

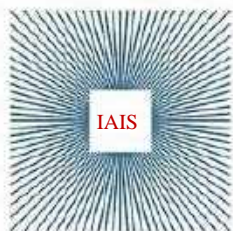
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Center for Afghanistan and South Asian Studies

AFGHANISTAN:
CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS AND
ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Edited & Reviewed by

Hamza Boltaev

hamza.boltaev@iais.uz

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CONTRIBUTORS



Iskandar Abdullaev
Visiting Professor
Justus Liebig University Giessen



Shakhboz Akhmedov
Director, Centre for SD
Institute for Advanced International Studies



Hamza Boltaev
Senior Research Fellow
Institute for Advanced International Studies



Fazliddin Djamalov
Research Fellow
Institute for Advanced International Studies



Abdusamat Khaydarov
Principal Research Associate
Institute for Advanced International Studies,
Director, Diplomatic Academy at UWED



Rustam Makhmudov
Senior Research Fellow
Institute for Advanced International Studies



Aziza Mukhammedova
Research Fellow
Institute for Advanced International Studies



Alisher Rakhimov
Senior Research Fellow
Institute for Advanced International Studies



Akram Umarov
Deputy Director
Institute for Advanced International Studies

FROM THE EDITOR

This annual report, including 13 policy briefs, offers an alternative glimpse at the events and developments in and around Afghanistan, prioritizing timely and significant thematic and regional approaches. Obviously, the Taliban's rapid surge into power in August 2021 and the subsequent measures to solidify their position reshaped relations with Afghanistan's neighbours.

Thematic analyses cover critical issues such as terrorism and extremism, humanitarian crises, transnational crime, as well as political and social problems stemming from Afghanistan. Additionally, sporadic efforts by the Taliban government to regulate the country's economic situation are deeply analysed. The report also explores Afghanistan's role as a centre for transport communications between its immediate and extended neighbours.

Policy briefs highlight emerging concerns such as transboundary water issues and border conflicts between Afghanistan and its neighbours. Furthermore, the report underscores Afghanistan's growing importance for Central Asian Republics (CAR), particularly Kazakhstan, as an alternative transportation corridor diversifying away from traditional partners. Several papers assess CAR's pragmatic foreign policy towards Afghanistan amid a challenging international environment where varying approaches to establishing formal relations with the Taliban prevail.

Overall, the report presents ideas in an orthodox yet easily understandable manner, with historical events laid out chronologically to aid in understanding the contemporary developments.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Islam and the Muslim clergy have had a significant historical influence in Afghanistan, playing a consolidating role during periods of armed intervention and political upheaval. From the fight against British intervention to the armed insurrection against the Soviet invasion, Islamic opposition groups emerged, eventually leading to the establishment of the Taliban regime in 1996. After the events of September 11, 2001, the Taliban was overthrown, but their recent return to power in August 2021 led to the proclamation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, resulting in the abolishment of the current constitution and the implementation of Sharia norms.
- The initial pessimistic assumptions about the further deterioration of a dire economic conditions in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan did not sustain, at least in a short run. Yet, the paper questions the Taliban's ability to prevent a complete economic collapse and viable transformation towards sustainable socioeconomic reforms. Additionally, the work focuses on the Afghan economy, its relationship with Uzbekistan, the security and long-term export interests of Uzbekistan in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.
- Central Asia has a complex history of water management exacerbated by its post-Soviet transition, leading to hydro-political deadlock and uncertainty. The recent construction of the Taliban's Qush-Tepa canal in the Amu Darya River Basin adds a new layer of complexity. The canal, spanning 285 km, aims to divert significant water resources for irrigation, potentially affecting downstream countries reliant on the Amu Darya's flow. The canal's impact extends beyond Afghanistan, with downstream nations like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan facing potential disruptions to agriculture, economy, and environment. Climate change aggravates these challenges, with projections indicating reduced water availability and increased temperatures, further stressing the region's water resources.
- The construction of the Qush-Tepa Canal in Afghanistan's Jawzjan province is progressing rapidly, with the first phase of the project has been completed since its inception in March 2022. The canal, drawing water from the Amu Darya River, has recently entered its second phase, as announced by Taliban officials. While the project was initially proposed by the previous government in 2018, it has gained significant momentum under the current Taliban government, indicating their strong support and prioritization of the project.
- The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 presented a significant challenge for Central Asian countries. The subsequent adjustment of their positions revealed

two distinct approaches towards the Taliban. Uzbekistan viewed the movement as a potential catalyst for ending the long-standing Afghan conflict and promoting regional projects, while Tajikistan took a more confrontational stance, prioritizing the protection of Tajik interests in Afghanistan and accusing the Taliban of renegeing on promises of inclusivity.

- Afghanistan's strategic geographical location has long held the potential to serve as a crucial link between Central and South Asia, as well as the Middle East. However, due to the two-decade-long reign of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, this potential remained largely untapped, primarily due to the escalating instability caused by Taliban and ISIS-Khorasan insurgency and terrorist activities. The recent Taliban takeover in August 2021 and the subsequent decrease in large-scale hostilities have created an opportunity to reassess the feasibility of harnessing Afghanistan's transit potential, taking into account both the advantages and risks associated with investment, cargo safety, and personnel security.
- The Central Asian Republics generally responded with a calm and pragmatic approach to the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan, adapting to the new reality following the swift departure of allied forces. While reluctant to recognize the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan, the CAR maintained open doors for necessary contacts and pragmatic relations. Uzbekistan, in particular, prioritized robust trade relations with the Taliban-led Afghanistan, focusing on trade and diplomatic exchanges, supporting infrastructure projects, and addressing challenges such as incorporating Afghanistan into the regional water regulatory system.
- The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has brought about significant changes in the region, raising concerns about the development of jihadist terrorist movements and the potential involvement of citizens from Central Asian countries. While initial assessments of direct coercive pressure on Central Asia from international groups supported by the Taliban have not materialized, the evolving dynamics within the Taliban itself present complex challenges. The Taliban is navigating its role as both a state-building force and a jihadist movement, facing intricate relationships with other regional and international terrorist groups.
- Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and Afghanistan in August 2021, Turkmenistan pursued a proactive policy aimed at establishing constructive and mutually beneficial relations with the new authorities. Ashgabat's approach focused on three strategic goals: securing its borders through diplomatic contacts, maintaining access to the Afghan consumer market, and revitalizing transport and energy projects tied to Afghanistan. By actively engaging with the new Afghan authorities, Turkmenistan sought to safeguard its interests and leverage potential opportunities for economic cooperation and regional connectivity.

- The transformative nature of the Tajikistan's approach to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was central in this report. Recent rumours and reports suggest that the control of the Afghan consulate in Khorog, Tajikistan, has been transferred to the Taliban government, while the main embassy in Dushanbe continues to operate under the former government's flag. The acting head of the Afghan consulate in Khorog, Naqibullah Dehghanzada, officially confirmed the transfer of the consulate to Taliban control. Tajikistan has maintained trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan despite not officially recognizing the Taliban government, but recent developments indicate a potential shift in the country's stance towards the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.
- From the very beginning of the creation of the Afghan state, Islam has played a decisive role in the development of internal political events in Afghanistan. The ideological basis of the Taliban movement, which is rooted in neo-bandism, is an explanation for the policies they are pursuing in Afghanistan today. However, nowadays the principles of justice, the fight against corruption, and the advantages of the Islamic form of government based on Sharia, which are often perceived by certain groups of believers in the republics of Central Asia as the most correct approaches to the development of Muslim states and may pose a greater danger.
- The strong relationship between Iran and the Taliban in recent years might face a setback due to the Taliban's unprofessionalism and inability to effectively govern Afghanistan. Iran, which had initially welcomed the Taliban's takeover, may now be disappointed with their behaviour and lack of capacity to address the country's socio-economic crisis. The international community's alarm and mounting terrorist attacks in Afghanistan have further raised doubts about the Taliban's ability to provide security, potentially prompting Iran to distance itself from the current government in Kabul.
- While U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, the country remains an important part of U.S. foreign policy. The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy emphasizes countering terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS-K, while also allowing indirect tactical engagement with the Taliban government. This balanced approach between vigilance and diplomacy focuses on working with regional partners like Uzbekistan, due to its geography and historical relations. The U.S. want to maintain influence in Afghanistan because of concerns about the geopolitical situation: China's Belt and Road Initiative to connect Afghanistan and Russia's desire to stay relevant further highlight the region's strategic importance.

THE RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY OF THE TALIBAN AND ITS IMPACT ON THE REGIONAL SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

Abdusamat Khaydarov, Principal Research Associate (IAIS)¹

Introduction

Islam and the Muslim clergy have played an extremely important role in the history of Afghanistan. Only in the last three centuries since the creation of the Afghan state, Islam has played a consolidating role in the fight against British attempts at armed intervention. In the mid-70s of the twentieth century Islam was also used during an armed insurrection against M. Daoud, in which young leaders of the country's religious class played a key role. A few years later in 1979 political parties created by the young leaders of the clergy came out as a united front against the Soviet invasion and the pro-Soviet regime.

The invasion of Soviet troops in Afghanistan served as a catalyst for the formation of the Afghan armed Islamic opposition, which declared jihad against Soviet troops and the "godless" government of the DRA. In 1992, the Islamic opposition was at the top of power in Afghanistan, but the struggle for power on ethnic and confessional basis between various mujahideen groups turned into an intensification of the civil war and the emergence of the Taliban movement.

In 1996 The Taliban was able to seize power in the country and establish a tough regime, which was removed by the troops of the international coalition after the events of September 11, 2001. In August 2021 the Taliban again comes to power in Afghanistan and proclaims the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Since coming the Taliban to power the current Constitution of the Republic of 2004 was abolished and the partial use of the 1964 Constitution and the abolition of provisions contrary to Sharia norms were announced.

¹ Director at the Diplomatic Academy at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy

The origins and current state of the Taliban ideology

The influence of the Deobandi school of the Hanafi school on the formation of the ideological views of the Taliban movement is a generally recognized fact. Many Taliban leaders are graduates of the Dar-ul-Uloom Haqqaniya Madrasa, which is a key part of the Deobandi school system in Pakistan. The main concept of this school is the revival of Islam based on Sharia law and purified of any innovations, as well as the creation of a unified Islamic state. It was these basic provisions of the Deobandi school that formed the basis of the ideology of the Taliban, but adapted to the conditions of Afghanistan and meeting the interests of the dominant ethnic group - the Pashtuns. In particular, the Pashtunwali - code of conduct of Pashtuns, which regulates behaviour of members of society both in everyday life and in extreme situations, has become an integrated and inherent part of the ideology of the movement. The inclusion of the provisions of this code of conduct into the Taliban doctrine affected the radicalization of the movement and the formulation of its following main tasks.

The task of reviving Islam or in other words establishing a Sharia form of governance was and remains central both in the first and second coming of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. The appeal to Islamic dogma was conditioned by the need to consolidate all forces to establish order and stability in the country. "Sharia will be our law ..."² noted Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, one of the prominent representatives of the Taliban, the former Ambassador of the Taliban administration in Islamabad at the initial stage of the Movement's formation. At the same time, only the Koran was recognized as the main source of Sharia.

The Taliban's negative attitude to any innovations has led to criticism of traditional Islam and its other branches. This approach led to a certain cooling of relations with the leaders of Sufi orders of Afghanistan, who played a prominent role in the 1980s during the fight against the invasion of the Soviet troops. This also led to the denial of the Jafari Mazhab, the school of Islamic law of the Shiites of Afghanistan and the aggravation of relations with the Shiite population of the country. However, the Taliban have never talked about protecting the rights of minorities in Afghanistan.

² Zaeef.A.S. My life with the Taliban. London: C. Hurst & Co, 2010.

The idea of creating an Islamic state was one of the key tasks of the movement both in the 1990s and during the confrontation with the republican regime in 2002-2021. This task was implemented under the slogan of jihad against the "infidels", which included foreign troops and the republican government. This approach enabled the movement to mobilize and unite not only Pashtuns, but also representatives of other ethnic groups of the country to achieve their goals. At the same time, all the activities of the Taliban were based on two principles: strict adherence to the Koran and the instructions of the Supreme Leader of the movement, bearing the title Amir al – mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful), who has full political, military and religious authority.

In order to give legitimacy to the fighting of the Taliban fighters, Mullah Omar in 2006 developed and published "Loyha" - peculiar rules of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan for the Mujahideen. In 2009 and 2010 Loyha was expanded and republished. In fact, this document is a set of Mullah Omar's guidelines based on the synthesis of certain provisions of the Afghan code of conduct Pashtunwali and the provisions of Islamic law, which guided the Taliban fighters during the confrontation with the republican government.

In 2016 (1438 according to the Islamic calendar), Haibatullah Akhunzada, the current leader of the Taliban, published a new guide for the mujahideen - "Rohnamudhoe Amir al–mu'minin baroye mujahedin"³ (Amir al–mu'minin Guide for the Mujahideen). This guide regulates the behavior of the mujahideen, prescribes obedience to the Amir, explains the goals of jihad, establishes rules for intimidating infidels, as well as rules for the treatment of prisoners, explains the need for unity and cohesion of the mujahideen, requests listening to the needs of mujahideen and shahids families, explains the value and importance of the Islamic government. In fact, this guide is an expanded version of the Loyha published during the lifetime of Mullah Omar. At the same time, it should be noted that both of these guides more reflected the traditions of the Pashtun ethnic group and corresponded to the period of open struggle with the republican government.

At the same time, from the moment of his election in 2016 as the Supreme Leader of «Taliban», until he came to power in August 2021, Haibatullah Akhunzada issued

رهنمودهای امیرالمؤمنین حفظه الله برای مجاهدين. سال چاپ: ۱۴۳۸ ه. ق 3

decrees, orders and instructions on various issues of daily life of the Taliban, which, in many cases, echoed the above-mentioned guidance for mujahideen. Since coming the Taliban to power in 2021, significance of the Loyha and the Guide for the mujahideen have dropped a little, and now the new authority is engaged in the issues of state-building on the basis of Sharia and the decrees of the current leader of the Taliban Haibatullah Akhunzada.

Over the past two years, over hundred such documents have been issued. Among them are the " Order on Prohibition of Distribution of Lands to Individuals without the Permission of the Leadership " of 24 October, 2021, " Decree on Women's Rights " of 2 December, 2021, " Decree on Distinction of Ministries and Departments of Offices of Prime Minister's Deputies Based on the Nature of their Work " of 9 May, 2022, " Decree on Balancing Salaries of Military Forces " of 17 May, 2022, " Decree on Registration and Appointment of *Mujahedin* Security Organs" of 17 May, 2022, " Decree on Prohibition of Hashish Cultivation "4 of 18 March, 2023, and a number of others. This category of prescriptive documents continues to play a significant role in the information and ideological policy of the Taliban.

IPA leader G. Hekmatyar is also trying to contribute to the process of Islamization of the country, thus in his message on Eid al-Adha day (June 28, 2023) proposing to develop unified programs for secular schools and madrassas with the inclusion of additional religious disciplines. The same approach was announced by acting Prime Minister Kabir at a meeting with representatives of the Kabul madrassas on July 2, 2023.

Haibatullah Akhunzada himself enjoys the full religious, political and military power and seeks to reduce the scope of powers of the ministers of security forces, in particular Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Minister of Internal Affairs and Mohammad Yaqoob, the Minister of Defense. Apparently, this is due to his desire to weaken the positions of the most powerful representatives of the Taliban, who could claim for supreme authority. However, in Kandahar, where the residence of Haybatullah Akhunzada is located, a military unit has been established to ensure the security of the Supreme Leader.

جریده رسمی تاریخ نشر: (۲) ذوالقعدة الحرام سال ۱۴۴۴هـ.ق 4
(۱) جوزا سال ۱۴۰۲هـ.ش نمبر مسلسل (۱۴۳۲)

In addition, to strengthen his authority, Haibatullah Akhonzada appoints members of the interim government, provincial governors, and heads of provincial ulema councils from among his trusted and loyal people, mostly of the clergy. His office made extensive use of social media, particularly Twitter, to quickly inform the public. At the same time, the dogma of Islam is used as an ideological tool capable of maintaining unity in the movement itself and preventing possible pockets of instability and entrenching the Islamic form of governance in the country. Failure to comply with the Supreme Leader's decrees is considered a violation of Islam and the Shariah.

The heads of ministries and departments of the country try to adapt to the style of work of the Supreme Leader by issuing their own orders and recommendations. Thus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a circular note dated 9 July 2023, instructed its diplomatic missions abroad to ensure that the appearance of diplomats was in accordance with the Shariah norms and obligatory performance of prayers during working hours.

Representatives of the Supreme Leader of the Taliban have been appointed to all ministries without exception to monitor the activities of the country's state bodies. In all provinces of the country, the former ulama councils have been dissolved and created new ones, which are directly subordinate to Haibatullah Akhonzada. In almost all provinces, the operating madrassas have been turned into an ideological forge of personnel rigidly focused on conducting constant information work with the population. Imams of mosques are given instructions for conducting sermons aimed at strict observance of Sharia. Mosques, the number of which, according to estimates, is close to two hundred thousand, are a key element in the ideological component of state power. Mosques are the main mechanism of information and ideological work of the Taliban with the population of the country.

Sharia courts, which played an important role in bringing the population to their side during the confrontation with the republican government, are also an important part of the ideological system of the new interim government. At the same time, all Islamic institutions of the country are built into a single hierarchical structure, subordinate to a single centre in the person of the Taliban leader.

In spring 2022 was published the book intitled "The Islamic Emirate and its System" by Abdul Hakim Haqqani, the Supreme Judge of the Islamic Emirate of

Afghanistan. The book is a kind of Taliban manifesto, revealing the purpose of the Islamic Taliban movement, the role of the political institutions of the Islamic Emirate, the sources of Sharia, as well as the principles of politics. This book is the most significant source of the Taliban, which allows to judge the ideology of the Taliban and now is known mostly to the Taliban leadership and elite clergy of the country supporting the current government.

The clergy of Afghanistan, whose number significantly exceeds the number of the country's armed forces, despite the lack of homogeneity due to differences on ethnic and confessional grounds, as a whole remains the main ideological tool, and the rural population is the main social base of the Taliban. A significant part of the clergy supporting the Taliban and being the bearer of the basic values of the Taliban is skilfully used to inculcate the ideology of the Taliban throughout the country.

It should be noted that the norms and values inculcated by the Taliban are shared by a significant part of the clergy and the population, which means that the social base of the current government is much broader compared to the republican government in Afghanistan had in 2002-2021. Having squeezed out of the country almost all the political parties that officially operated in Afghanistan until August 2021, the Taliban essentially completed the fight against the carriers of the former "anti-Islamic" ideology.

In general, the current process of state-building based on strengthening the role of Islam and Islamic institutions has outlined the framework of society and individual life, which to some extent resemble the system of power created in Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 and partly the system of power of the Persian Gulf monarchies. The very activity of the current authorities to build an Islamic state is still sporadic and is generally based on the decrees of the Supreme Leader. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that the authorities will make efforts to create a new Constitution that will give legitimacy to their domestic and foreign policy. So far, this construction process has not met with strong resistance, as it still enjoys support of a significant part of the clergy - the most conservative stratum of Afghan society, as well as a significant part of the Pashtun ethnic group, which regained its former dominant position with the coming to power of the Taliban. However, further development of the situation in Afghanistan in the medium term remains largely unpredictable for a number of reasons that require separate consideration.

Possible impact of the situation in Afghanistan on Central Asia

Islam remains a magnet for believers in Central Asia, where the role and influence of Islam has increased significantly over the years of independence. Various Islamic organizations and movements have appeared and are operating, brought from outside and alien to traditional forms of Islam in the republics of Central Asia.

Today, according to various estimates, there are more than a dozen and a half different Islamic movements and organizations operating in Central Asian countries, most of which are banned. Those organizations included Tablighi Jamaat, Hezb-ut Tahrir, as well as Salafia, Takfirizm and others. The closest to the Taliban in its ideological platform is Tablighi Jamaat. Many preachers of this organization, which is banned in all Central Asian countries except Kyrgyzstan, are graduates of the Deoband Islamic educational system of Pakistan.

However, the presence of these organizations and trends in the region does not mean that this will contribute to the rapid expansion of the influence of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the region. On the contrary, attempts to expand it may encounter opposition from these organizations and movements that already have their niches in the republics of Central Asia. Moreover, this influence will be limited due to very limited financial opportunities, unlike those organizations and movements already operating since the 1990s that reflect the geopolitical interests of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Pakistan and other leading countries of the Muslim world.

Indeed, the rise to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the creation of second theocratic state on the borders of the region was a new factor affecting the religious situation in Central Asia. However, the degree of influence on the mindset of believers requires a balanced consideration in the country context. Thus, the visits of the Taliban delegations to the republics of Central Asia showed a different degree of perception of the Taliban representatives and the current situation in Afghanistan in general by believers. A warmer reception and interest in representatives of the Taliban during visits to mosques was manifested in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where historically the religion of Islam has played an important role.

Less interest in the Taliban was shown in the rest of the Central Asian republics. According to some experts, the attractive side of the Taliban for the believers of the Central Asian republics was the fact of the success of the creation of the Islamic state.

However, the majority of believers could not answer the question of what is Islamic state and how it differs from a secular one. Moreover, most of these believers did not have objective information about the methods of establishing new Islamic orders, about the existing interethnic and confessional problems in the neighbouring country.

Nevertheless, the most favourable area of possible influence of events in Afghanistan may be the Fergana Valley, where Islam has played and plays an important role, and today the valley is a part of three Central Asian republics - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The first Islamist movements and organizations appeared here in the early 1990s. Most foreign experts believe that Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the centre of radicalism and extremism in Central Asia. Now banned the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), whose goal was to create an Islamic state, tried to expand their activities in these republics. The shattered remnants of the IMU and the former IRPT still continue to cooperate with terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and maintain relations with the Taliban.

According to some experts, Tashkent's new non-forceful approaches to persons who have joined radical Islamist organizations, while maintaining and using forceful methods, if necessary, make it possible to narrow the activities of radical movements and maintain stable control over the religious situation in the country with active support of traditional Islamic institutions. The noticeable economic growth of the republic, which began in 2017, a certain increase in the standard of living of the population and the success of the reform of the education system also contribute to eliminating the causes that lead believers into the bosom of radical ideologies.

The situation in Tajikistan is somewhat different from the situation in other Central Asian republics. The population of this republic still remembers the echoes of the civil war, in which the supporters of the IRPT took an active part. At the initial stage of its activity, this party advocated the creation of an Islamic state in Tajikistan. Subsequently, as a result of the agreements reached with the government, the IRPT received one third of seats in state authorities. However, later for a number of reasons, this party was banned and deprived of representation in the country's government system. Nevertheless, according to some experts, there are still IRPT sympathizers in the republic and underground madrassas are functioning. Tajik authorities are more

often trying to *control the situation* in the *religious* sphere through restrictions and prohibitions, widely using the *power* structures, but this does not mean a solution to the problem. Along with this, the Government seeks to inform the population about the infringement of the rights of Tajiks in Afghanistan, which also reduces the attractiveness of Taliban's Afghanistan. When it comes to the use of force to solve the problem, it should be noted that in some cases they have the opposite effect and contribute to the growing popularity of the Islamic form of governance and the advocates of this path of development see as justice.

Islam is not as deeply rooted in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, where the population moved to a sedentary lifestyle relatively later than in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Today in these republics, it seems that tribal relations, which were "reanimated" during the period of independence, have begun to play a significant role in socio-political life, temporarily pushing the issues of religious identity and manifestations of Islamism into the background.

In particular, seven regions of Kyrgyzstan have their own tribal isolation and non-traditional Islamic movements have already been entrenched in these regions since 1990s. In this regard, potential preachers of the Afghan versions of development are likely to experience resistance from Islamic organizations and movements that had previously established themselves in these regions. Nevertheless, the developments of recent years in the southern and western regions of Kazakhstan and part of the Ferghana Valley of Kyrgyzstan indicate about relative stability in certain regions of these republics, which opens up opportunities for the activation of various radical ideas and views.

The current situation in Turkmenistan seems much more prosaic. The authorities seek to fully control the religious situation, therefore the "attractiveness" of the Islamic form of governance in Afghanistan can hardly find fertile ground in this republic. However, even in this republic, only forceful methods, along with certain unresolved socio-economic problems, can contribute to the growth of the popularity of the Islamic form of government and the expansion of the social base of protest.

Conclusion

In general, speaking about the degree of influence of current events in Afghanistan on the republics of Central Asia, it should be noted that the second Taliban

takeover served as an "inspiring" impulse for radical and extremist elements in Central Asia and was perceived as a victory over the "infidels".

However, nowadays the principles of justice, the fight against corruption, and the advantages of the Islamic form of government based on Sharia, which are often perceived by certain groups of believers in the republics of Central Asia as the most correct approaches to the development of Muslim states, may pose a greater danger.

Given the weakness of high-quality coverage of today's events in the neighbouring country, and in some republics - its actual absence, the current situation in Afghanistan poses a certain latent challenge for the secular states of the region.

ASSESSMENT OF THE TALIBAN'S ABILITY TO ECONOMICALLY STABILIZE AFGHANISTAN AND THE INTERESTS OF UZBEKISTAN

Hamza Boltaev, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Contrary to the very dim and pessimistic assumptions about the Afghanistan's dire economic conditions eventually getting even worse during the Taliban rule, so far appears to be a hasty and premature assessment. Nonetheless, the Taliban's ability to stay in power so far by utilising any available tools to prevent full scale economic collapse cannot by any means be regarded as a viable transformation to solid socioeconomic reforms. Thus, this paper will analyse the economy of the country as well as its relationship with Uzbekistan with a greater emphasis on the security and long-term export interests of it to the Taliban run Afghanistan.

After the withdrawal of the allied forces led by the US and the subsequent Taliban takeover of the entire country in late August 2021, the Afghan economy which had traditionally been sustained by foreign aid has been experiencing enormous disruptions fuelled in part by the country's freezing foreign exchange reserves amounting some \$9 billion⁵.

During the last 10 months of 2023, there has been a slight economic underperformance in Afghanistan compared to the last year which was the continuation of the overall economic decline. According to the World Bank's data⁶, the export of the country faced a slight decline by 0.5 percent, while merchandise import saw a higher growth rate relative to the same period in 2022 showing a clear trade deficit. The trade imbalance, in the favour of imports, indicating an unhealthy economy is nevertheless the sign of an increasing demand in the economy which could partly be caused by the

⁵ *Two years into Taliban rule, new shocks weaken Afghan economy.* (2023, August 10). United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-taliban-rule-new-shocks-weaken-afghan-economy>

⁶ *World Bank.* (2023, October 30). Afghanistan Economic Monitor. Retrieved from [<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/2ab75317f6e86c9bb6fcf342f72e0b64-0310012023/original/Afghanistan-Economic-Monitor-31-October-2023.pdf>]

international humanitarian assistance, \$40 million per week in average, resumed in December 2021⁷.

In addition to this, the Taliban government's some strict economic measures including the restrictions against capital flight, smuggled imports, tax collection, and tough macroeconomic measures, in many ways, slowed down the economic free-fall. However, the wider prohibitions of women's economic participations such as barring girls' secondary schools, restricting female aid staff working with foreign organisations, banning women working at many other public places including bathhouses, parks and gyms⁸ also contributed to the overall economic downturn.

The Taliban government appeared to take some practical steps which helped to minimise the consequences of the economic difficulties in Afghanistan. These relatively successful practical measures appeared to be a result of the Taliban government's domestic and foreign policy choices.

Domestic achievements

The start of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan and the country's economic malaise came in parallel with devastating natural disasters such as an earthquake in Spring 2022, a drought in the Summer of 2022 and the winter anomalies of the late 2022 and early 2023, following the Covid-19 pandemic. As mentioned earlier, the Taliban's practicality was clearly observed in tackling several internal issues which eventually had some stabilising effects on the economy.

First, by fighting corruption. As per the Transparency International's latest annual corruption perception index, Taliban run Afghanistan was ranked as 150⁹ out of 180 countries who participated in this index. This is a seemingly enormous accomplishment for a country as isolated as Afghanistan, particularly considering it had been among top 10 most corrupt governments¹⁰ for decades. Although, this ranking remains significant in many ways, it cannot for sure demonstrate "an improvement of the situation on the

⁷ *Cash shipments to the UN in Afghanistan – info sheet.* (2023, January 9). UNAMA. <https://unama.unmissions.org/cash-shipments-un-afghanistan---info-sheet>

⁸ Glinski, S. (2022, January 7). Taliban stop Afghan women from using bathhouses in northern provinces. *The Guardian.* <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/07/taliban-stop-afghan-women-using-bathhouses-in-northern-provinces>

⁹ *Afghanistan.* (2019, November 1). Transparency.Org. <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/afghanistan>

¹⁰ Dawi, A. (2023, January 31). Can the Taliban tackle corruption in Afghanistan? *Voice of America (VOA News).* <https://www.voanews.com/a/can-the-taliban-tackle-corruption-in-afghanistan-/6942205.html>

ground”. Regardless, the crackdown on bribery and smuggling in custom services along with efforts to eradicate illegal road checkpoints¹¹ appear to be major steps that can be identified as a solid improvement the Taliban could be credit for. The Taliban government’s efforts on successfully eliminating the well-established bribery systems at official border control points (BCP) putting an end the annual bribery on some undeclared products as much as US \$767 million each year.

Second, tax collection. According to Afghanistan Economic Monitor, World Bank’s monthly report on Afghanistan, the Taliban’s revenue collection in the first 7 months of 2023 was 5 percent below the target though it was marginally higher than the previous year by 1.2 percent (in the last ten months of 2022, some \$1.7 billion were said to be collected by Taliban). Moreover, the border taxes being one of the major contributors to the revenue has also been risen almost unnoticeably by 1.3 percent due to the periodic closure of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border crossing point. This minor increase in 2023 is the continuation of the overall upward trend in tax collection that started after the Taliban came to the power in 2021.

Note: It's widely believed though that the Taliban's relative success in generating revenue through various taxations came by a large portion thanks to the movement's huge experience acquired in fighting against the former Afghan government and US-led allied forces. It is also important to understand that the years-long experience and the knowledge of the Taliban on functioning of the low-key governance in different local levels gave the movement certain edge for its future marginal success.

Third, preventing the capital flight. In addition to some strict measures involving the regulation of the popular informal money transfer system called *hawala* which is believed to be a principal cause of capital flight from the country. The interim Taliban government has managed to prevent currency depreciation and has kept the Afghani relatively stable against foreign currencies. For this purpose, the government injected¹² some \$14 million in July 2023 through several currency auctions.

Fourth, fighting smuggled imports as being one of the crucial pillars of the current Afghan economy which is operating in a survival mode gave the Taliban a solid leverage

¹¹ Changing the Rules of the Game: How the Taliban Regulated Cross-Border Trade and Upended Afghanistan’s Political Economy (n.d.) CEPT
https://www.alcis.org/_files/ugd/a5fe58_da37c295a84041ef97c2acb24e5bd7e0.pdf

¹² *Afghan central bank to auction 13 mln USD to keep afghani stable.* (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2024, from <https://english.news.cn/20230805/e14ae16e19ea41129f7fb3b40f92e550/c.html>

in dealing with this issue in an unusual way. The Taliban's historical experience its knowledge about every corner of the country while it was in a fierce armed conflict with the former government and its supporters played an important role in both eliminating the smuggled import and taking advantage of these illegal channels of income where the foreign support came into Afghanistan through smuggling. For effectively eliminating smuggling, the Taliban on the one hand, strengthened the execution of the regulations at the BCPs that are already existed in addition to some increase in duties and royalties for the extraction and trading minerals on the other hand, the Taliban did manage setting taxes at a relatively good rate that businesses could afford.

Fifth, the Taliban government's infrastructure projects were also no less an important factor in somehow balancing internal economic situation, considering these projects significant role in employment issues even though these are insignificant in entire economy of the country. Only the Qush-Tepa canal project itself accommodated roughly 5500 workers¹³ at various locations.

International Achievements

Overall, the economic measures the Taliban government have taken so far are most likely focused on strengthening and securing its governance rather than improving the lives of ordinary Afghan people. International aid, however, is mostly directed to a wider community. Seemingly this is how most of the anticipated famine and humanitarian catastrophe has been prevented despite poverty affecting one in every two Afghans according to the Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey.

