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Center for Afghanistan and South Asian Studies

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& alternative perspectives**

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FROM THE EDITOR

Afghanistan continues to occupy a special and often challenging place in regional and international discussions. More than four years after the Taliban's return to power, the country remains at the center of complex political, economic, and security processes that directly affect its neighbors and the wider region. This report was prepared with the intention of contributing to a calmer, more balanced, and regionally informed understanding of these developments.

This publication is part of the annual collection of analytical papers produced by the Centre for Afghanistan and South Asian Studies of the Institute for Advanced International Studies. It reflects the Centre's ongoing effort to track, analyze, and thoughtfully interpret key developments in and around Afghanistan.

The idea behind this report is simple: to look at Afghanistan as it is today, without preconceived judgments, and to reflect on how ongoing changes inside the country influence the surrounding geopolitical environment. The authors of this volume approach Afghanistan not only as a source of risks and uncertainties, but also as an important regional actor whose internal decisions increasingly shape trade routes, water use, security dynamics, and diplomatic relations across Central and South Asia.

The report brings together analytical chapters and shorter commentaries that address key issues such as regional security, economic interaction, infrastructure and connectivity, transboundary water challenges, and social change. Particular attention is given to Afghanistan's growing role as a link between regions and to the evolving policies of Central Asian states, which are adapting to new realities in the absence of a unified international approach toward the Taliban.

Rather than offering ready-made answers or policy prescriptions, this publication seeks to encourage thoughtful discussion and informed dialogue. The analyses presented here reflect different perspectives, united by a shared effort to understand Afghanistan within its historical context and present-day constraints.

We sincerely hope that this report will be useful to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners alike, and will contribute to a more nuanced and respectful conversation about Afghanistan and its place in the region.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This flagship report brings together a collection of analytical papers and commentaries that offer a comprehensive and regionally grounded assessment of contemporary developments in and around Afghanistan. The publication prioritizes timely, policy-relevant, and thematically structured analysis, reflecting the evolving realities that have emerged since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.

The report examines how the consolidation of Taliban authority has reshaped Afghanistan's interaction with its neighbors and external stakeholders. A central focus is placed on regional security dynamics, including the transformation of threats related to terrorism and extremism, border stability, and the broader implications of Afghanistan's internal political trajectory for Central and South Asia.

Thematic sections address a wide range of interconnected challenges. These include transboundary water management and the strategic implications of large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Qosh-Tepa Canal; shifting patterns of regional diplomacy and recognition; economic governance under conditions of international isolation; and Afghanistan's growing significance as a transit and connectivity hub linking Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Eurasia. Particular attention is paid to emerging transport corridors, energy projects, and trade routes that position Afghanistan as a critical node in regional economic integration.

Several contributions analyze the evolving foreign policies of Central Asian states toward Afghanistan, with a focus on pragmatic engagement amid an increasingly fragmented international environment. The report highlights how countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and others in the region are recalibrating their approaches—balancing security concerns, economic interests, and reputational risks in the absence of a unified international strategy toward the Taliban. These analyses illustrate the growing importance of Afghanistan for Central Asian states as both a security factor and an alternative route for trade and connectivity diversification.

The publication also explores social and ideological dimensions, including education, religious legitimacy, and women's rights, assessing their long-term implications for regional stability and international engagement. Commentary sections complement the main analytical chapters by offering concise, policy-oriented reflections on rapidly evolving developments.

Overall, the report presents its findings in a structured and accessible manner, combining historical context with forward-looking analysis. By situating contemporary events within broader regional and geopolitical processes, the publication aims to support informed policy discussions and contribute to a deeper understanding of Afghanistan's changing role in the regional order.

SECURITY

UZBEKISTAN'S EVOLVING NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN STRATEGY

26th March, 2025

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Hamza Boltaev, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS, CASAS)

Afghan-Uzbek relations are expected to reach to a new high in 2025. Last year, the two countries stated aims to increase bilateral trade turnover to \$3 billion². The planned construction of an Uzbek trade center, covering an area of 220 square meters, in Mazar-i-Sharif³ along with an effort for intensifying the implementation of the Trans-Afghan transport corridor might further solidify bilateral pragmatic cooperation between the two neighbors.

Over the last three years, Uzbekistan has pursued a proactive foreign policy toward Taliban-led Afghanistan based on its own strategic interests. Tashkent's long-lasting obsession with a security-oriented approach has been traded for a pragmatic, economy-first foreign policy in relation to Kabul. Adopting a flexible and multivector approach to its Afghan policy might incur potential reputational risks for Uzbekistan's international image. However, the current geopolitical reality and the historical links between Afghanistan and Central Asia underscore the significance of the country for Uzbekistan's foreign policy priorities.

* Published: Gafarov, I., & Boltaev, H. (2025, March 26). *Uzbekistan's evolving northern Afghanistan strategy*. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/uzbekistans-evolving-northern-afghanistan-strategy/>

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² Kun.uz. (2024, August 20). Transafgon temiryoli qurilishi bo'yicha amaliy ishlar tez orada boshlanadi - Laziz Qudratov. <https://kun.uz/news/2024/08/20/transafgon-temiryoli-qurilishi-boyicha-amaliy-ishlar-tez-orada-boshlanadi-laziz-qudratov>

³ Ariana News. (n.d.). Uzbekistan set to open permanent trade center in Northern Afghanistan. <https://www.ariananews.af/uzbekistan-set-to-open-permanent-trade-center-in-northern-afghanistan/>

Historical Context

Tashkent's foreign policy orientation toward Afghanistan is largely focused on the northern provinces. Historically, the two sides of the Oxus (the modern Amu Darya) were deeply connected through ethnic, historical, and cultural ties. The Afghan provinces of Balkh, Jowzjan, Faryab, Sar-e Pol, Takhar, and Kunduz, where a significant Uzbek community resides, have long been closely connected to the civilizational space of Mavarannahr (also called Transoxiana), the legacy of which modern Uzbekistan upholds.

Some northern Afghan territories maintained administrative and political ties with the Emirate of Bukhara until the late 19th century, highlighting the longevity and depth of shared historical heritage ⁴.

This factor plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary Afghan-Uzbek relations, providing a foundation for sustainable partnership. Even during the tenure of Uzbekistan's first president, when Tashkent officially exercised caution regarding Afghanistan, engagement with northern Afghanistan – particularly with the leader of the Uzbek community, Abdul Rashid Dostum – remained stable⁵.

Over time, historical-cultural ties led to practical steps. A key contribution by Uzbekistan to the region's infrastructure development was the construction of the 75-km Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif railway, completed in 2011 using its own funds. However, during that period, Tashkent's priorities were primarily focused on security issues, and northern Afghanistan was regarded as a buffer zone ensuring strategic stability along Uzbekistan's southern borders from the early 1990s to 2021.

⁴ Nazarov, R. R. (2025, March 6). Konflikt v Afganistane s pozitsiy etnopolitiki [Conflict in Afghanistan from the standpoint of ethnopolitics]. CyberLeninka.

<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/konflikt-v-afganistane-s-pozitsiy-etnopolitiki-istoricheskie-predposyalki-i-sovremennoe-sostoyanie-problemy>

⁵ Gazeta.uz. (2021, August 16). <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/08/16/dustum/>

Economic Context

Economic factors are playing a significant role in contemporary Afghan-Uzbek relations, shifting the focus away from security concerns. In recent years, Uzbekistan has actively expanded trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan, establishing an International Trade Center in Termez⁶, at the border, which has significantly boosted bilateral trade turnover. As part of furthering economic engagement, plans are under consideration to open a similar center in Mazar-i-Sharif, creating additional conditions for expanding trade and investment cooperation between the two countries.

Afghanistan, with its population of 41 million, represents a promising market for Uzbek goods. Currently, multiple countries – including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran, Qatar, and the UAE – are showing interest in the Afghan market. Given the increasing competition, Tashkent faces the challenge of maintaining and strengthening its economic position in Afghanistan at a time when others are eyeing much the same.

While Afghanistan's southern provinces are traditionally oriented toward Pakistan and its western regions toward Iran, Uzbekistan has the opportunity to sustain and expand its economic influence in the north. In this context, cultural and historical ties play a crucial role, fostering local preference for Uzbek goods and services in northern Afghanistan. This factor provides Tashkent with a strategic advantage in the competition for the Afghan market.

Qosh-Tepa Factor

The transformation of Uzbek foreign policy toward Afghanistan has manifested in its approach to the Qosh-Tepa Canal project. The Uzbek government

⁶ News Central Asia. (2024, August 30). International trade center opened at Uzbek-Afghan border, expected annual trade turnover is USD 1.2 billion. <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2024/08/30/international-trade-center-opened-at-uzbek-afghan-border-expected-annual-trade-turnover-is-usd-1-2-billion/>

has notably refrained from emphasizing the potential water-related tensions that may arise from the initiative. This careful approach can be attributed to the recognition that, for the sake of its own security, Tashkent has come to understand the importance of fostering economic development in northern Afghanistan as a means of ensuring regional stability. Consequently, the prevailing consensus in Tashkent underscores the prioritization of security through economic cooperation and socio-economic development strategies. Uzbekistan's approach to the canal project arguably demonstrates the evolving trajectory of Uzbek foreign policy toward Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the development of agriculture and irrigation infrastructure in Afghanistan's northern provinces contributes to improving living standards of local communities, and thereby strengthens bilateral relations between Tashkent and Kabul⁷. In this context, Uzbekistan supports the implementation of the Qosh-Tepa project, provided it adheres to international norms and standards, ensuring the minimization of potential environmental risks and long-term benefits for all stakeholders.

Soft Power

Uzbekistan has placed a significant emphasis on educational initiatives in northern Afghanistan, viewing them as key factors in mutual understanding and eventually fostering the regional stability. In this regard, Tashkent has sponsored the construction of the "Khair al-Mudaris Imam Bukhari" madrassa in Mazar-i-Sharif ⁸. The institution is reportedly planned to be built with Uzbek-backed financial support amounting to \$6 million and accommodating 1,000 students. Tashkent believes that establishing such a joint educational institution might facilitate the development of

⁷ Institute for Advanced International Studies. (2024). Policy Brief CA-Afg [PDF]. https://iais.uz/storage/files/1/PolicyBriefCA-Afg_FINAL%2027:03:2024.pdf

⁸ Kun.uz. (2024, August 24). Uzbekistan postroit medrese v Afganistane za 6 mln dollarov [Uzbekistan will build a madrasah in Afghanistan for \$6 million]. <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2024/08/24/uzbekistan-postroit-medrese-v-afganistane-za-6-mln-dollarov>

a unified approach to religious education, which will eventually minimize the risk of radical ideologies spreading and strengthen the region's spiritual security. Additionally, such a madrassa's activities appear to foster a positive perception of Uzbekistan among Afghanistan's religious community, which plays a crucial role in socio-political processes and governance. Thus, Uzbekistan's involvement in preparing Afghanistan's intellectual elite could become a vital instrument of its soft power strategy, contributing to the country's long-term influence in the region.

Challenges

Although the Taliban appear to view Uzbekistan's growing interest in northern Afghanistan as a positive development and recognize Tashkent as a key economic partner, several existing challenges could impact the development of bilateral relations.

First, the Taliban's conscious and subtle push toward changing the ethnic landscape⁹ of the northern regions of Afghanistan could shift the balance in these provinces. Pashtuns, with their distinct cultural and historical background, may be less receptive to Tashkent's initiatives in the area. In the long run, these developments might influence Uzbekistan's strategic approach toward northern Afghanistan and could necessitate adjustments to it.

Second, Chinese influence in the northern regions of Afghanistan is growing. Chinese investments in extracting oil from the Amu Darya delta¹⁰ and the development of the Wakhan Corridor¹¹ project could potentially shift local economic

⁹ Sangar. (2023, March 9). Pushtunizatsiya Afganistana: Kakie plany u talibov i Pakistana [Pashtunization of Afghanistan: What are the plans of the Taliban and Pakistan]. <https://sangar.info/l/pushtunizatsiya-afganistana-kakie-plany-u-talibov-i-pakistana>

¹⁰ Al Jazeera. (2023, January 6). Afghanistan signs oil extraction deal with Chinese company. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/6/afghanistan-signs-oil-extraction-deal-with-chinese-company>

¹¹ The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst. (n.d.). The Wakhan Corridor: China's inroad to Afghanistan. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13827-the-wakhan-corridor-chinas-inroad-to-afghanistan.html>

preferences in China's favor, which might affect conditions for Uzbek investments in the region. Nevertheless, this process might present opportunities for Chinese-Uzbek cooperation aimed at transforming northern Afghanistan into a key transit hub for international projects, thereby enhancing Tashkent's regional influence and advancing its economic interests.

Third, the implementation of international energy projects such as TAPI and CASA-1000 could lead to the Afghan energy market's reorientation toward Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. This, in turn, may reduce Uzbekistan's humanitarian assistance to northern Afghanistan while simultaneously diminishing Afghanistan's reliance on energy cooperation with Uzbekistan. A weakening of energy diplomacy could impact the overall nature of bilateral relations.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan has recognized Afghanistan as a part of the broader Central Asian region, at least in discourse. The primary projects being implemented and planned by Uzbekistan are concentrated in the northern parts of Afghanistan, underscoring its strategic importance within Uzbekistan's foreign policy framework. Notably, Uzbekistan's approach to the Qosh-Tepa Canal project as a development issue and a potential point for bilateral collaboration outweigh, at least for now, concerns about water security. In this context, Tashkent's policy extends beyond its traditional national security concerns to encompass broader objectives – enhancing regional stability and socio-economic development – which, in turn, contribute to the long-term strengthening of Afghan-Uzbek relations. In the end, the water from the canal feeds Uzbeks inhabiting both sides of the border.

THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN TO POWER AS A FACTOR IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THREATS AND CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL SECURITY

4th April 2025

Rustam Makhmudov: Senior Research Fellow (IAIS)

Introduction

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 significantly altered the geopolitical dynamics of Central and South Asia. Between 2001 and 2021, the regional balance of power was largely sustained by the American military and geopolitical presence, as well as substantial Western financial support to the Afghan government. However, the U.S. withdrawal and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces brought about a fundamental shift in this balance.

The Taliban's rise to power as an Islamic fundamentalist movement elicited varied and, at times, contentious responses across the region. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan responded relatively calmly to the group's return, maintaining diplomatic restraint. In contrast, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Iran initially voiced serious concerns regarding the evolving situation in Afghanistan. The most pronounced reaction came from Tajikistan, which approached the brink of open conflict with the Taliban.

Three years into Taliban rule, it can be stated that no major collapse has occurred in Central and South Asia. On the contrary, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) is gradually becoming a stable factor in regional security and the

* Published: Makhmudov, R. (2025). The return of the Taliban to power as a factor in the transformation of threats and challenges to regional security. *World Economy and International Relations*, 69(2), 65–75.

development of trade, economic, and transportation links. However, this stability does not imply that Afghanistan no longer poses serious challenges to the region. Rather, the Taliban's return has reshaped the regional security architecture by introducing new types of threats and challenges – some of which may be long-term in nature. These evolving dynamics must now be considered by neighboring countries in their strategic planning.

Water policy of the Islamic Emirate

One of the primary challenges posed by the new Afghanistan concerns water security in Central Asia. In March 2023, the Taliban initiated construction of the Qoshtepa Canal – a massive hydraulic infrastructure project intended to divert water from the Amu Darya to Afghanistan's northern provinces of Balkh, Jowzjan, and Faryab. The canal is projected to span 285 kilometers in length, 100 meters in width, and 8.5 meters in depth. According to various estimates, the project could divert between 20% and 30% of the Amu Darya's flow, enabling the irrigation of approximately 550,000 hectares of land¹³.

By commencing construction of the canal, the Taliban presented the region with a fait accompli. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) lacks formal recognition as a legitimate actor in international relations. Additionally, Afghanistan has historically remained outside key regional and international water governance frameworks. It is not a signatory to the 1992 Almaty Agreement, which regulates water usage among Central Asian states, nor is it a party to the 1992 United Nations Convention on the Protection and Use of

¹³ Kun.uz. (2023, June 10). Ne bylo pechali: Stanet li stroitel'stvo kanala Kushtepa katastrofой dlya Uzbekistana? [There was no sadness: Will the construction of the Qoshtepa canal be a disaster for Uzbekistan?]. <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2023/06/10/ne-bylo-pechali-stanet-li-stroitelstvo-kanala-kushtepakatastrofой-dlya-uzbekistana>

Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, which includes Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan among its participants¹⁴.

Rather than initiating dialogue with neighboring countries, the Taliban asserted that Afghanistan's access to the waters of the Amu Darya is a legal right. This position was articulated by Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar during a meeting with Abdulaziz Kamilov, Special Representative of the President of Uzbekistan for Foreign Policy, held in Kabul on March 22, 2023. Baradar stated that Afghanistan is entitled to the Amu Darya's waters "in accordance with international norms and with full consideration of Afghanistan's privileges and rights." At the same time, he expressed confidence that the completion of the Qoshtepa Canal would enhance bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan¹⁵.

Following a period of official silence among Central Asian states, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan publicly expressed concern regarding the situation. In his address at the summit of the founding states of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, held on September 15, 2023, in Dushanbe, he remarked: "In fact, a new participant in the water use process has emerged in our region, which is not bound by any obligations to our countries. You know well that the Afghan party is actively building a canal. Its launch can dramatically change the water regime and balance in Central Asia." He emphasized that Afghanistan holds no formal commitments toward the Central Asian states concerning the use of the Amu Darya's waters. As a response, President Mirziyoyev proposed the formation of a joint working group to assess the construction of the Qoshtepa Canal and its potential impact on the river's water regime. Additionally, he suggested initiating dialogue

¹⁴ Gazeta.uz. (2023, October 12). V Afganistane zaversheno stroitel'stvo pervogo uchastka kanala Koshtepa [In Afghanistan, construction of the first section of the Qoshtepa Canal has been completed]. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/10/12/qoshtepa-canal/>

¹⁵ Gazeta.uz. (2023, March 23). Uzbekistan i Afganistan obsudili kanal Koshtepa, torgovlyu, transport i prava zhenshchin [Uzbekistan and Afghanistan discussed the Qoshtepa canal, trade, transport and women's rights]. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/03/23/afghanistan/>

with Afghanistan on regional cooperation regarding the shared use of water resources¹⁶. However, when considering the prospect of a regional dialogue on the Amu Darya involving Afghanistan, doubts emerge regarding the Taliban's actual – rather than declarative – willingness to engage. There are at least three key reasons that justify such skepticism.

