

FRIDAY, APRIL 28, 2006

## Strengthening a partnership

**T**he long-standing friendship between India and Uzbekistan was reaffirmed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Tashkent. The relationship with the peoples of Central Asia was established several hundred years before the era of conquest in the middle centuries of the second millennium. The oasis towns of this region served as important staging-points on the Silk Route through which the cultures and artefacts of South Asia were transported over great distances. Buddhism and Gandharan art once flourished in Central Asia as vigorously as in the land of their origin. Thanks to the vicissitudes of history, independent India renewed its contacts with the countries of Transoxania that had become an integral part of the Soviet system. The linkages formed at that time got loosened briefly amidst the turmoil at the end of the Cold War. Today, the mutual commitment to secularism serves as a strong binding force between the two countries that are multicultural in character. New Delhi might not endorse all the methods used by Tashkent in the drive against fundamentalist movements within the country and in the campaign against global terror. However, the Joint Working Group on Combating International Terrorism provides an important forum for the exchange of intelligence about an elusive common enemy. At one point in time, it appeared Uzbekistan would allow excessive space to a non-regional power on account of the pressures exerted by the events of September 11, 2001. Those concerns have abated with Moscow and Beijing re-emerging as Tashkent's major partners in the political and economic spheres.

Uzbekistan, which is among the world's top 10 natural gas producers and has 594 million barrels of proven oil reserves, can contribute significantly to India's efforts at achieving energy security. New Delhi should consider seriously President Islam Karimov's proposal that Indian companies make use of his country's exploration facilities and share hydrocarbon extracts on an equal basis. The countries looking for a share in the petroleum resources of Central Asia would do well to explore the possibilities of developing these resources through cooperative endeavours rather than in competition with one another. Given the challenges involved in exporting oil and gas from a landlocked region, a combined effort is certain to prove most rewarding. Mr. Singh's visit provided an opportunity for India to showcase what it could offer in exchange. It signed a memorandum of understanding to establish an Entrepreneurship Development Centre, apart from offering to set up satellite-based tele-education and tele-medicine connectivity. A centre for information technology has also been inaugurated. The decision to establish a partnership between the Delhi University and the Tashkent Institute of Oriental Studies might, at first sight, appear less substantive in this context. However, this initiative could facilitate a reaffirmation of the deep-rooted cultural bonds between India and the heart of Central Asia.

THE HINDU

# Indian cos to tap Uzbek energy fields

## India, Uzbekistan sign 4 MoUs during PM's visit

ADITYA Sinha  
Tashkent, April 26

INDIAN COMPANIES will soon be allowed to explore hydrocarbons in Uzbekistan, the country's authoritarian President, Islam Karimov, told Prime Minister Manmohan Singh here on Wednesday. At the same time, however, he complained bitterly of drug-trafficking originating in Afghanistan despite the presence there of ISAF troops.

The two leaders held "fruitful" discussions at Karimov's grand palace, here at the centre of Central Asia (often referred to as the "next Middle East"), underlining the region's strategic importance to India. They then oversaw the signing of four memorandums of understanding (MoUs) - mainly to do with exploiting Uzbekistan's natural resources - before addressing a stiff and staged joint press conference there.

**PM's 2-yr blues**  
THE CONGRESS'S celebration of the Manmohan Singh government completing two years in office in May is tinged by twin concerns: the rise in prices, which hits the aam aadmi, and the feeling among workers and MPs that the PM and his office should be more accessible.

*HTC, New Delhi*

It was during the Press conference that Karimov made a personal plea for the increase of the number of Uzbeks allowed to study in India. And, although Singh emphasised the importance of India's setting up in Tashkent a bilateral Entrepreneurship Development Centre, as well as the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Information Technology, the interactions quite clearly focussed on such strategic matters as energy security and terrorism.

"We see Uzbekistan as an important element in any effort to optimally utilize the energy resources of Central Asia", the Prime Minister said. With the signing of an MoU in oil and natural gas between Uzbekneftegaz and India's petroleum ministry, Karimov said: "Uzbekistan has arrangements with China, Malaysia, Russia and countries of the EU. We're willing to allocate regions to India for exploration of hydrocarbons. The next step will be allocation on the basis of concessions of territories to Indian companies for the exploration of hydrocarbons".

