



The University of World Economy and Diplomacy

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# Policy Brief

On the Cusp of Diplomatic  
Realignment: Uzbekistan's Engagement  
Strategy with the Taliban

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## **Introduction**

The recent, on March 12, 2024, visit of Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov to Kabul underscores the importance of constant engagement with the Taliban regime. Ongoing negotiations with the unrecognised Taliban administration reflect Uzbekistan's profound interest in fostering pragmatic relations with its southern neighbour. Given critical nature of issues such as trade, transport connectivity and water management, continual dialogue between the parties remains paramount.

## **Diplomatic dialogue**

The Uzbekistan Foreign Minister's engagement with key members of the Taliban government [included](#) Acting Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, Acting Interior Minister Sirojiddin Haqqani, and Acting Minister of Commerce and Industry Nooruddin Azizi. As per the official [statement](#) from the Taliban's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the discussions during covered a wide array of topics, ranging from trade facilitation and visa issuance for Afghan business and transport personnel to transit agreements and electricity imports. In turn, Minister Saidov raised crucial issues between two neighbours, emphasizing the importance of security and advocating for investments in Afghanistan, particularly in sectors like cement production, coal extraction and coal-based electricity generation. He further highlighted how such investments could expediate the development of the Trans-Afghan railway.

## **Trade and Investment**

Cross-border trade with Afghanistan remains a pivotal concern for Uzbekistan, alongside significant security challenges. In 2022, Uzbekistan

recorded exports exceeding US\$750 million to Afghanistan, while imports from Afghanistan amounted to a mere US\$9.3 million, resulting in a substantial imbalance between the two nations. To address this trade disparity, both sides have expressed their intention to increase bilateral trade to \$3 billion a year during the [visit](#) of a prominent delegation from Uzbekistan, led by Deputy Prime Minister Jamshid Khodjaev, to Afghanistan in late October 2023.

In terms of investment, Uzbekistan has been steadfast in fostering deeper engagement with Afghanistan, particularly through various infrastructure projects encompassing railroad construction, mining, energy production, agriculture and irrigation systems. Furthermore, the recent visit of Minister Saidov to Kabul has brought trade and investment cooperation to the forefront of discussions, further underscoring the significance of these economic ties.

### **Diplomatic pivot – Engagement with Qatar**

The Foreign Minister's visit to Kabul followed closely on the heels his meetings in Qatar. Doha has long played a pivotal role as a mediator in the Afghan peace process, facilitating discussions between the Taliban and the United States. Given Qatar's established rapport with the Taliban and its potential [financial clout](#), particularly in projects like the Trans-Afghan railway, Mr Saidov's travel itinerary likely carries significant diplomatic signals.

Moreover, Uzbekistan's foreign policy establishment seems to view Doha as a pragmatic partner capable of aiding in the resolution of substantive disagreements between Tashkent and Kabul, particularly concerning the expeditious implementation of the Qush-Tepa canal in northern Afghanistan. By broadening the scope of the issue and considering Qatar's

potential involvement, Uzbekistan hopes to garner increased international attention and support for its initiatives.

### **Qush-Tepa factor**

The Uzbek government seems to be contemplating deeper cooperation with the Taliban authority as a potential means to mitigate the escalating economic and environmental challenges posed by the canal project. However, this strategy is fraught with risks, given Tashkent's decision not to formally recognise the Taliban government in Kabul. Without official ties between the Taliban and the Uzbek government, Tashkent may lack the legal framework necessary to manage transboundary water resources effectively.

In pursuit of its objectives, Uzbekistan seems to be intensifying diplomatic exchanges, fostering deeper economic cooperation, and nurturing stronger people-to-people relations with its neighbour. This concerted effort may eventually yield leverage over the Taliban government. A notable example of this approach is Deputy Prime Minister Jamshid Khodjaev's visit to Afghanistan in October last year, which marked the initial in this direction.

### **Change underway**

Preferring active diplomacy over guerrilla warfare, using weapons and intimidation, signifies a significant shift for the Taliban. This change in the Taliban's behaviour suggests a potential transition towards assuming a more responsible stakeholder role. This evolution marks a departure from the movement's traditional "isolationist" stance, renowned for its detachment from regional and international affairs. Instead, the Taliban is actively engaging in diplomatic engagement, particularly with its northern neighbours such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and most recently, Turkmenistan. This notable change in behaviour may strain relations with Pakistan, historically a close ally of the Taliban.

Additionally, the movement's intensified efforts towards multi-vector engagement with Central Asian Republics represents a historic occasion. It is crucial to acknowledge that the Taliban's diplomatic efforts may stem from its urgent need to diversify economic and trade relations with Pakistan, particularly in light of Pakistan's increasingly assertive posture following the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has leveraged its exclusive trade ties with the Taliban for various political objectives, including resolving border disputes and addressing issues related to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This dynamic underscores the complex interplay between diplomacy, economics, and regional politics in the Taliban's evolving behavior.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, Mr Saidov's visit epitomizes Uzbekistan's recent pragmatic approach, emphasizing diplomacy and practical cooperation, particularly in trade and investment, with the Taliban government. Uzbekistan appears to recognize the potential of intensified economic cooperation to foster closer ties between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, thereby expanding the scope for manoeuvring in their relations. The urgency to address the "Qush-Tepa dilemma", with its rapid construction causing increasing anxiety for Uzbekistan, serves as a primary driver behind the intensifying exchanges between the parties.

Moreover, in the context of Qatar, Uzbekistan appears to be leveraging Doha's close connections with the Taliban by involving Qatari investment in Uzbek-Afghan construction projects, while also seeking to appropriate Qatar's mediatory role to raise international awareness about pressing challenges in the region, notably the Qush-Tepa project.

These strategic initiatives, from Uzbekistan's perspective, hinge on the ongoing transition in the Taliban's behaviour, favouring active diplomacy

over security challenges and intimidation. The delicate deterioration of bilateral relations with Pakistan is also subtly nudging the Taliban towards embracing proactive diplomacy. These dynamics underscore the intricate interplay of regional politics and diplomatic manoeuvring shaping Uzbekistan's strategic calculus.