

**SPECIAL INTERVIEW WITH
UZBEKISTAN AMBASSADOR
JAVLON VAKHABOV**

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ABOUT US

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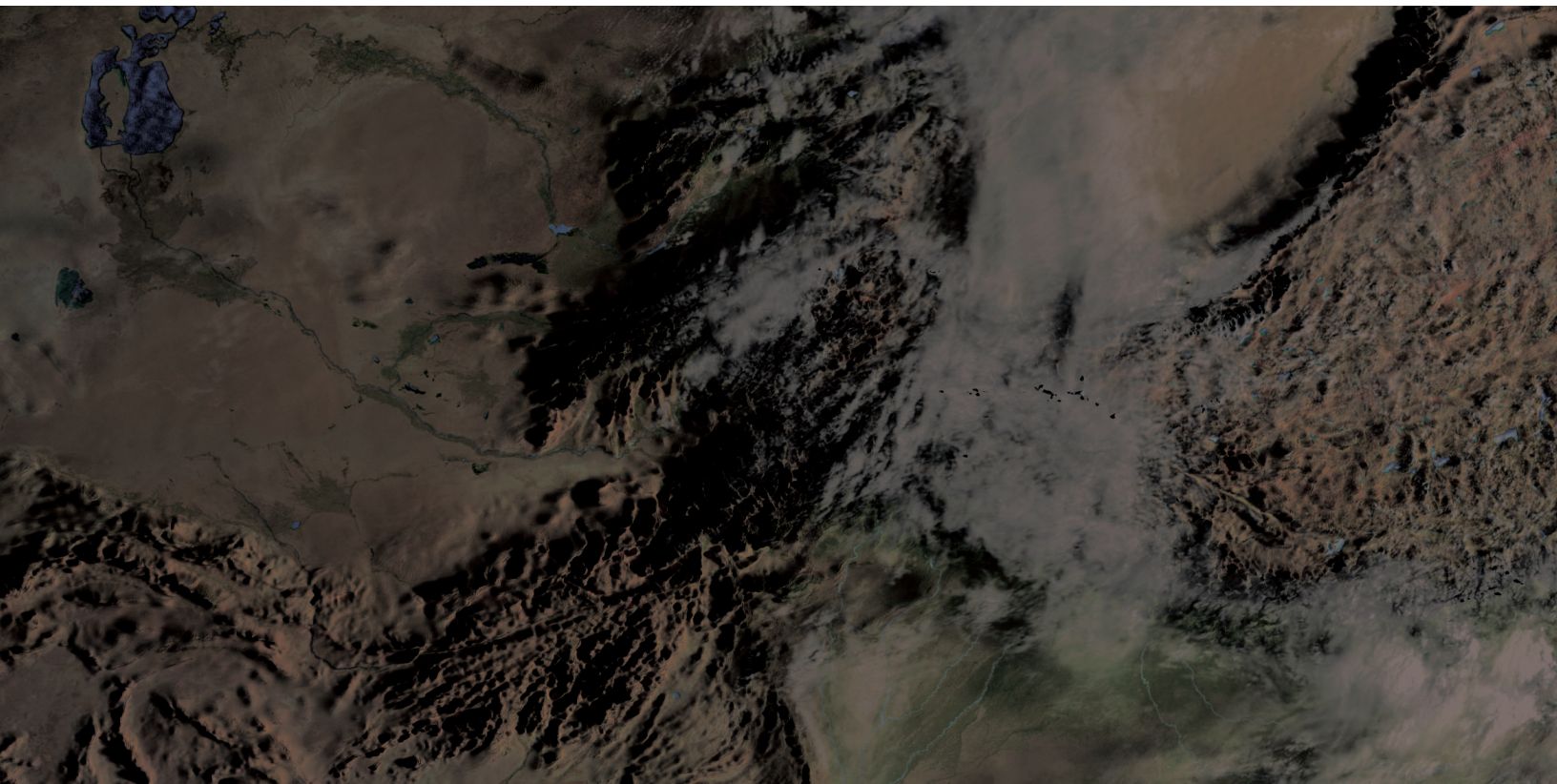
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Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the United States Javlon Vakhobov recently sat down for a special interview with Caspian Policy Center Executive Director Efgan Nifti. Throughout the discussion, Ambassador Vakhobov utilizes the 3 C's (corridors, connectivity, and cooperation) as focal points for discussion. The interview is split into three parts: diplomacy, economy, and human rights.

In this exclusive interview, Ambassador Vakhobov underscores the potential expansion of bilateral trade between Uzbekistan and the United States, the noteworthy value the United States places on Uzbekistan's role in the Greater Caspian Region, and Uzbekistan's engagement with neighboring countries, as well as its northern neighbors.



[Efgan Nifti] What is the role of infrastructure and new connectivity in Uzbekistan's diplomatic engagement?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Uzbekistan attaches great importance to promoting infrastructure development contributing to better connectivity in Central Asia. Special attention in this comprehensive process is given to all-out cooperation with our friends and partners such as the United States. In this regard, President Mirziyoyev's historic first visit to Washington in May, 2018, laid a solid foundation for such cooperation. It is noteworthy that the United States values Uzbekistan's key role in this important dialogue and pledges U.S. support to cooperation and development through the C5+1 regional format. Leadership of both of our countries expresses support for including Afghanistan in multilateral cooperation formats in Central Asia. Washington recognizes the important role that Uzbekistan plays in regional economic development and praises Uzbekistan's efforts to expand the development of trade and commercial ties with Afghanistan. The United States offered political support and planning consultations regarding Uzbekistan's railroad and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, in turn, assured continued support for the Northern Distribution Network and its contribution to achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Here, I would like to dwell on some of the projects aimed at improving connectivity in Central Asia. For over 15 years, Uzbekistan has been Kabul's reliable partner in the field of electricity supply. Compared with 2002, the volume of electricity supplies to Afghanistan has increased by 30 times. Effective January, 2018, Uzbekistan reduced the price of electricity supplied to Afghanistan by 35 percent: from 7.6 to 5 cents per kilowatt. Uzbekistan has also started the construction of Surkhon-Puli Humri power transmission line in Afghanistan. After its completion, Uzbekistan will be able to increase the electricity supply to Afghanistan by 70 percent – up to 6 billion kilowatt-hours per year. The implementation of this project will also open the opportunity to increase the production capacity and create new jobs in Afghanistan. Moreover, it can become an integral part of the CASA-1000 project.

