

India-Uzbekistan Defence Relations: The Growing Strategic Partnership

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ABSTRACT

India and Uzbekistan, the two nations with rich historical and cultural ties, have been steadily strengthening their bilateral relations in various fields, particularly in the field of defence and security. This paper explores the expansion of India-Uzbekistan defence relationship and its future prospects by examining the development of strategic ties including joint exercises between the forces, military exchanges and cooperation through collaboration in defence technology. It argues that the growing defence partnership between the two countries is motivated by shared security concerns, their mutual economic interests and vision for development by cooperation in maintaining regional stability. By working with the armed forces of other nations, the joint military exercises with friendly states improve our armed forces' capabilities in a variety of war-fighting domains and lead to positive operational interactions. With primary and secondary sources, this paper also highlights the challenges and opportunities for India and Uzbekistan in taking this relationship at new level. This paper also offers recommendations for both sides that can give valuable insights for researchers who are interested in the evolving dynamics of India's strategic relations with Central Asia.

Keywords: Bilateral ties, Security, Defence Relations, Regional Stability, Joint Exercise

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, defence diplomacy has grown in significance. In order to further its strategic objectives, India has also expanded its defence diplomacy. India conducts bilateral joint exercises with important defence allies, particularly Central Asian nations, including Uzbekistan as part of its defence diplomacy. The modern connection between India and Uzbekistan is firmly rooted in their historical ties. The Silk Road allowed for significant cultural and commercial contacts between the two areas during the Middle Ages. After Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, India and the Uzbekistan developed diplomatic ties in the contemporary period. The two nations have since endeavored to establish a complex partnership, with defence cooperation emerging as a crucial element. Among all the countries of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is

an important country where India is now actively engaging itself since last two decades. The India-Uzbekistan bilateral relations are now termed as strategic partnership. Both countries have signed many defence agreements, including the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation in 2011¹. The foundation for future cooperation in areas including military training, joint drills, and defense technology transfer was established by this agreement.

India and Uzbekistan, the defence forces of both countries have increased interaction through the joint participation in war drills and defence exercises. They are also coming together with discussions about joint production of weapons systems and many other defence equipment. As both countries use Russian origin weapons on large scale, they can share experience and learn a lot by interacting through joint training, upgradation and maintenance old military machines and equipment. Even

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if there is no direct access between India and Uzbekistan, the bilateral relations between India and Uzbekistan is on upward trajectory and they have reached to strategic level in recent years. New Delhi and Tashkent have increased cooperation in the field of defence, they are now assisting each other in the areas of security, economic growth, stability, energy security etc. The joint efforts in the field of defence would define these bilateral relations at different level. The defence forces on both sides have lot of room to learn from each other with the growing India-Uzbekistan relations. India's attempts to promote the indigenisation in its defence sector under the Make in India programme complements Uzbekistan's expanding defence demands. Therefore, the joint defense production, research in the areas of military medicines and other forms of expanded defence cooperation have become important part of joint training and exercises. India has plenty of opportunity to improve its strategic ties with Uzbekistan by using its technological and economic resources. In addition to making India's Central Asia strategy more strategically relevant, it would also improve relations between both the nations.

Strengthening Security Collaboration:

The defence relationship between India and Uzbekistan has gained momentum in recent years, reflecting the growing strategic convergence between the two nations. To take the defence and military cooperation at new level, the Defence Minister of Uzbekistan Major General Abdusalam Azizov paid a visit to India in 2018. The purpose of the visit was to discuss the plan for future engagements with Indian defence forces. During this visit, India and Uzbekistan discussed joint training of Special Forces, training capsules for Uzbek military engineers and development of the Qarshi Aviation School in Uzbekistan. India has also helped Uzbekistan in setting up India Room at Armed Forces Academy in Tashkent². The continuous engagement of India and Uzbekistan is taking the defence partnership to a new level. The first meeting of the Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation took place in February 2019. It was followed with the first ever joint military exercise called 'Dustlik' in November 2019. The exercise took place in Tashkent. The timing was special as it coincided with the visit of Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to Uzbekistan³. The second edition of this exercise was held in India's hilly state of Uttarakhand where forces of both countries held many

drills in March 2021. Dustlik-II was a 10-day exercise held in the Chaubatia area of Ranikhet. Contingents comprising 45 soldiers from both sides shared their skills and expertise in the field of anti-terror operations in the mountainous region⁴. Such exercises provide an opportunity for both India and Uzbekistan to grow their bilateral military relations and resolve to jointly counter the terror forces in their region. Along with such engagements, both countries are also cooperating in the field of military education, training and capacity building.

