

## THE STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS OF INDIA-UZBEKISTAN DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP IN THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF CENTRAL ASIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the evolving strategic dimensions of India-Uzbekistan defence cooperation in the context of Central Asia's changing geopolitical environment. It highlights how both nations, motivated by mutual security concerns, have transformed their bilateral defence relationship into a significant element of regional stability. The study also examines the role of external powers, such as Russia, China, and the United States, and how the shifting dynamics in Afghanistan and Central Asia influence India-Uzbekistan strategic ties. The paper concludes that the strengthening defence partnership between the two nations serves as a key factor in promoting security, regional balance, and sustainable cooperation in Eurasia.*

**Keywords:** Defence cooperation, Central Asia, strategic partnership, regional security, geopolitics, counterterrorism.

### INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed a reconfiguration of power relations in Central Asia, a region strategically positioned at the crossroads of South, West, and East Asia. In this evolving geopolitical environment, the Republic of India and the Republic of Uzbekistan have emerged as important regional partners with converging interests in security, stability, and connectivity. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, both nations have expanded their cooperation from traditional political and economic exchanges to deeper strategic and defence collaboration. India's growing involvement in Central Asia is guided by its "Connect Central Asia Policy" (2012), which aims to enhance political dialogue, economic partnership, and security cooperation with the region. Uzbekistan, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's reformist foreign policy, has also sought diversified partnerships to strengthen its sovereignty and ensure regional security. Against this background, the India-Uzbekistan defence partnership has evolved into a central pillar of bilateral relations.

### DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The defence relations between India and Uzbekistan began modestly in the early 1990s but have expanded rapidly since the 2010s. Several high-level visits, including

Indian Defence Ministers' trips to Tashkent and reciprocal meetings between military delegations, have institutionalized defence dialogue mechanisms. A landmark moment was the signing of the "Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation" agreement, which paved the way for regular consultations and joint exercises. The first-ever joint military exercise, "Dustlik-2019", held in Tashkent, marked a new phase in bilateral defence collaboration. Focused on counterterrorism and urban warfare, these exercises demonstrated both countries' shared commitment to combating transnational threats. Successive editions of Dustlik exercises have further strengthened operational understanding and interoperability between the Indian Armed Forces and the Armed Forces of Uzbekistan.

The strategic significance of the India-Uzbekistan partnership extends beyond bilateral defence cooperation. It is deeply rooted in the geopolitical transformations of Central Asia. After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the region faced new security challenges such as terrorism, extremism, and instability spilling over from the Afghan border. In this context, Uzbekistan has emerged as a key actor promoting dialogue and stability, while India has sought to enhance its strategic footprint to secure its northern frontier and energy interests.

Both countries share a common vision for a stable and multipolar Central Asia that is free from external domination. The partnership also serves as a balancing mechanism amid growing Chinese influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's continued strategic presence. The India-Uzbekistan partnership must be viewed within the broader geopolitical competition among Russia, China, the United States, and regional actors in Central Asia.

India's presence serves as a balancing factor, promoting multipolarity and regional independence from great-power dominance. Uzbekistan, maintaining a policy of strategic neutrality, views cooperation with India as a means to diversify its foreign partnerships while safeguarding its sovereignty. Through participation in multilateral institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), both nations have expanded their strategic dialogue, aligning their views on regional peace, connectivity, and counterterrorism.

Looking ahead, the India-Uzbekistan defence relationship has immense potential for expansion in defence technology, cybersecurity, and peacekeeping operations. India's experience in defence manufacturing and Uzbekistan's strategic location could open new avenues for joint ventures and military training programs.

However, challenges remain. Limited logistical connectivity between India and Central Asia, geopolitical competition among major powers, and resource constraints could hinder the pace of cooperation. Strengthening multilateral mechanisms and

increasing people-to-people defence exchanges can help overcome these limitations and make the partnership more sustainable.

The India-Uzbekistan defence partnership is not merely bilateral-it symbolizes the emergence of South-Central Asian strategic interdependence. It contributes to the evolving Eurasian balance of power, supports India's ambition to become a continental stakeholder, and enables Uzbekistan to act as a strategic hub linking East and West. By aligning defence cooperation with diplomacy, trade, and connectivity, the partnership enhances regional resilience and advances a collective vision of peaceful coexistence and shared prosperity.

## **CONCLUSION**

The strategic dimensions of the India-Uzbekistan defence partnership highlight the deepening convergence of South and Central Asian interests in ensuring long-term regional stability, security, and economic development. This partnership has gradually evolved from limited defence exchanges into a multifaceted strategic alliance, encompassing joint military training, defence technology cooperation, and intelligence collaboration. Such developments signify not only mutual trust but also a shared understanding of the changing security architecture of Eurasia.

In the broader geopolitical context, the growing partnership reflects both nations' determination to assert strategic autonomy in a world characterized by renewed great-power competition. India views Uzbekistan as a pivotal gateway to Central Asia—an anchor for its Connect Central Asia Policy and a bridge to continental Eurasia—while Uzbekistan regards India as a reliable partner capable of supporting its modernization efforts and security reforms. Their cooperation thus represents a mutually reinforcing alignment, where political dialogue and defence collaboration contribute directly to the stability of the entire region.

Moreover, joint initiatives in counterterrorism, border security, and defence industrial development not only strengthen bilateral security ties but also enhance regional mechanisms against emerging threats such as radicalization, cyber warfare, and energy insecurity. Within multilateral frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), both states have demonstrated a shared commitment to building a more inclusive and balanced security order in Central Asia.

Despite significant progress, several challenges remain: Logistical and geographical limitations restrict direct connectivity, making defence logistics and trade costly; Dependence on third-party infrastructure (such as through Iran or Afghanistan) complicates defence coordination; Balancing great-power politics — both nations must carefully manage their relations with Russia, China, and Western powers to maintain strategic autonomy.

Looking ahead, sustained engagement through institutionalized defence dialogues, strategic foresight, and technological collaboration will be critical for maintaining momentum in this evolving partnership. As India and Uzbekistan navigate the shifting dynamics of Eurasian geopolitics, their defence cooperation will continue to serve as a cornerstone for promoting peace, stability, and connectivity between South and Central Asia.

Ultimately, the India–Uzbekistan defence partnership stands as a model of regional synergy, illustrating how two historically connected civilizations can leverage strategic cooperation to shape a more secure and multipolar future in the heart of Eurasia.

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