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A NEW CHAPTER IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN AND UZBEKISTAN



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A NEW CHAPTER IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

Introduction

Following the return of the Islamic Emirate to power, a few visits by officials from neighboring countries have taken place in Kabul. However, recently, Abdullah Aripov, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, made a trip to Kabul, marking the highest-ranking foreign official to visit the city since the Islamic Emirate's return to power, following the visit of the Prime Minister of Qatar. This visit occurred after previous visits by Uzbekistani officials at the ministerial level to Kabul. Clearly, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan's visit to Kabul holds special significance for Afghanistan and reflects Uzbekistan's particular attention to Afghanistan's developments. Therefore, in this article, the objectives of the Uzbek Prime Minister's visit to Kabul will be examined, and its achievements will be evaluated.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF UZBEKISTAN'S RELATIONS WITH THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

When the Taliban movement emerged in 1994, Uzbekistan, despite having suspended formal relations with Kabul, supported the Jumbish-i-Milli (National Islamic Movement) party led by Abdul Rashid Dostum, which was engaged in war against the central government in Kabul. As the Taliban advanced and captured Kabul, followed by the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif, Tashkent, to avoid direct involvement in the conflict with the Taliban—who had now established the Islamic Emirate after taking Kabul—adopted a stance of near-neutrality towards the remnants of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. This government was an alliance of parties involved in the previous civil war, including Dostum's Jumbish party. Uzbekistan maintained this position until 2001 when the United States overthrew the Islamic Emirate. Beyond this, Islam Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan, proposed the "6+2" initiative (six neighboring countries of Afghanistan plus Russia and the United States) for establishing peace in Afghanistan.

After 2001, Uzbekistan cooperated with the U.S. by providing the Karshi-Khanabad airbase for military operations in Afghanistan. However, during the subsequent fifteen years of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan reverted to its previously adopted stance of neutrality regarding Afghan affairs. During this period, Uzbekistan also proposed the "3+6" initiative (six neighboring countries of Afghanistan plus Russia, the United States, and the European Union) for peace in Afghanistan, but it did not gain significant attention. In the final years of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan hosted several Taliban delegations and made efforts to facilitate peace between Kabul and the Taliban.

THE DYNAMICS OF UZBEKISTAN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent collapse of the previous government, leading to the Islamic Emirate's return to power, Uzbekistan not only refrained from severing its ties with Afghanistan but also kept its embassy in Kabul and its consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif operational, maintaining de facto relations with the Islamic Emirate. Furthermore, Uzbekistan became the second country, after Qatar, to send its Foreign Minister to Kabul in October 2021 (Mizan 1400 in the Afghan



calendar), less than two months after the Islamic Emirate assumed power, signaling its desire to strengthen and expand relations with the new regime.

In March 2024 (Hoot 1402), a 50-member delegation from Uzbekistan, led by Bakhtiyor Saidov, visited Kabul. Additionally, in April 2024 (Sawr 1403), another high-level delegation, led by the Special Representative of the President of Uzbekistan, traveled to Kabul. Most recently, on August 18, 2024 (Asad 28, 1403), the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, as the highest-ranking Uzbek official, led a delegation to Kabul.

Beyond these high-level visits, the President of Uzbekistan has repeatedly expressed satisfaction with the Islamic Emirate's governance in Afghanistan in international forums and has consistently emphasized the need for international support to help Afghanistan transition to a more stable political and economic situation. In his latest remarks, he reiterated his country's continued support for Afghanistan and stressed the importance of global attention and assistance to the country.

All these developments, particularly the recent visit by the Uzbek Prime Minister to Kabul, highlight that Uzbekistan recognizes more than any other country the significance of maintaining good relations and fostering beneficial political and economic engagement with Afghanistan.

KEY FOCUS AREAS OF THE UZBEK PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO KABUL

As mentioned, the Uzbek Prime Minister's visit to Kabul is one of the most significant and high-level visits to the city in the past three years. In addition to highlighting Uzbekistan's attention to Afghanistan and the political importance it places on the Islamic Emirate, this visit also encompassed numerous economic aspects, which will be outlined below.