Dustlik is now enhanced with multi domain operations as it troops from various branches have participated in various contingent that took part in these annual exercises. From Infantry to Combat Support Arms and from Artillery to Army Medical Corps including women officers, all kind of personnel have taken part in Dustlik exercises. The exercise facilitate not just interoperability, it also promotes bonhomie and camaraderie between the soldiers of both countries, which plays a very vital role in promotion of bilateral relations. By working with the armed forces of other nations, the joint military exercises with friendly states improve our armed forces' capabilities in a variety of war fighting domains and lead to positive operational interactions. Although this is an ongoing process, appropriate actions are occasionally taken to broaden the scope of exercises in accordance with our own strategic needs and the mutual benefit principle.

Apart from military interaction, the National Security Councils are also cooperating on issues like law enforcement and counter-terrorism activities. To shape these links, the first bilateral dialogue of National Security Councils took place in Tashkent in September 2019. India is now collaborating with Central Asian nations in the fields of joint exercises, defence equipment manufacture, and military training. Terrorism is a common threat the current engagements show their resolve to fight this menace through cooperation in various areas. In addition, the other area is where both sides can work jointly in the development and production of defence equipment. Here India has more to offer Central Asian states which are heavily dependent on Russian systems. India which is also a big user of Soviet/Russia-era weapons is now working on its domestic arms industry. India has produced many type of its own defence hardware over the past 20 years for all sectors of the Indian military, including the army, air force, and naval platforms. Central Asian nations have the option to purchase these weapon systems from

India and take part in cooperative development. Already, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are searching for ways to collaborate with India on the development of weapon systems.

Cooperation in Counter Terrorism Activities:

The defence relations of India and Uzbekistan are underpinned by several strategic motivations which includes shared security concerns which includes terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. New Delhi and Tashkent are also concerned about the instability in Afghanistan, which borders Uzbekistan. Promotion of regional stability by countering the threats posed by non-state actors is a major concern for both countries. The biggest concern of India in the Central Asia region has always been its security and stability. Like Central Asian states, India also views terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking as destabilising forces in the region. To expand cooperation in this area, India and Uzbekistan initiated their measures to ensure joint efforts against these problems. In 2003, India established a Joint Working Group (JWG) with Uzbekistan on counter-terrorism. It also made JWG with Kazakhstan in 2004 and Tajikistan in 2012⁵. The main aim of these JWGs is to review the threat of terrorism, analyse the situation of regional security and coordinate to share the information they gather on terror threats. The next level of these JWG was the framework to include joint training of military forces, military-technical cooperation as well as joint research and development of defence equipment as India and Central Asian states including Uzbekistan are using Russian-origin equipment (Joshi, 2017). The momentum of India-Uzbekistan defence and security relations started taking shape after 2001. Now they have reached the level of strategic cooperation. Overall the main features of India-Uzbekistan defence relations are:

- Intelligence sharing as part of counter terrorism.
- Training and assistance to increase military capability.
- Joint exercises between respective armed forces
- Military education and technical cooperation.

During 2006 Manmohan Singh's visit to Tashkent, India-Uzbekistan agreed to counter "international terrorism in all its manifestations" by attacking its source of finance. During joint media interaction with Karimov, Manmohan Singh said that "Both our countries face the common threats of terrorism, fundamentalism and religious extremism and President Karimov and I have

resolved to continue to work together to combat these dangers." The Joint statement issued said that both countries want to expedite the adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism within the framework of the United Nations (Prime Minister, 2006). Both sides emphasized again on this issue during Islam Karimov's next India visit in 2011 (Embassy of India, 2011). Even on the issue of Kashmir, Uzbekistan supports the Indian stand that it is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan and it should be solved through negotiations (Sengupta, 2006). The issue of Drug trafficking was discussed during Manmohan Singh's 2006 visit to Uzbekistan when Uzbek President Islam Karimov said that International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has failed to control opium production in Afghanistan. Islam Karimov underscored the need to counter drug trafficking in Afghanistan which produces 80 per cent of the world's opium and is one of the biggest sources of terror financing in the region. Karimov said that India and Uzbekistan should increase cooperation in Afghanistan as it is important for regional stability (Prime Minister, 2006, page 2). Uzbekistan was among the pioneer countries which joined the coalition of anti-terrorism forces, it was the only one among the Commonwealth of Independent countries to clear its position on Afghanistan at the initial stage of the war against the Taliban. According to Sayfiddin Juraev, "the two main issues that characterized the Uzbekistan position were; not to allow ground military operations against Afghanistan to be conducted on the territory of Uzbekistan and not to allow bomb-assault operations on Uzbekistan's territory"⁶. In 2007, when India sent its Army contingent for training purposes in Uzbekistan, it was a sign of India's military overreach to Central Asia⁷. Both countries have unease over the presence of the Taliban in Afghanistan which can fuel radicalism in Central Asia and South Asia. This factor brought India and Uzbekistan on one platform for wider security and defence cooperation (Scott, 2009, 129). The Tashkent visit of Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari in May 2013 was of immense significance when both countries discussed deeply the matters of terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and ways to counter it (Joshi, 2017, page 138). The bilateral security cooperation against terrorism was also discussed during Narendra Modi's 2015 visit to Uzbekistan when he reiterated that "India and Uzbekistan share concerns on the rising threat of terrorism and extremism in our extended neighbourhood"(India,