In addition to some sporadic, domestically oriented economic measures which helped the interim Taliban government to continue operating even though the overall environment was not responsive. The interim Taliban government's foreign policy strategies such as having special and pragmatic cooperation with neighbouring countries including China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and other Central Asian countries has helped the regime to continue operating despite several aforementioned hurdles.

China has been one of the vocal supporters of the interim Taliban government in the name of pragmatism since the dramatic change of power in August 2021. Amongst

¹³ *Afghanistan is building an enormous canal to draw water from Amudarya River. This may affect water availability situation in Central Asia.* News Central Asia (nCa). (2023, February 20). <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/02/20/afghanistan-is-building-an-enormous-canal-to-draw-water-from-amudarya-river-this-may-affect-water-availability-situation-in-central-asia/>

the security risks resonating from Afghanistan along with its geographic location being an important corridor for China westward, Beijing has a big economic interest in Afghanistan given its mineral-rich mining industry and other important natural resources. In early 2023, Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC) signed a contract with the Taliban government and agreed to invest \$540 million¹⁴ until 2026 for oil and gas search in Afghanistan's Amu Darya river basin. Furthermore, in Summer 2023, there has been a rumoured proposal from the Chinese company Gochin¹⁵ to invest \$10 billion for building "lithium ore processing plant and battery factories" in the country. China is clearly ready to be an active player economically despite the presence of the security risks coupled with the Taliban government's arguably vague future (no official recognition and no formal interactions) holding China back to be deeply engaged with the Taliban at least for now. Trade between two nations has also been strong since the beginning of 2023. Speaking of trade, it is important to note that China is among the top trading partners of Afghanistan with 18 percent of import in 2023 coming respectively from China and Pakistan followed by the United Arab Emirates with 14 percent.

Iran however was the number one trading partner of Afghanistan in terms of importing into Afghanistan. As for export, Pakistan has been the largest export market for Afghan goods comprising 55 percent of total export in 2023 with India coming second with a total 29 percent. Although there was a relatively intense economic cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the relations between the two significantly worsened over the second half of 2023. During this period, the export to Pakistan dropped by 15 percent. Moreover, the entire trade turnover among these two countries faced a 43 percent¹⁶ annual decline. This itself signifies the deteriorating relations with Pakistan during the Taliban reign, the reason for this can be explained by

¹⁴ Siddique, A. (2023, September 23). Taliban hyping huge mining deals, but afghanistan still far from cashing in. *RFE/RL*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-mining-deals-taliban-poverty-mineral-wealth/32605965.html>

¹⁵ Shih, G. (2023, July 20). Trove of EV metals in Afghanistan may boost Taliban and Chinese partners. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/ev-lithium-afghanistan-taliban-china/>

¹⁶ Rahmati, F. (2023, October 13). *Bilateral trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan witnesses a sharp decline*. Khaama Press. <https://www.khaama.com/bilateral-trade-between-afghanistan-and-pakistan-witnesses-a-sharp-decline/>

increasing border conflicts, rising geopolitical tensions, and economic difficulties that both countries are facing.

Uzbekistan Afghanistan Economic Relations

Uzbekistan remained one of the main trading partners of Afghanistan of the five Central Asian countries even though the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan has put the already tenuous relations between the two to a difficult test. The economic relations between them have progressively increased over the period of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan despite the absence of the official ties between two neighbours. Nevertheless, pragmatism has been a prevailing characteristic of the Uzbek-Afghan economic and diplomatic relations. Afghanistan is therefore a significantly important market for Uzbek export goods. In 2022, Uzbekistan exported more than \$750 million¹⁷ worth of goods to Afghanistan. Whereas, the import was substantially less than the export to Afghanistan with \$9.3 million in the same year, illustrating a huge trade imbalance between these countries. Uzbekistan also sees Afghanistan's geolocation as a potential trade route with the much sought after railroad project called Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Qobul-Peshowar which was kickstarted¹⁸ in March 2022, soon after Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan agreed upon to a roadmap for the construction of this project on February 2, 2022, in Tashkent.

Tashkent seems to be increasingly concerned about the huge trade imbalance with Afghanistan as it imports far less than it exports to Afghanistan. Thus, Uzbekistan is gradually drifting away from its traditional, more cautious approach to Afghanistan and is instead centring its relations with Afghanistan around its proactive trade policy – doing more trade as well as increasing import from its southern neighbour. For this reason, the Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Jamshid Khodjaev's visit to Afghanistan in late October and presenting an action plan for increasing the importation of goods from Afghanistan up to \$3 billion annually¹⁹ marks the importance of trade for Uzbekistan.

¹⁷ National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan. (2022). Export of goods and services of the Republic of Uzbekistan by country 2022.

¹⁸ Khan, I. (2022, March 27). Work on \$5bn Pak-Afghan-Uzbek railroad kicks off. *The News International*. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/944859-work-on-5bn-pak-afghan-uzbek-railroad-kicks-off>

¹⁹ Putz, C. (2023, November 2). Trade and transit top agenda as Uzbek delegation visits Afghanistan. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/trade-and-transit-top-agenda-as-uzbek-delegation-visits-afghanistan/>

Qush-Tepa Dilemma

The project seems to be a plan for the Taliban to potentially address multiple issues that the Taliban government is facing both at home and abroad. In addition to the canal project's potential in developing agriculture and the northern regions, the project could, at least in the Taliban's thinking, be a tool for the well addressing the foreign policy questions regarding gaining recognition first in the region and attaching itself even greater to its northern neighbours especially to Uzbekistan through greater engagement with it both economically and [pragmatically] politically. So far, we have seen the realisation of the latter as Uzbekistan, in its official stance, welcomed deepened engagement with Afghanistan in the construction of the Qush-Tepa canal and minimising its possible economic consequences to Uzbekistan. In 2023, there were several meetings²⁰ between Uzbek and Afghan officials specifically discussing Qush-Tepa issue both in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, the last of which held in mid-October 2023, in Kabul.

Apart from posing deeper economic challenges coupled with the environmental ones, the canal project could push the Uzbek government towards taking political risks through having even deeper cooperation with the Taliban authority. Tashkent has obviously chosen the path of cooperation on addressing the Qush-Tepa issue which accommodates Afghanistan's right to using the transboundary waters, whereas it requires some sort of political recognition for reaching an official agreement. This in turn might put some strains on Uzbekistan's relations with those nations, especially western countries who are reluctant to recognise the Taliban regime. Without having an official tie though, it is almost impossible to enforce any legal responsibilities in using transboundary water resources.

Conclusion

The overall economic situation in Afghanistan can be characterised as the epitome of the Taliban government's temporary measures such as tax collection, fighting corruption, preventing capital flight coupled with several practical moves involving constructions and mining industry. On the international arena, Kabul left the door open

²⁰ mfa.uz. *Делегация Узбекистана посетила Афганистан*. Mfa.Uz. Retrieved February 26, 2024, from <https://mfa.uz/ru/press/news/2023/delegaciya-uzbekistana-posetila-afganistan---33677>

for both economic relations with its neighbours and distant powers. Moreover, international aid as well as humanitarian assistance was in part crucial for preventing possible large-scale famine in the country, and therefore supporting the economy. Therefore, the Taliban's economic future will possibly depend upon how successfully it can utilise those various possibilities in harmony.

Speaking of the Taliban-Uzbekistan relations, it is important to note that Uzbekistan has reimagined its affairs with the Taliban-run Afghanistan. And the Uzbek government seems to be inclined towards having more deeper economic cooperation with Afghanistan since it came to the realisation that the core issue – Qush-Tepa project – appears to be solved through intensive economic collaboration for several years to come with focusing more on growing imports from Afghanistan. However, this approach could also lead to some unexpected outcomes involving the dilemma which requires recognising the Taliban legitimacy in Afghanistan.

QUSH-TEPA CANAL CONSTRUCTION - WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR CENTRAL ASIA?

Iskandar Abdullaev, Senior Associate Research Fellow (IAIS)²¹

Shakhboz Akhmedov, Director, Centre for Sustainable Development (IAIS)²²

Introduction

Central Asia, historically characterized as a water "hot spot" due to its geographical positioning, arid climate, and dynamic population shifts, has long grappled with water-related complexities, particularly in the aftermath of its post-Soviet transformations. The dissolution of the unified economic system in 1991 prompted newly independent states to establish individual national water management frameworks, significantly altering joint planning, allocation, and management of water resources. In response, the five newly formed Central Asian countries established the Interstate Coordination Water Commission (ICWC) in 1992 to oversee regional water management, initially adhering to Soviet-era water allocation principles. However, dissatisfaction with these arrangements led to a hydro-political deadlock driven by divergent economic pressures and development strategies among Central Asian countries.

In the mid-1990s, upstream nations prioritized reservoir operations for energy production, causing tensions with downstream irrigation demands. Attempts to reconcile these disparities culminated in the Syr Darya agreement, which was effective only between 1999 and 2001, ultimately contributing to a protracted hydro-political deadlock and elevating water into a sensitive and securitized domain.

Presently, the state of Central Asia's water systems remains uncertain, marked by ongoing transformations in regional and national water governance structures. The escalating impact of climate change exacerbates existing challenges, with droughts and water scarcity affecting both upstream energy generation and downstream agricultural irrigation. Additionally, inefficient water utilization, limited availability, and potential

²¹ Visiting Professor, SDG^{nexus} Network, Centre for International Development and Environmental Research (ZEU), Justus Liebig University Giessen, E-mail: iabdullaev68@gmail.com

²² Director of the Centre for Sustainable Development, Institute for Advanced International Studies, University of World Economy and Diplomacy Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Email: shakhboz.akhmedov@iais.uz

adverse climate effects further compound the region's uncertain trajectory, intensifying competition for water resources across all sectors. Amidst these complexities, the recent introduction of the Taliban's Qush-Tepa canal introduces another layer of complexity, heightening tensions and stakes in the region.

Qush-Tepa Canal in numbers

In the wake of the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan in August 2021, a significant infrastructure project was initiated with the start of Qush-Tepa canal construction in March 2022. This canal represents a crucial developmental effort by the Taliban administration, aimed at showcasing its ability to stimulate economic growth within the nation. With a workforce of 5,500 individuals and supported by 3,300 units of technical machinery, the project is operating continuously to advance its construction objectives.²³

Originally conceptualized in the 1970s, the Qush-Tepa irrigation canal underwent further examination by USAID in 2018. Spanning approximately 285 kilometers in length, 100 meters in width, and with a depth ranging from 6.5 to 8.5 meters, boasting a maximum discharge capacity of 650 cubic meters per second (m³/s), its primary objective is to facilitate irrigation across an estimated 550,000 hectares of land in northern Afghanistan.²⁴ Positioned at the primary Amudarya river in Kunduz Province, the canal will annually draw over 10 billion cubic meters of water from the Amudarya upon its completion.²⁵ Furthermore, plans include the construction of three reservoirs for water storage and hydroelectric power generation, anticipated to have a capacity to store up to 9 cubic kilometers (km³) of water. The construction costs for the Taliban are estimated to be around \$700 million.²⁶

Potential Impacts on Central Asia

While the canal holds promise for improving domestic economic conditions, its potential ramifications on neighbouring countries could be adverse. The Qush-Tepa

²³ The Economist. 2023. The Taliban are digging an enormous canal.

<https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/02/16/the-taliban-are-digging-an-enormous-canal>

²⁴ Gafurov et al. Impacts of Qush Tepa Canal on the Agriculture Sector in Uzbekistan, June 2023, Policy Study Uzbekistan, German Economic Team (<https://www.german-economic-team.com/uzbekistan>)

²⁵ Water, Peace and Security (WPS) Partnership. 2023. Navigating Water (In)security in Taliban's Afghanistan. Insights into Local, National, and Regional Water Security Challenges. Report. <https://waterpeacesecurity.org/files/380>

²⁶ Gafurov et al. Impacts of Qush Tepa Canal on the Agriculture Sector in Uzbekistan, June 2023, Policy Study Uzbekistan, German Economic Team (<https://www.german-economic-team.com/uzbekistan>)

canal, upon its completion, is projected to utilize a maximum of 13 km³ of water sourced from the Amudarya river.²⁷ Of notable concern is that over 80% of this water abstraction is anticipated to coincide with the regional planting season, exacerbating the strain on the already limited water resources of the Amu Darya River. Moreover, the implementation of this canal would result in a threefold increase in Afghanistan's utilization of the Amu Darya River's water, which currently stands at 5 km³. It's important to recognize that the Amu Darya River basin contributes approximately half of Afghanistan's renewable water resources. However, the country's susceptibility to the impacts of recurrent droughts and floods is heightened due to inadequate infrastructure and water storage capacity.

The water resources of the Amu Darya River, already under significant strain due to the impacts of climate change and glacier melt, face the prospect of further deterioration without effective coordination. Afghanistan's heightened utilization of shared water resources carries significant implications for neighbouring riparian nations, notably downstream Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. These countries heavily depend on over 80% of the basin's total renewable water resources, primarily for agricultural purposes.²⁸ Addressing this challenge would require several years and substantial financial investments from both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to reduce their water consumption, either through improving irrigation efficiency or scaling back irrigation activities. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that such measures could also potentially result in the displacement of population in these countries causing negative social and societal spillovers.

Furthermore, the conditions within the Aral Sea are poised to undergo further deterioration with a subsequent reduction in water volume, which could potentially negate ongoing initiatives aimed at mitigating ecological issues. The Aral Sea, once recognized as the fourth largest inland sea globally, has experienced a dramatic

²⁷ Feasibility Study Main Report (Volume I). Khush Tepa Irrigation Scheme and Power Generation (KTISPG) Feasibility Study Project. AACS Consulting in association with Bets Consulting, Kabul, Afghanistan, December 23, 2019

²⁸ Umirbekov, A., Akhmetov, A., & Gafurov, Z. (2022). Water–agriculture–energy nexus in Central Asia through the lens of climate change. Research project report. Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation Institute. <https://www.carecinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Report-onWater%E2%80%93agriculture%E2%80%93energy-nexus-in-Central-Asia-through-the-lens-of-climatechange.pdf>

reduction in size due to regional water competition and outdated water allocation practices inherited from the Soviet era.

In addition, Central Asia is undergoing accelerated temperature rises, exceeding the global average.²⁹ While the average annual temperature in Central Asia has risen by 0.5 degrees Celsius over the last three decades, it is further poised to increase by 2.0 to 5.7 degrees Celsius by 2085.³⁰ Increasing temperatures lead to higher evaporation rates, thereby reducing the amount of water in rivers, lakes, and reservoirs. This trend will exacerbate water stress, hasten glacier melting, resulting in short-term water surges, and significantly reduce glacier runoff in the long term. Decreased water availability coupled with more frequent heatwaves will adversely impact crop productivity and food security.

The current water allocation framework for the Amu Darya River, established under the 1992 Almaty Agreement, must consider Afghanistan's potential future water requirements. The construction of the Qush-Tepa canal challenges existing usage patterns and regional water-sharing protocols. Without collaboration with Afghanistan, the repercussions on downstream communities, especially those reliant on irrigation systems and the environment, could worsen. The lack of clarity regarding upstream planning hampers the ability to prepare for anticipated fluctuations in water flow. Climate-related uncertainties will only exacerbate these challenges, affecting the fragile regional water allocation systems across other riparian nations within the broader Aral Sea Basin.

Agricultural water consumption exceeds 90% in both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The Qush-Tepa canal is primarily intended for irrigation, with a projected peak water abstraction of around 10 km³ between May and August, aligning with the regional cropping season. This heightened demand places additional strain on available water resources, particularly affecting regions at the end of irrigation systems and those cultivating less water-intensive, complicating the shift to alternative crops.

As per the SIC ICWC, during dry years, riparian countries within the Amu Darya River basin receive only half of their water requirements. Over the past few decades,

²⁹ CAREC Institute 2020. Climate Vulnerability, Infrastructure, Finance and Governance in CAREC Region. Research Report. Urumqi, 2020

³⁰ SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) 2018. Central Asia – Climate Related Security Risk Assessment. Expert Working Group Report. Stockholm, 2018.

approximately 150-200 thousand hectares of irrigated lands in the lower Amu Darya basin have been abandoned due to irregular irrigation practices.³¹ Additionally, an estimated 400,000 individuals have migrated from northern Uzbekistan to central areas of the country or Kazakhstan, primarily due to environmental degradation and water scarcity concerns. Regions heavily reliant on the Amu Darya River's flow, such as Karakalpakstan, Khorezm, and Bukhara provinces in Uzbekistan, will face the most significant impacts.³² Reduced water availability will also affect agricultural lands in Kashkadarya (75-85%) and Surkhandarya (55-65%), leading to soil degradation in arable areas and pastures. Furthermore, a 35% decline in the Amu Darya River's flow could result in a GDP reduction of 0.7 to 6 percent and the loss of 250,000 jobs in Uzbekistan.³³

In Turkmenistan, the most of irrigated areas rely on water resources from the Amu Darya River. The country diverts more than 30% of the Amu Darya flow through the Karakum Canal, crucial for irrigated agriculture in regions like Lebap and Dashoguz. A reduction in river flow would likely impact rural populations and the irrigated agriculture sector, particularly the state-owned cotton industry. Despite facing water shortages, Turkmenistan has heavily invested in desert greening projects through massive irrigation infrastructure such as the Karakum Canal and the Golden Age Lake³⁴.

Salinity affects agriculture productivity and entails health and economic impacts on the populations. Water salinity is already high in the Amu Darya region, with over 50% of the irrigated lands affected by soil salinity in Uzbekistan³⁵. This number is even higher in Turkmenistan³⁶. According to a study by the World Bank, 10-15% of the total water used for agriculture in Uzbekistan is used for salt leaching³⁷.

³¹ <http://www.cawater-info.net/amudarya>

³² Gafurov et al. Impacts of Qush-Tepa Canal on the Agriculture Sector in Uzbekistan, June 2023, Policy Study Uzbekistan, German Economic Team (<https://www.german-economic-team.com/uzbekistan>)

³³ ibid

³⁴ Collado E. R, Water War in Central Asia: The Water Dilemma of Turkmenistan, 2015, Geopolitical Monitor ([Water War in Central Asia: the Water Dilemma of Turkmenistan | Geopolitical Monitor](#))

³⁵ Hamidov, A et al. Operationalizing water-energy-food nexus research for sustainable development in social-ecological systems: An interdisciplinary learning case in Central Asia. *Ecol. Soc.* 2022 (<https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12891-270112>)

³⁶ UNECE, Environmental Performance Review of Turkmenistan reveals soil salinity, waterlogging, land degradation and biodiversity losses are top environmental challenges for the country, 2012, (<https://unece.org/press/environmental-performance-review-turkmenistan-reveals-soil-salinity-waterlogging-land>)

³⁷ Akramkhanov A., Akbarov A., Umarova S., QB Le 2021. Agricultural Livelihood Types and Type-Specific Drivers of Crop Production Diversification: Evidence from Aral Sea Basin Region. Sustainability 15 (1), 65

The anticipated reduction in water quantity due to Qush-Tepa canal's water extraction is likely to worsen water quality degradation in the basin. Agricultural drainage and return water along the canal's right side, where most irrigation is planned, could lead to further water quality deterioration downstream. Additionally, the sandy soil composition along the canal may give rise to new environmental challenges such as reduced water delivery efficiency, waterlogging, increased salinity, and deterioration of groundwater quality (including arsenic, fluoride, and other heavy metals) in the Amu Darya River basin.

According to the World Bank, one-third of the population in Central Asia, totalling 22 million, already lacks access to safe water³⁸. Around one-third of Uzbekistan's population (rural and urban) lives in areas dependent on irrigation water supply from the Amu Darya River. Furthermore, 47% of Turkmenistan's population is employed in the agriculture sector. Presently, 7.8 million individuals reside in districts of Uzbekistan that could be affected by Qush-Tepa canal water withdrawals, with populations in these regions expected to increase to 8.7 million by 2030 based on current population growth rates.

A report from the German Economic Team suggests that Uzbekistan could potentially lose 250,000 jobs if Qush-Tepa canal withdraws 25% of water intake.³⁹ The most vulnerable populations reside in regions heavily reliant on the Amu Darya's water flow, such as Khorezm and Karakalpakstan. These areas, already experiencing significant out-migration, may face heightened risks and migration pressures due to increased water stress. Vulnerable groups, including female-headed households, are particularly affected, facing elevated risks of productivity losses due to drought, decreased agricultural yields, limited access to clean water, and reduced coping mechanisms.

The adverse effects on women, especially in rural agricultural areas, which are already economically marginalized, will be further exacerbated in the affected regions. Informal and seasonal agricultural work, such as cotton harvesting, offers limited

³⁸ Jennifer J. et al. Central Asia: at the confluence of global water action and climate resilience Dushanbe conference to emphasize role of water in sustainable development, 2022, The World Bank Water Blog ([Central Asia: at the confluence of global water action and climate resilience Dushanbe conference to emphasize role of water in sustainable development \(worldbank.org\)](https://www.worldbank.org/central-asia-at-the-confluence-of-global-water-action-and-climate-resilience-dushanbe-conference-to-emphasize-role-of-water-in-sustainable-development))

³⁹ Gafurov et al. Impacts of Qush-Tepa Canal on the Agriculture Sector in Uzbekistan, June 2023, Policy Study Uzbekistan, German Economic Team (<https://www.german-economic-team.com/uzbekistan>)

opportunities for women to generate cash income, despite challenges related to poor working conditions and inadequate payment for their labour.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

In conclusion, Afghanistan's pursuit of water resource development as an upstream, latecomer country presents a complex dynamic within the regional context. The existing premature water-sharing agreements constrain Afghanistan's future utilization of shared rivers, given its limited water resources. Nevertheless, the Afghan government's investment in independent river development aims to garner public support and bolster its population base, driven by years of deprivation, transit route closures, and mistreatment of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries.

The challenges of water availability in the Amu Darya basin are exacerbated by excessive water withdrawal and competition, with climate change projections further complicating the situation. The impending construction of the Qush-Tepa canal will exacerbate these pressures, highlighting the inadequacy of existing regional platforms to address these challenges effectively. However, these shared challenges also present opportunities for collaboration and mutual benefit, providing a foundation for identifying common opportunities.

The repercussions of water withdrawal from the Amu Darya will extend to Central Asian countries, particularly Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, impacting riverbank stability and necessitating additional costs for water pumping to irrigation canals. Moreover, Afghanistan's lack of high productivity and technological agriculture further complicates efforts to improve the water situation.

Addressing these challenges requires a **multi-track approach** to establish sustainable water relations between Central Asia and Afghanistan. **The first track** involves enhancing agricultural cooperation, promoting responsible water use, and supporting productivity in existing irrigated areas. It is crucial to offer extension support and advocate for enhancing productivity in existing irrigated areas, while also discouraging the expansion of new, low-productivity lands under irrigation. Additionally, efforts should be made to improve water access for established irrigated sites.

The second track focuses on enhancing trade, energy supply, and capacity building in Afghanistan's technical and agricultural sectors. Additionally, joint research

on water improvements and climate-resilient water management in Afghanistan is essential.

The third track emphasizes the development of a political-diplomatic platform for crafting regional or bilateral water agreements. Initiatives such as the UNRCC, Green Central Asia, and Blue Peace could facilitate dialogue between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, with the International Fund for Aral Sea serving as an institutional framework for inclusive water cooperation activities.

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QUSH-TEPA CANAL - TALIBAN'S BARGAINING CHIP?

Hamza Boltaev, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Introduction

In Jawzjan province of Afghanistan's north-east, an enormous canal [Qush-Tepa Canal] is in a full speed taking a shape. The canal, named after Qush-Tepa district in Jawzjan province, draws water from the Amu Darya River⁴⁰. So far, since the beginning of the construction in March 2022, about 100 km⁴¹ of the canal has been completed. Also, the second phase of this grandiose project has recently been kicked off according to the recent announcement of the Taliban officials⁴². Albeit the project has been around for quite some time, since it was initially put forward by the Ashraf Ghani's government back in 2018⁴³, it had never received as such a huge impetus as the Taliban's government is giving it today.

Drawbacks

Currently, the Taliban government is speeding up the process of digging the canal, despite having a dire economic situation due to the heavily imposed sanctions coupled with a struggle to get an international recognition partially for its controversial ban on women education along with increasing terrorist threat. Despite all these concerns, the Taliban government's enthusiasm about constructing the canal has only been intensifying which in turn raises rather legitimate question, why?

The commitment for speeding up the construction of the canal is impressive although it is said to be lacking the technical requirements modern water

⁴⁰ *Afghanistan is building an enormous canal to draw water from Amudarya River. This may affect water availability situation in Central Asia.* News Central Asia (nCa). (2023, February 20). <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/02/20/afghanistan-is-building-an-enormous-canal-to-draw-water-from-amudarya-river-this-may-affect-water-availability-situation-in-central-asia/>

⁴¹ The Economist. (2023, February 16). *The Taliban are digging an enormous canal.* *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/02/16/the-taliban-are-digging-an-enormous-canal>

⁴² Asia-Plus, A. (n.d.). *Work on the second phase of Qosh Tepa Canal starts in Afghanistan.* Tajikistan News ASIA-Plus. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/world/20231013/work-on-the-second-phase-of-Qush-Tepa-canal-starts-in-afghanistan>

⁴³ USAID/Afghanistan Development Outreach and Communications Office. (2018, December 10). *Press Release on Feasibility Study for Khush Tepa Irrigation Canal Ceremony Held* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.globalwaters.org/sites/default/files/Afghanistant-2018.12.10-Press-Release-feasibility-study.pdf>

infrastructures should have. Therefore, the construction process suffers several setbacks: **First**, it apparently lacks the modern canal building technics such as lining and covering the outer surfaces of the canal. As a result, much of the water seeps into the ground considering the dry weather and sandy soil of the region. **Second**, Experts warn⁴⁴ that such a huge absorption of water into the soil will have a great impact on the ecology of the environment, the composition of the soil, and the salinity cycle. **Third**, the fields that are supposed to receive water from Qush-Tepa canal are not ready yet, which is another issue. **Finally**, the absence of the irrigation networks, distribution-metering facilities as well as planning for the farmers appear to be lacking too. On top of all the issues above, there are still questions about how the farmers in that area are prepared, what they want to grow, and how much water they need. All these steps which need to be addressed in certain sequences are unfortunately not being followed.

The grandiose project with 280 km length, 100-meter width and at some point, up to 8-meter depth does not only shape the socioeconomic landscape of the northern provinces of Afghanistan but also [it] is believed to deteriorate the Amu Darya basin ecosystem as well as the regional cooperation. Partly for this reason, the project probably needs to go through some third-party feasibility assessments in order to evaluate its possible environmental impacts.

According to a construction plan, the canal is expected to be completed in three phases. The first of which costed about \$91m while funds for the remaining two phases are expected to be generated from the “selling of mines, particularly the Dar-e-Souph Mine” (Located in Kokcha Valley, Badakhshan region of Afghanistan). The construction of the canal is run by project’s main contractor, Afghanistan National Development Company with more than 200 local subcontractor companies, some 5,500 people and over 3,300 “bits of machinery”. When completed, the canal will have a capacity of diverting “650 cusec (cubic meters per second) of water” from the Amu Darya River.

Expectations

All undertakings around the project seem to give the impression that these are all about politics rather than recognising and properly addressing the real needs of the

⁴⁴ Kun.uz. (2023, February 10). “Tolibon”ni O‘zbekiston uchun fojiali kanalni qurishdan to‘xtatib bo‘ladimi? - Ekspertlar bilan suhbat. Kun.Uz. Retrieved from <https://kun.uz/news/2023/02/10/tolibonni-ozbekiston-uchun-fojiali-kanalni-qurishdan-toxtatib-boladimi-ekspertlar-bilan-suhbat>

society. Therefore, the Taliban government appears to be pursuing **two prone strategies** aimed at internal audience and international community.

In home front, it is very important for Taliban to win hearts and minds of the people of Northern provinces since the population of this region are not so much enthusiastic about Taliban's rule. In this region Taliban historically lacks the capacity and support from locals. Evidently, as canal is expected to irrigate "500,000 hectares of land in Balkh, Jawzjan and Faryab provinces"⁴⁵ it will eventually substantiate the economic wellbeing and food security since "severe drought and an unusually cold winter" along with a crisis in country dramatically increased acute hunger. So, increasing the agricultural capacity of the country and therefore securing food supply for the people is probably one of the driving forces of this project. Moreover, the northern provinces of Afghanistan where Qush-Tepa canal is being constructed are most densely populated⁴⁶ regions therefore, providing with developed agricultural and irrigational system through this project might presumably injects new impetus in developing these regions.

Internationally (most importantly), the Taliban government seems to believe that the successful completion of the project might signal the international community about the capacity and the competence of the government for delivering such an enormous infrastructure project that might potentially increase the prosperity of the people. In this regard, the Taliban government seems to believe that the more successful they were, the more it would become plausible to pull the international community into negotiation table for the recognition. Therefore, it provides Taliban with a unique opportunity, at least superficially, for disassociating itself from war and destruction. Thereby, speeding up the project appears to be so crucial for the Taliban government.

Potential Risks

Disruptive impact of Qush-Tepa Canal can be significantly higher since Amu Darya is a lifeline of the region. The region's riparian nations mainly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are heavily dependent on constant and steady flow of water through Amu Darya to keep the livelihood of their certain regions.

⁴⁵ *Qush Tepa Canal to be completed before scheduled date.* (2022, August 9). Retrieved from <https://pajhwok.com/2022/08/09/qush-tepa-canal-to-be-completed-before-scheduled-date/>

⁴⁶ SCA. *The Afghan population* – SCA. Retrieved from <https://swedishcommittee.org/afghanistan/population/>

Almost entire water of Amu Darya is used for the agricultural purposes⁴⁷ in both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan since agriculture is a significant constituent of their GDP by 20 and 12 percent accordingly. Therefore, Qush-Tepa Canal's account for up to 650 m³ per second will significantly diminish agricultural capacity of both countries. Some estimates suggest that Afghanistan has a capacity of 1.5 million⁴⁸ ha irrigable lands. Successful completion of Qush-Tepa could substantially increase the water shortages in the region. Experts warn that the real situation could be even worse when Amu Darya's water reduces to 34 km³ during the less water season. Almost third of the water (about 10km³) in this period could be diverted to Afghanistan.

Seemingly viable solution for the neighboring countries to solve the issue peacefully is apparently to cooperate with the Taliban government in several areas including the participation in building the canal in accordance with a modern construction technique as well as sharing with Afghani farmers its experience and know-how in agriculture and modern irrigation. In this regard, the visit of delegation of Uzbek diplomats led by A. Kamilov to Qobul on March 26, 2023 can be seen as a first practical step forward. In his recent meeting with Uzbekistan delegation, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, made a remark about the importance of the continuation of this project and "he emphasized the Islamic Emirate's readiness to carry out this vital project through mutual understanding"⁴⁹ which shows the Taliban government is ready to work with Uzbekistan in this project. On his part, Mr A. Kamilov stressed Uzbekistan's readiness "to work with the Islamic Emirate through technical teams in order to maximize the benefits of the Qush-Tepa canal project".

Legality issues

The main source of water in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan for both agriculture and everyday use is the Amu Darya River. Thus, the regulation of this life and death source is very important. There are two main regulatory sources in practice for managing water usage in Central Asia. First, 1992 UN "Convention on the Protection

⁴⁷ Rizk, J., & Utemuratov, B. (2012, November). Balancing the Use of Water Resources in Amu Darya Basin.

⁴⁸ McKinney, D. C. (2003, November 28). Cooperative Management of Transboundary Water Resources in Central Asia (4th draft).

⁴⁹ X (Formerly Twitter). Retrieved from https://twitter.com/FDPM_AFG/status/1638537683210305536

and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes”⁵⁰ to which only three Central Asian countries: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are the signatories. Second, the 1992 Agreement⁵¹ between five Central Asian nations “on Cooperation in the Field of Joint Management on Utilization and Protection of Water Resources from Interstate Sources” either of which does not oversee Afghanistan. Although the country has joined neither the agreement nor the convention, Afghanistan has some historical agreements with its former neighbor – Soviet Union. In 1946, Afghanistan signed an agreement⁵² with the former Soviet Union for regulating the usage of Panj river – main tributary of Amu Darya. According to which, Afghanistan and Soviet Union agreed upon using 9 km³ out of 19 km³ water for the former. In 1977, Soviets tried to negotiate with Afghanistan to minimize 1946 quota to 6 km³ however, Afghanistan disagreed, and sides could not reach an agreement. Due to a protracted conflict and war in the country, annual water usage by Afghanistan was about 2 km³ annually. Thus, the absence of Afghanistan within existing legal frameworks for the regional water regulations further complicates the matter.