First, the construction of the canal cannot be stopped, nor can its technical characteristics be amended. The first phase of the canal was launched in November 2023, and the Taliban are determined to see the project through to completion ¹⁷. In terms of technical design, the project relies on outdated construction methods and materials, which undermine the canal's efficiency and sustainability as a hydraulic structure. The Qoshtepa Canal resembles a large aryk – a traditional open irrigation channel commonly used in Central Asia. As demonstrated by the experience of the Karakum Canal, constructed in the 1950s, such structures are prone to significant water losses. The Karakum Canal, built without protective lining, loses an estimated 18% of its total water flow. These inefficiencies have contributed to severe waterlogging and salinization of adjacent lands ¹⁸. The Qoshtepa Canal is unlikely to perform any better in terms of water efficiency.

Second, the Taliban view the Qoshtepa Canal as essential for bringing new agricultural lands into cultivation. An analysis of Afghanistan's current economic landscape reveals that, in the absence of substantial domestic revenue and foreign investment, agriculture remains one of the few viable sources of foreign exchange. Expanding agricultural production in the northern provinces is also critical for

¹⁶ Sputnik News. (2023, September 15). Mirziyoyev: Afganskiy kanal Kushtepa mozhet kardinal'no izmenit' vodnyy balans v TsA [Mirziyoyev: The Afghan Qoshtepa canal can radically change the water balance in Central Asia]. <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20230915/mirziyoyev-afghanistan-kanal-koshtepa-sammit-38994333.html>

¹⁷ IntelliNews. (2023, October 12). Taliban commission first section of major canal that could threaten water sufficiency of Central Asia neighbours. <https://www.intellinews.com/taliban-commission-first-section-of-major-canal-that-could-threaten-water-sufficiency-of-central-asia-neighbours-296728/>

¹⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization. (n.d.). Turkmenistan. <https://www.fao.org/4/W6240E/w6240e18.html>

enhancing food security, as approximately half of Afghanistan's population – around 20 million people – is currently facing acute food insecurity¹⁹. The economic urgency has been further intensified by the Taliban's ban on opium poppy cultivation, a policy that has resulted in an estimated \$ 1.3 billion in lost income and the elimination of roughly 450,000 agricultural jobs.

Third, the Taliban needs to irrigate large areas of land and create 250,000 new jobs in the northern provinces to solidify their political influence in Afghanistan's northern provinces, which are pre-dominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Tajiks – groups that have historically supported political and military factions opposed to the Taliban.

It appears that the Uzbek authorities have recognized a fundamental shift in the regional dynamics of water management, acknowledging the need to adapt to a new reality. This is reflected in the designation of 2024 as “the period of transition to an emergency mode of work on water saving.” The primary drivers of this policy shift are identified as climate change and the increasingly complex management of transboundary water resources. As part of the transition strategy, the government has introduced a program aimed at drastically reducing water losses in agriculture, primarily through the concreting of irrigation canals.

According to official data, 90% of water resources in Uzbekistan, or 46 billion m³, are consumed by the agricultural sector. Irrigation of 1 hectare of cotton field requires between 10,000–11,000 m³ of water annually, which is 2–3 times higher than in countries with comparable climate and soil conditions. This is largely due to the fact that irrigation systems with natural cover lose on average 14 billion m³ per year, or 36% of incoming water. The highest loss rates are observed in Karakalpakstan (43%), as well as in Namangan (40%), Navoiy (38%), Khorezm

¹⁹ Sinno, A. (2023, September 5). Afghans stave off starvation in the face of economic sanctions. Relief Web. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghans-stave-starvation-face-economic-sanctions>

(38%), and Bukhara (37%) regions. As a result, the Uzbek economy incurs annual losses of approximately \$ 5 billion due to inefficient water use²⁰.

It remains unclear how Turkmenistan will respond to the “Qoshtepa challenge”, but it will undoubtedly need to implement substantial reforms to restructure its water consumption system and enhance efficiency. Currently, Turkmenistan ranks among the least efficient water users globally. On average, more than 16,000 liters of water are consumed per person per day – four times higher than in the United States, fifteen times higher than in China, and fourteen times higher than in Russia. Despite being predominantly arid, Turkmenistan consumes more water annually than Germany, the largest economy in the European Union, which benefits from a far more favorable climate²¹.

In addition to emerging water-related tensions with Central Asia, the Taliban’s relationship with Iran has also become increasingly strained due to disputes over the use of the Helmand River. This conflict has led to periodic armed clashes along the border, sharp rhetoric from officials on both sides, and an overall deterioration in the political climate between the two countries. The Helmand River originates in Afghanistan’s Hindu Kush mountain range and stretches approximately 1,150 kilometers, eventually flowing into Lake Hamun in Iran. As a vital water source, the Helmand is essential to agricultural activity in both Afghanistan and Iran.

The Afghan-Iranian water dispute dates back to the 1940s, when Kabul began constructing dams on the Helmand River to expand irrigated land and promote the sedentarization of nomadic tribes. In 1973, Afghanistan and Iran signed a bi-lateral treaty on the shared use of the river’s water resources, which

²⁰ Gazeta.uz. (2023, November 30). Prezident ob'yavil 2024 god periodom perekhoda na chrezvychaynyy rezhim raboty po ekonomii vody v Uzbekistane [The President declared 2024 a period of transition to an emergency mode of work to save water in Uzbekistan].

<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/11/30/water/>

²¹ Food and Agriculture Organization. (n.d.). Turkmenistan.
<https://www.fao.org/4/W6240E/w6240e18.html>

allocated 820 million m³ of water annually to Iran, but it was not ratified²². In February 2021, during the administration of President Ashraf Ghani, the two countries signed an additional agreement reaffirming the principles of the 1973 accord. Nevertheless, the agreement failed to resolve the underlying disagreements between the parties²³.

In recent years, the water dispute has been further exacerbated by a prolonged drought that has severely affected Iran's agricultural sector and the ecological health of Lake Hamun. Against this backdrop, Tehran began to assertively demand its allocated share of Helmand River water, while Afghan authorities maintained that insufficient water availability made it impossible to increase deliveries to Iran²⁴. This raised suspicion on the Iranian side that the Taliban were unwilling to provide Iran with its allocated share. In May 2023, IRNA published images of the Helmand River taken by Iran's Khayyam satellite showing that the reservoirs behind the Kajaki and Kamal Khan dams were nearly 80% full. This disproved the statements from the Afghan authorities concerning water shortages²⁵. Besides, in May 2023 Tehran requested permission to send a technical delegation to measure water levels in the Helmand River, but the Taliban refused the request²⁶.

²² International Water Law. (1973). The Afghan-Iranian Helmand-River Water Treaty. https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/1973_Helmand_River_Water_Treaty-Afghanistan-Iran.pdf

²³ United States Institute of Peace. (2023, May 30). Iran and Afghanistan clash over water rights. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/may/30/iran-and-afghanistan-clash-over-water-rights>

²⁴ Mayar, M. A., & Shapour, R. (2023, November 20). The long winding river: Unravelling the water dispute between Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan Analysts Network. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/11/Helmand-Water-FINAL.pdf>

²⁵ Pars Today. (2023, May 23). Sputnikovye snimki oprovergii zayavlenie Afganistana o kolichestve vody za plotinami Kadzhaki i Kamal Khan [Satellite images have refuted Afghan claims about the amount of water behind the Kajaki and Kamal Khan dams]. https://parstoday.ir/ru/news/west_asia-i182472

²⁶ Pars Today. (2023, May 19). Amir-Abdullahiyan: Taliby ne pozvolili tekhnicheskoy delegatsii Irana izmerit' uroven' vody Gil'mend [Amir-Abdullahiyan: The Taliban did not allow the Iranian technical delegation to measure the Helmand water level]. <https://parstoday.ir/ru/news/iran-i182218>

Against this background, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, during his visit to the Sistan and Baluchestan province on the border with Afghanistan, accused the IEA of deliberately withholding Iran's rightful share of the Helmand River water, despite sufficient availability. He urged the Afghan authorities to take his warning seriously²⁷.

These remarks marked a significant escalation in the dispute and contributed to a “war of words” that culminated in an armed confrontation along the Afghan-Iranian border on May 27–28, 2023, resulting in casualties on both sides. However, this failed to move the two parties closer to a resolution. The dispute over the Helmand River is thus expected to persist as a major source of bilateral tension, further complicating the geopolitical and economic landscape of the region.

Escalating problems in relations with Pakistan

Current relations between the Taliban and Pakistan are at a particularly complex and tense stage, giving rise to a range of strategic and security challenges. Historically, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence has maintained close ties with the Taliban, offering extensive support during the group's military struggle against the Northern Alliance. Pakistan was also one of only three countries – alongside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – to officially recognize Muhammad Omar's IEA. Defeated in 2001, the Taliban sought refuge in Pakistani territory, where they were able to regroup and launch a nearly two-decade-long guerrilla and sabotage war against the Afghan army and the international coalition that supported them. It is widely acknowledged that the resurgence of the Taliban

²⁷ Mayar, M. A., & Shapour, R. (2023, November 20). The long winding river: Unravelling the water dispute between Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan Analysts Network. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/11/Helmand-Water-FINAL.pdf>

and their return to power was in no small measure a consequence of assistance from Pakistan²⁸.

The consistency, with which Islamabad provided support to the Taliban, even at the risk of entering into a confrontation with the United States, raises important questions about Pakistan's underlying strategic motivations. This support appears to be rooted in the broader framework of Pakistan's national and regional policy, which has remained largely consistent since the country's founding. It is driven by two interconnected and yet mutually exclusive factors – first, securing strategic depth in its enduring rivalry with India, which it perceives as an existential threat; and second, curbing separatist and nationalist movements among its own Pashtun and Baloch populations. These internal vulnerabilities heighten Pakistan's sensitivity to Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan, which Islamabad views as a potential lever for Delhi's influence in the region.

In order to reconcile the conflicting goals of securing strategic depth and mitigating the risk of Afghan support for Pashtun and Baloch separatism within Pakistan – particularly in potential coordination with India – Islamabad found itself compelled to actively engage in intra-Afghan affairs. This involved both influencing political dynamics in Afghanistan and managing ideological currents among Pakistani and Afghan Pashtuns and Baloch. A central strategy was to shift their focus away from ethno-nationalist aspirations, such as the establishment of a “Greater Pashtunistan” or “Baluchistan”, and instead redirect their ideological orientation toward Islamic jihad. This approach helps explain Pakistan's consistent preference for supporting religiously motivated groups in Afghanistan. In the 1970s, Islamabad backed the Afghan fundamentalist organization “Muslim

²⁸ Satyaagrah. (2023, June 19). The Durand line dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan has remained a contentious issue for over a century. <https://satyaagrah.com/global/global-politics/2937-durand>

Youth", as well as mujahideen factions that fought against the People's Democratic Party of Afghan- istan (PDPA) from 1978 to 1993²⁹. From 1994 to 2021, Pakistan provided substantial support to the Taliban, a fundamentalist movement dedicated to establishing an Islamic state in Afghanistan.

For decades, Pakistan's policy of ideologically containing Pashtun nationalism proved largely effective. However, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has presented Islamabad with a complex strategic dilemma. The core of this dilemma lies in the uncertainty surrounding the future trajectory of the Taliban's ideological orientation. Pakistani policymakers remain unable to determine with confidence whether the Taliban will continue to promote a strictly Islamic ideological framework or whether they might incorporate elements of Pashtun nationalism. Even if this nationalism does not manifest domestically, its expression in relation to Pakistan could signal a potential shift in Kabul's foreign policy – possibly including closer ties with India.

It is important to note that, in recent years, many Pashtun nationalists have placed considerable hope in the Taliban, viewing their resurgence as an opportunity to restore Pashtun political dominance in Afghanistan. Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi, a former Minister of Finance and Commerce under the Karzai administration and a prominent Pashtun intellectual, has argued that the fall of Najibullah's government in 1992 marked not only the end of the communist era but also the decline of Pashtun hegemony in Afghan politics. Consequently, the rise of the Taliban generated optimism among segments of the Pashtun population about the potential reversal of this political marginalization³⁰.

²⁹ Laletin, Yu. P. (2008). Afgano-pakistanskie otnosheniya i dzhirga mira [Afghan-Pakistani relations and the peace jirga]. *Aziya i Afrika segodnya*, 5, 60-64.

<https://mgimo.ru/library/publications/138813/>

³⁰ Sarwar, A. R. (2015, January 18). Ashraf Ghani and the Pashtun Dilemma. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/ashraf-ghani-and-the-pashtun-dilemma/>

If one assumes that the modern Taliban, as the sole ruling authority in Afghanistan, will increasingly adopt a political realist approach, then it follows that they will seek to strengthen their position in dealings with Pakistan. The Taliban leadership is well aware of Pakistan's long-standing influence over Afghan affairs and appears intent on shedding the perception of being a "Pakistani puppet." In this context, the instrumentalization of Pashtun nationalism may serve as a strategic resource, alongside the Taliban's connections with jihadist groups operating within Pakistan. The movement's assertive stance on the water disputes with Iran and Central Asian states further suggests that at least part of the Taliban elite is beginning to adopt a realist posture in foreign policy. This shift could have significant and far-reaching implications for regional dynamics, particularly for Pakistan.

The first signs of political realism in the Taliban's actions are evident from its stance on the Durand Line. The toughest statements so far have come from acting Defense Minister Mawlawi Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, the son of the Taliban founder Mullah Omar. In February 2022, referring to Pakistan's unilateral construction of a 2,600-kilometer wall along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, he said that the IAE would not allow Islamabad to continue building a fence along the Durand Line³¹. Moreover, he called it an "imaginary line" ³².

In the Afghan-Pakistani border region, the Taliban are already seen as protectors of the Pashtuns. It is to the Taliban that many eastern Pashtuns direct their grievances regarding Pakistan's actions in the border regions – actions perceived as harmful to longstanding kinship and trade ties, as numerous clans and tribes are

³¹ Tolo News. (2022, February 18). Islamic Emirate: We have not allowed more fencing on Durand Line. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176733>

³² Satyaagrah. (2023, June 19). The Durand line dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan has remained a contentious issue for over a century. <https://satyaagrah.com/global/global-politics/2937-durand>

spread across both sides of the border ³³. The Taliban's reaction often leads to armed clashes between Afghan and Pakistani border patrols, as witnessed in December 2022. Such incidents risk fueling Pashtun nationalist sentiment within the Taliban itself, particularly given that the movement is predominantly composed of ethnic Pashtuns.

Regarding the potential use of jihadist groups as strategic assets against Pakistan, there is growing evidence to suggest that the Taliban may already be doing so – albeit in a covert or indirect manner. A key case in point is Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a terrorist group founded in 2007 by Baitullah Mehsud in Pakistan's federally administered tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. The goal of TTP is to fight against the “pro-Western” government of Pakistan and to establish a form of government based on the principles of Sharia. TTP is ideologically close to the Afghan “Taliban”. It was the Pakistani Taliban who was the first to officially celebrate the capture of Kabul by the Taliban in 2021, declaring it a “great victory of the jihadist project”. TTP Emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud publicly reaffirmed his group's oath of allegiance to Taliban Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada and pledged to continue unconditional support for the Afghan movement³⁴.

Speaking about the possible ties between the IEA authorities and TTP, experts note the synchronization of the Taliban's rise to power and the sharp intensification of TTP's subversive and terrorist activities in Pakistan. It is underscored that after August 2021, the TTP has significantly strengthened its organizational structure and military-technical equipment, as well as expanded its local support base in Afghan territory. This has allowed the Pakistani Taliban to

³³ Mohmand, R. S. (2023, July 7). The Durand Line: A British legacy that fuels new tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2333766>

³⁴ Saeyd, A., & Hamming, T. (2023). The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 16(5), 1-12. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052023.pdf>

intensify terrorist activity in Pakistan's western border areas. Statistics show that the number of attacks announced by TTP more than tripled in 2020 and 2022 compared to the previous two years³⁵.

In 2023, the statistics of TTP militant attacks did not improve for Pakistan. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province alone, more than 300 attacks took place, for which the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility³⁶. Besides, 500 civilians and the same number of security staff members were killed in 2023, which is the highest fatality rate in the country in six years³⁷.

Over the past two years, TTP has secured a foothold in such strategically important regions of Pakistan as North Waziristan and the province of Balochistan known for its separatist sentiments, where they were joined by four Baloch groups³⁸.

The growth of the TTP potential is fostered by the inflow of Afghan Taliban militants, who remain faithful to the ideas of jihad, as well as Pakistani citizens who previously fought on the side of the Taliban against US troops and Ashraf Ghani's government, although the new Afghan authorities publicly discourage them from war against Pakistan. Islamabad's attempts to launch a negotiation process with TTP through the intermediary of Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani failed. It is noteworthy that in response to the Pakistani authorities' offer

³⁵ Shah, S. S. H., Mahmood, A., & Kamran, M. (2024). Resurrection of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan amidst Afghan regime's indifference: Threats to intersectional security strands in the region. *Social Inclusion*, 12, Article 8598, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8598>

³⁶ Hussain, A. (2023, August 17). Taliban's ties with Pakistan fraying amid mounting security concerns. Al-Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/17/talibans-ties-with-pakistan-fraying-amid-mounting-security-concerns>

³⁷ Shah, S. S. H., Mahmood, A., & Kamran, M. (2024). Resurrection of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan amidst Afghan regime's indifference: Threats to intersectional security strands in the region. *Social Inclusion*, 12, Article 8598, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8598>

³⁸ International Water Law. (1973). The Afghan-Iranian Helmand-River Water Treaty. https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/1973_Helmand_River_Water_Treaty-Afghanistan-Iran.pdf

of general amnesty to militants on the condition that they lay down their arms and re- turn to normal life, TTP made a counter-demand to the Pakistani government to establish Sharia law in the country ³⁹. This indicates that TTP perceives a change in the rules of the game after the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan, and this offers it a unique opportunity to use the "strategic depth" factor⁴⁰.

By all appearances, the threat from TTP is becoming a long-term threat for Islamabad, and there is nothing it can do so far, since the IEA "stands aside" from the issue, assuming that it has intra-Pakistani causes. Islamabad's range of responses is not very broad and may include three key measures of influence on Kabul.

