

The Emerging Strides of Pak-Uzbek Relations through the Lens of Newspaper Articles Published in Islamabad

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This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but is purely based on academic purposes.

Abstract

Since Uzbekistan's initiative of "Central and South Asia", Pak-Uzbek relations are being discussed in many aspects. Initially, the US presence in Afghanistan along with the US-backed Afghan regime was assumed as the biggest hurdle in gaining financial incentives for Pakistan from Uzbekistan. However, recapturing of Kabul by Afghan Taliban once again boosted Pak-Uzbek relations. This study analyzes the content of newspaper articles in a way that "how Pakistan had been socio-economically and politically engaged with Uzbekistan via Afghanistan from August 15, 2021 to April 02, 2022" and "whether Pakistan railway would be connected to Uzbek railway under CPEC". As both countries have also signed various agreements during the Uzbek president's visit to Islamabad on March 22, 2022, this study also examines the newspaper articles regarding tracing the reasons for once again frozen bilateralism since April 2022.

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Introduction

Although Pakistan and Uzbekistan, both countries are experiencing Persian orientalism, many Pakistani archeologists claim that religious archeology in Pakistan is the reflection of Uzbek orientalism. Historically, this is a debatable question, but this claim generates socio-economic closeness among both states.

Moreover, Afghan Jihad has also facilitated the people of both countries to come close to each other. In recent times, when both countries were allies of the United States in the war against terrorism, their joint stake in Afghanistan has encouraged the Uzbek government to express the wish of joining CPEC. Later on, the Uzbek initiative of “Central and South Asia” was also an effort of cordial bilateralism between both states. Furthermore, when the Uzbek president decided to visit Islamabad, the government of Pakistan organized an exhibition at Pak-China Friendship Center that aimed to boost business relations between both countries. This visit also caused six agreements between both states about various aspects of cooperation (Saeed, Li, Zaheer, & Asim, 2021).

For this purpose, all the national-level newspapers in Pakistan published special editions that covered the visit of the Uzbek president to Islamabad. However, this study took a sample of content from the Daily Islamabad Post, and analyzes the content in this regard.

Sample

An article entitled “The Emerging Strides of Pak-Uzbek Relations” written by Dr. Akram Zaheer facilitates the study to investigate the six different phases of Pak-Uzbek relations. These phases are;

- 1) Pak-Uzbek relations during Afghan Jihad
- 2) Pak-Uzbek Relations during War against Terrorism
- 3) Pak-Uzbek Relations within the context of CPEC
- 4) Pak-Uzbek Relations under Uzbek-led Central and South Asia Initiative
- 5) Post-Ghani Pak-Uzbek Relations
- 6) Pak-Uzbek Relations since April 2022 (Zaheer, 2023)

However, this is essential to relook at published content before investigating what has been interrogated from scholarly debate within the newspaper article.

Newspaper Content about Pakistan-Uzbekistan Relations

“In the age of globalization, a miracle has now occurred in Central and South Asia. After the long-awaited dream of two great regions Central and South Asia are going to be connected and materialized. Both regions are about historical connectivity with colossal human efforts. Since the post-cold war, Pakistan has been seeking political, economic and security relations with the new Central Asian states. But, the uncertainty and instability in Afghanistan created hesitation among Pakistan and Central Asian Republics to develop bilateral relations. After the fall of the Taliban regime, both sides started to enter into a new era of relationship. The history of religious association, economic aspiration and strong political commitment of the people of the two sides has been playing a vital role to enhance the mutual relationship and to build up strategic collaboration. Moreover, Pakistan aims to enhance long-term sustainable engagement with Central Asian States by forging strategic partnerships” (Zaheer, 2023).

“Uzbekistan is one of the most important countries of the region due to its glorious history of knowledge. Post-cold war, Pakistan was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Uzbekistan. Pakistan wishes to gain access to the Central Asian market, while landlocked Uzbekistan also wants to access ports of the Arabian Sea. During the regime of President Islam Karimov, Pak-Uzbek relations faced some hesitations but Uzbekistan outreaches the regional countries under his successor Shavkat

Mirzlyoyev. Under president Mirzlyoyev, Uzbekistan is undergoing a huge economic transformation. Similarly, Pakistan has also reoriented its focus from geopolitics to geo-economics under the leadership of Imran Khan. Now both countries have cordial and deep relations as they have their interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan has always been seeking stability in Afghanistan whereas Uzbekistan also has hosted Taliban in 2019 to facilitate peace process” (Zaheer, 2023).