Demographic change

Long-lasting practice of forced eviction of the local communities – predominantly minority religious and ethnic groups – in northern provinces of Afghanistan has even been increased after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Such practices were common in Balkh, Faryab and Jawzjan provinces⁵³. Such an artificially driven measure is claimed⁵⁴ to be a common practice for the Taliban government against the backdrop of Qosh-Tepa construction. The completion of Qosh-Tepa project mixed with a potentially improved irrigation system will increase the agricultural capacity of the northern provinces. This, in turn, might even speed up the forced transformation of the

⁵⁰ *United Nations Treaty Collection*. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XXVII-5&chapter=27&clang=_en

⁵¹ *Agreement between the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan on cooperation in the field of joint management on utilization and protection of water resources from interstate sources*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.icw-aral.uz/statute1.htm>

⁵² *Ташкент поделится с Кабулом технологиями / СНГ / Независимая газета*. (2023, March 23). Retrieved from https://www.ng.ru/cis/2023-03-26/5_8689_asia.html

⁵³ *Afghanistan: Taliban forcibly evict minority shia*. (2021, October 22). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/22/afghanistan-taliban-forcibly-evict-minority-shia>

⁵⁴ *Taliban distributing land around Qosh Tepa to terrorists, claims NRF*. (n.d.). Afghanistan International. Retrieved from <https://www.afintl.com/en/202211258124>

demographic landscape of the northern provinces through the unfair land distribution scheme of Taliban predominantly giving a preferences and certain rights to those who are loyal to them. There are some who claim about giving lands only “to terrorists transferred from Pakistan” and to the people who are not indigenous residents of the area.” The claims further state that the purpose is “to change the demographic structure and erase the identity of the region”.

Geopolitical risks

The speedy construction of this project might probably trigger some unseen geopolitical tensions between Afghanistan and other riparian nations – Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan although the latter seems not so much enthusiastic about taking a lead, facing up the reality and actively engaging with the former to at least minimize the consequences of the unregulated usage of Amu Darya by any third party in our case Afghanistan. Given both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are located on the downstream of the Amu Darya River basin, in most cases their interests converge. The project’s geopolitical consequences could the following way increase the geopolitical tensions in the region:

First, the climate driven tensions. Climate change is increasingly playing a greater role in shaping the way the Central Asian nations operate. The last winter and summer were respectively the coldest and the hottest ones in the last several decades⁵⁵. The northern Turkmenistan and the south-western regions of Uzbekistan are already experiencing these dramatic changes driven by climate caprices, therefore the Taliban’s vigorous pursuit after this project might further fuel the issue. Furthermore, since the last year, Uzbekistan has already been suffering from the worse draught⁵⁶ in its recent history caused by the combination of both climate change and transboundary water issues. As both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan experience bad incidents regarding the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan dating back to the Taliban’s early takeover of Afghanistan when the Taliban fighters fired several missiles into Uzbekistan in April 2022, and the border skirmish between the Taliban fighters and Turkmenistan

⁵⁵ Kun.uz. (2023, January 14). *Tashkent records lowest temperature in last 50 years*. Kun.Uz. Retrieved from <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/01/14/tashkent-records-lowest-temperature-in-last-50-years>

⁵⁶ Kun.uz. (2022, August 10). *Water scarcity in Uzbekistan: Probable drought and escalating environmental challenges*. Kun.Uz. Retrieved from <https://kun.uz/en/news/2022/08/10/water-scarcity-in-uzbekistan-probable-drought-and-escalating-environmental-challenges>

border forces in 2014⁵⁷, the incidents of this kinds may well repeat themselves over the unregulated transboundary water resources between related parties.

Second, geoeconomically induced tensions. This project could potentially turbocharge the possible conflict between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan due to the latter's potential economic downturn caused by a disbalance relative to the population growth and appropriate economic opportunity. Currently, the share of the agriculture in Uzbekistan's economy is huge⁵⁸, albeit the country is consciously moving away from the heavily dependence on this sector. On top of this, the demographic landscape also needs an urgent attention as the population growth fuels the increase of the labour force. According to "The Global Economy"⁵⁹, Uzbekistan had 14.04 million labour force in 2022 and its well on the rise now. The combination of those factors could even further disrupt the normal life in region's the most populous country.

Conclusion

Out of the real needs of the people, it is wise to develop agricultural sector of the country with a robust irrigation system. In this case, the hasty speed behind the project and ignoring technical requirements encourage to draw a conclusion that the Taliban government apparently intends to attract the international community for the recognition. In this regard, Qush-Tepa canal might only be the Taliban's "Bargaining Chip". Notwithstanding, as Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund, accentuated the "mutual understanding" in constructing the canal at his meeting with A. Kamilov, Taliban increasingly appears to genuinely believe that they can "motivate" its northern neighbors to be generous enough to help for the project to be completed thereby, develop the northern regions. Furthermore, Qush-Tepa seems to be the shortest path to seek nationwide legitimacy and approval especially in northern provinces. Moreover, the economy as well as the environmental issues in both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan could potentially be turbocharged by this project given demographically driven unemployment coupled with the potential diminishment of the agricultural capacity of

⁵⁷ Soliev, N. (2015). Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 7(1), 50-57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351314>

⁵⁸ *World Bank open data*. (n.d.). World Bank Open Data. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.AGR.TOTL.ZS?locations=UZ>

⁵⁹ LLC, G. (n.d.). *Uzbekistan Labor force - Data, chart*. TheGlobalEconomy.Com. Retrieved from https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Uzbekistan/labor_force/

Uzbekistan could even further endanger the normal relations with Afghanistan. Therefore, it is important for those affected nations had better synchronize their actions for minimizing the following geopolitical risks.

POLITICAL APPROACHES OF UZBEKISTAN AND TAJIKISTAN TOWARDS THE TALIBAN AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE SECURITY OF CENTRAL ASIA

Akram Umarov, Deputy Director (IAIS)

Rustam Makhmudov, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Introduction

The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 was a challenge for the Central Asian countries. These countries were forced to make serious adjustments to their previous position which sought cooperation with the Kabul of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, whose power largely relied on international military and financial assistance.

As a result, two different approaches towards the Taliban emerged in Central Asia. **The first one** saw the movement as a force capable of finally ending the forty-year conflict in Afghanistan, **the other one**, assessed it as a serious threat to regional stability and security. While the political line of Uzbekistan became the embodiment of the first approach, the political course of Tajikistan became the epitome of the second.

August 15, 2022, shortly after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, Uzbekistan made contact with the movement believing that this would open a window of opportunity for resolving the Afghan conflict and implementing regional projects with the participation of Afghanistan. Tajikistan however, took a more confrontational position, seeking to protect the interests of Tajiks in Afghanistan and accusing the Taliban of violating its promises to the international community about creating an inclusive government, which led to the aggravation of Tajik-Taliban relations.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the processes inside and around Afghanistan today are getting increasingly dynamic, which may affect both the previous approaches of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, along with the stability and the security of Central Asia as a whole.

The economic priority as the basis for Uzbekistan's Afghan policy before and after August 15, 2021

The constructive approach of Uzbekistan regarding the radical change in the political situation of Afghanistan after August 15, 2021, cannot be regarded as a mere

accident. On the contrary, it is quite natural and fits into the framework of the country's approach to foreign policy formed after the start of reforms in the second half of 2016. The essence of this policy change lies in the shifting balance between security and economic interests.

During Islam Karimov's presidency, especially after the terrorist attacks in Tashkent in 1999 and the incursions of Islamic militants in 1999-2000 the security of the country was the main priority, often to the detriment of economic development. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the ratio of these two components has changed dramatically favouring economic development. Despite the "de-securitization" of Tashkent's foreign policy towards Afghanistan, it did not happen through downplaying the importance of security issues. It simply began to play an auxiliary function, providing conditions for economic growth, which should lead Uzbekistan into a new cycle of economic and technological development.

Based on this prioritisation of economic development, Uzbekistan's foreign policy became increasingly proactive, looking for new sources of industrial and agricultural growth. This approach had, for Tashkent, already proven itself especially in Central Asia. Uzbekistan had radically improved relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in recent years, driven, in part, by a growth of trade and economic cooperation.

This change in foreign policy approach was instigated by Uzbekistan's new administration following the death of President Karimov in 2016. As arguably its most pressing foreign policy consideration, the role of Afghanistan for Uzbekistan also had to undergo a major transformation. The new foreign policy of Uzbekistan regarded Afghanistan not as a threat to regional security and stability exclusively, but as an opportunity, the implementation of which can bring benefits not only to Uzbekistan but also to all interested regional and international actors. This approach worked from the second half of 2016 until August 2021, and continues to work after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan.

Assessment of Uzbekistan's position in resolving the military conflict in neighbouring Afghanistan demonstrates that Tashkent is interested in creating a stable, developing state in Afghanistan with authorities capable of taking control of the situation in the country. This would help to ensure the security of the whole region,

serve to the dynamic and sustainable development of the economy of Uzbekistan, increasing the attractiveness of the region to foreign business structures.

Structurally, this approach consists of three components: 1. Uzbekistan's efforts to ensure the peace process in Afghanistan and prevent a humanitarian crisis; 2. Development of bilateral Uzbek-Afghan political, trade and economic cooperation; 3. Creation of conditions for the inclusion of Afghanistan in large-scale projects of trade, economic and transport cooperation between Central and South Asia.

As part of **the first security component**, among the significant international initiatives of Uzbekistan to resolve the Afghan conflict, announced until August 2021, a model for stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan can be noted, which includes three levels of interaction - intra-Afghan, regional and global levels, which would simultaneously ensure the interaction of almost all interested actors. This model was initiated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in March 2018 at the international conference on Afghanistan called “Peace process, security cooperation and regional interaction.”

After the Taliban takeover, Uzbekistan, as part of the first component, on September 17, 2021, at the SCO summit in Dushanbe called for the unfreezing the \$9.4 billion worth of Afghan assets along with assisting Afghanistan in solving its social problems.⁶⁰ In addition, Uzbekistan during a speech at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2021, proposed to create a permanent UN committee on Afghanistan in order to prevent its isolation.⁶¹ Further, on October 13, 2022, at the 6th meeting of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, the Uzbek President proposed to consider the possibility of a joint appeal of Asian countries to the UN General Assembly with the initiative to form a high-level international negotiating group to develop common and coordinated approaches to interaction with the de-facto authorities of Afghanistan in order to prevent “a repetition of the bitter experience of thirty years ago, when this country became a hotbed of international terrorism.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Узбекистан предложил разморозить активы Афганистана в зарубежных банках. Что о них известно? // Газета.uz, 17 сентября 2021. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/17/frozen-assets/>

⁶¹ Выступление Президента Республики Узбекистан Шавката Мирзиёева на 76-й сессии Генеральной Ассамблеи Организации Объединенных Наций // Официальный сайт Президента Республики Узбекистан, 21 сентября 2021. <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/4632>

⁶² Узбекистан предлагает создать международную переговорную группу по Афганистану // Газета.uz, 13 октября 2022. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/10/13/summit/>

As part of **the second economic component**, until August 2021, Uzbekistan performed very well in building up trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan, while simultaneously creating conditions for the implementation of promising economic projects. In 2017, an Uzbek-Afghan roadmap was signed to increase bilateral trade turnover by \$1.5 billion.⁶³ In the period of 2019-2020 a particularly impressive growth in Uzbek exports was recorded. It rose from 433.3 to 776.7 million dollars, which made the Afghan market one of the leading export destinations for Uzbekistan.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵In May 2021, the parties agreed to expedite the negotiation of a draft preferential trade agreement in order to increase trade volumes by \$2 billion per year.

According to data, in 2021, Afghanistan became the leading trade and economic partner of Uzbekistan in South Asia with 48.9% of the total trade turnover with the countries of this region. India came second with 35.6%, followed by Pakistan (13.2%) and Bangladesh (2.1%) accordingly.⁶⁶

The construction of “Surkhan - Puli Khumri” power line to supply Kabul with electricity was among the significant infrastructure projects launched during this period. Uzbekistan managed to complete the part of the project on its territory, however, the project’s Afghan part was suspended in July 2021, due to intensified conflict in the country.

Trade, economic and infrastructure cooperation continued with the de facto government formed by the Taliban. An indicator of its productivity can be considered the practical return of trade to the indicators that took place before the change of power in the country. In 2022, it amounted to almost \$760 million, slightly falling short of the 2020 figures. It should be noted that at the end of 2022, Afghanistan showed an increase in exports to Uzbekistan, which surpassed the figures of recent years of the government of Ashraf Ghani. If in 2020 Afghan exports to Uzbekistan amounted to 2.3 million

⁶³ Узбекистан и Афганистан становятся "лучшими друзьями": что их связывает // Газета.uz, 26 мая 2021. <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20210526/uzbekistan-i-afganistan-stanovyatsya-luchshimi-druzyami-chto-ix-svyazyvaet-18917152.html>

⁶⁴ Afghanistan trade balance, exports and imports by country 2019 // World Bank, 2019, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/AFG/Year/2019/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>

⁶⁵ Сближение с Россией, Китай — главный поставщик. Как изменилась внешняя торговля Узбекистана в 2022 году //

Газета.uz, 24 января 2023. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/01/24/trade-partners/>

⁶⁶ Инфографика: Торговля Узбекистана со странами Южной Азии 2021 // Review.uz, 14.07.2022. <https://review.uz/post/infografika-torgovlya-uzbekistana-so-stranami-yujnoy-azii-2021>

dollars, and in 2021 – 6.2 million, then in 2022 – 9.3 million dollars.⁶⁷ During the same period, Uzbekistan implemented a project for the reconstruction of the Mazar-i-Sharif airport. In addition, the parties announced their intention to continue the implementation of the Surkhan-Puli-Khumri power transmission line project.

As part of **the third component**, it is worth noting that Tashkent’s initiatives to promote the idea of connectivity between Central and South Asia manifests Uzbekistan’s policy to include Afghanistan in interregional cooperation projects. The implementation of this idea can create a common space for security and economy on a vast territory with a population of almost 2 billion people. Therefore, Afghanistan plays a key role in this connectivity concept. First of all, Afghanistan can be a leading regional transport corridor if Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway project proposed by Uzbekistan becomes reality. These regional connections between Central and South Asia are more important now than ever. Due to sanctions against Russia and Belarus amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, northern transport corridors are becoming complex and risky for Central Asia. Alternative shipping routes across the Black Sea have also been compromised by the ongoing Russian naval blockade against Ukrainian ports. Therefore, the opening of a new transport corridor is an urgent issue for the diversification of regional connectivity with South Asia, South-East Asia and Middle East. In addition, Afghanistan could start exploiting its multi-trillion-dollar worth of natural resources, some of which are critical for today’s innovative economy, such as copper, lithium and rare earth metals.

President Ashraf Ghani understood the importance of Kabul taking part in the integration projects of Central and South Asia as he participated at the international conference called “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities” held on July 15-16, 2021 in Tashkent. Earlier, in February 2021, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan signed a roadmap for the construction of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway.⁶⁸

The participation of the Taliban representatives in a trilateral meeting with officials from Uzbekistan and Pakistan on December 6-7, 2021 in Tashkent on the

⁶⁷ Сближение с Россией, Китай — главный поставщик. Как изменилась внешняя торговля Узбекистана в 2022 году // Газета.uz, 24 января 2023. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/01/24/trade-partners/>

⁶⁸ Узбекистан, Афганистан и Пакистан подписали «Дорожную карту» по строительству железной дороги // Газета.uz, 8 февраля 2023. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/02/08/trans-afghan-railway/>

construction of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway hinted that the Taliban Government also holds the same view on this issue. Also, the statement made by head of the Afghan railway department, Bakht Rahman Sharafat during his visit to Pakistan in January 2023, about the Afghan side's full readiness for the technical surveys of the Trans-Afghan railway is an important message about the Taliban's interest in the project. Furthermore, on May 14 the Project Office for coordinating the construction of Uzbekistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan railway line was officially opened in Tashkent by the railway authorities of these countries.⁶⁹

Thus, political stance of Uzbekistan towards Afghanistan remains consistent although the internal situation in Afghanistan has significantly changed. The Uzbek government is trying to keep Afghanistan on top of the world's attention. Yet, despite this work, Tashkent has not been able to generate substantial concessions from the Taliban authorities. The start of the Qush-Tepa canal construction without any prior consultations with other neighbouring countries, the killing of al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in central Kabul in a home owned by a member of the Taliban leadership does not augur well for the credibility of the group. Tashkent has sought to serve as a broker between the Taliban and the world to keep Afghanistan on the agenda. But it is unclear to what extent the ratio of gained opportunities and the current challenges for Tashkent is leaning towards surplus.

Tajikistan taking hardline position towards the Taliban

Unlike Uzbekistan, which showed consistency and resilience in its approach to Afghanistan before and after August 2021, Tajikistan has changed its stance, demonstrating virtually complete rejection of the power of the Taliban. Such an official position of Dushanbe can be explained by at least three reasons.

First, possible fears of the Taliban, who promote fundamentalist religious beliefs, actively cooperate with various terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, and used terrorist methods to combat the Afghan authorities and foreign military contingents, will try to provide assistance to the opposition in Tajikistan.

During bloody Tajik Civil War (1992-1997), one of the government's fiercest opponents was the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT), which was part of the United Tajik

⁶⁹ IEA and Pakistan railway officials discuss bilateral railway cooperation // Ariana News, January 4, 2023. <https://www.ariananews.af/iea-and-pakistan-railway-officials-discuss-bilateral-railway-cooperation/>

Opposition. The Tajik opposition enjoyed the support of some of the leaders of the Afghan Mujahideen, therefore its fighters took refuge in the northern regions of Afghanistan.

Even the “General Agreement on Peace in Tajikistan” signed in 1997, could not dissolve overall contradictions between Emomali Rahmon and the IRPT, which eventually led to its recognition as a terrorist organization by the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tajikistan on September 29, 2015 and the ban on its activities throughout the country.

Islamic radicals from Tajikistan continue to operate in Afghanistan and collaborate with the Taliban. The leader of the “Jamaat Ansarullah” Mahdi Arslan (Muhammad Sharipov) has repeatedly stated his intention of building an Islamic emirate in Tajikistan.⁷⁰ He is also credited for founding, in 2022, the Tekhrik-e Taliban Tajikistan, stationed along the Tajik-Afghan border in the Badakhshan region.⁷¹

The **second reason** for Emomali Rahmon to reject supporting the Taliban is a fear of oppression of Afghan Tajiks, their culture and language, since the Taliban from an ethnic point of view is predominantly a Pashtun movement. "Pashtun nationalism" is well-known ideology of Pashtuns for being powerful enough to force other ideologies to socio-political peripheries or assimilate. Even President Ashraf Ghani, a Pashtun by nationality, was accused of Pashtun nationalism, for allegedly ousting Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras from the Afghan political scene.⁷²

Afghan Tajiks and other ethnic minorities of Afghanistan cannot agree with such a situation, considering Pashtuns do not represent an absolute ethnic majority in the country. According to some estimations, 40% of the population are Pashtuns while the other 60% represents all other ethnic groups combined.

Pashtuns in their claims to primacy often appeal to the fact that they are the founders of modern Afghanistan since 1747, when Ahmadshah Durrani formed his power. However, Afghan Tajiks, as ancient city dwellers and descendants of the Persian-

⁷⁰ Михаил Котляр «Эти храбрые люди носят жилеты со взрывчаткой» // Газета.ру, 2 октября 2021. https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2021/10/02_a_14044945.shtml

⁷¹ Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan has emerged! // Islamic World News, 17 July 2022. <https://english.iswnnews.com/24371/tehrick-i-taliban-tajikistan-has-emerged/>

⁷² Аваз Юлдашев, Эксперт: в Афганистане набирает обороты пуштунский национализм // Asia Plus Tj.info, 23 ноября 2017. <https://asiaplustj.info/news/tajikistan/security/20171123/ekspert-v-afganistane-nabiraet-oboroti-pushtunskii-natsionalizm>

Tajik civilization, traditionally believe that they are culturally superior to the predominantly rural Pashtuns.

All these factors provoke deep ethnic and cultural division in the Afghan society, overtime taking the form of political and armed clashes. In this regard, the return to power of the Taliban movement can be viewed by national minorities, and primarily by Afghan Tajiks, as an opportunity for Pashtun nationalists to finally resolve the historical dispute in their favour. For Tajiks, living in Tajikistan, who feel their ethno-cultural closeness to their brothers from Afghanistan, this is unacceptable.

Third, the increase in attention to Tajikistan in the light of its "special" position in relation to the Taliban movement. The distinctive position of Dushanbe in Central Asia was of interest to a number of Western countries and demonstrated the subjectivity of the Tajik side in regional processes. In this context, the leader of Tajikistan E. Rahmon was invited to visit the EU and France in 2021. The presence of such an approach played an important role for improving the images of a small country from Central Asia, which remained in the shadows in solving many global security problems.

The only way out of the current situation in Afghanistan, in the eye of Dushanbe, is the Taliban's allegiance to its obligations to create an inclusive government. Such a government, which includes all political and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, could deter the radical Islamist wing within the Taliban and Pashtun nationalists.⁷³

According to Tajik President Emomali Rahmon Tajiks in Afghanistan make up 46% of entire population and should take their rightful place in an inclusive government. Dushanbe will never recognize any other government formed through oppression and persecution, without taking into account the position of the entire Afghan people, especially all their national minorities.⁷⁴

Such a tough position of Tajikistan, which it demonstrated from the very beginning of the Taliban's advancement to power, sooner or later should have led to an aggravation of relations with the movement, especially after the movement established control over the Panjshir Gorge. On September 2, 2021, when the Taliban launched an

⁷³ МИД: Таджикистан признает только инклюзивное правительство в Афганистане // Sputnik Tajikistan, 03.10.2021. <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20211003/tajikistan-afganistan-inkluzivnoe-pravitelstvo-1042619686.html>

⁷⁴ Рахмон предложил создать инклюзивное правительство Афганистана с участием таджиков // Anadolu Agency, 25 августа 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/рахмон-предложил-создать-инклюзивное-правительство-афганистана-с-участием-таджиков/2345718>

attack on the positions at the Panjshir, Emomali Rahmon awarded Ahmad Shah Massoud with the Order of Ismail Somoni (the highest state award of Tajikistan), which is a symbol of the courage of the Panjshir Valley in its confrontation with the Soviet troops and the Taliban in 1990s. Obviously, this could not be ignored by the Taliban. After the defeat of the Panjshir, their leaders, according to some sources, took refuge in Tajikistan.

The speech of Emomali Rahmon at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2021 also had an impact on the deterioration of relations with the Taliban. He emphasized that the Taliban had not kept their promise to form an inclusive government. He spoke about the dire humanitarian situation in the Panjshir province and condemned all the offenses, murders, robberies and oppression against the people of Afghanistan.⁷⁵

On September 26, 2021, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Acting Deputy Prime Minister of the Afghan Transitional Government, accused Tajikistan of interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and stated that "For every action there is a reaction."⁷⁶ Accordingly, Taliban government transferred large military units to the Afghan province of Takhar, bordering with Tajikistan. Also, information began to appear about the creation by the Taliban of a battalion of suicide bombers "Lashkar-e-Mansuri" with the aim of transferring it to the Tajik border in the province of Badakhshan.⁷⁷

President Rahmon also decided to raise the stakes and hosted a military parade on September 27, 2021, which was attended by 2,000 servicemen and 50 pieces of military equipment. The parade was held in the border Darvaz district of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. On January 10, 2022 Emomali Rahmon at the CSTO summit addressed the members of the organization with a proposal to create a security belt around Afghanistan. He named three reasons for the need to create such a belt. First, deteriorating security situation on the Tajik-Afghan border, where there were clashes

⁷⁵ Президент Таджикистана: Афганистан превратился в площадку для геополитических игр // Сайт ООН, 23 сентября 2021. <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2021/09/1410572>

⁷⁶ Талибы обвинили Таджикистан во вмешательстве в дела Афганистана // РИА Новости, 26 сентября 2021. <https://ria.ru/20210926/tadjhikistan-1751870494.html>

⁷⁷ Taliban to deploy suicide bombers to Afghanistan's borders

By Najibullah Lalzoy // The Khaama Press News Agency, 02 Oct 2021. <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-to-deploy-suicide-bombers-to-afghanistans-borders-4574567547/>

between the Taliban themselves.⁷⁸ Second, ever increasing number of fighters of Islamic State on the border of the CSTO exceeded, according to Tajik President, 6 thousand people. Third, there are 40 camps and terrorist training centres in the north-eastern provinces of Afghanistan.⁷⁹

Taliban officials immediately reacted to this statement. Deputy Minister of Information and Culture Bilal Karimi strongly rejected the President's assessment about setting up several camps in Afghanistan for destructive activities in the areas bordering Tajikistan. At the same time, he assured all neighbouring countries, including Tajikistan, that no threat to their security emanates from the territory of Afghanistan.⁸⁰

Although direct military clashes have been avoided Dushanbe continues to openly demonstrate its rejection of the new Afghan authorities. At the IV Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia in Cholpon-Ata (Kyrgyzstan), held on July 21, 2022, President Rahmon said that so far, the Taliban has not taken real steps to convince the world community and the population of Afghanistan of the legitimacy of their power, the ability to control the situation in the country, ensure the safety of citizens, address socio-economic issues and respect for civil rights, in particular women and children. He reiterated that the Taliban is preventing the creation of an inclusive government with broad participation of all political and ethnic forces. Emomali Rahmon pointed out that the Taliban is not capable of solving the problems of governing a country in which extreme religious conservatism persists. Moreover, he noted, 18 people from the Taliban administration are on the lists of terrorists and terrorist organizations of the UN Security Council.⁸¹

Such a tough position of the Tajik president on the Taliban while being on the verge of a military conflict with, can be partly explained by the fact that he feels behind his back the potential support of the CSTO and Russia, which largely share Dushanbe's fears about the continued terrorist threat from Afghanistan. According to the head of the CSTO Joint Staff, Colonel General Anatoly Sidorov, the situation in Central Asia

⁷⁸ Рахмон предложил создать пояс безопасности вокруг Афганистана // РИА Новости, 10 января 2022. <https://ria.ru/20220110/afghanistan-1767159601.html>

⁷⁹ Рахмон заявил об укреплении позиций ИГ* в Афганистане // РИА Новости, 10 января 2022. <https://ria.ru/20220110/odkb-1767149841.html>

⁸⁰ Талибы ответили Рахмону про лагеря террористов у границ ОДКБ // Sputnik Таджикистан, 11 января 2022. <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20220111/taliby-rahmon-terroristy-odkb-1044722756.html>

⁸¹ Рахмон: талибы не могут управлять Афганистаном // Sputnik Tajikistan, 21.07.2022. <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20220721/rakhmon-taliby-upravlenie-afghanistan-1050147853.html>

remains tense due to threats from militants of terrorist organizations who have taken refuge in Afghanistan. According to him, the number of Islamic State (IS) militants in Afghanistan in 2022 was estimated at 6.5 thousand people, of which 4 thousand are concentrated on the border with Tajikistan.⁸²

Despite the difficult political relations with Afghanistan, Dushanbe continues to supply electricity to Afghanistan. At the end of 2022, Afghanistan became the main importer of Tajik electricity, having bought 1.7 billion kWh of electricity. This is approximately 50% of all Tajik electricity exports.⁸³ Bilateral trade and economic cooperation seem to be the driving force of the current interactions between Dushanbe and Kabul. Afghanistan, at least for Tajikistan, is too huge market to be ignored. Total trade turnover between two countries reached \$111 million last year. Total amount of electricity exported to Afghanistan was \$44.9 million only in the first half of 2022.

However, in March 2023, information appeared about the transfer of control over the Afghan consulate in the city of Khorog in eastern Tajikistan in GBAO (Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region) to the Taliban government⁸⁴, although the main staff of the embassy in Dushanbe still operates under the flag of the former government. Some, including the Afghan embassy in Dushanbe, report that a Taliban government official recently visited the city. Then there were statements that "the Khorog consulate, which issues Afghan passports, and its employees have been receiving salaries from the Taliban for the past two months." This news can be regarded as a serious shift for Tajikistan to interact with the Taliban government. Dushanbe's rather icy stance towards the Taliban's de-facto government has appeared to be thawing.

Future prospects for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan's policy towards the Taliban

Meanwhile, as the situation inside and around Afghanistan continues to develop dynamically, it is creating the possibility for some transformation in the approaches of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

⁸² Виктория Панфилова. ОДКБ готовится защитить Таджикистан от нападения боевиков // Независимая газета, 02.03.2023. https://www.ng.ru/cis/2023-02-15/1_8661_tajikistan.html

⁸³ Афганистан стал главным покупателем таджикской электроэнергии // Sputnik Tajikistan, 14.02.2023. <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20230214/afghanistan-tajikistan-elektro-1054900093.html>

⁸⁴ Tajikistan: Taliban take control of consulate. // Eurasianet, 27.03.2023. <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-taliban-take-control-of-consulate>

If we talk about the approach of Uzbekistan, then only the actions of the Taliban themselves can transform it, since Tashkent is clearly aimed at developing constructive relations with Kabul. Over the past two years, there have been several difficulties in Uzbek-Taliban relations, which the parties either managed to overcome or postpone their solution to a more appropriate time in the future.

The first serious challenge was related to the fact that immediately after the Taliban established control over Afghanistan, pilots of the Afghan Air Force hijacked 25% of the fleet of military aircraft and helicopters located at air bases in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. As of August 21, 2021, there were 46 aircraft in Uzbekistan and 18 in Tajikistan, the official said. These included Mi-17 UH-60 helicopters as well as PC-12, C-208, AC-208 and A-29 fixed-wing aircraft.⁸⁵

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan found themselves in a difficult situation. On the one hand, military equipment belonged to Afghanistan, but on the other hand, it could not be returned to the Taliban, whose government did not have international recognition. In addition, arms manufacturers retain certain rights regarding their export or redeployment to other countries in relation to transferred weapons even after they have been sold to buyers. In addition, the Taliban is still subject to the sanctions imposed on them on January 16, 2002 by the UN Security Council.

In January 2022, the Taliban began to tighten their rhetoric, declaring the need to return the planes as the property of Afghanistan. Addressing the Afghan air force ceremony in Kabul, Taliban Defence Minister Mohammad Yaqoob said his government would never allow the aircraft to be seized or used by its northern neighbours. "I respectfully call on [Uzbekistan and Tajikistan] not to test our patience and not to force us to take all possible retaliatory steps [to retake the aircraft]," Yaqoob said firmly.⁸⁶

For its part, the United States was forced to intervene. Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby stated on January 19, 2022 that "We're still working out the disposition of those helicopters ... I don't have an update ... on any decisions about how they will be handled," said Kirby . "But I think it's safe to assume that they will not be sent into Afghanistan to be used by the Taliban." The final decision on what happens to those

⁸⁵ Navbahor Imamova, Jeff Seldin. *Uzbeks Say Aircraft Flown From Afghanistan Are US Property // Voice of America*, April 29, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbeks-say-aircraft-flown-from-afghanistan-are-us-property-/6551163.html>

⁸⁶ Ibidem

aircraft, Kirby said, is something the Defense Department is still working on. Currently, Kirby said, the Taliban is not recognized by the U.S. as the official government of Afghanistan, though he added that such decisions are not the purview of the Defense Department.⁸⁷

On this matter Uzbekistan also delivered its position to the Taliban. As Ismatulla Irgashev, Special Representative of the Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, stated in an interview with Voice of America on April 30, 2022, “The U.S. government paid for them. It funded the previous Afghan government. So, we believe it is totally up to Washington how to deal with them. We’ve kept this military equipment in agreement with the U.S. and have told the Taliban so.”⁸⁸

Uzbek diplomacy managed to somewhat defuse the atmosphere in relations with the Taliban on this issue, however, it still sometimes rises from the Afghan side. In August 2022, The Defense Ministry of Afghanistan again asked Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to return the helicopters. In an interview with TOLO News, Inayatullah Khwarazami, the Afghan Defense Ministry’s spokesman, said that “The helicopters are the property of the Afghan people. They should be returned to the current government, to the Ministry of Defense.”⁸⁹

However, with a high degree of probability it can be argued that military aircraft and helicopters will not be handed over to the Taliban until their government receives international recognition.

