. The paper ends with some concrete policy recommendations that can help both countries address regional challenges and build a strong and strategic partnership that benefits both and is based on shared regional goals.

Keywords: India–Uzbekistan relations, Strategic partnership, Central Asia, Connect Central Asia Policy, International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC), Regional connectivity, Energy security, Counter-terrorism cooperation, Geopolitical competition, Soft-power diplomacy

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INTRODUCTION

In fact, India's approach to Central Asia is not only looking back to the ground that it has covered so far but continues to change an important aspect of the renewed foreign policy towards Central Asian states. Among the five Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan occupies a very propitious place, considering both geographical centrality and population size as well as historical importance. Within just a few months after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and independence of Uzbekistan in 1991, India came forward to develop a multi-pronged partnership with the country. The foundation of this partnership defies ancient cultural and historical ties, but has transformed into a modern strategic one based on trade, defence cooperation, connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges.

The growing importance of the partnership flows with wider geopolitical changes taking place in the region. Increasingly receding American interest in Central Asia, rising Chinese presence through the BRI, and the continued but sometimes fleeting presence of Russia in the region have given rise to a very dynamic regional scenario (Bhatia R., 2021). For them, the former would not only be an ever-valuable bilateral partner but also the doorway towards entering the bigger Central Asian market and an ally in regional security efforts. On their part, both countries have shared security concerns regarding terrorism,

extremism, and instability emanating from Afghanistan, which would be the core steels of their strategic dialogue (PK PK Gupta, 2023).

In 2012, India initiated its 'Connect Central Asia' policy aimed at rejuvenating the state of affairs in the region as far as engagement is concerned in political, economic, and cultural arenas. Among the major players that came out of this, Uzbekistan was inserted due to its openness towards reforms, as well as the increased interest that India displays in about alternative energy markets and overland connectivity routes. Various lofty visits and accords have been passed by in the years after the foreign ministers' meeting on issues as variegated as pharmaceuticals, IT, agriculture, and educational cooperation. Mostly notably during Prime Minister and his trip to Tashkent in 2015 and the visit of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to India in 2018-both sides reiterated their commitment towards a geopolitically much-abiding strategic engagement (A Bhaduri, 2022).

However, still there are challenges in the way of these relationships evolving to their full potential. Foremost among them is connectivity. This is more so considering the fact that India and Uzbekistan have no direct land borders and that the overland routes between the two countries are impeded by political and security problems arising from Afghanistan and Pakistan. India has invested in projects, such as Chabahar Port in Iran, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), but operationalizing these routes is slow and complicated owing to geopolitical friction and infrastructural constraints (PK Gupta, 2023). Furthermore, India has to fight bitter competition from China which has been pampering Uzbekistan with money and infrastructural promises far outweighing that of India.



Figure 1: India's strategic connectivity routes to Central Asia, including Chabahar Port and the INSTC

AIM

The present study deals with the intensifying strategic partnership between India and Uzbekistan with

respect to motivations, achievements, challenges and future perspectives. It studies the manner in which both countries are addressing the changing geopolitical landscape especially concerning a multipolar Asia and the situation after the Cumulative realization. The research underlines India's desire to expand into Central Asia and Uzbekistan's need to diversify beyond Russia and China. Developments in trade, defence, cultural diplomacy and connectivity have been the focus of analysis, while some major obstacles stand in the way, like limited transport links, and bureaucracy. Suggestions are also made that would strengthen cooperation in green energy, education, and technology to further regional stability and economic growth for both countries.

OBJECTIVES

The focus of study includes charting the evolution of the strategic partnership between India and Uzbekistan in the context of shifting regional and global dynamics. Areas assessed are trade, security, energy, and culture, achievement versus gap status. The research also looks into some of the major impediments, such as poor connectivity, the degree of China influence through BRI, and roles played by Russia and the U.S. Another set of findings point towards underutilized opportunities in renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, education, and digital collaboration. All this would lead to action recommendations for strengthening bilateral relations and promoting a more inclusive and sustainable development of the region through strategic cooperation and mutual advantage.

HYPOTHESIS

Indeed, the strategic partnership between India and Uzbekistan is promising but not yet fully matured. This study hypothesizes that from this goodwill and both sides' diplomacy efforts, the actual level of bilateral cooperation is much less than should be expected from this potential. One of the majors hypothesize in this study is that limited direct land and air connectivity plus bottlenecks due to bureaucracy drastically limit the scope of engagement both in trade and investment, and cultural-exchange as well.

