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THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF SOUTH KOREA-UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS SINCE 1992

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ABSTRACT
All interactions involving independent countries, their officials, and their citizens that serve the interests of the citizen and the greater goal of world peace are considered to be part of diplomacy. The Republic of Korea and Uzbekistan have been diplomatically linked since 1992. Since then, they have worked together more closely in many areas, which has set the stage for stronger political ties between the two countries. The primary objective of this article is to discuss the historical evolution of political ties between South Korea and Uzbekistan. The two countries worked together closely and respected each other's political interests, especially from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Uzbekistan has also admired South Korea's model of a democracy. So, in this context this article seeks to analyze the role of Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum in maintaining strong political engagement between South Korea and Uzbekistan.
KEYWORDS: *Political dynamics, South Korea, Uzbekistan, Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum.*

INTRODUCTION

All interactions involving independent countries, their officials, and their citizens that serve the interests of the citizen and the greater goal of world peace are considered to be part of diplomacy. Although they should have some degree of cohesion and a sense of collective identity in order to be considered diplomatic actors, private entities or transnational groupings without official status, as well as such groups themselves, may engage in diplomatic activities. Therefore, diplomacy is the expression of one actor pertaining to another in order to create a relationship that will work across a territory; or, in the event that this is unsuccessful and a break in the peace occurs, to manoeuvre and manipulate one another's political assets and relationships in order to gain a strategic or tactical advantage (Weisbrode 2016).

Upon the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, South Korea started political and diplomatic efforts to strengthen its relationship with the newly created CARs. In 1991, Uzbekistan was acknowledged as a sovereign state for the first time in the Asia-Pacific region by South Korea. While the South Korean Embassy in Kazakhstan has been operational in Tashkent since 1993, it maintains a representative office in Almaty as well as its Embassy in Astana. Similarly, since 1995, the Uzbek embassy has been operational in the Republic of Korea. The Embassy of South Korea in Tajikistan has been operational since 2008, but the Tajik Embassy in Seoul began to operate much later in 2015. Most interestingly, South Korean citizens can visit Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan without a visa for up to 30 days. South Korea and Central Asia have amicable relations based on mutual trust in a variety of areas. Korean aid and investment have potentially been helping in fortifying the autonomy of Central Asian countries. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have the highest level of interaction with South Korea, while Tajikistan has the lowest level of interaction (Gussarova 2018).

The earlier links and contacts were swiftly severed by South Korea in the early 1990s. Central Asian nation such as Uzbekistan was naturally included in such relationships. The Central Asian nations maintained their diplomatic links with North Korea, but they improved and increased their relationships with South Korea. Since then, South Korea has progressively increased its presence and sphere of influence in Central Asia. Seoul did not place a high priority on Central Asia in the beginning, instead choosing to concentrate on academic collaborations as well as providing assistance to Koryo-saram (Fumagalli 2013).

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Korea's diplomacy with Central Asia was promoted centering on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where many ethnic Koreans reside, and both have great political, economic, and diplomatic importance. It has pursued expanding diplomacy. In fact, in November 2006, Korea adopted a comprehensive plan to advance into Central Asia and has been implementing it. First, active use of bilateral cooperative relations is established through summit diplomacy. Second is the promotion of differentiated access policies considering the characteristics of each country. The third is the strengthening of synergies in related industries and active entry into industries with comparative advantage. Fourth is the strengthening of legal and institutional foundations and expanding cooperative infrastructure and fifth is establishing strategic development partnerships with Central Asia, which has great growth potential, through sharing economic development experiences (Dadabaev 2019).

South Korea quickly established diplomatic relations with the newly independent Central Asian countries nearly in 1992, but failed to conduct summit diplomacy. The Roh Tae-Woo

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government established diplomatic relations with Uzbekistan on 29 January 1992, invited President Islam Karimov to hold a summit in June 1992, and contributed to Korean companies' investment in Uzbekistan, including Daewoo Motor. In conclusion, Roh Tae-Woo's government normalized diplomatic relations by promoting a northern policy using post-Cold War diplomacy based on Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev's new thinking. They established the foundation for rapid diplomatic normalization and bilateral cooperation with Central Asian countries. President Kim Young-Sam visited Uzbekistan in June 1994. President Kim Young-Sam, who emphasized globalization and internationalization policies at the time, visited Uzbekistan, where many Koreans lived after a summit with President Yeltsin in Moscow, and had a summit with President Islam Karimov. Central Asian countries paid great attention to economic cooperation with Korea, and as a result, President Karimov visited Korea in February 1995 and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in May 1995. It may be noted here that President Kim Young-Sam established the foundation for summit diplomacy with Central Asian countries through his visit to Uzbekistan and conducted summit diplomacy by inviting the presidents of Central Asian countries. The Kim Dae Jung administration did not seek any summit diplomacy with Central Asia due to the financial crisis in December 1997. Nevertheless, President Islam Karimov visited Korea for the second time in October 1999 and contributed to strengthening the foundation for cooperation between Uzbekistan and South Korea (Yong 2019).