The second challenge was the missile attack on Uzbek territory near the city of Termez from Afghanistan. The incident took place in April 2022. Initially, rumours began to circulate in Telegram channels about a rocket attack on military facilities in Termez. However, the press secretary of the President of Uzbekistan, Sherzod Asadov, denied them, writing in his Telegram channel that “The information disseminated by some Telegram channels about the alleged rocket attack from the territory of

⁸⁷ U.S. aircraft will not return to Taliban, says Pentagon press secretary // The Tashkent Times, January 1, 2022. <http://tashkenttimes.uz/world/8209-u-s-aircraft-will-not-return-to-taliban-says-pentagon-press-secretary>

⁸⁸ Navbahor Imamova, Jeff Seldin. Uzbeks Say Aircraft Flown From Afghanistan Are US Property // Voice of America, April 29, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbeks-say-aircraft-flown-from-afghanistan-are-us-property-/6551163.html>

⁸⁹ MoD Requests Helicopters Be Returned to Afghanistan // TOLO News, August 8, 2022. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-179308>

Afghanistan on parts of the armed forces of Uzbekistan in the Termez region is absolutely untrue.”⁹⁰

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Taliban Government also denied this report. According to them, “IEA-MoFA rejects all social media rumours regarding firing of rockets from Afghanistan’s soil on Termez, Uzbekistan. The situation along the Afghan-Uzbek border is normal with nothing to be concerned about.”⁹¹

However, a little later, the deputy spokesman for the Taliban movement, Inamullah Samangani, nevertheless confirmed the shelling attempt, placing the responsibility on the ISIS-Khorasan group. According to him, ISIS failed to achieve its goal. Two or three shells fired by its members did not reach the border of Uzbekistan. They were arrested. He also assured neighbouring countries that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan would not allow anyone from its territory to threaten their security.⁹²

The third challenge concerned the management of the Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif railway, which was built by Uzbekistan in 2010. The project was financed by a \$165 million Asian Development Bank (ADB) grant. In April 2022, Afghanistan Railways Authority (ARA) officially said that operating contracts with neighbouring countries for Afghanistan's railway stations were formalized without taking the country's best interests into consideration. According to officials, tens of millions of dollars have been paid annually to companies from neighbouring countries to run the stations. The new leadership has been working on a plan to outsource the operation of railway stations to the Afghan companies so that it can benefit the country’s national economy directly.

Regarding Uzbekistan, Bakht-u-Rehman Sharafat, director of ARA, said an Uzbekistan’s company “Sogdiana Trans” (subsidiary of Uzbekistan Railways state company) has the contract to operate the port of Hairatan at a cost of \$18 million a year. However, local companies are prepared to do the same work for much less, he said. “The port of Hairatan, through which we carry most of our shipments, has been contracted

⁹⁰ Асадов прокомментировал информацию об обстреле Термеза со стороны Афганистана // Sputnik Uzbekistan, 19.04.2022. <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20220419/asadov-prokommentiroval-informatsiyu-ob-obstrele-termeza-so-storony-afganistana-24062471.html>

⁹¹ IEA-MoFA rejects all social media rumors regarding firing of rockets from Afghanistan’s soil on Termez, Uzbekistan // MFA Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, October 12, 2022. <https://mfa.gov.af/en/iea-mofa-rejects-all-social-media-rumors-regarding-firing-of-rockets-from-afghanistans-soil-on-termez-uzbekistan-the-situation-along-the-afghan-uzbek-border-is-normal-with-nothing-to-be-con/>

⁹² Ракеты ИГИЛ не долетели до Узбекистана — «Талибан» // Газета.uz, 20.04.2022. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/04/20/afghanistan-border/>

by an Uzbek company for \$18 million a year, while Afghan companies will do this for less than 25 percent of this amount," said Sharafat.⁹³

On December 5, 2022, the Afghan news agency Tolo News reported that the Kazakh company Mansour Fatih had received a contract to manage the Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif railway. Bakht Rahman Sharafat stated on this occasion: "We pay this company (more than) \$4.1 million annually. We were paying \$15 million to the Sogdiana Trans, and the Sogdiana Trans company from Uzbekistan was only providing us service for 22 kilometres, only in Hairatan port. This new company will provide service for 106 kilometres." In turn, the deputy head of the Fatih Company, Bisn Bai Makhanov, said: "We have earned this contract through bidding."⁹⁴

In turn, Uzbekistan Railways denied this information, indicating that during a bilateral meeting in Termez on December 5-6, 2022, M. Sharafat said that there were no such statements and gave a corresponding interview specifically in English about successful cooperation with the Uzbek company "Sogdiana Trans".⁹⁵

Nevertheless, from February 1, 2023, the Uzbekistan Railways company suspended transportation to Afghanistan at the Hairatan-Mazar-i - Sharif section due to the failure of the Afghan side to carry out the agreed technical work. The company claimed non-fulfilment of the agreement concluded in December 2022 by Sogdiana Trans on the action plan for the gradual implementation of technical work by Afghan railway workers on the territory of Afghanistan by February 1, 2023.

As a result, on February 12, 2023, the Afghan Railway Administration and the Sogdiana Trans company signed an agreement to continue the operation of the Hairatan- Mazar-i- Sharif railway for another 2 years, which served as the basis for resuming the delivery of freight cars to Afghanistan.⁹⁶

If the above three challenges have either been resolved, or their final solution has been postponed for the future, then **the fourth challenge** will arise, associated with

⁹³ Afghanistan's Railways Authority reviewing operating contracts // Ariana News, April 10, 2022. <https://www.ariananews.af/afghanistans-railways-authority-reviewing-operating-contracts/>

⁹⁴ Fatema Adeeb. Contract to Run Hairatan-Mazar Railway Signed With Kazakhstan Company // TOLO News, December 5, 2022. <https://tolonews.com/index.php/business-181061>

⁹⁵ Комментарий по обслуживанию железнодорожной линии «Хайратон – Мазари-Шариф» со стороны АО «Узбекистон темир йуллари» // Railway.uz, 07.12.2022. https://railway.uz/ru/informatsionnaya_sluzhba/novosti/31988/

⁹⁶ Узбекистан и Афганистан подписали новый договор по эксплуатации ж/д линии «Хайратон — Мазари — Шариф» // Газета.uz, 12 февраля 2023. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/02/12/afghanistan-railway/>

the start of construction in March 2022 of the Taliban of the Qush-Tepa canal, which, according to experts, will take up to 30% from the Amu Darya for irrigation of 550 thousand hectares in the northern Afghan provinces of Balkh, Faryab and Jawzjan. This can seriously threaten the water, ecological, economic and anthropological situation of the Khorezm, Bukhara, Surkhandarya and Navoi regions of Uzbekistan, the Republic of Karakalpakstan and Turkmenistan.

The Taliban started the construction of the canal without agreement with the countries of the Amu Darya basin - Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, guided by solely their economic and strategic goals. From a geopolitical perspective, the Qush-Tepa canal will theoretically give the Taliban a powerful instrument of pressure on all these countries, which can be used to bargain on various issues of a bilateral and multilateral nature.

So far, there is not enough clarity on how Uzbekistan, as well as Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, are going to solve this problem. One can only assume that if the Taliban refuses to take into account the interests of their northern neighbours, this will lead to the emergence of an issue causing political tension in the region, which will jeopardize the implementation of large-scale Trans-Afghan infrastructure projects involving the countries of Central and South Asia.

As for the future policy of Tajikistan towards the Taliban, it is most likely that it will not undergo major changes. Its key postulates will remain the formation of an inclusive government with the participation of political parties and ethnic minorities, and the protection of the interests of the Tajik population of Afghanistan. This was clearly shown by the provision of Dushanbe with its venue for the 10th Herat Security Dialogue organised by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies and held on November 29-30, 2022. This large-scale event was attended by 120 experts, politicians and public figures from 20 countries, including the leader of the Afghan National Resistance Front, Ahmad Massoud. An invitation was also sent to representatives of the Taliban, but they did not arrive in Dushanbe. NRF is now lacking the needed external funding and weapons supply, so it is facing numerous challenges in terms of operations sustainability. Potentially only one or several neighbouring countries of Afghanistan can serve as supporting platform for any opposition to Taliban.

At the same time, it is assumed that the Tajik side is inclined towards the idea of establishing pragmatic relations with the neighbouring Taliban in order to achieve their own national interests. The retention of power by the Taliban almost 2 years after they came to power of the country, as well as the inability of the opposition Taliban groups to consolidate and demonstrate any significant results in relations with the Taliban, could encourage the country's leadership to establish working relations with the movement, as well as to intensify contacts in various important points of bilateral cooperation.

The issue of ensuring security may also impact Uzbekistan's "economized" policy if the Taliban fail to fully cope with ISIS - Khorasan. A suicide attack on the Afghan Foreign Ministry and security threats to the embassies of China, India and Iran can serve as an indicator of the growing threat from this terrorist organization. After all this, Saudi Arabia made the decision in early February 2023 to close its embassy in Kabul, moving employees to Islamabad.

In general, both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan could increase their subjectivity in global politics due to the active foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has become a major driver of reconciliation in Afghanistan and become a credible partner for Kabul, notwithstanding who is in power in Afghanistan. Relations between the countries developed substantially both during the Ghani administration and under the current Taliban government. Tajikistan has very close positioning with Tashkent on the Afghan track despite differences in official rhetoric and formal statements on the Taliban governance. Both countries are, and will remain, crucial neighbours of Afghanistan in ensuring its peace, stability and prosperity.

ASSESSING THE PROSPECTS OF AFGHANISTAN AS A TRANSPORT CORRIDOR BETWEEN CENTRAL ASIA AND SOUTH ASIA

Rustam Makhmudov, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Akram Umarov, Deputy Director (IAIS)

Introduction

Afghanistan's unique geographical position allows the country to be a link between Central and South Asia and the Middle East. However, for the last twenty years, during Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani's reign such potential was not actually realised. This was largely seen as a consequence of the increasing year-on-year instability caused by the insurgent and terrorist activities of the Taliban and ISIS-Khorasan. It, thus, increased investment risks and threats related to the safety of cargo and the safety of personnel. At the same time, the Taliban's take over the country in August 2021 and the cessation of large-scale hostilities in the country created the prerequisites for considering all the factors pros and cons of the likelihood of realising the transit potential of Afghanistan at a practical level.

Factors in favour of transport projects through Afghanistan

The first and key factor that makes it possible to speak of an increase in the likelihood of the realisation of the transit potential of Afghanistan is the ability of the Taliban movement to control the situation within the border of the country. Unlike the previous Afghan authorities, the Taliban do not face large-scale military action from their opponents. Of course, ISIS-Khorasan is acting against them, however, so far, its actions are presented in the form of terrorist acts directed against the security forces of the Taliban movement, the Haqqani network, Hazara Shiites, supporters of Sufism and diplomatic missions of foreign countries⁹⁷. Also, there are no large-scale military actions by the Afghan National Resistance Front, led by Ahmad Masoud, who resisted the Taliban in the Panjshir Valley in August-September 2021, ending with the defeat of the Front.

⁹⁷ ISIS-Khorasan Appears to Be Replacing the Taliban's Terror in Afghanistan By Mahmut Cengiz // Homeland security today.US, February 13, 2023. <https://www.hstoday.us/featured/isis-khorasan-appears-to-be-replacing-the-talibans-terror-in-afghanistan/>

The second factor favouring the transit projects is the Taliban Government's commitments for the economic recovery of Afghanistan, despite having extremely limited financial resources, unlike the governments of H. Karzai and A. Ghani, whose budgets were 70-75% formed by foreign donors. Undoubtedly, international organizations and their donors play an important role in preventing a humanitarian crisis in the country. However, the efforts of the Taliban Government cannot be ignored. In particular, it managed to strengthen the Afghan currency, reduce inflation, partially restore imports, and double exports. The situation with the collection of taxes and customs duties has improved, which has been recognised by Western experts⁹⁸.

The third important factor is both Uzbekistan and Pakistan interested in cooperation with the Taliban Government for developing transit transport communications and cargo transportation. These two countries are capable of providing Afghanistan with most of the land road and rail access to foreign markets along the North-South line. The interest of Uzbekistan and Pakistan in cooperation with the Taliban Government is based on several indicators.

First, the new Taliban authorities themselves are looking for cooperation in the transport and transit sector as evidenced by their participation in the Uzbek-Afghan-Pakistani meeting to discuss the construction project of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway 6-7 December 2021 in Tashkent, as well as their contacts on this issue with Uzbekistan and Pakistan on a bilateral basis.

There is no doubt that the implementation of this project will allow Afghanistan to become an important player in international cargo transportation, competing with Iran, and this will become a source of constant foreign exchange income for Kabul. The Afghans understand their advantages over Iran in cargo transportation along the line of Central and South Asia. Imposed restrictions on activities with Iran create many barriers on using its territory for transit and also the Iranian railway infrastructure needs considerable modernisation⁹⁹. For example, according to experts, the time of delivery of goods from Pakistan to Uzbekistan by rail will be reduced from 35 to 3-5 days. In turn,

⁹⁸ Afghanistan in 2023: Taliban internal power struggles and militancy By Vanda Felbab-Brown // Brookings, February 3, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/02/03/afghanistan-in-2023-taliban-internal-power-struggles-and-militancy/>

⁹⁹ Iran: The Place Where The World's Rail Industry Goes To Feast. // Forbes, 31.10.2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/31/iran-the-place-where-the-worlds-rail-industry-goes-to-feast/?sh=691f78041ebf>

the cost of transporting a 20-pound container along the Tashkent-Karachi route, as of 2021, was estimated at \$1,400-1,600, which was cheaper than delivery through the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, which cost \$2,600-3,000.¹⁰⁰

Another indicator for the interest of Uzbekistan and Pakistan in the development of transport and transit ties with the Taliban Government is the growth of a trade on a bilateral basis, which strengthens the material ties between countries and raises the level of mutual trust. Uzbek-Afghan trade, despite the change of power in Afghanistan in 2021, has not undergone catastrophic changes. If in 2020 the value of trade turnover amounted to \$779.1 million, having decreased by 13.5% to \$673.7 million in 2021, by the end of 2022 it won back most of the fall and even increased it to \$759.9 million USD.¹⁰¹

The power change in Afghanistan also did not have catastrophic consequences for the country's trade relations with Pakistan. Trade between the two countries increased from July to February 2022-2023 fiscal year by 28% compared to the same period last fiscal year - from 1.04 to 1.33 billion dollars. At the same time, Pakistani exports increased by 32% - from \$500 million to \$658 million. Pakistan's imports of goods from Afghanistan over the specified period also showed an increase of 24% - from \$544.17 to \$675.01 million, largely due to increasing purchases of Afghan coal (10,000 tons).¹⁰²

An additional indicator is the Taliban's capability for providing security for the delivery of Uzbek and Pakistani cargo through their territory. The first test trials took place back in November 2021, when the first batch of Pakistani cargo arrived in Uzbekistan in transit through Afghanistan. From March 2022, deliveries of Pakistani meat to the Uzbek market has been going through the Afghan territory. Since May 2022, this route has been used to deliver Uzbek goods to Pakistan, which has made it easier for Uzbek truck drivers to enter by eliminating the so called "deposit rule".^{103,104}

¹⁰⁰ «Мазари-Шариф — Пешавар»: коридор в новое будущее Центральной и Южной Азии // Газета.uz, 11.02.2021: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/02/11/route/>

¹⁰¹ Сближение с Россией, Китай — главный поставщик. Как изменилась внешняя торговля Узбекистана в 2022 году // Газета.uz, 24 января 2023. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/01/24/trade-partners/>

¹⁰² Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan increases by 32% // Ariana News, March 13, 2023. <https://www.ariananews.af/pakistans-exports-to-afghanistan-increases-by-32/>

¹⁰³ Узбекистан и Пакистан договорились нарастить товарооборот до \$1 млрд // Spot.uz, 27 декабря 2022. <https://www.spot.uz/ru/2022/12/27/pakistan-trade/>

¹⁰⁴ Пакистан упростил прохождение таможи для узбекского транзита // Spot.uz, 17 ноября 2021. <https://www.spot.uz/ru/2021/11/17/pakistan/>

According to the data provided by Akramjon Nematov, Deputy Director of the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies (Uzbekistan), cargo transportation through Afghanistan increased 2.6 times in the first six months of 2022 and amounted to 330,000 tons. Out of these, 52,000 (15.7%) were transit traffic from the CIS countries, the Caucasus, the Middle East and the European Union, which is 3.5 times more than in the same period in 2021.¹⁰⁵

The indicators mentioned above clearly justify the collaborative effort to elevate the enhancement of Afghanistan's transit capabilities to a significantly improved and more practical level. This involves the ongoing preparation of a feasibility study for a specific project, which the involved parties have already initiated. In the summer of 2022, a research expedition was organised from the city of Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan to the city of Torkham in Pakistan.¹⁰⁶ Also, with the help of satellite imagery, a digital model of the route of the future railway was developed.¹⁰⁷

In January 2023, Mulla Bakhtur Rahman Sharaft, the head of the Afghanistan Railway Authority (ARA) met with the deputy head of Pakistan Railways Zafar Zaman Ranjha, Pakistan Railways' Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in Pakistan to discuss the Trans Afghan Railway line. At the meeting, Sharaft assured the Pakistani side that the Afghan side is fully prepared for the technical studies of the Trans-Afghan Railway, read the ARA statement. The Pakistani side, also said it was ready to start its preliminary studies and said the country has a joint commitment with Uzbekistan to pay the costs of technical studies.¹⁰⁸ In May 2023 a project office to coordinate the construction of the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway line was opened in Tashkent¹⁰⁹. On August 26-27 the Minister of Transport Ilkhom Makhkamov and President's Envoy for Afghanistan Ismatulla Ergashev visited Afghanistan and discussed the enhancement of

¹⁰⁵ Транзит грузов через Афганистан при «Талибане» вырос в разы // Spot.uz, 16 августа 2022. <https://www.spot.uz/ru/2022/08/16/afghanistan-transit/>

¹⁰⁶ Началась реализация проекта Трансафганской железной дороги // Газета.uz, 26 июля 2022. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/07/20/railway/>

¹⁰⁷ По ТВ показали маршруты крупных железнодорожных проектов и рассказали о финансировании // Кун.uz, 17.12.2022. <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2022/12/17/po-tv-pokazali-marshruty-kрупных-jyeleznodorojnyx-proyektov-i-rasskazali-o-finansirovanii>

¹⁰⁸ IEA and Pakistan railway officials discuss bilateral railway cooperation // Ariana News, January 4, 2023. <https://www.ariananews.af/iea-and-pakistan-railway-officials-discuss-bilateral-railway-cooperation/>

¹⁰⁹ A Project Office for coordinating the construction of the Uzbekistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan railway line opens in Tashkent. // Uza, 15 May 2023. https://uza.uz/en/posts/a-project-office-for-coordinating-the-construction-of-the-uzbekistan-afghanistan-pakistan-railway-line-opens-in-tashkent_482783?q=%2Fposts%2Fa-project-office-for-coordinating-the-construction-of-the-uzbekistan-afghanistan-pakistan-railway-line-opens-in-tashkent_482783

connectivity along Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan automobile and potential rail routes¹¹⁰.

Notably, among the countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan showed interest in participating in this project. As President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said at the IV Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia, his country is ready to take part in the construction of the Trans-Afghan railway by ensuring the supply of materials and rolling stock.¹¹¹

Russia also has a certain interest. In December 2021, the Russian Railways holding company announced its readiness to cooperate with the railways of Uzbekistan in terms of preparing a feasibility study for the Trans-Afghan Railway project.¹¹² In the context of the war in Ukraine and a significant reduction in trade relations between Russia and European countries, Moscow may view the South Asian region as an attractive potential market for expanding trade and economic contacts. In this context, it becomes necessary to create an appropriate railway infrastructure to access this market.

It is possible that in the future, India may also be interested in the project, in March 2022 they tested the delivery of its goods by land along the Mumbai-Karachi-Kabul-Termez route.¹¹³

The fourth factor which favours the transit potential of Afghanistan, is the energy interests of Turkmenistan and Russia. After the Taliban take over, Ashgabat resumed its efforts to implement the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project, designed in the 1990s to export 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas to the Pakistani and Indian markets. The project was not implemented due to the continuous instability in Afghanistan and high security risks of the construction on this territory. The estimated cost of the project is about 10 billion USD. The visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov to Kabul on the 30 and

¹¹⁰ Uzbekistan plans to enter ports of Indian Ocean through Afghanistan and Pakistan. // Kun.uz, 28 August 2023. <https://kun.uz/en/26880684>

¹¹¹ Александр Тен. Казахстан готов поддержать строительство Трансафганской железной дороги // Kursiv.media, 21 июля 2022. <https://uz.kursiv.media/2022-07-21/kazahstan-gotov-podderzhat-stroitelstvo-transafganskoj-zheleznoj-dorogi/>

¹¹² Ксения Потаева. Казахстан готов поддержать строительство Трансафганской железной дороги // Ведомости, 02 ноября 2021. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2021/11/02/894016-rzhd-zainteresovalas>

¹¹³ In a first, Indian trader exports goods to Uzbekistan via Pak and Afghanistan// Tribune India, March 17, 2022. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/in-a-first-indian-trader-exports-goods-to-uzbekistan-via-pak-and-afghanistan-378624>

31 October 2021, during which the Taliban Government agreed in principle to cooperate. It can be considered a landmark event for establishing a dialogue between Ashgabat and the Taliban around the gas pipeline.

The Afghan side expressed willingness to resume work on bilateral project. "We want as soon as possible to launch national projects between the two countries, because for their implementation all the necessary conditions, including security, have been created," it quoted Afghan Deputy PM Abdul Salam Hanafi as saying. "We will spare no effort to ensure the security of infrastructure and economic projects between the two countries," another Afghan official, Defence Minister Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, was quoted as saying.¹¹⁴

Against the backdrop of a sharp reduction in Russian gas supplies to the European market, Moscow with its urgent needs to redirect its gas flows to new markets has also become interested in the TAPI project. South Asia, with its growing energy hunger, seems to be a promising target. The first signal was sent by Energy Minister Nikolai Shulginov, who announced the following on January 19, 2023: "So far, we are not in this project (TAPI), but we do not exclude the possibility of Russia participating in this project. Of course, various issues must be addressed, including the security of its (passage) through Afghanistan. But I don't see any particular difficulties here, because this topic is being discussed, and we both understand that such security can be provided."¹¹⁵

Fifth factor. There is a certain probability that China may act as an investor in transport projects. The implementation of Afghanistan's road and rail transit potential may be in Beijing's interests, as new transport corridors can link large-scale Chinese infrastructure projects into a single system within the framework of the One Belt, One Road and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, including the port of Gwadar.

Equally China is unlikely to act as an investor in the TAPI gas pipeline project, as it will enhance the energy security of India's regional counterpart and increase the competitiveness of its economy. Also, TAPI may weaken the dependence of Turkmenistan on the Chinese market.

¹¹⁴ Taliban assure Turkmenistan of gas pipeline commitment, security // The New Arab Staff & Agencies, 01 November, 2021. <https://www.newarab.com/news/taliban-assure-turkmenistan-gas-pipeline-commitment-security>

¹¹⁵ В Минэнерго не исключили в будущем участия России в газопроводе ТАПИ // Interfax.ru, 19 января 2023. <https://www.interfax.ru/business/881467>

When speaking about the interest of China and Russia, and assessing their possible participation in financing transport projects through Afghanistan, it is also important to keep in mind that they may face the risks of new sanctions from the United States and its allies, which may limit participation from Chinese and Russian companies and banks in these projects.

Factors against transport projects through Afghanistan

Meanwhile, there are also a number of factors that can block the realisation of Afghanistan's transport and transit potential.

The first is the risks of a faction within the Taliban movement, which theoretically could lead to a destabilisation of the existing ruling system and result in armed clashes. First of all, we are talking about contradictions regarding the issue of the distribution of power and the very model of Afghanistan's development.

The spiritual leader of the Taliban Government, Amir al-Mu'minin Haibatullah Akhundzada, is trying to build a system of government that would strengthen his own positions whilst also limiting the power and political resources of the powerful military leaders of the Taliban. To do this, he, apparently, is trying to use the model of Imam Khomeini, who created in Iran two parallel systems of power and law enforcement agencies (secular and religious) based on a system of checks and balances. Simultaneously religious structures are endowed with great influence.

Haibatullah relies on representatives of the clergy close to him. These representatives formulate his Office, the Kandahar shura of the ulema, and various provincial shuras. He also controls the Ministry of Justice and Sharia courts. Using his rich experience in creating the internal security system of the Taliban, acquired during his time as Mullah Omar's deputy, Haibatullah is attempting to create a similar system of control over influential Taliban leaders, which is expressed in controlling almost any appointment of top and middle officials.

Since Haibatullah relies on the clergy who think in the fundamentalist ideas of Islam, and he himself is considered the leader of the religious fundamentalists of Afghanistan, he gives priority to tightening the Sharia rules in society. At the end of December 2022, The Taliban prohibited women from attending university, working in non-governmental organisations and the UN structures, adding to directives in 2022

banning them from visiting gyms, amusement parks and public baths, closing beauty salons, as well as curbing their ability to travel more than 70km without a male escort.¹¹⁶

Another pole of influence in the Taliban movement is formed by three of the most charismatic leaders of jihad and leading political figures in the Taliban Authorities - Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Baradar, acting Minister of Defence Mulla Yakoob (eldest son of Mulla Omar) and acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani. They try to think more pragmatically, realising that an ultra-conservative approach towards women can have negative consequences for the power of the Taliban, as it further delays the likelihood of recognition, risks continued international humanitarian assistance and threatens the economic development of Afghanistan.

Currently they are not in a position of privilege. As some observers point out, these high-ranking Taliban officials failed to influence the decisions restricting women's rights that were made by Haibatullah and his inner circle, which demonstrates a significant shift in power towards the Supreme Leader. This, in turn, is the reason for the aggravation of the internal political struggle, which is increasingly beginning to acquire a public character.

The warning speech against the monopolisation of power within the Taliban delivered by Sirajuddin Haqqani in Khost on February 11, 2023, can be considered an indicator of its beginning. He was answered by a supporter of the Supreme Leader, Governor of Kandahar Province, Haji Yusuf Wafa, who stated that "they swore allegiance to the emir, which required sacrifices", i.e. he believed the interests of the emir and the interests of Afghanistan were synonymous, thereby justifying the harsh authoritarianism unusual for the culture of the Pashtuns.¹¹⁷ Defence Minister Mulla Yaqoob responded by saying at one of the events that "God has blessed us with wisdom and the ability to reason. We have to think carefully and make a decision. Therefore, we should not obey anyone with blind eyes."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Taliban divisions inflamed by sweeping restrictions on women // The Straits Times, 13 December November, 2022. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/taliban-divisions-inflamed-by-sweeping-restrictions-on-women>

¹¹⁷ Akhundzada vs Haqqani, who will win the battle to lead the Taliban? By Kazim Ehsan // Kabul Now, March 15, 2023. <https://kabulnow.com/2023/03/akhundzada-v-haqqani-who-will-win-the-battle-to-lead-taliban/>

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

So far, it is too early to talk about a single consolidated group opposing the monopolisation of power by Haibatullah, but certain prerequisites for rapprochement between Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Yakoob, who compete with one another for influence, have already been noted.

The second factor, directly related to the first, is the likelihood of a sharp intensification of terrorist actions by ISIS-Khorasan, as well as military actions by the National Resistant Front of Afghanistan. If there are factions within the Taliban, this could lead to a weakening of its control over the internal political situation. With such a development of events, the risks for the current schemes of cargo transportation through the Afghan territory and investment in promising transport and pipeline projects will seriously increase.

The third factor could be the strengthening of the international community's position towards the Taliban in response to the refusal to follow the promises to form an inclusive government, respect the rights of women and girls, and ethnic minorities. This could have a number of unpleasant consequences for the Taliban, which could, among other things, create risks for transport projects.

Firstly, G7 countries and the largest international financial institutions associated with them, are unlikely to agree on investing in transport and pipeline projects, part of the profits from the use of which will end up in the pockets of the Taliban, strengthening their military and political positions.

Secondly, potential risks may be created by donors reaching a financial cliff edge resulting in a sharp decline in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, which will worsen the humanitarian situation, and then the domestic political stability in the country. Statistical data shows the level of Afghanistan's vulnerability. In 2022, the G7 countries provided \$3 billion in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, while after December edicts that violated women's rights, the G7 countries said that there would be "consequences for how our countries engage with the Taliban"¹¹⁹. As new priorities are arising for the major funders of the humanitarian aid programmes in Afghanistan, we may expect a decline in spending as the country moves further away from the immediate

¹¹⁹ Statement by the Chair of today's virtual G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting. // Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, 22 December 2022. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/global-challenges/news/article/statement-by-the-chair-of-today-s-virtual-g7-foreign-ministers-meeting-22-dec>

crisis. Furthermore, the donors are trying to find the difficult balance between looking for longer-term support to Afghanistan beyond humanitarian aid and the difficulty of not demonstrating political support to the Taliban authorities in the absence of formal political recognition.

Afghanistan will need even more humanitarian aid in 2023. The UN has already requested \$4.6 billion in aid, the largest single country request ever. This is because 28 million Afghans, or two-thirds of the country's population, are in need of humanitarian assistance.¹²⁰

The fourth factor which may stop the implementation of transport and pipeline projects through Afghanistan is the potential risks in the Taliban's relation with Uzbekistan and Pakistan.

In relations with Uzbekistan, the most likely risk so far is a water problem associated with the construction of the Qush-Tepa canal by the Taliban, designed to draw 10 cubic kilometres of water from the Amu Darya per year. This canal will reduce the amount of water used downstream in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Which in turn will increase the risks for agriculture and increase the trend of climate migration in the most vulnerable areas.

The risks associated with Pakistan are mainly related to the aggravation of the security problem in bilateral relations. Islamabad periodically accuses the current Afghan authorities of harbouring militants from the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan, which is responsible for numerous attacks on the Pakistani military and police, as well as terrorist attacks in the Pakistani regions and cities bordering Afghanistan.

According to Voice of America, "violence claimed by or blamed on the TTP and other militant groups killed almost 1,000 Pakistanis, including nearly 300 security forces, in some 376 terrorist attacks in 2022." This represents an approximately 50 percent increase since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

In the foreseeable future, the most likely option for Afghanistan to realise its transit potential will be the expansion of international road freight transportation, if

¹²⁰ Report says donors 'turning away' from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan // Al Jazeera, February 23, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/23/report-says-donors-turning-away-from-taliban-ruled-afghanistan>

there is no sharp deterioration in the internal political situation in the country and its relations with Uzbekistan and Pakistan. (To conclude, in the foreseeable future, the most likely option for Afghanistan to utilise its transit potential will be the expansion of international road freight transportation. However, tackling security risks in Afghanistan, providing stability and high commitment to creating conditions for smooth transit of goods via its territory is crucial for the sustainable development of the entire region. Moreover, the Taliban government should realise that the role of Afghanistan as the Eurasian connectivity hub would not be possible without predictable and partnering relations with its direct neighbours. As for the implementation of railway and gas pipeline projects, it would only be possible if there is at least partial international recognition of the Taliban authorities, which will reduce investment risks and provide a green light to the work of international financial organisations and construction companies.

CENTRAL ASIA'S RELATIONS WITH TALIBAN- RULED AFGHANISTAN

Hamza Boltaev, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Introduction

The Taliban's lightning-fast takeover of entire Afghanistan received rather calm and "wait and see" style reactions from almost all the Central Asian Republics (CAR) with Tajikistan being unusually outspoken about the dramatic events unfolding in its southern neighbor. Although the Central Asian Republics did not welcome the Biden administration's swift decision on the allied forces' sudden departure from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, they reluctantly adapted to the reality. Since then, the Central Asian countries' approaches towards the Taliban-led Afghanistan have shared a great deal of similarities with the trade-driven pragmatism being the most important characteristics of these relations.

This paper will explore some of the important distinctive characteristics of these relations through addressing every Central Asian Republics' affair with the Taliban-led Afghanistan.

