

Uzbekistan – Indian partnership is an integral part of global and regional processes



Traditionally Uzbekistan considers India as a close, strategic partner, with which cooperation has recently acquired a multifaceted and long-term character.

This year both countries celebrate 29 year-successful partnership. Evidently, India was among the first countries to recognize Uzbekistan's independence.

Nowadays, based on the principles of trust, mutual respect and consideration of interests, relations between Tashkent and New Delhi are on an upward trajectory. Bilateral interaction has experienced a boost since 2017. Since then, the Uzbekistan – Indian strategic partnership has reached a qualitatively new level, mainly due to contact intensity among high-level officials of the two countries.

President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev visited India twice in 2018 and 2019. Moreover, the leaders of the two countries have a good tradition of holding bilateral meetings out of sessions within international structures. The Head of Uzbekistan met with the Indian Prime Minister within the framework of SCO summits in Astana and Qingdao. In this regard, Uzbekistan – Indian virtual summit, held in December 2020, was another significant event that conducts the model of the current bilateral relations between Tashkent and New Delhi.

Stance similarity of Uzbekistan and India on various vital issues of the global and regional agenda plays a core role in their strategic rapprochement. This allows finding common ground between national interests of both states in a wide range of areas of practical cooperation: political, economic, scientific, technological, cultural, humanitarian, and healthcare.

Mutual interest in enhancing and deepening cooperation between Uzbekistan and India is also due to the

growing efforts of the countries in international and regional structures.

Particularly, the Uzbek side supports India's desire to obtain the status of a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In this context, it should be noted that the sides take a principled position in countering such threats and challenges as terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking and other transboundary crimes that directly impact on security, prosperity and sustainable development of the international community. Tashkent also took an active part in almost all events held within the framework of New Delhi's Chairmanship of the SCO Council of Heads of Government.

Afghanistan is another important realm of Uzbekistan – Indian cooperation. Both countries are interested in restoring a peaceful economy and make a significant contribution to the socio-economic stabilization of this country.

At present, such transport and energy projects as the «Khairaton – Mazari-Sharif» railroad, the «Surkhan – Puli-Khumri» electric power transmission line are being implemented by Uzbekistan, while the «Zaranj – Dilaram», «Spin-Buldak – Kandahar» and «Kandahar – Kabul» highways, the «Salma» and «Shahtoot» dams are being carried out by India.

Tashkent and New Delhi also pay special attention to the issue of the education of Afghan citizens. A clear proof of this is the opening of an Educational Center in the city of Termez for training Afghan youth in 17 areas of higher and 16-secondary, vocational education. India, in turn, supports the idea of establishing the Afghan National University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology in Kandahar. Annually India provides 1,000 scholarships for Afghan students to study at universities in India.

Such efforts by the parties will undoubtedly make an important contribution to putting the Afghan economy on the track of reconstruction and establishing long-term peace on Afghan soil, in which Tashkent and New Delhi are very interested.

After all, it is Afghan territory that can serve as a land bridge connecting Uzbekistan with India, providing an opportunity to establish a completely new transport-transit corridor between South and Central Asian regions.

Tashkent and New Delhi are interested in building the connectivity of Central and South Asia, as well as support the implementation of the trans-Afghan highways. Especially, Uzbekistan and India join in the Ashgabat Agreement, in the North-South transport corridor project, where the construction of the Mazari-Sharif – Herat railroad with access to the Iranian port Chabahar, plays a key role.

The implementation of these transport hubs along with the North-South international transport and communication project by the Indian side will undoubtedly create favorable conditions for the full use of all the existing potential of regional cooperation, including the intensification of trade and economic exchanges between the two regions.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan promotes the project of the trans-Afghan railroad Mazari-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar. Hopefully, this can be connected with India's transport and communication systems. It will strengthen the connectivity of South and Central Asia as well as become a core factor of mutually beneficial not only for cooperation between the two countries, but also for sustainable development of the two regions.

