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STRATEGIC AND DEFENCE COOPERATION BETWEEN INDIA AND UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategic and defence cooperation between India and Uzbekistan, a vital aspect of their bilateral relationship. Over the past two decades, both nations have enhanced military exchanges, counterterrorism coordination, and defence training programs. Uzbekistan's central location in Eurasia and India's regional security aspirations have fostered joint military exercises, high-level defence visits, and institutional mechanisms for strategic dialogue. The study highlights key developments including the Dustlik joint military drills, the 2018 MoU on Security Cooperation, and India's support in defence training through the ITEC program. This cooperation reflects shared interests in regional security and combating emerging threats. The study uses a qualitative content analysis based on secondary sources, including official documents and defence publications.

Keywords: Defence cooperation, strategic partnership, counterterrorism, military training

Introduction

The strategic and defence cooperation between India and Uzbekistan forms an essential pillar of their bilateral relations and reflects the growing importance of Central Asia in India's foreign policy. Since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, both nations have developed strong diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties, underpinned by a shared interest in promoting regional stability, countering terrorism, and ensuring collective security. The relationship gained new momentum with the signing of the India-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Agreement, which emphasized cooperation in defence, security, and counter-terrorism as key areas of engagement.

Situated at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, Uzbekistan holds significant geopolitical value for India's "Connect Central Asia Policy," serving as a gateway to the broader Eurasian region. The defence partnership aims to enhance mutual trust, expand military collaboration, and address common challenges such as extremism, radicalization, and cross-border threats. Over the past decade, initiatives such as the Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation and the annual Dustlik joint military exercises have institutionalized this relationship, transforming it into a practical and strategic alliance. Thus, India-Uzbekistan defence cooperation not only strengthens bilateral ties but also contributes to the wider goal of maintaining peace, stability, and security across the Central Asian region.

Main body

Since the early 2000s, India and Uzbekistan have steadily expanded their military exchanges. These interactions have enhanced interoperability and mutual understanding between their armed forces. A significant milestone was the 'Dustlik-1' joint military exercise held in 2019 in Chirchiq, Uzbekistan, focused on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. Following its success, subsequent exercises—Dustlik-II (India, 2021) and Dustlik-III (Uzbekistan, 2022)—addressed jungle warfare, tactical combat, and urban counter-terrorism. In addition, regular high-level defence visits have facilitated institutional dialogue on doctrines, logistics, and strategic planning.

The major aim of the Strategic and Defence Cooperation between India and Uzbekistan is to enhance regional security, strengthen counter-terrorism capabilities, and promote mutual strategic interests in

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Central and South Asia. This partnership seeks to build a stable and secure regional environment through defence collaboration, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing. Both countries are committed to combating terrorism, extremism, and transnational threats by improving operational coordination and conducting regular joint training. The cooperation also focuses on military education, capacity-building, and technological development, including initiatives like the establishment of IT and cybersecurity laboratories in Uzbek defence institutions. Strategically, this collaboration aligns with India's "Connect Central Asia Policy" and supports Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy, contributing to balanced regional relations. Ultimately, the partnership serves as a cornerstone for fostering mutual trust, defence modernization, and sustained peace and stability in the broader Eurasian region.

The strategic significance of India-Uzbekistan defence cooperation lies in its role as a key component of India's broader engagement with Central Asia and its efforts to ensure regional stability and security. Uzbekistan occupies a central geopolitical position in the heart of Eurasia, bordering Afghanistan, which makes it a vital partner for India in addressing shared concerns such as terrorism, extremism, and cross-border security threats. Strengthening defence ties with Uzbekistan allows India to expand its strategic footprint in a region traditionally influenced by Russia and China, thereby contributing to a more balanced regional power structure. For Uzbekistan, partnership with India diversifies its foreign and security relations while providing access to advanced military training, technology, and institutional support. Moreover, the cooperation complements India's "Connect Central Asia Policy" and the goals of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in promoting regional connectivity, peace, and security. Thus, this partnership holds substantial strategic value for both nations as it reinforces mutual trust, defence diplomacy, and long-term geopolitical stability.

India and Uzbekistan view counterterrorism as a crucial area of collaboration, particularly due to threats from radicalization and extremist ideologies in Central and South Asia. The 2018 Memorandum of Understanding on Security Cooperation established a framework for intelligence sharing, combating terrorism financing, and addressing organized crime. Both nations coordinate through Joint Working Groups and regional forums like the India-Central Asia Dialogue to enhance cooperation against non-state actors and emerging security threats, including cyberterrorism.

India has supported Uzbekistan's defence capacity through training programs under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) initiative. Uzbek officers receive education at premier institutions such as the National Defence College, Defence Services Staff College, and Infantry School, Mhow. This not only enhances military professionalism but also fosters strategic trust. India also contributes to the modernization of Uzbekistan's defence infrastructure and logistics. The Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation, established in the early 2010s, ensures structured engagement and periodic review of bilateral defence activities.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative content analysis approach. It relied primarily on secondary sources such as official government reports, press releases from the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs, policy documents, and academic publications related to India-Uzbekistan defence relations.

