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India–Uzbekistan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Deepens Central Asian Engagement Through Energy, Trade, Security and Connectivity Cooperation

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Recent Developments:

- India and Uzbekistan have elevated their **Strategic Partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership**, marking a significant expansion of bilateral cooperation during the **15th anniversary of their Strategic Partnership**.
- During Prime Minister **Narendra Modi's State Visit to Tashkent**, India and Uzbekistan agreed to deepen cooperation across **civil nuclear energy, trade and investment, critical minerals, defence, security, infrastructure, digital public infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, technology, education and culture**.
- The two countries have set an ambitious target of increasing annual bilateral trade to **USD 5 billion by 2030**, while agreeing to systematically address constraints related to **market access, connectivity, banking and payment systems**.
- India and Uzbekistan also agreed to establish a framework for the **long-term supply of uranium** from Uzbekistan to India, strengthening cooperation in civilian nuclear energy and India's broader energy-security strategy.

India–Uzbekistan Relations: Background and Evolution:

Historical and Strategic Foundations:

- India and Uzbekistan share historical and civilisational links shaped by centuries of interaction between the **Indian subcontinent and Central Asia** through trade routes, cultural exchanges and intellectual contacts.
- India and Uzbekistan established diplomatic relations after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and their engagement subsequently expanded into cooperation in **security, defence, trade, connectivity, education and culture**.
- Uzbekistan occupies a geographically central position in **Central Asia**, making it an important partner for India's wider engagement with the region.
- The elevation to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership indicates an attempt to transform bilateral relations from primarily diplomatic and security engagement into a broader **multidimensional strategic relationship**.

Institutional Deepening:

- To ensure implementation of the expanded partnership, the two countries have agreed to establish a **Foreign Ministers-led coordination mechanism**.
- The existing **Inter-Governmental Commission** is also being elevated to the **ministerial level**, providing greater political direction and institutional capacity for reviewing bilateral cooperation.

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- Such institutional mechanisms are important because ambitious strategic partnerships require regular monitoring, sectoral coordination and mechanisms to convert political commitments into measurable outcomes.

Civil Nuclear Cooperation and Uranium Supply:

Long-Term Uranium Partnership:

- India and Uzbekistan have agreed to work towards a framework for the **long-term supply of uranium**, opening an important new dimension in their civilian nuclear-energy cooperation.
- India requires reliable uranium supplies to support the expansion of its civilian nuclear-energy programme and to strengthen long-term energy security.
- Access to uranium from Uzbekistan can help India **diversify its sources of supply**, reducing excessive dependence on a limited number of external suppliers.
- Diversified sourcing is strategically important because nuclear power provides relatively reliable **low-carbon baseload electricity**, which can complement India's renewable-energy expansion.

Strategic Importance for India:

- Uranium cooperation can strengthen India's **energy security** by expanding access to a strategically important nuclear fuel.
- A diversified supply network can reduce vulnerabilities arising from geopolitical disruptions, supply constraints and overdependence on individual exporting countries.
- The arrangement also reflects the increasing linkage between India's foreign policy and its requirements for **energy, strategic resources and resilient supply chains**.

Trade and Economic Partnership:

USD 5 Billion Trade Target:

- India and Uzbekistan have set a target of increasing annual bilateral trade from more than **USD 1 billion to USD 5 billion by 2030**.
- Priority sectors include **trade and investment, agriculture, pharmaceuticals and healthcare, energy, critical minerals, mining, jewellery, infrastructure, information technology and digital public infrastructure**.
- The countries intend to address structural constraints involving **market access, logistics and connectivity, banking arrangements and payment mechanisms**.
- A stronger economic partnership could help India expand its commercial presence in the resource-rich Central Asian region.

Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Cooperation:

- India and Uzbekistan have recognised significant potential for cooperation in the **pharmaceutical sector**, including investment, technology transfer, manufacturing and skill development.
- Uzbekistan's **Tashkent Pharma Park Innovative Scientific and Industrial Pharmaceutical Cluster** can provide opportunities for joint projects involving Indian pharmaceutical companies.
- The partnership also envisages cooperation in medical centres, laboratories, biomedical research, medical innovation and joint pharmaceutical manufacturing.
- Such cooperation can strengthen India's role as a major supplier of affordable medicines while supporting Uzbekistan's healthcare and manufacturing capabilities.

