

Historic Visit Boosts Uzbek-Tajik Ties

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Trip is latest in leader's efforts to improve a range of regional relations.

Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev's historic visit to Uzbekistan this month has resulted in significant moves to improve cooperation between Tashkent and Dushanbe.

Although the two countries have close ethnic and cultural ties, their relations have been fraught since the fall of the Soviet Union. Uzbekistan's previous leader, Islam Karimov, appeared particularly hostile and Mirziyoyev was the first Uzbek leader for 18 years to visit Dushanbe

Mirziyoyev, who took power there months after his predecessor's death in September 2016, has made improving foreign relations a central plank of his policy.

Last September, he made an official visit to Bishkek, announcing a formal border agreement as well as improved economic ties.

(See **A Turning Point for Kyrgyz-Uzbek Relations?**).

During his visit to Tajikistan, which began on March 9 - and on which he was accompanied by Uzbek politicians, business leaders and even pop stars- he also announced a number of high-profile agreements.

These included measures to free up travel, such as the introduction of a bilateral visa-free regime for up to 30 days and the gradual opening of all 16 checkpoints on the Tajik-Uzbek border. Flights resumed between the two countries last April.

The Galaba-Amuzang-Hoshady rail route, which connects the southern Khatlon region of Tajikistan and the Uzbek region of Surkhandarya, was also formally inaugurated during the visit.

Tajik officials said that the rail link will transport up to five million tonnes of cargo every year and improve the economic situation for some three million people living in the area.

Mirziyoyev told a joint press conference that "the historical arrangements reached today are of tremendous value not only to our nations, but also to the whole region".

Rakhmon agreed the arrangements reached during the visit "create a firm basis for the gradual propulsion of Tajik-Uzbek relations to a whole new level."

"Today we have virtually resolved all the issues that have accumulated in the last 20 or more years," he added.

Dushanbe-based political analyst Parviz Mullojanov said that the trip was clearly part of Mirziyoyev's wider strategy of outreach.

"During [Karimov's era], Uzbekistan was geopolitically and economically isolated, which was very bad for the Uzbek economy. Now we are normalising relations with our neighbours - and we should not focus on Tajikistan alone," he said.

Bilateral economic ties were also emphasised during the visit. Trade between the two countries has steadily grown since the end of 2016 and is now estimated at around 120 million US dollars, according to the Tajik ministry of industry.

Rakhmon said during the visit that he believed bilateral trade could reach 500 million dollars a year.

A trade fair was held in Dushanbe during the Mirziyoyev visit featuring 100 Uzbek enterprises showcasing agriculture, construction and the production of consumer products.

Tashkent promised to allocate 100 million dollars to the development of joint Uzbek-Tajik ventures, although Dushanbe-based expert Parviz Mullojanov said this it was doubtful that Tajik entrepreneurs could significantly benefit, noting that the economy was particularly vulnerable to cheap imports.

The Tajik economy is less diverse than that of Uzbekistan and exports are mostly unprocessed, including heavy and agricultural goods. For its part, Uzbekistan has already resumed selling goods including cars, household appliances and industrial equipment, as well as food items, to Tajikistan.

"The point should be how to protect and support businessmen in the food, consumer goods industry and

other facilities that contribute to industrialisation,” Mullojanov said. “In the beginning, Uzbekistan could reduce the prices of their goods to force local competitors out; it could be very dangerous for Tajikistan and its economy.”

Water was another key issue discussed. In Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with major water resources, have long wanted to develop hydro energy projects. This alarms the countries downstream from them - Uzbekistan, Kazakstan and Turkmenistan - who fear they will lose out on vital irrigation resources.

Due to Uzbekistan’s strong reliance on its cotton industry, Karimov strongly opposed efforts by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to develop hydro energy resources, in 2014 even warning that a Central Asian war could be triggered by water issues.

Mirziyoyev has taken a different tack. After visiting Bishkek last year he even said that the two countries could collaborate on the Kambarata scheme, a large-scale hydroelectric dam Kyrgyzstan plans on the Naryn river but which Tashkent has previously argued could disrupt the supply essential to its own farming sector.

In Dushanbe this month, Rakhmon told the joint press conference that he welcomed Uzbek support on the development of hydraulic power in Tajikistan.

This included the Rogun dam, a giant hydroelectric project that could solve Tajikistan’s energy problems at a stroke but would use such vast volumes of water that it might potentially deprive Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states of irrigation.

The Tajik leader said that “we’ve been united in our opinion that existing hydropower facilities and the ones in construction will contribute to the solution of water and power issues in the region,” adding, “I would like to emphasise that I have repeatedly said from high platforms, including the UN, and also in my messages to the national parliament, that Tajikistan has not created any problems for its neighbours regarding water use and will not do so in future.

“We will never leave our neighbours without water.”

Tashkent-based political analyst Farkhod Tolipov said that Tajikistan had already resumed construction of the Rogun dam back in September 2016, without consulting Uzbekistan.

“The Uzbek party has remained calm on this issue. However, no reaction from Uzbekistan does not mean there are no problems there. This is a complicated issue,” Tolipov said, although he did not rule out the idea of cooperation.

He noted that Uzbekistan had made a strategic decision to grow crops that require less water and to modernise their own irrigation system.

“Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan slightly modified its vision of cotton growing. Under Karimov, agricultural production relied on cotton and now it’s been decided to reduce cotton plantations and instead grow fruits and vegetables, which means that they need less irrigation water,” he said.

But the analyst did not rule out further cooperation, adding, “If relations improve at this stage, I think that the two states may jointly participate in the construction of the facility.”

Location: Tajikistan
Uzbekistan

Focus: From the Borderland to the
Steppes

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