# India, Uzbekistan must fight terrorism together: Manmohan

MoU for cooperation in oil and natural gas, six other agreements signed

**TASHKENT:** Asserting that the stability and prosperity of Central Asia was in the interest of India as well as the world, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said on Wednesday that India and Uzbekistan should fight the menace of terrorism collectively.

Speaking at a banquet hosted in his honour by Uzbek President Islam Karimov, he asked Tashkent to lead the way in ensuring peace and stability in the region. "Our common objective is to seek peace and prosperity for our people. Terrorism is a menace that must be fought collectively," Dr. Singh said.

He noted that the stability and prosperity of Central Asia "is in the interest of not just India but the world community as a whole. This goal cannot be reached without Uzbekistan, which must lead the way." Uzbekistan, which shares border with Afghanistan, is also facing terrorism in some parts.

## Gas exploration

During his 90-minute talks with Dr. Singh, Mr. Karimov said Uzbekistan, one of the world's 10 largest producers of gas, could offer exploration facilities to Indian companies in the hydrocarbon sector with a proposal that the extracts be shared by the two countries on an equal basis.

Uzbekistan also "resolutely backed" India's claim for permanent membership of the expanded United Nations Security Council.

The two leaders discussed a wide range of issues covering bilateral and international issues such as terrorism, drug trafficking, the Afghanistan situation and U.N. reforms.

Issues relating to enhancement of energy, economic and trade cooperation also figured



**STRENGTHENING TIES:** Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov in Tashkent on Wednesday. — PHOTO: PTI

prominently.

Addressing a joint press conference with Dr. Singh, Mr. Karimov said the two sides agreed to set up working groups in the oil and gas sectors besides on Information Technology, under the framework of an Inter-Governmental Commission.

The two sides inked seven pacts that included an MoU for cooperation in oil and natural gas between the Ministry of Pet-

roleum and Natural Gas and Uzbekistan's National Holding Company "Uzbekneftegaz."

A Memorandum of Cooperation between Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL) and Uzbekneftegaz and an MoU for geology and mineral resources between the Coal Ministry of India and Uzbekistan's State Committee were also signed.

Mr. Karimov said he was aware that energy security was

an important part of India's policy and offered his country's cooperation in this field.

"Uzbekistan is ready to allocate geological territory to Indian companies to explore the resource of gas, oil and other hydrocarbons," he said. The products of this exploration could be shared by the two parties on 50-50 basis.

Dr. Singh said India saw Uzbekistan "as an important ele-

ment in any effort to optimally utilise the energy resources of Central Asia."

Uzbekistan is estimated to have 594 million barrels of proven oil reserves and an estimated 66.2 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves.— PTI

Historical links: Op-Ed Page

# Historical links, civilisational affinities

Uzbekistan and India share a tradition of secularism and accommodating the interests and aspirations of diverse ethnic groups.