Defence and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation:

Towards Defence-Industrial Collaboration:

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- Defence cooperation is expanding beyond traditional military exchanges towards greater **defence-industrial collaboration**.
- Both countries intend to promote direct linkages between their defence industries and explore opportunities for **co-development and co-production of military equipment**.
- The **Joint Working Group on Military Cooperation** is exploring new avenues for strengthening defence-industrial engagement.
- The **Dustlik joint military exercise** continues to enhance interoperability, operational understanding and professional exchanges between the armed forces.

Zero Tolerance Towards Terrorism:

- India and Uzbekistan have unequivocally condemned **terrorism, including cross-border terrorism**, and rejected attempts to justify terrorist activities on any grounds.
- Their cooperation includes **intelligence sharing, law-enforcement coordination, countering violent extremism, combating terrorist financing, addressing terrorist safe havens and infrastructure, fighting organised crime, preventing illicit drug trafficking and countering cyber threats**.
- This cooperation assumes particular importance because instability in **Afghanistan** can create security challenges for Central Asia through terrorism, radicalisation, transnational crime and narcotics trafficking.
- India–Uzbekistan security cooperation therefore complements India's broader objective of promoting a stable and secure **Central Asian and Eurasian neighbourhood**.

Critical Minerals and Strategic Resources:

Building Resilient Supply Chains:

- Critical minerals and mining have emerged as important pillars of the expanded bilateral partnership.
- Uzbekistan possesses significant mineral resources, while India is seeking to diversify access to minerals required for **clean-energy technologies, electronics, advanced manufacturing and strategic sectors**.
- Cooperation can support India's broader objective of reducing supply-chain concentration and building **resilient and diversified global supply chains**.
- Critical-mineral partnerships have acquired increasing geopolitical importance because several strategically important minerals are geographically concentrated in a limited number of countries.

Strategic Relevance:

- Greater access to diversified mineral resources can support India's **energy transition and manufacturing ambitions**.
- It can also strengthen India's capacity in strategic technologies and reduce vulnerabilities associated with external supply disruptions.
- The partnership demonstrates the growing role of **economic security and resource diplomacy** in India's foreign policy.

Connectivity and Digital Partnership:

The Connectivity Challenge:

- Connectivity remains one of the principal constraints in India–Central Asia relations because India does not possess direct overland access to the region.
- This limitation increases the importance of developing **alternative transport, trade and connectivity corridors**.
- India's engagement with Uzbekistan therefore complements the broader objectives of its **Connect Central Asia Policy** and wider efforts to improve Eurasian connectivity.

Digital Payment Integration:

- A commercial agreement between **National Payments Corporation of India International Payments Limited** and Uzbekistan's **National Interbank Processing Centre** will enable Indian **Unified Payments Interface applications** to scan the national **UPI** system for merchant payments in Uzbekistan.
- Digital-payment connectivity can facilitate tourism, business travel and commercial transactions while demonstrating India's capabilities in **Digital Public Infrastructure**.
- Such cooperation can create opportunities for the internationalisation of India's indigenous digital-payment ecosystem.

People-to-People Connectivity:

- Uzbekistan's decision to remove visa requirements for Indian citizens for stays of up to **30 days** can facilitate tourism, business exchanges and people-to-people interaction.
- Cooperation in education, culture, tourism and youth exchanges can strengthen the social foundations of the bilateral relationship.
- Improved societal connectivity is particularly important for sustaining long-term strategic partnerships beyond government-level engagement.

Culture, Education and Civilisational Heritage:

Buddhist Heritage Cooperation:

- India and Uzbekistan have concluded a **Letter of Intent** for the restoration and conservation of the Buddhist sites of **Fayaz Tepa and Kara Tepa**.
- These initiatives highlight the historical links between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent and provide an important cultural dimension to contemporary diplomacy.
- Conservation of shared heritage can strengthen India's **cultural diplomacy and soft power** in Central Asia.

