



STRATEGIC PIVOT WESTWARD: THE IMPORTANCE OF UZBEKISTAN FROM THE LENS OF INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The re-emergence of Central Asia as a tactical backyard to the modern international relations has brought with it a fresh analytical focus on the bilateral and multilateral interactions that powers in the region and the world at large have with the states within the former Soviet space. Uzbekistan has become one of these, now especially consequential actors because of the position it holds at the geographical and political centre in Central Asia. Uzbekistan is a significant point in the strategic game of large power calculation due to its large population, a critical location in the middle of trans-regional connectivity routes, and a foreign policy that is increasingly liberalised to diversified external relationships since 2016, under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Luzianin 2019; Rashid 2020). Here, India has acquired a commendable depth of involvement with Uzbekistan due to the convergence of interests comprising connectivity, counterterrorism, energy, trading, and similar needs necessitating to deal with an unstable regional environment, which is brought about by the re-entry of Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

Literature on India's Central Asia policy has had the tendency to treat the region as a whole and has focused more on macro-structures like the Connect Central Asia Policy or the larger Indo-Pacific strategic framework and not disaggregating the importance of individual state partners (Pant 2017; Singh 2020). The strategic value of Uzbekistan in the Indian foreign policy calculus has therefore not been examined in detail as it deserves. The India-Uzbekistan relationship has often been recognised in passing by existing scholarship, but rarely has it been exposed to comparative or analytical examination. This article attempts to fill that gap by placing Uzbekistan as a separate and structurally important constituent in Indian foreign policy construction, as opposed to a marginal component of a generalised Central Asia relationship.

The main thesis here is that Uzbekistan is occupied by the growing strategic salience of the country within the external relations of India, which is simultaneously both geopolitical and economic as well as normative. Geopolitically, the central location of Uzbekistan to the region, its common interests on the issue of the state of Afghanistan, and even its ambitions to diminish its reliance on both Russia and China provide structural chances for India to further a bilateral relationship. Economically, the reform path and growing market of Uzbekistan, in tandem with India's interests in connectivity corridors between South Asia and Central Asia, further make the bilateral relationship a mechanism through which the region is able to be economically integrated. The two states are normatively similar in their dedication to strategic autonomy,

multipolarity and a rules-based international system that does not subject smaller and medium powers to the will of great powers.

The issue of whether India and Uzbekistan have common interests is not the main research question that guides this article, but rather how these interests are translated into foreign policy priorities and structural factors that facilitate and limit the enhancement of the bilateral relationship. The article goes on to formulate an analytical structure in the analysis of medium-power engagement in post-Soviet Central Asia and subsequently scores India in terms of strategic posture and Uzbekistan in terms of foreign policy orientation, after which a comparative analysis of convergence and divergence and future areas of collaboration is done. The paper is based on the qualitative approach that utilises secondary sources, policy papers, official statements, and empirical evidence. Instead of contrasting the bilateral relationship with the other Indian relationships, the article tries to trace the logic of its strategy and assess the circumstances under the influence of which it can be intensified or inhibited.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH CENTRAL ASIA

The serious analysis of the Indian approach to Uzbekistan should be based on the wider interpretation of how India conceptualises its involvement in Central Asia as a region and with medium-sized post-Soviet states specifically. Historically, the framework of the foreign policy development in India has been shaped by two principles: strategic autonomy, which takes its roots in the experience of non-alignment and post-colonial sovereignty; and issue-based multilateralism, which allows flexibly engaging with diverse partners without engaging in hierarchical relationships (Mohan 2017; Pant and Passi 2021). These principles are not just rhetorical but have practical implications on the way India relates to the regional partners, especially on matters that involve Central Asia, where there is great power rivalry between Russia, China, and the United States, raising important structural pressures.

The analytical framework used in this paper is based on three dimensions of foreign policy involvement, which are especially applicable to the Indian relations with Uzbekistan. The first one is connectivity involving both physical infrastructure, such as transport corridors, rail routes, and access ports, and institutional connectivity in trade agreements, economic relations, and development systems. The second is the security cooperation, especially in the area of counterterrorism, border control as well as the handling of instability arising out of Afghanistan. The third is normative alignment, which



encompasses a common stand on sovereignty, non-interference, multipolarity, and also the reformation of multilateral institutions (Acharya 2014; Ikenberry 2011). These three dimensions are an extensive prism through which to examine the strategic significance of Uzbekistan in Indian foreign policy and to determine where structural conditions favour increased engagement and where they cause tension or constraint.

