

Uzbekistan-Pakistan Regional Connectivity

Political, Economic, Humanitarian, and
Academic Aspects



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Keynote Address

by

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NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS)

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About the Speaker



H.E. Oybek Arif Usmanov

Ambassador of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

H.E. Oybek Arif Usmanov is serving his second appointment to Islamabad as Ambassador. He has already served in Pakistan as an Ambassador from 2006 to 2011. Ambassador Usmanov has an extensive educational and professional background. He received his MA from Tashkent State University (Tashkent, Uzbekistan) in 1985. He started his service in the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 1997, working as First Secretary of the Consular Department.

In a long and distinguished diplomatic career, he has served in several positions in the diplomatic missions working, including as the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

His early career as a journalist and editor has earned him a warm reputation within the journalist circles of Islamabad. He worked as the

Head of the Broadcasting Section, State TV and Radio Company Uzbekistan, and the Senior Editor of the Publishing House for Asian Countries. Moreover, he was a senior expert, Head of the South Asian Division, National Association for International and Cultural Relations of Uzbekistan.

He is actively fostering and promoting enhanced regional ties between Uzbekistan and Pakistan. Through his diplomatic initiatives, he has consistently advocated for stronger collaboration, economic partnerships, and cultural exchanges between the two nations.

1. Executive Summary

The NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS) organized the keynote address of H.E. Oybek Arif Usmanov, Ambassador of Uzbekistan to Pakistan, on “Uzbekistan-Pakistan Regional Connectivity: Political, Economic, Humanitarian, and Academic Aspects” on Friday, October 6, 2023.

During his keynote, Ambassador Usmanov highlighted the historical significance of not only Central Asian-South Asian links but also emphasized the importance of comprehensive Pak-Uzbek relations for common development and regional integration. The ambassador expressed his country’s commitment to promoting Pak-Uzbek connectivity. He hailed Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan Railway Project as a major vehicle of regional connectivity in the days to come.

He further stressed the potential for the growth of bilateral trade following the signing of the billion-dollar bilateral trade agreement earlier this year.

Ambassador Usmanov said that there is an urgent need to encourage increased contacts and exchanges between young Pakistanis and Uzbeks for a sustainable, long-term bilateral partnership.

The ambassador expressed his deep appreciation for the NUST knowledge ecosystem and identified higher education cooperation and S&T collaboration as a win-win priority area where rapid mutual gains could be made.

Ambassador Usmanov stated that Uzbek cities like Bukhara, Ferghana, Samarkand, and Tashkent are resplendent symbols of the shared Islamic heritage and could attract Pakistani tourists. Similarly, he said that Pakistani cities like Karachi, Lahore, Multan, Peshawar, and Quetta are historic cities which could attract Uzbek tourists. He stated

that bilateral tourism promotion could generate multiple opportunities for mutual cooperation.

The keynote was attended by senior NUST leadership, faculty, think tank experts, young researchers, and students.



2. Uzbekistan-Pakistan Regional Connectivity: Political, Economic, Humanitarian, and Academic Aspects

Keynote Address

by

H.E. Oybek Arif Usmanov

Ambassador of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan



From Ancient Caravans to Modern Trade Routes

Uzbekistan and Pakistan are both heirs to a rich ancient heritage. For centuries, both nations were connected by the Silk Road, which served as a vital route for trade and cultural exchange. The Silk Road was a highway of ideas in addition to being a commerce route. Many significant Silk Road regions, such as the historic cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, are located in Uzbekistan. These cities were once major centers of trade and learning and were also home to some of the

greatest scholars and artists of their time. The Silk Road is a reminder of the deep historical and cultural ties that bind Uzbekistan and Pakistan together. It is also a reminder of the importance of regional connectivity and cooperation. In recent times, both nations have sought to revive this historical connection.

Dimensions of Uzbekistan-Pakistan Regional Connectivity

Connectivity is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses various aspects, each of which contributes to the strength and nature of relationships between countries. Some important dimensions of connectivity between Uzbekistan and Pakistan include political dynamics, historical trade, business-to-business transport links, and a pivotal aspect – education.