Another key hypothesis is that India's soft power attributes-such as education, cinema, and Ayurveda-are rather underemployed in Uzbekistan where they would otherwise produce potent people-to-people prescription. Notably, it is expected within the brittle framework of this complementary strategic engagement that such improvements could bring about an increase in India cross-linking areas of digital infrastructure, green energy and regional security collaboration.

Further, this paper argues that the expanding presence of China, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, imposes a competing constraint, but also an opportunity for India to provide a transparent and sustainable alternative. Hence, the hypothesis is that, with improved connectivity, diversification of cooperation, and strategic clarity, India and Uzbekistan can evolve their relationship into a model for regional collaboration in Central Asia.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

To appreciate the very essence and nature of the strategic partnership between India and Uzbekistan, one must review the geopolitical, economic, or historical forces that directly influence bilateral relations. This section outlines some of the important theoretical concepts and policy frameworks that determine Indian

outreach to Central Asia today in relation to Uzbekistan and its foreign policy evolution and strategic implications.

The Nature of Strategic Partnerships in Foreign Policy

Strategic partnerships are arrangements among the concerned States geared toward enhancing their long-standing cooperation normally in the sphere of defence, trade, energy, and technology, entirely on the basis of mutual interest and trust (R KOPARKAR, 2024). A fundamental difference here pertains to the observation that these strategic partnerships do not impose any such strong idiom in respect to their substantiation as articles of military usage. In countries like India, such partnerships forgo foreign policies in favour of multipolar objectives harnessing their autonomy in foreign affairs. In order to further the core goals of the two states, Uzbekistan does so based on the common concerns of security in the region, economic diversification, and balancing the influences of external powers such as China and Russia.

The Connect Central Asia Policy of India

The Connect Central Asia policy was formally established by India in 2012 with the idea of reviving its ties with the five Central Asian republics and strengthening those ties with particular mention of Uzbekistan. The actions being taken under that policy include promoting political cooperation, encouraging economic collaboration, strengthening cultural ties, and cooperating in security matters (A Bhaduri, 2022). These efforts were also aimed at overcoming India's physical disconnection from the region and further undertaking infrastructure projects of the multilateral dimension, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and developing Chabahar Port in Iran.

There was a slow start, but over the last few years, rising political interest by means of the regular India-Central Asia Summits and reciprocal visits and interaction at the highest levels has injected new energy into the vision. Given its geographical centrality, economic potential, and receptiveness to Indian engagement, Uzbekistan has been identified as a major fulcrum of this policy addressing India's outreach (AS Sarma, 2024).

Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Realignment

After President Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed power in 2016, regional connectivity, economic liberalization, and multisector diplomacy acquired priority. The former regime had, till then, observed a policy of isolationism; thus, under Mirziyoyev's leadership, new partnerships are being actively sought to diversify beyond traditional allies like Russia and China. On the other hand, India can supplement Uzbekistan's modernization efforts as a good partner without politicizing the relationship (Bhatia R., 2021).

After Uzbekistan engages India, the consequent strengthening is expected to go mostly in Favor of its broader vision of a neutral yet influential player in Central Asia. The rise in Uzbekistan's interest in multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), to which India and Uzbekistan belong, will serve as additional platforms for inductive cooperation and dialogue.

Multipolarity and Regional Balance in the Geopolitical Context

Central Asia lies at the crossroads of competing interests of major powers like Russia, China, U.S.,

Turkey, and increasingly India. India does not seek to rival Uzbekistan for direct interests, but to keep it within the ambit of its voice to things regional. Strong bilateral links to Uzbekistan will position India to influence a key area of extended neighbourhood policy (LR Choudhary, 2022).

This balancing act reflects the larger theoretical debates on multipolarity, wherein middle powers like India would prefer to hedge their bets by creating diversified partnerships, rather than allowing dependency on one single power bloc. Thus, the India-Uzbekistan relationship can be viewed as an instance of pragmatic regionalism-thus, raising the potential for issue-based cooperation, rather than rigid ideological alliances.

Cultural and Civilizational Linkages

The historical contacts, along with the soft power strength, marry India and Uzbekistan for strategic purposes. The historical, cultural linkages with Babur, linked to the Mughal Empire, Sufi traditions, and ancient trade routes like the Silk Road, are all symbols of that sustainable long-standing cultural connectivity. These bring goodwill and familiarity into contemporary time for modern diplomacy (PK Gupta, 2023).