The first measure can be to exert pressure on Kabul through Afghan refugees, whose population was recently estimated at nearly 3 million. Islamabad showed in October 2023 that it was ready to use this leverage against the Taliban. Pakistani authorities ordered 1.7 million illegal Afghan refugees to leave the country by November 1, 2023⁴¹. The political motivations behind this move were openly acknowledged. At a press conference, Acting Prime Minister Anwaar ul-Haq Kakar stated, "after non-cooperation by the Afghan interim government, Pakistan has decided to take matters into its own hands" ⁴².

The second measure of impact is to exert pressure on trade operations and transportation with the participation of representatives of Afghan businesses. A

³⁹ Mehsud, R. (2021, September 19). Pakistani Taliban reject amnesty offer unless Islamic law imposed. Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1931331/world>

⁴⁰ Saeyd, A., & Hamming, T. (2023). The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 16(5), 1-12. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052023.pdf>

⁴¹ Aamir, A. (2023, October 9). Pakistan intends to deport 1.7 million Afghans. Relief Web. <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistan-intends-deport-17-million-afghans>

⁴² Reuters. (2023, November 8). Pakistan PM says expulsion of Afghans a response to Taliban non-cooperation. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-pm-says-expulsion-afghans-response-talibannon-cooperation-2023-11-08>

significant part of the income of the population of the border regions depends on trade with the eastern neighbor, and Islamabad periodically uses this tool of pressure.

The third measure of Pakistan's impact on the Taliban can be cooperation with the US in the field of security. Islamabad strives to involve the US in its problems with the Taliban and TTP, as evidenced by the visit of Pakistani Army Commander Chief Asim Munir to Washington in December 2023, during which he met senior US military and intelligence officials, as well as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin⁴³. Nevertheless, by all appearances, the US, busy in other areas of confrontation with Russia, Iran, and China, is not yet ready to start a new big "Afghan game". However, it can be assumed that Islamabad will not stop trying to receive American support to increase pressure on Kabul.

Ideological challenge for Central Asia

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan not only changed the military and political balance of power in the regional security system but also dramatically altered the ideological map of the region. For Central Asia, this means that the entire border space to the south of the country turned into a full-fledged "fundamentalist belt" consisting of Shiite Iran and Sunni IAE.

Moreover, for all supporters of modernization and its next stage, in the form of the fourth industrial revolution characterized by rapid technological transformation and creative disruption, the Taliban's fundamentalism means that Afghanistan in its worldview is once again regressing to the Middle Ages. The Taliban's rise to power also symbolizes yet another failure in the long series of attempts to modernize Afghanistan, spanning multiple efforts throughout the 20th century and into the early decades of the 21st.

⁴³ International Water Law. (1973). The Afghan-Iranian Helmand-River Water Treaty. https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/1973_Helmand_River_Water_Treaty-Afghanistan-Iran.pdf

As known, the first attempt at modernization was initiated by Emir Amanullah Khan, who, after Afghanistan gained independence in 1919 as a result of the third Anglo-Afghan war, tried to transform the deeply traditionalist society of this country. His efforts failed. The revolt of conservative forces led to the overthrow of Amanullah Khan in 1929 and the establishment of a short-term reactionary power of Emir Habibullah (Bacha-ye Saqao).

The second attempt at modernization was associated with the name of King Mohammed Zahir Shah and spanned from 1933 to 1973. This period is often referred to in Afghan national memory as the “Golden Age”. However, this era also laid the groundwork for future instability and three critical fault lines emerged during this time.

First, there were the ambitions of Mohammed Daoud, a relative of the king, who served as prime minister from 1953 to 1964. He overthrew Zahir Shah in 1973, but did not April 1978, known as the “April Revolution”, in which the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) temporarily emerged as the dominant force. This event marked the third major attempt at modernization, this time underpinned by ideological alignment with and material support from the Soviet Union. However, the revolution also signaled the onset of a protracted civil war, in which modernist forces were opposed by religious fundamentalists and traditionalists – many of whom accept the title of king himself, instead becoming President of Afghanistan. This, in fact, opened Pandora’s box due to the desacralization of the traditional system of governing Afghan society, headed by the shah as “the shadow of Allah on earth”. Second, the growing popularity of leftist ideas, represented by supporters of Marxism-Leninism, who formed the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and its two wings – Parcham and Khalq, as well as adherents of Maoism. Third, the propagation of Islamic fundamentalist ideas as a response to modernization and the activity of leftist forces. Muslim Youth became the vanguard of conservatives.

All three forces were ideologically antagonistic, setting the stage for inevitable power struggles. This tension culminated in the military coup of operated from rear bases in Pakistan and Iran. Ultimately, it was the fundamentalists who prevailed, culminating in the overthrow of the last PDPA president, Mohammad Najibullah, in 1992.

The fourth attempt at modernization was launched in Afghanistan after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 during the presidency of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani with large-scale financial and technical support from the United States and its allies. Despite criticism of the Afghan political system during that period particularly regarding corruption and its failure to curb the narcotics industry – it is important to acknowledge the notable progress made in the field of education, which is a cornerstone of any successful modernization process.

Between 2001 and 2021, the country's literacy rate increased from 8 percent to about 43 percent ⁴⁴. Prior to 2002, the number of students enrolled in public schools was estimated at 1 million or less, and almost all of them were boys. However, by 2019, more than 9 million children were enrolled in school, of which more than 3.5 million were girls ⁴⁵. As of May 2021, the number of students in Afghanistan increased to 9.7 million. While significant challenges persisted – such as a shortage of qualified educators, with only 220,000 teachers nationwide in 2021, and marked disparities in teacher training quality across regions – the foundational structure of a national education system had clearly begun to take shape⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ Debre, I. (2021, April 30). Counting the costs of America's 20-year war in Afghanistan. Associated Press News. <https://apnews.com/article/asia-pacific-afghanistan-middle-east-business-5e850e5149ea0a3907cac2f282878dd5>

⁴⁵ USAID. (2017-2020). Afghanistan, Education. <https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/afghanistan/education>

⁴⁶ Pajhwok. (2021, May 5). Ghani sees threat to Afghanistan's education system. <https://pajhwok.com/2021/05/05/ghani-sees-threat-to-afghanistans-education-system/>

The system of higher education was modernized based upon several universities, some of which were established during the eras of King Mohammad Nadir Shah (Kabul University), King Zahir Shah (Kabul Polytechnic University and Kunduz University), and the PDPA (Balkh, Herat, Kanda- har, and Badakhshan Universities). Several public and private universities opened during the presidencies of Karzai and Ghani. However, the Taliban's return to power jeopardized these fragile achievements. One of the Taliban's first decisions in 2021 was to ban girls from receiving secondary education, which was motivated by the development of a female dress code and new curricula consistent with "Islamic values" as interpreted by the Taliban.

The Taliban's ideological approaches to the education system in Afghanistan can be understood by analyzing the statements of some senior officials. In August 2021, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, a member of the Haqqani network, who was the Taliban Minister of Higher Education until October 17, 2022, stated that the people of Afghanistan would continue their higher education in the light of Islamic law ⁴⁷. According to Mawlawi Noorullah Munir, who served as Minister of Education until September 26, 2022, "no PhD degree, Master's degree is valuable to- day. You see that the mullahs and Taliban that are in power, have no PhD, MA or even a high school degree, but are the greatest of all" ⁴⁸ In December 2022, acting Minister of Higher Education Neda Mohammad Nadeem, commenting on his decision to ban women from attending university, stated that "girls were studying agriculture and engineering, but this didn't match Afghan culture. Girls should learn, but not in areas that go against Islam and Afghan honour" ⁴⁹. On the issue of equality of men and

⁴⁷ Reuters. (2023, November 8). Pakistan PM says expulsion of Afghans a response to Taliban non-cooperation. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-pm-says-expulsion-afghans-response-talibannon-cooperation-2023-11-08/>

⁴⁸ The Express Tribune. (2023, December 14). COAS meets US Defence Secretary in Washington. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2450026/coas-meets-us-defence-secretary-in-washington>

⁴⁹ The Guardian. (2022, December 23). Taliban minister defends closing universities to women as global backlash grows. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/23/taliban-minister-defends-closing-universities-to-women-as-global-backlash-grows>

women, one of the key postulates of modernity, Neda Mohammad Nadeem during a rally at Baghlan University directly stated that they are not equal. According to him, “A male is the ruler, he has the authority, he must be obeyed, and the woman must accept his world. A woman is not equal to a man; however, they (Western nations) have placed her above a man”⁵⁰.

Another specific feature of the Taliban’s education policy is the network expansion of religious educational institutions. In particular, the IEA government announced plans to build one large madrassa in each province and 3 to 10 jihadist seminaries in each district (wuluswali)⁵¹. Besides, the Taliban created religious police and special Islamic committees in universities to work with students, while simultaneously announcing that they would send 15 thousand mullahs to fight Western ideas, which is seen as one of the most important goals of their rule ⁵².

The Taliban’s antimodernism is evident, and at this stage, they view the education system from the perspective of the priority of masculinity and utility, i.e. training personnel to solve current socio-economic problems. Given that the “jihadist” generation is likely to be in power for quite a long time, one can assume that the course of prioritizing religious knowledge over secular knowledge will be a long-term one. This, in turn, raises the question of the impact of ideological processes in Afghanistan on Central Asia, which is also undergoing complex identification transformations characterized by the strengthening of post-secular trends.

The problem is that the Central Asian region itself does not generate identification models for export, but, on the contrary, is the object of external identification influence. Currently, several external identification models are active

⁵⁰ Times of India. (2023, October 1). 'Men and women are not equal': Taliban education minister. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/men-and-women-are-not-equal-taliban-education-minister/articleshow/104090692.cms>

⁵¹ Mohammadi, G. H. (2024, January 5). Jihadi seminaries under the Taliban: A looming threat. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/jihadi-seminaries-under-the-taliban-a-looming-threat>

⁵² Mohammadi, G. H. (2024, January 5). Jihadi seminaries under the Taliban: A looming threat. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/jihadi-seminaries-under-the-taliban-a-looming-threat>

in the region – Western, Dubai, and neo-Ottoman, as well as Middle Eastern Islamic conservative and fundamentalist models. The ideology of the Afghan Taliban in this ensemble can be considered one of the variations of conservative and fundamentalist models, which, in turn, creates certain prerequisites for its possible impact on the minds of admirers of this type of thinking and values in the countries of Central Asia.

Conclusions

The absence of serious opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan implies that their power is becoming a long-term factor in shaping political, economic, trade, and ideological processes in the vast areas of Central and South Asia and the Middle East. Furthermore, the IEA is trying to develop its own model of integration into these processes as a full-fledged subject, trying to increase its overall potential not only by developing cooperation with other actors but also by obtaining tools to influence them.

One such tool is the control over water resources in relations with Iran and the Central Asian countries, given that such important rivers as the Helmand, Harirud, and Murghab originate entirely within the territory of Afghanistan, while Afghanistan contributes approximately 14.5% of the Amu Darya flow ⁵³. In relations with Pakistan, potential tools of influence include Pashtun and Baloch nationalism, as well as Islamabad's difficulties in opposing TTP. Obviously, the countries of Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan also possess leverage over the Taliban's political realism, particularly given Afghanistan's heavy reliance on imports of industrial goods and access to regional transit corridors.

With all this in mind, two broad scenarios appear plausible for the future of regional relations with the IEA. The first is a model of pragmatic cooperation. The

⁵³ Boyarkina, O. A. (2017). Afganistan v politike Tsentral'noy Azii na reke Amudar'ya [Afghanistan in the politics of Central Asia on the river Amu Darya]. *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, 4, 29-35.

second envisions a more open and trust-based framework, in which parties acknowledge each other's concerns and seek solutions through bilateral and multilateral dialogue. After three years of Taliban rule, the Taliban and the region remain at a crossroads, and the structure of the entire new regional security system will depend directly on which of these two paths ultimately prevails.

RUSSIA'S TALIBAN RECOGNITION SIGNALS POTENTIAL DOMINO EFFECT

9th July, 2025

Islomkhon Gafarov, Political Analyst (CPR)

The Russian Federation's formal recognition of the Taliban government on July 3 may fundamentally reshape the international community's approach to Afghanistan⁵⁴. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the regime has made notable diplomatic gains over nearly four years. Unlike the first Taliban government (1996–2001), which received recognition primarily from within the Islamic world, the current recognition by a major non-Islamic power underscores a new, more pragmatic and proactive direction in the Taliban's foreign policy – what might be termed "Taliban 2.0."

Impacts of Russia's Taliban Recognition

The appointment of a Taliban ambassador to Moscow, the raising of the Taliban flag on Russian soil, and the official recognition of the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government carry significant geopolitical implications.

First, the Taliban have secured recognition from a major global power not on the basis of religious or ideological affinity, but through strategic, political, and economic considerations. This constitutes a significant diplomatic victory for the

* Published: Gafarov, I. (2025, July 11). *Russia's Taliban recognition signals potential domino effect*. *Geopolitical Monitor*. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/russias-taliban-recognition-signals-potential-domino-effect/>

⁵⁴ The New York Times. (2025, July 3). Russia becomes first country to recognize Afghanistan's Taliban government. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/03/world/asia/russia-afghanistan-recognize.html>

Taliban and suggests that the regime exhibits core features of statehood and sovereign governance.

Second, this recognition comes from a leading representative of Slavic civilization – a region with which Afghanistan has historically had adversarial relations, particularly during the Soviet era. Yet, both sides have demonstrated the ability to move beyond historical grievances, engaging instead in forward-looking diplomacy driven by realism and mutual interests.

Third, Russia's move may shift the global framing of Afghanistan – from a problem primarily viewed through the lens of regional security to one integrated into the broader geopolitical tensions between East and West. As Western powers continue to disengage from Afghanistan, Moscow's recognition could pave the way for greater partnerships between Kabul and Eastern capitals.

Why Russia?

The Russian side had been steadily preparing for this step. In December 2024, the President of Russia signed a decree removing the Taliban from the list of terrorist organizations, a decision that was formally upheld by the Supreme Court in April 2025⁵⁵. On July 3, Taliban envoy Gul Hassan officially assumed his post as ambassador. Just days earlier, on July 1, Russia's Special Presidential Representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, announced that the seventh round of the "Moscow Format" talks would be held in autumn 2025, with Afghanistan participating "as a full-fledged member." This high-level statement served as a clear indication of the beginning of the official recognition process.

⁵⁵ Gafarov, I., & Mukhammedova, A. (2025, April 19). Russia and the Taliban: Political rapprochement [Commentary]. Institute for Advanced International Studies. <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/russia-and-the-taliban-political-rapprochement>

The rationale behind Russia's shift can be explained by several factors:

First, Russia seeks to strengthen its position in Central Asia, viewing Afghanistan as an integral part of the region. Security developments in Afghanistan have a direct impact on Russia's regional interests, particularly in Tajikistan. In July of this year, Moscow announced the start of arms exports to Afghanistan as part of its counterterrorism strategy⁵⁶. Arms trade remains one of the central pillars of Russia's foreign policy toolkit. Cooperation in this domain may pave the way for broader military-industrial collaboration, potentially elevating bilateral relations to a new strategic level.

Second, Afghanistan represents a new export market for Russian goods. Bilateral trade has already reached \$1 billion, with a target of \$3 billion set for 2025. During the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2025, Russia announced an expansion of its labor market to include Afghan specialists. This marks the deployment of a second core element of Russian influence – labor migration – now extended to the Afghan direction.

Third, under the pressure of international sanctions, Russia is increasingly pivoting toward the Global South. South Asian markets, particularly India and Pakistan, have emerged as key importers of Russian oil and wheat. In this context, Afghanistan serves as a critical transit corridor for Moscow's continental ambitions. In early April⁵⁷, Russia and Uzbekistan signed agreements to launch the Trans-Afghan Railway⁵⁸, reaffirming the strategic importance of Afghanistan in regional connectivity.

⁵⁶ Rahimi, H. (2025, July 2). Kabulov: Russia should arm the Taliban against ISIS. Tolo News. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-194855>

⁵⁷ TACC. (2025, April 8). РФ и Узбекистан подписали документы о проекте Трансафганской железной дороги [Russia and Uzbekistan signed documents on the Trans-Afghan Railway project]. <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/23624197>

⁵⁸ Aguiar, P. (2025, June 24). Trans-Afghan Railway: Central Asia's gateway to global trade [Backgrounder]. Geopolitical Monitor. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/trans-afghan-railway-central-asias-gateway-to-global-trade/>

Fourth, Russia has entered the competition for influence in Afghanistan and aspires to become a major external power in Afghan foreign affairs. Among the major powers, China was one of the first to make a diplomatic gesture toward the Taliban: in February 2024, President Xi officially accepted the credentials of the Taliban's appointed envoy. Since then, Chinese firms such as Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC⁵⁹) and China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC⁶⁰) have become leading players in oil and copper extraction. Additionally, Chinese companies have made significant inroads in lithium mining, driven by the global demand for electric vehicles. These successes may have spurred Moscow to intensify its own efforts to secure diplomatic and economic footholds in Eurasia.

A Domino Effect?

Russia's actions may fundamentally reshape the global community's stance on Afghanistan. Until now, most countries have adopted a wait-and-see approach. Uzbekistan has been one of the few exceptions, pursuing proactive diplomacy on the Afghan track. On several occasions, Tashkent has called at high levels for a coordinated international approach to Afghanistan and emphasized the need to acknowledge the reality of Taliban authority. Nevertheless, no collective recognition has taken place. Key regional actors such as Iran, Pakistan, and various Arab states have also remained silent. Russia's move may now trigger a bandwagoning effect, both at the regional and continental levels, with more countries reconsidering their positions on recognizing the Taliban-led government.

On the same day that Russia officially recognized the Taliban, the President of Uzbekistan held his first-ever meeting with Deputy Prime Minister of Afghanistan

⁵⁹ Kabul Now. (2023, January 5). Taliban signs \$540 million oil deal with China. <https://kabulnow.com/2023/01/taliban-signs-540-million-oil-deal-with-china/>

⁶⁰ Goalfore. (2024, July 27). China resumes work at Afghanistan's Mes Aynak copper mine after 16-year delay. <https://news.goalfore.com/detail/69050/china-resumes-work-at-afghanistans-mes-aynak-copper-mine-after-16year-delay.html>

Abdul Ghani Baradar on the sidelines of the 17th ECO Summit⁶¹. Mullah Baradar, representing the so-called Kabul faction of the Taliban, is seen as one of the key proponents of pragmatic state-building in Afghanistan. This meeting signals both sides' commitment to pragmatism; however, it is difficult to conclude that Uzbekistan will automatically align itself with Moscow's position. Tashkent's policy toward Afghanistan remains independent and is guided by the country's own geopolitical interests. Any potential recognition of the Taliban by Uzbekistan will likewise be shaped by a strategic calculus specific to its national priorities.