Uzbekistan Ink, 2015). Today, both countries are a member of SCO and they share common views against terrorism in the region.

The Defence Cooperation between India and Uzbekistan has seen upward growth since the Uzbek Defence Minister Maj. Gen. Abdusalam Azizov visited India on 4-7 September 2018. His meeting with Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman came just after the Tashkent visit of Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj' where both sides decided to increase their bilateral cooperation in the areas of defence and security⁸. Since then the strategic ties between Indian and Uzbekistan started to reach the next stage. The following year in February 2019, both sides had their first annual Joint Working Group on Defence and Security⁹. When the Narendra Modi government came back to power in 2019, the relations between his and Mirziyoyev administrations saw an upswing in the strategic relations of both countries. At beginning of November 2019, the new Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh paid a very important visit to Uzbekistan on the sidelines of the SCO meeting in Tashkent. His visit was the first by any Defence Minister to Uzbekistan in about 15 years. Both sides signed three MoUs to enhance defence cooperation in the areas of military medicine and education¹⁰. He along with his Uzbek counterpart Major General Bakhodir Nizamovich Kurbanov witnessed the curtain raiser of 'Dustlik-2019', the first-ever joint military exercise between Indian and Uzbekistan forces. The exercise was focused on counter-terrorism as both army contingents learned each other's tactics for greater operational benefits. The preparation of this exercise and this level of engagement was the result of a meeting of JWG on Defence Cooperation in February 2019 which was followed by the Tashkent visit of the Indian Defence Secretary in March 2019. Both sides also had their first-ever Defence-Industry Workshop in Tashkent just two months before Dustlik-2019 (Visit of Raksha, 2019).

India-Uzbekistan Joint Military Exercise 'Dustlik':

Training programmes help in learning theoretical aspects of technology and operations. The military exercises are the best kind of military training since they are founded on the practical application of theoretical information. The guiding philosophy for military preparing to conduct operations against a common enemy or in common geographic places is "train together to fight together"¹¹. India has offered training programmes for

Uzbek defence personnel through institutions such as the Indian Army's Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School (CIJWS) and the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC). These programs have helped build the capacity of Uzbek defence forces and have fostered closer ties between the two militaries. Joint military drills between India and Uzbekistan, such the 'Dustlik' series, have been held with an emphasis on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. These drills have improved the ability of armed forces of both countries to communicate with one another and have given them excellent chances to exchange best practices. The first-ever joint military exercise between India and Uzbekistan was the result of a higher level of mutual trust and their shared interests and views regarding regional challenges like stability and combating terrorism and extremism. Under UN mandate, the 10-day joint exercise 'Dustlik-2019' was conducted between 4th-13th November 2019 at Chirchiq Training Area near Tashkent. 'Dustlik' means 'Friendship' in the Uzbek language, so this nomenclature testifies to the special partnership between India and Uzbekistan¹². Joint defence exercises are meant to share best practices among the armed forces so that they can learn from each other's experiences. They are conducted as part of military diplomacy to build and promote defence relations between the armies¹³. The focus of Dustlik-2019 was counter-insurgency and anti-terror operations in mountainous, urban and rural scenarios. In this exercise, a 45-member Indian Army contingent participated with a similar number of troops from the Uzbekistan side. Both sides had training schedules like firing, combat conditioning, heliborne operations, tactical operations and other anti-terror exercises like house intervention drills. They conducted joint training operations like cordon and search, room intervention and check post drills¹⁴. Keeping up the pace of these defence relations the second edition of Exercise Dustlik took place in Ranikhet of the Indian state of Uttarakhand during 10-19 March 2021¹⁵. Dustlik-2021 was comprised of 45 soldiers from each side and they trained with each other in terrains like mountain, urban and rural areas of Chaubatia near Ranikhet. The training area was recreated like areas of Kashmir where Indian armed forces are fighting an insurgency since the 1990s¹⁶.