The structural asymmetries that define the bilateral relationship are also given attention by this framework. India is a vast economy and an upcoming global superpower with ambitions of being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and taking up leadership positions in the world government. Uzbekistan is a medium-sized economy but with a relatively small international footprint, despite being the most populous state in Central Asia. These imbalances define the dynamics of interactions in a non-direct manner. India needs to find a way around a potential hegemonic mindset in a region that still has memories of previous oppression by foreign powers. Uzbekistan, in its turn, will have to weigh the advantages of closer integration with India against the relationships that it has with Russia and China, which have a much more structural position in the region. This pattern of asymmetric yet mutually advantageous interaction is crucial to understanding why the India-Uzbekistan relationship has been formed as it has and what limitations and opportunities it has on its future course.

Furthermore, it is analytically convenient to draw the line between what this article refers to as declaratory engagement and structural engagement. Declaratory engagement is defined as the official utterances, meetings, collective declarations, and bilateral accords that indicate the diplomatic facade of the relationship. Structural engagement is said to be the background pattern of trade, investment, people-to-people contact, security engagement, and institutional engagement, which provides the relationship with a substantive dimension. The major flaws of the analysis concerning the policy of Central Asia in India are the tendency to pay close attention to the declaratory aspect and underestimating the structural aspects which restrict the application of this policy. This article uses the two lenses to the India-Uzbekistan relationship in order to give a more holistic view.

3. INDIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN UZBEKISTAN

The four main axes through which it is possible to analyse the strategic interests of India in Uzbekistan include geopolitical positioning, imperatives of connectivity, counterterrorist and security cooperation, and economic and energy interests. All these axes have become increasingly salient on the past decade as both nations have made great transitions on their foreign policy orientations, and the regional environment is being redefined by the reappearance of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the advancing competition between China and the United States in the acquisition of power across the Indo-Pacific and Eurasian highways.

The geopolitical aspect of India's interest in Uzbekistan is influenced mostly by the overall Central Asian region dynamics and India's wish to continue having a significant strategic presence in its extended neighbourhood. To India, Central Asia is not only a peripheral region but a region of historical civilizational attachment and current strategic importance. One of the most significant trade and cultural linkages of pre-modern times was the land routes connecting the subcontinent of India to Central Asia, and their modern-day revival in the shape of connectivity corridors is a major strategic prospect. As a state in the very middle of the Central Asia region and the state with the most assertive foreign policy participation, Uzbekistan is an obvious target for Indian interests in Central Asia. The fact that India is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where Uzbekistan has hosted key summits, is an institutional arena within which the two nations can interact on the issue of regional security and economic collaboration (Luzianin 2019).

The most direct impact of connectivity to the strategic interests of India is arguably the first one. India is not directly landlocked to Central Asia owing to the political geography of Pakistan, which has effectively blocked the overland passage of South Asia to the northwest. This limitation has triggered India to invest in alternative connectivity routes, the most significant ones are the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) that links India with Iran to the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the project of the Chabahar Port in Iran that would allow India to use the maritime-to-land route bypassing Pakistan (Singh 2020). The involvement of Uzbekistan in these connectivity systems is not trivial, as it will make Tashkent a possible hub of Indian trade and logistics entering the Central Asian interior. The active process of regional integration and the investment made by the government of Uzbekistan in the reform of domestic infrastructure have turned Uzbekistan into an even more practical partner of these corridors.

The third and more significant dimension of Indian interest in Uzbekistan is security cooperation, especially with regard to similarities in approaches to the common problem of Afghan instability and transnational terrorism. The fact that the Taliban came to power once again in Kabul in 2021 dramatically changed the security situation in the region and generated new urgency in the context of issues of terrorism and extremism as well as in border security that both India and Uzbekistan have to deal with. Cross-border terrorism originating on the territory of Afghanistan is a long-standing concern of India, and Uzbekistan is concerned with the spread of radical ideology and the threat of destabilization of the southern border. Such a common perception of threats forms a firm foundation of security collaboration, such as the exchange of intelligence, counterterrorism drills, and coordination on a multilateral platform like the SCO (Rashid 2020; Jaishankar 2020).

The economic and energy interests of India in Uzbekistan are predetermined by the development of the industrial base of the country, its hydrocarbon deposits, and its consumer market. The bilateral trade between India and Uzbekistan has continued to increase steadily, yet it is not as high as its structure would be considering the above connectivity barriers. The pharmaceutical industry, the information technology industry



and the education sector of India have been experiencing increasing market opportunities in Uzbekistan, and the Indian firms have already been interested in the mineral resources and agricultural products of Uzbekistan. The ambitious economic liberalisation agenda of the Uzbek government since 2016, such as the opening of its closed currency market and privatisation of state companies, has introduced new opportunities to investments, which Indian companies have been advised to consider. The possibility of the growth of trade and investment has always been emphasised in Narendra Modi's and later Indian diplomatic visits to Tashkent as one of the main focuses of the bilateral relations (Singh 2020; Pant 2022).

4. UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY ORIENTATION AND INDIA

The significance of Uzbekistan to India can only be understood after a close scrutiny on the foreign policy orientation of Uzbekistan and where India fits. The Uzbekistan foreign policy was significantly changed after the death of President Islam Karimov in 2016 and the takeover of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. In contrast to the secluded nature of the Karimov era, and the frequent conflict with the neighbours and the inclination to the strongest suspicion of the external forces, the Mirziyoyev era can be described as open-minded, reconciled regionally, and actively seeks to establish various external relationships (Rashid 2020). This change has given India great new prospects of getting deeper into the interaction with Uzbekistan.

The foreign policy of Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev is structured on a number of defining principles that provide natural convergence with the Indian system of thought. The former is the adherence to multi-vector diplomacy i. e. the Uzbekistan intentionally establishes relations with a wide circle of external forces in order not to be overdependent on one power. This very principle is similar to that of the strategic autonomy of India. Similar to India, which avoids dependence on any specific policy by hedging between the two superpowers, Uzbekistan employs diversified foreign relations in resisting the structural attractiveness of Russian and Chinese dominance in the area. India is a strong yet non-threatening external partner with no past record of imperialism in the area, which makes it an appealing choice to Uzbekistan, which wants to increase its diplomatic leeway (Luzianin 2019).

The second principle that is driving the foreign policy orientation in Uzbekistan is its regional connectivity and economic integration. Uzbekistan, under Mirziyoyev, has been engaged in working towards the normalisation of its relations with its neighbouring Central Asian states, and restored the differences between the Karimov and Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan and took a lead in regional cooperation efforts. This regional connectivity agenda fits perfectly well with India's interests to come up with trans regional corridors that will connect South Asia and Central Asia. The active regional policy of Uzbekistan opens the prospect of Tashkent becoming a node in the connectivity plan of India, offering the institutional and logistical base through which the Indian trade and investment may enter the larger Central Asian market (Singh 2020).

The security interests of Uzbekistan also make structural convergences with India. Uzbekistan has been worried just as India regarding the destabilising impacts of Afghan instability, transnational terrorism, and the spread of radical ideology. One of the few Central Asian states that has been less ambivalent in its relationship to the Taliban, Uzbekistan has expressed its favour towards a stable, inclusive, and terror-free Afghanistan. Such common grounds in Afghan security provide the ground of bilateral and multilateral coordination in systems like the SCO, where both India and Uzbekistan are members. The possibility of intelligence sharing, the joint training activities, and the organised diplomatic stances on Afghanistan is also a major aspect of the bilateral relationship that is expected to become increasingly important (Rashid 2020; Jaishankar 2020).

One should not undervalue the cultural and civilizational aspect of Uzbekistan-India interaction. The Uzbekistan region also hosts some of the most important Islamic civilisation sites, such as Samarkand and Bukhara that are large historical and cultural links with the Indian subcontinent. The Timurid era in specific was characterised by a large-scale cultural exchange between the Persianate courts of central Asia and the Mughal Empire in India. This common civilizational background offers a platform of people-to-people contact, a level of education exchange as well as give a platform of cultural diplomacy which may supplement or even enhance the more instrumentally focused side of the bilateral relationship. The great number of Muslims in India, the extensive academic involvement of the country in the history and culture of Central Asia, and its desire to use cultural diplomacy as a tool of soft power all point to the fact that the civilizational aspect is not just symbolic but can have practical diplomatic application.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN INDIA-UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS

The comparative analysis of the strategic interests of India and the foreign policy priorities of Uzbekistan, conducted systematically, indicates that there is a correlation between a high level of structural convergence and other areas of divergence and limitation of interest. Without comprehending both sides, both aspects would be crucial in the realistic evaluation of the bilateral relationship and its future direction.

The areas where the convergences are more evident include strategic autonomy, counterterrorism, and connectedness. India and Uzbekistan both use the styles of multi-vector diplomacy that are aimed at avoiding over-reliance on a single foreign force. Both fear being aligned to the great powers that will limit their independence in policy. The two encounter structural pressures of increasing assertiveness of China in their respective neighbourhoods, and both have incentives to pursue diversified partnerships to deal with such Pressure without necessarily confronting it. These convergences are not accidental but structural in the sense that they are founded in the geopolitical location of the two states, as well as in the similarities in their experiences of being influenced by the outside. They establish a natural foundation of a partnership of strategy beyond pompous statements.