With regard to another of Afghanistan's neighbors, Iran, it is difficult to expect that Tehran will follow Moscow's lead. Amid its conflict with Israel, Iranian intelligence reportedly suspected the presence of Afghans with ties to Israeli operatives. This was one of the key factors behind Iran's mass deportation campaign targeting Afghan nationals. In June 2025 alone, Iran expelled over 250,000 Afghans⁶². Against this backdrop, bilateral relations have continued to deteriorate.

Pakistan, traditionally seen as one of the key candidates to recognize the Taliban, also maintains a complicated relationship with Afghanistan. Islamabad has been conducting mass deportations of Afghan refugees and has periodically shut down border trade crossings. However, following an informal trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan held in Beijing on May 21⁶³, a noticeable thaw has emerged in Kabul-Islamabad relations. This recent rapprochement, combined with Russia's diplomatic shift, may soon encourage Islamabad to move toward formal recognition of the Taliban.

⁶¹ Kun.uz. (2025, July 3). Shavkat Mirziyoyev Mulla Abdul G'ani Barodarni qabul qildi. <https://kun.uz/30709135>

⁶² IOM. (2025, June 30). Record 256,000 Afghan migrants return from Iran as IOM warns of dire funding shortfall. <https://www.iom.int/news/record-256000-afghan-migrants-return-iran-iom-warns-dire-funding-shortfall>

⁶³ Xinhua. (2025, May 21). Wang Yi on the outcomes of the trilateral meeting of foreign ministers of China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

<https://english.news.cn/20250521/30af4071d29d4fa784154346b6a53afd/c.html>

China is unlikely to base its actions on Russia's lead. Beijing has already established its own Afghan agenda within its foreign policy and primarily views Afghanistan through a South Asian lens – particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is highly likely that China will give special attention to the Afghan issue at the 25th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit⁶⁴, scheduled to take place in Tianjin in late August and early September 2025. Should China officially recognize the Taliban, this move could generate a broader wave of recognition – both within the SCO framework and in the international arena more broadly.

Russia's decision may resonate with certain Central Asian states. Kazakhstan appears to be a potential candidate for recognizing Taliban authority. Almaty has already taken meaningful steps in this direction; in June of the previous year, Kazakhstan removed the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations. Kazakh officials have also conducted multiple high-level visits to Kabul. At present, there seem to be no significant barriers preventing Kazakhstan from initiating formal recognition.

Tajikistan, which maintained a “cold” stance toward the Taliban from the outset, may now reconsider its approach in light of Russia's diplomatic signal. While Dushanbe is still some distance from recognition, signs of warming ties with Kabul have begun to emerge.

In addition, Belarus – Russia's closest ally – is likely to follow suit. While Minsk's recognition may not significantly deepen bilateral relations with Kabul, it would bolster Moscow's diplomatic efforts and contribute to a bandwagoning effect under Russian leadership.

⁶⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2024, September 9). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs holds a briefing on China's rotating presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202409/t20240910_11488270.html

Looking Ahead

Russia's recognition of the Taliban regime may signal the beginning of a new phase in international engagement with Afghanistan. On one hand, recognition by a major global actor like Russia could trigger a domino effect, initiating a broader process of normalization. On the other hand, it could also intensify competition among global and regional powers over spheres of influence within Afghanistan.

In addition, the diplomatic perseverance of the Taliban deserves attention. Through sustained effort, the movement has secured recognition not from a spiritual ally or regional power, but from a state of global significance. This marks an evolution in both the state-building trajectory and foreign policy conduct of the Taliban regime – an actor often overlooked in international discourse. The upcoming SCO Summit in Tianjin is highly likely to open a new chapter of diplomatic engagement on the Afghan file.

THE TALIBAN'S STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMACY

22nd February, 2025

Islomkhon Gafarov, Political Analyst (CPR)

After more than three years in power, the Taliban have struggled to gain recognition for a host of reasons. The ongoing power struggle between the Kandahari and Kabuli factions of the Taliban has garnered significant attention in post-Soviet media spaces ⁶⁵. This internal conflict, which could potentially lead to a shift in Afghanistan's leadership, reveals the complex dynamics at play within the organization. Central to this struggle are the disagreements between the leader of the Taliban movement, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, and Minister of Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani, concerning governance approaches and Afghanistan's international role. These internal divisions highlight the lack of a cohesive vision among the Taliban's top leadership. Such fragmentation at the highest levels of leadership has several significant implications, and serves to exacerbate the international community's distrust toward Afghanistan's current authorities.

However, the lack of international recognition for the Taliban government extends beyond this internal discord. Several factors contribute to this continued non-recognition, ranging from the Taliban's problematic history and widespread global condemnation of its lack of inclusivity, to the shifting geopolitical landscape and the persistent presence of radical and terrorist elements in Afghanistan.

* Published: Gafarov, I. (2025, February 22). *The Taliban's struggle for legitimacy*. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/the-talibans-struggle-for-legitimacy/>

⁶⁵ Rambler. (2025, February 6). <https://news.rambler.ru/world/54162052-pechalnyy-stsenariy-v-afghanistane-dopustili-grazhdanskuyu-voynu-posle-smeny-vlasti/>

These, and other factors, combined with the internal power struggles, create substantial obstacles to international recognition. Despite controlling Afghanistan for over three years, the Taliban regime remains largely unrecognized globally, with only limited engagement from neighboring states and powers like China and Russia.

A Matter of Distrust

The international community's distrust of the Taliban government is a primary obstacle to recognition, stemming from historical precedent, a lack of inclusive governance, and internal political fragmentation. The limited recognition afforded to the Taliban during its first period of rule (1996-2001), followed by its swift ouster after the September 11 attacks, inspires a climate of skepticism. Political elites in countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, and India view this history as a cautionary tale, leading them to avoid rushing into recognition.

In addition, a critical demand from the international community is the establishment of an inclusive government representing all political forces and ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. Despite claims of diversity, Pashtun dominance persists within the Taliban, and the regime's non-democratic seizure of power in August 2021 raises questions about its domestic political legitimacy. Concerns over the representation and satisfaction of ethnic minorities, social groups, and women remain prominent, particularly among the United States and European Union countries.

Frequent clashes between the Kandahar-based Taliban faction and the Haqqani Network, meanwhile, signal internal instability. The contrasting leadership styles of the reclusive Mullah Akhundzada and the more visible Sirajuddin Haqqani have fueled perceptions of a divided Afghanistan⁶⁶, potentially splitting into rival political centers – Kandahar and Kabul. This uncertainty regarding the Taliban's long-term unity and viability, among other effects, makes global financial institutions

⁶⁶ The New York Times. (2024, October 24).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/24/world/asia/afghanistan-haqqani-what-we-learned.html>

hesitant to unfreeze Afghan assets, thereby exacerbating the country's economic crisis and weakening the Taliban's overall position.

Reputation and Regional Dynamics

The international community's approach to recognizing (or not) the Taliban government in Afghanistan remains complex and nuanced. While some nations are cautiously moving toward recognition, others maintain a more reserved stance due to potential diplomatic and economic repercussions.

Some Arab and Central Asian countries exhibit reluctance to formally recognize the Taliban's regime, fearing reputational risks and potential backlash from the wider international community. The United States and the European Union's potential imposition of sanctions serves as a significant deterrent, leading countries like the UAE, Qatar, and Turkmenistan to adopt a wait-and-see approach.

However, a gradual shift toward recognition is emerging among other states. Russia⁶⁷ and Kazakhstan⁶⁸, for instance, have taken steps that signal a more favorable stance toward the current Afghan government. In 2024, they both removed the Taliban from their lists of terrorist organizations, laying the groundwork for future diplomatic recognition. This measured approach not only indicates a changing perspective on the Taliban's governance but also reduces the likelihood of unexpected international backlash against formal recognition.

Disrespect and Undesirability

The relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a close alliance to strained ties characterized by mutual distrust and strategic divergence.

⁶⁷ The Diplomat. (2024, June). Kazakh president explains decision to take Taliban off terrorist list. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/kazakh-president-explains-decision-to-take-taliban-off-terrorist-list/>

⁶⁸ Jamestown Foundation. (2024, November 13). Kremlin to remove Taliban from list of terrorist organizations. <https://jamestown.org/kremlin-to-remove-taliban-from-list-of-terrorist-organizations/>

For years, Pakistan remained the Taliban's closest ally. However, the Taliban's ascension to power in 2021 has not yielded the anticipated benefits for Pakistan. Instead, the Taliban's push for autonomy and refusal to play the role of a "younger brother" led to heightened tensions, particularly along the Durand Line. The Taliban's stance on the Durand Line, which they refuse to recognize as an international border, has become a major point of contention⁶⁹. This position aligns with longstanding Afghan nationalist sentiments but directly challenges Pakistan's territorial integrity and strategic interests.

The Taliban's unrecognized status provides Pakistan with additional leverage over Afghanistan. However, Pakistan may consider unilateral recognition if the Taliban make the desired concessions. Alternatively, if Afghanistan-India cooperation strengthens, Pakistan may be compelled to make certain concessions and recognize the Taliban government in order to avoid being encircled by India and its partners.

Iran and Tajikistan maintain limited dialogues with Afghanistan. Given its involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts, Iran seeks to avoid new challenges on its eastern borders. Tajikistan, following other Central Asian states, has begun to soften its stance toward the Taliban. However, both countries would prefer a government in Afghanistan that represents the interests of ethnic Tajiks or the Shia community, and thus view the present Taliban as an undesirable force.

New International Standards

China and Uzbekistan have developed new approaches to the diplomatic problem of recognizing Afghanistan's leadership. In February 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping's acceptance of the Taliban envoy's credentials signaled de facto recognition and a shift in diplomatic engagement⁷⁰. Today, China maintains high-

⁶⁹ Deutsche Welle. (2024, March 20). Pakistan's growing clash with Afghan Taliban: Is war looming? <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-growing-clash-with-afghan-taliban-is-war-loomng/a-68623354>

⁷⁰ Dawn. (2024, February 5). Afghan envoy in Beijing — a diplomatic milestone for Kabul govt? <https://www.dawn.com/news/1811248>

level diplomatic contacts with Afghanistan's leadership and has become a major economic partner, fostering pragmatic relationship built on a solid economic cooperation at the intergovernmental level.

Uzbekistan has emerged one of the most active countries regionally regarding Afghanistan, advocating for a unified international strategy and a tailored approach to Afghan stabilization. The Uzbek leadership has acknowledged the Taliban as a leading power⁷¹ in Afghanistan, with Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov visiting Kabul in 2024⁷². Bilateral trade turnover reached \$1.1 billion by the end of 2024⁷³. These developments indicate that Uzbekistan is engaging in substantive dialogue with the Taliban, potentially setting new precedents for recognition in international practice.

The Global Agenda

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021 led to a decline in global media attention toward Afghan affairs. The media appears to be gradually “forgetting” this issue, while the international community’s focus shifts toward the situations in Gaza, Syria, Ukraine, and the United States, with Donald Trump’s new administration. This decreasing attention to Afghanistan delays decisions related to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations, with each country engaging with the Taliban based on its own interests and strategic considerations.

Uzbekistan’s calls for a specialized international approach to Afghanistan have not received much of a response from the global community⁷⁴.

⁷¹ President of Uzbekistan. (2021, September 18). <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/4622>

⁷² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan. (n.d.). <https://afghanistan.mfa.uz/news/27436?language=en>

⁷³ Tolo News. (2025, February 7). <https://tolonews.com/index.php/business-192958>

⁷⁴ Daryo. (2023, September 20). Uzbekistan's President urges UN to adopt constructive approach for Afghanistan, highlights importance of humanitarian aid. <https://daryo.uz/en/2023/09/20/uzbekistans-president-urges-un-to-adopt-constructive-approach-for-afghanistan-highlights-importance-of-humanitarian-aid>

Terrorism and Radicalism

The Taliban have shifted their policy on terrorism, claiming to be actively combating al-Qaida and the Islamic State Khorasan branch. However, reports occasionally emerge regarding its cooperation with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)⁷⁵, also known as the Pakistani Taliban and viewed by Islamabad, among others, as a terrorist organization. The ideological proximity between the Taliban and the TTP leads to the perception that the Taliban regime is a sponsor of the group. This perception continues to deter the international community from recognizing the Taliban government.

Despite certain positive reforms in economic development, taxation, and countering opium cultivation – potential indicators of efforts to establish a functioning state – elements of radicalization persist in the Taliban⁷⁶. The ban on education for girls and women remains a major point of contention globally. The Taliban has not fully shed its association with terrorism and radicalism and this negatively impacts the question of international recognition, overshadowing any governance achievements.

Taliban's Response

The Taliban authorities recognize the evolving international stance toward their regime and have taken steps to adjust. Afghanistan is actively engaged in several international projects, including the TAPI gas pipeline, CASA-1000 energy initiative, and the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway. The Taliban have also expressed interest in major initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative,

⁷⁵ Daryo. (2023, September 20). Uzbekistan's President urges UN to adopt constructive approach for Afghanistan, highlights importance of humanitarian aid.

<https://daryo.uz/en/2023/09/20/uzbekistans-president-urges-un-to-adopt-constructive-approach-for-afghanistan-highlights-importance-of-humanitarian-aid>

⁷⁶ Institute for Advanced International Studies. (n.d.). Evolyutsiya Talibana: Izmeneniya v povedenii i strategii [Evolution of the Taliban: Changes in behavior and strategy].

<https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/evolyutsiya-talibana-izmeneniya-v-povedenii-i-strategii>

the International North-South Transport Corridor, and the Chabahar port project⁷⁷. In northern Afghanistan, the large-scale Qosh Tepa Canal construction is underway⁷⁸, further demonstrating the Taliban's commitment to economic development and state governance.

However, a lack of economic resources severely hinders the full realization of these goals, limiting their impact on the global stage. As a result, Taliban efforts receive insufficient international recognition, while Afghanistan's economic fragility remains a critical factor in the regime's struggle for legitimacy.

What Next?

The path forward requires gradual political pluralism, even at a minimal level, to reshape international perceptions. Resolving the country's internal political fragmentation is also crucial, as the ambiguity surrounding the authority of Kandahar versus Kabul complicates diplomatic engagement. Strengthening ties with countries that already maintain a *de facto* dialogue with the Taliban could keep Afghanistan relevant in global discussions, encourage the development of tailored recognition mechanisms, and facilitate the unfreezing of Afghan foreign assets.

Additional measures should focus on curbing drug trafficking and reassessing the benefits of cooperating with groups like the TTP. These steps could enhance Afghanistan's economic standing, attract more international partners, and enable participation in major global projects. Socioeconomic stability will be key to achieving these goals. However, the Taliban's rigid stance on women's rights and human rights remains a significant barrier. Viewing international calls for reform as interference in domestic affairs, combined with political intransigence, may undermine Afghanistan's prospects for pragmatic and sustainable progress.

⁷⁷ The Media Line. (n.d.). Afghanistan invests \$35M in Iran's Chabahar seaport, fueling economic shift by extending trade connections that bypass Pakistan. <https://themedialine.org/by-region/afghanistan-invests-35m-in-irans-chabahar-seaport-fueling-economic-shift-by-extending-trade-connections-that-bypass-pakistan/>

⁷⁸ Institute for Advanced International Studies. (2024). Policy Brief CA-Afg [PDF]. https://iais.uz/storage/files/1/PolicyBriefCA-Afg_FINAL%2027:03:2024.pdf



SECURITY:COMMENTARIES

THE MIGRATION CRISIS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

23rd March, 2025

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In April 2025, the Government of Pakistan launched an initiative titled the “Return to Homeland,” which was characterized by the Taliban administration as an act of “forced deportation.” As a result, nearly **80,000** Afghan nationals were deported⁷⁹ through the Torkham border crossing in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province within the span of one month. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other sources, **between 19,000 and 45,000 of these individuals** were forcibly expelled, while the remainder returned voluntarily or under minimal pressure⁸⁰.

The primary justification for the deportation process has been Pakistan’s internal security concerns. The heightened activity of terrorist organizations such as ISKP and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), along with cross-border militant movements and threats posed by criminal groups, have constituted key factors influencing this policy. During the first ten days of March 2025, **five major terrorist attacks occurred** in Pakistan—three in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and two in Balochistan⁸¹. All five were suicide bombings, resulting in the deaths of at least 18 individuals, including 12 military personnel, five Chinese nationals, and one Pakistani citizen. While such attacks have

* Published in: Mingyasharov, B. (2025, April 25). *The migration crisis between Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS). <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/the-migration-crisis-between-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

⁷⁹ Al Jazeera. (2025, April 18). Over 80,000 Afghans expelled from Pakistan as deadline nears. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/18/over-80000-afghans-expelled-from-pakistan-as-deadline-nears>

⁸⁰ Relief Web. (2025, April 10). Pakistan-Afghanistan returns emergency response. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/pakistan-afghanistan-returns-emergency-response-10-april-2025>

⁸¹ Al Jazeera. (2024, March 29). March of terror: Pakistan grapples with deadly attacks on China interests. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/29/march-of-terror-pakistan-grapples-with-deadly-attacks-on-china-interests>

occurred in prior years, the deaths of Chinese citizens are particularly sensitive, as China remains one of Pakistan's most crucial economic partners. The incident has consequently strained bilateral relations.

In response to these challenges, the Pakistani government initiated the "**Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan**" (IFRP)⁸², grounded in both security and political considerations. While this strategy seeks to bolster domestic security and regulate migration, it has also raised serious humanitarian and regional stability concerns.

Afghanistan, on the receiving end of these deportations, now faces significant challenges. Thousands of individuals who had resided in Pakistan for many years are now expected to reintegrate into a homeland marked by weak infrastructure and a deteriorated economy. Many of the returnees lack shelter, employment, and basic resources, rendering them vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organizations such as ISKP-Khorasan and TTP.

For the Taliban administration, this mass return could yield complex economic, political, and social repercussions. A considerable portion of the returnees are likely to migrate toward urban centers in search of employment, thereby straining already limited urban infrastructure. Failing this could result in rising unemployment, criminality, and public discontent that might severely undermine the internal stability of the country.

