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## DEEPENING COMPLEMENTARITIES BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND UZBEKISTAN

**Abstract:** In recent three years the political environment in Central Asia has been changing with Uzbekistan's particular role to play. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country sends a constructive message to new "middle powers" beyond a group of traditional great powers. Herein, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Asia's 4th largest economy, the ROK has much to offer Uzbekistan: excellent economic opportunities without being a threat against national sovereignty. This paper discusses perceptions of the ROK by Uzbekistan in terms of common history, new geopolitical openings. The eight-day regional tour of Moon Jae-in, President of the ROK, is under special focus. It discusses new ways of connecting Central Asia and the Pacific envisaged by leaders of both countries who share close philosophies of governance. The paper is a new look at complementarities between two states located in different regions but having much potential for common international agendas.

**Key words:** Republic of Korea, Uzbekistan, complementarities, interregional connectivity, shared philosophies of governance, special strategic partnership.

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### Introduction

**"The process of rapprochement in Central Asia is not against the interests of other countries"** [1] – this is how the new political environment in Central Asia formulated by the regional players. Within this new architecture, Uzbekistan has a particular role to play. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country's trade turnover with the regional neighbors grew by more than 50% in 2018 [1].

The region of Central Asia as a whole and Uzbekistan in particular, attracts renewed focus of new middle powers beyond the group of geopolitically active world powers. Herein, the **Republic of Korea (ROK)** is viewed in Uzbekistan as a leading nation not only in promoting economic development but also in addressing security concerns.

The world's 11<sup>th</sup> largest and Asia's 4<sup>th</sup> largest economy, the ROK has achieved its middle power

status by raising its relative regional stature through rapid economic development and modernization.

Having transformed into one of the most vibrant democracies in Asia, one of the members of the G20, the ROK is viewed in Tashkent as a **globally responsible and proactive actor** on the international stage. Moreover, it has been able to achieve strategic consistency in dealing with both regional and global challenges.

Most importantly, the ROK is able to offer Uzbekistan (as well as other Central Asian states) economic opportunities without appearing to be a threat against national sovereignty, which distinguishes it from other players of the grand Eurasian economic chessboard [2].

In many senses, the ROK and Uzbekistan have complementary economic structures. The former has abundant capital and technology, which the country needs for its industrial diversification. The latter can

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offer natural resources, energy and labor force that the former lacks.

For the ROK, the Central Asian agenda is ultimately needed for foreign policy diversification. Seoul does not want its foreign policy to be defined by the North Korean dossier alone. Moreover, as was noted by “France-24”, Seoul is looking to reduce its reliance on traditional partners – Beijing and Washington [3]. Resource-rich Central Asia may contribute to alleviation of its reliance on oil, particularly from the Middle East, as well.

And here Central Asian markets which, as was put by presidential economic adviser Joo Hyung-chul, would grow **“even more significant on a global scale”** in coming years are of strategic interest for the ROK [3].

### *Different regions, common stakes*

Not so many countries of the world located in geographically distant regions can boast so many commonalities, as can Uzbekistan and the ROK. The relationship between the two nations dated back as far as 1,500 years when their merchants began traveling back and forth via the fertile Silk Road. One of the pieces of evidence is that wall paintings of the “Afrasiyab” museum in ancient Samarkand portray Korean ambassadors received by the local ruler late in the VII century.

Both regions were located at the nexus of great powers often falling victim to the maneuvers of their rivalries. Korea’s historical experience has some analogies with the destinies of Central Asian nations who have been dominated culturally, politically, and economically by neighboring empires.

Having gained independence in 1991, Uzbekistan put many hopes and stakes on the ROK. While some post-Soviet republics were cautious towards South Korea given its close links with the US, Uzbekistan preferred active political dialogue with Seoul as a modern symbol of Asian dynamism and technological breakthrough.

The ROK leads the list of Uzbekistan’s trade partners in Asia being one of the top five sources of its imports. In 2015, bilateral trade turnover between the two countries exceeded 1.7 billion USD, corresponding to 50 percent of South Korea’s overall trade with Central Asia [4].

Currently, Uzbekistan has more than 660 enterprises involving Korean investors. Seoul invests heavily in strategic sectors such as uranium, infrastructure development, and transportation. Moreover, Seoul can offer more comprehensive services connecting Central Asia to other markets outside the region.

