

H.E. Ismatulla Irgashev
Special Representative of Uzbekistan for Afghanistan

“Uzbekistan set as its goal building constructive and long-term relations with all internal political forces in Afghanistan, including the Taliban”

Uzbekistan has emerged as a key interlocutor with the Taliban. How has Uzbekistan managed greater engagement with the Taliban without alienating Western partners?

With the emergence of new acute world problems and challenges, the Afghan problem seemed to fade into the background. At the same time, we believe that the settlement of the situation in this country should remain at the focus of the entire world community.

Uzbekistan adheres to a firm position that re-isolation of Afghanistan, leaving it alone with the existing problems cannot lead to anything good. This is a direct path to the further impoverishment of the Afghan people and the subsequent widespread radicalization of the region as a whole.

Realizing all these important aspects, Uzbekistan set as its goal building constructive and long-term relations with all internal political forces in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, long before they came to power in August 2021.

At the beginning of 2018, Uzbekistan for the first time in the history of the Afghan settlement proposed to the United States to establish a direct negotiation process with the Taliban for an early ceasefire. The February 2020 Doha Agreements between the United States and the Taliban opened a direct path to the early launch of direct inter-Afghan talks in Doha and the overall development of the peace political process in the country.

As a close neighbour of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan welcomed the creation of the Interim Government of Afghanistan, which, from the first days of its existence, firmly stated that no threat would ever again emanate from the territory of Afghanistan to its closest neighbours and third countries.

It should be emphasized that Uzbekistan’s constructive contacts with the Taliban allowed our country, committed to the principles of international law and cooperation, provide all possible assistance in the evacuation of citizens of EU citizens, employees of European diplomatic missions from Afghanistan – in total, more than 10,000 people were evacuated from the country through Uzbekistan.

In addition, Uzbekistan has become, in fact, the only country in the region that has made joint efforts with such states as Germany, Russia, the US, Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Kazakhstan to provide services for the use of airport

infrastructure, flight permits, take-off and landing, extending the necessary technical and logistical assistance.

A lot has been done with representatives of the Taliban to obtain security guarantees for Afghan citizens who illegally crossed the Uzbek-Afghan border.

Naturally, all this could not be achieved without our established contacts with the Taliban, who show sincere respect for the policy of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, which is based on the principles of friendship, good neighbourliness and mutual trust. But, most of all, the President of Uzbekistan enjoys great prestige among ordinary Afghans, who see special attention, sensitivity and readiness of Uzbekistan's Leader to provide all possible assistance to the Afghan people in their efforts to build a peaceful future for their country.

At the same time, Uzbekistan remains a consistent supporter of the fulfilment by the Taliban of the basic requirements of the world community – creation of an inclusive government, observance of the rights of women and national minorities, severing ties with terrorist groups. The fulfilment of these obligations by the authorities in Kabul will lead to a noticeable softening of the position of the world community towards the Taliban, as well as a possible unfreezing of the country's financial assets abroad. This, in turn, will save millions of Afghan lives and bring the country out of chaos and ruin.

Particularly, much work needs to be done in connection with the recent ban on the education for women and girls. In particular, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan made an appropriate statement on this issue. At the same time, we support the statement made by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy H.E. Josep Borrell that gender-based persecution is a crime against humanity. “The EU strongly condemns the Taliban's decision to suspend higher education for Afghan women. The decision, unique in the world, violates the rights and aspirations of the Afghans and deprives Afghan women of their contribution to the life of the society,” said Mr. Borrell.

I'd like to draw your attention to the fact that the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev for the first time among the heads of state outlined not only the obligations of the Afghan government, but also declared the moral responsibility of the world community to the people of Afghanistan.

Emphasizing the importance of cooperation with the European community in the Afghan direction at the first summit of Central Asia – European Union dialogue on October 27, 2022 in Astana, the President of Uzbekistan proposed establishing a “European Union – Central Asia” Committee for Economic Cooperation at the level of vice-premiers of the governments of the Central Asian countries, as well as to actively use the potential of logistics and educational hubs in the Uzbek border city of Termez.

It is my deep conviction that Uzbekistan and the European Union today have largely identical points of view on the prospect of bilateral cooperation in the Afghan direction.

The Trans-Afghan railway (Termez – Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar) is a critical infrastructure project connecting Central and South Asia, which will enable Uzbekistan and the other landlocked Central Asian Republics access to key sea lines of communication through the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi. What is the current state of affairs of this project, with regards to attracting international investment for its realization? How will the safety of the Trans-Afghan railway be ensured?

The Resolution of the UN General Assembly "On strengthening the connectivity between Central and South Asia", adopted in July 2022 at the initiative of Uzbekistan, gives a priority to the involvement of Afghanistan in regional economic cooperation.

From this point of view, the implementation of the Termez – Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar railway construction project is of particular importance.

This line will connect 10 settlements of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan and will become the main transport and logistics highway of the region.

The length of the railway from Mazar-i-Sharif to Peshawar (*Pakistan*) is 760 km, at 1,520 mm gauge and transition to 1,676 mm gauge on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. According to estimates, it is planned to build 785 km of power supply lines, 790 km of communication lines, 33 railway stations, 187 km of station tracks, 1,212 new artificial structures, including: 3 tunnels, 336 bridges and overpasses, 107 crossings. The estimated cost is USD 8.1 billion, and the expected duration of the project is 5 years.