The estimated amount of the project is \$150 million, of which \$32 million will be covered by Uzbekistan. The construction of the Surkhon-Puli-Khumri transmission line on Afghan territory began in June this year. Its expected implementation period is three years, and the payback period will be 12 years.

Flights on the route Tashkent-Kabul have been launched between Uzbekistan Airways and the Afghan airline, KamAir, since November 2017. After a 25-year-pause we have resumed direct flights with Dushanbe as well as bus tours, effective May 2018, on the Tashkent-Khodjand-Tashkent route.

In December 2017, a comprehensive five-year program to improve Uzbekistan's transport infrastructure and diversify foreign trade routes of cargo was adopted. According to the program, it is important to realize agreements reached on the construction of several international transport corridors, including Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman, Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China, and the trans-Afghanistan transport

route which open access to the seaports of Iran (Bandar Abbas and Chabahar) and Pakistan (Gwadar and Karachi).

In particular, following President Mirziyoyev's state visit to Turkmenistan in March 2017, an important section of the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman transport and communication corridor was launched. The Turkmenabad-Faryab railway and road bridges across the Amu Darya river were opened, more than doubling the volume of cargo transportation. Moreover, the opening increased the opportunity to promote the idea of creating a through-transport and communication highway along the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Caspian Sea-South Caucasus route with access to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and Black Sea ports of Georgia, Turkey, Romania, and other states.

The agreement on the construction of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway, reached during Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's official to Uzbekistan in December 2017, is particularly important. The railway is a continuation of the existing Hairatan-Mazar-e-Sharif rail line, which was constructed by Uzbek specialists. About half of Afghanistan's imports and a significant volume of humanitarian supplies are imported along this route.

The launch of the trans-Afghan transport corridor along the route "Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat" will contribute to an increase in Afghanistan's foreign trade turnover by 50 percent.

The construction of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway and ensuring its effective functioning will contribute to the successful integration of the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan into international transport and trade systems in a number of ways.

First, the implementation of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway project will make a real contribution to international efforts for the socioeconomic reconstruction of Afghanistan. According to Asian Development Bank estimates, more than 1,000 people were provided with new jobs when the Hairatan-Mazar-e-Sharif railway launched. Employment in the project area showed an overall growth rate of 10 to 11 per cent per year since 2010, and about 1,200 locals were employed in logistics operations.

In addition, due to the formation of its own sources of income from the increase in goods turnover and transit, Kabul will be able to reduce its acute dependence on foreign aid.

Second, the implementation of the project will open a new stage in achieving regional consensus between the countries involved in the Afghan peace process by creating objective conditions for cooperation, rather than competition. All of Afghanistan's neighbors and regional partners, primarily India, Iran, and Pakistan, would benefit economically from the construction of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway.

The construction of the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat railway will allow the transportation of goods in the direction of Central Asia-Pakistan through the joint Iranian-Pakistani railway networks Zahedan-Quetta-Karachi. At present, the Pakistani side is actively promoting the construction of the Peshawar-Jalalabad railway, which will subsequently connect to a single Afghan railway line and open a direct connection with the Pakistani port of Karachi. According to the Ministry of Railways of Pakistan, the World Bank is interested in executing a new railway route between Peshawar and Jalalabad, which will go through the Loi Shalman Valley.

Third, the prospect of using the transit and infrastructure potential of the Uzbek-Afghan transport corridor opens the possibility for Central Asian states to access the Indian Ocean's sea-trade routes. The

Eurasian region has a high transport and transit potential already, owing to its geographic positioning with access in all directions — from south to north and east to west — given infrastructure improvements to seize this potential.

The realization of trans-Afghanistan transport and communication projects along with other equally important regional projects such as the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman route and the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway project creates the necessary conditions for the development of efficient inter-continental transport corridors.

For example, the length of the alternative land corridor in the direction of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Iran (3,500 km) will be four times shorter than the existing sea link between China and Iran (13,800 km). In turn, the construction of the Mazar-e Sharif-Herat road will allow goods to get from Afghanistan to China in just three days through Andijan (Uzbekistan).

In general, given the transport and transit potential of Uzbekistan, the economic benefits from the implementation of these projects are obvious. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to do a great amount of work from the point of view of coordinating the technical parameters of the construction of railways, the issues of ensuring security and financing, formalizing the regulatory framework, and other issues to ensure they meet international standards.

The preliminary agreements reached on the formation of new rail-transport routes should be viewed as another step toward strengthening the transit position of the Central Asian region, integrating Central Asia and Afghanistan into global economic ties, enhancing the economic potential and welfare of the countries of the region. At the same time, the practical implementation of these initiatives will turn Central Asia not only into an international transit hub, but also a key link in the transcontinental economic space between South Asia, the Asia-Pacific region, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Europe, and the Middle East.

All this, in turn, will help to bring Uzbekistan's relations with major foreign economic partners to a qualitatively new level, significantly expanding trade and economic cooperation with developed and dynamically developing countries such as India, Iran, Pakistan, and others.

[Efgan Nifti] What role does China have in those initiatives, especially in regard to its Belt and Road Initiative?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] In his speech in "One Belt, One Road Forum" in China in 2017, President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan noted that the Great Silk Road not only contributed to the development of trade relations, but also the exchange of information between states and regions, the dissemination of new types of products and crops, and the mutual enrichment of cultures of various peoples, thus being an important means of inter-civilizational dialogue.

The One Belt, One Road Project (OBOR), designed to revive this path, plays an important role in further expanding economic cooperation, creating even more favorable conditions for trade and investment, developing transport and communication infrastructure, partnership potential in agriculture, tourism,

education, and culture. It provides for the effective use of the capabilities of developed countries and their assistance to developing countries with growing economies.

China's OBOR is aimed at improving relations with neighboring states as well as providing for the accelerated development of industrial and transport infrastructure, not only with Central Asia countries but also with Europe, Iran, Turkey, the Balkans, and the Caucasus across the 11,000-kilometer-long Eurasian continent.

BRI calls for the development of new mechanisms for regional economic partnerships, stimulating the economic prosperity of the countries involved, strengthening cultural exchanges and ties in all areas between different civilizations, and promoting peace and sustainable development. To implement this project, China has put forward a proposal to create an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund, which is already bringing the first results.

In the framework of the BRI, significant progress has been made on the construction of a railway linking China and Central Asia through Kyrgyzstan. During a tripartite meeting of delegations from China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, held on December 25–27, 2017, in Tashkent, practical decisions were made aimed at the forthcoming implementation of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan–China railway project. It was expected that by the end of 2018, issues of route identification, a feasibility study for construction, and financing will be resolved.

