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AN OVERVIEW OF MULLAH ABDUL GHANI BARADAR'S VISIT TO UZBEKISTAN



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



AN OVERVIEW OF MULLAH ABDUL GHANI BARADAR'S VISIT TO UZBEKISTAN

Introduction

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of the Islamic Emirate, led a high-level delegation on a two-day visit to Uzbekistan on February 22, 2024 (4th Hut, 1403). The delegation included key officials such as Hedayatullah Badri, Acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum; Hamidullah Akhundzada, Acting Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation; Nooruddin Azizi, Acting Minister of Industry and Commerce; Ataullah Omari, Acting Minister of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock; Noor Ahmad Agha, Governor of Da Afghanistan Bank (Afghanistan's Central Bank); and Abdul Mateen Saeed, Deputy Minister for Revenue and Customs at the Ministry of Finance. Representatives from the private sector also accompanied the delegation.

During the visit, the Afghan delegation met with senior Uzbek officials, including the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and several ministers from the Uzbek cabinet. These meetings focused on strengthening bilateral relations and exploring areas of economic cooperation. This visit holds significance from multiple perspectives, and the following discussion highlights its key aspects.

POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

While the primary focus of Mullah Baradar's visit and that of his accompanying delegation was economic, it is essential to first highlight its political significance before discussing its economic objectives and outcomes. High-level official visits play a crucial role in expanding diplomatic relations and achieving strategic goals. The Islamic Emirate has effectively utilized such visits as a key instrument for strengthening its international engagement.

The choice of Uzbekistan as a destination for this direct meeting carries significant political weight. Currently, Uzbekistan is the most politically influential country in Central Asia. Even during the Soviet era, it held a central position in the region, playing a key role as the administrative and political hub of Soviet Central Asia. Geographically, Uzbekistan can be considered the heart of Central Asia, sharing borders not only with Afghanistan but also with four other Central Asian countries. With the region's largest population, a strong military, and an industrialized economy, Uzbekistan is a major player in regional affairs.

Beyond its regional influence, Uzbekistan, as Afghanistan's immediate neighbor, has the potential to play a crucial role in Afghanistan's political landscape. At the same time, maintaining strong ties with Afghanistan offers significant political advantages for Uzbekistan. Notably, both nations recognize the importance of fostering their bilateral relationship. This is evident in the increased frequency of high-level exchanges over the past three years.

Uzbekistan is the only country whose highest-ranking executive official, the Prime Minister, has visited Kabul, reflecting the depth of engagement between the two nations. On the Afghan side, the recent visit of the highest-ranking executive official of the Islamic Emirate to Uzbekistan further solidifies this relationship. Such reciprocal high-level visits between Tashkent and Kabul are instrumental in



strengthening diplomatic ties and can significantly enhance political, security, and economic cooperation between the two neighboring nations.

ECONOMIC OBJECTIVES

As evident from the composition of the Islamic Emirate's delegation, the primary focus of Mullah Baradar's visit to Uzbekistan was economic. The delegation, which mainly consisted of sectoral ministers, pursued multiple objectives in key areas such as trade, transit, energy, and investment. The following discussion outlines these economic goals in detail.

1- Trade Relations

Bilateral trade between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan has been growing steadily in recent years, making it a crucial area of interest for both the Islamic Emirate and the Uzbek government. One of the main factors driving both countries to expand and diversify their trade is the complementary nature of their markets—Afghanistan, as a consumer-driven economy, seeks affordable, high-quality, and geographically accessible sources of goods, while Uzbekistan is well-positioned to meet much of Afghanistan's market demand.

During this visit, one of the key agreements reached was the establishment of a free economic zone to enhance trade between the two nations. However, a major challenge Afghanistan faces in its trade relations is the lack of balance between imports and exports. Afghanistan imports large quantities of goods, particularly from neighboring countries, while its export levels remain significantly low. Although this trade imbalance is largely due to Afghanistan's limited domestic production capacity, the country is actively seeking preferential treatment for its exports to neighboring markets.