In turn, Iranians might also follow the Pakistan's lead and **begin to demand strict compliance with migration regulations** from Afghan refugees residing within their territory, otherwise might undertake a massive deportation campaign similar to Pakistanis in near future⁸³.

At the same time, the international community has also begun to issue measured responses to the unfolding crisis. Notably, Qatar has launched a **humanitarian initiative to support deported Afghan citizens by allocating \$800,000** for the

⁸² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan. (2023, October 30). Statement attributable to the Spokesperson in response to media queries. <https://mofa.gov.pk/the-following-statement-is-attributable-to-the-spokesperson-in-response-to-media-queries>

⁸³ Tolo News. (2025, April 20). Iran urges Afghan migrants to follow national laws. <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-193985>

construction of housing in Gardez, the capital of Paktia province. Through such efforts—providing humanitarian assistance, supporting stability in Afghanistan, and mediating peace negotiations—Qatar appears to be solidifying its diplomatic standing in the international arena, particularly within the Muslim world, and positioning itself as a capable actor in resolving global crises⁸⁴.

In conclusion, the migration crisis along the border represents not merely a bilateral issue between Afghanistan and Pakistan but a significant challenge to broader regional security and stability. Its implications might extend to Iran, China, Central Asia, and other key regional stakeholders, influencing their political and security strategies since, migration policy of certain country reverberates across a complex system tied to human lives, stability, and international relations.

⁸⁴ Hanif, M. Y. (2025, April 18). Qatar builds \$800K housing project for Afghan returnees in Paktia. Tolo News. <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-193951>

HAUNTED BY KABUL: THE DANGERS OF NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL CUTS

4th June 2025

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The US invasion of Afghanistan cost taxpayers over \$2.3 trillion and claimed the lives of more than 243,000 people⁸⁵. Determined to never repeat such a costly and misguided endeavor, Congress created the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). Over several years, SIGAR produced a series of sobering “Lessons Learned” reports⁸⁶ that detailed not just tactical failures, but structural ones: incoherent strategy, constant turnover of key personnel, failures of monitoring and evaluation, and a lack of contextual understanding.

At the core of SIGAR’s findings was a warning: when policymaking is stripped of continuity, transparency, and informed decision-making, even the most well-funded missions collapse. The fall of Kabul in 2021 was not a surprise to those who paid attention to these warnings, but rather a grim confirmation. For a while, it seemed like the federal government was actually taking steps toward this goal: it prioritized collaboration between agencies, encouraged dissent, and even called for renewed cooperation between the public and private sectors.

And yet, history sighs and repeats itself.

* Published:Raghuraman, A. (2025, June 4). *Haunted by Kabul: The dangers of National Security Council cuts*. Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS). <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/haunted-by-kabul-the-dangers-of-national-security-council-cuts/>

⁸⁵ Costs of War Project. (2021, August 18). Long-term costs: United States care for veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq wars. <https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/paper/long-term-costs-united-states-care-veterans-afghanistan-and-iraq-wars>

⁸⁶ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Lessons learned. <https://www.sigar.mil/About/Organization/Lessons-Learned/>

On May 23, President Donald Trump gutted the size of the National Security Council (NSC), giving analysts and aides a mere 30 minutes to clear their belongings⁸⁷. While many of these experienced officers have been reassigned to their original agencies, their valuable expertise will no longer directly inform national security decisions, as the administration shifts toward a more centralized, top-down leadership style.

Proposals to reshape the NSC have become a recurring feature of American political discourse. Under President George HW Bush, the NSC comprised roughly 50 staffers⁸⁸, but this number surged to over 200 in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks⁸⁹. Subsequent administrations attempted to scale it back: President Barack Obama reduced NSC staff by 15% in 2016⁹⁰, and President Trump attempted to bring it down to around 110 personnel⁹¹ during his first term. President Biden reversed this trend, expanding the NSC to between 350 and 370 staffers⁹², reflecting his concern with cybersecurity and Chinese aggression. Now, in his second term, President Trump has once again moved to drastically reduce its size.

Since returning to office in January, Trump has aimed to overhaul Washington's bureaucratic machinery in pursuit of what he calls his "America First" agenda. Within weeks, he placed hundreds of NSC staffers — both aides and analysts — on administrative leave, citing a need for greater efficiency. He dismissed National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, reportedly for advocating the diplomatic isolation of Vladimir Putin and for including a journalist in a Signal group chat discussing US strikes in

⁸⁷ NPR. (2025, May 23). Trump National Security Council. <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/23/nx-s1-5409610/trump-national-security-council>

⁸⁸ Congressional Research Service. (2022, October 19). Report R44828. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44828>

⁸⁹ The Washington Post. (2017, January 16). Rice favors 'mean but lean' National Security Council. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/rice-favors-mean-but-lean-national-security-council/2017/01/16/6244aa3c-dc49-11e6-ad42-f3375f271c9c_story.html

⁹⁰ Obama White House Archives. (2017, January 17). Reflecting on the NSC's greatest asset: Its people. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2017/01/17/reflecting-nscs-greatest-asset-its-people-0>

⁹¹ Associated Press. (2020, March 14). Donald Trump, AP top news, virus outbreak, Barack Obama, public health. <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-ap-top-news-virus-outbreak-barack-obama-public-health-ce014d94b64e98b7203b873e56f80e9a>

⁹² Politico. (2021, August 2). Biden's beefed-up NSC. <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2021/08/02/bidens-beefed-up-nsc-493813>

Yemen. Most recently, Trump ordered the downsizing of the NSC, presumably returning it to its previous reduced level of 110 staffers.

What alarms many experts on the War on Terror is not merely the reduction in NSC personnel, but the governing philosophy it reflects. With this move, Trump's foreign policy strategy will largely court recommendations from top-level cabinet members who align with his agenda.

Trump's top-down leadership style, where the NSC is relegated to executing directives rather than contributing to deliberation, is deeply concerning considering the "Lessons Learned" from Afghanistan. It risks sidelining expert analysis, weakening interagency coordination, and eliminating dissent from the national security decision-making process. A system of impulsive, top-down decision-making gambles with repeating the very failures that SIGAR warned of: the erosion of institutional memory, lack of strategic coherence, and an aversion to critical oversight.

The strength of the NSC has never been its size, but its function as a hub for interagency coordination, rigorous analysis, and long-term strategic planning. When staffed and empowered appropriately, it serves as a critical buffer against reactive policymaking and geopolitical missteps. Specifically, it incorporates experts and analysts from various federal departments who coordinate closely to ensure strategic continuity in the US national security strategy. Undermining its role in favor of a loyalty-based inner circle not only concentrates power but narrows the scope of expertise informing Washington's most consequential decisions.

Trump's foreign policy strategy will largely court recommendations from top-level cabinet members who align with his agenda.

The consequences of such a shift extend beyond bureaucratic reshuffling; they affect lives abroad and credibility at home. As the US navigates rising global instability from renewed great-power competition to asymmetric threats in the Middle East and Africa, the margin for error is slim.

The most significant asset of the NSC is its structure: a diverse assembly of experts from across government agencies who analyze, debate, and advocate on

overlapping issues using a variety of methods and perspectives. This approach helps ensure that emerging threats are thoroughly assessed and addressed with strategic depth, so that we never find ourselves locked into another Afghanistan. Policymaking rooted in ideology rather than informed deliberation risks repeating old mistakes under new guises.

To ensure the NSC functions effectively, it should take SIGAR's lessons to heart, irrespective of its size. Decisions made by the NSC must be transparent, collaborative, consistent, and open to debate. To dismiss hundreds of staffers and prioritize a top-down model flies in the face of their recommendations.

As the world becomes more dangerous, with more active conflicts than at any time since World War II⁹³, it's more urgent than ever to ground national security decisions in expert analysis, debate, and long-term planning. SIGAR's "Lessons Learned" were not just bureaucratic paperwork. They were a testament on behalf of the soldiers and civilians who died as a result of ineffective foreign policy. Entering another Afghanistan wouldn't just waste money — it would mean more lives lost, more refugees displaced, and more instability spreading across regions already struggling. That's precisely what is at stake if we continue to destroy the system created to prevent such a disaster.

To ignore the recommendations of SIGAR is not just to disregard the cost of past failures, but to guarantee their return.

⁹³ PRIO. (2024, June 10). New data shows record number of armed conflicts. <https://www.prio.org/news/3532>



POLITICS

Afghanistan on the Geopolitical Chessboard of the Middle East

1st July, 2025

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Against the backdrop of this dangerous crisis, with the international community's attention focused on the direct participants in the conflict, Gaza, Libya, and Syria, it is appropriate to turn attention to Afghanistan, which, despite its peripheral position relative to the region, is also becoming involved in these processes. Israel and Iran seek to expand their spheres of influence both ideologically and strategically. In this context, South and Central Asia, including Afghanistan, are becoming key zones of geopolitical rivalry, especially for Iran.

Consequently, Afghanistan's geographical and diplomatic position may once again acquire strategic significance as regional actors seek to counterbalance Iran's eastern influence. This rivalry can manifest through investments, trade routes, media, and humanitarian initiatives. At the same time, Afghanistan's neutrality and its internal policies play a crucial role - especially if external forces view it as a buffer zone or a strategic corridor within a broader regional struggle.

Relationship Built on Interests

Initially, Iran refrained from official contacts with the Taliban government, which came to power in Kabul in 2021⁹⁴. However, it was subsequently forced to move towards pragmatic engagement with Afghanistan on a number of issues - security, migration, water resources, and counter-terrorism.

Firstly, the weakening or elimination of Iranian proxy groups in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine forced Iran to seek new strategic allies, including Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan does not possess the same strategic weight as Syria, it has the potential to

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⁹⁴ The New York Times. (2021, August 16). <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/08/16/world/taliban-afghanistan-news>

supply volunteer military forces in the event of a new conflict with Israel. This is why Iran attempted to re-recruit Afghan Shiites, particularly fighters from the “Fatemioun Brigade”. However, the Taliban firmly rejected this, stating that allowing third countries to conduct military operations and recruit fighters on its territory poses a threat to Afghanistan's sovereignty. On the other hand, rapprochement with Iran could be seen as an attempt by Kabul to achieve de facto recognition from one of the leading actors in the Middle East, which could play an important role in Afghanistan's foreign policy and diplomacy. The war that began on October 7, 2023⁹⁵, between Israel and Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip further accelerated geopolitical processes in the Middle East. Iran, positioning itself as the “shield of Islam”, supported Hamas throughout the war. At the same time, Afghanistan expressed solidarity with Iran and supported the Palestinian people.

Secondly, Iran sought to strengthen economic cooperation with Afghanistan. It invested in infrastructure projects such as the Khaf-Herat railway and Chabahar Port. The Khaf-Herat railway line is one of Iran's priority projects: it not only increases budget revenues and reduces transport costs between Iran and Afghanistan but also contributes to increased stability, security, job creation, and an improved overall economic situation in the region.

Chabahar Port can play an important role as a transit route connecting Central Asian countries and Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean, serving as a link between East and West, South and North. The Taliban's willingness to continue the Chabahar-Zahedan railway project, initiated in 2016 by India and the previous Afghan government, as well as the promise of \$35 million in investments⁹⁶, indicate a desire to break free from dependence on Pakistan. However, in 2025, due to the “maximum pressure” policy pursued by US President Donald Trump against Iran, Chabahar Port came under sanctions⁹⁷. The future of the project remains uncertain. Overall, Iran-Afghanistan

⁹⁵ Britannica. (n.d.). Israel-Hamas War. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Israel-Hamas-War>

⁹⁶ Al-Monitor. (2024, March). How significant is \$35M Taliban-Iran Chabahar port deal?

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/03/how-significant-35m-taliban-iran-chabahar-port-deal>

⁹⁷ Voice of America. (n.d.). Trump reimposes 'maximum pressure' on Iran, aims to drive oil exports to zero. <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-reimposes-maximum-pressure-on-iran-aims-to-drive-oil-exports-to-zero/7963388.html>

relations can be characterized as built on mutual economic and political interests, excluding ideological contradictions.

Spy Game

According to a number of Russian sources, the escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict in June 2025 revealed new facets of Iran-Afghanistan relations⁹⁸. One of the most alarming episodes was the exposure of a large agent network linked to Israeli intelligence "Mossad". It is reported that a group of Afghan citizens was detained in Tehran, allegedly recruited to carry out subversive activities on Iranian territory. Most of them turned out to be Pashtuns from Kandahar, which caused concern among Iranian authorities and cast doubt on the neutrality of the "Taliban" regime amid the Iran-Israel crisis.

According to the same sources, Israeli intelligence may have used Afghan territory, particularly Herat province and Shindand city, as a transit route for delivering drones and explosives to Iran. If this information is confirmed, it could indicate a high level of Israeli intelligence penetration into Iranian territory and the possibility of using Afghan migrants in sabotage operations.

Such incidents could put an end to pragmatic cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan and lead to the destabilization of their foreign policy positions. A striking example is the mass deportation of Afghan refugees from Iran: from June 1 to 27, 2025, according to the International Organization for Migration, approximately 233,000 people were expelled⁹⁹. This led to overcrowding on trade routes and in economic centers of Afghanistan, as well as a noticeable decrease in business activity.

However, growing distrust and tension in Iran-Afghanistan relations create difficulties for both sides. Due to US sanctions, Iran cannot fully utilize its infrastructure and is forced to reorient itself towards the Trans-Afghan Corridor. For Afghanistan,

⁹⁸ TopCor. (n.d.). <https://topcor.ru/61099-agentami-mossada-v-irane-okazalis-afgancami-i-indijcami.html>

⁹⁹ The Hindu. (n.d.). More than 230,000 Afghans left Iran in June ahead of return deadline: International Organization for Migration. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/more-than-230000-afghans-left-iran-in-june-ahead-of-return-deadline-international-organization-for-migration/article69754341.ece>

Iranian logistics are of strategic importance, both in terms of oil and gas supply and in the prospect of becoming a key transit hub. During the 12-day war, restrictions on Iranian oil exports caused a sharp rise in fuel prices in Afghanistan.

In the current conditions, Afghanistan simultaneously faces new opportunities and serious challenges. On the one hand, by maintaining stability and neutrality, it can strengthen its role as a link in trans-regional trade, energy, and diplomacy. On the other hand, increasing tension between regional powers could draw Afghanistan into geopolitical rivalry and information wars, which threatens to undermine internal cohesion

U.S. Strategy on Afghanistan: In Search of an Approach

10th May 2025

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The return of the Taliban to power has elevated the significance of the Afghan issue. This is especially evident in the transformation of U.S.-Afghan relations following the withdrawal of American military forces from the country. An analysis of U.S. foreign policy toward Afghanistan reveals four distinct phases or approaches to the Taliban regime. Each of these approaches reflects the dynamic and diverse perspectives within the American establishment on the Afghan issue.

War on Terror

The first phase or approach was marked by the continuation of the fight against international terrorism, albeit outside the framework of direct military presence in the country. The Biden administration announced the end of the war in Afghanistan¹⁰⁰, yet counterterrorism operations persisted. A notable example of this approach was the 2022 elimination of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on Afghan soil¹⁰¹. Thus, Afghanistan's relevance in the U.S. foreign policy agenda was predominantly defined through the prism of counterterrorism.

Political Disengagement

The second phase was characterized by a sharp decline in political engagement and a diplomatic boycott of Afghan affairs. The United States adopted a strategy of

* Published: Gafarov I. (2025, May 10). *U.S. strategy on Afghanistan: In search of an approach. The Asia Today*. <https://theasiatoday.org/essays/u-s-strategy-on-afghanistan-in-search-of-an-approach/>

¹⁰⁰ CNBC. (2021, August 31). Biden addresses the end of the US war in Afghanistan.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/31/biden-addresses-the-end-of-the-us-war-in-afghanistan.html>

¹⁰¹ Plummer, R., & Murphy, M. (2022, August 2). Ayman al-Zawahiri: Al-Qaeda leader killed in US drone strike. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62387167>

political disengagement and strategic patience, hoping for internal transformations within Afghanistan's ruling structures and the Taliban regime itself. As a result, the U.S. ceased its involvement in major infrastructure and economic projects, many of which it had originally initiated. These include the TAPI gas pipeline project, the CASA-1000 energy route, and the Trans-Afghan transport corridor. An exception to this disengagement was the provision of humanitarian aid by the U.S.¹⁰². Agency for International Development (USAID). During this phase, Washington's interaction with the Taliban regime was carried out through intermediaries, particularly via Qatari mediation.

The Trump Administration

The new administration of Donald Trump, despite its relatively brief tenure, exhibited a dual approach to the Afghan issue. Elements of its policy toward Afghanistan appear to have been influenced by the logic of Trump's electoral campaign, which was rooted in the slogan "Make America Great Again". On the other hand, U.S. military circles, guided by rational analysis, advocated for a strategy aimed at reinforcing American global leadership and maintaining presence in key geostrategic centers – one of which Afghanistan still represented.

While the first few months of the year (from January to mid-March) were marked by rhetoric aligned with campaign logic, by the end of March, the second direction – one shaped by strategic pragmatism – became dominant. As a result, the United States initiated direct contacts with Taliban representatives, signaling a new trend in bilateral relations.

MAGA

From the outset of his presidency, Donald Trump issued a series of strong statements directed at the Taliban. These pronouncements were largely shaped by the logic of his campaign, during which he criticized the Biden administration for

¹⁰² Deutsche Welle. (2025, March 5). What does the suspension of US aid mean for Afghanistan? <https://www.dw.com/en/what-does-the-suspension-of-us-aid-mean-for-afghanistan/a-71514207>

undermining U.S. prestige in handling the Afghan issue.¹⁰³ However, upon assuming office, Trump was faced with the dual challenge of both revising U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and remaining consistent with his campaign rhetoric to satisfy his electorate.

In this context, the Trump administration undertook several steps aimed at demonstrating a tough stance on Afghanistan:

1. The Trump administration suspended international aid¹⁰⁴, affecting Afghanistan and exacerbating the country's humanitarian crisis.
2. Trump demanded the return of \$7 billion¹⁰⁵ worth of U.S. military equipment left behind after the withdrawal of troops. As well as he called for the return of the Bagram airbase¹⁰⁶, claiming it was under Chinese control.
3. White House officials criticized the Taliban's repressive policies, emphasizing human rights violations¹⁰⁷ and demanded the release of American hostages held by the Taliban.