For the most part, the relations between Afghanistan and the five republics of Central Asia were shaped by the Western countries' collective approach towards the recognition issue of the incumbent Taliban government in Afghanistan. Understandably, since the beginning of the Taliban rule, the United States with its allies has been reluctant to recognize the Taliban as an official government of Afghanistan due to the well-known concerns¹²¹. This situation has left many regional countries in a strategic ambiguity - even though the CAR have officially chosen to avoid any recognition and formal contacts with the Taliban, they have kept doors open for any necessary contacts and pragmatic relations. This pragmatism could, in the future, probably give rise to another deeper issue - the erosion of trust - between these republics and the Western countries. This situation could be called as a "Reciprocal doubt" where on the one hand, CAR's bettering relations with the Taliban-run

¹²¹ Brookings. 30 09 2022 г. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/recognition-and-the-taliban-2/> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

Afghanistan could overtime create some unease and potentially be assumed by the West as a shift towards the recognition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the Western countries' direct/indirect intense exchanges with the Taliban could also raise doubt in the eyes of CAR towards the west.

Uzbekistan - Afghanistan

For Uzbekistan, the issue of recognition has not been an obstacle for maintaining robust trade relations with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Thereby, since August 2021, trade and diplomatic exchanges have remained to be the bedrock of the cooperation between the two. In 2022, Uzbekistan exported more than \$750 million worth of goods to Afghanistan. The imports were substantially less than the exports to Afghanistan with \$9.3 million in the same year, showing a huge trade imbalance between these countries¹²². Uzbekistan also sees Afghanistan as a potential trade route; therefore, Uzbekistan was a principal supporter of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Qobul-Peshowar railroad project which kickstarted in March 2022, soon after Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan agreed upon to a roadmap for the construction of this project on February 2, 2022, in Tashkent¹²³. However, the Qush-Tepa canal project, the Taliban is vigorously pursuing to put in operation, appears to be the most pressing challenge in the Afghan-Uzbek relations. Due to the absence of any official contacts, it has almost been impossible for Uzbekistan to legally incorporate Afghanistan into the broader regional water regulatory system which only regulates Central Asian nations' water affairs.

Kazakhstan - Afghanistan

The Kazakh - Afghan relations have also been improving for the last two years. The war in Ukraine was a probable impetus for this increasingly dynamic relationship. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine seemed to have pushed Kazakhstan to diversify its trade relations with Russia, in addition to the greater need for minimizing the logistical interdependence with its northern neighbor. To this end, Afghanistan might be crucial in the eyes of the strategists in Astana as one of the senior politician, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Integration Serik Zhumangarin pointed out,

¹²² Statistics Agency. Export of goods and services of the Republic of Uzbekistan by country. 21 07 2023 г. <https://stat.uz/en/official-statistics/merchandise-trade> (дата обращения: 2023 12 15 г.).

¹²³ Khan, Israr. Work on \$5bn Pak-Afghan-Uzbek railroad kicks off. 27 03 2022 г. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/944859-work-on-5bn-pak-afghan-uzbek-railroad-kicks-off> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

“Politics is politics, economics is economics”¹²⁴. As a result, several key areas including trade, constructions and mining cooperation clearly stood out in the Kazakh-Afghan cooperation. In 2022, the trade turnover with Afghanistan doubled the volume of 2021 and reached \$ 987.9 million¹²⁵ with exports being the major part of this cooperation. In January 2023, Afghanistan has become one of the top ten trading partners of Kazakhstan. Afghanistan has also been the largest market for the Kazakh grain and flour with more than 90%¹²⁶ of which being a Kazakh origin. Moreover, the Kazakh-Afghan business forum which was held in Kabul in April 2023, where the announcement of the trading house in Kabul was made is another testimony to the deepening of the economic cooperation among both sides. In addition to the trade relations, Kazakhstan has also been actively exploring the possibilities of participating in railway development projects in Afghanistan. To discuss the matter, Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Mavlavi Amir Khan Muttaki met with Kazakh Ambassador to Afghanistan Alimkhan Essengeldiyev on March 12, 2023 in Kabul¹²⁷. Kazakhstan is also exploring the possibilities of bypassing Uzbekistan in exporting goods especially grain and flour to Afghanistan citing the higher rate of transit charges by Uzbekistan. On this note, Turkmenistan¹²⁸ is said to be interested in both developing new transportation systems through its territory and offering quite lucrative discount, 30%, to Kazakhstan. Despite being far from implementation at the current stage, Kazakhstan has been eying to participate in the mining industry of Afghanistan as two of the Kazakhstan’s mining companies, “KazMunaiGas” and “Kazgeologia” are quite fond of being present in this market.

¹²⁴ Kazakhstan today. Kazakhstan to boost trade coop with Afghanistan. 25 04 2023 г. https://www.kt.kz/eng/politics/kazakhstan_to_boost_trade_coop_with_afghanistan_1377949457.html (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹²⁵ The Astana Times. Kazakhstan, Afghanistan Pledge to Bolster Trade, Investment Partnership. 04 08 2023 г. <https://astanatimes.com/2023/08/kazakhstan-afghanistan-pledge-to-bolster-trade-investment-partnership/#:~:text=The%20trade%20turnover%20between%20Kazakhstan,Kazakhstan's%20exports,%20mainly%20processed%20products.> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹²⁶ APK Inform. Afghanistan remains a priority flour market for Kazakhstan. 01 04 2023 г. <https://www.apk-inform.com/en/news/1535490> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹²⁷ Ariana news. Afghanistan, Kazakhstan in move to strengthen ties. 13 03 2023 г. <https://www.ariananews.af/afghanistan-kazakhstan-in-move-to-strengthen-ties/> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹²⁸ Orient. Kazakhstan considers the opportunity of exporting grain to Afghanistan through Turkmenistan. 29 02 2020 г. <https://orient.tm/en/post/5724/kazakhstan-considers-the-opportunity-of-exporting-grain-to-afghanistan-through-turkmenistan> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

Tajikistan - Afghanistan

Tajikistan has also been following the footprint of the other regional nations in its approach towards the Taliban-run Afghanistan. This reality is understandably a part of the general trend today which has to do with being practical not political. The early approach towards the Taliban rule was not as pragmatic as it is today therefore, the Tajik government was openly hypercritical about the Taliban's rapid advancement in Afghanistan. The Tajik government even openly announced to accept a thousand of Afghan refugees into its territory¹²⁹ even though later it u-turned from this action and started closing the border to further Afghan refugees as well as sent many refugees back to Afghanistan¹³⁰. The changing tone, on the part of Tajikistan, could signal about the need for having some practical relations with Afghanistan as there are pressing challenges ranging from trade, terrorism, border clashes, drug trafficking, question of refugees and issue of ethnic Tajik people living in Afghanistan which require some degree of engagement.

The main driver for the thawing bilateral relations between two countries seems to be a trade and economic cooperation since, Afghanistan, at least for Tajikistan, is too huge market to be ignored. Total trade turnover between two countries reached \$111 million last year¹³¹ with the electricity being the main product that Tajikistan exported to Afghanistan. Total amount of electricity exported to Afghanistan was \$44.9 million only in the first half of 2022¹³².

Turkmenistan - Afghanistan

Although the relationship between two countries have often been eclipsed by other concerns that are strictly confined to the region, Turkmen-Taliban relations are nevertheless one of the important developments to look at. The essence of this relations can probably be a cooperation in the areas like the energy and developing new transport

¹²⁹ UNHCR. UN High Commissioner for Refugees calls for greater support for Afghan refugees in Tajikistan. 18 03 2022 г. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/un-high-commissioner-refugees-calls-greater-support-afghan-refugees-tajikistan> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹³⁰ Ruchi Kumar, Hikmat Noori. Tajikistan 'rounding up and deporting Afghan refugees'. 09 09 2022 г. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/09/tajikistan-rounding-up-and-deporting-afghan-refugees> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹³¹ Euroasianet. Tajikistan: Taliban take control of consulate. 27 03 2023 г. <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-taliban-take-control-of-consulate> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹³² Ariana News. Tajikistan increases export volume to Afghanistan by 38%. 27 07 2022 г. <https://www.ariananews.af/tajikistan-increases-export-volume-to-afghanistan-by-38/> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

corridors. To this end, Turkmenistan has continued to keep a practical relation with the Taliban government. The Taliban government's former acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited Ashgabat in mid-January¹³³ this year to discuss the gas project (TAPI) and Turkmen-Afghan-Pakistan high voltage power transmission project (TAP). Moreover, Turkmenistan is also interested in the development of the cargo transportation through Afghanistan. Thereby, Turkmenistan is eyeing the construction and the modernization of transport infrastructure in Afghanistan¹³⁴. It includes highways, railways, and improving customs procedures. Apart from the transportation and trade cooperations, Turkmenistan as a downstream region of the Amu Darya basin, is deeply concerned with the construction of Qush-Tepa canal in the northern Afghanistan. On August 4, 2023, Turkmenistan hosted first ever trilateral summit between Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan in Ashgabat where parties shared their concerns about the rational use of transboundary water resources. Among other issues, the "...protection, and rational use of water resources..."¹³⁵ was released as a joint statement after the summit. There are several other issues including border clashes and the threat of terrorism about which Turkmenistan and Afghanistan is continuing a practical dialogue.

Kyrgyzstan - Afghanistan

Bilateral trade was a dominant force in relations between two countries. In the first 9 months of 2023, the trade turnover reached \$13.2 million with the agricultural products being the most traded goods¹³⁶. However, during this period, Kyrgyzstan imported from Afghanistan little over than \$2 million worth of goods which is a well-known characteristic of the Central Asian Republics trade cooperation with Afghanistan. Interestingly, the Taliban rule saw the rapid increase of export goods from

¹³³ Jalilov, Orkhan. Turkmen, Afghan Officials Discuss Energy and Transport Projects. 18 01 2022 г. <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/turkmen-afghan-officials-discuss-energy-and-transport-projects-2022-1-18-3/> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹³⁴ Azer News. Turkmenistan, Afghanistan discuss dev't of co-op in transit cargo transportation. 30 05 2023 г. <https://www.azernews.az/region/210455.html> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹³⁵ Nelson, Haley. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan Push for Regional Independence with First-Ever Trilateral Summit. 09 08 2023 г. <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/uzbekistan-tajikistan-and-turkmenistan-push-for-regional-independence-with-first-ever-trilateral-summit> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹³⁶ Kg24 News. Kyrgyzstan's Trade Turnover with Afghanistan for Six Months Amounted to \$13.2 Million. 06 09 2023 г. <https://kg24.news/finances/tovarooborot-kyrgyzstana-s-afganistanom-za-polgoda-sostavil-13-2-mln.html> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

Kyrgyzstan from \$4 million to \$26 million in 2022, the reason of which could potentially be explained by the rebounding trade cooperation after the pandemic restrictions ended. Apart from trade, Kyrgyzstan seems to be mainly concerned by the security challenges that might potentially be spread out of Taliban governed Afghanistan into the country¹³⁷. Also, both sides have been continuing discussions over the CASA-1000 project which is planned to supply Afghanistan with Kyrgyz electricity¹³⁸.

Conclusion

Central Asian countries' Afghanistan policy has so far been dominated by carefully crafted recalibration of their practical interests with avoiding any official exchanges as well as recognition of the Taliban government given it might give a wrong signal to those who are not having a normal relation with the Taliban government today. Therefore, CAR affairs with the Taliban government have experienced some downs at the early period of the Taliban rule, nevertheless, pragmatism and the policy centered around putting the economic interests first eventually prevailed. Moreover, CAR seem to be still exploring various ways to keep doors wide open for a win-win economic cooperation with the Taliban-run Afghanistan without incurring the wrath of the international community. The "collective approach" narrated mainly by the western countries towards the issue of recognition could also be assumed to be transforming by the CAR into more practical, economic cooperation without any political engagement with the Taliban government. At the same time, the western countries affairs with the Taliban could also trigger some unease in CAR. This CAR-West relations on the Taliban issue could be called as "*Reciprocal doubt*" where the lack of trust is a dominant between the two. Apart from all the mentioned traditional challenges, the new issue regarding the construction of Qush-Tepa canal has emerged between Afghanistan and its immediate northern neighbors.

¹³⁷ Kabar. FMs of Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan discuss topical issues of bilateral relations. 14 03 2022 г. <https://en.kabar.kg/news/fms-of-kyrgyzstan-and-afghanistan-discuss-topical-issues-of-bilateral-relations/> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

¹³⁸ Kabar. FMs of Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan discuss topical issues of bilateral relations. 14 03 2022 г. <https://en.kabar.kg/news/fms-of-kyrgyzstan-and-afghanistan-discuss-topical-issues-of-bilateral-relations/> (дата обращения: 15 12 2023 г.).

THE CURRENT STATE OF PARTICIPATION OF CENTRAL ASIAN NATIONALS IN THE ACTIVITIES OF TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

Rustam Makhmudov, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Alisher Rakhimov, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Akram Umarov, Deputy Director (IAIS)

Introduction

The radical change in the situation in Afghanistan, brought about by the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021, raised the question of the further development of the jihadist terrorist movements in the region, as well as the participation of citizens of Central Asian countries. Experts' assessments, made immediately after the fall of Kabul, that Central Asia would be the target of direct coercive pressure from international groups, which would receive Taliban protection and funding, have not yet come true.

The reason was the change in the status of the Taliban from an insurgency into a state-building force. However, this does not mean that the Taliban itself is not undergoing complex processes related to its two development vectors - one focused on Afghan interests and the other focused on continuing the jihad.

Moreover, the Taliban itself is under challenging relations with other regional and international terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, Jamaat Ansarullah, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, etc. The Taliban is forced to cooperate or provide protection, whereas, it is in war with others such as ISKP and IMU. All this creates space for the development of processes in which citizens of the Central Asian countries can participate, especially since the threat of disseminating the ideas of radical Islam in the region continues to be relevant.

The Taliban's ambivalent relationship with Islamic terrorist groups

One of the key factors in assessing the prospects of increased participation of citizens of Central Asian countries in terrorist groups based in Afghanistan is the factor of further ways of development of the Taliban movement. Throughout the history of Taliban development, it has been closely associated with numerous terrorist groups

operating in Pakistan and Kashmir, Xinjiang, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.

After the formation of the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in 1996, when the Taliban controlled 95% of the Afghan territory, this public entity became an important part of the so-called «Islamic International», acting on the axis of «Afghanistan - Kosovo - Bosnia - Philippines - Chechnya». Within this axis, fighters were recruited, trained, and rotated.

Many foreign terrorists have found refuge in Afghanistan. In particular, the headquarters of the «Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan» (IMU) was in Kandahar, from where terrorist actions against the countries of Central Asia were planned.

Areas of Kabul, Vazir Akbar Khan, and Shahrinaw have become the home base of Chechen militants. They were home to 250 to 300 Chechen families who were fighting against the Northern Alliance in the provinces of Kunduz, Takhar, and near Mazar-i-Sharif. The number of Chechen fighters was estimated at 300-700.¹³⁹

In 1997, the ideologues of the Uighur terrorist group Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) Hassan Mahsum and Abudukadir Yapuchan and their supporters took refuge in Afghanistan. Until 2001 ETIM was stationed in a fortified area in the Tora Bora Mountains. ETIM fighters were trained in camps near Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kunduz, Herat, Kandahar, Shibergan and Wardak. The Uighurs joined the «Chinese Battalion of the Turkestan Army», numbering up to 320 militants, as part of the Taliban armed forces.

The Taliban also had close relations with Arab terrorists and, above all, al-Qaeda, which actively supported the Taliban in its confrontation with the Northern Alliance. It was the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, organized by Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who had taken refuge in the Taliban, that led to the US military operation and the overthrow of the Taliban.

The Taliban continued to actively cooperate with international terrorist organizations between 2001 and 2021 when it led military operations against the forces of the governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, as well as the US and its allies. However, after the return to power in August 2021 and the restoration of so called «Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan» (IEA) the unambiguous line of the Taliban to close

¹³⁹ Another Chechen trace, 07.23.2002. Izvestiya. <https://iz.ru/news/264795>

cooperation with international terrorist organizations became less obvious, this was due to the Taliban's desire to gain official recognition from the international community as the new authorities of Afghanistan. Thus, a certain ambivalence has emerged in the Taliban's strategic line, opening up opportunities to attract jihadists from Central Asia.

On the one hand, the Taliban has officially given security assurances to the international community and its neighbours. On the 15th of September 2021, Afghanistan's foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi stated that the Taliban governing the country remained committed to not allowing militants to use their territory to launch attacks.¹⁴⁰ This was prompted by the Taliban's desire to gain international recognition and access to foreign financial assistance and investment, which are essential for social and political stability in Afghanistan. On the other hand, since coming to power, the Taliban have not broken off relations with those terrorist organizations with which they previously had partnerships.

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri continued to take refuge in Kabul until July 31, 2022, when he was eliminated by a US drone strike. In addition, Dr. Amin-ul-Haq, a major Al-Qaeda player in Afghanistan who was in charge of Osama Bin Laden's security in Tora Bora, returned to Afghanistan on the 30th of August to his native Nangarhar province after it fell to the Taliban. Dr. Amin became close to Osama Bin Laden in the 80s when he worked with Abdullah Azzam in Maktaba Akhidmat.¹⁴¹ In October 2021, the son of Osama bin Laden Abdullah secretly visited Afghanistan and met with officials from the Taliban government.¹⁴² According to Afghan opposition sources, al-Qaeda forces in the Indian subcontinent began to move freely in Afghanistan after the Taliban returned to power.

The Taliban opted to maintain ties with Al-Qaeda despite an agreement with the US concluded on 29 February 2020 in Doha (Qatar), under which they undertook not to allow any of its members, other individuals, or groups, including Al-Qaeda, to use Afghan territory to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Minister pledges Taliban govt won't allow militant attacks by Kathy Gannob, September 15, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-cabinets-taliban-militant-groups-3652ae786079637a56a4edff5063fe5f>

¹⁴¹ <https://twitter.com/bsarwary/status/1432254182468333568?lang=en>

¹⁴² گزارش شورای امنیت سازمان ملل درباره سفر پسر بن لادن به افغانستان/
<https://8am.media/un-security-council-report-on-bin-ladens-sons-visit-to-afghanistan/>

¹⁴³ Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America,

Nor have they severed ties with China's security-threatening Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Pakistan's Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). As the Taliban relies on Chinese investment and financial assistance to solve their economic problems, it removed Uyghur militants from an area near Afghanistan's border with China in September-October 2021.¹⁴⁴

However, according to Afghan opposition sources, Taliban cooperation with Uighur terrorists continues. Haji Furkan, the leader of ETIM, was among the 16 terrorist group leaders who arrived in Kabul on 20 August 2022 and spent three days at the Haji Afzal residence of the Haqqani Network. There they met with Mr. Sirajuddin Haqqani, Head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Taliban authorities, and agreed with him to redeploy 50% of the personnel of their armed units to the northern regions of Afghanistan bordering Uzbekistan and Tajikistan within 6 months.¹⁴⁵

As for the TTP, they were able to create shelters on the Afghan part of the border with Pakistan in the area of the «Durand line», most likely with the consent of the Afghan Taliban. The TTP has sworn allegiance to the current Taliban supreme leader Mullah Haybatullah Akhundzadeh. TTP militants take refuge in Afghan shelters after attacks on Pakistani soldiers and civilians. The presence of rear bases allows them to expand the geography of their terrorist activities in Pakistan. Now they operate not only in the Pashtun-populated province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but in the province of Baluchistan, in the region of Kulichak, where a subdivision of Zhob province was established in 2023.¹⁴⁶ Islamabad's attempts to broker a lasting ceasefire with the TTP through the Afghan Taliban had only a short-term effect. The leaders of the Afghan Taliban may be playing a double game, using the TTP to pressure Pakistan and stop its efforts to build engineering facilities along the «Durand Line», which is not recognized by Afghans. It must be said that all of this contradicts the 2021 promise to Islamabad

February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-uyghurs-china/31494226.html>

¹⁴⁵ طالبان ۱۶ عضو رهبري گروه‌های خارجی را در شمال شرق مستقر کردند

<https://8am.media/the-taliban-deployed-16-members-of-the-leadership-of-foreign-groups-in-the-northeast/>

¹⁴⁶ Pakistani Taliban move into new territories by Zia Ur Rehman, May 03, 2023. DW. <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistani-taliban-move-into-new-territories/a-65503987>

that the Taliban government will not allow the TTP to use Afghan territory for operations against Pakistan.¹⁴⁷

Thus, it is obvious that the Taliban is not completely breaking with jihadist ideas, as also indicated by the statement made by the Taliban leader Mullah Khaybutullah Akhundzadeh on the 10th of January 2023 at a meeting with the head of the movement's directorates responsible for human resources, in which he pointed out that «the Taliban soldiers must wear armour and be ready to extend the rule of sharia to the whole world». This was seen by many Afghan, Iranian, and Russian resources as a call for cross-border jihad.¹⁴⁸

Taliban and Central Asian terrorist groups

This regard raises the question of the extension of current and future Taliban support for terrorist groups aimed at recruiting Central Asian nationals and spreading jihad to the north. According to available data, the Taliban provide direct support to the Jamaat Ansarullah group and the Tehrik-e Taliban group of Tajikistan, which are mainly composed of Tajik citizens.

The first information reports about the existence of Jamaat Ansarullah appeared in September 2010, when the group claimed responsibility for an explosion in Khujand. In 2011, calls began to appear online on Ansarullah's behalf, including video messages in which members of the group called out Tajiks for jihad. After the ban on the activities of Jamaat Ansarullah in Tajikistan in May 2012, the group launched activity on the Internet to recruit young Tajiks for jihad in Syria, and social networks were filled with appeals on behalf of Ansarullah. On its official website, the group shared news about the “victories” of the ISIS in Syria and Iraq, talked about Tajiks who became “shahids”.

Since the Taliban banned foreign extremist organizations under their control from online propaganda and recruitment in 2020, the spread of Islamist propaganda by such groups on the Internet has significantly decreased¹⁴⁹. Only in the spring of 2022, Jamaat Ansarullah commander Mehdi Arslan (Mohammad Sharipov) posted a video of

¹⁴⁷ Taliban have reassured won't allow TTP to use Afghan land against Pakistan: Sheikh Rashid, August 23, 2021. DAWN. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1642195>

¹⁴⁸ دستور جدید رهبر طالبان؛ برای «جهاد برون مرزی» آماده شوید ۱۴۰۱/۱۲/۲۱ ۰۹:۱۲ <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/بخش-خوان-سایت-بخش-62/3951343-جدید-دستور-رهبر-طالبان-ر-هبر-جدید-دستور-62/3951343> شویید-آماده-مرزی-برون

¹⁴⁹ О боевиках из Центральной Азии на территории Афганистана и Сирии. // RATS SCO, 26 January 2023. https://ecrats.org/ru/security_situation/analysis/1965/

the militants of his group on his social network page. One of the group's latest media and social media references was also linked to the January 2023 killing of Abu Omar Tajik, who led about 90 members of the Jamaat Ansarullah in Badakhshan.¹⁵⁰ Together with other terrorist groups leaders Abu Omar was involved in arms and drug smuggling in Badakhshan area and was killed under mysterious circumstances by an unknown group that is likely linked to smugglers or foreign terrorist groups.¹⁵¹

Until August 2021, Jamaat Ansarullah militants, also known in Afghanistan as the Tajik Taliban, fought in the ranks of the Afghan Taliban against US and NATO forces, as well as the army of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Jamaat Ansarullah unit of up to 300 people played a crucial role in establishing Taliban power in the districts bordering Tajikistan in the northeastern Afghan province of Badakhshan.¹⁵² Historically, there are many radical Central Asians in these areas who are ready to return home and try to repeat the success of the Taliban in their homeland.

Moreover, today Tajik militants from Jamaat Ansarullah are actually performing the functions of the Taliban border guard here, which seriously irritates and worries Dushanbe. Jamaat Ansarullah has installed an observation tower on the border to monitor the Tajik territory. The tower also houses sound-amplifying equipment, with the help of which provocative speeches against the Tajik authorities are broadcast.

According to the Afghan opposition, the current leader Jamaat Ansarullah Mawlawi Ibrahim (aka Tajik Motasim Billah) was appointed by the Haqqani Network to command a network of foreign fighters in northern Afghanistan.¹⁵³ In turn, the commander of Ansarullah Mehdi Arsalan created in 2022 the Tehrik-e Taliban of Tajikistan (TTT), the number of up to 200 fighters located near the Tajik-Afghan border in Badakhshan. According to some reports, TTT is part of Jamaat Ansarullah.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ "One of two": How was Abu Omar Tajik killed?". Sangar. 05.01.2023. <https://sangar.info/en/the/t/one-of-two-how-was-abu-omar-killed>

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² "Are the militants ready to storm?", Pravda, 11.08.2022. <https://gazeta-pravda.ru/issue/87-31290-11-avgusta-2022-goda/boeviki-gotovy-k-shturmu>

¹⁵³ طالبان ۱۶ عضو رهبری گروه‌های خارجی را در شمال شرق مستقر کردند
<https://8am.media/the-taliban-deployed-16-members-of-the-leadership-of-foreign-groups-in-the-northeast/>

¹⁵³ <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistani-taliban-move-into-new-territories/a-65503987>

¹⁵⁴ منابع معتبر از ظهور "جنیش طالبان تاجیکستان" در شمال افغانستان خبر دادند, ۱۴۰۱/۰۴/۳۱
<https://www.afintl.com/202207226732>

The question of the Taliban's connection with the «Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan» (IMU) remains open. Until 2015, IMU was in close union with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, in 2015, IMU leaders Usmon Ghazi and Sadullah Urgenchi took an oath to ISIS Head Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁵⁵ Spiritual leader, Sheikh Muhammad Ali, likewise pledged to IS. The main reason for the transition to ISIS was that the Taliban concealed the death of Taliban founder Mullah Omar and that the ISIS offered IMU a more ambitious concept of extending influence to the territory of Central Asia.¹⁵⁶

Since then, IMU has been actively involved in the recruitment and training of Central Asian nationals for ISIS. The main recruitment efforts were in Central Asia and among Central Asian migrant workers. After recruitment, migrants were sent to military training camps in North Waziristan and then to war in Afghanistan or Syria, often with families who settled in ISIS-controlled territories.¹⁵⁷ IMU, as an ally of ISIS, was declared an enemy of the Taliban, who killed a large number of IMU militants during the fighting, including their leader Usman Ghazi and the son of one of the founders of IMU, Tahir Yuldash.¹⁵⁸ However, according to the opposition National Resistance Front, Sheikh Zakir was present at the already-mentioned meeting in Kabul. Acting head of Ministry of Internal Affairs Sirajuddin Haqqani and leaders of 16 terrorist groups had meeting including the head of the IMU. In these meetings, Shaikh Zakir and Abdul Haq from Haji Forqan Network assumed the responsibility of strengthening Al Qaeda and communicating with other branches of the group. After the meeting, he left for the Baharak area in Badakhshan province.¹⁵⁹

If this information is correct, it is possible that the IMU, or part of its leaders and militants, has again begun to cooperate with the Taliban, which in turn, raises the question of the likely Taliban focus on increasing their propaganda and recruitment efforts among Uzbek citizens in Central Asia and Russia.

¹⁵⁵ UN: Central Asian fighters are among senior ISIS commanders, October 12, 2015. [Gazeta.uz. https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2015/10/12/un/](https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2015/10/12/un/)

¹⁵⁶ Accelerationist Narratives: Involuntary Celibacy by Erica Barbarossa, 27th January 2022. Global Network on Extremism and Technology. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/03/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistans-enduring-influence-on-is-khurasan/>

¹⁵⁷ UN: Central Asian fighters are among senior ISIS commanders, October 12, 2015. [Gazeta.uz. https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2015/10/12/un/](https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2015/10/12/un/)

¹⁵⁸ Accelerationist Narratives: Involuntary Celibacy by Erica Barbarossa, 27th January 2022. Global Network on Extremism and Technology. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/03/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistans-enduring-influence-on-is-khurasan/>

¹⁵⁹ Taliban Relocated Leaders of 16 Foreign Terrorist Groups in Northeastern Afghanistan. September 26, 2022. National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. <https://www.nrfafg.org/en/view-points/northeast.html>

According to the law enforcement agencies of Tajikistan, most of the Central Asian fighters present in Afghanistan are serving in the Taliban as instructors and mercenaries in special units «Shuhado», «Badri», «Mansuri», «Umari» and «Intihori». All of them are members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Defense and Security of the IEA. Central Asian fighters, inspired by the experience of the Taliban takeover by force, do not hide that their goal is to overthrow the secular regimes of the States of the region.¹⁶⁰

Islamic State - Khorasan Province as a key rival of the Taliban in attracting fighters from Central Asia

The rival of the Taliban in the field of recruitment of citizens of Central Asia is the branch of the Islamic State «ISIS-Khorasan». The group was formed on January 10, 2015, when six commanders of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan publicly pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The first leader of ISIL-Khorasan was Hafiz Saeed Khan. They were later joined by some warlords from the Afghan provinces of Logar and Kunar, Central Asian militants, primarily from IMU. The eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar became the main base of ISIS-Khorasan.

This organization managed to survive despite devastating attacks from Afghan and international security forces for many years. The previous Afghan regime and the forces of the international coalition stated that in the period from 2015 to 2020, more than 13 thousand militants of the group were killed or captured, including five emirs in a row¹⁶¹. Nevertheless, it has demonstrated amazing resilience, having managed to make up for lost strength, expand its geographical presence and increase the number and intensity of operations.

During and after the fall of the former government, about 2-3 thousand supporters of ISKP, including 400 foreign citizens from 14 countries, were released from prison¹⁶². Among them were senior leaders, commanders, media propagandists of the organization. IS-Khorasan has ceased to be pursued by NATO airstrikes, having gained greater freedom of movement inside Afghanistan, and now seeks to unite many regional

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/24122>

¹⁶¹ Shashok L., "Afghanistan is turning into a sanctuary of terrorists", *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 15.12.2022. <https://centrasia.org/news.php?st=1671140040>

¹⁶² Jadoon A., Sayed A., Mines A., *The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan*. CTC Sentinel, Jan 2020, vol. 15, Issue 1, p.37. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-state-threat-in-taliban-afghanistan-tracing-the-resurgence-of-islamic-state-khorasan/>

groups, including some militants from the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Jamaat Ansarullah, as well as defectors from the Taliban.

In addition, ISIS allocates significant resources to its branches in Afghanistan, along with groups in a number of African countries. The trend has been particularly pronounced as IS group comes under intense attack in Syria and the weakening of its affiliates in Southeast Asia, Libya and Egypt. ISIS “core” is intensifying its contacts with the ISKP to help it strengthen its potential, expand recruitment of new members and emphasize its supposed successes through increased propaganda.

ISKP is fundamentally a transnational organization. This is indicated by its very name, where "Khorasan" covers parts of Afghanistan, Iran, Central and South Asia. The goal of the Islamic State is to create a single World Islamic Caliphate with the absorption of the territory of all countries and peoples professing Islam. Unlike its main opponent, the Taliban, which claims only to control the territory of Afghanistan and does not claim any territorial claims to neighbouring countries, ISKP considers the existing national borders in this region illegal and arbitrarily established.

ISKP has demonstrated its ability to conduct operations against the Taliban in a number of areas of Afghanistan. In 2022, its militants carried out 181 attacks in Afghanistan, killing and injuring 1,188 people. In terms of the number of victims, the Afghan branch of the Islamic State was ahead of the offshoots of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (833 and 887, respectively), and only second to the Islamic State in Nigeria (1412 people).¹⁶³ These ISKP attacks are part of a set of measures to delegitimize the Taliban regime and prevent recognition of their government internationally. Despite claims by the Taliban of significant success against ISKP in their counter-terrorism operations, deadly attacks, such as the January 11, 2023 suicide bombing outside the Afghan Foreign Ministry, signal an ongoing security crisis in the country.

In the northern direction, the IS-Khorasan group seeks to recreate by force the Maverannahr province, which belongs to the ancient territory north of Amu Darya. In an attempt to attract the attention of local Uzbek and Tajik jihadists, IS-Khorasan claimed on the shelling of border areas of the Central Asian states, which were part of

¹⁶³ Mapping the Islamic State. Multimedia Project of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 21.03. 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home>

the Islamic State's global operation called «Revenge of the Two Sheikhs».¹⁶⁴ The Islamic State provided an audio message from a representative of the organization, as well as photographs and video recordings of the shelling on April 18, 2022 from the territory of Northern Afghanistan in the direction of the Uzbek city of Termez¹⁶⁵. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the interim government of Afghanistan denied this information.