The Korean government's summit diplomacy with Central Asia has been restarted due to the heightened interest in energy security since 2003. While actively promoting policies to strengthen energy and resource diplomacy, President Roh Moo Hyun visited Uzbekistan in May 2005 to hold summit meetings. The Roh Moo Hyun government invited leaders of Central Asian countries to visit Seoul, and President Karimov was the first to respond and visited South Korea in March 2006. In December 2005, the Roh Moo Hyun government formed a "Central Asia Advancement Council" with about 20 people representing government and private institutions to prepare "Comprehensive Measures for Central Asia," including Azerbaijan, which was passed by the Cabinet on 7 November 2006. South Korea's Foreign Ministry was responsible for implementing the comprehensive measures to advance into Central Asia and supporting the implementation of the measures to advance into politics and diplomacy (Saidazimova 2006).

The frequent visits by the Korean government to Central Asia are the result of the Lee Myung Bak (2008-2013) government's full-fledged promotion of energy and resource diplomacy and "New Asian Cooperation Diplomacy." During his presidency, the government designated the Prime Minister as the person in charge of energy and resource diplomacy, presenting the national goal of further strengthening energy and resource diplomacy. As a result, in April 2008, shortly after the inauguration of the Lee Myung Bak government, a preliminary investigation team led by Minister Lee Je-Hoon was dispatched to Central Asia, followed by Prime Minister Han Seung-Soo in May 2008 to visit three Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan). The South Korean minister's trip to three Central Asian countries has achieved significant results. President Lee Myung Bak visited Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan further in May 2009 and made diplomatic efforts to strengthen economic and energy cooperation as well as embodying "New Asia Cooperation Diplomacy. "In particular, during his visit to Kazakhstan, the President of Lee Myung Bak upgraded the relationship to a "strategic partner" that expanded comprehensive cooperation in various fields (The Korea Times 2009).

South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak provided an opportunity to expand collaborations by enhancing understanding and further strengthening trust with the presidents of the two countries, taking this summit meeting as an opportunity. President Lee Myung-Bak's diplomacy tour to Central Asia provided an opportunity to further expand cooperation in economy and trade between Korea and Central Asia, which had shown a steady increase every year in recent years. Considering that ethnic Koreans play a role as a bridgehead in introducing Korean dramas and Korean culture and arts, which are popularly aired in these two countries, this summit has resulted in expanding the foundation of the Korean wave culture network through ethnic Koreans residing in Uzbekistan. This bilateral summit provided an opportunity to expand the Lee Myung-Bak administration's New Asian diplomacy initiative to all of Central Asia. Therefore, the momentum of comprehensive cooperation established in the wake of President Lee Myung-Bak's visit to two Central Asian countries was the momentum to establish and expand cooperative relations with other Eurasian countries, including South Caucasus countries such as Azerbaijan, as well as three other Central Asian countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 2011). Meanwhile, President Islam Karimov also visited Korea three times in August 2008, September 2010, and September 2012, making summit-level efforts to expand economic cooperation between the two countries (Graubner 2012 & The Korea Times 2012).

Ms. Park Geun Hye's government which ruled over South Korea from 2013 to 2017 promoted the Eurasia Initiative (one continent, one continent of peace, and one continent of creation) to promote cooperation with Central Asian countries. This is a cooperation initiative and a grand national strategy put forward by Ms. Park to achieve sustainable prosperity and peace in Eurasia. She was the first Korean leader to visit three Central Asian countries namely Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in 2014. President Park expanded the diplomatic and economic cooperation base for Central Asia by visiting three Central Asian countries for the first time, but the three major economic cooperation projects ended in failure and consequently dampened the engagement. This relationship got a boost during former Uzbek President Islam Karimov's visit to South Korea (Rakhimov and Ki 2016). Islam Karimov's visit opened an era of engagement and cooperation at a regional and international forum. There has been a change in the scenario of international

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relations with the shift in power in Uzbekistan after 2015, which brought Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the helm of affairs. According to him, Uzbekistan changed its policy of engagement with South Korea and a new economic roadmap of Uzbekistan with East Asian nations was brought to the fore (Dadabaev 2021).