All of these actions fit within Trump's broader MAGA strategy, aimed at restoring U.S. authority and influence on the international stage. However, despite the administration's tough rhetoric, these measures appeared to fall short of their intended results, prompting a reassessment of Washington's approach to Afghanistan.

Direct Contact

At this stage, the U.S. administration appears to have altered its methods of engagement and initiated direct dialogue with representatives of the Taliban. This is

¹⁰³ The Wall Street Journal. (2024). Trump criticizes Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan.

<https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/biden-trump-first-presidential-debate-2024-election/card/trump-criticizes-biden-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-XxZ2qwY9PhRyzWcH0ye7>

¹⁰⁴ Reuters. (2025, February 26). Trump administration says it cannot meet court deadline for foreign aid payments. <https://www.reuters.com/legal/trump-administration-says-it-cannot-meet-court-deadline-foreign-aid-payments-2025-02-26/>

¹⁰⁵ Fox News. (2025, February 26). Trump pushes to recover billions of dollars in military equipment left behind in Afghanistan withdrawal. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-pushes-recover-billions-dollars-military-equipment-left-behind-afghanistan-withdrawal>

¹⁰⁶ Chen, Q. (2025, March 3). Afghanistan refutes Trump's claims about Chinese presence in Bagram Airfield. Global Times. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202503/1329409.shtml>

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Mission to the United Nations. (n.d.). Remarks by Ambassador Dorothy Shea, Chargé d'Affaires, at a UN Security Council briefing on Afghanistan. <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-dorothy-shea-charge-daffaires-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-afghanistan/>

evidenced by the visits of former U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad and U.S. Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Adam Boehler, who held talks in March of this year with the Taliban's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi. During these meetings, potential areas of cooperation were discussed, and agreements were reached that led to the release of American citizen George Glazmann, who had been held captive in Afghanistan for over two years.

One possible incentive behind the U.S. shift toward direct engagement with the Taliban may be the growing rapprochement between Afghanistan and China¹⁰⁸. After the end of the two-decade U.S. military presence, Washington effectively ceded influence to Beijing, allowing China to entrench itself as Afghanistan's primary economic partner. In this context, the U.S. resumption of contact with the Taliban can be seen both as a reaction to China's moves and as a recognition of Afghanistan's enduring strategic importance in the eyes of Washington.

Taliban's Response

In its dialogue with the United States, Afghanistan does not exhibit the typical inferiority complex of smaller nations. The Taliban seeks to establish relations on an equal footing. They categorically reject a number of demands put forth by the Trump administration. In particular, they have strongly opposed the demand for the return of military equipment left behind by the U.S. after its withdrawal. According to the Taliban, this equipment is now the property of the Afghan state¹⁰⁹ and is not subject to repatriation. Moreover, they consider it to be war trophies acquired through victory.

For its part, Washington has informally expressed a willingness to consider a potential exchange of military equipment for Afghanistan's frozen foreign assets. However, the Taliban have also rejected this proposal. They argue that the financial

¹⁰⁸ The Diplomat. (2024, December). China deepens its engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/china-deepens-its-engagement-with-taliban-ruled-afghanistan/>

¹⁰⁹ CBS News. (2025, March 29). Taliban refuses to hand back U.S. military hardware but says Afghanistan is "open" for business [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gNktqmQRdU>

assets in question belong not to the government, but to the Afghan people¹¹⁰, and therefore must be returned unconditionally.

Possible Scenarios

Based on the current dynamics of U.S.-Afghan relations, two potential scenarios for their future development can be outlined. The first scenario envisions a strategy in which the United States adopts a wait-and-see approach, aiming for a transformation within Afghanistan's political elite. Internal divisions within the Taliban leadership – particularly the disagreements between Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani – could work to Washington's advantage. Unlike Akhundzada, who adheres to a conservative governance model rooted in strict ideological principles, Haqqani appears to adopt a more pragmatic stance. Should Haqqani gain greater influence, new opportunities for compromise with international actors, including the United States, could emerge. In such a case, Afghanistan might be willing to make certain concessions in exchange for economic benefits and partial political recognition by the international community.

The March 2025 cancellation of the \$10 million¹¹¹ reward for information leading to the capture of Sirajuddin Haqqani signals a potential U.S. openness to selective engagement with Taliban representatives who show flexibility in foreign policy matters. In this context, it may serve as both a diplomatic gesture and a component of a broader negotiation strategy, potentially including discussions around the return of U.S. military equipment.

Another possible scenario suggests that even if Washington fails to secure the return of military equipment, it may use Afghanistan's frozen assets as a tool of leverage. Specifically, the United States could consider unfreezing these assets on the condition that Chinese influence in Afghanistan is reduced. Political distancing by Kabul from

¹¹⁰ CBS News. (2025, March 29). Taliban refuses to hand back U.S. military hardware but says Afghanistan is "open" for business [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gNktqmQRdU>

¹¹¹ BBC News. (2025, March 25). US drops bounties on key Taliban leaders. BBC News.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1enxy4vz7do>

Beijing and a reorientation toward cooperation with Washington or alternative partners – such as India – could be seen as part of a broader U.S. strategy to contain China.

Given its strategic geographic location, Afghanistan plays a pivotal role in the continent's transportation and logistics networks. As a result, the country is drawing increasing interest from China within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative – an expansion that contradicts U.S. interests in the region. In this context, Washington may seek to employ economic instruments to limit China's influence, using financial leverage as a means of guiding Kabul's foreign policy orientation.

Uzbekistan Bridge

In the process of re-establishing U.S.-Afghanistan relations, Uzbekistan can serve as a platform for mediation. Undoubtedly, following numerous accusations against the Taliban, the United States cannot fully restore ties with the movement. This process will require time, mediation, and multilateral formats. In this context, the format of U.S.-Uzbekistan cooperation may gain increased significance.

Firstly, the United States and Uzbekistan are strategic partners.

Secondly, both countries have prior experience cooperating on Afghan issues. During the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan provided an airbase. When American forces withdrew, the U.S. left behind part of its military equipment – specifically, 22 airplanes and 24 helicopters¹¹², most of which are still located in Uzbekistan, reflecting a level of trust between the two sides.

Thirdly, when the Trump administration demanded the return of U.S. military equipment from the Taliban and was met with refusal, Uzbekistan handed over seven Black Hawk¹¹³ helicopters that had been left on its territory. In doing so, Uzbekistan assisted the Trump administration in demonstrating to its electorate that the

¹¹² Kun.uz. (2025, February 5). US recovers seven Black Hawk helicopters flown to Uzbekistan by Afghan forces. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/02/05/us-recovers-seven-black-hawk-helicopters-flown-to-uzbekistan-by-afghan-forces>

¹¹³ Kun.uz. (2025, February 5). US recovers seven Black Hawk helicopters flown to Uzbekistan by Afghan forces. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/02/05/us-recovers-seven-black-hawk-helicopters-flown-to-uzbekistan-by-afghan-forces>

repatriation of U.S. military assets from Afghanistan was underway, thereby helping to preserve its political reputation.

Fourthly, Uzbekistan and the United States share similar views on Afghanistan. Both nations regard it as part of Central Asia and link security and stability to prospects for economic development. This commitment was reaffirmed by the President of Uzbekistan at the first “Central Asia – European Union” summit¹¹⁴ held in April 2025, where he emphasized the need for Afghanistan’s active participation in major economic initiatives.

Fifthly, Uzbekistan is currently one of Afghanistan’s two closest partners, along with China. This diplomatic advantage could be valuable for the United States in the context of the Afghan issue.

Thus, Uzbekistan stands out as one of the United States’ potential partners in restoring ties with Afghanistan. Tashkent’s position is grounded in the necessity of a coordinated international approach to Afghanistan¹¹⁵. In this regard, Uzbekistan would welcome Washington’s initiatives related to this country.

Conclusions

Overall, the U.S. strategy toward Afghanistan has developed in an uneven and inconsistent manner, likely due to the absence of a clearly articulated long-term strategic vision from Washington. One of the key factors contributing to this uncertainty may be doubts about the stability of the Taliban’s rule, possibly tied to ongoing internal divisions within the Taliban leadership.

Another potential cause is the growing activity of terrorist groups such as ISIS-Khorasan and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In this context, the U.S. perceives the Taliban as weak in terms of neutralizing threats from these organizations, as well as the potential for covert ties or informal support from certain members of the movement.

¹¹⁴ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2023, September 20). Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly. Official web-site of the President of Uzbekistan. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/6677>

¹¹⁵ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2025, April 4). Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the first “Central Asia – European Union” summit. Official web-site of the President of Uzbekistan. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8023>

A third significant factor remains the issue of human rights, including the rights of women and girls. Despite the possibility of more flexible rhetoric on this issue from the Trump administration, the broader U.S. foreign policy establishment cannot fully ignore this aspect.

All these factors strengthen Washington's doubts about Kabul's reliability as a potential partner, which, in turn, affects the formation and implementation of subsequent U.S. actions concerning Afghanistan.

UZBEKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN: A NEW ERA OF LIMITED RECOGNITION

15th July, 2025

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In early May, Uzbekistan's Deputy Minister of Agriculture Jamshid Abduzukhurov and the governor of Afghanistan's Balkh Province, Haji Muhammad Yusuf Wafa, signed a bilateral agreement concerning the joint management of the Amu Darya water resources^{u7}, ensuring their fair and rational use. On one hand, this agreement marks a transition to a new phase in the management of transboundary water resources, and on the other hand, it signifies that relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan are becoming increasingly institutionalized.

While Uzbekistan has not officially recognized the current government of Afghanistan, its practical steps – including the acceptance of an ambassador appointed by the Taliban, Abdul Ghafoor Bahar – indicate a policy of de facto recognition. This raises an important issue from the perspective of international law and politics: to what extent is it justified and legitimate to conclude legally binding agreements with a political entity that has not been officially recognized?

Against the backdrop of such legal uncertainty, the signed agreement reflects Uzbekistan's pragmatic foreign policy and underscores Tashkent's prioritization

* Published: Gafarov, I., Boltaev, H., & Mingyasharov, B. (2025, May 13). *Uzbekistan and Afghanistan: A new era of limited recognition*. *The Diplomat*.

<https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/uzbekistan-and-afghanistan-a-new-era-of-limited-recognition/>

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^{u7} Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2025, April 30). *Uzbekistan–Afghanistan: a new strategic step toward efficient use of resources* [Archived page]. Government Portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20250501074548/https://gov.uz/ru/agro/news/view/50449>

of regional interests, based on the recognition of the actual situation in Afghanistan. This approach emphasizes the superiority of practical solutions over ideological considerations in critical matters such as water resources.

Following the Taliban's return to power, Uzbekistan has repeatedly emphasized the need for a unified and coordinated international strategy toward Afghanistan¹¹⁸. Tashkent has articulated this position repeatedly at many international forums, such as the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Organization of Turkic States. Uzbekistan cannot remain a passive observer, since instability in Afghanistan directly impacts its own vital interests. Therefore, Tashkent is compelled to pursue an active and pragmatic foreign policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, even if it is unilaterally pursued.

At the same time, deepening ties with Afghanistan is accompanied with serious challenges. A primary challenge concerns security as terrorist groups, such as Islamic State Khorasan Province and al-Qaida, continue to operate in the country, posing a threat to regional stability. Uzbekistan is compelled to extend its security horizons toward its neighbor in order to make sure its vital interests are intact. In its efforts to combat radicalization, Uzbekistan sees education as a key tool, which is why it Tashkent is funding the construction of madrassas in northern Afghanistan¹¹⁹.

The Qosh-Tepa canal project has raised significant concerns in the media, both within Uzbekistan and globally. The 285 km long canal project¹²⁰, currently under construction in Afghanistan, could divert about 25 percent of the Amu Darya's water, thereby substantially affecting water supplies for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Despite the reported completion of over 80 percent of construction, there are concerns about the canal's compliance with international standards, as reports have indicated water leakage in certain sections.

¹¹⁸ Uzbekistan actively expands cooperation with the UN and its institutions. (2024, July 1). President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/7362>

¹¹⁹ Uzbekistan to build a madrasa in Afghanistan for \$6 million USD. (2024, August 24). Kun.uz. <https://kun.uz/en/48352003>

¹²⁰ Fazl-e-Haider, S. (2025, October 2). *Central Asia faces potential water shortage as Afghanistan's canal project nears completion*. Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor. <https://jamestown.org/central-asia-faces-potential-water-shortage-as-afghanistans-canal-project-nears-completion/>

Regarding international standards and transboundary water use, Afghanistan has disputes not only with Uzbekistan but also with Iran and Pakistan. While the Iran-Afghanistan conflict over the Helmand River seemed to be resolved [in early 2025](#), no official agreements have been signed with Pakistan, despite decades of negotiations¹²¹. The planned construction of new dams on the Kunar (Gamberi) and Kabul (Shahdud) rivers with India's support is causing concern in Pakistan due to the potential reduction in water supply, which would impact agriculture and drinking water for millions of people¹²².

The countries in the region have not engaged in a collective effort to resolve water issues with Afghanistan; each is acting independently. Given that the Amu Darya issue is a matter of survival for Uzbekistan, Tashkent has adopted an independent and proactive stance, establishing direct and decisive contact with Afghanistan, without waiting for initiatives from other players.

In late March of this year, Uzbekistan's Minister of Water Resources Shavkat Hamraev stated, "Once the documents are in place, we will take further steps; everything will be resolved through dialogue" ¹²³.

This has come to pass – Uzbekistan signed a water agreement with Afghanistan without officially recognizing its government.

Here, a logical question may arise: to what extent, given the lack of official status in relations between the government of Uzbekistan and the Taliban, is the agreement credible?

In Uzbekistan's approach to the conundrum of Afghanistan, pragmatism takes precedence. Within this pragmatic approach, implementation is carried out practically via local inter-regional, inter-ministerial, and inter-agency cooperation. The absence of official recognition of the Taliban government does not mean the absence of formality or a lack of a legal basis when official documents are signed between local authorities

¹²¹ Blue Community. (2025, February 9). *Afghanistan/Iran: Water rights issue resolved*. Blue Community. <https://blue-community.net/2025/02/09/afghanistan-iran-water-rights-issue-resolved/>

¹²² Lad, R. M., & Jaybhaye, R. G. (2024). *Water politics in Pakistan: The internal and external dynamics*. *Water Policy*, 27(1), 40–65. <https://doi.org/10.2166/wp.2024.098>

¹²³ Uzbekistan open to dialogue on Taliban's Qosh Tepa Canal. (2025, March 24). Kun.uz. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/03/24/uzbekistan-open-to-dialogue-on-talibans-qosh-tepa-canal>

and relevant government organizations. The ties between Uzbekistan's Surkhandarya region and the Afghan province of Balkh, as well as between the cities of Termez and Mazar-i-Sharif, are evidence of this. In Termez, a trade center for Afghan products has been opened, and a Trade House of Uzbekistan¹²⁴ is planned for Mazar-i-Sharif.

Therefore, contemporary relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan go beyond legal and diplomatic recognition, forming a model for so called "limited recognition" based on practical cooperation. This approach enables the development of intersectoral ties even in the absence of official recognition.

In summary, Uzbekistan has chosen a model of practical cooperation, developed consistently through a clear strategy. Although formal recognition has not yet occurred, the republic remains the only regional state striving for an independent solution to the Afghan issue. This highlights that Uzbekistan is not passive; it is acting in accordance with its own national interests.

If the international community continues to delay the recognition of Afghanistan and fails to adopt a unified stance, the likelihood of Uzbekistan making an independent political decision regarding recognition increases. In such a case, this could trigger a domino effect in the region – similar steps may be taken by other countries actively involved in the Afghan agenda, such as Kazakhstan and Russia.

Uzbekistan's strategy is not merely a shift in foreign policy but reflects a consistent direction aimed at ensuring regional security, deepening economic integration, and strengthening its leading position in Central Asia. Therefore, Uzbekistan is not only shaping a new platform for political engagement with Afghanistan but also offering the international community an extra option for establishing a working collaboration.

¹²⁴ A trade house for Uzbek construction materials to open in Kabul, Afghanistan. (2025, March 24). Daryo. <https://daryo.uz/2025/03/24/kobulda-ozbekiston-qurilish-materiallari-uchun-savdo-uyi-ochiladi>

ARE THE TALIBAN'S ACTIONS IN BADAKHSHAN PART OF THEIR FOREIGN POLICY TACTICS?

15th July, 2025

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In August 2025, it will be four years since the Taliban came to power in Kabul. The initial focus of the Taliban after coming to power was on establishing centralized authority in the country, halting poppy bean cultivation¹²⁵, and attempting to govern the country based on Sharia law. The new government also aims to improve the socio-economic situation in the country, pursue stable and pragmatic policies with neighboring states, and achieve international recognition.

However, the local protests on June 21 of this year and their brutal suppression in the Hash Badakhshan area of Afghanistan's northeastern province cast doubt on the country's recently initiated improvement in its international image¹²⁶. At the same time, the actions of the Taliban in the strategically important province of Badakhshan, which borders Tajikistan, China, and Pakistan, may play a tactical role in integrating Afghanistan into the global community.

This is not the first instance of local protests erupting in the Badakhshan region. A similar incident occurred in the spring and summer of 2024¹²⁷. The main reasons for the protests can be identified as follows. Firstly, the Taliban's policy of sharply restricting poppy bean cultivation deprives the province of its main source of economic income. This, in turn, leads to an increase in poverty, hunger, and discontent among

* Published: Khujabekov, U. (2025, July 15). *Are the Taliban's actions in Badakhshan part of their foreign policy tactics?* *Paradigma.uz*. <https://paradigma.uz/en/news/are-the-talibans-actions-in-badakhshan-part-of-their-foreign-policy-tactics-1570/>

¹²⁵ New Lines Institute. (n.d.). The Taliban poppy ban project.

<https://newlinesinstitute.org/initiative/the-taliban-poppy-ban-project/>

¹²⁶ Caravan. (2025, June 21). <https://www.caravan-info.pro/taliby-otpravili-sily-pravoprijadka-v-uezd-hash-afganskoy-provincii-badakhshan-na-fone-massovyh-protestov-mestnogo-naselenija/>

¹²⁷ MEMRI. (2024, May 14). Afghan Taliban's worst nightmare – A people's uprising in Badakhshan province. <https://www.memri.org/reports/afghan-talibans-worst-nightmare-%E2%80%93-peoples-uprising-badakhshan-province>

the local population. Secondly, due to the authorities' desire for strong centralization of the country, the appointment of Pashtuns to most administrative positions slows down effective interaction between the Persian-speaking population of the region and the administration. Protests may express the local residents' desire to see representatives of ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks in administrative positions, which would allow for a more effective and pragmatic dialogue with the authorities.

