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UZBEKISTAN AND THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: THE EMPHASIS ON THE CONNECTIVITY

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Abstract

The geographical location of Uzbekistan at the Hearth of Central Asia is a main precondition of conducting the proactive transport diplomacy. Uzbekistan seeks via the SCO to gain political and diplomatic support for connectivity projects of strategic importance. The expansion of the SCO opens new opportunities for Uzbekistan in implementing its connectivity strategy, in particular, between Central and South Asia.

Keywords The SCO, Uzbekistan, transport and transit, connectivity, geopolitics, geo-economics, diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

In light of the high geopolitical dynamics in the world and around Central Asia in particular, issues of transport connectivity, especially the creation of new international transport corridors, are becoming key task of the foreign policy strategy of the states of the region. This fact determines the strategic importance of connectivity diplomacy in the foreign policy of Uzbekistan.

Based on this, both in the context of bilateral political and economic contacts with its partners, and within the framework of multilateral cooperation, i.e. with regional and international organizations, Tashkent attaches great importance to promoting its interests in strengthening transport connectivity. The SCO is one of the most important multilateral platforms for the implementation of the main goals and objectives of Uzbekistan's connectivity and transport diplomacy.

SCO's connectivity potential. The very geography of the SCO determines the need for extensive development of transport communications. If one looks at the map of the "SCO space", in the East

there is China, which is the driving force of international trade, in the South - India, turning into a new economic giant, in the North - Russia with the world's largest reserves of natural resources, in the Middle East - Iran, which, given its rich oil and gas reserves, plays a strategically important role, and the center of this large territory is the Central Asian region with Uzbekistan in its very heart.

However, the vast space of the SCO with a territory of 35 million km² is weakly connected from the inside. This applies, first of all, to Central Asia, where each country depends on its markets and the transit of its goods going to world markets (R. Alimov, 2022). At the same time, the states of Central Asia are among the least "connected" economies in the world. The region's connectivity indicator averages less than 60 percent of its transport access ratio to global GDP, the lowest on this scale. The cost of importing and exporting goods in Central Asia remains high, undermining their competitiveness abroad and increasing the cost of imported goods for local consumers. For

example, the cost of shipping a container to Shanghai from any Central Asian country is more than five times higher than the cost of transporting it from Poland or Turkey .

In terms of transport and communications, Central Asia is practically isolated from South Asia, where India and Pakistan are located. This remains a major obstacle to expanding trade ties between Uzbekistan and other countries in the region with South Asian partners. For example, the share of Central Asian countries in India's foreign trade remains very low - only 1.1% .

Geography as a precondition for Uzbekistan to conduct proactive connectivity diplomacy. In the new geopolitical and geo-economic conditions, the demand for Central Asia as a transit hub is growing. The benefits of the region's transit position on the route of goods, services and passengers are obvious. About 3 billion people live in countries directly bordering Central Asia or geographically adjacent to them. (Kamynin, Lazareva, Lapenko, Lyamzin, 2017).

As a state that needs to cross the territory of at least two countries to access international sea trade ports, strengthening transport connectivity in the SCO space is a vital task: 98% of the country's total cargo traffic is carried out by SCO countries . This objective necessity determines the extreme relevance and priority of the issue of transport links in the geostrategy of Uzbekistan and, in particular, in its approaches to the development of cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Based on this, Tashkent is implementing its transport and connectivity diplomacy within the Organization in the following priority areas.

The first is the active promotion on the SCO platform of the issue of creating new transport corridors, primarily the construction of the "Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China" and "Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat" railways.

In particular, the President of Uzbekistan Mr.Shavkat Mirziyoyev, at the SCO summit in Astana in 2017, announced the strategic importance of the "Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China" railway corridor, pointing out that this direction is

the shortest way for a Central Asian country to enter world markets.

Since then, the Uzbek leader at all SCO summits and other international forums has been emphasizing this project as one of the most relevant and promising transport corridors for the entire region. This consistent line began to produce results. Thus, on the eve of the Samarkand SCO summit, on September 14, 2022, the Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Ministry of Transport and Communications of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the State Committee for Development and Reform of the People's Republic of China signed a tripartite memorandum on the project for the construction of the "Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China" railway . A logical continuation was the signing on June 6, 2024 in Beijing of a tripartite intergovernmental agreement on the implementation of this project. The agreement establishes the basic principles and mechanisms for cooperation between the three countries, including financing, construction, operation and maintenance of the railway .

This project, as a part of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, has a number of advantages: it is the shortest route from China to Europe and the Middle East. The launch of the railway will reduce the distance by 900 km and the delivery time by 7-8 days compared to existing routes. For Uzbekistan, the implementation of the project provides a number of advantages. Firstly, it will turn it into one of the key players in the transport geopolitics of Central Eurasia, dramatically increasing its transit potential. Secondly, it will become a powerful driver for the development of trade and the formation of new sources of growth. Thirdly, this railway will subsequently connect with the railway networks of Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey and may lead to the formation of a new transcontinental transport system in Eurasia.