The state visit of Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to South Korea in 2021 marked the beginning of a new era of special strategic cooperation that strengthened friendly ties between the people of both nations. During this state visit, Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his counterpart Moon Jae-in signed a Joint statement on the deepening of a 'Special Strategic Partnership'. The main focus was given to achieving the goals of comprehensive development of mutually beneficial cooperation. The 30th-year commemoration of the establishment of foreign relations between Uzbekistan and South Korea was discussed threadbare. Several bilateral agreements, including one establishing engagement between the justice ministries of the two nations, were signed during this visit (MOFA, South Korea 2021).

It is important to note here that since establishing diplomatic relations, the leaders of South Korea and Uzbekistan have met 16 times until 2019, and have developed a tight working relationship in every sphere. South Korea and Uzbekistan developed friendly and cooperative relations after establishing diplomatic ties in 1992. Uzbekistan and South Korea established a "Strategic Partnership" in 2006, and President Moon Jae-In and Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the summit on April 19, 2019, decided to upgrade it to a "Special Strategic Partnership" and signed the "joint declaration on special strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and South Korea (Putz 2019).

In addition, seven agreements and MOUs were signed under the leadership of both countries, including a 'revised investment guarantee agreement' to promote mutual investment, a double taxation agreement to reduce the tax burden on local companies and workers, and a joint research MOU on the validity of the Korea-Uzbekistan FTA (Free Trade Agreement). After the signing ceremony, the two leaders explained the main achievements of the visit in a joint press release. President Mirziyoyev held an official welcoming ceremony for South Korean President Moon and his wife. The event was held in the order of personnel exchange between the leaders of the two countries and the performance of the two countries. Negotiations on trade agreements are also underway to expand trade and investment cooperation. With the opening of new areas of cooperation in recent years, various joint projects are being promoted in areas such as the oil and gas industry, energy, health-medical, education, information technology, engineering, and chemical industries (The Korea Herald 2018).

The South Korean government proposed the 'New Northern Policy' as a national task in July 2017, adopted regulations on the establishment and operation of the 'Northern Economic Cooperation Committee in August of the same year and the first meeting was also held the same year. President Moon's visit to Central Asia marks the third year of the New Northern Policy, laying the foundation for activating and full-fledged promotion of the New Northern Policy for key cooperative countries, including Turkmenistan. South Korean government drew support from the leaders of the three Central Asian countries by explaining the government's willingness and policy toward the peace process through peaceful resolution of North Korea's nuclear issue through summit talks, parliamentary speeches, compatriots' meetings, and interviews (Botto 2021).

KOREA-CENTRAL ASIA COOPERATION FORUM

Besides, the initiatives taken up by the leadership of both Uzbekistan and South Korea, there are a few other efforts by both countries. For example, 'The Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum' was launched in 2007 with the objective to upgrade Korea-Central Asia relations and establish comprehensive cooperative relations such as economic, cultural, and education through multilateral forums with Korea and five Central Asian countries. Every year, government delegations from five Central Asian countries, as well as key figures from the economic, academic, and cultural sectors, are invited to establish human networks and discover public-private joint cooperation projects (Park 2016).

Since its inception in 2007, the 'Korea -Central Asia Cooperation Forum' has served as a new model for regional and cross-regional cooperation. 'The Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership' between Uzbekistan and South Korea was signed during Uzbek President Islam Karimov's visit to South Korea in 2006. Therefore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promoted the "Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum" in which vice foreign ministers from five Central Asian countries participated as chief delegates, and held the first forum in Seoul on 15 November 2007. This Declaration marked a watershed moment in bilateral relations as it provided a new window for cooperation and investment activities that reached beyond industrial development and the energy sectors (Peyrouse 2010). Since its inception, it has been held 11 times until last year. In 2017, the secretariat of the 'Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum' was established in Seoul. South Korea achieved significant results through it. First, it created many platforms for dialogue channels and expanded comprehensive cooperation with the five nations; Second, it established a pan-government multilateral forum with the participation of relevant ministries, and diplomatic cooperation was strengthened, such as enhancing mutual understanding and establishing a network of friendly personnel to the central government through industrial and cultural inspections. Thirdly, the first multilateral dialogue body between Korea and Central Asia was established. Fourthly, it provided an opportunity to expand Korean companies' entry into Central Asia; Fifthly, it contributed to building a human network between Korea and Central Asia and public-private trust, and sixthly, it strengthened diplomatic cooperation by holding a bilateral meeting at the vice-ministerial level. This also resulted in holding a vice minister-level bilateral council (Gussarova 2018).

