



## Foreign Minister's Visit Reinforces India's Ties with Central Asia

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External Affairs Minister of India Ms. Sushma Swaraj paid a three-nation visit to Central Asian region from 2-5 August 2018. The visit to India's 'extended neighbourhood' included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan. In recent years, Central Asian Republics have gained prominence in India's foreign policy priorities. On the other hand, Central Asian countries also seek to deepen interaction with India, particularly in economic spheres. The Foreign Minister's visit was in continuation of multiple bilateral ministerial visits between India and countries of the region and in preparation of Uzbekistan President's upcoming visit to India.

The visiting Indian Minister held bilateral meeting with Kazakhstan Foreign Minister Mr. Kairat Abdrakhmanov in Astana. The Minister of External Affairs also called on Kazakhstan Prime Minister Bakytzhan Sagintayev and discussed ways to increase cooperation between the two countries. The Minister interacted with Indian diaspora in Kazakhstan. Ms. Swaraj and her counterpart discussed bilateral, regional and global issues of common concern and explored areas for increasing cooperation between the two countries, including in agriculture, pharmaceuticals and energy. The two countries showed keen interest in exploring the prospects of 'Digital India' programme and Kazakhstan's 'Digital Kazakhstan' programme.

Trade and investments are important components of bilateral relations. India's total direct investment in Kazakhstan during 2005 to 2017 has been US\$ 245 million, and Kazakhstan has invested US\$ 83 million in India. Bilateral trade was about US\$1 billion in 2017 but it is likely to get a boost as the two countries are cooperating to expand the potential of the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway. This tri-nation rail line linking Caspian Sea to the Indian Ocean has been operational since December 2014. Kazakhstan is also a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and India is holding negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement with the Union.

Improved connectivity and FTA with EEU will promote India's trade and investment relations not only with Kazakhstan but with the entire region.

Bilateral cooperation in security has also gained momentum. The two countries conduct the 'Prabal Dostyk' joint military exercises. India has given peacekeeping training to Kazakhstan forces. October onwards, Kazakh peacekeeping forces are expected to be deployed in Lebanon as part of the Indian contingent of UN Interim Force in Lebanon.

The External Affairs Minister was in Kyrgyzstan for two days on 3-4 August 2018. She called on President of Kyrgyz Republic Mr. Sooronboi Jeenbekov, and held meetings with Foreign Minister Mr. Erlan Abdyldaev. The President stated that hydropower, healthcare, agriculture and introduction of information and communication technologies in the activities of state agencies are priority areas of cooperation between the two sides. During the delegation level talks, the Ministers discussed possible collaboration in IT, health, tourism, energy and natural resources between the two countries.

Kyrgyzstan, which is also a member of the EEU, is trying to improve economic relations with India. The instrument of GSP+ can increase the scope of opportunities between the two countries. The GSP+ is an additional component of the European Union's (EU) Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) for developing countries. Since January 2016, Kyrgyzstan has been granted the status of the GSP+ by the EU that removes tariffs on more than 6,000 product categories. The arrangement makes Kyrgyzstan an attractive destination for investments, including from India.

In Uzbekistan, the visiting Minister was received by her counterpart at the Tashkent airport. During the meeting, the two Ministers discussed key issues of mutual interest and exchanged their perspectives on regional and global developments. Further cooperation was explored, including in political, trade, economic, investment, tourism, cultural and humanitarian areas. In the regional context, prospects of cooperation between the two countries in Afghanistan were discussed for promoting the peace process and development. The Minister also called on Uzbekistan Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov and discussed bilateral ties. She interacted with the Indian community and offered tribute at Lal Bahadur Shastri memorial in the capital.

The visit of the External Affairs Minister to the region was significant from both bilateral and regional perspectives. It offered an opportunity to take stock of the progress made in relations since the important visit of Prime Minister Modi to all five countries of the region in July 2015. It also contributed to preparing the ground for the visit of Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to India in September-October 2018, which will be his first visit to India since coming to power in 2016.

All the three countries visited by the Minister are full members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Enhancing connectivity, economic and security cooperation

were common themes throughout the visit to these countries. Evidently, after joining SCO as a full member, India's interaction with the region has increased, including in the security domain. The visit was also undertaken in the backdrop of a renewed effort from Central Asia to resolve the Afghan crisis in a regional framework, with support from external stakeholders. Afghan situation is a matter of concern for both South and Central Asia. Stability in Afghanistan is critical for trade and economic engagement between Central Asia and South Asia. The Mirziyoyev Government in Uzbekistan has taken keen interest in strengthening regional cooperation in Central Asia and addressing the Afghan issue through regional initiative. In March 2018, the International Conference on Afghanistan 'Peace process, security cooperation and regional collaboration', was organized in Tashkent to pave the way for talks between Kabul government and the opposition Taliban. The joint declaration notes 'strong backing for the National Unity Government's offer to launch direct talks with the Taliban, without any preconditions.'

The two regions of Central Asia and South Asia are pursuing multilateral political, economic, transport and cultural initiatives to mutually benefit from their reciprocal potentials. The countries are working towards integration of Afghanistan into regional economies, which can accelerate the country's development. The SCO, International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), TAPI natural gas pipeline, CASA-1000 power transmission project, Ashgabat Agreement on transport corridor between Central Asia and West Asia, Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the proposed FTA with EEU, and tele-connectivity are set to intensify India and South Asia's all round engagement with neighbouring Central Asia. The Minister's visit to the region reinforces India's strong commitment to develop comprehensive ties with the region.

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