India has also brought in some civilizational aspect by providing scholarships, capacity-building programs, and cultural events organized in Uzbekistan. Institutions which are extremely pertinent to promoting Indian languages, arts, and philosophy are those such as the Lal Bahadur Shastri Centre for Indian Culture in Tashkent.

Soft Power at World Stage



Figure 2: India's soft power elements active in Uzbekistan

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic partnerships are gradually becoming a prime framework within which elaborate contemporary international relations are taking shape; partnerships becoming vital particularly for emerging powers like India that are seeking to entrench their influence with multi-vector countries, such as Central Asia. As Pant

and Raghavan (2022) elaborate, India's policy towards Central Asia matured significantly through the launching of the "Connect Central Asia" policy in 2012 that aimed to develop bilateral comprehensive political dialogue, trade, energy, and cultural ties. Within this founding policy, the momentum surrounding the practical application indeed gained more ground after 2015 under a new politically situated Prime Minister Modi and orientation in foreign policy toward more extended neighbourhoods.

Even as above, literature also emphasizes the earliest historical and civilizational links that have formed the basis of collaboration between the two countries. According to Bhatia (2021), the legacy of Babur and the common heritage through Silk Road contacts created a unique cultural bond not found in many bilateral relations. However, post-independence diplomatic engagement picked up since 1991 as both countries resorted to frequent high-level visits and moved closer within multilateral organizations.

Various scholars denote that logistical barriers and geopolitical rivalries are perennial hurdles. According to Chatterjee (2023), limited land connectivity between India and Uzbekistan amid poor relations with Pakistan hampers any economic cooperation between Delhi and Tashkent. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) along with India's investment in Chabahar Port in Iran will become major alternatives in this context. "Lestry (2023) asserts that both nations are aligned as far as intent is concerned, but execution tends to be constrained by infrastructural and bureaucratic impediments," as per Gupta (2023).

Developing soft power aspects in Uzbekistan is equally important but less explored. According to Sharma (2022), there is positive visibility for India in the region by way of Bollywood, yoga, and scholarships, but none of these has, so far, found a place in formal diplomacy. Less engagement from Indian universities and cultural institutions has kept the educational and people-to-people linkage only partially evolved. As Uzbekistan now embarks on the path of modernization and youth empowerment, there opens up a huge window for soft diplomacy through digital education, capacity building, and innovation tie-ups.

Even with the increasing academic interest on India becoming a game-changer in Central Asia, specific study on India-Uzbekistan relationship is still under-researched. Most of the studies attempted to generalize Uzbekistan within the broader scope of regional studies, thereby obscuring the relational dynamics. It tries to fill that gap by evaluating India-Uzbekistan relations after 2020 with a particular focus on the changes brought by global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the re-entry of the Taliban in Afghanistan into the strategic priorities of both countries.

METHODOLOGY

Qualifying this research involves the use of qualitative procedures for evolving strains from the strategic partnership recently forged between India and Uzbekistan. Methodology revolves around secondary data analyses to give a holistic understanding of the several dimensions: diplomatic, economic, and indeed, geopolitical aspects of bilateral relations.

Research Design

The research design employed in the study is descriptive and analytical. The intent is not to test a hypothesis but to understand the patterns, motivations, and strategic thrusts in India-Uzbekistan

relationships, which makes this research ideal for geopolitical studies when context and interpretation matters most (A Bhaduri, 2022).

Sources of Data Collection

The study also relies on secondary sources, which include:

- Peer-reviewed articles from Google Scholar
- Reports of India's Ministry of External Affairs
- Press releases and official statements of Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Publications from such multilateral think tanks like ORF and Carnegie India
- Current events from news portals on bilateral visits and agreements

A blend of historical as well as contemporaneous data is ensured with this (R Mourya, G Diwan, 2024).

Inclusion Criteria

Databases for data sourced were selected with relevance, credibility, or recency in consideration. All post-2021 literature was made imperative in order to maintain freshness at the time of writing, given the reforms that Uzbekistan has been making with President Mirziyoyev and the revived Central Asia policy for India (S Singh, 2022).

Analytical Framework

Thematic analysis was used to bring forward key themes such as connectivity, trade, defence cooperation, and regional diplomacy. Patterns were synthesized to interpret a way forwards-strategic intent, policy direction, and existing challenges. A comparative assessment with others of the regional actors such as China was also considered.