“Both countries have also been intertwined with religious, spiritual and historical binds of ancient times. The ancient Buddhist sites of Kara Tepa and Fez Tepa in Uzbekistan reveal the untold stories of travels by Julian Monastery Monks in Taxila and Swat Pakistan, and beyond spreading their message from South to Central Asia. The pearls of wisdom have been emanating from Samarkand and Bukhara during the 10th and 11th centuries illuminated the hearts of the people living in today’s Pakistan. Uzbekistan was part of Abbasid and Great Amir Timor’s dynasties which stretched to almost the area of present Pakistan and beyond. The interconnected area has been facing geopolitical divides, artificial barriers, iron curtains and great games since the last two centuries” (Zaheer, 2023).

“Present Uzbekistan has introduced many reforms to boost its economy since March 2019 as it announced a visa of three years for the participants of foreign investment companies. Furthermore, foreign investors who invest more than \$3 billion can get a residence permit for ten years. Within one day, a certificate of origin of goods will be issued to foreign traders. With the participation of international financial institutions, 89 projects were launched in 2019. Then 31 projects of more than \$3 billion are also planned with the help of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Banks can open an account for those who are Uzbek residents and businesspeople with the requirement of FATF. Such initiatives of the Uzbek government attracted Pakistan and its business community to get benefits from the business and investment environment” (Zaheer, 2023).

“Today Pakistan and Uzbekistan are members of some international forums like UN, OIC, ECO and SCO. Both countries have formed Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC) which held meeting regularly and discussed bilateral, regional and international issues. Both countries share a common aspiration for peace, prosperity and development of their people. Several initiatives are underway to transform Pakistan and Uzbekistan into a regional trade hub. The CPEC is also progressing to fruition and both countries may achieve maximum their economic goals. The world is also on the way of realizing that Pakistan is emerging as a hub of regional trade, economic activities and commercial potential due to CPEC” (Zaheer, 2023).

“Prime Minister of Pakistan has embarked on two days visit to Tashkent. The leadership of both countries has covered the full range of bilateral relationships particularly focused on bilateral trade and economic cooperation and regional connectivity. The prime minister has addressed Pak-Uzbek business forums and the Joint Business Council. The leadership of both countries has also discussed international and regional issues, the Covid-19 situation and particularly the situation of the post-withdrawal United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan. Being the neighbors of Afghanistan, both countries have more stake than extra-regional players for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The ties between these two countries may form a strong connection between South and Central Asia. The prime minister of Pakistan also participated in an international conference “Central and South Asia regional Connectivity: Challenges and Opportunities” (Zaheer, 2023).

“The geography, strategic, geopolitical, geo-economics, regional interests and common aspirations for the development and prosperity of both the countries have the potential to achieve the benefits of regional connectivity. The visit of Prime Minister Imran Khan may lead to promising initiatives for mutual interest and bilateral cooperation between both the countries in future. Hopefully, Uzbekistan may prove a gateway for Pakistan to Central Asia Republics” (Zaheer, 2023).

Content Analysis

Under the six phases, Pak-Uzbek relations have to described below;

1) Pak-Uzbek relations during Afghan Jihad

Afghan Jihad facilitated the Uzbek community to engage with the Pashtun community at large. Both ethnicities came close to each other through social and marital engagements. Till this time, many Pashtun and Baloch families have family relations with Uzbeks in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Rather than the formal trade between Pakistan and Uzbekistan, these social and marital engagements are the biggest cause of boosting informal economic ties between both states till 2023 (Tashmatov, 2020).

Although Uzbekistan was the part of Soviet Union till 1991, the Uzbek population had been fed up with Soviet authoritarianism. Therefore, ethnographers considered their socio-economic engagements with Afghans and Pakistanis as the reaction to Soviet restrictions on them (Saeed, Li, Zaheer, & Asim, 2021).

2) Pak-Uzbek Relations during War against Terrorism

During War against Terrorism, not only Pakistan but Uzbekistan also hosted US and NATO forces by offering them air spaces and air bases (Saeed, Li, Zaheer, & Asim, 2021).

During the US presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, Uzbekistan was continuously hosting the US army. However, the US army had been forced to leave Pakistan since 2018 when Pakistan decided to take distance from US interests in the region (Saeed, Li, Zaheer, & Asim, 2021).