It is likely that the statements by IS-Khorasan were a signal for the Uzbek Taliban. In mid-January 2022, Uzbek Taliban units in Afghanistan's Faryab province rebelled against the Taliban's central leadership, opening a rift between them. In this regard, IS-Khorasan is trying to exploit this split to increase fragmentation within the Taliban. It should be noted that IS-Khorasan has been attracting militants from Central Asia for a long time. In particular, the organization has a successful experience in recruiting the commanders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

On May 7, 2022, the IS-Khorasan group also announced the launch of missiles at Tajik military installations along the border with Afghanistan¹⁶⁶. According to analysts at the Institute for the Study of War, demonstrating that IS-Khorasan is able to carry out attacks against the Tajik government, the organization is trying to encourage Tajik jihadist groups such as Jamaat Ansarullah to switch sides¹⁶⁷.

ISKP's media strategy

The Islamic State manages to stay afloat, maintaining its image as an international terrorist group, both through the creation of a global network of affiliates and through powerful propaganda. Therefore, the Islamic State attaches the same importance to the activities of the propagandists as the activities of the militants. In competition with other Islamist groups, the Islamic State was able to create the most powerful propaganda message, primarily through the proclamation of the "Caliphate."

¹⁶⁴ The beginning of this campaign was announced on April 17, 2022 by the representative of the Islamic State Abu Umar al-Muhajir, calling on supporters of the organization to carry out terrorist attacks to avenge the death of the leader of the organization Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Kureishi and the official representative of the group Abu Hamza al-Kureishi.

¹⁶⁵ "The "Islamic State" announced rocket attacks on Uzbekistan from the territory of Afghanistan". Caravanserai. 19.04.2022. https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/04/19/feature-02

¹⁶⁶ "Missile strikes were inflicted on Tajikistan from the side of Afghanistan", 09.05.2022. SNG.TODAY. <https://sng.today/dushanbe/22883-po-tadzhikistanu-so-storony-afganistana-naneseny-raketnye-udary.html>

¹⁶⁷ Peter Mills P., "Islamic State Khorasan Province Expands Attacks beyond Afghanistan", 01.06.2022. The Institute for the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>

This allowed the Islamic State to significantly increase the share of Salafi-Jihadist agitation in the network.

Any model of radicalization affects the religious side of the issue, since Islamists appeal precisely to Islamic terms and dogmas, justifying their activities. The danger of propaganda of the Salafi-jihadist ideology is that it is one of the most radical currents of Islam, which presuppose not just infringement of the rights of "non-believers", but also their physical extermination. Even co-religionists who do not share the views of the Islamic State are subject to "remaking". The Islamic State has chosen jihad as the only means of establishing its power - a holy war against all "infidels" for the triumph of their religion. At the same time, the attitude that the very concept of jihad was initially interpreted as a war primarily with one's own doubts, a spiritual war with oneself, a path to one's own spiritual self-improvement is completely rejected.

Of all the offshoots of the Islamic State, its regional division, IS Khorasan, has demonstrated the ability to produce and distribute propaganda, not inferior to the level of propaganda of the Islamic State itself. This is due to the fact that from the second half of 2021, IS-Khorasan seeks both greater regionalization and internationalization of its activities. IS-Khorasan is significantly weaker than the Taliban, so the group seeks to gain authority wherever possible. One of these places was the media space, where IS-Khorasan gave additional impetus to the campaign to recruit militants and incite violence against its enemies.

IS-Khorasan is heavily involved in the Islamic State's global propaganda, notably increasing its international scale in recent years. The main propaganda unit of IS-Khorasan is the al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, which at the end of January 2022 presented its English-language magazine "Voice of Khorasan" with the aim of spreading radical ideas to a wider international audience. The magazine includes original content, translations of past and present statements by Islamic State leadership, and issues of the group's official media bodies that serve to incorporate IS-Khorasan regional propaganda into Islamic State's comprehensive global mission.

The Al-Azaim Foundation has also stepped up its efforts to reach a wider range of ethnic and linguistic groups. If originally IS-Khorasan published materials in Arabic, Pashto and Dari, but recently it has expanded to languages such as Uzbek, Tajik, Farsi, Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Russian, English and Uighur. The main information messages

are aimed both at supporting the Islamic State's claim to the self-proclaimed global Sunni caliphate and at undermining the ideological legitimacy of the Taliban. Propaganda materials through the accounts of official media centres, closed forums and accounts of members of the Islamic State reach active supporters, including in Central Asian countries, who further distribute the materials to a large audience. In this regard, not only the content and quality of the materials, but also their widespread and rapid distribution, as well as reaching the target audience, are of great importance in the propaganda activities of jihadists.

In order to intensify propaganda among speakers of Central Asian languages, a Tajik-speaking wing of the official propaganda apparatus of the group called Al-Azaim Tajiks appeared. Another media resource called "Voice of Khorasan" produces media content in Uzbek and actively recruits immigrants from Central Asia to the ranks of IS-Khorasan. In the materials of these publications, the group mainly calls for the fight against the Taliban, who are accused of being a Pashtun-centric organization that oppresses ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks. To increase the number of supporters in the region, IS-Khorasan increasingly emphasizes the Taliban's friendly relations with Central Asia's "tyrannical regimes". Conversely, the group positions itself as a tool for destroying arbitrarily established state borders in Central Asia and reviving the ancient province of Maverannahr.

Anti-Taliban propaganda, in particular, is devoted to two books in Uzbek, printed in Latin alphabet.¹⁶⁸ The first book of the authoritative ideologist of the terrorist organization IS-Khorasan Abu Saad Muhammad Khorasani sets out the reasons why the Taliban are the worst enemies of Islam and indicate the so-called "non-Islamic character" of the Taliban government. The second book talks about the Taliban's slave dependence on China, Russia, the United States, Pakistan and Turkey.¹⁶⁹ The book criticizes the Taliban for their foreign policy and attempts to integrate into the international community, voicing open contempt for the Taliban because of their international diplomatic visits and attempts to improve relations with other countries.

¹⁶⁸ Webber L., Valle R. "Islamic State in Afghanistan seeks to recruit Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz". Eurasianet. 17.03.2022. <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-seeks-to-recruit-uzbeks-tajiks-kyrgyz>

¹⁶⁹ "Islamic State Khurasan Province threatens Uzbekistan, Central Asia, and neighboring countries». Special Eurasia. 20.05.2022. https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/05/05/islamic-state-uzbekistan/#_ftn5

In particular, the leadership of the movement is condemned for cooperation with international organizations such as USAID and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Even accepting foreign aid is a controversial aspect for IS-Khorasan, since the group believes that financial support from outside dictates the Taliban's line of conduct. In March 2022, Al-Azaim Tajiks published the book “Why Jihad is a Duty”, printed in Tajik in Cyrillic, used in Tajikistan¹⁷⁰.

In shaping the enemy image, Islamic State's claims also include a Taliban killing of IMU members in 2016, the story of which was originally published in the Islamic State's former main international print online publication, Dabiq magazine, and is available today on major online archiving sites. This plot is actively spreading on Telegram through an audio message from the Uzbek jihadist IS-Khorasan Muhammad Ali Domla, in which he spoke about how the Taliban killed more than 150 Uzbek militants and their families.

A prominent place is occupied by the efforts of the Islamic State of the group aimed at attracting the attention of an extremist Tajik audience, making heroes of jihadists of Tajik origin. The martyrs of the Tajik ethnic group are extolled as examples of courage, devotion and self-sacrifice to the cause of the Islamic State. Thus, many audiovisual propaganda materials prepared by Al-Azim Tajiki and Amak publishers praise Tajik militants who participated in a number of high-profile terrorist acts in Afghanistan and military operations in Syria and Iraq. Such heroic image is actively spreading in the Tajik media and social networks. Some extremist channels on Telegram have launched an audio recording of the Islamic State's operation against Sikhs in Kabul with a photo of the perpetrator of the terrorist act, Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki. This media file was widely distributed by Tajik-language Telegram channels, including Al-Azaim Tajiki, Umma Muhammad and Sadoi Sheikh.¹⁷¹

The photo of Abu Muhammad al-Tajika was also posted on two different pages of the official newsletter of the Islamic State, Al-Nab, and in the magazine Voice of Khorasan, published by the terrorist group. This is another case when information about

¹⁷⁰ Webber L., Valle R. “Islamic State in Afghanistan Looks to Recruit Regional Tajiks, Inflict Violence Against Tajikistan”. *The Diplomat*. 29.04.2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/islamic-state-in-afghanistan-looks-to-recruit-regional-tajiks-inflict-violence-against-tajikistan/>

¹⁷¹ Webber L. “Islamic State in Khorasan Province Exploits Tajik Martyrs for Online Recruitment in Central Asia. Jamestown Foundation”. *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 20, Issue, 14, 2022. <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2075977.html>

Tajik militants has received coverage and promotion at all levels from IS-Khorasan's own propaganda publications to the Islamic State's central media apparatus. Given the increased efforts of IS-Khorasan to promote its activities among extremist Tajiks, it is likely that the group will continue to use Tajik militants and representatives of other ethnic groups to carry out high-profile terrorist attacks in order to continue online propaganda and increase the number of non-Pashtun ethnic groups recruited.

Evaluation of recruitment among Central Asian migrant workers

Of all the international terrorist organizations associated with Afghanistan, ISIS is the most active among Central Asian migrant workers. Millions of migrant workers from Central Asian countries are the most vulnerable group to jihadist propaganda, as they are cut off from the cultural and information environment of their countries of origin.

Today, the main directions of labour migrants from Uzbekistan are Russia (61.5%), Kazakhstan (16.9%), Turkey (6.1%), South Korea (2%), UAE (0.8%).¹⁷² According to the authorities of Tajikistan, in the first six months of 2022, more than 322,000 citizens left the country in search of work.¹⁷³ More than 90% of Tajik migrants have temporary work in Russia. Most migrants admit that they go to work in Russia due to the limited labour migration options. Many migrants would like to work in South Korea or in some European country, but this requires a visa. Work can also be found in Kazakhstan, but salaries there are lower than in Russia.

Most of the labour migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are recruited to the terrorist groups in Russia. However, their number is limited comparing to the residence of millions of migrants on the Russian territory. At the peak in 2017 approximately 5 thousand militants from Central Asian countries fought in Syria and Iraqy¹⁷⁴. Nevertheless, most of the poorly educated young people who fall into actual social, cultural, linguistic, religious isolation and live in conditions of huge psychological stress

¹⁷² "Potential destinations for labor migrants from Uzbekistan have been named." *Gazeta.uz*, 25.04.2022. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/04/25/migration/>

¹⁷³ "Ministry of Labor: The number of Tajiks who went abroad to work has doubled". *Radio Ozodi*. 27.06.2022. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31960984.html>

¹⁷⁴ Richard Barrett. *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*. // The Soufan Center, October 2017. <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>

are a very convenient object of religious radical propaganda. On the other hand, terrorist organizations forced to limit their operational activities in Syria directed their efforts to intensify propaganda on the Internet in order to online recruit supporters, including from various diasporas. The rapid uptake of new technologies, including in an immigrant environment, as well as the increasing use of social media, has expanded potential audiences at risk.

According to some researchers, the recruitment mechanism consists of several stages¹⁷⁵. They are recruited not in mosques, but in places of compact residence at construction sites, markets, in densely populated hostels or remotely. Sometimes extremists meet in person with migrants after preliminary study through social networks, where they find out whether one or another person is ready to share extremist views, whether he expresses radical ideas. By calculating those migrants who express extremist beliefs, recruiters can promise large sums for participating in illegal actions, and to some this proposal may seem very attractive.

Experts note that in Russia, the Islamic State most often uses such messengers as Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp and Skype to recruit into its ranks. Thus, the resonant terrorist act in the St. Petersburg metro in 2017, in which immigrants from Central Asian countries participated, was coordinated through WhatsApp and Telegram, and the emissaries of the Islamic State carried out the management of the activities of all sabotage and terrorist groups planning to carry out terrorist attacks in Russia through Telegram and Internet radio Zello.¹⁷⁶

Currently, a radicalized group of migrants of Central Asian origin has been seen in various areas of terrorist activities of the Islamic State, including the preparation of terrorist acts, recruitment activities, the dissemination of propaganda by an extremist, and the financing of terrorism. The priority task of the Islamic State of the organization is to create cells where labour migrants from Central Asia are also involved. The recruitment work of the Islamic State is indicated by the activities of one of the leaders of the Islamic State, a citizen of Tajikistan T. Nazarov, who recruited Tajik migrants to

¹⁷⁵ Krupnov A. "Islamic State": propaganda of the group and the mechanism of its spread". Center for the Study of New Communications. Moscow. 2017. 123 p.

¹⁷⁶ "The security forces told what messengers are used by terrorists in the Russian Federation". Habr. 7.07.2017. <https://habr.com/ru/news/373613/>

a cell of the Islamic State in the Moscow region and in Novosibirsk.¹⁷⁷ The purpose of the cell was to commit sabotage and terrorist acts in these regions using improvised explosive devices, which were planned to be detonated in crowded places, including at the facilities of the Russian Railways.

Infrastructure and industrial facilities were the goal of the Islamic State also in the Kaluga region, where two immigrants from Central Asia planned to set fire to tanks with fuel and lubricants at a chemical plant using an improvised explosive device and incendiary means. Attackers who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State planned to travel to the zone of armed conflict in Syria after committing a crime. During the arrest, the criminals put up armed resistance and received fatal wounds from return fire. A laboratory of explosives was found in the secret house of criminals, as well as a ready-to-use powerful improvised explosive device, incendiary checkers, firearms and ammunition.¹⁷⁸

The Syrian case also involves labour migrants in fundraising for the Islamic State. In March 2023, a supporter of the Islamic State, a native and citizen of one of the Central Asian republics born in 2001, was arrested in the Vladimir region for financing terrorists in Syria. According to investigators, the accused on the Internet contacted a member of a banned organization taking part in terrorist activities in Syria. In the process of communication, the defendant decided to support terrorists and transferred personal funds to buy firearms for militants.

In September 2022, a 24-year-old citizen of one of the Central Asian countries was detained in the Moscow region on charges of distributing propaganda materials about terrorist activities in the Middle East. For indoctrination, he actively used social networks and instant messengers to promote the ideology of the Islamic State among his fellow countrymen in their places of work in Moscow and Voronezh¹⁷⁹.

The participation of Central Asian migrants in the preparation and implementation of terrorist acts in India and Iran, which are in geographical proximity

¹⁷⁷ “FSB detains IS leader who plotted to carry out terrorist attacks in Moscow”, Novosibirsk. Russian News Agency TASS. 17.04.2023. <https://tass.com/defense/1605319>

¹⁷⁸ “FSB foils IS terror plot targeting chemical facility in Russia’s Kaluga Region”. Russian News Agency TASS. 17.02.2023. <https://tass.com/defense/1577723>

¹⁷⁹ “FSB detained a native of Central Asia in the Moscow region who involved fellow countrymen in ISIS”, Rossiyskaya gazeta, 27.09.2022. <https://rg.ru/2022/09/27/reg-cfo/fsb-zaderzhala-v-moskovskom-regione-urozhenca-centralnoj-azii-vovlekavshego-zemliakov-v-ig.html>

to Afghanistan, especially draws the attention. Participants in these terrorist operations underwent ideological processing, gained skills in sabotage and terrorist activities, and were co-focused on the preparation and implementation of terrorist attacks. On October 26, 2022, the Islamic State managed to attack the Shiite shrine in Shiraz, which killed 13 people. The attacker turned out to be a citizen of Tajikistan, Komron Subkhoni, nicknamed Abu Aisha al-Umari. He went to work in Moscow three years ago and it is not known how he ended up in Iran. On the website of the Al-Naba edition, his suicide photo with a Kalashnikov assault rifle was posted against the background of the Islamic State flag with the words in his honour: “Brother Abu Aisha al-Umari, who attacked the Mushrik prayer house in the city of Shiraz in southern Iran - may Allah accept him”.¹⁸⁰

In August 2022, a citizen of Uzbekistan, Mashrabhon Azamov, was identified and detained on the territory of Russia, who planned to commit a terrorist act against Nupura Sharma, a representative of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party of India, for speaking out against Islam. While in Turkish territory from April to June 2022, he was recruited by one of the leaders of the Islamic State as a suicide bomber. Its ideological processing was carried out remotely through the accounts of the Telegram messenger. As the Hindustan Times notes, an audio version with speeches by the famous Islamic State propagandist Yusuf Tajiki, hosted by the Movarounnahr channel, had a significant influence in the radicalization of M.Asamov.¹⁸¹ Subsequently, he underwent special training as a suicide bomber. He was tasked with leaving for the territory of Russia, issuing the necessary documents and flying to India to commit a terrorist act. As India tightened visa checks for a number of Muslim countries, including Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait and Central Asian republics, the suicide bomber chose a Moscow route to avoid scrutiny.

The facts about the influx of citizens from Central Asia into the ranks of terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan over the past year did not appear in the media. At the same time, according to some estimates, in the pre-pandemic period, about 8 thousand people were recruited by emissaries of terrorist groups and ready to engage in

¹⁸⁰ News of the Caliphate. 29.10.2022. An-Naba. <https://i3l.co.za/146938/>

¹⁸¹ “Indian agencies seek access to Uzbek suicide bomber in Russian custody”. 24.08.2022. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-agencies-seek-access-to-uzbek-suicide-bomber-in-russian-custody-101661307893770.html>

subversive activities¹⁸². However, the strengthening of control on the borders of countries adjacent to Afghanistan, progress in the fight against the Islamic State and other terrorist groups in Syria, including the destruction of iconic figures of armed formations of Central Asian origin, as well as the effective work of law enforcement agencies of the countries of the region, preventing attempts to travel to combat zones conflicts, significantly limited the plans of potential militants. In particular, the Tajik authorities announced that in the first half of 2022, 720 criminal cases related to terrorist and extremist activities were registered in Tajikistan. In turn, Uzbekistan for 6 months of last year repatriated 59 citizens detained abroad on suspicion of having links with militants¹⁸³.

The intelligence agencies in the region also blocked dozens of social media channels that recruited, raised funds for terrorist and extremist groups. Nevertheless, the activity of the Islamic State in the digital space continues to be high. This, in particular, is evidenced by the data of the specially created *ISIS Watch* Telegram channel, which publishes a daily report on how many jihadist channels have been blocked. Monitoring of the messenger shows that in January 2022 the Telegram messenger blocked 25749 terrorist bots and channels, and in January 2023 this figure was 13279.

Governments, internet service providers and social media are trying to contain this deluge of unwanted content. The paradox is that as soon as a channel or social media account is blocked, new ones are created to replace them and so is repeated indefinitely. This indicates a high degree of mobility and adaptability of the Islamic State in the information space. As the founder of SecDev Group R.Rohozinsky notes, terrorist and violent extremist ecosystems in the region are small but impactful. While having comparatively limited appeal, they proved to be resilient to government crackdowns, adapting and extending their reach via “amplifier networks”¹⁸⁴.

Conclusion

¹⁸² “Portrait of a future terrorist. How young Uzbeks get hooked by extremist recruiters”. 21.02.2022. Center for the Study of Regional Threats. <https://crss.uz/2022/01/21/portret-budushhego-terrorista-kak-molodye-uzbekistancy-popadayut-na-kryuchok-k-verbovshhikam-ekstremistov/>

¹⁸³ “About militants from Central Asia in Afghanistan and Syria”. 26.01.2023. Regional antiterrorist structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. https://ecrats.org/ru/archive/facts_of_terrorism/1965/

¹⁸⁴ Outcome document of the webinar “Terrorist Use of the Internet”. 12.03.2021. OSCE Secretariat’s Transnational Threats Department. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/7/483059.pdf>

To summarize, Afghanistan maintains its status as a threat to the security of Central Asia and a source of radical Islamist and jihadist ideas among the citizens of the region, despite all the assurances of the Taliban that there will be no threat from Afghan territory to neighbouring countries. This is because the Taliban encounters difficulties eliminating links with international and regional terrorist and jihadist groups for numerous reasons.

Thus, any attempt to sever ties with allied terrorist groups would risk withdrawing to ISIS-Khorasan, and this would seriously change the balance of forces inside Afghanistan towards weakening the Taliban's authority and capacity to control the country. Nevertheless, even though the Taliban will not sever ties with allied terrorist groups, the latter will eventually demand that the Taliban take more active steps to spread jihad towards Central Asia, Pakistan, and Iran. This may present the Taliban with a decision dilemma, as meeting their demands will complicate further international recognition of the Taliban government and the arrival of large-scale foreign investment.

Under either scenario, the Central Asian countries and their migrant workers will remain a priority target for the recruitment, subversion, and terrorist activities of Islamist groups linked to Afghanistan. In this regard, the Governments of the region need to continue their efforts to create efficient national ideologies, improve the economic well-being of the population, and combat the ideologues of extremism and terrorism created by their networks, including through cooperation with states, where there are large masses of Central Asian migrant workers.

TURKMENISTAN'S APPROACHES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER AUGUST 2021

Rustam Makhmudov, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Introduction

The policy of Turkmenistan after the Taliban took control of b Kabul, and the entire territory of Afghanistan in August 2021 can be described as proactive, aimed at establishing constructive, working and mutually beneficial relations with the new authorities of the country. Meanwhile, Ashgabat sought to achieve three strategic goals - by establishing diplomatic contacts to secure its borders, to maintain access to the Afghan consumer market and to try to give new impetus to transport and energy projects, tied to Afghanistan.

Ensuring border security as a key interest of Turkmenistan

Shortly before the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the intensification of fighting in Afghanistan posed a serious challenge to the security of Turkmenistan as the future policy of Taliban along with its factions was not fully clear. Both the armed attacks against Turkmen border guards and the fighting between the Afghan army and the Taliban during the presidency of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani were cause for concern Turkmen border is 744 km long.

Several attacks on the Turkmen border personal which resulted in a death of three border guards on 26 February 2014 and another attack by an armed group of Afghan-based militants allegedly linked to the Taliban or the international drug mafia¹⁸⁵ along with other group of fighters crossing the border in the Mukur area of Badghis Province were all reacted by the Turkmen government silently. Yet, shortly after the tragedy, Turkmenistan conducted military exercises on the border with Afghanistan.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ *Attack leaves three Turkmen border guards killed. But who killed them?* (2014, March 6). Global Voices. <https://globalvoices.org/2014/03/06/attack-leaves-three-turkmen-border-guards-killed-but-who-killed-them/>

¹⁸⁶ Редакция. (2014, Мау 27). *На границе с Афганистаном вновь погибли туркменские пограничники.* Хроника Туркменистана. <https://www.hronikatm.com/2014/05/na-granitse-s-afganistanom-vnov-pogibli-turkmenskie-pogranichniki/>

In May 2014, Afghan militants again attacked a Turkmen outpost near Bala Murgab, Badghis province, killing three more border guards. The Consul of Turkmenistan in Mazar-i-Sharif, Bazarbai Kabayev then pointed out the absence of any official information about what happened on the Turkmen-Afghan border.¹⁸⁷

Clashes on the Turkmen-Afghan border were reported in 2018. In mid-June 2018, allegedly, a fight took place between Turkmen border guards and Afghan smugglers on the border between the cities of Serkhetabad (formerly Kushka) and Takhtabazar. As a result, 25 Turkmen soldiers were killed and several dozen were wounded.¹⁸⁸ However, the Turkmen Border Guard then denied the fact of combat and death of servicemen.¹⁸⁹

Security on the Turkmen-Afghan border was also threatened by fighting between the Afghan army and the Taliban. The most famous case occurred in March 2019, when 58 Afghan border police officers, as well as women and children, crossed the border with Turkmenistan in the Bala Murgab area in search of salvation from the Taliban after a heavy two weeks of fighting. They later returned home through Torgundi in the western province of Herat.

From the political point of view, instability on the Turkmen-Afghan border narrowed Ashgabat's ability to continue its neutral military approach. This could have made Turkmenistan dependent on external assistance. It is noteworthy that after the incidents on the border with Afghanistan in 2014, Iranian Defence Minister General Hossein Dehghan visited Ashgabat. According to some reports, the topic of his talks with the top leadership of Turkmenistan was the establishment of Iran-Turkmen cooperation in case of invasion of Turkmenistan by militants' 'jihadists' from Afghanistan. H. Dehkan also invited the Turkmen military as observers to the exercise of the Iranian armed forces in the north-eastern part of Iran.¹⁹⁰

How painful the border security issue was for Ashgabat is demonstrated by his reaction to the statement made by the first President of Kazakhstan Nursultan

¹⁸⁷ *ibidem*

¹⁸⁸ Türkmen – owgan serhedinde bolan atyşykda 25 töweregi türkmen esgeriniň ölendigi aýdylýar // Azatlyk Radiosyň, Iýul 03, 2018: www.azathabar.com/a/29336132.html

¹⁸⁹ Информация о жертвах среди солдат на туркмено-афганской границе не соответствует действительности // Turkmenportal, 03.07.2018: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/15087/informaciya-o-zhertvah-sredi-soldat-na-turkmenoafganskoi-granice-ne-sootvetstvet-deistvitelnosti>

¹⁹⁰ Может ли Туркменистан оказаться таким слабым звеном или, наоборот, станет заслоном на пути «джихадистов» в страны Центральной Азии? - эксперт // Central Asia, 12 января 2015: <https://centralasia.media/news:1073851>

Nazarbayev on the situation on the Turkmen-Afghan border following his meeting with Vladimir Putin on October 15, 2015. He said: 'We already know about the incidents that have taken place on the border with Turkmenistan - we are very worried'.¹⁹¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan immediately reacted. In the official communication, it was noted that 'the Turkmen side expresses extreme concern and misunderstanding in connection with such a statement of the Kazakh side about the inappropriate situation on the state border of Turkmenistan'. The hope was also expressed that henceforth when assessing the situation around Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan will be guided by more objective information.¹⁹²

Given the above reasons, Ashgabat immediately after it became known about the beginning of the withdrawal of American troops on May 1, 2021, requested a meeting with representatives of the Taliban movements. According to Radio Liberty, referring to the official head of the Taliban political office in Qatar Muhammad Naim, a secret meeting was held on July 10, 2021 in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. The Taliban delegation was headed by Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanizai, Head of the Taliban political office in Qatar.¹⁹³ The main topic of the meeting was security, illegal migration and non-aggression. The Turkmen Foreign Ministry asked representatives of the Taliban not to disclose information about the talks in order to avoid confrontation with the official authorities of Afghanistan.¹⁹⁴

The meeting appeared to have been successful, as Ashgabat was able to establish cooperation with the movement on border security very quickly after the Taliban came to power a month after the talks. On August 18, 2021, three days after the fall of Kabul, the Consul General of Turkmenistan in Mazar-i-Sharif held a meeting with the head of the Taliban office in Balkh province. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan characterised the meeting as being 'held positively and constructively', and noted that

¹⁹¹ Заявления для прессы по завершении российско-казахстанских переговоров // Kremlin.ru, 15 октября 2015: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50512>

¹⁹² Ашхабад возмутился словами Назарбаева об инцидентах на границе Туркмении // RBC.ru, 16.10.2015: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/10/2015/5620d0629a79477bfa7c0da7>

¹⁹³ Taliban Holds Talks With Turkmen Officials In Ashgabat Amid Deteriorating Afghan Security // RFE/RL's Turkmen Service, July 12, 2021: <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-turkmenistan-talks/31354090.html>

¹⁹⁴ В МИД Туркмении провели тайные переговоры с талибами // Lenta.ru, 12 июля 2021: https://lenta.ru/news/2021/07/12/turkmenia_taliban/

the relations between the two people are 'fraternal and based on the principles of friendship and good neighbourliness'.¹⁹⁵

In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan reported on the rapid contacts between the Turkmen authorities and the Taliban on the protection of the state border, ensuring customs, sanitary, phytosanitary and other types of control and supervision, carried out while moving goods across the border. The Foreign Ministry of Turkmenistan noted the absence of any serious changes in the work of the border checkpoints Imamnazar-Akina and Serkhetabad-Turgundi.¹⁹⁶

It is noteworthy that, despite the change of power in Afghanistan, Ashgabat continued to execute a contract to supply electricity to the northern and north-western provinces of Afghanistan - Herat, Badghis, Jouzjan, Balkh, Faryab, as well as the cities of Mazar-i-Sharif, Shibergan and others.¹⁹⁷ It should be noted that the Taliban paid special attention to the protection of the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Kabul. On 28 August 2021, the spokesman for the Taliban, Zabihull Mujahid, in a report in which he denied information in the media about the detention of two Pakistanis who intended to commit a terrorist act against the Turkmen diplomatic corps, stated that the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Kabul is not in any danger.¹⁹⁸

A positive indicator of bilateral relations was the official congratulation sent by the Taliban acting Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund on the 30th anniversary of the independence of Turkmenistan – “Dear Brother, on behalf of the people and the Government of the Islamic Emirate, Afghanistan is pleased to extend sincere congratulations to Your Excellency and the fraternal Turkmen people on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the independence of friendly Turkmenistan.”¹⁹⁹

The interview of G. Berdymukhamedov with the Russian news agency TASS, which took place on October 1, 2021, can be considered a peculiar response to this

¹⁹⁵ Генконсул Туркменистана в Мазари-Шарифе провел встречу с руководителем провинции Балх // МИД Туркменистана, 18 августа 2021: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2751>

¹⁹⁶ Сообщение для средств массовой информации // МИД Туркменистана, 18 августа 2021: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2750>

¹⁹⁷ МИД: Туркменистан продолжает обеспечивать электроэнергией регионы Афганистана // Turkmenportal, 26.08.2021: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/39189>

¹⁹⁸ Представитель талибов: "Туркменскому посольству в Кабуле ничего не угрожает" // Turkmenportal, 29.08.2021: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/39264/predstavitel-talibov-turkmenskomu-posolstvu-v-kabule-nichego-ne-ugrozhaet>

¹⁹⁹ "Талибан" поздравил президента Туркменистана, назвав "дорогим братом" // TenгриNews, 29 сентября 2021: https://tengrinews.kz/world_news/taliban-pozdravil-prezidenta-turkmenistana-nazvav-dorogim-449927/

message. The Turkmen President noted that his country is ready to work closely with the new Taliban government to further strengthen traditionally fraternal Turkmen-Afghan relations, to provide the necessary assistance for the speedy normalisation of the situation in this country and to ensure its sustainable socio-economic recovery.²⁰⁰

The visit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Rashid Meredov, to Kabul from 30 to 31 October 2021 was a serious step towards establishing constructive relations with the Taliban. The Head of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry held meetings with Mr. Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, Mr. Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi and Mr. Mr. Mawlawi Mohammad Yakub. Several landmark statements were made during the negotiations.

In particular, R. Meredov said that the presence of representatives of the Islamic Emirates at international meetings already seems necessary.²⁰¹ In turn, the Afghan side stated: ‘We will spare no effort to secure infrastructure and economic projects between the two countries’.²⁰²

Successive diplomatic contacts resulted in Ashgabat’s decision to approve the appointment of the Taliban representative Mohammad Fazel Saber as interim Chargé d’Affaires for Afghanistan in Turkmenistan. He took office on 18 March 2022. Thus, Turkmenistan became the first Central Asian country to take such a diplomatic step.²⁰³

Economic and energy vector of Turkmenistan’s Afghan Policy

The second major thrust of Turkmen policy towards Afghanistan since the return to power of the Taliban has been to maintain access to that country’s consumer market

²⁰⁰ Туркмения заявила о готовности работать с новым правительством Афганистана // Информационное агентство ТАСС, 1 октября 2021: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12556539>

²⁰¹ Attendance of Representatives of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in International Meetings is Urgently Needed: Turkmen Foreign Minister // Bakhtar News Agency, October 10, 2021: <https://bakhtarnews.af/attendance-of-representatives-of-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-in-international-meetings-is-urgently-needed-turkmen-foreign-minister/>

²⁰² Талибы пообещали обеспечить безопасность туркмено-афганской границы // РИА Новости, 01.11.2021: <https://ria.ru/20211101/taliby-1757278425.html>

²⁰³ Appointed by IEA MFA, Mr. Mohammad Fazel Saber was introduced in a ceremony as chargé d’affaires to his colleagues at the Afghan Embassy in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, yesterday // Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 19, 2022: <https://mfa.gov.af/en/appointed-by-iea-mfamr-mohammad-fazel-saber-was-introduced-in-a-ceremony-as-charge-daffaires-to-his-colleagues-at-the-afghan-embassy-in-ashgabat-turkmenistan-yesterday/>

and to continue efforts to exploit its transit potential for access to the South Asian energy market.