Another priority of Uzbekistan's transport diplomacy within the SCO is the project for the construction of the "Termez-Kabul-Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat" railway. According to Uzbek experts, when it is launched, the trans-Afghan corridor will become the shortest route for Central Asian countries to access the Indian Ocean through the

Pakistani ports of Karachi and Gwadar. The new railway will allow transporting up to 20 million tons of cargo per year, which reduces transportation costs by 30-35% .

Pakistan has been a key strategic partner of Uzbekistan in promoting this project for several years . They also actively interact within the SCO on issues of interconnectedness.

At the same time, due to the ongoing difficult situation in Afghanistan and a number of other technical and financial factors, the start of practical work on the construction of the railway has been delayed. However, official Tashkent is making active diplomatic efforts in this direction, not only together with Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also with third interested parties. In particular, recently Russia, within the framework of the new foreign policy course “pivot to the East,” is also beginning to show interest in this project. Thus, according to Russian expert A. Knyazev, this route is confidently considered as an additional corridor, thanks to which Russia will diversify the southern direction with access to both Iranian and Pakistani ports, complementing the North-South international transport corridor . During his state visit to Uzbekistan on May 26-28, 2024, President Vladimir Putin confirmed Moscow’s interest in the trans-Afghan project.

In the final Joint Statement of the Presidents of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation, they gave a positive assessment to the results of the first meeting of the working group on the development of the multimodal transport corridor “Belarus – Russia – Kazakhstan – Uzbekistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan”, held on April 23, 2024 in Termez .

On this basis, it can be assumed that Russia, within the SCO, will henceforth actively support Uzbekistan’s efforts to promote the trans-Afghan railway corridor. In this regard, the geostrategic significance of this project in transport diplomacy in Tashkent will only increase. Firstly, the railway directly connects the Central Asian region with South Asia and provides access to Indian Ocean ports. Diversification of transport corridors is of strategic importance for the states of Central Asia in the context of the fact that, from a geographic

point of view, it is a rather “closed” region with limited opportunities for the development of international trade. Secondly, the construction and launch of the railway opens up broad prospects for the political, economic and financial stabilization of Afghanistan, as well as its integration with Central Asia through strengthening trade and economic ties. In a broader geopolitical context, if construction of the railway begins and foreign banks are willing to provide loans, this will amount to international recognition of the Taliban (Yann Alix, 2022).

In addition to the fact that the SCO regions and countries are not interconnected by transport and communication systems, the legal framework and mechanisms for cooperation in this area are very poorly developed within the Organization. As a result, cooperation in the field of transport and transit continues to face a number of problems and obstacles of a technical, customs and administrative nature. The lack of a mechanism for protecting foreign investments aimed at developing the transport network, as well as a procedure for resolving disputes that arise, also hinders the development of cooperation in the field of transport infrastructure in the SCO countries. But the most important problem is the lack of political consensus within the Organization regarding the development of transport projects and mechanisms for their financing .

In this regard, the second key area of Uzbekistan’s transport and connectivity diplomacy in the SCO is the formation and strengthening of the legal framework and institutional framework for cooperation of the Organization in the field of transport and transit. The country takes an active part in the development of international agreements and conceptual programs adopted in this area within the Organization. In particular, during the Samarkand summit in 2022, the Concept of cooperation between SCO member states to develop interconnectivity and create effective transport corridors, initiated by the Uzbekistan, was approved. The implementation of this document, along with policy coordination with other regional institutions, will contribute to the development of transport and logistics infrastructure, strengthening regional connectivity

and integration of economic systems, as well as stimulating comprehensive spatial development .

Tashkent is also an active supporter of expanding practical mechanisms of transport interaction within the SCO. Back in 2004, at his proposal, the Organization's Working Group on the Development of Transport and Transit Potential was created. The Uzbek side is the permanent chairman of this mechanism.

Along with this, Uzbekistan initiated the establishment of a mechanism for Meetings of heads of railway administrations (railroads) of the SCO member states in 2018. Since then, this format of cooperation has become regular and within its framework, broad issues of multilateral interaction between the member states of the Organization in the railway sector are discussed.

The idea of regularly holding the SCO Transport Forum also belongs to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev. At the First Transport Forum of the Organization on November 1, 2023 in Tashkent, delegations from 15 countries discussed the potential for the development of the transport and logistics sector in the SCO space, the possibilities of digitalization of the transport sector, exchanged views on the best practices for creating sustainable cargo supply chains, implementing existing infrastructure projects and ensuring sustainable economic growth in the field of transport and communications .

CONCLUSION

In general, Uzbekistan's connectivity diplomacy within the SCO stands out for its proactivity and pragmatism. This, on the one hand, is due to the need to overcome the "geographical isolation" of the country and implement proactive transport strategy in this regard, and on the other hand, due

to the new opportunities of the SCO to promote interconnectedness in the Eurasian space in the context of the ongoing expansion of the Organization.

At the same time, as analyzes and observations show, important initiatives and projects discussed on the SCO platform have a low degree of implementation due to the lack of consensus among the SCO member states on issues of transport cooperation in a strategic context.

However, taking into account the expansion of the composition and increase in the international influence of the Organization, its importance as a multilateral platform, including for the coordination and implementation of large transport projects in the Eurasian space, will only increase. In this regard, in our opinion, the SCO will remain one of the key vectors in Tashkent's strategy to strengthen international transport connectivity in the future.

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