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In addition, South Korea actively promoted diplomacy to obtain cooperation from Central Asian countries on the international stage and achieved significant results. Uzbekistan first openly supported Korean leader Ban Ki-moon in the process of preparing for the election of the UN Secretary-General in 2006, and in 2007 supported the hosting of the Yeosu Expo. Uzbekistan and South Korea support one another's viewpoints on several crucial regional and global issues. Uzbekistan particularly praised the outcomes of the Seoul Nuclear Summit and the G20 summit held in Seoul in November 2010. These incidents have provided evidence of Korea's growing influence and position in the international community. As the country that spearheaded the creation of the Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone state, Uzbekistan is a major proponent of the nuclear-free Korean Peninsula (Koh 2016).

It has been 11 times since the first forum began in 2007 under the leadership of the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and has been institutionalized as the first vice-foreign minister-level dialogue platform covering various cooperation issues between Korea and five Central Asian countries. South Korean President Moon Jae-In shared the strong essence of bilateral relations by developing public-private dialogue and concrete cooperation projects on various and important areas of cooperation between the two sides. In 2017, Korea and five Central Asian countries established the Korea-Central Asian Cooperation Secretariat in the International Exchange Foundation to expand cooperation. This Cooperation Forum was held twice in Central Asia, again holding the 12th 'Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum' in Nursultan (formerly Astana), the capital of Kazakhstan, this fall with the first minister-level representative attending (MOFA 2019).

The 17th Central Asia-Republic of Korea Cooperation Forum, which took place on November 4, 2024, was a big step forward in the bilateral relationship between South Korea and the Central Asian countries. A high-level group from Central Asia met at the meeting, which was led by the South Korean Foreign Minister. Over 300 people, including government officials, business leaders, and experts, attended the event. It was a place to talk about and move forward the strategic relationship between the two areas. This year's meeting was especially important because it happened at the same time as South Korea's K-Silk Road program, which is a broad political plan to improve relations with Central Asia. At the meeting, people talked about the forum's part in finishing up important projects and making plans for the first Korea-Central Asia Summit, which will happen in South Korea the following year. The meeting is meant to strengthen the strategic relationship even more and take cooperation between the two countries to a whole new level (Sakenova 2024).

CONCLUSION

The two nations have established cordial and mutually beneficial ties in various fields based on reciprocal cooperation and trust since establishing diplomatic relations in 1992. The two leaders welcomed the fact that the development of bilateral relations has also contributed greatly to the promotion of Korea-Central Asia cooperation, which was started in 2007, and has established itself as a successful multilateral consultative body. The main objective is to upgrade Korea-Central Asia relations and establish comprehensive cooperative relations such as economic, cultural, and educational through multilateral fora with Korea and five Central Asian countries. Every year, government delegations from five Central Asian countries, as well as key figures from the economic, academic, and cultural sectors, are invited to establish human networks and discover public-private joint cooperation projects.

Central Asian countries are slightly different from country to country, but they have been promoting industrial innovation strategies such as infrastructure construction projects such as transportation and communication, and fostering the petrochemical and IT industries, so they are highly likely to emerge as new investment destinations for Korean companies. Therefore, Korea should carry out the current comprehensive plan for entering Central Asia by establishing an inter-departmental cooperation system and supervision system, taking into account the economic and industrial policies of Central Asian countries and the stabilization and instability factors of the domestic situation. In addition, it is necessary to establish an information bank related to Central Asia by activating regional research on the Central Asian region.

The South Korean leadership considers Uzbekistan as a good partner amidst the changes and dynamics of the international situation such as the US-China and US-Russia conflicts, and the revolutionary changes in the economy and industrial structure brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, in order to turn Uzbekistan into a land of opportunity, the Korean government's more specific, meticulous, and systematic strategy for entering Central Asia is needed above all else. Above all, a holistic approach, including politics, diplomacy, economy, and culture, that can properly understand the characteristics of Central Asian countries and respond appropriately must be mobilized.

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