Despite the aforementioned problems, the changes that the Taliban is trying to implement in this conflict-ridden province may be part of its complex foreign policy strategy. Firstly, the new government's refusal to cultivate opium, despite the economic crisis in the country, and its active anti-drug policy help to create an image of a pragmatic and reformist government in the eyes of the international community. However, the brutal suppression of protests in Badakhshan creates a paradox: on one hand, the desire to end poppy bean cultivation is welcomed, on the other hand, the use of force is condemned. Nevertheless, the agreements reached at the UN-sponsored meeting in Doha in 2024-2025¹²⁸, concerning the development of the private sector and cooperation in the fight against drugs, indicate a gradual improvement in the international community's attitude towards the new government.

Secondly, the use of force to maintain stability demonstrates the Taliban's centralized control and ability to resolve internal conflicts. This encourages major world powers to express confidence in the prospects of the new Afghan government, which occupies an important geopolitical position in South Asia, and to expand cooperation with it. The recognition of the Taliban government by the Russian Federation, as well as the desire of Central Asian countries and China to develop economic and neighborly relations with Afghanistan, confirm these assumptions¹²⁹. The negative attitude of the international community toward the Taliban in the early years of their rule, as well as suspicions about their future, may gradually be replaced by a more positive perception thanks to pragmatic, and forward-looking foreign policy.

¹²⁸ Azizi, A. (2025, July 2). Taliban say counter-narcotics cooperation discussed at Doha working group meeting. Amu TV. <https://amu.tv/184147/>

¹²⁹ BBC Russian. (2025, July 25). Russia officially recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. No other country in the world has done so.. BBC News Russian. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c4gd2pp2d23o>

The Cost of Recognition: Taliban, Trump, and the Battle for Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan

12nd October, 2025

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The United States of America completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021, finally pulling out after two decades of boots on the ground.

Four years later, President J. Donald Trump has stirred the hornet's nest by signaling his strong intention to take back the Bagram Air Base, once the center of the U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

Now, in 2025, President J. Donald Trump argues that Bagram airbase is important for countering China's influence and monitoring its military activities in the region. For all that, the prospect of regaining control over the Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan remains highly unlikely given the Taliban resistance, Pakistan's strategic role, and China's growing foothold in Afghanistan.

Michael Waltz's Influence

The idea of holding onto Bagram was not new. In 2021, Michael Waltz warned in the Military Times¹³¹ that "the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan was too important to abandon.

* Published: Kakar, J. U. D., & Mukhammedova, A. (2025, October 12). *The cost of recognition: Taliban, Trump, and the battle for Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan. World Geostrategic Insights*. <https://www.wgi.world/the-cost-of-recognition-taliban-trump-and-the-battle-for-bagram-airbase-in-afghanistan/>

¹³⁰ Research Fellow at the Center for Security Strategy and Policy Research and PhD International Relations scholar at the School of Integrated Social Sciences, University of Lahore, Pakistan.

¹³¹ Military Times. (2021, May 3). Why Afghanistan is critical to the struggle against China, Russia and Iran. <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2021/05/03/why-afghanistan-is-critical-to-the-struggle-against-china-russia-and-iran/>

He warned that “*in addition to giving up the only airbase in the world located in a country that physically borders China and Russia’s southern border, the Biden administration will also give up a key strategic foothold along Iran’s eastern border, and along the Iran’s eastern flank, and along the nuclear-equipped and unstable Pakistan.*” Accordingly, one may assert that his warning underscored the long-term strategic values of Bagram beyond the Afghan war. In light of this, I contend that someone planted this idea in Donald Trump’s mind, who later picked it up and ran with it, claiming that Bagram Airbase was near Chinese nuclear sites; his rhetoric exaggerated its proximity¹³². Yet, it remains evident that his adoption of Waltz’s position indicates how concerns over great power competition continue to shape U.S. thinking.

The Bagram Air Base and Its Legacy

The Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan, located roughly 50km¹³³, around 30 miles north of Kabul, was originally built by the Soviets in the 1950s¹³⁴ and later taken over by the U.S. into a mega operational hub. Further, the Bagram Airbase supported over 40,000 personnel, with dual runways and advanced facilities. When the U.S. forces pulled out of Bagram in July 2021, just days before Kabul fell, the Taliban swooped in and took control¹³⁵. In today’s geopolitical landscape, it is plausible to suggest that it remains a symbol of Taliban authority and a strong reminder of America’s hasty exit. During recent remarks, Trump said, “*We gave it to [the Taliban] for nothing. We want that base back,*” but the Taliban regime has categorically rejected the notion of foreign control over Afghan territory¹³⁶.

¹³² Watson, E. (2025, September 25). Trump’s push to reclaim Bagram Air Base cites proximity to China’s nuclear program. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-bagram-afghanistan-china/>

¹³³ Newsweek. (2025, September 22). Bagram Afghanistan: Taliban react to Trump. <https://www.newsweek.com/bagram-afghanistan-taliban-react-trump-2133592>

¹³⁴ Reuters. (2021, July 2). Bagram: Soviet-built air strip that became America’s main Afghan base. <https://www.reuters.com/world/bagram-soviet-built-air-strip-that-became-americas-main-afghan-base-2021-07-02/>

¹³⁵ History. (n.d.). US withdraws from Bagram Air Force Base, Afghanistan. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/July-2/us-withdraws-bagram-air-force-base-afghanistan>

¹³⁶ Winn Media. (n.d.). Afghanistan’s Bagram Airbase: Why is Trump desperate to take it back? <https://www.winnmediaskn.com/afghanistans-bagram-airbase-why-is-trump-desperate-to-take-it-back/>

The Taliban's Calculus

The Taliban leadership has been explicit; Afghanistan's territorial integrity is not up for grabs. Fasihuddin Fitrat¹³⁷, Afghan defense chief, declared that "ceding even an inch of our soil to anyone is out of the question and impossible." Even amid this uncompromising posture, Afghanistan's economic desperation could open avenues for backchannel diplomacy. UN reports say that since 2021, the UN has handed out \$13 billion in aid, but funding was slashed by 50% in 2024, while 23 million Afghans now depend on humanitarian assistance to get by¹³⁸. World Bank reports say Afghanistan's GDP shrank 20.7% in 2021 and kept sliding in 2022, even though aid continued to pour in¹³⁹.

By 2023, the economy was ~25% smaller than in 2020, with only 2.7% growth recorded last year. Taking these factors into account, one may conclude that potential incentives for the Taliban could include Humanitarian aid¹⁴⁰ (food, medicine, education), release of \$7 billion¹⁴¹ frozen Afghan assets, or lifting travel bans on their leaders, or even official recognition of the Taliban government. However, such concessions risk legitimizing a regime accused of systematic human rights abuses, including the suppression of women's rights.

China's Shadow Over Kabul

China has filled much of the vacuum left by the U.S., and its influence in Afghanistan cannot be swept under the rug. In 2023, China was the first country to build diplomatic relations, and became the first country to appoint the first ambassador to

¹³⁷ Azizi, A. (2025, September 21). Taliban army chief: No negotiations over Bagram air base. Amu TV. <https://amu.tv/201217/>

¹³⁸ UN News. (2025, September 17). Afghanistan faces 'perfect storm' of crises, UN warns. United Nations. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165870>

¹³⁹ Barriga Cabanillas, O., Kosmidou-Bradley, W., Redaelli, S., Tateishi, E., & Teruggi, I. (2024, November). Afghanistan's new economic landscape: Using nighttime lights to understand the civilian economy after 2021. World Bank.

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/5b63628c-4b4c-4a10-ba46-5db1d66e7a29/content>

¹⁴⁰ National Security Journal. (n.d.). A return to Bagram Air Base. <https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/a-return-to-bagram-air-base/>

¹⁴¹ Voice of America. (2025, February 1). Taliban decry US claims about frozen Afghan assets. <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-decrys-us-claims-about-frozen-afghan-assets/7959576.html>

Taliban-controlled Afghanistan¹⁴². One could assert that with its eyes on Afghanistan's \$1–3 trillion¹⁴³ in untapped natural resources, Beijing views engagement as central to its high-tech ambitions, helping it power ahead in the global tech race. In fact, financial support and investment from China reduce the Taliban's dependency on Western aid, limiting Washington's leverage. Zakir Jalaly¹⁴⁴, a Taliban foreign ministry official, said that "*military presence has never been accepted by Afghans throughout history, and this possibility was completely rejected during the Doha talks and agreement.*" Still, they have left the door open for limited diplomatic engagement, further highlighting China's advantage.

Pakistan's role

Given the prevailing dynamics, Pakistan's role in the equation remains indispensable. Its deep and longstanding ties both with China and the Taliban complicate the U.S. ambitions in the region. Even the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, was cheered on by the former Prime Minister of Pakistan¹⁴⁵, seeing it as a strategic victory. Against this backdrop, it is justifiable to argue that while Pakistan could, in theory, pressure the Taliban to consider the U.S. requests, doing so would risk undermining its relationship with Beijing and its influence in Kabul. Therefore, Pakistan has to tread carefully and stay on its toes, keeping its own national interest front and center while also not upsetting its own strategic balance. Therefore, keeping this scenario in mind, there's no possibility that for Pakistan, balancing its security concerns and regional alliances makes supporting a U.S. return to Bagram highly improbable.

¹⁴² The Diplomat. (2024, December). China deepens its engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/china-deepens-its-engagement-with-taliban-ruled-afghanistan/>

¹⁴³ Discovery Alert. (2025, August 20). China Belt Road Initiative: Afghanistan integration 2025. <https://discoveryalert.com.au/china-belt-road-initiative-afghanistan-integration-2025/>

¹⁴⁴ The Hans India. (2025, September 19). US return to Bagram faces logistical, diplomatic challenges. <https://www.thehansindia.com/news/international/us-return-to-bagram-faces-logistical-diplomatic-challenges-1007928>

¹⁴⁵ The Independent. (2025, August 17). Taliban, Pakistan, Imran Khan, Afghanistan. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/taliban-pakistan-imran-khan-afghanistan-b1903821.html>

Conclusion

President Trump's push to get Bagram back is a bold step, but it won't be a walk in the park to accomplish. In fact, he highlights enduring U.S. anxieties about China's rise and the loss of strategic footholds in South Asia. Despite this, it is justifiable to assert that the Taliban's rejection, Pakistan's alignment with both China and the Taliban, and China's deepening influence in Kabul make such a move implausible. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that reclaiming Bagram would necessitate compromises with far-reaching political implications that could legitimize an internationally isolated regime, creating new political and ethical dilemmas for Washington. Thus, the tug-of-war over Bagram Airbase mirrors the broader chessboard of South Asian geopolitics, where the U.S. and China vie for influence.

RUSSIA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR CENTRAL ASIA?

26th March, 2025

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The withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan has triggered a new wave of competition among Eurasia's leading powers for access to Afghanistan's markets and transit potential. Situated in the heartland of the continent, Afghanistan serves as a vital link facilitating regional connectivity between Central and South Asia, as well as the Middle East and China. As such major powers of the region as China and India are increasingly engaged with Afghanistan, Russians seem to be also actively leveraging strategic partnerships, geopolitical positioning, and access to Afghanistan's substantial market of 41-million people.

Amid the Ukrainian crisis and growing isolation, Russia has redirected its focus towards strengthening relations with countries in the Global South. Afghanistan, with its pivotal location and logistical potential, presents itself as a promising partner for Moscow. The Russian leadership appears committed to fostering closer political ties and expanding trade and economic relations with South Asian nations, where Afghanistan plays a crucial role as a transit corridor. On a broader scale, amidst confrontation with the West, Russia seeks to consolidate its position in Eurasia, with Afghanistan occupying a crucial geostrategic position in this equation.

* Published: Gafarov, I., Mingyasharov B.(2025, March 26). *Russia's growing influence in Afghanistan: What does it mean for Central Asia?* Kun.uz. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/03/26/russias-growing-influence-in-afghanistan-what-does-it-mean-for-central-asia/>

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Russia has since adopted a pragmatic approach to relations with Afghanistan under the Taliban following U.S. withdrawal and it maintained its embassy in Kabul. Furthermore, in late December 2024, the Russian leadership signed a law enabling the potential removal of the Taliban from Russia's list of terrorist organizations¹⁴⁷. In November last year, Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu visited Afghanistan¹⁴⁸, making statements about developing transport and economic relations. These developments appear to lead to potential delisting of Taliban from a terrorist organization in 2025, paving the way for deeper engagement between Russia and Afghanistan.

Several key areas are slowly emerging in Russia's pragmatic relations with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Firstly, trade turnover between Russia and Afghanistan has exceeded \$1 billion¹⁴⁹. Russia's main exports include petroleum products, wheat, and agricultural machinery, while Afghanistan primarily supplies dried fruits, textiles, and carpets. In August last year, the two sides expressed intentions to expand agro-industrial cooperation, aiming to increase trade turnover to \$3 billion by 2025 and \$10 billion by 2030¹⁵⁰. This trade growth is largely driven by agricultural products, livestock, and agrochemicals. In July 2024¹⁵¹, collaboration began with a supply of petroleum products, signaling the expansion of energy partnerships between the two countries.

Secondly, Russia is also interested in Afghanistan's vast natural resources, including lithium, copper, and rare earth elements. Russia's interest might be driven by the global rise in demand for lithium, a key component in battery production, and rare earth elements essential for high-tech industries. Intense competition is anticipated

¹⁴⁷ Fazl-e-Haider, S. (2024, November 13). Kremlin to remove Taliban from list of terrorist organizations. Diplomacy Publication (Eurasia Daily Monitor), Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/kremlin-to-remove-taliban-from-list-of-terrorist-organizations/>

¹⁴⁸ Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Sergei Shoigu visited Afghanistan on a working visit. (2024, November 26). Security Council of the Russian Federation. <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/3747/>

¹⁴⁹ Trade turnover between Russia and Afghanistan reaches one billion dollars. (2024, May 15). RIA Novosti. <https://ria.ru/20240515/tovarooborot-1946047248.html>

¹⁵⁰ Khabibullin: Russia and Afghanistan to increase trade turnover to \$3 billion in 2025. (2024, August 24). RIA Mo. <https://riamo.ru/news/ekonomika/habibullin-rr-i-afghanistan-uvelichat-tovarooborot-do-3-mldr-dollarov-v-2025-godu>

¹⁵¹ Russian Ambassador reports start of cooperation with Afghanistan on petroleum product supplies. (2024, July 20). Izvestia. <https://iz.ru/1730296/2024-07-20/rr-i-afghanistan-nachali-sotrudnichestvo-v-sfere-postavok-nefteproduktov>

among key Eurasian players, such as India, China, and Russia, for access to Afghanistan's mineral wealth.

Thirdly, Russia is also actively engaged in a humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. In December 2024, Russia delivered 30 tons of humanitarian aid to Kabul under the "People Together Through the Years" project¹⁵². Through such initiatives, Russia actively employs humanitarian aid as a "soft power" tool to strengthen ties with Afghan authorities. Ostensibly, with these efforts Russia seems eying to overcome historical grievances Afghans suffer from the Soviet-Afghan war.

China factor

China has emerged as a close partner of Afghanistan, capitalizing on its logistical and economic potential while increasingly influencing Kabul's political decisions, particularly concerning Pakistan. Following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, Afghanistan seems to be transitioning into China's economic sphere of influence. Russia, as one of Eurasia's leading powers, may seem to view China as a competitor in the race for economic influence in Afghanistan. While China seeks to secure the Afghan market and utilize its logistical potential within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing leans towards Islamabad in Afghan-Pakistani relations. This dynamic poses challenges for Russia: it risks losing a promising market and faces potential isolation of Afghanistan from South Asia, fueled by Beijing's support for Pakistan. To reclaim this market and maintain Afghanistan's stability as a gateway to South Asia, Russia is likely to deepen ties with the Taliban authorities. In this context, Beijing and Moscow may emerge as Afghanistan's primary political and economic partners, though a renewed "Great Game" over trade and economic influence is not out of the question.

The development of a competitive scenario in Afghanistan, where major players vie for markets and mineral resources, could destabilize the broader Central Asian region, undermining its political stability and economic prospects.

¹⁵² Russia sent nearly 30 tons of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. (2024, December 4). RIA Novosti. <https://ria.ru/20241204/afghanistan-1987228964.html>

India-Pakistan factor

Beyond Afghanistan's political and market advantages, Russia is also drawn to its logistical potential, which offers access to the energy markets of Pakistan and India. In 2024, trade between Russia and India reached over \$66 billion, a fivefold increase since the onset of the Ukraine conflict¹⁵³, with India becoming Russia's largest oil buyer. Meanwhile, Pakistan, traditionally aligned with the U.S., is emerging as a significant economic partner for Russia, particularly in agriculture and food supplies. For instance, in 2024, Russia became the leading supplier of wheat and flour to Pakistan.

To further these interests, Russia supports the construction of the Trans-Afghan Railway. This project aligns with Russia's broader goal of strengthening its global, particularly Eurasian, standing. The railway and Afghanistan's transport infrastructure reconstruction would not only grant Russia access to Indian and Pakistani markets and ports but also enhance its geostrategic position in Afghanistan and South Asia. This will also strengthen the role of Central Asia as a transit territory.

The U.S. factor

Russia's rapprochement with the Taliban reflects an anti-American narrative, positioning itself as a counterweight to U.S. policies in Afghanistan. Russian media has framed the U.S. withdrawal as a failure, lauding the Taliban as victorious fighters against U.S. and NATO forces. Supporting the Taliban allows Russia to project itself as an independent actor, free from Western influence.

The political and economic convergence of Russia and Afghanistan, along with China's growing ties with Kabul, is straining U.S.-Afghan relations. This alignment could result in Russia and China becoming the leading global powers partnering with Central Asia, significantly altering the regional balance of power and undermining the multivector policies pursued by Central Asian states.

¹⁵³ India-Russia trade hits USD 66 bn in 2024; target of USD 100 bn by 2030 on track: Russian envoy. (2024, November 27). The Economic Times.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-russia-trade-hits-usd-66bn-in-2024-target-of-usd-100bn-by-2030-on-track-russian-envoy/articleshow/115734758.cms?from=mdr>

Challenges

Afghanistan presents not only political and transport-economic opportunities for strengthening Russia's position on the continent but also poses security challenges for Russia and its interests in Central Asia due to the socio-political situation in certain aspects.