It has to be understood that the relationship between Uzbekistan and Pakistan has historically tended to be influenced by the complex power dynamics of the region. Uzbekistan, situated in Central Asia, plays a pivotal role in regional stability and security. In contrast, Pakistan, located in South Asia, has its own geopolitical significance. Enhancing business-to-business transport links is a crucial element of fostering connectivity between Uzbekistan and Pakistan. The development of efficient transport corridors, including road and rail links, can significantly reduce the time and cost of movement of people and goods between the two countries. Establishing direct transportation routes can serve as a catalyst for greater trade and economic ties.

It must also be stressed that education plays a vital role in building bridges between nations and fostering enduring relationships. Within the context of Uzbekistan and Pakistan, education serves as a cornerstone for deeper connections. Cultural exchange programs and scholarships can encourage students from both countries to study in each other's academic institutions, thereby promoting understanding and cross-cultural ties. Language programs and collaborative research projects can further strengthen academic and intellectual connectivity

between Uzbek and Pakistani universities and research institutions. Moreover, skill development initiatives and vocational training exchanges offer the potential to enhance human resource development and economic growth in both nations. These educational endeavors are not only about knowledge transfer but also about the creation of a strong, interconnected, and mutually beneficial community of common aspirations and interests between Uzbekistan and Pakistan.

In recent years, there has been a notable paradigm shift towards the strategic approach of facilitating bilateral exchanges between nations through encouraging people-to-people, expert-to-expert, teacher-to-teacher, and student-to-student interactions. This shift has gained acceptance as a progressive strategy in international relations, attracting the endorsement of various countries, governments, and experts. It is essential to underscore the pivotal role that the younger generation can potentially play in bolstering this strategic approach to deepening relations among nations.

The Concept of “Re-connectivity”

The term "re-connectivity" refers to the strategic steps undertaken to restore or strengthen connections and ties among nations. It involves recognizing the value of historic associations together with appreciating the importance of forging new ones, with the goal of fostering collaboration, exchange of ideas, and cooperation. The concept of re-connectivity in the case of Uzbekistan and Pakistan draws from a rich historical legacy, one that traces its origins to the crisscrossing ancient caravan routes that facilitated the exchange of goods, culture, and knowledge between Central Asia, the subcontinent, and the neighboring regions. These historic trade routes exemplify the deep interconnections that have persisted between Central Asia and South over long stretches of time. Uzbekistan, known as the land of great scholars, played a significant role in the evolution and maintenance of this multidimensional network of trade, culture,

and people. It is essential to acknowledge the strong enduring foundation laid by our historical forerunners.

However, this historical connectivity faced serious disruptions intermittently for decades during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the greater part of the twentieth century, due mainly to global geopolitical rivalries and struggles. The incorporation of Central Asia into the Russian sphere of influence marked a turning point and the long exploitative shadow of European colonialism in South Asia led to the emergence of new frontiers, borders, visa regimes, and the closure of traditional routes. While colonialism came to end in 1947 in South Asia, Central Asia remained part of the Soviet empire till 1990-1991. The chronic instability and conflict in Afghanistan further curtailed the efficaciousness of regional linkages and the promise of Pak-Uzbek connectivity.

However, the concept of re-connectivity and the historical awareness associated with the concept allows a collective recognition of the shared historical regional and cultural legacy, a desire to honor and build upon the timeless ties between the two nations, and a commitment to overcoming the contemporary barriers that may impede the natural flow of meaningful and productive relations. Therefore, Pak-Uzbek spirit of re-connectivity embodies the aspiration to rebuild the bridges between the two nations, fostering mutual understanding, cooperation, and shared progress, while honoring the wisdom and heritage of our ancestors.