This issue was specifically addressed during the visit, as highlighted by Nooruddin Azizi, Acting Minister of Industry and Commerce. He noted that Afghanistan's exports to Uzbekistan had declined in recent years, and both sides agreed on measures to create a more balanced trade relationship. Discussions also focused on preferential trade agreements, banking cooperation, tariff reductions on Afghan exports to Uzbekistan, and the establishment of joint trade centers.

As part of the preferential trade agreement, customs duties on ten Afghan export items will be reduced to zero, while ten Uzbek products needed in Afghanistan will also receive special trade benefits. In addition, both sides discussed enhancing banking cooperation, simplifying cross-border customs procedures, improving Afghan traders' access to Uzbek markets, facilitating visa issuance for Afghan businessmen, and enabling trade transactions in local currencies. These measures aim to strengthen economic ties and create new opportunities for trade and investment between the two countries.

2- Transit and Connectivity

Transit infrastructure plays a crucial role in the economies of both Afghanistan and Uzbekistan in two keyways. First, the development of multiple, high-standard trade routes is essential for expanding commercial ties and facilitating cross-border trade. As discussed earlier, both nations are



eager to strengthen their economic relations, but achieving this goal requires enhanced transit facilities and improved infrastructure. While the existing "Friendship Bridge" has connected the two countries for decades and remains operational, additional transit routes and logistical enhancements are necessary to keep pace with growing trade demands. In addition to infrastructure development, administrative and regulatory facilitation is equally important—an issue that was a major focus of Mullah Baradar's visit. Reports indicate that he urged Uzbek officials to invest in the construction of a second Salang Tunnel, a project that could significantly boost trade efficiency between the two countries while also serving as a vital transit corridor between Central and South Asia.

Secondly, regional transit plays a strategic role in the broader economic interests of both Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. As a landlocked country within another landlocked country, Uzbekistan relies on transit through Afghanistan to access South Asian markets and, ultimately, open-sea trade routes. Conversely, Afghanistan requires transit access through its northern neighbors to reach countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, China, and Russia. This mutual dependence makes regional transit cooperation an urgent priority for both nations. While preliminary efforts to enhance transit routes had already been made in the past, recent discussions suggest that both the Islamic Emirate and Uzbek authorities are now intensifying their efforts to accelerate progress in this area.

One of the most ambitious regional transit projects under consideration is the **Trans-Afghan Corridor**, which aims to connect Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan and further extend to Pakistan's seaports. However, this project faces a significant challenge—the often unstable and strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Given these obstacles, part of Mullah Baradar's visit appears to have focused on exploring alternative transit routes. One such alternative is the **East-West Corridor**, which has been a key topic of negotiation.

The East-West Corridor would connect Termez in Uzbekistan to Mazar-i-Sharif, then extend to Herat, and from there link to Khaf in Iran, ultimately providing access to Iran's southern and western ports. Compared to the Trans-Afghan Corridor, this route offers several advantages—it is politically more stable, has fewer implementation hurdles, and benefits from Iran's involvement as a third-party investor. In practical terms, connectivity between Herat and Khaf is already underway via railway, and a railway link exists between Termez, Hairatan, and Mazar-i-Sharif. The key missing link is the rail connection between Mazar and Herat. Reportedly, agreements have been made to move forward with this section, and technical feasibility studies are set to begin soon. Once completed, this project will seamlessly link Uzbekistan with Iran, creating new opportunities for trade and regional integration.

Looking at the bigger picture, this corridor has the potential to establish a direct trade route between West Asia, Central Asia, and beyond, including China. If successfully implemented, it could transform regional trade dynamics, making Afghanistan a central transit hub and significantly benefiting all participating nations.

3- Energy Sector Cooperation



Another key focus of Mullah Baradar's visit to Uzbekistan was the energy sector. For years, Uzbekistan has been a primary supplier of electricity to Afghanistan, playing a crucial role in meeting the country's energy demands. While Uzbekistan has largely fulfilled its commitments in this regard, further discussions were needed to ensure supply stability, affordability, and diversification. Given the importance of these issues, energy negotiations were a central part of Mullah Baradar's visit.