This corridor will make it possible to transport goods by a shorter route from China via Central Asia to the countries of South Asia and the Middle East, and through the Trans-Caucasian corridor to Europe. According to the preliminary parameters of the project, the delivery time of cargo will be reduced by seven to eight days and the length of the route from East Asia to the countries of the Middle East and Southern Europe shortened by 900 kilometers.

Undoubtedly, the project will increase economic cooperation between China and the countries of Central Asia. Currently, the foreign trade turnover between Uzbekistan and China amounted to almost \$6.428 billion, ranked first place. Of this amount, \$2.869 billion is export, \$3.559 billion is import. China received \$2.1 billion due to an increase in construction in the Central Asian republic.

The Chinese BRI initiative is a long-term project aimed at promoting the integration of the international community, requiring the efforts of many countries and Uzbekistan will contribute to the implementation of this unique project.

[Efgan Nifti] How is Uzbekistan working to engage diplomatically with Afghanistan?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Over the past two years, Uzbek–Afghan relations have gained completely new dynamics and have seen significant intensification of political and diplomatic contacts. Leaders of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have met five times: President Mirziyoyev met with President Ghani three times on the margins of regional and international organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in June, 2017 in Astana, at the Organization of the Islamic Conference, as well as at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2017. In December 2017 President Ghani paid an official visit to Tashkent. Tashkent and Kabul signed a solid package of agreements, including on the construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif–Herat railway line and the Surkhon–Puli-Khumri power line with a capacity of 500 kW. In addition, more than 40 solid contracts worth more than \$500 million were signed on providing Afghanistan with building materials, food products, wheat, household appliances, vehicles, and other goods.

President Ghani visited Uzbekistan in March 2018 to participate at the International Conference on Af

Afghanistan organized at the initiative of President Mirziyoyev to support the Kabul process.

The Tashkent Declaration adopted at the conclusion of the Conference stipulated key principles of the Afghan peace process:

First, peace process must be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned and in accordance with UN resolutions without any preconditions. It is important for Afghans themselves to choose the format, time, and venue of peace negotiations.

Second, an important condition for ensuring success for the peace process is the guaranteed integration of the Taliban into the political life of Afghanistan and its recognition as a legitimate political force.

In its turn, the Taliban must recognize its share of responsibility for bringing peace and security to Afghanistan, and to renounce violence and to break all ties to international terrorism, including Al-Qaeda, ISIS/Daesh, and other terrorist networks.

The speedy conclusion of a peace treaty between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban meets the interests of both parties.

Third, the international community must confront decisively any form and manifestation of terrorism without any distinction in accord with the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy.

Fourth, it has been underscored that it is important to respect by all the states the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity of Afghanistan, and to eliminate external interference in inter-Afghan affairs.

The two countries have intensified high- and mid-level meetings between ministries and agencies. Over the course of last two years, Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Kamilov as well as Special Representative Irgashev held a series of consultative meetings and negotiations with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; and with representatives of the United States, China, Russia, the countries of the International Contact Group, the states of the Eurasian region, South Asia, the Middle and Near East. In order to implement the consolidated position of the participants of the Tashkent Conference, the Uzbek side established contacts and held working meetings with senior representatives of the Taliban Movement.

Uzbekistan is ready to provide a platform for direct negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. It is noteworthy that a governmental delegation from Uzbekistan visited Kabul on March 31, 2019, and put forward an initiative to host the next round of talks in Samarkand with the participation of the Movement of Taliban and representatives of the Afghan Government, as well as other key stakeholders.

We are promoting Afghanistan's active role in regional processes in Central Asia. In this regard, we support Afghanistan's accession into TIFA during the upcoming session in Washington, DC. I also would like to draw to your attention that for the first time in history Baker McKenzie in partnership with AUCC – American-Uzbekistan Chamber of Commerce – gathered six Central Asian Ambassadors on March 29 to the United States, including Afghanistan, to discuss key aspects of doing business in Central Asia.

Lastly, one cannot overestimate the deep historical, cultural, and humanitarian ties between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Several of our great ancestors were buried on the Afghan land: Abu Rayhan Beruni

in Ghazni, Alisher Navoi in Herat, and Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur in Kabul. In 2016, an Uzbek delegation led by the chairman of the International Fund named after Babur restored and landscaped Alisher Navoi's tomb and reconstructed Kamoliddin Behzod's mausoleum in Herat.

[Efgan Nifti] What motivated Uzbekistan to pursue stronger engagement in Afghanistan?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] We have come to understand that Afghanistan is the integral part of Central Asia. We have understood the uselessness of fencing ourselves from Afghanistan; we stopped looking at it as a source of problems. We began to realize that Afghanistan presents a unique opportunity for Central Asia to have the shortest access to sea ports and energy markets in South Asia. However, Uzbekistan is not able to promote peace and economic projects alone in Afghanistan and needs the international community's support in this endeavor.

The cornerstone of Uzbekistan's approach to Afghanistan is economy. Indeed, a significant breakthrough has been achieved in trade and economy. Over the past 1.5 years, we have seen not only the intensification of the dynamics of bilateral trade, but also a significant expansion of its structure, through the inclusion of a completely new range of goods. Our trading house in Kabul was opened, and the UzTrade showroom has been established in Mazar-i-Sharif. Due to these efforts, the volume of mutual trade in 2018 amounted to \$600,7 million, transforming Afghanistan into a top-eight trading partner of Uzbekistan. There are concrete plans to increase this number several times and bring it up to \$1.5 billion. Uzbekistan is supplying Afghanistan with building materials, food, wheat, household appliances, motor vehicles, and other goods.

Uzbekistan reached an agreement with Afghanistan on long-term supplies of mineral fertilizers (annually up to 300,000 tons), 2,000 units of agricultural machinery, up to 250,000 tons of wheat, and other products, depending on Afghan market's demand. In addition, in January 2018 Uzbekistan provided the free delivery of 25 "SamAuto" buses, as well as three tractors and attachments. In Uzbekistan, 110 enterprises operate with Afghan capital, including 19 enterprises with 100% Afghan capital. Twelve of Afghanistan's companies work in the Uzbek market in services, trade operations, and the production of building materials.