Fostering Trade Partnerships

In the pursuit of fostering a new foundation for the younger generation and establishing a contemporary platform for regional re-connectivity, Uzbekistan and Pakistan have taken noteworthy initiatives. Over the past two years, the two nations have embarked on a journey toward a strategic partnership characterized by growing political confidence, reflecting their deep-seated desire and unwavering commitment to

fortify their bilateral bonds. This strategic partnership is marked by multifaceted collaboration, spanning diverse sectors such as trade, S&T, education, and culture. Both Uzbekistan and Pakistan have been actively exploring the potential for joint projects, an effort that not only bolsters economic growth but also enhances their industrial and technological cooperation. A significant highlight in this collaborative endeavor has been the remarkable surge in bilateral trade. The trade volume between the two nations has soared, transitioning from a modest USD 15-20 million over the previous five to six years to more than USD 250 million in 2023. This promising growth in bilateral trade not only underscores the burgeoning economic cooperation between Uzbekistan and Pakistan but also serves as a testament to the vast potential for further expansion.

It is pertinent to note that a substantial portion of the bilateral trade takes place through Afghanistan, and despite historical disruptions caused by regional conflicts, both Uzbekistan and Pakistan are actively committed to revitalizing bilateral trade in a way that also leverages the considerable economic potential of Afghanistan.¹

The establishment of Pakistan-Uzbekistan Inter-Government Commission on Trade-Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation (IGC) constitutes a crucial step forward in the promotion of bilateral relations.

In February 2023, during the eighth meeting of IGC held in Tashkent, both countries signed a bilateral agreement to boost their bilateral trade to USD 1 billion. This increase will transpire through proactive multipronged exchanges between the two countries. Major Pak-Uzbek

¹ It is pertinent to mention here that the first trilateral meeting of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan on trade, connectivity, and infrastructure cooperation took place in November 2023 in Islamabad, co-chaired by the deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan and the commerce ministers of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The three nations set up a trade working group to promote trade and infrastructure connectivity.

urban hubs like Tashkent, Islamabad, Samarkand, Bukhara, Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar will act as central nodes of the bilateral strategic economic and cultural partnership.

These cities provide the fundamentals of business forums, expos, including business-to-business, business-to-government, people-to-people, city-to-city, institution-to-institution platforms, facilitating extensive economic engagement, cooperation, and partnerships.

For Pak-Uzbek industrial cooperation and trade enhancement, critical sectors like pharmaceuticals, textiles, chemicals, housing, construction, and IT technologies need to be prioritized. A noteworthy recent example of how the private sectors of the two countries can set best practice in business cooperation involves the agreement between big Uzbek and Pakistani telecommunications players, namely, Beeline Uzbekistan and Jazz Pakistan, for technology and digital skills transfer and cooperation. This exemplifies the tangible benefits of business-to-business collaboration offering fresh opportunities to a range of private players including big corporates, small and medium-sized enterprises, new technology-based firms, and startups from Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

Connectivity and Infrastructure Cooperation

Both Pakistan and Uzbekistan recognize the importance of promoting regional connectivity and infrastructure promotion as the indispensable building blocks of regional integration and shared prosperity. In this regard, the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (UAP) Railway Project will provide a solid bridge for enhanced regional connectivity. Signed in July 2023, the key objective of the project is the speed up the transportation of goods from Uzbekistan to Pakistan, through the reduction of transit time from currently 30-35 days to just 5-10 days following the project's completion. The length of the line is around 600 km, starting This railway spans 677 kilometers, serving as

a crucial link from Tashkent to Islamabad, passing through Termez² in Uzbekistan through Mazar-i-Sharif and Logar in Afghanistan to Peshawar via the Kharlachi area in Kurram in Pakistan. The section connecting Termez to Mazar e Sharif, was completed in 2011. This railway is operational since then, facilitating the transport of humanitarian aid and goods from Central Asia and beyond to Mazar-i-Sharif. Once this three-nation rail link is completed, the further expansion of multimodal infrastructure connectivity would become a concrete prospect.

S&T and Higher Education in Bilateral Partnership Promotion

Another intriguing facet is the role of science and technology in fostering connections. In this digital age, physical meetings are not always necessary. Even without visiting cities physically, institutions can establish direct online connections anywhere in the world. This offers an excellent opportunity for the younger generation to engage in direct contact. NUST may consider initiating Zoom meetings with prominent higher education institutions and S&T organizations in Uzbekistan, thus further facilitating valuable connections and cooperation. The timeless value of one-on-one contact cannot be underestimated. In this regard, post-independence linguistic developments in Uzbekistan are sure to facilitate the country's increased contact with the world. While Uzbekistan's youth predominantly spoke Uzbek and Russian in the past, now more than half of young Uzbeks are fluent in English.