Until 2021, Afghanistan was among the leading export destinations for Ashgabat. In 2019, the Turkmen market was supplied with various types of goods worth \$ 690 million, i.e. 8.06% of the total volume of Afghan imports. Turkmenistan ranked fifth after Iran, China, Pakistan and the US.²⁰⁴ The structure of Turkmen exports was dominated by petroleum products and electricity. In turn, Afghanistan exported to the Turkmen market of goods for only \$1.11 million.²⁰⁵

In parallel, Ashgabat made vigorous efforts to implement several infrastructure projects with Afghanistan until 2021. Eight months before the change of government in Afghanistan, on January 14, 2021, the Presidents of Turkmenistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan took part in the online ceremony of commissioning of the railway branch Akina - Andha, an international fiber-optic cable in the areas of Imamnazar (Turkmenistan) - Akina (Afghanistan) and Serkhetabat (Turkmenistan) - Turgundi (Afghanistan), as well as transmission lines from the Turkmen city of Kerki to Afghanistan Shibirgan.

At the ceremony, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated that 'we are ready to open TAPI and TAP projects in Afghanistan in August 2021'.²⁰⁶ The TAPI project envisages the construction of a gas pipeline from the Galkynsh gas field in the Marysk region of Turkmenistan via Herat and Kandahar (Afghanistan) to Quetta and Multan (Pakistan) and then to Fazilka in the west of India, located near the India-Pakistan border. The length of the gas pipeline will be 1,814 km and will have the capacity to transport 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year. The initial cost of the project was estimated by the Turkmen side at \$ 10 billion. and then was reduced to \$ 7 billion.²⁰⁷

TAPI project has been discussed since the 90s. As early as December 2015, Turkmenistan began construction of its 214 km section. On February 23rd, 2018 a ceremony of pipe welding of Turkmen and Afghan sections of the gas pipeline was

²⁰⁴ Afghanistan Trade // WITS, 2019: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/AFG/textview>

²⁰⁵ Afghanistan-Turkmenistan // OEC. World, 2019: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/afg/partner/tkm>

²⁰⁶ Ашраф Гани: «Афганистан готов открыть проекты ТАПИ и ТАП в августе 2021 года» // Turkmenportal, 15.01.2021: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/33577/ashraf-gani-afganistan-gotov-otkryt-proekty-tapi-i-tap-v-avguste-2021-goda>

²⁰⁷ Туркмения снизила стоимость проекта газопровода ТАПИ до \$7 млрд // TASS.ru, 13.11.2018: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/5787601>

held.²⁰⁸ The Turkmen side also did a lot of work to attract investors. In 2018, the head of the project Mukhatmerat Amanov said that the main investor is considered the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which at that time already provided technical and financial assistance. The Islamic Development Bank in turn allocated \$700 million for the construction of the Turkmen site. According to Amanov, Ashgabat expected the ratio of investment and own funding to the project to 70% by 30%. Speaking about ensuring the security of the gas pipeline on the Afghan territory, M. Amanov said that 1,500 thousand people were involved in the territory of this country, where pre-project surveys were carried out. Only one security incident occurred during all time.²⁰⁹

As for the TAP project, it provides for the construction of the power transmission line Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan. In October 2018, an agreement was signed between the Ministries of Energy of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan on the project of TAP power lines. The agreement was signed by the Ministry of Energy of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. The agreement defined the amount of electricity to be delivered to Afghanistan as 300 MW each to Herat and Kandahar (total of 600 MW), with a further increase to 1,000 MW. Turkish Çalık Holding was to invest \$1.6 billion.²¹⁰ In 2019, a ceremony was held in the Maryskaya Region to mark the beginning of the project and construction of 220 kV TAP power line in the direction of Maryskaya Hydroelectric Power Station (HPS) - Herat.²¹¹

The importance of this project for Turkmenistan underlines the fact that that in January 2020, President Berdimuhamedov reshuffled the Ministry of Energy and transferred Head of the Ministry M. Atykov to the post of Head of the specially created Department of International Electricity Projects in the direction of TAP.²¹²

²⁰⁸ Президент Туркменистана разрешил подписание важных контрактов для энергетики // Neftegaz.ru, 01.02.2020: <https://neftegaz.ru/news/transport-and-storage/522285-prezident-turkmenistana-razreshil-podpisanie-vazhnykh-kontraktov-dlya-energetiki-v-t-ch-dlya-mgp-tap/>

²⁰⁹ Туркмения снизила стоимость проекта газопровода ТАПИ до \$7 млрд // TASS.ru, 13.11.2018: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/5787601>

²¹⁰ С. Бердымухамедов назвал строительство ЛЭП ТАП приоритетной задачей Туркменистана // Neftegaz.ru, 11.10.2022: <https://neftegaz.ru/news/powernetworks/753867-s-berdymukhamedov-nazval-stroitelstvo-lep-tap-prioritetnoy-zadachey-turkmenistana/>

²¹¹ Ашраф Гани: «Афганистан готов открыть проекты ТАПИ и ТАП в августе 2021 года» // Turkmenportal, 15.01.2021: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/33577/ashraf-gani-afganistan-gotov-otkryt-proekty-tapi-i-tap-v-avguste-2021-goda>

²¹² С. Бердымухамедов назвал строительство ЛЭП ТАП приоритетной задачей Туркменистана // Neftegaz.ru, 11.10.2022: <https://neftegaz.ru/news/powernetworks/753867-s-berdymukhamedov-nazval-stroitelstvo-lep-tap-prioritetnoy-zadachey-turkmenistana/>

Meanwhile, the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government, as well as the tough stance of the US and the West as a whole towards official recognition of the new authorities, which was largely due to the refusal of the Taliban to create a truly inclusive Government and the movement's policy of violating the rights of women and ethnic minorities, has endangered Turkmenistan's commercial interests in the Afghan and South Asian markets.

Despite this, Ashgabat and the new interim Afghan authorities have been in direct contact since August 2021 to re-establish trade and resume TAPI and TAP. At a meeting with the Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Mr. Meredov on October 30-31 2021 in Kabul, acting Minister of Defence of Afghanistan Mawlawi Mohammad Yakub directly stated that his country will make every effort to provide security for infrastructure and bilateral economic projects.²¹³ Further, on February 28, 2022, the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Defence of the Interim Taliban Authorities of Afghanistan presented to Ambassador of Turkmenistan Khoja Ovezov and Director General of the TAPI project Muhammatmyrat Amanov a plan to ensure the security of the TAPI gas pipeline.²¹⁴

Despite increased attention to TAPI, however, the most intensive and fruitful contacts between the parties took place around the continuation of the TAP project. Pakistan has also come to the Turkmen-Afghan negotiating process. On February 6, 2022, the Ambassadors of Turkmenistan and Pakistan Khoja Ovezov and Mansur Ahmad Khan met in Kabul to discuss the implementation of the TAP LINE project. On the Turkmen side, it was stated that Ashgabat will take over construction and installation works at the Nur al-Jihad substation in Herat.²¹⁵ 22 days later, February 28, 2022 a corresponding Turkmen-Afghan agreement was signed in Kabul to increase the power of power lines for the Nur al-Jihad substation from 110 kV to 220 kV.²¹⁶ The implementation of the project of modernisation of the substation Nur ul-Jihad was

²¹³ Ibidem

²¹⁴ TAPI security plan shared with Turkmenistan // The Kabul Times, 28.02.2022: <https://thekabultimes.gov.af/tapi-security-plan-shared-with-turkmenistan/>

²¹⁵ Туркменистан и Афганистан подписали Соглашение по строительству ЛЭП // Turkmenportal, 28.01.2022: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/43782/turkmenistan-i-afganistan-podpisali-soglashenie-po-stroitelstvu-lep>

²¹⁶ Ibidem

started in September 2023. Its cost is estimated at \$3.5 million and project implementation should take six months.²¹⁷

At present, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are in active contact on intensification of diplomatic contacts with Pakistan to coordinate the implementation of the transnational electricity transmission project. This was mentioned at the meeting held on 18 September 2023 between Myrat Artykov, Head of the Department for International Electric Power Projects Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan and the Acting Minister of Energy and Water Resources of Afghanistan, Mullah Abdul Latif Mansoor.²¹⁸

Active contacts between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in the period from 2021 to 2023, were in the sphere of bilateral trade and transit. In January 2023, the parties renewed the contract for the supply of Turkmen electricity, but the volumes of supply and the cost of supplied electricity were not disclosed.²¹⁹

The appointment in May 2023 of Mohammad Harun Sayedi, ITA Ministry of Industry and Trade of Afghanistan, as a commercial attaché to the Afghan embassy in Ashgabat, was a breakthrough. Its objective was to stimulate trade and investment and to develop economic relations and cooperation between the two neighbouring countries.²²⁰

In May 2023, the parties also agreed to establish a joint committee to improve trade and began negotiations to reduce the cost of transit of commercial goods from Afghanistan. The Acting Minister of Industry and Trade of Afghanistan made a similar request to Ashgabat. In turn, the Minister of Transport of Turkmenistan responded that it is necessary to establish a bilateral commission to discuss the details. Afghan

²¹⁷ Afghanistan embarks on upgrading infrastructure to increase electricity import from Turkmenistan // News Central Asia, 06.09.2023: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/09/06/afghanistan-embarks-on-upgrading-infrastructure-to-increase-electricity-import-from-turkmenistan/>

²¹⁸ Turkmenistan and Afghanistan discuss implementation of the TAP regional energy project // News Central Asia, 18.09.2023: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/09/18/turkmenistan-and-afghanistan-discuss-implementation-of-the-tap-regional-energy-project/>

²¹⁹ Туркмения и Афганистан продлили контракт на поставки туркменской электроэнергии // TASS.ru, 24.01.2023: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16867327>

²²⁰ Минпромторг Афганистана назначило торгового атташе в Туркменистане // Tmcars.info, 29.05.2023: <https://tmcars.info/post/2958937230/minpromtorg-afganistana-naznacilo-torgovogo-attashe-v-turkmenistane>

economists believe that the reduction of transit costs will have a positive impact on the economic situation in the country.²²¹

The successful delivery of Turkmen liquefied petroleum gas to the Pakistani market in April 2023 is an indication that the Taliban is complying with its guarantees to ensure safe transit through Afghan territory. It was a test delivery consisting of 50 gas carriers.²²²

To further expand bilateral trade, Kabul announced in September 2023 plans to build a new transit crossing with Turkmenistan through the Bala Murgab district of Badghis Province. Negotiations are under way with companies that are ready to sign a contract for its construction.²²³

Meanwhile, trade relations between the two countries cannot always be referred to as positive. The case of July 2023, when the Afghan National Standards Authority (ANSA) returned 17 tankers with substandard Turkmen LNG back to the sender in Turkmenistan, was significant. Experts interviewed by the Turkmen news Internet Agency note that the supply of substandard LNG to Afghanistan is a frequent case of a general crisis of the Turkmen oil and gas sector. As examples are given the accident in winter 2023 at the field Galkynysh, as a result of which the gas supply to Uzbekistan and, partly, to China was suspended. Ashgabat also lost competition to Gazprom in the market of Central Asian countries. The Russian gas concern managed to sign an agreement on cooperation in the gas sphere with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Moreover, Gazprom ahead of Turkmenistan in volume of gas supplies to China.²²⁴

Uncertain TAPI prospects and water problem

Of all the key economic projects, the prospects for implementing the TAPI gas pipeline are still very uncertain, as the lack of international recognition by the Interim Taliban Government creates high political risks for investors. Without international

²²¹ Afghanistan and Turkmenistan Agree to Form Joint Trade Committee By Fatema Adeeb // Tolonews, 31 May 2023: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183591>

²²² Turkmenistan began supplying natural gas to Pakistan through Afghanistan // SpecialEurasia, May 2, 2023: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/05/02/natural-gas-turkmenistan-afpak/>

²²³ Islamic Emirate: Efforts Underway to Create New Crossing with Turkmenistan By Habib Rahman Qooyash // Tolonews, 22 Sep 2023: <https://tolonews.com/business-185216>

²²⁴ Афганистан вернул в Туркменистан 17 цистерн с некачественным газом // Turkmen News, 12.07.2023: <https://turkmen.news/afganistan-vernul-v-turkmenistan-17-cistern-s-nekachestvennym-gazom/>

recognition of the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan the ADB were unable to provide previously promised fundin for the TAPI project in March 2022.²²⁵

Although the Taliban gave their guarantees to ensure the safety of the pipeline, and announced in March 2022 that they would resume the project and that the suspension of ADB's involvement will not stop them, however, this did not happen. Experts had already pointed out at the time that the lack of official recognition could be a serious problem for TAPI. In addition, the Interim Taliban government lacks financial capacity to support the project.²²⁶

Despite these problems, Ashgabat is still trying to maintain momentum around TAPI, and to find a solution to the current situation. As General Director of LLC TAPI Pipeline Company Muhammatmyrat Amanov said, his company is currently working with legal consultants and relevant stakeholders on a road map to reduce the sanctions risks for the project.

In addition, according to him, Turkmengas and the Ministry of Energy of Pakistan signed the Joint Plan for the implementation of the accelerated implementation of the TAPI project in June 2023. Ashgabat also continues cooperation with the Afghan side on the consideration of security measures, necessary for the construction and operation phases of the project in accordance with international standards.²²⁷ Uncertainty is also present in the relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan around the water issue. Turkmen government is still silent about the continued construction of the Qush-Tepa canal by the Taliban, which threatens the water, economic and human security of downstream Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The Qush-Tepa canal, which will pass through the territory of the Afghan provinces of Jawzjan and Faryab bordering Turkmenistan, will be a huge hydro-technical facility 285 km long, 100 meters wide and 8 meters deep. Experts believe that this canal, which will take at least 12-15% of the water from the Amu Darya, and represents a serious threat to Turkmenistan, a significant agricultural area of which

²²⁵ ADB suspends TAPI project until IEA gains international recognition // Ariana News, March 10, 2022: <https://www.ariananews.af/adb-suspends-tapi-project-until-iea-gains-international-recognition/>

²²⁶ Work on TAPI Project Will Continue: Islamic Emirate // Tolonews, 10 March 2022: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177052>

²²⁷ Turkmenistan-South Asia gas pipeline could reduce energy poverty in region - Consortium // Daryo.uz, 28.10.2023: <https://daryo.uz/en/2023/10/28/turkmenistan-south-asia-gas-pipeline-could-reduce-energy-poverty-in-region-consortium>

depends directly on the stability of irrigation. The drinking water situation may also worsen.

Several Turkmen provinces are currently experiencing water problems. For example, settlements in the Balkan Region along the Karakum Canal and at its end have suffered the loss of winter wheat, onion and garlic crops due to lack of water.²²⁸ Due to the decrease in the volume of run-off in the Amu Darya itself there is a shortage of water for irrigation of agricultural land in Lebap province.²²⁹ This is compounded by long-standing problems with inefficient water use in the country. In this regard, it is obvious that Ashgabat sooner or later will have to raise the difficult topic of coordinated water withdrawal from the Amu Darya with the ITA, as well as to start fundamental reforms of the entire water management system in the country. Otherwise, Turkmenistan could face extremely complex consequences, exacerbated by the continuing deterioration of climatic conditions in the Central Asian region.

Turkmenistan has become one of the crucial partners for the Interim Taliban government since their takeover in August 2021. Ashgabat prefers to maintain a pragmatic approach towards Afghanistan and build a cooperative relationship with the authorities in Kabul. Shared border and water resources, plans for energy transit via the country by construction of pipeline and concerns over stability in the neighbouring territory are driving factors of Turkmenistan's careful attention and foreign policy in Afghanistan. Ashgabat is trying to have more subjectivity on Afghanistan related issues in the broader region and would be interested to use the current momentum in the promotion of its long-term support and development assistance to the neighbouring country. More coordination of efforts with other regional states could add to stronger and long-term strategy of Turkmenistan towards Afghanistan.

²²⁸ Туркменский эксперт: Строительство канала в Афганистане приведет к резкому осложнению водной обстановки // Radio Azatlik, 30 марта 2023: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/32341718.html>

²²⁹ Строительство канала в Афганистане может усугубить водную проблему Туркменистана // Radio Azatlik, 29 марта 2023: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/32338884.html>

TAJIKISTAN AND THE TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN. PRAGMATISM OVER ARROGANCE

Hamza Boltaev, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

In late March of this year, the control of the Afghan consulate in the eastern Tajikistan city of Khorog in GBAO (Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region) was rumored²³⁰ to pass over to the Taliban government albeit, the main embassy's staff in Dushanbe are still operating under the former government's flag. Some report²³¹, including Afghan Embassy in Dushanbe, about the Taliban government's representatives recent visit to the city. There was a further claim about "Khorog consulate issuing Afghan passports and staff were receiving salaries from the Taliban for the last two months". The recent statement by the acting head of the Afghan consulate in Khorog, Naqibullah Dehghanzada²³², dispelled all these speculations and officially confirmed the transfer of the consulate to the Taliban control.

Although such a practicality has been extensively characterized by some media outlets as an unprecedented undertaking by the Tajik government towards acknowledging the Taliban government, it is seemingly less extraordinary event given Tajikistan has maintained the volume of trade and economic cooperation with its southern neighbor even though Dushanbe has not officially recognized the Taliban government.

Yet, as recent developments indicate, Tajikistan's rather icy stance towards the Taliban's de-facto government has appeared to be thawing though. Such a shift in relationship with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan might have been caused by several reasons.

²³⁰ *Tajikistan: Taliban take control of consulate.* (2023, March 27). Eurasianet. <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-taliban-take-control-of-consulate>

²³¹ Asia-Plus, A. (n.d.-a). *Taliban delegation visits Tajikistan to discuss handover of Khorog consulate, says Afghan media outlet.* Tajikistan News ASIA-Plus. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20230330/taliban-delegation-visits-tajikistan-to-discuss-handover-of-khorog-consulate-says-afghan-media-outlet>

²³² X (Formerly Twitter). Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tolonews/status/1722670225022451760?s=12&t=P3yq--n3cVvVTbBMLhG2Q>

First, bilateral trade and economic cooperation seem to be the driving force behind such a subtle shift since, Afghanistan, at least for Tajikistan, is too huge market to be ignored. Total trade turnover between two countries reached \$111 million last year with the electricity being the main product that Tajikistan exported to Afghanistan. Total amount of electricity exported to Afghanistan was \$44.9 million only in the first half of 2022²³³.

Second, the question of ethnic Tajiks regarding how the Taliban was/is treating them is seemingly not less important for Tajikistan considering more than quarter of the population of Afghanistan is ethnic Tajiks²³⁴, according to Tajikistan's president Imomamli Rakhman though Tajik segment of the Afghanistan's population is 46%²³⁵. Having said that, it is very important for Tajikistan to keep back door open (to have some level of limited cooperation) in its relations with the Taliban to achieve what it professes for the "power-sharing with all political forces in Afghanistan".

Third, Tajikistan is interested in keeping some level of cooperation with the Taliban due partly to its probably the biggest insecurities – the terrorism threat. As we know, Tajikistan's Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) shares long border with Afghanistan. Therefore, the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan has been increased ever since the Taliban took control over the country. Since the Taliban is the most powerful agent in Afghanistan, accepting the reality and maintaining some level of cooperation with it appears to serve the Tajikistan's interests. In November, 2019, 20 masked people who are said to be the member of the terrorist organization called Islamic State attacked Tajikistan's border outpost²³⁶. The New York Times reported²³⁷ that at least five assailants were detained by Tajik border forces during the assault. Along with an existing threat posed by ISIS, in July 2022, the reports emerged about the newly established militant organization in the north of Afghanistan called "Tehrik-e-

²³³ News, A. (2022, July 27). *Tajikistan increases export volume to Afghanistan by 38%*. Ariana News | Bringing Afghan News to the World. <https://www.ariananews.af/tajikistan-increases-export-volume-to-afghanistan-by-38/>

²³⁴ Puri-Mirza, A. (n.d.). *Afghanistan: Share population by ethnic group 2020*. Statista. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1258799/afghanistan-share-of-population-by-ethnic-group/>

²³⁵ *Tajikistan: President demands Tajik role in running Afghanistan*. (2021, August 25). Eurasianet. <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-president-demands-tajik-role-in-running-afghanistan>

²³⁶ *Tajikistan: 17 killed in border outpost attack*. (2019, November 6). *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/en/tajikistan-17-killed-in-border-outpost-attack/a-51129060>

²³⁷ Gibbons-Neff, T., & Rahim, N. (2019, November 6). *ISIS fighters attack outpost in Tajikistan*. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/06/world/asia/isis-tajikistan.html>

Taliban Tajikistan”²³⁸. All these slews of threats are likely to be pushing Dushanbe towards having more practical cooperation with the Taliban while avoiding any official exchanges and acknowledgments.

Fourth, Tajik-Afghan border has been a flash point with its rather unstable and informal characteristics in the relationship of both countries since the Taliban have taken over the power in Qobul. In May 2022, on the Afghan-Tajik border, there occurred an armed clash²³⁹ between the Taliban and Tajik border forces, which was said to be lasted for four hours²⁴⁰. Prior to this clash, the border area of Tajikistan was “shelled from the Afghanistan’s territory”. This attack was later claimed to be carried out by ISKP.

Fifth, Tajikistan has long been heavily suffering from the excessive influx of refugees from Afghanistan. The fall of former Afghan government to the hands of the Taliban have worsen the situation even further. According to UNHCR²⁴¹, in 2022 there were about 14 thousand refugees and asylum seekers came from Afghanistan. Interestingly, soon after the Taliban’s advancement throughout the country, Tajikistan, unlike its neighbors, was openly sympathetic towards accepting refugees from Afghanistan and did not oppose the border crossings of the desperate afghani refugees. It even went further by announcing the readiness to accept up to 10 thousand refugees from Afghanistan²⁴². Little earlier, deputy minister of the Ministry of Emergency Situation of Tajikistan, colonel Imomali Ibrokhimzoda said while answering the questions from journalists that the country was capable of receiving and looking after up to 100 thousand refugees. One might wonder if why Tajikistan was so open to such a sensitive issue and spoke out about its real (or imagined) capacity in receiving such a

²³⁸ *Tajikistan faces threat from Tajik taliban*. (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13750-tajikistan-faces-threat-from-tajik-taliban.html>

²³⁹ □ شدند درگیری شدند. (n.d.). اینترنشنال افغانستان. Retrieved from <https://www.afintl.com/202205152376> \

²⁴⁰ SpecialEurasia. (2022, May 18). *SpecialEurasia*. SpecialEurasia. https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/05/18/tajikistan-politics-security/#_ftn10

²⁴¹ UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency. (2022, March 18). *UN High Commissioner for Refugees calls for greater support for Afghan refugees in Tajikistan*. UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/un-high-commissioner-refugees-calls-greater-support-afghan-refugees-tajikistan>

²⁴² Ёдгор Файзов: При необходимости мы можем принять 10 тысяч афганских беженцев. Новости Таджикистана ASIA-Plus. Retrieved from <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20210623/yodgor-faizov-pri-neobhodimosti-mi-mozhem-prinyat-10-tisyach-afganskih-bezhentsev>

huge number of refugees while almost all its neighbors publicly/privately opposed any flow of refugees²⁴³. Maybe Tajikistan wanted to express its sympathy towards the collapsed former Afghan government by furiously opposing any advancement of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Whatever the cause was, soon after, Tajikistan government abandoned all its initial promises and started deportation of Afghani refugees from the country and stopped further receiving any refugees²⁴⁴. Such conflicting actions – initial sympathy for hosting Afghani refugees, at least in its discourse, and later withdrawing from it – stimulate to speculate about Dushanbe preferring to float/walk through the fine line between fully shifting its stance towards the Taliban and hoping for the power sharing “saga”.

Sixth, drug trafficking from Afghanistan is one of the major problems which directly undermines the security of not only Tajikistan but entire Central Asian countries. In 2021, according to the official data from Tajikistan’s related agencies, the “illegal narcotics they interdicted in 2021 increased by almost 69 percent year-on-year”²⁴⁵. The Head of Drug Control Agency of Tajikistan, Khabibullo Vohidzoda emphasized the “evolving situation” in Afghanistan as being an important factor for the rapid surge of drug trafficking through Tajikistan. Moreover, UNODC estimated that the opium production in Afghanistan in 2021 was 6800 tons²⁴⁶ with 8 percent higher than it was in 2020. The report also concluded that the ongoing economic collapse in Afghanistan along with the deterioration of living conditions of millions of Afghans resulted in increasing drug trade among population which in turn, caused the rise of drug trafficking through Tajikistan territory.

Tajikistan was highly critical of the Taliban taking over entire Afghanistan along with the movement’s disregard to any power-sharing among conflicting parties. Tajikistan’s historic support to National Resistance Front bared no surprise. Tajikistan hinted willingness to support the Panjshir based resistant group with its rather symbolic

²⁴³ Hashimova, U. (2021, September 22). What explains Tajikistan’s evolving position on Afghan refugees? *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/what-explains-tajikistans-evolving-position-on-afghan-refugees/>

²⁴⁴ Kumar, R. (2022, September 9). Tajikistan ‘rounding up and deporting Afghan refugees.’ *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/09/tajikistan-rounding-up-and-deporting-afghan-refugees>

²⁴⁵ *Tajikistan says Afghan instability fueling narcotics trade boom*. (2022, February 18). Eurasianet. <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-says-afghan-instability-fueling-narcotics-trade-boom>

²⁴⁶ UNODC. (2021, November). Drug Situation in Afghanistan 2021: Latest Findings and Emerging Threats [Research Brief].

gesture – bestowing upon Ahmad Shah Massoud the Order of Ismail Somoni – as recent as 2021. The country went even further by allowing self-proclaimed leader of NRF, Ahmad Massoud, to give a keynote speech at the 10th Herat Security Dialogue held in Tajikistan’s Dushanbe in November of last year. With all these being said, Tajikistan’s pragmatism in relations with its southern neighbor has always been obvious as well as it has been more situational rather than static. Moreover, there were also accusations²⁴⁷ about corruption cases within the group involving Ahmad Massoud himself who is said to be getting profits from the funding the group receives from its supporters. Also, some accuse Ahmad Massoud of “disclosing and sharing locations of martyrs including Akmal Amiri to Taliban”²⁴⁸. All these events seem to have been sounding on Tajikistan’s stance concerning Qobul.

Conclusion

Thus, Tajikistan has been apparently shifting its position towards the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan which is understandably a practical move considering the country needs some level of pragmatic relations with Afghanistan for addressing issues it is facing today. Also, expecting any dramatic changes towards putting any official labels on this status-quo seems to be not realistic. Thereby, maintaining a limited relationship with the current power in Afghanistan tends to be out of a sheer realism which stems from the contemporary challenges that I mentioned above.

So, Dushanbe’s current Afghanistan policy is not dramatically different from those of the other Central Asian Republics’ affair with the Taliban-run Afghanistan. Hence, Tajikistan has rationally chosen to simply follow the footsteps of its neighbors when it comes to the setting up of the relations with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

²⁴⁷ Zenn, J. (2023, March 31). *Brief: National resistance front (NRF) fails to foment unrest against the taliban*. Jamestown. <https://jamestown.org/program/brief-national-resistance-front-nrf-fails-to-foment-unrest-against-the-taliban/>

²⁴⁸X (Formerly Twitter). Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/SharifAhmadza1/status/1647830961109848069>

KAZAKHSTAN'S EVOLVING AFGHANISTAN POLICY

Aziza Mukhammedova, Research Fellow (IAIS)

Afghanistan's market and its position as a trade route that can connect Central Asia to South Asian ports are critically important to Kazakhstan. As the global community experiences a turbulent and unpredictable period, Kazakhstan, alongside other countries, faces a range of challenges and risks. A timely reorientation and adjustment of both its external and internal policies may enable the country to effectively cope with these challenges and even extract benefits from them.

For example, the Ukraine war exposed vulnerabilities stemming from Kazakhstan's intensive economic and trade relations with its northern neighbor, Russia. In light of this, the Kazakh government has increasingly focused on developing resiliency in managing the security, trade, and logistical challenges it is facing today. Among those challenges are various restrictions regarding northern trade routes, as well as concerns about the potential introduction of secondary sanctions. Dealing with these challenges, the Kazakh authorities realized the importance of finding new markets, trade routes, and economic opportunities for the country.

In this environment, Kazakhstan has emerged as a model for revising its foreign policy in favor of cooperation with South Asia in service to this quest for new prospects. This move can be looked at as an attempt to diversify away from its heavy dependence on Russia, paired also with a carefully crafted balanced position toward both the United States and Russia.

There is an alternative way to view these shifts, however, according to which Russia is possibly an actor gently pushing Kazakhstan toward the south, as Moscow can also benefit from trade routes to through Central Asia. As was stated by Russian President Vladimir Putin last July, "the international transport corridor 'North-South' will provide Russian goods with a shorter route to the African continent and back to Russia."²⁴⁹

²⁴⁹ Новости, Р. (2023, July 27). *Путин рассказал о развитии транспортного коридора "Север — Юг."* РИА Новости. Retrieved from <https://ria.ru/20230727/koridor-1886603600.html>

Regardless of the motivation, there has been a noticeable increase in Kazakhstan's interest in South Asian countries, particularly Afghanistan. Indeed, in December Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry decided to exclude the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations²⁵⁰.

Afghanistan's market (as an importer of industrial and agricultural products) and its position (as a trade route that can connect Central Asia to countries such as Pakistan, with significant ports) are both critically important to Kazakhstan and shape its emerging new Afghanistan policy.

Kazakhstan's Trade Relations with Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan's support for Afghanistan is rooted not just in considerations of regional stability but also Astana's own economic interests in growing trade links through Afghanistan into South Asia.

Although Kazakhstan has never officially recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan, it has been pragmatic about contacts with the Taliban and maintained economic and trade relations with the country. The first high-level interaction between Kazakhstan and the Taliban government occurred on September 2021, less than a month after the Taliban assumed control²⁵¹. Kazakhstan's then-Ambassador to Afghanistan Alimkhan Yessengeldiyev met with Acting Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Kabul, where they committed to strengthening economic cooperation.

²⁵⁰ *Kazakhstan removes Taliban from list of terrorist organizations.* (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/kazakhstan-removes-taliban-from-list-of-terrorist-organizations/3096203>

²⁵¹ Opinion, G. C.-. (2021, November 26). *Kazakhstan has a vested interest in Afghanistan's stability.* EU Reporter. <https://www.eureporter.co/kazakhstan-2/2021/11/26/kazakhstan-has-a-vested-interest-in-afghanistans-stability/>

Collaboration for the revival and extension of trade and economic links contributed to a substantial increase in trade turnover between the two nations. In 2022 the volume of trade between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan reached a record \$987.9 million²⁵², twice as much as the previous year (\$474.3 million). By November 2023, the trade between the two countries had decreased to \$583 million, with it unlikely to have jumped dramatically in the final month of the year.



In an interview with journalists in May 2023, Kazakhstan’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Integration Serik Zhumangarin said, “Politics is politics, economics is economics,” when discussing trade with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan²⁵³. His intent was to convey that even without recognizing the Taliban government and while disagreeing with their domestic policies, it is possible to have a fruitful bilateral trade relationship as it brings benefits to both sides. Kazakhstan’s approach is pragmatic and practical, given that Afghanistan has become a major market for the sale of Kazakh products.

In January 2023, Afghanistan became one of the top 10 trading partners of Kazakhstan thanks to the export of \$133.8 million worth of diesel-electric railway

²⁵² Ualikhanova, A. (2023, August 4). *Kazakhstan, afghanistan pledge to bolster trade, investment partnership*. The Astana Times. <https://astanatimes.com/2023/08/kazakhstan-afghanistan-pledge-to-bolster-trade-investment-partnership/>

²⁵³ *Kazakhstan to boost trade coop with Afghanistan*. (n.d.). Kazakhstan Today. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from https://www.kt.kz/eng/politics/kazakhstan_to_boost_trade_coop_with_afghanistan_1377949457.html

locomotives to Afghanistan²⁵⁴. In comparison, the export of a single locomotive was equal to the volume of total monthly trade of Kazakhstan with Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan.