Reports suggest that the discussions yielded notable outcomes. First, Afghanistan appears to have secured stronger commitments from Uzbekistan for an uninterrupted electricity supply. More importantly, negotiations focused on pricing adjustments and the status of several infrastructure projects that had previously been delayed due to recent political changes. One significant achievement was the agreement to reduce the cost of the 500-kilovolt transmission line project from \$252 million to \$222 million. Additionally, agreements were reached to increase the volume of imported electricity while lowering its cost, which could greatly benefit Afghanistan's economy and energy security.

4- Investment Sector

Investment plays a vital role in the economy of any country, and even the world's largest economic powers rely on foreign investments to sustain growth and development. Recognizing this, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has actively encouraged investment in various sectors. By providing security guarantees and simplifying administrative and technical procedures, the Afghan government has opened the country's economy to investors from around the world.

Attracting foreign investment has also been a key priority in the official visits of high-ranking Afghan officials, and Mullah Baradar's visit to Uzbekistan was no exception. Investment promotion was a major focus of discussions, leading to several significant agreements. These included the establishment of a cement factory in Samangan province, investment in oil and gas exploration and extraction in Faryab province, and the creation of processing plants for pine nuts and cotton. Additionally, agreements were reached on the development of packaging centers, logistics hubs, and food production factories within a special trade zone that Uzbekistan plans to establish soon.

Beyond these agreements, Mullah Baradar also met with Afghan businessmen residing in Uzbekistan, encouraging them to invest in their home country. As a result, they committed to investing up to \$100 million in Afghanistan's economy, further strengthening economic ties between the two nations.

CONCLUSION

One of the most effective strategies that demonstrate the active diplomacy of the Islamic Emirate is the high-level political and economic visits of its officials to various countries. Direct visits play a crucial role in strengthening Afghanistan's political and economic relations, often proving more beneficial than other diplomatic tools. While official visits to any country bring advantages, choosing Uzbekistan at this time holds even greater strategic value.



From a political perspective, Mullah Baradar's visit and his meetings with Uzbek officials have the potential to open new avenues for diplomatic relations between the two nations. Strengthening ties with Uzbekistan—one of the key players in Central Asia—can enhance Afghanistan's position in regional dynamics. Moreover, given that major global powers consider Uzbekistan a strategic partner in the region, a positive stance from Uzbekistan toward Afghanistan could favorably influence international perceptions of Afghanistan.

Economically, which was the primary focus of Mullah Baradar's visit, the trip brought significant progress. The agreements reached between Afghan and Uzbek economic officials will accelerate bilateral trade and contribute to the economic development of both countries. In terms of transit, the visit led to a breakthrough. Given the challenges associated with the Trans-Afghan route due to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, the two sides agreed to develop an alternative route. This new East-West corridor, connecting Termez to Mazar, and further linking Mazar to Herat and the Herat-Khaf railway network, presents a more feasible and technically viable option, with strong interest from all stakeholders.

On the energy front, the visit resulted in concrete achievements. Afghanistan's economy, in the short term, stands to benefit significantly from a stable and cost-effective energy supply from its neighbors. Another critical area of discussion was investment. Afghanistan, rich in natural resources and economic opportunities, remains an attractive destination for investors. While the Islamic Emirate has taken commendable steps to encourage both domestic and foreign investment, high-level diplomatic engagements such as this visit play an essential role in attracting international investors and strengthening economic partnerships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussions, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Given the agreements made during Mullah Baradar's visit, the country's executive institutions need to establish special committees to ensure their effective implementation.
- ii. Greater attention should be given to sectors that enhance Afghanistan's export capabilities, facilitating broader trade opportunities.
- iii. As transit serves as a vital artery for the country's economy, efforts should be made to increase investment in domestic transportation infrastructure.
- iv. Investment strategies should focus on attracting industries and advancing technological capabilities.
- v. Uzbekistan has extensive experience in mechanized agriculture; therefore, the Islamic Emirate should pursue further agreements to benefit from Uzbekistan's expertise in this field.

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