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Significance of India-Uzbekistan Security Partnership

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Mmilitary and security cooperation between India and Uzbekistan has seen an upward trend in recent years. *Dustlik-2*- the recently conducted second edition of joint military exercises between the two, is a testament to this growing engagement. 45 soldiers each from Indian and Uzbek armies participated in this exercise and the main focus of the exercise was counter- terrorism and counter-insurgency operations for mountainous, rural and urban scenarios as dictated by United Nations mandate.¹ The drill was also aimed at people-centric intelligence-based operations and incorporating technological advancements to minimize collateral damage. Troops from both nations shared their expertise and skills in this endeavour. Clearly, it reflected the great resolve shared by both the countries to counter terrorism as they have a similar perspective towards the issue.² The leaders of both the countries- Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, exhibited an equal amount of commitment during the virtual summit between them on 11 December, 2020. The joint statement by both the leaders issued “a strong condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and emphasized on the need to eliminate this menace in totality. They also stressed that every country should ensure that its territory is not used as a safe-haven to promote terrorism. The joint statement also called for an early finalization of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT).³ Thus, strengthening defence and security cooperation constitutes a vital component of bilateral strategic partnership between the two countries.

A number of defence cooperation agreements have been signed between India and Uzbekistan following the visit of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to India in 2018. For instance, both sides agreed to focus the joint military training exercise on the vital subject of counter terrorism, cooperation in the field of military education and military medicine. Additionally, they also agreed to establish Joint Working Group to support and sustain the mutually beneficial defence related activities along with instituting the Defence Wing at the Embassy of Uzbekistan in New Delhi.⁴

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited Uzbekistan in 2019 and this was the first visit by an Indian defence Minister in the last 15 years. During his visit three Memorandum of Understanding (MoU's) were signed to develop cooperation in military medicine, military education and training fields. The MoU's on training and capacity building between the institutes of higher military learning of the two countries were the by-products of the interactions emanated from the MoU on Military Education signed between the two countries in October 2018. Moreover, the first joint military exercise 'Dustlik 2019, which was held in Chirchiq Training area near Tashkent was inaugurated and the Defence Minister also witnessed the first ever virtual exchange between the College of Defence Management in Secunderabad and Armed Forces

Academy of Uzbekistan in Tashkent.⁵ Further, India has also assisted in setting up an Indian room at the Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan in Tashkent.⁶ Furthermore, India has offered a line of credit of USD 40 million to Uzbekistan, as a part of Defence Industrial Cooperation.⁷

Uzbekistan has offered India its territory to set up a defence manufacturing unit which could further strengthen their security cooperation.⁸ Such a venture could help India in attaining a strategic foothold in the region. Further, a MoU on the joint 'Exploration and Uses of Outer Space for Peaceful Purposes' was signed on October 1st, 2018. Since Uzbekistan is seeking international cooperation for developing its own space programme, the Indo-Uzbek joint collaboration can begin a new chapter in the current bilateral relationship.⁹

All this indicates that the bilateral cooperation agenda is expanding due to these engagements. However, it needs to be discussed from national, regional and global perspectives.

National Perspective

Uzbekistan- the most populous country of Central Asia , also has the most powerful army in the region.¹⁰ The country has embarked on a modernisation programme under the leadership of President Mirziyoyev who set the agenda to restructure the government, increase religious tolerance and inter-ethnic harmony, and reform social and economic structure by releasing a five year " Uzbekistan's Development Strategy for 2017-2021", in 2017.¹¹ Moreover, with a focus on increasing the professionalism of its military, the President also adopted a new "Military Doctrine" with an objective of bringing changes in defence and security sectors. The doctrine focuses on military modernisation and professionalism in the rapidly changing times as well as on security situation in Afghanistan that the country needs to tackle.¹² Thus, Uzbekistan has made its security priorities quite clear by reflecting on the specifics of its geo-strategic location as well as the growing political and security situation in the region. Therefore this new vision, a brainchild of President Mirziyoyev requires building extensive bilateral and multilateral partnerships. In this context, India-Uzbekistan bilateral military agreements/MoU's can help in establishing the shared goals.