N. Ram

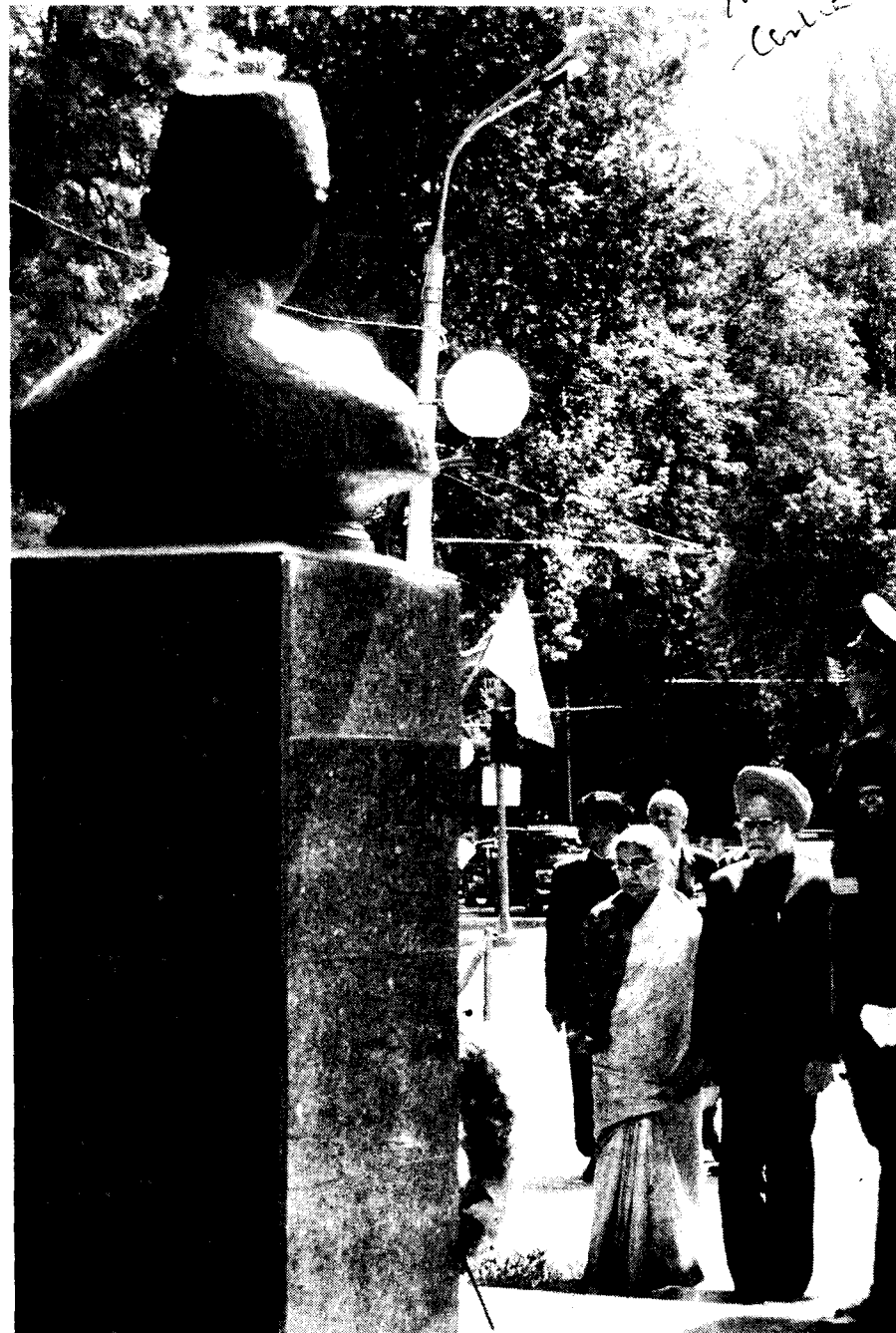
PRIME MINISTER Manmohan Singh's official visit to the capital of Uzbekistan might have seemed a flying visit tagged on to a major visit to Germany. It was marked by an hour's meeting with President Islam Karimov; quick delegation-level meetings; and the signing of six memoranda of understanding on such matters as establishing an Entrepreneurship Development Centre at Tashkent, cooperation in the field of oil, natural gas, geology, natural resources, and agricultural research, and partnership between Delhi University and the Tashkent Institute of Oriental Studies. Uzbekistan readily accepted India's offer to set up satellite-based tele-education and tele-medicine connectivity between the two countries; and Dr. Singh and Uzbekistan's Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyayev, jointly inaugurated an India-Uzbekistan centre for information technology named after Jawaharlal Nehru.

Uzbekistan, with a population of 26 million, is Central Asia's leading power. Once part of the Soviet Union, it became independent on September 1, 1991 and immediately joined the Commonwealth of Independent States. Its executive President, Mr. Karimov, a soft-spoken strongman, has been in the driving seat since 1990, when he was chosen President of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. The government has tried to balance relations with the United States and Russia. It made common cause with the former in the military invasion of Afghanistan and the continuing fight against the Taliban. It has also received substantial economic aid from Washington. But more recently — "doing a 180 degree turn," according to an informed senior Indian official — the Karimov regime has moved closer to Russia, which it perhaps sees as its strategic bulwark. It takes membership of the CIS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation seriously.