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[Efgan Nifti] In your view, what place does Uzbekistan occupy in Central Asia? In the world?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Let me start from the last part of your question. In fact, we feel impressed by your generosity in expanding Uzbekistan's role to the world arena. We are mindful of the scale and scope of our potential, capabilities, and role. In this context, each and every country of Central Asia has its own place and role in the region. Answering the first part of your question, I would like to rephrase President Kennedy's famous phrase: It is not about what place the individual country in Central Asia occupies, rather it's about

what we can accomplish as one region. We have done a lot within the span of very short period of time in this regard.

Thanks to the common efforts of all Central Asian countries, a completely new political atmosphere has taken hold in the region, and the level of political trust has noticeably increased. Constructive solutions to the most acute regional problems has significantly advanced, including border issues and water use that previously served as the source of tension in Central Asia.

In an unprecedentedly short period of time, truly breakthrough results were achieved in the economic, trade, transport, scientific, technical, cultural, and humanitarian fields. Practical cooperation in ensuring security and countering cross-border challenges and threats is consistently strengthening. Meetings of the heads of foreign ministries and regions of Central Asian countries are becoming regular.

A new page in the history of the region was opened after the International Conference on Ensuring Security and Sustainable Development in Central Asia under the auspices of the United Nations in Samarkand in November 2017. As an outcome of the event, a Joint Communiqué was adopted in which the Central Asian states spoke in favor of deepening regional cooperation, resolving all disputes based on mutual compromises, and respecting each other's interests.

The logical continuation of the Samarkand International Conference in March 2018 in Astana was the first consultative meeting of heads of Central Asian states. For the first time in the last 20 years, the leaders of regional countries have had the opportunity to meet on a regular basis and to develop common priorities for regional cooperation.

The historic decision on the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the Resolution "Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation for Peace, Stability, and Sustainable Development in the Central Asian Region" in June 2018 has also ushered in a new era of regionalism in Central Asia.

The document, the draft of which was developed by Uzbekistan together with the countries of Central Asia, was unanimously supported by all UN member states. The resolution was co-authored by 55 countries of Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Africa. All leading partners among the countries of Central Asia, including Russia, China, the United States, and the EU, actively and constructively participated in the consultations on the drafting of the document.

The adopted UN General Assembly Resolution is an important step towards the development of Central Asia as a single consolidated region, where countries can work together to solve common problems and to ensure the prosperity of the region and the well-being of its multi-million population.

One of the latest initiatives is the International Conference, "Connectivity in Central Asia: Challenges and New Opportunities," that took place in Tashkent on February 19-20, 2019. The U.S. delegation of experts was the largest in the forum. It consisted of distinguished specialists representing such leading think tanks as Central Asia Caucasus Institute, RAND Corporation, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and others. Given the opportunity, I would like to express my appreciation to the leadership of Caspian Policy Center for the participation of Ambassador Robert Cekuta in this important conference.

[Efgan Nifti] What are the biggest obstacles Uzbekistan faces in achieving its diplomatic strategies?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] There has not been a time in the modern history of Central Asia when all countries were so much involved, supportive, and believed in each other. Current increasing regional connectivity is a sustainable and irreversible trend based on the strong political will of all leaders and deep historical roots. However,, I consider the following challenges as main obstacles at present.

1. Intraregional trade remains comparatively low. On average it accounts for only 7.5 percent of the whole trade volume (155,2 bln), while a similar indicator in the EU is 60 percent, and in APEC 68 percent. The share of Uzbekistan's trade with its neighbors is only 12.4 percent. We all still trade more natural resources than manufactured goods. As was recently highlighted by the World Bank, the size of the market accessible by transport systems in our region still remains as low as 40 percent, while in advanced Europe this figure is over 85 percent.

2. Regional logistical infrastructure is underdeveloped. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 40 percent of all of the time spent on the transportation of goods via the Silk Road is lost due to imperfect procedures of border-crossing alone. Moreover, Central Asia lacks proper connectivity with other regions. By 2020, we expect that land transportation between Asia and Europe is going to increase from current 1-2 percent to 10 percent. New rail and road links with China, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Europe; new air connections with Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; and the extension of existing communications will all serve as a cost-decreasing factors of trade through the region.

3. We have a lack of diversity and a narrow investment portfolio. With the population of about 1 percent of the global share, the Central Asian economy accounts for only 0.3 percent of the world GDP. Countries have different levels of industrialization, many production facilities are not highly efficient, and dependency on natural resources remains high. The total share of the regional economy increased from 0.1 percent since 2000. Doing business in the region is becoming easier and easier. Investments are attracted faster – over the last ten years, the region attracted about \$113 bln or 1.5 percent of the global share. However, most of these investments are directed to the resource sector – 60%; construction – 12 percent;, and telecommunication, trade, and finances – 9 percent.

4. Without peace in Afghanistan, we will never reach the full potential of Afghanistan. Speaking about Central Asia today, we see Afghanistan as an integral part of the region. A self-sufficient, stable, and progressing Afghanistan is a crucial element of the prosperous economic equation of the region. The prospects of stable and sustainable development in Central Asia are inextricably linked with the achievement of peace in neighboring Afghanistan. The best solution is comprehensive assistance in terms of Afghanistan's integration into regional economic processes. Uzbekistan has and will continue to actively engage in the economic reconstruction of our southern neighbor, facilitate the development of transport and energy infrastructure, and train the people to the best of our knowledge.

5. There are a lot of efforts underway to foster mutually beneficial cooperation among our partners in the region towards the effective management of water resources of the Aral Sea Basin. But we are confident that even more can be done to create a durable mechanism for regional cooperation for long-term transboundary water resources management in Central Asia through effective international legal instruments and improving regional institutional frameworks.

6. The five Central Asian republics are home to almost 70 million people, with an average of 60 percent of the population under the age of 35 and almost 1.5 million people annually entering the labor market.

In this regard, developing core human resources adaptable to both global and local settings and transformations is another challenge.

Despite extensive reform efforts, the quality of education systems needs to be further improved. Specifically, educational institutions are not sufficiently equipped, there is a lack of practical pre-service and in-service training, and effective human-resource management and quality-assurance systems need to be improved.

[Efgan Nifti] What is Uzbekistan optimistic about in this area?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Today, Central Asia is changing, becoming more united, open, and trusted. We have one history and a common future. It is the right time to facilitate our mutual connectivity and prosperity. This new trend is supported by all parties both in the region by all parties and also internationally.