Since, the main objective of a country's military diplomacy is to build interoperability and capacity among allies, develop better understanding of strategic culture of other states and build trust among the member countries, it can be achieved by engaging in joint military exercises and training programmes etc. Military education, where students are able to spend more time in a foreign institute and socialise, helps in understanding the security problems from the host country's perspective.

Indian-Uzbek military cooperation can be seen as a step towards this direction. This cooperation is at a very nascent stage and we can see it as a long-term investment.

Regional and Global Perspective

Since the bottom line of joint military exercises was counter-terrorism, regional security looms large in India-Uzbekistan engagements, considering their geo-strategic location. In this context a stable and secure Afghanistan and also establishing lasting peace there is a common concern for both the countries. This particular concern was shared by the leaders of two countries during their virtual summit in December, 2020 and they expressed unanimity in their support for a united, sovereign and democratic Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. "Both the sides expressed their interest in strengthening cooperation for the development and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, including through implementation of various development projects for the benefit of the people of Afghanistan and strengthening the institutions of Afghanistan."¹³ In fact, India and Uzbekistan are contributing in this endeavour with a focus on connectivity- India via Chabahar Port in Iran and Uzbekistan through its planned railway projects connecting the two countries.¹⁴ Uzbekistan has also indicated an interest in joining the Chabahar project and has conducted a virtual trilateral meeting with India and Iran for the use of strategically located Chabahar port.¹⁵ Such initiative will help not only in making Afghanistan a hub of connectivity projects but will also help in ending isolation of doubly land-locked Uzbekistan in terms of its access to the warm waters. One can also expect a domino effect of this move as other Central Asian republics may join in because they are also looking towards diversification. Nonetheless, Central Asia is strategically located in the centre of Europe and Asia and thus is an important entry point for trade and transit. Besides, the region itself is richly endowed with natural resource and provides a huge potential for trade and investment. Consequently, geo-economic factors cannot be ignored while dealing with any of Central Asian republic. Since, geo-economics is closely related with geo-politics, therefore, economic cooperation between India and Uzbekistan can play an important role in intensifying security and strategic cooperation, further strengthening the defence cooperation. Security cooperation includes joint military exercises to coordinate counter-terrorism measures, therefore, *Dustlik* exercises between India and Uzbekistan are paving a way for closer engagements, which must be pursued and accelerated.

Besides, India and Uzbekistan are even trying to explore areas of cooperation in the nuclear sector.

Nuclear Cooperation

The two countries have signed an agreement on the long-term supply of uranium ore concentrate to India in October, 2018. to widen its source base for the nuclear energy.

The deal was signed in 2019, during President Mirziyoyev's second visit to India in 2019.¹⁶ Uzbekistan has now become the second Central Asian republic to supply uranium to India after Kazakhstan.

A delegation of Agency for the Development of Nuclear energy (Uzatom), visited New Delhi (16-19 February, 2020) and held talks with the officials of the Indian Atomic Energy Commission on the possibility of joint personnel training and consulting services from India on the design and construction of nuclear power plants in Uzbekistan.¹⁷ The discussions were culminated with signing of a MoU between Uzatom and Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership under the Department of Atomic Energy of the Republic of India (GCNEP) on 21 September, 2020.¹⁸

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) between India and Uzbekistan for solar energy cooperation was signed where the governments of the two countries agreed to "identify research/demonstration/pilot projects between the National Institute of Solar Energy (NISE), Ministry of New & Renewable Energy, India and the International Solar Energy Institute (ISEI), Uzbekistan" in areas such as solar photovoltaic, storage technologies and technology transfer.¹⁹

Again all these efforts, to further build the cooperation between the two countries to the next level, are at a budding stage. However, from Uzbekistan perspective, the relationship is important because the new leadership under President Mirziyoyev is looking for increased foreign collaborations to ensure the success of its "Development Strategy". On the other hand from Indian perspective, active engagement is the key for reaching out to its 'extended neighbourhood' with which it does not have direct physical access. Therefore, mutuality of interests and increased convergence can help in achieving the new heights in the coming years.

Notes

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