

Central Asia's Relations with Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

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The Taliban's lightning-fast takeover of Afghanistan received rather calm and "wait and see" reactions from nearly all the Central Asian Republics (CAR), with Tajikistan being unusually outspoken about the events unfolding in its southern neighbour. Although the CARs 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' respective policies towards a Taliban-led Afghanistan have shared certain similarities, with trade-driven pragmatism being their most important characteristic. This article explores the affairs of the CARs with Taliban-led Afghanistan, which are largely shaped by Western countries' reticence in recognising the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan.¹

Many countries in the region are in a state of strategic ambiguity; even though the CARs have officially chosen to avoid any recognition and formal engagements with the Taliban, they have kept doors open for any necessary contacts. This pragmatism could, in the future, give rise to another deeper issue: the erosion of trust between these republics and Western countries. This situation could result in "reciprocal doubt" where, on one hand, improved relationships of the CARs with Taliban-run Afghanistan could, over time, create some unease and potentially be assumed by the West as a shift towards the recognition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan; and on the other, Western countries' direct and indirect exchanges with the Taliban could raise doubts in the eyes of the CARs towards the West.

Uzbekistan

For Uzbekistan, the issue of recognition has not been an obstacle to maintaining trade relations with Afghanistan. In 2022, Uzbekistan exported more than US\$750 million worth of goods to Afghanistan; imports from Afghanistan were at a far lower value of US\$9.3 million.² Uzbekistan also sees Afghanistan as a potential trade route; therefore, it was a principal supporter of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Qobul-Peshowar railroad project, kickstarted in March 2022, soon after Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan agreed to the construction.³ However, the Qoshtepa Canal Project, which the Taliban is pursuing, appears to be the most pressing challenge to Afghan-Uzbek relations. Due to the absence of any official contacts, it has been almost impossible for Uzbekistan to legally incorporate Afghanistan into the broader regional water regulatory system for Central Asian nations' water affairs.

Kazakhstan

Kazakh-Afghan relations have also been improving in the last two years. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine seems to have pushed Kazakhstan to diversify its trade relations with Russia, in addition to the greater need for minimising logistical interdependence with its northern neighbour. To this end, according to strategists in Astana, Afghanistan might be crucial; as Deputy Prime

Minister and Minister of Trade and Integration Serik Zhumangarin pointed out, "Politics is politics, economics is economics."⁴ Kazakh-Afghan cooperation covers domains like trade, construction, and mining. In 2022, trade turnover with Afghanistan doubled that of 2021 to reach US\$987.9 million,⁵ with exports constituting a big share. In January 2023, Afghanistan became one of the top ten trading partners of Kazakhstan. Afghanistan has also been the largest market for Kazakh grain and flour.⁶ Moreover, the Kazakh-Afghan business forum, held in Kabul in April 2023 and which witnessed the announcement of the trading house in Kabul, is another testimony to the deepening economic cooperation between the two sides.

Kazakhstan has also been actively exploring the possibility of participating in railway development projects in Afghanistan. Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Mavlavi Amir Khan Muttaki met with the Kazakh Ambassador to Afghanistan Alimkhan Essengeldiyev on 12 March 2023 in Kabul to discuss the matter.⁷ Kazakhstan is also considering the possibility of bypassing Uzbekistan in exporting goods, especially grain and flour, to Afghanistan, citing Uzbekistan's higher rate of transit charges.⁸ On this note, Turkmenistan⁹ is said to be interested in both developing new transportation systems through its territory and offering a discount of

30 percent to Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has also been eyeing to participate in Afghanistan's mining industry, with two Kazakhstani mining companies, KazMunaiGas and Kazgeologia, reportedly interested in establishing a presence in the market.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan has been following in the footsteps of the other CARs in its Afghanistan approach and has become more pragmatic. The Tajik government also openly announced the acceptance of a thousand Afghan refugees into its territory.¹⁰ However, it would later reverse this policy, close the borders, and send many refugees back home.¹¹ Tajikistan's changing tone could signal the need for practical relations with Afghanistan, as there are pressing challenges that require some degree of engagement—these include issues of trade, terrorism, border clashes, drug trafficking, and refugees.

For Tajikistan, Afghanistan is too large a market to be ignored. The total volume of trade between the two countries reached US\$52.7 million in the first half of 2022.¹² In the first half of 2022 alone, Tajikistan exported a total of US\$44.9 million of electricity to Afghanistan.¹³

Turkmenistan

The relationship between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan has often been eclipsed by other concerns that are strictly confined to the region. The essence of these relations lies in cooperation in areas like energy and new transport corridors. To this end, Turkmenistan has continued to maintain practical relations with the Taliban government. The Taliban government's former acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited Ashgabat in mid-January 2022 to discuss the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas project and the Turkmen-Afghan-Pakistan (TAP) high-voltage power transmission project.

Turkmenistan is also interested in the development of cargo transportation through Afghanistan. Therefore, Turkmenistan is eyeing participating in the modernisation of transport infrastructure in Afghanistan¹⁴ that includes construction of highways and railways, and improving customs procedures. Apart from the transportation and trade cooperation, Turkmenistan, as a downstream region of the Amu Darya basin, is deeply concerned with the construction of the Qoshtepa Canal in northern Afghanistan. On 4 August 2023, Turkmenistan hosted the 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”¹⁵ was identified in a joint statement released after the summit. Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are continuing a practical dialogue on a number of other issues, including border clashes and the threat of terrorism.

Kyrgyzstan

Bilateral trade was a dominant force in the relations between Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. In the first half of 2023, trade turnover reached US\$13.2 million, with agricultural products being the most traded goods.¹⁶ During this period, Kyrgyzstan imported a little over US\$2 million worth of goods from Afghanistan, which is characteristic of the CARs’ trade cooperation with Afghanistan. Since the Taliban’s return to power, the export of goods from Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan has increased, from around US\$1.2 million in 2020 to US\$21 million in 2022. This could be attributed to the rebounding trade cooperation after the end of COVID-19-related restrictions. Apart from trade, Kyrgyzstan seems to be mainly concerned about the security challenges that could spread into the country from a Taliban-governed Afghanistan.¹⁷ Additionally, both sides have been continuing discussions over the CASA-1000 project, which is aimed at supplying Afghanistan with Kyrgyz electricity.¹⁸

Conclusion

Central Asian countries’ Afghanistan policy has so far been dominated by a careful calibration of their pragmatic interests, alongside avoiding any official exchanges, as well as recognition of the Taliban government, which might give the wrong signal to nations that do not have typical relations with the Taliban government. Although the engagements of CARs with the Taliban government experienced some lows in the early period of Taliban rule, pragmatism and policies centred around prioritising economic interests eventually prevailed. Moreover, the CARs are exploring ways by which they can keep their doors open to allow for a mutually beneficial economic cooperation with the Taliban-run Afghanistan without incurring antagonism from the international community.

The “collective approach” adopted mainly by Western countries towards the issue of recognition could also be implemented by the CARs towards more practical economic cooperation without any political engagement with the Taliban government. At the same time, Western countries’ affairs with the Taliban could trigger some unease in the CARs. CAR-West relations on the Taliban issue could result in both sides distrusting the other.