Educational and Cultural Initiatives:

- India announced **100 Lal Bahadur Shastri Scholarships for Hindi language** for Uzbek students.
- An **Indian Council for Cultural Relations Sanskrit Chair** will be established at the **Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies**.
- More than **2,700 Uzbek nationals** have participated in India's **Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme**, while more than **400 Uzbek students** have been selected under Indian Council for Cultural Relations scholarships, including scholarships related to traditional medicine.
- These initiatives can deepen human-resource development, academic engagement and long-term cultural familiarity between the two societies.

Environmental Cooperation and the Aral Sea:

Afforestation and Ecological Rehabilitation:

- India has announced a **USD 1 million grant** for afforestation and ecological rehabilitation in the **Aral Sea region**.
- The initiative reflects cooperation between Uzbekistan's **Yashil Makon** green initiative and India's **Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam** campaign.
- India's participation links bilateral diplomacy with environmental restoration and demonstrates the growing role of **climate and ecological cooperation** in India's international engagement.
- The Aral Sea crisis is globally significant as an example of severe environmental degradation resulting from unsustainable diversion and management of river waters.

Strategic Significance for India:

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Central Asia and the Extended Neighbourhood:

- Uzbekistan occupies a pivotal position in Central Asia, a region influenced by the strategic interests of **Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran and other regional powers**.
- Stronger ties with Uzbekistan can expand India's economic and strategic footprint within its **Extended Neighbourhood**.
- Deeper engagement can also provide India with greater access to Central Asian markets, energy resources and strategic mineral supplies.

Balancing Regional Geopolitics:

- Central Asia has witnessed increasing economic and strategic engagement by China, particularly through connectivity and infrastructure initiatives.
- Greater Indian engagement can provide Central Asian countries with **additional economic and strategic partnerships**, supporting a more diversified regional order.
- India's approach is based on expanding cooperation through trade, connectivity, technology, security and people-to-people engagement rather than viewing the region solely through geopolitical competition.

Afghanistan and Regional Security:

- Uzbekistan's geographical proximity and engagement with Afghanistan make it an important partner for understanding evolving regional security developments.
- India–Uzbekistan cooperation can contribute to counter-terrorism coordination and wider efforts to prevent instability from affecting Central Asia.
- A stable Central Asian region is important for India's connectivity ambitions, economic interests and broader security environment.

Challenges and the Way Forward:

Implementation and Connectivity Constraints:

- The success of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership will depend on translating political commitments into **time-bound and measurable implementation**.
- Limited direct connectivity remains a structural challenge and requires sustained investment in viable transport and logistics corridors.
- Banking and payment mechanisms, market-access barriers and regulatory differences must also be addressed to achieve the **USD 5 billion trade target**.

Recommended Approach:

- India and Uzbekistan should establish clear sector-specific implementation mechanisms under the proposed high-level coordination architecture.
- Greater participation by private companies is necessary to convert government agreements into sustained **trade, investment and industrial cooperation**.
- Defence-industrial and critical-mineral cooperation should focus on long-term institutional partnerships rather than isolated transactions.
- Connectivity initiatives should be integrated with India's wider Central Asian and Eurasian economic strategy.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims Pointers:

- **Uzbekistan:** A landlocked country located in Central Asia.

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- **Capital: Tashkent.**
- **Aral Sea:** A major transboundary water body associated with one of the world's most serious ecological degradation crises.
- **Fayaz Tepa and Kara Tepa:** Important Buddhist heritage sites located in Uzbekistan.
- **Dustlik:** A joint military exercise associated with India and Uzbekistan.
- **India–Uzbekistan trade target: USD 5 billion by 2030.**
- **Recent partnership upgrade:** From **Strategic Partnership** to **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership**.
- **New energy cooperation:** Framework for the **long-term supply of uranium** from Uzbekistan to India.

Potential UPSC Mains Question: *“Central Asia has emerged as an important component of India's Extended Neighbourhood Policy. Examine how the India–Uzbekistan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can advance India's economic, security and connectivity interests.”*