It is also planned to set the Tashkent airport (whose new terminal will be built by a Korean company) into filling important functions in Central Asia, comparable to transport hubs like Incheon airport for the Asia-Pacific region [5].

Uzbekistan has even invited a number of South Korean experts to take positions as deputy head in a number of ministries and state-run agencies (such as Ministry for development of information technologies and communications), as well vice rectors at some universities. The Korean experience has been introduced into the preschool education of Uzbekistan as well.

One important reason for Seoul’s continued focus on Uzbekistan is not only of economic nature, but also of deep cultural and social bonds. Uzbekistan is home to the fourth largest Korean diaspora (after China, the United States, and Japan), with about **200,000 ethnic Koreans** living in the country, which makes us 40 per cent of all ethnic Koreans living across Central Asia [6].

### *Connecting Central Asia and the Pacific?*

On April 16, 2019 President of the ROK Moon Jae-in embarked on an eight-day regional tour to make state visits to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. It marked his first visit to the region since taking office in May 2017. Economic affairs dominated negotiations in all the regional capitals.

Moon Jae-in referred to Uzbekistan as a **“key state”** in Seoul’s plans to expand its role as a player across the vast Eurasian landmass [7]. Moon is the first South Korean president to have addressed both the upper and lower houses of the Uzbek parliament (Oliy Majlis).

In a summit with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, whom Moon credited for **“leading Uzbekistan into a new era”** with a series of bold reforms, both leaders agreed to upgrade their countries’ relationship to a **“special strategic partnership”** [8]. [9].

Trade between Uzbekistan and the ROK reached a record high level of 2.1 billion USD in 2018. During his state visit, Moon signed deals worth 12 billion USD in Tashkent.

Uzbekistan and the ROK manifest harmony in a wide range of international issues. Tashkent shows support for Seoul’s efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. For its part, Seoul provided support for Tashkent’s strategic initiatives for cooperation in Central Asia, dealing with the Aral Sea and peace process in Afghanistan.

**“President Mirziyoyev is actively supporting our efforts toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and permanent peace. Also, he is spearheading regional integration and cooperation in Central Asia. I express my support for his unrelenting efforts toward peace”** [10], Moon told the joint press conference in Tashkent.

Today, the complementarities of both countries will extend to greater geographies. Both leaders are thinking through different ways of connecting Central Asia and the Pacific. Moon noted, **“South Korea will be able to join the limitless development of Central**

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**Asia right here in Uzbekistan, and the people of Uzbekistan, which is a landlocked country, will be able to meet the world's largest ocean, the Pacific, in South Korea” [11].**

### *Shared philosophies of governance*

Common traits between Uzbek and Korean nations extend to personalities of both leaders. In an interview, Moon Jae-in stressed that he shared the **philosophy of governance** with President Mirziyoyev, both stressing people-centered policies.

President Lee Sang-ki, Founder of the Asia Journalist Association (AJA) noted, **“President Mirziyoyev is a peace-driver of Central Asia and President Moon Jae-in is a peace-driver of Northeast Asia” [12].**

He continued, **“both presidents of Korea and Uzbekistan are those who consider communication with people as the most important priority. After president Mirziyoyev was inaugurated, he designated the next year as the year of interaction with people as well as improving human rights in an attempt to stay closer to people. President Moon has also communicated with people more than ever since he took the office”.**

### *Conclusions*

The Great Silk Road that linked the Chinese and Roman empires moving goods, people, and ideas

between Asia and Europe two thousand years ago continues to unite more countries and regions today.

Today, Uzbekistan and the ROK have stepped on a new age of their centuries-old links. By upgrading relations to “special strategic partnership”, the ROK will have more economic presence in Central Asia through Uzbekistan, and the latter could get closer to the Pacific through the former.

Uzbekistan views the ROK as a reliable “multidimensional player”, whereas Seoul shows ever more rapprochement with Uzbekistan going through dynamic reforms under President Mirziyoyev.

President Moon Jae-in’s state visit to Uzbekistan opened a new page in bilateral relations. It shows the ROK’s intention to play a “bridging” role between large and small powers, as well as between the developed and developing economies.

With economic affairs dominating the bilateral agenda and increasing international cooperation over a wide range of issues, both are able to strengthen each other’s potentials. Uzbekistan, affecting Central Asian political environment, could contribute to Seoul’s aspirations for a stronger place in the grand Eurasian economic chessboard.

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