SIGNING OF AGREEMENTS

The first and most notable focus of the Uzbek Prime Minister's visit to Kabul was the signing of numerous agreements between the two countries. According to reports, 35 agreements were signed between officials from both countries in various sectors, including energy, joint copper, iron, and oil and gas extraction projects, transportation, agriculture, water management, and education. The total value of these agreements is estimated at \$2.5 billion.

Among these agreements, signed in the presence of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, and Abdullah Aripov, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, along with other government officials and representatives from the private sectors of both countries, 12 were investment memorandums worth \$1.4 billion, and 23 were commercial contracts valued at \$1.1 billion.

EMPHASIS ON INCREASING BILATERAL TRADE TO THREE BILLION DOLLARS

Another significant aspect of the Uzbek Prime Minister's visit to Kabul was the agreement to boost bilateral trade between the two countries to a target of three billion dollars annually. The trade volume, which was 239 million dollars last year and is projected to reach 500 million dollars this year,



is now set to rise to three billion dollars within the next three years. This agreement, signed in the presence of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, and Abdullah Aripov, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, was formalized between the Ministers of Industry and Commerce of both nations.

OPENING OF UZBEKISTAN'S TRADE PRODUCTS EXHIBITION IN KABUL

Another major objective of the Uzbek Prime Minister's visit to Kabul was the inauguration of the largest exhibition of Uzbekistan's products and goods in Kabul. This event took place on the sidelines of the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Business Forum and was jointly inaugurated by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and Abdullah Aripov, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, with the participation of Nuruddin Azizi, Acting Minister of Industry and Commerce of the Islamic Emirate, and Laziz Kudratov, Minister of Investments, Industry, and Trade of Uzbekistan.

At this grand exhibition, a wide range of products from various sectors were showcased for three days, including light vehicles, cargo transportation, trucks, firefighting equipment, cranes, various agricultural machinery, food products, textiles, electrical appliances, carpets, and more.

Regarding the exhibition, the Acting Minister of Industry and Commerce of the Islamic Emirate stated that this exhibition is a unique opportunity to deepen relations between the two countries. He also mentioned that Uzbekistan has offered Afghanistan a discount of 10 to 75 percent on exports and has facilitated the export of Afghan goods to Central Asian countries and China at competitive prices. Of the total agreements made, approximately one billion dollars' worth of contracts will be implemented this year, with the remainder to be executed over the next three years.

DISCUSSIONS ON REGIONAL TRANSIT

Another key focus of the Uzbek Prime Minister's visit to Kabul was discussions on regional transit. In this regard, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan had previously reached agreements to develop the Trans-Afghan project, a railway line from Termez to Peshawar through Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is keen to expedite the preparations and start the practical work on this project as soon as possible. As a country with a developing economy transitioning into an exporter of agricultural and industrial products, Uzbekistan needs shorter and more cost-effective routes to closer markets.

Although Uzbekistan is connected to China, Russia, and Europe through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the country's further economic growth depends on access to the large markets of South Asia and the Middle East, which can only be achieved through transit via Afghanistan. Therefore, during the Uzbek Prime Minister's visit to Kabul, this issue was a significant part of the discussions, with the Prime Minister emphasizing the urgent implementation of the project.



DISCUSSIONS ON THE APPOINTMENT AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE'S AMBASSADOR IN TASHKENT

Although Uzbekistan, like other countries, has not officially (de jure) recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, it has established informal (de facto) relations with the Emirate and has engaged in extensive political and economic interactions, as evidenced by the Uzbek Prime Minister's recent visit to Kabul. Last year, Uzbekistan handed over the Afghan embassy in Tashkent to a diplomat from the Islamic Emirate at the charge d'affaires level. According to reports, during his recent visit to Kabul, the Uzbek Prime Minister promised the Islamic Emirate officials that his country would soon accept a representative of the Emirate at the ambassadorial level.

This promise indicates Uzbekistan's willingness to further develop its relations with the Islamic Emirate at the highest level.