It is relevant to mention here that the study and the application of science, technology, and engineering in Uzbekistan were historically influenced by the Russian system of education. However, over the past 30 years, following Uzbekistan's independence, higher education in

² Termez is the birthplace of the famous Imam Al-Tirmizi, the 9th-century Islamic scholar and the compiler of the authoritative Hadith (PBUH) collection, Sahih Al-Tirmizi.

Uzbekistan has been veritably diversified and globalized in terms of contacts, collaborations, and orientation. Several prominent universities in Europe and Asia Pacific have established contacts and presence in Uzbekistan and are collaborating fruitfully with their Uzbek counterparts. At least 48 Uzbek universities are variously ranked in the renowned global university ranking like Times Higher Education World University Rankings. In line with its national human capital formation priorities, Uzbekistan spends about 22 percent out of its total expenditure on education.

It is important to acknowledge here the exceptional internationalization of higher education in Pakistan with elaborate international linkages of Pakistani universities with leading global hubs of research and knowledge production. Uzbek-Pakistani higher education cooperation can prove to be the cutting edge of bilateral cooperation, going forward.

The potential benefits extend beyond just economic growth, reaching into the realm of cultural exchange and the creation of a brighter and more interconnected world. The journey ahead is promising, with dedicated young minds and strong political will leading the way.

Educational Initiatives and Student Exchange

In the past two years, Uzbekistan and Pakistan have made good progress in fostering educational ties and promoting student exchange programs. The number of Pakistani students studying in Uzbekistan has seen a significant increase, surging from 250 to 1200. These students are now enrolled in reputed medical institutions and universities in various Uzbek cities, including Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand, the famous centers of learning and scholarship in the medieval Islam world. Uzbekistan welcomes the presence of Pakistani students and expects them to not only gain high-quality education but also wants them to grow as world-class professionals and become the

future ambassadors and champions of Pak-Uzbek friendship and cooperation.

Both countries have exhibited their commitment to educational cooperation through government-to-government scholarship programs. Starting from last year, Uzbekistan has begun offering scholarships to Pakistani students for study in Uzbekistan and Pakistan has offered the same to Uzbek students for study in Pakistan. Such programs are underwritten by the bilateral commitment to nurturing the immense potential of the youth of the countries. With strong political will and the presence of capable academics, eminent scientists, diligent researchers, and promising young minds, significant progress can be made in the realm of bilateral higher education, research, and innovation.

NUST, with its world-class reputation and academic excellence, holds the promise of becoming an invaluable partner in these educational endeavors. There is immense potential for collaboration with Uzbek higher education institutions across a wide range of faculties. Faculty-to-faculty partnerships, research group-to-research group initiatives, institute-to-institute linkages, and think tank-to-think tank cooperation, all offer promising avenues for strengthening educational and scientific bonds. NUST's forward-looking approach, dedicated to creating a conducive environment for the future, aligns perfectly with the objectives of this growing partnership. This collaboration is an opportunity to foster understanding and trust between nations and to work together towards a brighter and more connected future.

3. Discussion



The keynote was followed by a comprehensive and insightful discussion.

One of the participants remarked that transitioning from the old era of connectivity to a new era necessitates a broad-based open dialogue on regional connectivity, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents a concrete opportunity for this organizing and promoting such a dialogue. The keynote speaker acknowledged the importance of CPEC and BRI as well as emphasized the need for promoting Central Asia-South Asia connectivity and multidimensional partnerships as tangible outcomes of this interregional integration. Ambassador Usmanov also discussed the relevance of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway project, which will extend into Afghanistan and Pakistan, emphasizing its transformative potential.

One of the participants requested the keynote speaker's views on the recent bilateral trade agreement signed between Uzbekistan and Pakistan. Ambassador Usmanov responded by stressing the need for

maximizing the mutual benefits under the existing Pak-Uzbek Preferential Trade Agreement to fulfill the vision of boosting bilateral trade to USD 1 billion as spelled out in the recent Pak-Uzbek trade agreement. One participant added that once these bilateral trade goals were met, perhaps the two countries could consider promoting a regional trade agreement with the cooperation of other nations in the regions.

