

UZBEK PRESIDENT TO INVITE INDIA TO JOIN AFGHAN RAIL PROJECT

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Ilhom Nematov

India will be invited to help with a key rail link in Afghanistan, during the visit of Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev early next week, a presidential aide told *The Hindu* .

The rail link of approximately 650 km, connecting the Afghan cities of Mazaar-e-Sharif and Herat, which may later be extended to Kabul, is a major project agreed to by President Ashraf Ghani and President Mirziyoyev last year, and many of the preliminary surveys for the project have already been completed.

"We support a greater presence of India in Central Asia, and hope for some benefits of that for Afghanistan. I hope that negotiations with PM Modi will open a new page in our bilateral relations," Special Assistant for Foreign Affairs Ilhom Nematov told *The Hindu* during a visit to Delhi ahead of the President's visit beginning on Sunday.

"If India would be involved in [the railway line] construction, we would welcome them because of India's proven record and experience, and because of its contribution to bringing peace to Afghanistan," he added, saying that Uzbekistan has an interest in open trade and connectivity routes "all the way to the Indian Ocean."

The project, for which Uzbekistan has already committed \$500 million, could become another major regional connectivity project for India, after its construction of the Zaranj-Delaram Highway in Afghanistan and the Shahid Beheshti port in Chabahar, Iran.

India is also committed to building another rail route, from Chabahar to Zahedan on the Iran-Afghan border, and President Mirziyoyev is keen to join the transit trade agreement signed by India, Afghanistan and Iran.

The rail route to Herat, if extended to Kabul, would also link to India's "air corridor", allowing trade, especially dry fruits and agricultural produce to travel along the routes from India to Central Asia and back in much shorter time.

Uzbekistan has held talks with Iran, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and China, which is already running a rail route into Uzbekistan under the Belt and Road Initiative, for the same project in the past few months.

Indo-Pak. talks

Making a pitch for talks between India and Pakistan, Mr. Nematov said Uzbekistan's role in regional security is likely to grow as it will take over the Secretary Generalship of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in January 2019. "I think that SCO is a good platform for India and Pakistan to talk at and to maybe work with other countries on how to bring peace," he told *The Hindu* .

President Mirziyoyev may also discuss peace efforts in Afghanistan and his offer of mediating talks between the Ghani government and the Taliban, during his visit to India.

In August, a Taliban delegation had also visited Tashkent and held talks with the President's representative.

President Mirziyoyev is scheduled to arrive in Delhi on Sunday, and will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi for bilateral talks on Monday.

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