

Taking the U.S.-Uzbekistan Relationship to the Next Level: Mirziyoyev's Historic Visit

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's visit to Washington was historic, being the first official visit of an Uzbek president since 2002. Mirziyoyev's reception, and the breadth and width of agreements signed, constitute an acknowledgement of the reform process in Uzbekistan, as well as of the country's newfound regional role and in particular its constructive approach to resolving the problem of Afghanistan. Washington's engagement in these efforts will further improve the prospects of success in Uzbekistan's domestic reforms and regional initiatives.

BACKGROUND: The official visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, to the United States of America in May 2018 has been characterized as historic. Indeed, the Uzbek leader's meetings at the White House, Congress, with key departments, major corporations and international financial institutions indicate that this visit brought significant results.

President Mirziyoyev received a warm welcome in Washington, being accompanied with the highest level of Diplomatic protocol and being accorded significant time by U.S. President Donald Trump. Following the negotiations conducted in Washington DC, the two Presidents issued a Joint Declaration, "The United States and Uzbekistan: Launching a New Era of Strategic Partnership." A package of documents was signed during the visit, to include protocols to enlarge bilateral trade relations and cooperation in higher education and academic research, agricultural industry and energy. A memorandum of understanding was signed to establish cooperation in Uzbekistan's bid to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) and to organize a Central Asian Trade Forum in 2018 in Tashkent. Another Memorandum was signed between Uzbekistan's National Bank of Foreign Economic Activity and the U.S. Export-Import Bank to finance cooperative projects. Corporations of the two countries signed more than 20 large contracts estimated to be worth \$4.8 billion. In the sphere of security, the U.S. and Uzbekistan agreed on a five-year plan in defense and military affairs targeted at consolidation of peace and stabilization in the region.

At the World Bank headquarters, World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim praised Uzbekistan's reform process and loan agreements for \$940 million were signed, with the purpose of financing project in energy efficiency, horticulture, and emergency medical services.

The total World Bank engagement up to 2020 includes 27 significant projects, with a total worth exceeding \$4 billion. In addition, an agreement on consulting services was signed with International Financial Corporation (IFC), focused on improving public-private partnerships to attract private investors to Uzbekistan.

IMPLICATIONS: The visit's significance stems only in part from the impressive array of agreements concluded. On a deeper level, it constitutes the U.S. acknowledgment of immense progress being done in Uzbekistan in the past two years; consolidates Uzbekistan's reputation as a country with a consistent and constructive foreign policy; and shows the value of Uzbekistan's approach to regional affairs, particularly Afghanistan.

Since coming to power, the new Uzbek president has launched wide-scale reforms in almost all spheres of life, focused on improving governance, raising the international status of the country, and providing a positive business and investment climate. This has added impetus to the heartening signs of positive political dynamics and a newfound drive for regional cooperation in Central Asia. Uzbekistan's far-reaching program to reform and modernize the state – what one American scholar called "Extreme Makeover: Central Asia Edition" are at the heart of this region-wide process.

Even so, any internal reforms can be self-defeating in the event of serious external impediments. Therefore, a friendly relationship with all of the world's leading powers – including Russia, China and the U.S. – is crucial for Uzbekistan's prospects of success. Even though close ties with Moscow and Beijing are

a given as a result of geographical proximity, Washington remains a global leader that Tashkent seeks to engage, and a natural ally to any country undergoing fundamental reforms.

This explains the significance of the strong support the U.S. expressed for Mirziyoyev's reform program, of the U.S. recognition of Uzbekistan's increasingly important role as an economic leader, and of American assistance in achieving WTO membership. The implementation of the agreements signed in Washington will create a solid foundation for the development of new opportunities to improve Uzbek-American cooperation in trade, investment and economic activity. As the holder of significant advantages in innovation and high technology, the U.S. can play an important role in the modernization of the Uzbek economy, raising the country's human resources, and enhancing its scientific and technical potential.

Similarly, the commercial contracts and agreements signed during the visit also sends a clear signal to business circles in other countries regarding the long-term stability of the Uzbek market. The engagement of key U.S. corporation further increases the interest of business entities elsewhere in Uzbekistan's growing economy.

Another important product of the visit was a recognition of Uzbekistan's improving international reputation as a country with consistent and constructive foreign policy. Uzbekistan has always stood out for the pragmatism and results-oriented nature of its foreign policy, based on Foreign Policy Concept that emphasizes respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; non-interference in internal affairs; the peaceful settlement of disagreements; and a commitment to universally accepted international norms and principles. On this basis, Uzbekistan is effectively establishing relations based on mutual respect across the globe and with leading international and regional organizations. In the meantime, Tashkent develops relations with all major powers, seeking to keep a balance between the interests of foreign powers, and to maintain a platform for constructive engagement in Central Asia.

Thus, President Mirziyoyev has established positive relations with a number of global leaders. In 2017, he visited Moscow, Beijing, Ankara and Seoul; at this point, Tashkent is turning its attention to European states, with forthcoming visits being planned. Tashkent's growing profile in international organizations is worth mention. Mirziyoyev participated in the summit of the United Nations General Assembly, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), bringing a new "proactive" approach.

In this regard, the United States is a crucial strategic partner for Uzbekistan, given its pivotal role in international security. The main directions of U.S.-Uzbekistan cooperation were reflected in the Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation signed on March 12, 2002, and reinvigorated during Mirziyoyev's visit. Successful Uzbek-American cooperation can play a significant role in stabilizing the situation in Central and South Asia.

In this connection, Tashkent's active regional policy in Central Asia and Afghanistan is of particular significance. Uzbekistan has renewed close contacts with all countries of Central Asia and with Afghanistan, with a vision to transform the region into a zone of sustainable and stable growth and to generate trustful and good neighborly relations within this area.

Indeed, as RUSI scholar Raffaello Pantucci has noted, there were more activities of a regional nature in 2017 than in the past two decades. Tashkent's decision to host a conference on Afghanistan and seek a major role in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan generated novel opportunities. In addition, Tashkent is taking a greater interest in efforts to manage other regional problems, ranging from the Aral Sea to the rational use of water resources and transboundary rivers, and maintaining a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia.

Mirziyoyev's visit is an indication that this proactive approach makes Uzbekistan an attractive partner for the United States, especially one that can play an important role in the international coalition's strategy to build peace in Afghanistan.

Importantly, Beijing's reaction has been equally positive. Chinese experts support the view that cooperation between Uzbekistan and the United States on Afghanistan will contribute to the development of transit potential and further integration of the countries in the region.

CONCLUSIONS: An important result of the Uzbek leader's official visit to the United States is Washington's support for Tashkent's initiatives concerning Afghanistan. If President Mirziyoyev's proposals are implemented – including mechanisms of consultations of among heads of Central Asian states, and the economic, social and cultural integration of Afghanistan into this region – this would undoubtedly facilitate efforts to overcome the Afghan crisis and create conditions for Central and South Asian development over time.

Today, new leaders are in charge in Uzbekistan and the U.S., and are taking a fresh attitude to world and regional affairs. This provides promising prospects for the further deepening of relations between the two sides, based on their common aspiration to maintain peace and stability, and to improve mutually beneficial and long term relationships.

These mutual interests formed the agenda of highest level Uzbek-American negotiations, whose success indicate a positive bilateral understanding. This inspires confidence that Washington and Tashkent will implement these agreements promptly and efficiently, benefiting both their own citizens and all states in the region.