Our biggest optimism is the very fact that Uzbekistan is enjoying unprecedented support by the international community of our country's development path as envisioned by the leadership of our country. As a testament to that, I would single out the unanimous support at the United Nations of resolutions on strengthening regional cooperation and security in Central Asia as well as religious tolerance initiated by President Mirziyoyev. The Secretary General supported the launch of the Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea Region – the signature initiative aimed at overcoming the consequences of the drying up of the world's once fourth-largest lake – the Aral Sea.

International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF support development goals in Uzbekistan.

Bilaterally, the President of Uzbekistan visited a large number of countries on various continents, including America, Europe, and Asia. We are very much hopeful that this trend will continue.

Economy

[Efgan Nifti] What are Uzbekistan's top economic reform priorities?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Key document defining the economic reform priorities of Uzbekistan is the five-year Strategy of Actions Plan adopted in 2017. The document focuses on such key areas as building foundations for sustainable economic growth and stability, creating markets to boost private sector development and create jobs, and expanding social protection for vulnerable groups to mitigate potential adverse impacts of economic reforms.

Following this strategy, the Government of Uzbekistan started a series of significant reforms that completely changed the macroeconomic situation in the country. A most significant step was made in September 2017, when the Central Bank of Uzbekistan reunified Uzbekistan's exchange rates.

Following the currency reform, the Government demonstrated a decisive commitment to liberalizing the economy, gradually eliminating the administrative barriers for doing business. We committed to a market economy – and we changed the legislation accordingly. Problems with the repatriation of profits have been eliminated. Exporters are no longer required to sell a quarter of their foreign-currency revenue to the government. All kinds of unscheduled inspections of business entities have been abolished. The process of granting loans to small business and private entrepreneurs was simplified. The institution of the Business Ombudsman under the President of Uzbekistan was established.

As a result, in a very short period Uzbekistan improved by 90+ points in the World Bank Doing Business ranking. In 2012, the country was in the 166th position, while this year we are already ranked 76th. And our ambitious but realistic goal is to enter Top 20 of Doing Business by 2022.

According to recent forecasts of the IMF, in 2019 GDP growth will pick up from 5 percent to 5.5 percent. Investment will remain the main driver, followed by private consumption, which will benefit from robust wage growth. Growth of formal-sector jobs is projected to expand in 2019, spurred by lower labor taxes and formalization of jobs.

We are working closely with the IMF on simplifying our tax code. Another important goal is restructuring state-owned enterprises, with their eventual privatization. The management of airports and the state-owned airline is being separated. According to the Presidential Decree of January 2019, the two biggest state-owned enterprises – the Almalyk Mining-Metallurgical Complex and the Navoi Mining-Metallurgical Combinat – will be put up for IPO and SPO in 2022 and 2023.

We launched active partnerships with leading consultancy firms, such as “The Boston Consulting Group,” to develop our mining and oil and gas industries, including through the identification of promising investment projects in exploration and production.

Just recently, Uzbekistan's credit risk rating by the OECD, was upgraded from 6th to 5th grade. This suggests great progress for a potential expansion of the bilateral trade between Uzbekistan and foreign countries, including Canada and the United States. The improvement significantly reduces the insurance premium for attracted loans under the guarantee of export-credit agencies. Furthermore, we are working on improving Uzbekistan's OECD credit-risk rating by another point within the next year.

In early February 2019, Moody's assigned a first-time long-term issuer rating to the Government of Uzbekistan at the B1 level. Previously the country had already been assigned BB- rating by Fitch and S&P, and now we hold three major global agencies' ratings for the first time in our history.

Uzbekistan has placed its first-ever overseas government bonds on the London Stock Exchange, successfully priced at \$1 billion. The sale pitch worked very successfully. According to the data, the demand for the bonds exceeded \$8.5 billion, showing a huge interest of investors in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan is confidently undertaking its reforms, with the number of new investors steadily increasing, although we see that many foreign companies are not rushing to invest but are still waiting to see what will happen next. Once again, on behalf of the Uzbek Government, I want to firmly declare that Uzbekistan's reforms are irreversible. They will definitely continue confidently and effectively.

[Efgan Nifti] What are the biggest areas of potential growth for Uzbekistan's economy?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] There are a number of spheres that could serve as a driving force for economic growth of a new Uzbekistan. Some of them traditionally have been on our agenda, such as mining or oil and gas, as well as agriculture. Some others have emerged recently, considering the changes happening in the country in all spheres of economic development. These new areas include tourism, food processing, the chemical industry, machinery, private clinics, production of apparel, and data-center development.

Speaking about some of this, I should first of all mention tourism. Development of this sector is a national priority for sustainable development of our country. In 2017, Uzbekistan welcomed 2.69 million tourists. By the end of the 2018, this number increased to 5 million. Our ambitious but doable goal is to bring the number of foreign tourists visiting our country to more than 9 million by 2026.

Everybody knows Uzbekistan as a country of great, historic cities, where you can see hundreds ancient and unique architectural monuments created in various periods of history. Many of these cities, such as Bukhara, Tashkent, Samarkand, Shahrisabz, and Khiva, have millenniums of history. These cities were part of powerful states, as well as the most important points for caravan trade along the Silk road in ancient times. More than 4,000 architectural and archeological monuments are located in the country, and four of them are inscribed on the World Heritage List by UNESCO.

Last year, we introduced an E-visa system for citizens of 78 countries and a transit visa-free procedure for 100 countries, including the United States. The electronic visa is issued for a period of 30 days and valid for 90 days from the date of its issuance. This measure has become a significant impetus for the development of inbound tourism in Uzbekistan. In just four months of operation, about 195,000 electronic visas were issued to citizens of 49 countries. Uzbekistan has also established a visa-free regime for citizen of 65 countries. The next step will be the Silk Road Visa. "This is an analogue of the Schengen visa, but only between the countries of Central Asia" stressed Abdulaziz Akkulov, the Minister for the State Tourism Committee of Uzbekistan. This measure will allow us to target a specific audience willing

to discover the Silk Roads cities – such as Samarkand, Khiva, and Bukhara. We have twice-a-week flights to Uzbekistan from New York with Uzbekistan Airlines on Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft.