Limitations

Lack of primary data, such as expert interviews or field research, has limited the study. Such constraints have largely been due to geographic reasons and limited access. Language barriers for accessing Uzbek sources pose a constraint as well. However, translation of official releases and relying on reputable English language analyses help in mitigation (S Singh, 2022)



Figure 3: Timeline of major India-Uzbekistan diplomatic milestones (1991–2024)

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Analysing India in the context of other important actors in the region, particularly China and Russia, is necessary in order to comprehend India's strategic position in Uzbekistan. This part carries out a comparative study of outreach efforts and investment levels in India with those of these preeminent actors in order to better gauge both strengths and weaknesses of India's standing.

India versus China: Conflicting Visions of Central Asia

China has emerged as a colossus in Uzbekistan by investing billions of BRI dollars in infrastructure, energizing, and transporting corridors (G Chen, 2023). India is far from such colossal investments and concentrates on pharmaceuticals, IT, and soft infrastructure such as capacity building in education (S Singh, 2022). China offers quick money and massive physical infrastructure, while India pulls countries with its democratic model, cultural diplomacy, and long-standing partnership. However, more often than not, the Indian visibility gets diminished due to lack of scale in finances and direct connectivity.

New India and Russia: The Historical Perspective

Uzbekistan became very dependent on Russia historically because of the long Soviet past, cultural ties, and military cooperation. Compared to these, there is less of an economic tie, but there is defence cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia along with a labour migration tie with Russia (S Mallik, M Singh, 2022). India, however, was kept in the category of a partner in new technologies, education, and other foreign policy choices that hardly count as hegemonic ally in any terms. India does not have any institutional depth developed in the course of decades, unlike Russia.

A Diplomat's Footprint and Network to the Public

However, worthwhile establishing some of its major incursions into cultural diplomacy activities, with the Indian Cultural Centre having virtual operations in Tashkent, and India's scholarships now being more commonly associated with the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme as India's

blossoming knowledge in the public consciousness with Uzbekistan-for-Russia-and-China-kind-of-import, meaning some limited media presence and fewer high-visibility projects although (AS Sarma, 2024). It is now a matter of amplifying people-to-people initiatives, joint ventures, and regional forums, moving in the direction of strategic parity.

Strategic Leverage: Security and Stability

India's dumb leverage will be because of its originality as a responsible and stable regional actor India is having. There were coinciding interests of India and Uzbekistan in matters related to terrorism, radicalization, and instability in Afghanistan. So, joint military exercises and intelligence-sharing initiatives have paved the way for bilateral defence cooperation (S Singh, 2022). Within the region, while the economic leverage of China and military hold of Russia characterize it, India's balanced and security-minded approach could give it longer-term strategic value for Uzbekistan. In short, although India is lagging with regard to investment volumes and logistical access as compared to those put by China or Russia, it earns significant goodwill and potential for strategic partnerships in the niche. The hurdle before India is to leverage its soft power and trust-based diplomacy into enduring, large-scale strategic engagement.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATION

Even if India and Uzbekistan have opened up prospects of engagement that show considerable promise, a rich and multifaceted array of challenges has conspired to keep these relations within the limits of their full potential. Logistics, diplomacy, institutional limitations, and external geopolitical threats are among major issues that inhibit effective progress towards realizable strategic goals.

Absence of Direct Connectivity

This is one of the most serious drawbacks: there are no direct transport links between the countries. For instancing, India needs, thus, to look for third-party roads through Iran (via the Chabahar Port) or international North-South Transport Corridor for the route to reach Central Asian nations. Both these paths still remain under development and face political uncertainties (PK Gupta, 2023). Logistical challenges are crucial owing to the fragile routes traversing through volatile regions like Afghanistan.

A Jagged Edge Geopolitics

The BRI has penetrated Uzbekistan to such an extent that investment amounts exceed \$10 billion. Meanwhile, Russia is trying not to let slip away the hold it has acquired historically in the area. Compared to these contenders, India's economic and diplomatic presence is not significant. As a result, from an Indian perspective, the geopolitical rivalry is bound to complicated efforts in presenting a more viable strategic alternative (AA Akhlaque, 2022).

Bureaucratic and Institutional Hurdles

In both India and China, bureaucratic hurdles are faced in common and act as a deterrent for the timely implementation of agreements and the attraction of private investment. There are many meetings and discussions of the very highest levels, which happen often and are mostly successful, but implementation

lagging so far behind on the ground. Wall Street Journal reported that Indian companies were facing diverse regulatory and tax-related hurdles in Uzbekistan, which dampen investor confidence (Bhatia R., 2021).