The convergences are also strong in the field of counterterrorism and security in Afghanistan. India and Uzbekistan have a common interest in the form of having a stable, internationally recognized and terrorist free Afghanistan as a strategic need. Both of them have prominent interests in extremist infiltration of the area, and each has prior relationships with Afghan politicking actors that the Taliban takeover harmed. Their existence in the SCO gives them an institutional platform through which they can coordinate on such matters. India-Central Asia summits, such as the first India-Central Asia Summit in 2022, have established an additional multilateral venue to coordinate the positions on the issue of Afghan security and counterterrorism (Jaishankar 2020; Pant 2022).

The most economically significant is probably the connectivity convergence. India and Uzbekistan have powerful reasons to build the INSTC and the related corridors as an alternative to the Chinese-dominated or Chinese-controversial connectivity infrastructures. In the case of India, the corridors provide access Central Asian market in addition to decreasing strategic vulnerability. In the case of Uzbekistan, they offer alternative trade routes, which make it not very dependent on Russian and Chinese infrastructure. These mutually beneficial interests have resulted in an increasing practical collaboration in the field of logistics, customs procedures and harmonisation in the area of regulation. A trade house and direct logistic linkage between Indian and Uzbek business centres is a material aspect of this convergence.

Nevertheless, the structure of the relationship has significant structural limitations as well. A lack of direct overland connectivity due to the topography of Pakistan and Afghanistan greatly constrains the amount and the cost-efficiency of trade and investment between the two countries. Although the INSTC and Chabahar Port offer some partial replacement, they are not as competitive in bilateral trade compared to the direct land connectivity because of their length and costs incomparable to the bilateral trade between Uzbekistan and China and Russia. It is a structural limitation that bilateral diplomacy and institutional frameworks will be unable to conquer wholly without political normalisation between India and Pakistan.

The second limitation is that India and Uzbekistan have different relationships with Russia and China. Uzbekistan is thoroughly intertwined with Russian and Chinese economic and security systems, which are impossible to reproduce by India. Russian heritage of military equipment, training and doctrine in Uzbekistan, coupled with Chinese Belt and Road Initiative investments of extraordinary scale in Central Asia, implies that India is structurally disadvantaged in the degree of economic and security integration it can provide as an alternative to the Chinese. India and Uzbekistan trade together at the bilateral level is, however, very small compared to the trade between Uzbekistan and China. India can neither replace nor carry out these relations, and this limitation leads to the practical constraints of the bilateral strategic partnership.

Regardless of these differences, the overall balance of the comparison is that the relationship between India and

Uzbekistan has a strong structural basis and high growth prospects. These convergences are deep and structural and not superficial and conjunctural, and will probably grow stronger, as the two nations operate in a regional environment that is becoming shaped by great power rivalry, the instability in Afghanistan, and the growing significance of connectivity as a geopolitical tool.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S CENTRAL ASIA STRATEGY AND REGIONAL ORDER

The discussion of the Indian involvement in Uzbekistan has wider implications on the way India imagines its policy in Central Asia and the role played by medium-sized post-Soviet states in India's vision of the regional order. One of the salient implications is the fact that India needs to shift beyond declaratory interaction and invest in the structural aspects of its Central Asia relations. India has long been better at explaining strategic constructs, like the Connect Central Asia Policy and the overall vision of Indo-Pacific, than turning these constructs into a long-term economic and institutional presence. The India-Uzbekistan relationship indicates that in the event that India invests in structural engagement, even in terms of connectivity projects, educational exchanges, pharmaceutical exports, and security collaboration, the bilateral relationship would acquire a substantial depth.

The other implication is with regard to the role of connectivity as a strategic tool. The fact that India can hardly reach overland Central Asia through Pakistan has been a chronic limitation to its strategic approach to Central Asia. The Chabahar-INSTC route is a partial, but important, bypass to this limitation, and the Indian involvement with this route as a transit route is strategically significant to Uzbekistan. But this potential of connectivity cannot be fully achieved without continuous diplomatic, financial and institutional investment, which India has not always been able to provide. The only way that the INSTC can be transformed into a commercially feasible and strategically credible substitute to Chinese-controlled platforms is by making Uzbekistan a priority partner as opposed to being part of a generalised engagement of Central Asia.