The food processing industry is very important. As you know, since last year we have introduced a new “cluster system” to the agricultural sector. Farmers are given all privileges for controlling the process from seeding till manufacturing of finished products. By 2021, Uzbekistan intends to increase agricultural exports to \$5 billion. Since 2000, Uzbekistan’s agriculture has been steadily growing at an annual rate of 6.6 percent, which is much higher than the world average of 2.8 percent. In 2018, Uzbekistan exported \$1 billion dollars of food products (an increase of 25.3 percent), with the CIS countries only accounting for \$730 million. There are more than 350 food-manufacturing companies in Uzbekistan. They mainly specialize in the production of canned foods and beverages, meat and dairy products, confectionery, and vegetable oils. We established a number of joint ventures in this sector with foreign investors, among them Coca-Cola, Pepsi the Swiss company Nestle, and others.

About 33 investment projects for \$0.5 billion will be implemented in the industry by 2020. Uzbekistan plans to establish a confectionery plant for processing cocoa beans, to construct hundreds of milk and meat processing factories, as well as to modernize and construct around 150 plants for processing fruits and vegetables. Since antiquity, Uzbekistan has been famous for its unique and flavorful apples and pears, cherries and plums, quince and grapes, melons and water-melons. This potential offers perfect opportunities to increase the processing of fruit and vegetables and to produce high-value-added-natural products.

Speaking about agriculture, I should note that we are confident that our increase of agricultural productivity is only possible through the adoption of new technologies and by developing processing and packaging capabilities. The Government’s main goal is to develop the country’s textile sector. About \$1 billion will be allocated to the modernization of the textile industry by 2020. The program envisions an increase in the volume of local processing of cotton from the current 44 percent to 70 percent in 2020, and a corresponding increase in the production of textile products from \$800 million to \$1.5 billion.

The chemical industry serves as a key component of the development of Uzbekistan. Today, enterprises of the chemical industry of Uzbekistan produce mineral fertilizers, plant protection chemicals, chemical fibers and yarns, synthetic resins, polymer products, and other goods. Several factories have been established with the participation of foreign investors from Spain, South Korea, and China. The program to develop the chemical industry of Uzbekistan includes 30 projects with a total value of \$3 billion. During the visit this March of President Mirziyoyev to the Navoi region in the northern part of Uzbekistan, a number of initiatives were put forward to strengthen the potential of the largest enterprise of the chemical industry in Uzbekistan, JSC Navoiyazot, by introducing the latest technologies of the leading Western states.

Our automobile and agricultural machinery industry includes 21 major enterprises. Uzbekistan’s automotive industry is the largest (after Russia) in the CIS market, producing the highest output in the market. Currently we produce 10 types of Chevrolet cars jointly with General Motors; light trucks and medium trucks and buses with the Japanese company ISUZU; heavy trucks jointly with Germany’s MAN; harvesters with Germany’s CLAAS; agricultural machinery with Case New Holland and German LEMKEN. In 2011, jointly with General Motors, we launched a brand new state-of-the-art facility to produce engines for automobiles, which are being supplied to our local GM car-production factory and exported to other GM plants around the world. There are thousands of small- and medium-size factories in Uzbekistan that produce spare parts and components for the industry. Many of them were established with the partici-

pation of South Korean, Chinese, and Indian investors. Today, the local-level of production of GM cars in Uzbekistan accounts for about 80 percent.

The pharmaceutical industry of Uzbekistan is represented by 126 enterprises. They mainly specialize in the production of pharmaceuticals, medical devices, diagnostic aids, and other items. This sector has a large and well-developed research and human capacity, supporting the training of chemists and technologists, biotechnologists, engineers, and pharmacists. There are eight research institutions in the pharmaceutical industry.

[Efgan Nifti] What has been inhibiting that growth so far?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] As Uzbekistan conducts huge-scale reforms, the country is facing a number of challenges. It is mostly about shifting to a market-based, private-sector-driven system open to the world economy. Uzbekistan has one of the most fast-growing working-age populations among the CIS countries. Each year, more than 700,000 young people enter the country's labor market. According to World Bank experts, by 2030 the labor force will increase to the fifth largest in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region.

At the same time, we should also admit that we currently lack medium-sized companies. The country's economy is still dominated by large, underperforming state-owned enterprises and small firms. According to some data, 70 percent of such companies do not employ any additional workers.

Another important issue, of course, is energy efficiency. It is not a secret that our energy waste, water use, and CO2 emissions per unit of GDP, are among the highest globally. Inefficient, old technologies in the chemical and petrochemical sector are a major contributor to this problem. And that's why the Government of Uzbekistan is paying so much attention to developing close cooperation with the leading infrastructural development companies of the West.

Uzbekistan being a land-locked country, logistics issues always used to be a big "head ache" for Uzbekistan. Air and railroad connectivity is critical for us. With this in mind, the Government of Uzbekistan is reforming both sectors, liberalizing the visa regime, and opening its borders with its neighbors. Raising Uzbekistan Airways' competitiveness is a huge challenge. A key reform in this direction has already been made – our government separated the airline, airport management, and air-traffic control.

The underdeveloped logistical infrastructure is a challenge not only for Uzbekistan but also for all the region of Central Asia. 40 percent of all time spent on the transportation of goods via the Silk Road is lost simply due to imperfect procedures of border-crossing. By 2020, we expect that land transportation between Asia and Europe is going to increase from current the 1-2 percent to 10 percent. New rail and road links with China, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Europe; new air connections with Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; and the extension of existing communications and the introduction of European-style Schengen or American-Canadian NEXUS-like Silk Road Visa all will serve to decrease the cost of trade and tourism through the region.

We agreed to make a land port in the central part of Uzbekistan, specifically in the Navoi region. Dubai Port World is helping us and bringing Emirates Cargo. Chinese Alibaba is already in Central Asia. Now we are waiting for Amazon, which is absent not only in Central Asia but also throughout the entire CIS region. Moreover, we are holding an Uzbek-American Business Forum in Navoi on May 16-17. Our good friend, Governor Bryant – the first U.S. governor to visit Uzbekistan – is leading a trade mission from Mississippi. We are also in close contact with the U.S. Department of Commerce and with the development

authorities of several U.S. states.

Solving problems by strengthening the role of the private sector, especially in agriculture, is very important. From July 2019, Uzbekistan will allow the privatization of non-agricultural land plots by legal entities and individuals, which we believe will lead to reaching new markets in Europe and East Asia. In the cotton industry, we are aggressively moving towards the cluster system. We are confident that privatization and mechanization of this sphere will serve as a key to eliminating existing barriers for leading Western retailers to purchase Uzbek textiles.

