Center for Global & Strategic Studies
Islamabad

Pakistan - Uzbekistan Connectivity:
The Way-forward

By Prof Dr. Shabir Ahmad Khan, Director, Area Study Centre (Russia, China & Central Asia), University of Peshawar, Peshawar, and Member Board of Experts, Center for Global & Strategic Studies (CGSS), Islamabad

Published on 12th July 2021
Connectivity as a concept includes cross border linkages through roads (highways), railways, airways, pipelines, educational exchanges, diplomatic exchanges, B2B exchanges, and people to people contacts under the umbrella of cultural and media exchanges. All kinds of connectivity generate economic activity in one form or the other. Two most important factors that induce Pakistan and Uzbekistan to enhance connectivity are their significant geographical locations in respective regions and secondly ongoing integration processes in the region. In order to capitalize their geographies and maximally benefit from the integration processes both the countries enhancing mutual connectivity in this era of revival of Silk Roads. For Pakistan connectivity with Uzbekistan means connectivity with all other CARs and access to $90 billion Central Asian market. Pakistan is naturally facing towards Central Asia and considers itself part of the process of regionalism reinvigorated by President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Central Asia. Improving physical connectivity infrastructure and harmonizing, coordinating policies via Afghanistan is imperative for meaning-full cooperation between Pakistan and Uzbekistan in the short term.

Infrastructure development plays crucial role in connectivity. One of the basic aims of connectivity must be to develop the transport and logistic corridors between Pakistan and Uzbekistan via Afghanistan through Railways and Highways and these will
naturally transform into economic corridors due to agglomeration effects. A production network can be developed in the fields of textile, leather, automobiles, food processing and pharmaceuticals by both the countries.

Railways are important mode for heavy transportation. The fact is that railways, because of its advantages for bulk, containerized and long-distance transport, play key role in freight movement. It is strongly recommended that both the countries expedite work on the Uzbek proposed railway line from Mazari Sharif to Peshawar involving a distance of 753 km. Similarly, ML 1 between Karachi and Peshawar can be linked to Uzbek proposed railway line from Termiz to Peshawar.

Asian Highway 7 starts from Yekaterinburg in Russia crosses Tashkent, Kabul and reaches Gwadar via Chaman and Kandahar, however Torkham is also linked through highway with Kabul via Jalalabad. AH7 can be a backbone connecting Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Russia and can also take a shape of North-South Corridor.

It is also important to harmonies and coordinate cross border polices for smooth border crossing between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to UN Convention every landlocked country has the right to be provided with transit facilities. The Prospective Pak-Uzbek Transit Trade agreement going to be signed on 15 July 2021 will be historic milestone
to enhance bilateral as well as transit trade. Closer cooperation and smooth border crossings will enable Pakistan and Uzbekistan to maximally benefit from the regional integration plans like CAREC, BRI, Eurasian Union and ECO due to their significant geographies in respective regions. The ECO Road Routes 1 to 7 links all 10 member states up to the borders of Russia and China. The strategy should be to coordinate inter-organizational policies for maximum utilization of this infrastructure by both the countries Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

The Governments of Uzbekistan and Pakistan shall announce Termiz and Peshawar as “Sister Cities” as Termiz may serve as a gateway to Central Asia while Peshawar can be a gateway to South Asia. This status will help increasing cultural, social, educational, trade and economic relations between the two cities. There is an irregular bus service between Peshawar and Kabul. This bus service can be extended and regularized between Peshawar and Termiz via Kabul for increased people to people contact as the distance between Peshawar and Termiz via Kabul is less than 800 kms. In this regard a time may reach when visa services at borders or in Peshawar and Termiz will be needed for enhancing people to people contact and tourism between the two countries in particular and between Pakistan and Central Asia in general.

There is a need to further enhance people to people contact between Pakistan and Uzbekistan through cultural, educational and media exchanges as everything starts with humanity. These need to be enhanced on priority basis through faculty/scholar
exchanges, cultural exhibitions, book fairs, movies, plays and sports. Direct flights between the two countries will have positive impact on overall relations.