However, Pakistan has been again engaged with US interests in the region since April 2022, and now, US missions for Afghanistan from both countries have been restarted indirectly with full strategic potential since April 03, 2022 (Zaheer, 2023).

3) Pak-Uzbek Relations within the context of CPEC

When Modi visited central Asian states including Uzbekistan for convincing them regarding joining North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), the majority of Pakistanis were considered that Central Asian states along with Iran will continue to assist India in bypassing CPEC (ANI, 2021) (Khozin, 2018) (Massimov, 2015) (Matiullah, 2021) (Movlamov, 2019). However, soon Iran and Uzbekistan realized that India is just desiring to disturb Pakistan. When Iran was investigating how India was manipulating Iranian soil against Pakistan, Uzbekistan was also assessing Gwadar as the shortest feasible trade route. Thus, both countries decided to leave NSTC and join CPEC (Tashmatov, 2020).

However, regional connectivity between both countries was a question mark due to the US-installed pro-Indian government in Afghanistan (Tashmatov, 2020).

Hence, both countries along with Iran and Russia decided to assist Afghan Taliban for the sake of getting a friendly government in Afghanistan that would facilitate regional connectivity. For this purpose, Moscow Peace Dialogues were started. Many of their sessions were also held in Tehran, Beijing and Islamabad (Zaheer, 2023).

4) Pak-Uzbek Relations under Uzbek-led Central and South Asia Initiative

Although Central and South Asia Initiative is assumed as the Uzbek initiative, the US presence in this agreement reflects US ambitions behind the scene. CPEC experts in Islamabad and China count this agreement as the de-tracking of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan from CPEC (Zaheer, 2023).

5) Post-Ghani Pak-Uzbek Relations

Since the retaking of Kabul by Afghan Taliban, Uzbekistan and Pakistan came close with each other as;

- Trade between both countries raised 90% than to 2020-2021 (Asghar, 2023).
- The informal economy between both states assisted 05% boost in foreign reserves of Pakistan (Asghar, 2023).
- Distance of Pakistan from US strategic interests in the region stimulated the Uzbek community in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan to restore their socio-economic and marital ties with Pashtuns in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (Asghar, 2023).
- The relative peace in Afghanistan along with economic growth in Pakistan facilitated Uzbek traders to use of Karachi and Gwadar ports for their exports and imports. So, their movement towards Pakistan's seaports was recorded as 39% high than the 2020-2021 record (Asghar, 2023).
- Both countries became ready to enhance their cultural ties through exhibitions and cultural exchange programs. For this purpose, the Uzbek president signed six agreements with Pakistan during his visit in March 2022 (Asghar, 2023).

6) Pak-Uzbek Relations since April 2022

The phase of cordial closeness came to an end in April 2022, and now both countries are once again experiencing frozen formalities as;

- Since the end of CPEC authority, Uzbek authorities along with Iran have been once again inclined towards either NSTC or the Kashgar-Kabul-Herat-Mashhad route of the Silk Road (Asghar, 2023).
- As the political change in Pakistan brought distances between Afghan and Pakistani governments, Uzbek traders have also been insecure now to use Pakistani soil for their exports and imports (Asghar, 2023). Therefore, trade between Pakistan and Uzbekistan has once again deteriorated (Asghar, 2023).
- The law-and-order situation in Pakistan has become a cause of stopping Afghan and Uzbek people to meet with their blood relations in Pakistan once again (Asghar, 2023).

Academic judgments within the Context of Recent Regional Developments

Content analysis of “The Emerging Strides of Pak-Uzbek Relations” assists the scholars to present some recommendations regarding boosting Pak-Uzbek ties as;

- 1) The government of Pakistan should draw redlines regarding national interests.
- 2) Regional engagements should be exhibited at any cost.
- 3) Pak-Uzbek along with Pak-Afghan and Pak-Iran ties should be boosted under ECO, SCO and OIC.
- 4) Pakistan should never compromise on CPEC.
- 5) Restoration of CPEC authority can incline Iran and Uzbekistan along with many other regional states once again towards regional connectivity under Pak-China patronage.
- 6) Cultural and Religious relations should be prioritized during engaging with major powers.
- 7) Political development and political stability must be ensured at any cost. This is the only way to attract Uzbek investors and traders to Karachi and Gwadar seaports once again.

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