[Efgan Nifti] What sort of digital innovations will Uzbekistan implement as part of Uzbekistan Digital – 2030?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Our government is moving towards a digital economy. Starting in January 2019, our national concept for the transition to a digital economy, “Digital Uzbekistan – 2030,” is an ambitious program of measures to implement crypto assets on local and international crypto-exchanges, to introduce blockchain technologies, to develop e-commerce infrastructure and smart contracts with digital transactions and many other aspects.

We need to develop further a national concept for the transition to a digital economy. That is why it was necessary to introduce the “Digital Uzbekistan – 2030” program. We set big goals to bring the share of the digital economy to 30 percent. The introduction of the concept will dramatically reduce corruption. That is why President Mirziyoyev instructed the government to develop a roadmap for the transition to a digital economy.

Despite the fact that we are only now introducing the digital economy, we have already had good results in this direction.

In July, a Presidential decree was issued on the development and integration of blockchain technology, crypto-assets, and crypto mining with the goal of modernizing the state administration system and advancing digital economics in the country.

Starting January 1, 2021, blockchain reportedly will be integrated into the operation of governmental agencies for the purposes of verifying identifying information, in the systems of corporate management, and in clearing transactions.

The Digital Trust Fund of Uzbekistan has been established in line with the resolution of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in order to attract and consolidate investor funds for the implementation of public-private partnership projects in the field of digital economy development, including those related to the introduction of the blockchain technology. Our compatriot from the United States, Babur Akilkhanov, was appointed the head of this Fund.

Regarding the “Uzbekistan Digital – 2030” program, we have identified the following key directions for the development of digital economy in Uzbekistan:

- identification of state and economic bodies and local self-government bodies on the basis of necessary information systems and resources, implementation of software and electronic services;
- creation of favorable conditions for attracting foreign investments in the country by organizing the technology market and technology parks on the

basis of the digital economy and information technologies market, including public-private partnerships;

- coordination of modern telecommunication infrastructure, development of communication technologies and networks, introduction of modern telecommunication services;
- increase of the digital economy through the introduction of electronic services in the field of public administration and economics, development of the e-commerce and software market;
- development of proposals for the development of the national segment of the Internet, organizational, material and technical and economic support for digital media content;
- development of "intellectual systems" for the management of urban and regional infrastructure, in particular housing and communal services, transport logistics, safe and "smart cities";
- improvement of the system of training qualified personnel.

At the same time, by 2030 we plan to implement measures to develop the concept of "Digital Uzbekistan."

We have to understand that the government is making significant success in transferring our economy from central-control to a market-based system, decreasing the public sector's involvement. We are moving from "closed" to "open."

Uzbekistan has entered the digital transformation stage. An innovation center has been created, electronic government is developing, and citizens are provided with multiple interactive services through a single portal of public services. Further economic development of the CIS countries and increasing competitiveness in the world arena will largely depend on the effective formation and development of the digital economy.

We consider it necessary to create a joint platform for an integration partnership between traditional financial institutions and innovative companies in the field of financial technologies. This cooperation will facilitate the joint implementation of digital innovative products in the financial markets of our countries, as well as the development of effective solutions for the use of technologies such as blockchain, open data, and other elements.

[Efgan Nifti] Are there sectors of the economy where digital innovation will be more heavily concentrated?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Uzbekistan's economy requires strengthening the role of digital innovation in development projects. As you know, the Year 2018 was declared in Uzbekistan as the "Year of Proactive Entrepreneurship, Innovative Ideas and Technologies." A special State program on implementation of these innovative ideas was adopted. A center for digital innovations has been created, electronic government is developing, and citizens are provided with a lot of interactive services through a single portal

of public services. In other words, the country is truly entering the digital-transformation stage.

Our government understands that further economic development and increasing competitiveness in the world arena will largely depend on the effective formation and development of the digital economy. Mostly, the focus will be on improving the education system and the development of human capital; the development of science, inventiveness and technology transfer; improving the system of financing innovations; development of competition and reduction of administrative barriers; development of

infrastructure and IT. We have already started cooperation with a number of partners from CIS countries on joint implementation of digital innovative products in the financial markets of our countries, as well as the development of effective solutions for the use of technologies such as blockchain, open data, and others.

Human Rights

[Efgan Nifti] What have been the biggest challenges Uzbekistan has faced in reforming its human rights record?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Within only the past two years, significant progress has been achieved in the field of human rights in many respects – in advancing anti-corruption measures and strengthening accountability of public servants; ending systematic forced labor and child labor; ensuring religious freedom and providing greater transparency in the justice system, ensuring freedom of expression and press, to name only the most important.

This progress has indeed been acknowledged by the international community and particularly by the U.S. government.

Uzbekistan's position was upgraded in the annual U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report on June 28, 2018; and the U.S. Department of Labor has upgraded Uzbekistan from 4th to 2nd level as a result of a significant reduction of the mobilization of forced labor for picking cotton. According to the Department of Labor's Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act Report, Uzbekistan cotton was removed from the List of Goods produced by Child Labor. On March 25 this year, the Department of Labor took a similar decision and removed Uzbek cotton from the list of products requiring federal contractor certification as to forced or indentured child labor pursuant to Executive Order 13126.

In December 2018, U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo's decision on the removal of Uzbekistan from the list of the Countries of Particular Concern for Religious Freedom became yet another recognition of the success of reforms and changes in Uzbekistan. The recently published Department of States Report on Human Rights Practices in 2018, despite of some distortions, indeed reflects Uzbekistan's achievements in human rights.

However, some challenges still remain, primarily related to the implementation of our laws, especially at the regional level. The President and the Cabinet have a very strong top-down message that the human-rights violations and abrogation of the rule of law will not be tolerated, regardless of the title or the position of the perpetrator. But there are still some isolated incidents that are not systematic in nature.

Changing mindsets of officials from various agencies and authorities towards more rule-based, people-oriented decision-making, and increasing legal awareness among the population and their ability to know their rights and seek protection are other challenging dimensions.

[Efgan Nifti] Are there any Uzbekistan NGOs or international organizations advising on these reforms?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] The Government considers civil society not only as advisors but as a key ally trusted to be instrumental in effective implementation of the reform agenda. This is enshrined in numer

ous legislative acts and in initiatives to ease the ability of NGOs to be registered and operate in the country.

NGOs are specifically mentioned in the Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of the Country's Development for 2017–2021, where it notes the “necessity of further development of civil society institutions and improvement of their social and political activism.” The Action Strategy also refers to NGO engagement with government bodies to assist in “countering crime and the prevention of offenses.”