In 2024, Indian Army went to Uzbekistan to for the 5th edition of their joint military exercise called Dustlik. The exercise was conducted between 15th to 18th April 2024 at Termez with 45 soldiers from JAT regiment of

Indian Army while 100 personnel represented the Uzbekistan side from Southern Operational command¹⁷. The goal of this exercise was to enhance capabilities through combined execution of joint operations and foster military cooperation by exchanging practices and ideas. The forces from both sides took part in joint exercises held in semi urban as well as mountainous terrain where soldiers were involved in activities like joint planning, special weapons operation and joint tactical drills. The Dustlik exercise includes the establishment of Intelligence and Surveillance centre, creation of Joint Command Post, Small Team operations like insertion and extraction of troops, Securing landing site, Helicopter borne operations, Room Intervention, Cordon and Search operations and demolition of illegal structures.

Depending on the needs and nature of the particular exercise, different troops or battalions from armed services participate in these joint drills. Earlier in 2023, Uzbek contingent came to India and the 4th edition of Dustlik was conducted at Pithoragarh in northern hilly state of Uttarakhand. Field training exercises, combat debates, lectures, demonstrations, and a validation exercise was part of 2023 edition of Dustlik¹⁸. It was focused on combined counter-terrorist operations in mountainous and semi-urban scenarios under UN mandate. Such joint exercises give armed forces exposure to the tactics of other armies and provide impetus to the defence ties of nations. But compared to other Central Asian states like Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the joint exercise with Uzbekistan came rather little late as Indian forces are already involved in similar joint exercises with other states of the region. The increased political, security, and strategic interactions between India and Uzbekistan are reflected in such joint exercises. The bilateral relationship between the two nations has actually improved during the past few years. The unique cooperation is attested by growing security cooperation.

India-Uzbekistan Defence Deals:

The President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has implemented many socio-economic reforms in last few years. He has increased investment in the nation's defence and security industry to improve the security infrastructure. In 2023, the Uzbekistan's defence budget increased by 37% from USD 154 million to USD 260 million. With this increase, the defence and security budget now totals more than USD 7.8 billion. With its expanding presence as a defence manufacturer and exporter, India

has the ability to support Uzbekistan in modernizing its forces¹⁹. India has indicated interest in working with Uzbekistan in the defence sector, specifically in the manufacturing of military technologies and equipment. Indian defence firms have taken part in Uzbekistan's defense expos, looking into joint venture and technology transfer possibilities. Uzbekistan is also undergoing a process of defence modernisation, and India, with its growing defence industry and technological capabilities, is seen as a valuable partner in this regard. Due to its relatively small defence budget, Uzbekistan may not be able to participate in extensive defence procurement from India. But this also gives India a chance to provide affordable alternatives to Uzbekistan.

India could explore opportunities for transferring defence technology to Uzbekistan, mainly in areas like artillery guns, surveillance systems, communication equipment, cyber security etc. In April 2024, the Chief of Indian Army General Manoj Pande paid a very important visit to Uzbekistan. Apart from meeting his counterparts and important figures related to Uzbekistan security, he also inaugurated a cutting-edge IT laboratory with modern training facilities for Uzbek armed forces. The opening of this state-of-the-art IT Laboratory at the Uzbek Academy of Armed Forces made a big mark in the advancement in the bilateral ties. Built with India's support, the genesis of this project can be traced back to a commitment made during a Defence Ministers' meeting in September 2018²⁰. The project moved forward despite facing early financial limitations. This partnership will improve the training materials accessible to the Uzbek military, promoting a better understanding of contemporary combat strategies and strengthening bilateral communication between Indian and Uzbek armed forces.