Responding to a question about the modus operandi for fostering scientific and technical cooperation between the two countries, Ambassador Usmanov stressed the importance of establishing formal relations between S&T universities of Uzbekistan and Pakistan through MoUs and other formal instruments. He further underlined that reciprocity in everything was the key to initiating and sustaining serious partnerships.

Ambassador Usmanov suggested that both Pakistani and Uzbek universities should start by establishing contact with each other and arrive before long at a common plan of action to be adequately and mutually resourced and that it was a good idea to involve relevant official channels in the process at an early stage. He suggested that the extensive experience at the disposal of both Pakistani and Uzbek universities as a result of elaborate international higher education, research, and innovation (IHERI) partnerships now needed to be channeled for bilateral cooperation. The Uzbek ambassador assured the good offices of the Uzbekistan's diplomatic mission are available in this regard.

Another participant's question pertained to terrorism and extremism, which pose common threats to both Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The question sought the ambassador's perspective on the situation in Afghanistan, particularly concerning militant groups with Uzbek origins, where many fighters of Uzbek ethnicity are involved.

The ambassador responded by highlighting that security is an important part of international cooperation and plays a role in science, technology, and engineering. The ambassador remarked that various groups with roots in different regions, including America, Europe, Central Asia, and South Asia, have emerged over time. He considered that it is important to acknowledge that the history of proxy wars is long and complex, and terrorism is not exclusive to any particular region. He stressed that terrorism has been used for political purposes and is often influenced by geopolitical rivalries.

The ambassador drew the attention toward the fact that the region has been the focal point of superpower rivalries, and historically, there were open borders, and people traveled without restrictions. The ambassador reiterated that terrorism is a byproduct of geopolitical rivalries, and it is a global issue and that it was hasty and unwise to want that developing countries, like Pakistan and Uzbekistan, should bear the sole responsibility for addressing this challenge.

The ambassador highlighted that these groups with various ethnic origins have indeed caused problems in the region but blaming any specific country is counterproductive, because extremist ideologies have contributed to the rise of such groups, and these ideologies are not unique to any nation. Ambassador Usmanov underscored that collaboration is essential, including government-to-government cooperation, security sector collaboration, and educational collaboration. The ambassador stated that there is a need to work toward a future where a peaceful educational and scientific culture replaces the culture of violence, extremism, and radicalism.



4. Recommendations

The following recommendations were derived from the keynote address and the discussion session.

- Encourage and expand cultural exchange programs, student exchanges, and scholarship opportunities between the two countries to foster increased student mobility.
- Strengthen language programs on both sides to facilitate effective communication and understanding between students and researchers from different cultural backgrounds.
- Implement skill development initiatives and vocational training programs and exchanges to enhance human resource development in both countries. These opportunities for joint vocational training programs may align with the economic needs and growth sectors of each nation.
- NUST may broaden its network by establishing connections with multiple relevant institutions in Uzbekistan and foster a diverse range of collaborations to maximize the benefits of academic, research, and cultural exchange programs.
- Leverage the historical relevance and significance of Pakistani cities such as Karachi, Lahore, Multan, Peshawar, and Quetta to attract Uzbek tourists and encourage Pakistani tourists to visit Uzbek cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent. Furthermore, explore joint marketing campaigns, cultural events, and travel incentives to encourage tourism and strengthen people-to-people connections.

5. Conclusion



The keynote address provided a comprehensive roadmap for enhancing the multidimensional relationship between Uzbekistan and Pakistan. The address stressed, among other things, the shared historical connections between the two countries and called for leveraging the rich historical and cultural heritage of Pakistani and Uzbek cities for tourism promotion through which people-to-people connections can also be fostered.

The keynote highlighted the importance of utilizing the potential of the youth of both countries in the new era of re-connectivity and encouraged creativity, enterprise, and strategic optimism in fostering bilateral cooperation in education, research, innovation, skill development, and cultural exchange.



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