The Concept of Administrative Reform in the Republic of Uzbekistan, that identifies main areas for reform of the public administration system, also focuses on improving regulatory tools through the transfer of certain governmental functions to the subjects of public control, as well as legal and institutional frameworks for social and public-private partnerships aimed at ensuring broad participation of NGOs and business in addressing issues of social and economic development.

The Decree on Measures to Fundamentally Enhance the Role of Civil Society Institutions in the Process of Democratic Renewal of the Country of May 4, 2018, ensures the openness and transparency of government bodies in their interactions with NGOs, mass media, and the general population. It is cementing the engagement of civil society institutions in the elaboration and implementation of socio-economic programs and timely delivery of essential regulatory legal acts that reflect the interests of all social groups.

The right to exercise public oversight over the activities of government bodies and officials is provided to NGOs by the new Law on Public Control, adopted on April 12, 2018.

Currently, all essential draft laws and legal regulations before their approval are given a thorough review by civil society through the internet-based government “Portal for discussions of normative legal acts of Uzbekistan” (<https://regulation.gov.uz>).

The Government of Uzbekistan actively engages with local NGOs like the National Association of Non-governmental Non-commercial Organizations (NANNOUz), National Association of NGOs, and the Independent Institute of Monitoring of Establishment of Civil Society (NIMFOGO) in terms of invigorating civil society to play a key role in the reform and transformation processes as an effective check-and-balance mechanism.

Currently, more than 8,000 NGOs are operating in the country actively supporting entrepreneurship, democratic institutions, women and youth, improving the system of education and healthcare, and promoting transparency and good governance.

The Development Strategy Center, the first national think-tank of its kind, established in February 2017, consolidates efforts for effective organization of expert and public discussions and the in-depth study of measures stipulated by the Action Strategy, as well as the active involvement of representatives of civil society institutions, experts and scientists in the processes of the democratization and modernization of the country.

Aside from engaging in research that itself fosters open dialogue between the government and citizenry about the reform processes around the country, the Center is advancing proposals for effective implementation of the Action Strategy, including the preparation of draft laws and regulations.

The Public Foundation for the Support and Development of Print Media and News Agencies of Uzbeki

stan, together with the National Association of Electronic Media (NAESMI), are contributing to protect and promote freedom of expression and press in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan hosts a regional office of the UNODC and, together with the UN experts' team, has been implementing comprehensive projects on criminal-justice reform.

In close cooperation with ILO and its guidance, Uzbekistan has elaborated and implemented the Decent Work Country Programme for 2013–2016 that was extended to 2020 in order to improve employment opportunities, working conditions, and social protections. As a result of comprehensive measures that have been taken by the Government to eradicate forced labor, the ILO's 2018 Third-Party Monitoring concluded that systematic use of child labor in the cotton harvest has ended and it is no longer a concern, and 93 percent of those involved in the 2018 cotton harvest worked voluntarily.

After the visit to Uzbekistan of Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, in October 2017, we've developed the "Roadmap on ensuring freedom of religion or belief" adopted by the Uzbekistan Parliament and being gradually implemented.

We work with OSCE on several projects on "human dimension," including on empowering women's entrepreneurship, anti-corrupting reforms, and strengthening the Ombudsman institution, and supporting judicial reform.

The dialogue with American NGOs at various levels has also visibly intensified. We have well-established, regular consultations with Human Rights Watch and with the Cotton Campaign. For instance, a high-level delegation from Uzbekistan headed by Deputy Prime Minister Tanzila Narbayeva for the first time in the history attended the Cotton Campaign's annual strategy meeting on February 4 this year where both sides agreed to have a Roadmap with set of measures aimed at complete eradication of systematic forced labor and ending the cotton pledge.

[Efgan Nifti] Does Uzbekistan look to any other country as a model for its human rights policy?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Today, Uzbekistan is confidently presenting itself as a country of progressive transformation and large-scale, irreversible reforms aimed at ensuring free society and good governance, justice and rule of law, the country where the Government has committed to effective people-oriented policy with the paramount principle – "human interests come first." Our government has established its own model for the gradual implementation of international human-rights standards into our national legislation and law enforcement practices.

Uzbekistan has been seen by many as the country offering a unique model of ensuring peace and prosperity in a multiethnic society. For instance, U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo commended Uzbekistan's progress toward religious freedom: "When religious freedom flourishes, a country flourishes. As one example today, we applaud the steps that Uzbekistan is taking towards a more free society. We have great confidence that a degree of religious freedom greater than before will have a positive ripple effect on their country, their society, and the region as well."

[Efgan Nifti-] How is the State Security Service supporting Uzbekistan's human rights reforms?

[Ambassador Vakhobov] Within the framework of judicial and legal reforms aimed at strengthening the rule of law, Uzbekistan Parliament adopted the Law on the State Security Service of the Republic of

Uzbekistan.

According to the Article 24 of this Law, the State Security Service, when performing the assigned tasks of ensuring state security, is obliged to take all necessary measures to protect the constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens.

In this regard, the State Security Service along with other law-enforcement agencies is instrumental in the process of effective implementation of the human rights reforms.

BIOS



Efgan Nifti
Executive Director
Caspian Policy Center

Efgan Nifti is the executive director and the board member of the Caspian Policy Center (CPC). He previously worked for Georgetown University as a research assistant and as a faculty development coordinator and lecturer for Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA). His areas of expertise include energy security, political economy and international affairs of the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Caspian. One of his policy research papers called “Energy Future of Europe and the Southern Gas Corridor” was selected as one of the best policy papers in 2013 by the University of Pennsylvania. He regularly testifies and makes presentations on critical policy issues of the Caspian Region in various international organizations including NATO, European Union and UN and international conferences. His commentaries and articles also appeared in major news media including Bloomberg, Foreign Affairs, CNN, NTV, MSNBC etc. Dr. Nifti received his graduate degrees in international affairs and political science from Georgetown University and the George Washington University. He is fluent in English, Azerbaijani, Turkish and Russian.



Javlon Vakhobov
Uzbekistan Ambassador to the United States

Ambassador Javlon Vakhobov is currently serving as the Uzbek Ambassador to the United States since October 2017. He previously served as the First Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Director of the Institute of Strategic and Interregional Studies. He has worked with Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2001. He holds a BA and an MA in International Law from the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

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1015 15th Street NW, Suite 380, Washington, DC 20006
202.864.69.58
INFO@CASPIANPOLICY.ORG
CASPIANPOLICY.ORG