In this context, it should be noted that in 2020 the trade turnover between Uzbekistan and India reached \$442.6 million, exceeding the indicator in 2019 by \$87 million (increase by 20%) despite the geographical distance between the two countries, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the economies of both states and the disruption of global supply chains.

Another positive dynamic of the development of Uzbekistan – Indian ties is the establishment of the direct cooperation practice between Central and South Asian regions. In this regard, the interaction between

Andijan district of Uzbekistan and Gujarat state of India is noteworthy to note that 9 projects worth \$84 million are already being implemented together with Indian companies in Andijan.

From this point of view, the plans of two entities to conclude a bilateral investment agreement, which is defined to promote and protect investments, also look very promising.

Special attention should also be paid to the fact that the Indian side confirmed the approval of a credit line for \$448 million for four development projects in Uzbekistan in road construction, wastewater treatment and information technology.

Simultaneously the two states have started efforts on using the potential of free economic zones of each other, including Uzbekistan – Indian free pharmaceutical zone in Andijan region.

Tashkent is interested in further deepening cooperation in the high-tech realm with India, which is one of the world leaders in infocommunications and technologies and occupies a dominant position in the global market of programming and IT outsourcing, which is of great importance for Uzbekistan.

Over the past years, the Indian side has made a significant contribution to the growth of the infocommunication and technology field. A Joint Committee for Cooperation in the Field of Science and Technology was established in 2019. Since July 2019, Tashkent Technopark has been developing in cooperation with the Indian Society of Software Technology Parks. All at once, the number of joint ventures in the ICT field has tripled in only the last 3 years.

At the same time, the development of events in the global economy shows that Uzbekistan needs new, modern schemes and models of partnership both on a bilateral and in a multilateral format. This will allow both countries to respond to changes in the global economy, create new economic centers, and widely introduce innovations and digital technologies. All this requires a certain rethinking of the nature of our cooperation, updating its strategic model and starting cooperation in new promising areas.

In this context, projects to enhance the connectivity of Central and South Asia through advancing digital economy and accelerating sustainable economic cooperation between the two countries become one of the most critical areas of cooperation. Uzbekistan hopes for an active partnership with India on the project of creating the SCO platform for interaction between the information technology agencies of the two states. The implementation of this initiative is vital for ensuring the presence of India and Uzbekistan in the SCO digital space.

Taking into account that India has the third largest «start-up» ecosystem in the world, strong and dynamic environment for the development of «start-ups», Indian experience in this area is interesting for Uzbekistan. Taking this into account, the creation of a joint working group on «start-ups» and innovations could contribute to the study of the Indian experience in this realm.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also proved that international cooperation is needed in the fight against the spread of infectious diseases. This updates India's proposal to form a medical expert group within the SCO annual meeting of health ministers to study effective and optional ways to care for citizens' health conditions.

Both countries also pay great attention to the development of cooperation in the cultural and humanitarian fields. Thus, India intends to participate in the implementation of a project to preserve the Buddhist heritage in Surkhandarya region (the Fayaztepa and Karatepa complexes in Termez). The implementation of this initiative is important from the point of view of the common historical connectivity of the two countries.

There is a high dynamics of development of cooperation between the two countries in education and technology. Amity and Sharda university branches function in Tashkent and Andijan. Besides, the issues of opening branches of other Indian universities are in the process of discussion. The Uzbek side highly

appreciates India's assistance in training specialists through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program. Today, the number of specialists who have completed the necessary training courses of this program consists of more than 2,400 people.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned factors, it can be confidently noted that over the past 29 years, Uzbekistan - Indian relations have acquired a new dynamic in a lot of respects and have reached the next level of strategic partnership. Tashkent and New Delhi cooperate on specific issues to ensure mutual interests. This creates the necessary conditions and prerequisites for deepening not only cooperation between India and Uzbekistan, but also enhancing the interaction of the Central Asian region with South Asian countries.

Alisher Kadirov,

Head of Department,

Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan

Source