In 2018, an interstate working group and a project office were established to coordinate the construction of the railway line.

Also, Afghan technical specialists for the operation and maintenance of railways are being trained at the Educational Center in Termez.

From July 29 to August 8, 2022, a field expedition was carried out along the entire route of the railway with the financial support of Uzbekistan and Pakistan. An approximate railway route has been determined, whose total length is 783 km. Orthophotomaps and a digital elevation model have been created, work is underway to develop the project's preliminary feasibility study.

More than 2,000 new jobs will also be created for the maintenance and operation of this railway. At the same time, the expected volume of cargo transportation is over 10 million tons per year.

It is my deep conviction that the successful implementation of the project will help turn Afghanistan into a bridge between Central and South Asia and further develop the overall process of regional connectivity.

So far, the Uzbek side held detailed presentations of this project in November-December last year in Rotterdam, Brussels, Riyadh and Jeddah, with the participation of representatives of public and political circles, banks, investment, logistics and railway companies.

The July 2021 High-Level International Conference “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities” conference clearly demonstrated the commitment of the international community to discuss the models of the mutually beneficial strategic link "Central Asia – South Asia" in transport and logistics, energy, trade, manufacturing, investment, technological, cultural and humanitarian spheres.

There is no doubt that Afghanistan, which is an integral part of the region, will benefit from this multilateral interaction and become a connecting bridge between Central and South Asia.

Uzbekistan is a key hub for the provision of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. Earlier this year, the Government of Uzbekistan granted the LLC Termez Cargo Centre the status of an international multifunctional transport and logistics hub rendering humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and other countries by the United Nations, other international organizations, and foreign countries on a systemic basis. Could you tell us about the operation of this centre concerning its capacity, functioning and the volumes of aid processed so far?

The Termez Cargo Center terminal is located 4 km from the Galaba station and less than 2 km from the Uzbek-Afghan border. It is unique in terms of size and throughput, in addition, it is the only terminal located near the border of Afghanistan.

The total area comprises 48.9 hectares; the capacity of the container warehouse is 70 containers per day; the container platform capacity is more than 3,000 units of 20 feet containers, and 2,000 units of 40 feet containers.

The task of the terminal is to provide a range of transport and logistics services: customs clearance, cargo manoeuvring, storage of import-export and transit cargo, including customs and terminal warehousing, as well as handling transit cargo of intermodal transportation, rail and road, to / from Afghanistan.

An open area has been allocated for temporary parking of vehicles. The area is 10.5 hectares, with a capacity for 300 heavy trucks.

Four substations of 1000 kW and two autonomous diesel generators of 440 kW are provided for uninterrupted power supply. "Termez Cargo" accommodates 4 hangars of 6,000 square meters each.

It is also noteworthy that the President of Uzbekistan also initiated the establishment of a special Humanitarian Support Fund for Afghanistan at the border city of Termez, for which

the modern infrastructure of the International Transport and Logistics Hub will be used to deliver humanitarian aid to the country.

I would like to note that from September 2021 to January 2023, Uzbekistan sent 6 consignments of humanitarian goods to Afghanistan, consisting of food, fuel, medicines, clothing and footwear.

In addition, in 2021-2022, humanitarian cargo from such countries as Italy, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, as well as the UN World Food Programme, UNHCR and UNICEF were sent through this hub.

This international hub today actually operates under the auspices of the UN.

The Uzbek leadership has regularly stated that Afghanistan is an integral part of Central Asia, “seeing a common future with common interests, regardless of who is in power there”. Do you foresee a more active participation of Afghanistan in regional processes such as the annual meeting of Central Asian leaders?

Uzbekistan advocates for more active involvement of Afghanistan in regional integration processes. The restoration of the Afghan economy can become a guarantee of peace and stability in the country. And this has direct impact on ensuring not only regional, but also global peace and security.

On July 26-27, 2022, Tashkent hosted the international conference “Afghanistan: security and economic development” which was attended by over 100 guests from more than 20 countries, as well as leading international structures – the UN, the European Union, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Economic Cooperation Organization, and a high-profile delegation of Afghanistan led by Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Amir Khan Muttaki.

For the first time, at such a high-profile international forum, representatives of the new Afghan authorities were able to listen and see with their own eyes specific comments and proposals from the international community, in particular, on the fulfilment of certain requirements.

At the same time, taking into account the lack of recognition of the Interim Government of Afghanistan by the world community, it is still too early to talk about the participation of the Taliban at any official meetings or formats.

However, we believe that it is necessary and extremely important to maintain a dialogue with the new authorities in Kabul:

- In the first place, the dialogue should be about fulfilling their obligations.

- Secondly, it should aim significantly changing their rigid position towards women, their right to education and work.
- Third, it is important for the implementation of large infrastructure projects in the country.

We hope that the time will come and the current acute problems of the Afghans will be left behind. Having fulfilled all the requirements of the international community, Afghanistan will develop normal relations with all countries, and, as an integral part of our region, will take an active part in all regional processes in Central Asia.