Key agreements, including the 2018 Memorandum of Understanding on Security Cooperation, as well as records of Dustlik joint military exercises, were studied to track developments in military collaboration. No primary data collection (e.g., surveys or interviews) was used. Instead, the research

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examined publicly available and credible documents to identify patterns and evaluate the strategic depth of bilateral defence cooperation.

Results and Discussion

The cooperation between India and Uzbekistan has produced several tangible results that have significantly strengthened their bilateral relationship and contributed to regional stability. One of the most visible outcomes is the successful institutionalization of regular joint military exercises, particularly the Dustlik series, which has enhanced interoperability, tactical coordination, and counter-terrorism capabilities of both armies. The establishment of defence training and educational exchanges, including the inauguration of an advanced IT and Cybersecurity Laboratory at the Uzbek Academy of Armed Forces, demonstrates practical progress in defence capacity-building and technology sharing. At the diplomatic level, the formation of a Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation has facilitated structured dialogue, policy coordination, and implementation of new defence initiatives. Furthermore, the partnership has strengthened counter-terrorism collaboration, with both countries sharing intelligence and best practices to combat radicalization and extremism in the region. Overall, these results have elevated the India–Uzbekistan partnership from symbolic engagement to a functional, multidimensional security collaboration, promoting peace, trust, and strategic balance in Central Asia.

The 2018 MoU on Security Cooperation provided a structured framework for intelligence sharing and combating cross-border threats, including terrorism and organized crime. Additionally, India's training programs under ITEC and its support for Uzbekistan's military modernization signal long-term strategic commitment. These developments show that the partnership is not symbolic but operationally meaningful. Both countries share common concerns regarding regional security, counterterrorism, and non-state threats, and their defence ties increasingly reflect geopolitical alignment in Central and South Asia. Mechanisms like Joint Working Groups and regular defence visits further enhance the durability and structure of this growing partnership.

Despite notable progress, India–Uzbekistan defence cooperation faces several structural and geopolitical challenges that may influence its long-term sustainability. One major challenge is the logistical and geographical limitation, as India lacks direct land connectivity with Uzbekistan due to the absence of a shared border and the instability in Afghanistan, which complicates military and strategic coordination. Additionally, competing regional influences, particularly those of Russia and China, pose challenges to India's ability to deepen its defence engagement in Central Asia. Differences in defence procurement systems, technology standards, and operational doctrines also hinder greater interoperability.

Nevertheless, the future prospects of this partnership remain highly promising. Both nations have shown strong political will to expand cooperation through joint training, defence industry collaboration, and cyber defence initiatives. India's growing involvement in Central Asia under the "Connect Central Asia Policy" and Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy provide a solid foundation for broadening strategic ties. Strengthening transport corridors like the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and exploring trilateral cooperation with other regional partners could further enhance connectivity and defence collaboration. Therefore, while challenges persist, the partnership's trajectory points toward a deeper, more institutionalized, and mutually beneficial strategic relationship.

Conclusion

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The strategic and defence partnership between India and Uzbekistan has evolved into a structured, multi-dimensional cooperation model over the last two decades. From joint military exercises such as the Dustlik series to enhanced counterterrorism coordination and defence training under ITEC, both countries have demonstrated a strong commitment to regional security and stability.

Uzbekistan's central position in Eurasia and India's growing role as a regional security provider offer a natural convergence of interests, especially in the face of rising non-state threats. The institutional frameworks, including Joint Working Groups and high-level defence visits, ensure continuity and strategic depth in this bilateral relationship.

Moving forward, India and Uzbekistan are likely to play a more prominent role in shaping regional security dynamics in Central and South Asia. Their cooperation serves as a model for effective defence diplomacy rooted in mutual trust, shared values, and a vision for peace and development.

The Strategic and Defence Cooperation between India and Uzbekistan represents a vital dimension of their evolving partnership, reflecting shared aspirations for regional peace, security, and sustainable development. Rooted in mutual trust and a common commitment to combating terrorism and extremism, this cooperation has advanced significantly through initiatives such as the Dustlik joint military exercises, defence education programs, and the establishment of institutional mechanisms like the Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation. These developments have transformed the relationship from symbolic diplomacy into a practical and results-oriented partnership.

While geographical barriers, limited connectivity, and competing regional interests pose certain challenges, both nations have demonstrated a strong strategic will to overcome them through long-term collaboration and policy alignment. Looking ahead, the deepening of defence ties - combined with broader political, economic, and cultural engagement - has the potential to make India and Uzbekistan key partners in maintaining stability and fostering cooperative security across Central and South Asia. In essence, their defence cooperation embodies a forward-looking strategy aimed at ensuring peace, resilience, and regional balance in the evolving Eurasian landscape.

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