## Future economic powerhouse

For the region, Uzbekistan — whose economy grew by 7.2 per cent and agricultural production by no less than 6.2 per cent in 2005 — is a potential medium-sized economic powerhouse of the not-too-distant future. It is rich in petroleum resources: second only to Russia among the CIS' natural gas producing countries and one of the world's top 10 natural gas producers. It has an estimated 594 million barrels of proven oil reserves. But Uzbekistan also has an abundance of mineral resources. Among other things, it is a large producer and exporter of gold and copper, and has the world's seventh largest uranium deposits. Its agriculture and agricultural processing industry are relatively advanced. The development strategy of Mr. Karimov's People's Democratic Party government is claimed to be "building a socially oriented market economy," and transforming an economy dependent on agriculture and the extraction of natural resources to a modern industrial economy.

The economic dimension aside, Uzbek-



**PAYING TRIBUTE:** Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife, Gursharan Kaur, at the memorial to Lal Bahadur Shastri in Tashkent, on Wednesday.

— PHOTO: PTI

## DATELINE TASHKENT

kistan and India share a tradition of secularism and accommodating the interests and aspirations of diverse ethnic groups. President Karimov and other Uzbek leaders have, on several occasions, publicly spoken of their admiration for the Indian model of a secular and democratic state. Notwithstanding its 90 per cent Muslim population, Uzbekistan has no state religion. Indeed its government cracks down on not just religious fundamentalism and

extremism, but also any mixing up of religion and politics.

The challenge of forging fresh ideas and instrumentalities for action against terrorism seems high on the agenda of Tashkent's equation with New Delhi. Uzbekistan has faced a major challenge on this front — with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Taliban's close ally and collaborator, and the Jordan-based Hizb-u-Tahrir figuring on the world terrorist map and other religious extremist groups working underground against the government. The Karimov regime's uncompromising fight against religion-based

extremism and terrorism has involved a major cost: there are several complaints by international human rights NGOs against the regime, including allegations of arbitrary arrest, torture, and extra-judicial killings.

India, of course, does not wish to engage in any bilateral or international controversy over this issue. The joint statement issued at the end of Prime Minister Singh's official discussions simply noted that the two countries "once again underlined their resolve, on a long term basis, to fight against terrorism, which is one of the most serious threats to international peace and security." The India-Uzbekistan Joint Working Group on Combating International Terrorism, which met last in New Delhi in October, will meet fairly soon in Tashkent.

History and civilisational affinities are a strong background presence for any Indian visitor to Central Asia. Recent history took the Prime Minister to the Shastri Monument — to pay tribute to a simple bust of Jawaharlal Nehru's successor who died in a Tashkent dacha on January 11, 1966. The memorial, located in a park and maintained neatly, is worthy of a man who was known for his personal integrity, his quick decision-making, his no-frills style. Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri flew in here to participate in Soviet-mediated peace talks with Pakistan's Ayub Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This was three months after India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire, at the insistence of the United Nations Security Council, to end the second India-Pakistan war over Kashmir.

The core of the formula that emerged out of the Tashkent negotiations was this: the belligerents agreed to restore the *status quo ante* and to resolve the issues between them by negotiations. Specifically, this meant India agreeing to hand back Haji Pir and Tithwa, two posts won by the Indian Army in the 1965 war, and Pakistan committing itself formally not to resort to arms. Returning the territory captured proved a wrenching decision for Shastri because it was unpopular with public opinion in India and (it was said) even with his wife, Lalita, who refused to speak to him when he called from Tashkent. But Shastri, in his quest for peace, did what he thought was right as well as realistic. His death, coming unexpectedly, set the stage for the rise of Indira Gandhi and her family in India's political theatre.

But older historical associations beckon. Babur — descended from Chaghatai Mughals on his mother's side and from Timur on his father's side but who always considered himself a Timurid Turk — was born in Andijan, capital of the mineral-rich Andijan Province, located some 360 km to the east of Tashkent, in the Fergana Valley along the ancient Silk Route. His *Babur Nama*, an autobiographical and literary treasure, has a fascinating account of life, geography, customs, kingdoms, conflicts, (then-discovered) natural resources of 15th-16th century Fergana and Samarkand and Tashkent and the "dominion of Kabul" — before the founder of India's Mughal Empire turns his eagle eye and military and political genius to India.