The Kazakh-Afghan business forum held in April 2023 in Kabul was a significant investment in strengthening existing ties. During the forum, they announced the opening of a trading house in the Afghan capital. This contrasts with the closure of the Trade Representation of Kazakhstan in Russia last year.

Kazakhstan's Interests in Transport and Logistics

As previously mentioned, Kazakhstan seems to have far greater interests in cooperation with Afghanistan using the geographical location of the country as a trade corridor for reaching South Asian ports. Kazakhstan is particularly interested in participating in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan's infrastructure, especially in the fields of transport, energy, and agriculture. This was evidenced by a March 2023 meeting between Muttaqi and Yessengeldiyev. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the development of the railway system in Afghanistan.

However, Kazakhstan does not border Afghanistan and does not have any existing routes installed. This reality is expected to push Kazakh authorities to deepen collaboration with other Central Asian nations, particularly Uzbekistan, in the construction of trans-Afghan transit and logistical projects.

Kazakhstan has already taken steps to help restore Afghanistan's rail potential. The Afghanistan Railway Authority and the Kazakhstani company Integra Construction signed a contract to resume construction work on a railway branch from Rozanak Station to Rabattaryan Station (43 kilometers) in October 2023.

Furthermore, another benefit that Kazakhstan could enjoy is participation in the mining industry as Afghanistan is reportedly rich in resources such as copper, gold, precious stones, and others. Based on a survey of only 30 percent of Afghan territory, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) estimated the country's resource wealth to be

²⁵⁴ press.kz. (2023, April 5). Экспорт одного локомотива принес Казахстану втрое больше денег, чем продажа муки. *Press.Kz*. <https://press.kz/novosti/eksport-odnogo-lokomotiva-prines-kazahstanu-vtroe-bolshe-deneg-chem-prodazha-muki>

around \$1 trillion²⁵⁵. This has attracted many interested parties, such as China, and may also interest Kazakhstan. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid recently declared that Kazakh companies, among others, are expected to invest in the mining sector, energy production, and hydroelectric projects in 2024²⁵⁶.

Domestic Motivations

The first factor in Kazakhstan's domestic politics that influences its present approach toward Afghanistan is the recent cadre reshuffle. In September 2023, then-Minister of Trade and Integration Serik Zhumangarin, known for his pragmatic views on Kazakhstan's approaches to Afghanistan, was promoted to the position of deputy prime minister. This indicates top-line support for his views regarding the establishment of pragmatic economic ties with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and suggests that they will be further solidified in Kazakhstan's foreign policy agenda.

Moreover, also in September 2023, the establishment of a Ministry of Transport was announced, signaling the country's readiness to dedicate specific attention to infrastructure and transportation projects, both domestically and internationally.

Late last year, Kazakhstan dispatched a new ambassador to Kabul, Alim Khan Yasin Gildayev. He met with Muttaqi on December 29²⁵⁷.

Another internal factor that influences Kazakhstan's policy is public opinion regarding active cooperation with Afghanistan. Kazakh expert Eldaniz Gusseinov, of the Heartland Expert-Analytical Center, told *The Diplomat* that the Kazakhstan-Afghanistan Business Forum held in April 2023 triggered some criticism and concerns among a part of Kazakhstan's population. People expressed fear of their country's convergence with a state ruled by a "terrorist group."

But on the other hand, as described above, the Kazakh authorities clearly realize the importance of Afghanistan's involvement in regional processes and the benefits that Central Asian countries could get from usable trans-Afghan routes.

²⁵⁵ Haddad, M. (2021, September 24). Mapping Afghanistan's untapped natural resources. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/24/mapping-afghanistans-untapped-natural-resources-interactive>

²⁵⁶ Qooyash, H. R. (2024, January 13). *Islamic emirate: Efforts continue to attract foreign investment in 2024*. TOLONews. <https://tolonews.com/business-186957>

²⁵⁷ Khan, Zahir. (2023, December 29). *Ambassador of Kazakhstan calls on Foreign Minister*. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Исламский Эмират Афганистан. <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/ambassador-of-kazakhstan-calls-on-foreign-minister/>

Potential Challenges to Kazakhstan's Afghanistan Policy

While shaping its emerging policy toward Afghanistan, the Kazakh government must take into consideration the reality that the Taliban's government is still not recognized by the international community. This lends a degree of unpredictability to the situation.

Another important problem is that according to Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) data, there are more than 20 terrorist organizations operating in the territory of Afghanistan, a total number of approximately 10,000 individuals²⁵⁸. The potential aims of these various groups are not necessarily known in full, but their presence poses a potential threat to the wider region. This is a cause for concern because a secure environment is needed to effectively exploit the potential of trans-Afghan rail routes.

In order to fully realize trade routes that will connect Kazakhstan to South Asia's major trading ports, it will be important for Kazakhstan to continue developing ties with Uzbekistan. Despite the current positive trajectory of relations between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, there are potential conflicts between the two that could damage Kazakhstan's plans.

Finally, Kazakhstan's Afghanistan policy could be hindered in part by Astana's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. The requirement of consensus within the union regarding certain trade policies may complicate Kazakhstan's ambitions in Afghanistan, or at the very least chip away at Kazakhstan's ability to independently develop such economic and trade relations.

Conclusion

The economic and political consequences of the war in Ukraine arguably prompted Kazakhstan to look more seriously southward to Afghanistan and South Asia. However, it is worth noting that although Kazakhstan is looking away from its northern neighbor, this initiative also aligns with Russia's interests. Russia is a possible beneficiary of the very same trade routes in which Kazakhstan is currently most interested.

²⁵⁸ Роль ОДКБ в противодействии терроризму. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://odkb-csto.org/analytics/?ELEMENT_ID=22538#loaded

The Kazakh authorities are seeking access to South Asia's seaports by assisting in the development of routes across Afghanistan. The realization of such trade routes requires Kazakhstan to take steps in strengthening cooperation with the other countries of Central Asia, namely Uzbekistan, which currently manages the construction of the trans-Afghan railway route from Termez through Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, and on to Peshawar, Pakistan.

Kazakhstan's recent exclusion of the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations speaks loudly regarding their attitude toward the Taliban government, confirming a commitment to further close cooperation. If the relative peace in Afghanistan continues, Kazakhstan's Afghanistan policy will pragmatically forge ahead as cooperation deepens.

IS IRAN DISTANCING ITSELF FROM THE TALIBAN GOVERNMENT?

Hamza Boltaev, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Iran is arguably disappointed with the Taliban, but will Tehran take a step back from the relationship?

For the past few years, Iran-Taliban relations have been very strong. When Kabul fell to the Taliban in August 2021, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei publicly, although with carefully crafted words, welcomed the new reality²⁵⁹. Iran was one of just a handful of countries that kept its embassy open when the Taliban took over in Kabul, demonstrating Iran's great expectations²⁶⁰.

Nevertheless, the Taliban's recent behavior, particularly the group's unprofessionalism and lack of capacity to actually govern and address the severe socioeconomic crisis in Afghanistan, might cast shadow over its relations with Tehran. The alarmed reaction of the international community to the Taliban's recent political decisions, in addition to the mounting terrorist attacks in the country, have also raised questions about the Taliban government's ability to provide security for the people of Afghanistan or guarantee it to the country's neighbors.

Tehran is arguably disappointed with the Taliban. As such, Iran may aim to distance itself from the powers-that-be in Kabul given the Taliban's failure to address a range of security and social issues.

Security Challenges

The Taliban government has failed to adequately provide and maintain order in Afghanistan, leading to difficulties in sustaining neighborly relations with Iran. Over the course of the Taliban's present rule in Afghanistan, in addition to several minor border clashes between Taliban border forces and Iranian border guards, there have been three major border conflicts between two sides.

²⁵⁹ X (Formerly Twitter). Retrieved from https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1431554721844797442

²⁶⁰ (Iran), A.-M. S. (2021, August 17). *Iran's Kabul embassy "operational" despite Taliban takeover*. Al-Monitor: Independent, Trusted Coverage of the Middle East. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/irans-kabul-embassy-operational-despite-taliban-takeover>

The first serious incident occurred in December 2021 in Shangalak village, in Iran's Hirmand county. Farmers who were trying to pass the village's walls while still being within Iran's territory were mistakenly targeted by Taliban border forces²⁶¹. Soon after this clash, Iran's foreign affairs ministry spokesperson, Saeed Khatibzadeh, in a delicately worded statement said that "misunderstanding between border residents" had caused the fighting²⁶². Iranian media reported that the insufficiently skilled Taliban border forces seemed to be the major contributor to such random incidents, since "the Taliban border guards were unfamiliar with the complexities of the porous Iran-Afghanistan borders."²⁶³

A second incident occurred in April 2022. Iran and the Taliban border forces skirmished in Herat's Qala district after which Iran closed its border post²⁶⁴. Iran International, citing social media videos, reported that Iran had deployed military vehicles on its border after the clash took place²⁶⁵. Both sides blamed each other for starting the fight. According to the Iranians "fighting began when Taliban forces ... tried to raise their own flag. ... With a wrong understanding of the borderline, Taliban forces imagine the wall is the border between Iran and Afghanistan."²⁶⁶

A third incident took place in July 2022. After a border shooting in Afghanistan's Nimroz province, one Afghan soldier died and one was wounded. The same scenario repeated itself as the Taliban forces tried to raise their flag on Iranian territory. IRGC affiliated news agencies mostly avoided using belligerent language and naming the Taliban as responsible, whereas some news agencies did the opposite. An Iranian MP, Shahriar Heydari, in his interview with Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA) said that

²⁶¹ Motamedi, M. (2021, December 1). Iran and Taliban forces clash in border area. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/1/iran-and-taliban-forces-clash-in-border-areas>

²⁶² Motamedi, M. (2022, January 15). Iran says 25-year China agreement enters implementation stage. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/15/iran-says-25-year-china-agreement-enters-implementation-stage>

²⁶³ Tehran Times. (2022, August 1). Iran-Taliban border clashes can be prevented. *Tehran Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/475283/Iran-Taliban-border-clashes-can-be-prevented>

²⁶⁴ *Iran closes Afghan border crossing after skirmishes with Taliban*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/iran-closes-afghan-border-crossing-after-skirmishes-with-taliban/2571219>

²⁶⁵ *Iran deploys military to border with Afghanistan*. (n.d.). Iran International. Retrieved from <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202204268985>

²⁶⁶ *Afghan-Iran border clash: Taliban says one killed*. (2022, July 31). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62370108>

“in case they repeated such violations they should be dealt with decisive action by our military and border guards.”²⁶⁷

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), declaring it would “punish Iran for being a ‘vanguard’ of Shias” and other minority groups, including the Hazaras, was a major motivating factor for Iran to bet on the Taliban in Afghanistan²⁶⁸. However, a substantial increase in the number of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, in addition to the aforementioned border incidents, might impact Iranian faith in the Taliban’s ability to manage the ISKP threat. Since August 2021, according to SITE Intelligence Group, different terrorist groups in Afghanistan carried out at least 224 attacks²⁶⁹. In the second quarter of 2022, ISKP remained the most active terrorist organization in Afghanistan with 80 attacks it claimed during that period²⁷⁰. The worsening security condition increased the vulnerability of minorities, including Hazaras, Shias, and Sufis, in some provinces. In April 2022, for example, a series of blasts in Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, and Kunduz appeared to target these minority communities specifically²⁷¹.

Social Issues

Recent controversial social measures enacted by the Taliban government have been met by worldwide condemnation. For many, including Iran, these moves degrade the Taliban’s perceived reliability as a partner in Afghanistan. On December 24, 2022, in addition to banning women from going to universities, an order introduced by the Taliban’s higher education ministry, women were also banned from working for non-governmental organizations²⁷². These measures were strongly condemned by the international community, including the Islamic world. Such a short-sighted policy

²⁶⁷ پایگاه ایلنا (2022, August 1). Iran should deter Taliban in case they repeated border violation: MP. خبری ایلنا. <https://www.ilna.ir/Section-politics-3/1261719-iran-should-deter-taliban-in-case-they-repeated-border-violation-mp>

²⁶⁸ *The ISIS-K resurgence*. (n.d.). Wilson Center. Retrieved from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-k-resurgence>

²⁶⁹ Parker, C. (2022, August 18). How strong is the Islamic State in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan? *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/18/faq-islamic-state-khorasan-afghanistan-taliban/>

²⁷⁰ *Lead inspector general for Operation Enduring Sentinel and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel I*. (2022, August 16). Department of Defense Office of Inspector General. <https://www.dodig.mil/Reports/Lead-Inspector-General-Reports/Article/3129129/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-enduring-sentinel-and-operation-freedoms-s/>

²⁷¹ *Deadly mosque explosion ‘another painful blow to the people of Afghanistan.’* (2022, April 29). UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1117322>

²⁷² *Afghanistan: Taliban ban women from universities amid condemnation*. (2022, December 20). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64045497>

might worsen the security situation, as well as endanger the fragile peace. This, in turn, might further shift Iran's attitude toward the Taliban.

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian expressed concerns about the recent developments in Afghanistan on January 19, 2023. According to media reports, he and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu both declared that "there is no religious justification for the ban on women's access to education²⁷³." Within Afghanistan, most prominent leaders of various factions, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, also swiftly criticized the Taliban's decision to ban women entirely from education²⁷⁴.

Similarly, concern over the Taliban's governance made it into the joint statement issued during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Beijing in February 2023. In the statement issued by Raisi and Chinese leader Xi Jinping, the two "urged the Afghan governing body to form an inclusive government with the meaningful participation of all ethnic and political groups and eliminate discrimination against women, minorities and religions."²⁷⁵

Is Iran Distancing Itself from the Taliban?

Recent developments related to Tehran's relationship with Ahmad Massoud – the leader of the National Resistance Front (NRF) – have raised questions as to whether Iran is distancing itself from the Taliban in favor of closer ties to the NRF.

For the time being, Iran is maintaining some level of cooperation with Ahmad Massoud. In July last year, the special envoy of the Iranian president to Afghanistan, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, praised Massoud and said that "he represents an inextricable part of Afghan society²⁷⁶." With these remarks, Qumi seemed to deflect Taliban allegations that Massoud was working for U.S. interests.

²⁷³ TOLONews. (2023, January 19). *Iran, Turkey seek women's access to education in Afghanistan*. TOLONews. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-181663>

²⁷⁴ Oberoi, S. S. (2022, December 25). Taliban bans women from working in national or international NGOs. *NewsDrum*. <https://www.newsdrum.in/international/taliban-bans-women-from-working-in-national-or-international-ngos>

²⁷⁵ Office of the President of Iran. (2023, February 16). *Importance of close relations between the leaders of Iran and China in deepening comprehensive strategic partnership/ Firm support for national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national honour of the parties*. Retrieved from <https://www.president.ir/en/142506>

²⁷⁶ Мирзобекова, Asia-Plus (2022, August 19) *Медийный или реальный лидер: Как обстоят дела у Ахмада Масуда? Новости Таджикистана ASIA-Plus*. Retrieved from <https://asiaplustj.info/news/tajikistan/security/20220819/mediinii-ili-realnii-lider-kak-obstoyat-dela-u-ahmada-masuda>

Prior to this, in January 2022, Tehran organized a meeting with Massoud and the Taliban government's foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, on Iranian soil, after which Muttaqi posted a video on Twitter saying "We met commander Ismail Khan and Ahmad Massoud, and other Afghans in Iran, and assured them that anyone can come to Afghanistan and live without any concerns²⁷⁷." Showing such a bold political gesture to the parties of the conflict is rather substantial move by Tehran.

The participation of Iran's ambassador to Tajikistan, Mohammad Taghi Saberi, along with several Iranian academics, in the 10th Herat Security Dialogue, held in late November 2022 in Dushanbe, appeared to be an important event. The keynote speaker was Massoud²⁷⁸. One prominent Iranian researcher, Mohammad Ali Bahmanighajar, who also attended the event argued that "the rule of the Taliban has not led to the establishment of peace and stable government" in Afghanistan²⁷⁹. This suggests there may be at least some Iranian scholars critical of the Taliban government due to its failure to tackle Afghanistan's major issues.

Keeping Massoud on its radar appears to be in line with Tehran's interests for a couple of reasons. First, Iran has an interest in maintaining or even strengthening its influence over the NRF since there were mounting calls from some in the international community to support the group outright, arguing it could be the West's bulwark in Afghanistan. Tehran therefore seems to be more vigilant about Massoud and other leading members of the NRF, including Amrullah Saleh, and the NRF's head of foreign relations, Ali Nazary, being active in fundraising activity through interviews and social media propaganda²⁸⁰.

Second, the NRF mainly consists of several ethnic groups in Afghanistan such as Hazaras, Tajiks, Shiites, and other Persian-speaking populations. Thereby, from Tehran's perspective, it should continue to support these groups due to its historical connections as well as cultural, linguistic, and religious closeness to these minority

²⁷⁷ X (Formerly Twitter). Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/AsiaFreePress/status/1480532460165378051>

²⁷⁸ *World must show its support for Afghan opposition*. (2022, December 4). Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2210716>

²⁷⁹ Subh, H.-E. (2022, November 30). *First day of herat security dialogue, center of threats to motivation promotion of terrorist groups*. Hasht-e Subh. <https://8am.media/eng/first-day-of-herat-security-dialogue-center-of-threats-to-motivation-promotion-of-terrorist-groups/>

²⁸⁰ Harding, T. (2022, December 3). *Afghan resistance sees Taliban weakness as it seeks to exhaust the enemy*. *The National*. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/asia/2022/12/03/afghan-resistance-sees-taliban-weakness-as-it-seeks-to-exhaust-the-enemy/>

groups. That will help to avoid a widespread backlash at home for its links with the Taliban, as some Iranians think there is too much Iranian blood already on Taliban hands. Apart from that, based on remarks made by some high-level officials, ranging from Iran's supreme leader to the country's special envoy to Afghanistan, Tehran is clearly interested in dealing with all parties in Afghanistan, both the Taliban government and its opponents, in order to prevent either side from monopolizing power.

The Economic Reality

The search for new economic opportunities increases the need, on the part of Tehran, to have a strong partner in Afghanistan.

For the last few years, the Iranian economy has been greatly impacted by U.S. sanctions. The country has long sought new economic opportunities beyond its eastern borders. Iran's balanced support to the Taliban could be translated not only into its economic interests in Afghanistan, but also, in a broader sense, its relations with China. Considering Afghanistan's geographic location between China and Iran, it's very important for Iran to have good relations with Afghanistan for boosting its economy via trade with China, using Afghanistan as a transportation corridor.

In addition, over the last decade Afghanistan has been among the top five export destinations for Iranian goods, yet exports declined 40 percent in 2022 compared to the previous year²⁸¹. However, as the head of the Mashhad Office of the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce declared, the volume of trade between Iran and Afghanistan has risen by 25 percent as of December 2022²⁸². According to vice president of the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, Aladdin Mir-Mohammad-Sadeghi, who is very optimistic about the prevalence of trade between two nations, if "the promises made by Taliban officials" were kept, bilateral trade could potentially reach \$3 billion²⁸³. Furthermore, Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan, in October 2021,

²⁸¹ Tookhy, A. F. (2022, August). Iran's Response to the Taliban's Comeback in Afghanistan. Afghan Peace Process Issues Paper. Retrieved from https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Afghanistan-Peace-Process_Irans-Response-Talibans-Comeback-Afghanistan.pdf

²⁸² 25% rise in Iran-Afghanistan trade exchange. (2022, November 30). Iran News Daily. <https://irannewsdaily.com/2022/12/25-rise-in-iran-afghanistan-trade-exchange/>

²⁸³ *Iran and the Taliban after the US fiasco in Afghanistan*. (n.d.). Middle East Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-and-taliban-after-us-fiasco-afghanistan>

expressed the willingness of his country to invest in the energy, transportation, mining, trade, and health sectors in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The Iranian response to growing social grievances and a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, coupled with several border clashes, suggest that Tehran's expectations of the Taliban have not been met. However, disappointment with the Taliban might not prevent Iran from pursuing pragmatic cooperation with the Taliban, considering its cooperation with the movement extends beyond security boundaries and includes challenges ranging from transboundary water issues to migration and drug trafficking.

Furthermore, Tehran's positive attitude toward Ahmad Masood and effort to maintain some level of connection with the NRF cannot be simplistically interpreted as Iranian readiness to sacrifice its relations with the Taliban. However, based on the factors laid out above, Tehran is likely to lower its exposure to the Taliban, to moderate its expectations.

As Tehran increasingly seeks new economic opportunities on its eastern boundaries, Afghanistan will remain an important partner. As long as the Taliban movement is the most powerful agent in Afghanistan, maintaining pragmatic relationship with the group is a rational decision for Tehran.

UNVEILING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UZBEKISTAN'S ROLE IN AMERICAN AFGHANISTAN POLICY

Fazliddin Djamaalov, Research Fellow (IAIS)

The issue of Afghanistan has remained salient in American foreign policy owing to its implications for counterterrorism, regional stability, geopolitical dynamics, and humanitarian concerns. Despite the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021, the region continues to hold importance in U.S. foreign policy, as reflected in the Biden-Harris National Security Strategy 2022²⁸⁴. The document emphasizes the need for sustaining counterterrorism efforts against such terrorist organisations as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), while remaining committed to a practical engagement with the Taliban government. This policy suggests Biden administration's willingness to keep balance between constant vigilance and pragmatic diplomacy.

Furthermore, there is a wide spread believe among experts that the American foreign policy towards Afghanistan is possibly focused on prioritizing the multiplicity of issues coupled with balancing the emerging powers such as Russia and China while shaping major regional developments. The USA is further believed to face other array of factors having to do with Central Asia, Iran, Russia, and China according to Pir-Mohammad Mollazehi, an expert on the Indian Subcontinent & Middle East issues.

Keeping as much influence as possible in Afghanistan could potentially be the interest of the U.S. considering the country is very much concerned about the geopolitical balance in the region²⁸⁵. Precisely, China's appetite to gradually integrate Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative coupled with the Moscow's attempt to remain relevant towards Afghanistan due to the country's closeness to the neighbouring Central Asia could increase the importance of the region²⁸⁶.

²⁸⁴ The White House. (2022). National Security Strategy. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

²⁸⁵ Mollazehi, P. M. (2020, November 17). Joe Biden's approach to Afghanistan peace process. Strategic Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.scfr.ir/en/politics/128687/joe-bidens-approach-to-afghanistan-peace-process/>

²⁸⁶ Doshi, R. (2021, August 30). The Afghan exit damaged U.S. global standing. The Washington Post.

In contrast to these developments, the emerging U.S. policy approach toward Afghanistan, with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate in power, involves a tactical engagement aimed at addressing immediate security concerns, alongside a diplomatic stance of isolationism to pressure the Taliban into making concessions regarding human rights and inclusive governance²⁸⁷. The United States appears to be inclined to use both incentives and deterrent measures to influence Taliban behaviour. However, miscalculations in this delicate balancing act could lead to unintended consequences such as pushing the Taliban closer to American adversaries. The effectiveness of this nuanced approach remains uncertain due to the complex dynamics at play.

In this context, the role of Uzbekistan could be a strategic asset for the United States due to its geographical proximity to Afghanistan along with a shared values, traditions and historical relations. Therefore, the Uzbekistan's official position towards resolving Afghan issue emphasizes three key points²⁸⁸: Firstly, acknowledging that the Afghan crisis cannot be resolved through military means; Secondly, recognizing the importance of gradual integration of Afghanistan into Central Asia; and finally, underscoring the necessity for a comprehensive regional and global approach to achieving a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan.

Thus, the American strategy towards Afghanistan seems to prioritize indirect engagement with focusing on advancing the U.S. interests via regional partnership with CA countries namely Uzbekistan. In this context, the CA governments' joint statement²⁸⁹ during the October 2021 "Ten-nation Moscow summit" about a regional consensus on cautiously integrating the Taliban into the region could potentially increase the Uzbekistan's role as a crucial intermediary for the United States.

In light of this, the notable shift in the U.S. strategy that is encouraging Afghanistan to be perceived as an integral part of the Central Asia as opposed to the previous U.S. policy that treated Central Asia and Afghanistan as separate entities demonstrated by the South Asia-Afghanistan initiative. This change has been

²⁸⁷ Dobbins, J., Radin, A., & Miller, L.E. (2022). Engage, isolate, or oppose: American policy toward the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1363-1.html>

²⁸⁸ IA Centr. (2021, August 18). Chapter of Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry Reveals What Taliban Wants. <https://ia-centr.ru/publications/glava-mid-uzbekistana-rasskazal-chego-khochet-taliban/>

²⁸⁹ Amarynth. (n.d.). Joint statement of the participants in the Moscow format consultations on Afghanistan, moscow. The Vineyard of the Saker. Retrieved from <https://thesaker.is/joint-statement-of-the-participants-in-the-moscow-format-consultations-on-afghanistan-moscow/>

acknowledged by Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells, who stated, “the significant change is that Afghanistan is now considered a Central Asian state, and our policies must reflect this reality in order to support the region’s efforts to achieve the necessary level of connectivity required by landlocked nations”²⁹⁰.

Similar to Afghanistan, Uzbekistan holds a significant geostrategic position due to its potential to facilitate crucial connectivity between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East²⁹¹. In addition to engaging the Taliban in negotiations, there have been efforts to encourage broader regional involvement in Afghan development. Events such as the “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity” conference in July 2021 and the “Peace Process, Security Cooperation, and Regional Interaction Forum” in March 2018 exemplify Uzbekistan’s interest in Afghanistan as a market and a gateway for communication with other regions, while also serving as a platform for promoting American interests. During the “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity” conference in Tashkent in July 2021, a new negotiation group for Afghan settlement was announced, comprising the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan²⁹². However, due to the rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan, this American initiative “did not see the light”. The connectivity initiative can be viewed as part of the comprehensive U.S. C5+1 project, and Uzbekistan’s participation in it reflects an attempt to align its priorities with the interests of global centres of influence within its multi-vector foreign policy concept. Furthermore, it is important to consider the arrangements of these conferences as a means for Tashkent to reclaim its position as a regional initiator and mediator in the negotiation process concerning Afghanistan, particularly given the current circumstances in the country.

In comparison to Turkmenistan or Iran, Uzbekistan has maintained a more reserved approach in its interactions with the Taliban government since their rise to power in Kabul in August 2021. Unlike other countries in the region, the official stance

²⁹⁰ U.S. Department of State. (2020, February 5). United States strategy for Central Asia: Advancing sovereignty and economic prosperity. <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>

²⁹¹ UzDaily. (2021, August 17). Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues official statement on Afghanistan. <https://www.uzdaily.uz/ru/post/63000>

²⁹² Jagran Josh. (2021, July 19). US, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan form new Quad group: All you need to know. <https://www.jagranjosh.com/current-affairs/us-pakistan-afghanistan-uzbekistan-form-new-quad-group-all-you-need-to-know-1626674534-1>

of Tashkent refrains from accrediting Taliban diplomats, even in the role of chargé d'affaires. Uzbekistan's position towards the Taliban government is characterized by a general attitude, with minimal criticism of their actions in the media or public discourse within Uzbekistan. This approach bears similarities to that of the United States, as highlighted by Secretary of State A. Blinken during his visit to Tashkent in March 2023²⁹³. In an interview with VOA, Donald Lu, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, emphasized that it is premature to consider recognizing the Taliban. Furthermore, there exists a global agreement involving Moscow, Beijing, and Iran to refrain from taking such a step²⁹⁴.

Uzbekistan's enhanced focus on Afghanistan aligns seamlessly with its transition to becoming an export-oriented economy since 2016. President Mirziyoyev, in his address at the SCO-CSTO summit 2021, emphasized that Uzbekistan's primary objective is to create a conducive environment in Afghanistan that facilitates the implementation of infrastructure, transportation, and energy projects targeting South Asia and the Middle East²⁹⁵. Uzbekistan's transportation priorities encompass not only Afghan projects but also Iranian initiatives. However, the Iranian route presents challenges due to potential U.S. sanctions. In pursuit of its strategy to engage Central Asian nations in Afghanistan and establish the "Greater Central Asia" region, the United States endorses the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar initiative. This endorsement aligns with Uzbekistan's transit and transportation ventures, which aim to counter Russia's influence in the region.

Moreover, the United States holds a vested interest in maintaining its influence in the region, particularly concerning its long-term relationships with China, as outlined in the NSS 2022. China's primary concern regarding Afghanistan revolves around ensuring stability and security in Central Asia and its western provinces. Prominent Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, have

²⁹³ Blinken, A. (2023, March 2). "Taliban not keeping to its commitments" – Blinken. Kun.uz. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/03/02/taliban-not-keeping-to-its-commitments-blinken>

²⁹⁴ II. Amerika Ovozi. (2022, July 2). US invests in sovereignty and independence of Central Asian states, says Donald Lu, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia. <https://www.amerikaovozi.com/a/6644406.html>

²⁹⁵ Mirziyoyev, S. (2021, September 16). Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at a SCO-CSTO Format Meeting. SCO-CSTO Format Meeting, Dushanbe, Tajikistan. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/4623>

consistently emphasized the importance of peace, security, and stability in Afghanistan²⁹⁶.

China views the growing instability in northern Afghanistan as an opportunity for terrorist organizations like the Uyghur East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) to expand their influence. China accuses the ETIM of promoting separatism and carrying out acts of terrorism within its borders. China's approach to the Taliban seems to be guided by four main objectives: ensuring the establishment of a functional government in Afghanistan, securing its border, eradicating Uyghur militant groups, and safeguarding its investments and citizens in the region²⁹⁷. During the 4th Meeting of Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan in April 2023, China's Former Foreign Minister Qin emphasized the need to enhance regional cooperation on counter-terrorism, drug control, and refugee management²⁹⁸. He stressed the importance of strengthening border control and collaborating to assist Afghanistan in developing its counter-terrorism capabilities, with the aim of effectively combating cross-border terrorist activities and promoting stability.

China, being one of Uzbekistan's key trade and economic partners, is utilizing various platforms such as the One Belt One Road initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to advance its interests in Afghanistan. The Chinese policy in Central Asia has raised concerns in the United States, which considers China as the "most significant challenge" to its national security. However, Uzbekistan, acting as a mediator state, highlights the importance of China's support as a regional power in promoting stability not only in Afghanistan but also in the wider region. As a result, during the recent meeting of leaders from SCO member countries in July 2023, it was proposed to resume cooperative efforts and discussions through the framework of the SCO-Afghanistan contact group²⁹⁹.

²⁹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2022, July 29). Remarks by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the International Conference on Afghanistan. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202207/t20220729_10730107.html

²⁹⁷ Schoff, J., & Xi, J. (2022, May 17). China's Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/17/china-s-activities-and-influence-in-south-and-central-asia-pub-87146>.

²⁹⁸ Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies (ANKASAM). (2023). Results of Afghanistan's Neighboring Countries Meeting for China. <https://www.ankasam.org/results-of-afghanistans-neighboring-countries-meeting-for-china-1/?lang=en>

²⁹⁹ Mirziyoyev calls for further development and strengthening of multilateral cooperation within SCO. (2023, July 4). Kun.uz. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/07/04/mirziyoyev-calls-for-further-development-and-strengthening-of-multilateral-cooperation-within-sco>

Given the threats posed by extremist groups such as the ISIS, alongside China's increasing influence and Russia's desire to maintain its historical role in the region, close cooperation among the six nations of Central Asia is imperative. As China and Russia vie for influence in the area, the five former Soviet republics cannot afford to exclude Afghanistan from their efforts to establish a regional bloc that would bolster their economic and political strength, ultimately benefiting their citizens. The extent to which the United States pursued a long-term perspective with a specific strategy for Afghanistan is a subject of debate and interpretation. Nevertheless, it is evident that the situation in Afghanistan remains intricate and uncertain, and the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal are likely to have significant ramifications for the region and beyond.

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54 Mustaqillik Avenue, Mirzo-Ulugbek District,

Tashkent, 100007, Uzbekistan, URL: <https://iais.uz/en>

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