The armed forces of both countries may have started training together in the second decade of the 21st century but defence relations between India and Uzbekistan started taking shape in the late 1990s when Indian Air Force (IAF) was looking for mid-air refueller aircraft. Then Uzbekistan emerged as a possible source to acquire such refuellers for IAF when Uzbek President Islam Karimov gave it as a proposal during his New Delhi visit in the year 2000. Later in March 2002, India signed a contract with Uzbekistan to supply 6 Ilyushin -78 or IL-78 refueller aircraft with each unit cost at Rs.130 crores²¹. The IL-78 is based on IL-76 transport aircraft; they were manufactured at Tashkent Aircraft Production

(TAPC) in Uzbekistan. TAPC provided the airframe while the systems related to mid-air refuelling were acquired by Israel²². The aircraft which can fuel three fighters like Sukhoi-30 mki, Mirage-2000, Jaguar and Tejasat one time is now part of the No.78 squadron of IAF in Agra (Mukherjee, 2004). This defence deal with Uzbekistan gave Indian Air Force a true force multiplier capability with tactical flexibility to conduct long-range operations. These aircraft have improved the strategic reach of the Indian Air Force. After the contract of refueller aircraft, India inked another landmark deal linked with Uzbekistan giving the Indian Air Force a big advantage over other air forces in the region. To enhance airborne radar coverage, India signed a \$1bn contract with Israel and Russia for a Phalcon airborne early warning and control system (AWACS) for the IAF. According to the deal, Israel bought the IL-76 aircraft from Uzbekistan and then sent them to Russia to equip them with better engines. Thereafter structural modifications, Israel mounted the Phalcon radars and delivered the aircraft to India²³. Phalcon system mounted on IL-76 aircraft produced by Uzbekistan gave India a bigger conventional edge over Pakistan and China. Its radar can detect airborne objects from hundreds of kilometres of distance in all weather conditions²⁴. Before the Phalcon deal, the then Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha paid a visit to Uzbekistan where he went to the same plant that made IL-78 refueller for IAF. During this visit, Uzbekistan's Defence Minister Kodir Gulomov expressed Tashkent's keen desire to build a defence relationship with New Delhi. He proposed that the relationship should be expanded with the inclusion of joint exercises between the armed forces of both nations²⁵.

While the India-Uzbekistan defence relationship has made significant progress despite many challenges. Both India and Uzbekistan operate in complex geopolitical environments, with competing interests and alliances. For example, Uzbekistan's close ties with Russia and China could potentially limit the scope of its defence cooperation with India. But there are several opportunities for further deepening the defence ties. Since the conflict in Ukraine, Russia's influence in Central Asia has decreased, which has helped China to promote its defence relations in the region. Once the dominant economic force in the area, Beijing is becoming increasingly important as a security ally. Furthermore, Turkey is strengthening its defence cooperation with Central Asian countries, especially with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. One of the major regional

nations, Uzbekistan, might be crucial in assisting India in reorganizing its defence and security cooperation with the other Central Asian nations in such a situation.

Conclusion:

Driven by similar security concerns, economic interests and a shared vision for regional stability, the defence cooperation between India and Uzbekistan has become a crucial foundation of their strategic ties. Even though there are many obstacles to overcome, there is a great deal of room for additional cooperation. The relationship between India and Uzbekistan has been steadily improving despite the absence of direct access. The geographical challenges can be bridged with long term planning and approach. India and Uzbekistan can enhance their strategic collaboration and promote peace and stability in the region by expanding on their current cooperative base and working on new avenues of interaction. In addition to looking at potential new areas of cooperation, the 2024 visit of Indian Army Chief General Manoj Pande to Uzbekistan was intended to deepen military cooperation between India and Uzbekistan. The defence relationship between both countries has been steadily improving despite the absence of direct access. In addition to providing energy security and a fulfilling regional role for India, increased defence cooperation will support these nations' security, stability, economic growth, and development. To fortify its strategic ties with Tashkent, New Delhi needs to leverage its scientific and economic assets. In addition to making India's Central Asia strategy more strategically relevant, it would also improve relations between the two countries. The increased defence cooperation will support Uzbekistan's security, stability, economic growth and development. To fortify its strategic ties with Tashkent, New Delhi needs to leverage its scientific and economic assets. In addition to making India's Central Asia strategy more strategically relevant, it would also improve relations between the two countries.

India and Uzbekistan should enhance high level defence dialogue with regular interactions at high level. This will help in aligning the strategic priorities on both sides by identifying the new areas of cooperation. To promote the defence industry collaboration on both sides, India and Uzbekistan should encourage greater participation of their defence companies in each other's defence expos and exhibitions that will help in exploring new opportunities of joint ventures and technology

transfer. Both countries need to focus on capacity building and India should offer more training programmes for Uzbek defence personnel. Not just military, there is a big scope in the field of cyber security and counter-terrorism. India and Uzbekistan should leverage their defence cooperation in regional and multinational forums like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which will also promote regional security initiatives and enhance mutual defence cooperation.

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