It is also interesting to note the implications of the India-Uzbekistan relationship to the regional order. These two states also have the same inclination to have a multipolar regional order where no power has hegemonic control over Central Asia. The common ground of this taste generates the incentives of coordination on multilateral frameworks such as the SCO, the United Nations and bilateral and sub-regional dialogue structures. The problem is, however, that the process of converting the shared normative preferences into coordinated diplomatic action is limited by the varying structural positions of the two states towards Russia and China. Compared to Uzbekistan, India is more structurally separate in the relation of these powers, and, therefore, its ability to openly confront Russian or Chinese domination of the region is more significant than that of Uzbekistan. Such asymmetry needs to be handled with care in case India becomes a useful partner to Uzbekistan, and the relationship does not seem like a way to compete in the geopolitical arena.



The analysis also indicates the significance of soft power and people-to-people in India's involvement in Uzbekistan. The diaspora diplomacy, cultural institutions and educational scholarships of India have established networks of relationships, which outlive the cycles of government-to-government and offer a foundation of long-term further commitment to bilateral relations. The Indian scholarship programs of Uzbek students, the enhancement of the institutional relations between the Indian and Uzbek universities, and facilitating the cultural exchange activities can complement the more instrumentally focused aspects of the bilateral relationship and create the human capital for future engagement. These investments of soft power are not just complementary ones, but epitomise a long-term infrastructure that can keep the relationship alive during the time of political instability or diplomatic antagonism.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to prove that Uzbekistan has taken a new and unrecognised strategic role in the foreign policies of India, and the role has structural reasons that are bound to increase, but not decrease, over the next few decades. This has been analysed by constructing an analytical framework of India's Central Asia engagement, the Indian strategic interests in Uzbekistan on the parameters of geopolitics, connectivity, security, and economics, the foreign policy orientation of Uzbekistan as a whole, and a comparative analysis of both convergent and divergent aspects of the relationship between India and Uzbekistan.

The main results are tripled. To begin with, India and Uzbekistan have a complex of structural convergences in the areas of strategic autonomy, counterterrorism, connectivity, and interests in a multipolar regional order, which gives them a solid basis of further strategic cooperation. Such convergences are not only rhetoric, but are based on the geopolitical stance, perception of the threats, and developmental interests of the two states. Second, the relationship suffers significant structural limitations, first because there is no direct overland connectivity, the intensity of economic integration of Uzbekistan in Russia and China, and institutional constraints of the currently available multilateral platforms, which constrain the rate and level of bilateral interactions. Third, the growth potential of the relationship lies most in the sphere of connectivity, educational and cultural exchange, pharmaceutical trade, and security collaboration, and the potential has to be achieved by India through making the transition to the structural engagement that it has not made consistently in the course of the past.

The global theoretical impact of this analysis is the ability to illustrate that relationships between medium powers can possess strategic value that is not commensurate with their material value as perceived in the structural and regional sense. Uzbekistan is by no means a great power, and the relationship between India and Uzbekistan is not a global strategic alliance, the kind that India has with the United States or Russia. However, within the particular framework of India's Central Asia strategy, and the new competitive landscape of the Eurasian connectivity, the centrality of Uzbekistan, its

reformist foreign policy, and its similarly strategic tastes and preferences, it is an overvalued partner. This can only be acknowledged by breaking out of thinking in terms of great power and peripheral actor and focusing on the structural logics that constitute medium-sized states, such as Uzbekistan, to be consequential in certain regional circumstances.

The analysis proposes some practical priorities for policymakers. The INSTC and Chabahar-based connectivity infrastructure should also be considered an investment in a long-term strategic resource by India, where the Uzbek node is a priority resource. It must build educational, cultural and pharmaceutical diplomacy with Uzbekistan by establishing a structural relationship that can carry the relationship through political cycles. It must enhance security collaboration on Afghan-related terrorism, both on a bilateral basis and in the SCO. And it ought to come up with a more systematic engagement approach to Central Asia, which disaggregates the region and discerns what each state partnership is worth and Uzbekistan should be treated as a priority partner due to its structural importance. Otherwise, it runs the risk of losing key strategic ground in a region which is increasingly a core of the architecture of Eurasian connectivity and great power competition.

In conclusion, middle power involvement in regional orders must acknowledge that structural constraints, similarity in the nature of perceived threats, and the convergence of normative preferences could form a strategic partnership of real depth even without any formal alliances or the strong institutionalised nature of such partnerships. The example of India and Uzbekistan is possible. Their relationship is not as deep as it may be structurally, yet the circumstance of its intensification exists. The Indian foreign policy has the challenge of acknowledging this and investing in it.

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