Pakistan can provide best academicians on least cost as compare to the western countries. Similarly, Uzbekistan has very good academic institutions especially in biotechnology, chemistry and other science subjects, we can send our students there, instead of sending them to west, which are more expensive. Joint research projects which are important for the region can be undertaken together e.g effects of US withdrawal from Afghanistan on the region, Eurasian integration and Iran-Saudi rivalry etc. In the academic spheres it is needed to facilitate scholarship opportunities also and students should be integrated more in the educational domain. Strong efforts should be made in order to curtail the language barriers for the people. Role of research experts, think-tank and embassies in enhancing people to people contact should be sector specific.

Establishment of joint ventures and enhancing cooperation in agriculture particularly cotton sector needs to be prioritized. A cotton cartel can be developed between Uzbekistan, Pakistan and China under the CPEC industrialization phase

The Area Study Centre (Russia, China and Central Asia) University of Peshawar runs MPhil and PhD programs only. Title of the degree is MPhil and PhD in Central Studies though the Centre also conducts research on Russia and China. So far, the Centre has produced 83 PhD scholars in Central Asia Studies. The Criteria for admissions in MPhil is 16 years of education while in PhD 18 years of education mainly in the disciplines of
social sciences arts and humanities. The Centre advertises admissions twice in a year namely Fall and Spring Semesters. I hereby suggest and invite scholars from Uzbekistan to take admission in our MPhil and PhD programs and we will provide all the facilities available at the Centre.

Ali Sher Navoi Research Corner has also been developed at the Area Study Centre (Russia, China and Central Asia) University of Peshawar with the financial assistance of the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Islamabad. It will benefit the scholars in Peshawar to learn and conduct research on Uzbek language literature. On behalf of the Area Study Centre University of Peshawar I am grateful to H.E. Oybek Arif Usmanov, the Ambassador of Uzbekistan to Pakistan and his team including Col Saadulla Defence Attaché and other colleagues for providing financial assistance and reading material for the Ali Sher Navoi Research Corner at the Centre.

**Afghanistan: The Linking Node**

For any meaningful movement between Pakistan and Uzbekistan, peace and stability in Afghanistan is a pre requisite. Peace in Afghanistan will pave way for meaningful political, security, trade and economic relations between the two countries. The ongoing peace process must culminate in a logical conclusion because break down of negotiations will lead
towards chaos and instability with dire consequences for the neighbors of Afghanistan. Prospects for peace in Afghanistan are bright as no party has left out from the process yet and regional support also seems there. It is encouraging that immediate neighbors of Afghanistan have a consensus on to prevent Afghanistan from civil war. There is a realization in CARs to play active and positive roles in ensuring sustainable peace in Afghanistan. The two parties Kabul regime and Taliban need to be pressurized to make compromises and reach a consensus on future political setup leading to inclusive broad-based government. Afghan Taliban have agreed to present a proposal for power sharing agreement soon.

If a new setup comes into being as a result of the peace talks, the immediate neighbors of Afghanistan will have to support it with increased interaction and financial, trade facilitation as per their capacities. Pakistan and Uzbekistan as immediate neighbours are the real stakeholders in the peace of Afghanistan and are important partners in this regard. Uzbekistan and Pakistan through coordinated policies can be instrumental in achieving sustainable peace and development in Afghanistan. Both the countries can also help Afghanistan by increasing interaction and accelerating the process of integration via Afghanistan through the development of soft and hard infrastructure. All the regional integration arrangements such as BRI, CAREC, CPEC, ECO, Eurasian Union, TAPI, CASA, UTRP (Uzbekistan Trans Afghan Railway Project), Energy Projects and highways complement each other in terms of inclusive regional development and shared prosperity. These multilayered processes have brightened the prospects of regional integration. Both the countries Pakistan and Uzbekistan will remain relevant
to these processes due to their geographies and can benefit maximally from all the regional integration processes through increased connectivity and cooperation. Similarly, if the mentioned projects materialize will be enough for Afghanistan to sustain its economy, to effectively address the issue of narcotics and to substantially reduce its dependence on foreign aid.