TRILATERAL MEETING BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN, UZBEKISTAN, AND AZERBAIJAN

In addition to the bilateral discussions resulting from the Uzbek Prime Minister's visit to Kabul, a trilateral meeting was also held between Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan during the visit. This meeting, hosted by Nuruddin Azizi, Acting Minister of Industry and Commerce of Afghanistan, took place with the participation of Laziz Kudratov, Minister of Industry, Trade, and Investment of Uzbekistan, and Mammadov, Deputy Minister of Economy of Azerbaijan. The discussions focused on trade, investment, transportation, construction materials, and geological exploration.

During the meeting, the parties discussed developing trade and investment, enhancing transport and logistics cooperation, exploring geological reserves of hydrocarbons and minerals, implementing a cement production project in northern Afghanistan, promoting regional cooperation, effectively utilizing the New Silk Road, expanding railway networks, and ensuring Afghanistan's active re-engagement in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). The Acting Minister of Industry and Commerce also provided detailed information to the Uzbek and Azerbaijani delegations about the activities in Afghanistan's mining sector, highlighting the country's investment opportunities and priorities in this field.

This meeting has the potential to pave the way for economic development on a multilateral and regional level and attract regional investments to Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

From the outset of taking control in Afghanistan, the Islamic Emirate has shown openness to establishing and resuming relations with all countries, particularly Afghanistan's neighbors. Internally, the environment in Afghanistan has become more conducive to economic engagement than ever before. Regionally, the trends align with this approach, and globally, there are no significant obstacles in this regard. This indicates that, following the rise of the Islamic Emirate, a shared regional and global understanding has emerged regarding Afghanistan, with no country seeking to plunge Afghanistan



back into conflict. Even global powers seem to share the view that Afghanistan should be supported in transitioning from a post-war situation to a more stable state.

Considering this positive regional and global outlook, Uzbekistan, which has been one of the pioneers in establishing relations with the Islamic Emirate, has correctly recognized the opportunity to capitalize on this favorable environment. To this end, alongside its previous effective actions, Uzbekistan has now sent its second highest-ranking official to Kabul to further strengthen and expand relations.

This visit underscores that Afghanistan holds significant importance for Uzbekistan and that maintaining close ties with Afghanistan plays a vital role in Uzbekistan's economic strategy. Afghanistan offers several key economic advantages to Uzbekistan. First, Afghanistan serves as Uzbekistan's gateway to the world. Thus, through close engagement with the Islamic Emirate, Uzbekistan is striving to establish a connection to the south as quickly as possible using infrastructure such as railway lines. Second, Afghanistan represents a strong market for Uzbek products. This is why Uzbekistan organized a major exhibition in Kabul to showcase its products, which was one of the primary objectives of the Prime Minister's visit. Uzbekistan is well aware that in the current environment, where everyone is eyeing Afghanistan and its potential \$10 billion market, it must secure its fair share. Third, Afghanistan is an attractive destination for Uzbek investments. As a result, the Prime Minister's visit was accompanied by a large delegation of officials from industrial, agricultural, and commercial sectors.

In conclusion, Afghanistan, which is now experiencing relative security stability, has created a favorable environment for shared economic growth. As observed, Afghanistan's neighbors have recognized the need to take advantage of this opportunity, with Uzbekistan leading the way. If this approach, which Uzbekistan has adopted in its dealings with Afghanistan, continues, the future outlook for both countries' economies appears promising and prosperous, with a significant portion of this potential realized through the implementation of agreements and the fulfillment of the objectives of the Prime Minister's visit to Kabul.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussions in this article, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Although neighboring countries have established extensive informal relations with the Islamic Emirate, in order to fully capitalize on such relationships, the Islamic Emirate needs to be recognized as an official state. Therefore, the Islamic Emirate should take firm steps towards achieving official international recognition.
2. To attract further attention from other countries, the Islamic Emirate must also ensure internal conditions, such as security and economic infrastructure. Without developing the necessary internal infrastructure to position Afghanistan as a bridge between the North and South, other countries will not be encouraged to use Afghanistan as a transit route.



- Specifically, regarding the relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, the Islamic Emirate should create the necessary conditions for the implementation of the agreements reached. This will encourage other countries to follow Uzbekistan's example and engage in broader interactions with Afghanistan.

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