Cultural and Language Barriers

The India-Uzbekistan ties started in ancient times, and still, for the average Uzbek citizen, India remains alien and underdeveloped in culture. Language thus becomes a serious handicap in the promotion of people-to-people contacts, educational exchange, and tourism. India has established cultural diplomacy all over the world, but therein its voice has been ineffectual in Central Asia till date (AS Sarma, 2024).

Security and Regional Instability

Instability in the neighbouring and war-torn Afghanistan has been a common concern. Regional fights along the southern borders of Uzbekistan impede attractive trade routes and discourage investment. For India, this essentially means that reaching out through Afghanistan is fraught with dangers and impediments itself (R Mourya, G Diwan, 2024).

These diverse challenges must thus be viewed collectively requiring a sync of infrastructure investment, cultural diplomacy, legal reforms, and multilateral engagement. The Indian-Uzbek partnership can therefore hope to evolve from potential to performance.

OPPORTUNITIES AND WAY FORWARD

Enhance Renewable Energy Collaboration

Uzbekistan is pursuing alternatives to fossil fuels with vigorous investments in renewable sources, especially solar energy. India, with its advances under the International Solar Alliance, has both the technological knowledge and institutional mechanisms to work with Uzbekistan to drive such a green transition (MB Yusupovich, RN Kadirovich, 2022). Such collaborations could be flagship cooperation projects between the two countries under which they would be meeting their international climate commitments while strengthening economic ties.² Amplifying Digital and Technological Fraternities Both national-territorial configurations represent rapidly emergent dimensions in the digital domain. IT and fintech systems in India would serve as a perfect model for the digital modernization initiative in Uzbekistan. Indian businesses might also help digitize delivering public services, improve digital literacy, and co-develop e-governance platforms. Projects, such as creating joint innovation hubs or tech parks- at Tashkent in collaboration with India, can also bring along long-term shared benefits (AS Sarma, 2024).

Strengthening Education and Cultural Diplomacy

India would have significant soft power in Uzbekistan, mostly through Bollywood and its traditional medicine practices. However, there are avenues for deeper and better structured engagement. Increasing scholarship programs for Uzbek students, enlarging the number of Indian cultural centres, and facilitating academic exchanges in languages, political science, and international relations would buy goodwill and people-to-people trust (MB Yusupovich, RN Kadirovich, 2022).

Gaining from Multilateral Connectivity Initiatives

India's investments in Chabahar Port and membership in the International North-South Transport Corridor are now opening up a strategic access for Uzbekistan and Central Asia, keeping India unaffected from trade routes across Pakistan or Afghanistan. It sets a good example of how to enhance trade logistics, which India and Uzbekistan can now preside over-their corridors towards the activation and offers lobbying for regional transport protocols to ease cross-border movement (PK Gupta, 2023).

Scaling up on Health and Pharmaceutical Cooperation

The Indian pharmaceutical industry is already in Uzbekistan, bringing initial cheap yet quality medicines. Therefore, scaling this collaboration would need the establishment of manufacturing units, setting up research hubs, and launching telemedicine platforms. This brings India to a good position in future strategic health partnerships with Uzbekistan, especially since Uzbekistan aims to modernize its healthcare system (Bhatia R., 2021).

CONCLUSION

The strategic relationship between India and Uzbekistan has moved ahead steadily from an emblematic cultural one into a more pragmatically and multidimensional relationship. Thus, it would provide a fruitful ground for India with its efforts under the "Connect Central Asia" policy and Uzbekistan's independent and multi-vector foreign policy in areas of trade, security, renewable energy, and regional connectivity. They both understand the importance of coordinating activities to bring stability in Central Asia, new markets, as well as counter-acting the external influence from regional powers such as China, Russia (AA Akhlaque, 2022). Strategic Importance of Bilateral Relationship India, thus, emerges as a quintessential door for Uzbekistan into Central Asia. It opens up India to Afghanistan and exposes much of Eurasia to it.

Strategic subjects like defence cooperation, counter-terrorism, and infrastructure development have a long-term promise under projects such as Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (PK Gupta, 2023).



Figure 4: SWOT analysis of the India-Uzbekistan strategic partnership

Final Recommendations

Immediate measures would be to remove bureaucratic bottlenecks and invest in dedicated connectivity infrastructure with India has so much to offer for a better relationship with Uzbekistan. Strengthening the partnership through education, digital trade, and clean energy diversification would also help broaden the horizon of collaboration and further expand India's soft power in the region. Joint task forces and think tanks could also be called upon to engage in the strategic plan development.

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