First, despite three years of Taliban rule, the movement has yet to fully establish control over the country and ensure internal security. Afghanistan remains a hub of activity for terrorist organizations such as ISIS-Khorasan and Al-Qaeda. Following the events at Crocus City Hall in Moscow, Russia began viewing the Taliban as a significant partner in combating terrorism. It seems, Moscow seeks to establish close cooperation with the Taliban to contain ISIS-Khorasan in the region, strengthen ties with Afghan authorities, and prevent terrorist threats on its own territory.

Additionally, Russia supports the Taliban's efforts against ISIS-Khorasan and occasionally acts as an “advocate” to bolster Afghanistan's foreign policy image. For instance, the December 11, 2024, terrorist attack, which claimed the life of Afghanistan's Minister for Refugee Affairs, Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani¹⁵⁴, was portrayed in Russian media as a “tragedy” underscoring the shared threat posed by ISIS-Khorasan to both Russia and Afghanistan. Russian outlets emphasized the need for joint efforts to counter terrorist activity, a stance aimed at strengthening relations with the Taliban authorities.

Second, stability in Afghanistan directly impacts Russia's interests in Central Asia, where it maintains military bases. Amid the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow is keen to avoid new threats in Central Asia, making Afghanistan a critical aspect of its regional policy. Despite the Taliban's rise to power in Kabul, Russia has reportedly not increased its military presence at bases in Central Asia¹⁵⁵. One reason for this restraint is the

¹⁵⁴ Islamic State claims responsibility for blast in Kabul that killed a minister. (2024, December 12). RBC. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/675a665e9a79475cdf8c4361>

¹⁵⁵ Suleymanov, R. (2023, September 19). Russia's growing ties with Afghanistan are more symbolism than substance. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/09/russias-growing-ties-with-afghanistan-are-more-symbolism-than-substance>

absence of radicalization export by the Taliban to neighboring countries. Instead of expanding its military footprint, Russia has prioritized diplomatic tools to foster relations with the Taliban.

Russia's security policy in Afghanistan may have a dual impact on the situation in Central Asia:

1. A partnership between Russia and Afghanistan could bolster counterterrorism measures in the region. Central Asian countries might benefit from the assistance of one of the continent's leading powers in combating terrorism, a common threat to both the region and Russia.
2. Enhanced security cooperation between Russia and Afghanistan could significantly increase Russian influence in the region

Central Asia and water balance

The Russia's policy toward Afghanistan largely aligns with the interests of Central Asian countries. A key aspect of this alignment is Moscow's foreign policy perspective, which views Afghanistan as part of Central Asia. Unlike most nations, which classify Afghanistan as part of South Asia, Uzbekistan and other countries in the region consistently emphasize its belonging to Central Asia. This shared position creates opportunities for Uzbekistan to secure Russia's support in advancing its interests regarding Afghanistan¹⁵⁶. Specifically, it opens the door for collaboration in developing a unified and coordinated international strategy on Afghanistan, with Russia potentially acting as an ally to Tashkent.

Another significant aspect of Russian policy in Afghanistan that impacts Central Asia concerns the use of transboundary water resources. Despite Uzbekistan's extensive diplomatic efforts, the issue of constructing the Qosh Tepa Canal in compliance with international standards remains unresolved. Afghanistan appears to view this project

¹⁵⁶ Uzbekistan stands for consolidation of efforts of the entire world community on the Afghan issue. (2023, September 22). Institute of Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. <https://isrs.uz/ru/smti-ekspertlari-sharhlari/uzbekistan-vystupaet-za-konsolidaciu-usilij-vsego-mirovogo-soobsegstva-po-afganskому-voprosu>

not only through an economic lens but also as a foreign policy tool to gain international recognition.

Under these circumstances, Central Asian states could effectively leverage Russia's diplomatic support to urge Afghan authorities to adhere to international norms on water resource management. Moscow's involvement in this matter could significantly influence the Taliban government's decisions.

Conclusions

Russian-Afghan relations have entered a new phase following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Russia is currently considering removing the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations. Strengthened cooperation with Afghanistan offers Russia several strategic advantages:

1. Access to a new market for goods and services;
2. Transit access to South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan;
3. Enhanced regional security measures and counterterrorism efforts;
4. Increased strategic influence in the Eurasian region.

Russia's policy in Afghanistan could have a profound impact on Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan. First, Russia could act as a partner in forming a unified regional strategy toward Afghanistan. Second, Moscow could facilitate the Taliban's compliance with international norms on water usage. Third, Russian-Afghan cooperation could bolster Central Asia's transit potential. Fourth, such collaboration might intensify counterterrorism efforts in the region.

However, the strengthening of Russian-Afghan relations also presents certain dynamics. Russia's growing engagement in Central Asia and Afghanistan may lead to an expanded political and economic presence, influencing the region's balance of power.

THE BOOMERANG EFFECT: HOW PAKISTAN'S PROXY STRATEGY UNLEASHED A WAR IT CANNOT WIN

2nd November 2025

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Introduction

The Durand Line, a colonial-era demarcation¹⁵⁸, remains a politically and historically contested boundary that Afghanistan has never formally recognized. This unresolved status continues to contribute to periodic instability in the region. Recent developments indicate a renewed escalation of tensions along this frontier. Afghan authorities have alleged that Pakistani military operations have affected civilian areas, while Islamabad maintains that its actions were directed against militant sanctuaries of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) reportedly operating from Afghan territory.

According to various reports, Pakistan initiated air operations targeting sites around Kabul, an action that may have marked the latest upsurge in cross-border hostilities. In response, Taliban forces reportedly conducted retaliatory strikes, leading to sustained armed exchanges between the two sides. Pakistani official sources have claimed the elimination of more than 200 Taliban combatants¹⁵⁹ during these

* Published: Kakar, J. U. D., Huma, Z. E., & Mukhammedova, A. (2025, November 2). *The Boomerang Effect: How Pakistan's proxy strategy unleashed a war it cannot win* [Analysis]. *Eurasia Review*. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/02112025-the-boomerang-effect-how-pakistans-proxy-strategy-unleashed-a-war-it-cannot-win-analysis/>

¹⁵⁷ Researcher at Mir Chakar Khan Rind University, Sibi, Balochistan

¹⁵⁸ National Geographic. (n.d.). Durand Line.

<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/durand-line/>

¹⁵⁹ The News. (n.d.). Pak-Afghan ties hit new low as 23 Pak soldiers martyred, 200 militants killed in border clashes. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1350604-pak-afghan-ties-hit-new-low-as-23-pak-soldiers-martyred-200-militants-killed-in-border-clashes>

confrontations¹⁶⁰, whereas Taliban representatives have stated that their forces inflicted significant losses on Pakistani troops, allegedly killing 58 soldiers¹⁶¹.

The Taliban administration has repeatedly accused Pakistan of territorial and airspace violations, while Pakistani statements emphasize that Afghan territory continues to serve as a refuge for TTP elements responsible for attacks within Pakistan. These reciprocal allegations illustrate the entrenched mistrust characterizing bilateral relations and highlight the enduring difficulty of advancing a diplomatic resolution to this longstanding dispute.

Alfredo Toro Hardy has argued that the Boomerang Effect refers to the undesirable consequences of mistaken political decisions that, much like a boomerang, return to haunt or deeply challenge subsequent generations, a warning that still hits close to home¹⁶². One notable case of this phenomenon was the role played by the Reagan administration in shaping an Islamic jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, which later came back to bite. Between 1979 and 1989, the Soviet Union fought a grueling war in that country, getting bogged down in a conflict that drained its resources and morale. In the context of U.S. support for the Taliban during the Cold War, Pakistan also stood side by side—fully aware that it would have to pay the price after the U.S. withdrawal, yet still chose to support them to safeguard its strategic interests.

Pakistan was among the earliest states to extend¹⁶³ diplomatic recognition to the first Taliban regime in the 1990s, reflecting Islamabad's political alignment with the movement that had emerged as a dominant force in Afghanistan. When the Taliban regained control of Kabul in 2021, Pakistan again publicly welcomed the development¹⁶⁴, framing it as a potential strategic gain that could enhance regional stability and

¹⁶⁰ WGI. (n.d.). The boomerang effect. <https://www.wgi.world/the-boomerang-effect/>

¹⁶¹ Paradigm Shift. (n.d.). Taliban and Pakistan. <https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/taliban-and-pakistan/>

¹⁶² Associated Press. (n.d.). Afghanistan Taliban timeline: Four years anniversary. <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-timeline-four-years-anniversary-cc0741771e66ed2de2fe8a0e97f7d0f7>

¹⁶³ Wilson Center. (n.d.). Unraveling deception: Pakistan's dilemma after decades of promoting militancy in Afghanistan. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/unraveling-deception-pakistans-dilemma-after-decades-promoting-militancy-afghanistan-and>

¹⁶⁴ Counter Extremism Project. (n.d.). Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-ttp>

strengthen Pakistan's influence along its western frontier. However, in the ensuing years, this perceived asset has increasingly come to be viewed as a source of growing security concerns for Pakistan itself. Analysts have characterized this reversal as a classic example of strategic blowback, whereby policies intended to secure geopolitical advantages eventually produce unintended and adverse consequences. In this context, the Taliban, once supported as a strategic partner, have evolved into a complex and, at times, adversarial actor, underscoring the inherent volatility of Pakistan's regional security calculus.

The Genesis: Cultivating the Hydra

For decades, Pakistan has been widely regarded as playing a strategic “double game”¹⁶⁵ in its policy toward Afghanistan and militant groups operating within the region. Pakistan’s policy in Afghanistan was based on publicly supporting the U.S. fight against terrorism, while covertly assisting the Taliban to further its own security objectives, mainly to counter Indian influence and secure leverage in the region. The goal was to maintain a friendly regime in Kabul that would cooperate with Islamabad. However, in recent years, the Taliban has become more independent and less responsive to Pakistan’s interests, turning from a strategic asset into a potential challenge for Pakistan’s security and influence.

There is considerable support for the claim that the Taliban, upon gaining power in the 1990s, were seen in Pakistan as the ultimate compliant proxy. This led to a profound strengthening of ties, and the relationship was symbiotic. Further, it can be said that the Taliban received sanctuary and support, at the same time as Pakistan gained its coveted ‘strategic depth.’ Following this, one might infer that this strategy of Pakistan, in fact, contained the seeds of its own destruction from the very beginning. Further, it may be hypothesized that individual bonds and ideological bonds would forever override nationalistic impulses and the rational demands of governance. In fact, it was a fatal miscalculation of a goal it had long set its sights on.

¹⁶⁵ Wilson Center. (n.d.). Unraveling deception: Pakistan's dilemma after decades of promoting militancy in Afghanistan. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/unraveling-deception-pakistans-dilemma-after-decades-promoting-militancy-afghanistan-and>

Pakistan's longstanding support for the Afghan Taliban was intended to strengthen its influence in the region and create a cooperative government in Kabul. However, in recent years, the Taliban has grown increasingly independent, and its priorities no longer always align with those of Islamabad. The presence and activities of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have contributed to instability in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, impacting both civilians and security forces. Pakistan now faces the complex reality that a movement it once helped shape has begun to challenge its own interests.

According to a Global Terrorism Index report¹⁶⁶ (GTIR) released in March 2025, the TTP ramped up its comeback operations by 91 percent since 2023, carrying out a total of 482 attacks in 2024 sharply following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. It seems the TTP has benefited from safe havens across the border, which has enabled it to plan and conduct more coordinated operations against Pakistani targets. This situation appears to have complicated regional stability.

Unfortunately, both Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to blame each other and have officially fallen out, running proxies against one another. On one hand, Islamabad has accused Kabul of helping the TTP and BLA, claiming that Afghanistan is using and sheltering them as proxies to stir up trouble along the border areas. Conversely, Afghan officials allege that Pakistan has maintained contacts with IS-K (the Islamic State of Khorasan¹⁶⁷), which they see as a threat to Afghan security and regional stability. Despite Islamabad's denial of these allegations, efforts to rebuild trust have proven difficult. As a result, tensions between the two countries remain high and are reflected in repeated border incidents.

On the other hand, Kabul has accused Pakistan of helping IS-K (the Islamic State of Khorasan¹⁶⁸), the Islamic State in this part of the world; in fact, it throws Pakistan

¹⁶⁶ Counter Extremism Project. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-ttp>

¹⁶⁷ Wilson Center. (2023, September 23). Unraveling deception: Pakistan's dilemma after decades of promoting militancy in Afghanistan. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/unraveling-deception-pakistans-dilemma-after-decades-promoting-militancy-afghanistan-and>

¹⁶⁸ Wilson Center. (n.d.). Unraveling deception: Pakistan's dilemma after decades of promoting militancy in Afghanistan. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/unraveling-deception-pakistans-dilemma-after-decades-promoting-militancy-afghanistan-and>

under the bus. They are the Taliban's own enemy, and Afghanistan says Pakistan is using IS-K to destabilize their country, adding fuel to the fire. Without a doubt, Pakistan has dismissed these claims, but it has failed to restore trust, and that continues to play out in frequent border clashes.

The Evolution of Independent Agency: When Influences Develop Their Own Direction

The first significant divergence arose with the Taliban's stance on the Durand Line¹⁶⁹. This colonial-era border holds critical importance for Pakistan, while for Kabul, it represents a deeply emotional and nationalist concern, especially as it divides the Pashtun population. Many scholars argue that Pakistan's attempt to replace Afghan Pashtun nationalism with a more unified Islamic identity did not succeed. Consequently, the Taliban, despite their historical ties, maintain a firm position on this issue, reflecting a core aspect of Afghan sovereignty.

Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, their role naturally shifted from that of an insurgency to a governing authority. Managing an economy, conducting diplomacy, and addressing internal challenges require a broader approach, which appears to have prompted the Taliban to diversify their international relationships beyond Pakistan. Their engagements with countries such as China, Russia, Qatar, and notably India signify a move towards greater independence in foreign policy. The recent visit of the Taliban's foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, to India, symbolically reflects this evolving dynamic and underscores an increasing assertion of autonomy.

The Patron vs. the Proxy

Pakistan has consistently encouraged the Taliban to pursue constructive relations and has formally requested the elimination or extradition of the TTP to Pakistani authorities. Islamabad also calls for stronger measures against the TTP; however, the Taliban have been cautious in their response. This hesitation appears to stem from internal challenges within the Taliban's governance, where a strict

¹⁶⁹ Hakimi, H. (2024, December 28). Analysis: Why have Pakistan's ties with the Afghan Taliban turned frigid? Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/28/analysis-why-have-pakistans-ties-with-the-afghan-taliban-turned-frigid>

crackdown might risk destabilizing their own administration and unintentionally strengthening rival factions.

Conclusion

Analysis suggests that Pakistan currently faces significant challenges from forces it once sought to influence. What was originally intended as a strategy to secure a stable western border—commonly referred to as the doctrine of strategic depth—appears to have had quite the opposite outcome. Rather than a secure and friendly border, Pakistan now contends with an unstable Afghanistan that harbors groups like the BLA+TTP, creating ongoing vulnerabilities along the Durand Line.

The consequences are considerable and multifaceted. Pakistan's military resources are strained, the economy faces pressures, and major initiatives including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) are at risk. Moreover, this situation demands diverting attention and resources from Pakistan's primary eastern front with New Delhi, even as it observes its regional rival strengthen diplomatic ties in Kabul. Domestically, these challenges contribute to growing public dissatisfaction with the military's prominent role and perceived security shortcomings, testing the limits of public patience.

INDIA'S POLITICAL RAPPROCHEMENT WITH THE TALIBAN: A PATH TOWARD RECOGNITION OR AN INSTRUMENT OF INFLUENCE

19th November, 2025

Aziza Mukhammedova, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS, CASAS)

Rayxonabonu Abdullayev, Research Assistant (IAIS)

A policy of “engagement without recognition”

On October 10th 2025 a meeting¹⁷⁰ took place in New Delhi between Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Amir Khan Muttaqi. This marked the first high-level bilateral meeting, signaling significant shifts in South Asian geopolitics. During the meeting, it was announced that India's technical mission¹⁷¹, operational in Kabul since June 2022 would be upgraded to embassy status. Since the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan, the character of bilateral relations has undergone positive transformation. Despite its maximal presence, India refrains from officially recognizing Taliban authority. Maintaining neutrality, New Delhi continues to pursue its long-term geopolitical and economic objectives. However, India's elevation of its mission status indicates not so much a readiness for formal recognition of the Taliban at this stage of relationship development, but rather the construction of a pragmatic engagement strategy whereby India continues a policy of maximum involvement without recognition.

* Published: Mukhammedova, R., & Abdullayeva, R. (2025, November). *What's behind India's political rapprochement with the Taliban? The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/11/whats-behind-indias-political-rapprochement-with-the-taliban/>

¹⁷⁰ Al Jazeera. (2024, December 28). Analysis: Why have Pakistan's ties with the Afghan Taliban turned frigid? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/28/analysis-why-have-pakistans-ties-with-the-afghan-taliban-turned-frigid>

¹⁷¹ Ministry of External Affairs, India. (2025, October 10). India-Afghanistan joint statement, October 10, 2025. <https://www.meaindia.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40193/india++afghanistan+joint+statement+october+10+2025>

India has consistently sought to establish stable relations with Afghanistan. Thus, two weeks following the Taliban's assumption of power in August 2021, the first official meeting occurred between Indian Ambassador to Qatar Deepak Mittal and a Taliban representative, demonstrating the Indian side's readiness for open dialogue.

Economic presence as an instrument of soft power

In its approach to Afghanistan, India actively employs economic and humanitarian assistance as an instrument of influence. Recent years reveal an interesting trend: according to Afghanistan's National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA¹⁷²), India is the only major partner with which Afghanistan maintains a consistently positive trade balance. In fiscal year 2022-2023¹⁷³, Afghanistan's positive balance stood at \$143.8 million, rising to \$331.3 million in 2023-2024¹⁷⁴, with Afghan exports totaling \$598.8 million and imports from India at \$264.5 million. Between 2022 and 2025, Kabul received more foreign currency from India than from China, Iran, or Pakistan - its primary trading partners, thereby intensifying Afghanistan's economic dependence on India. In this situation, economic levers enable India to consolidate its geopolitical influence while maintaining maximum political distance.

Beyond infrastructure and economic projects, India actively utilizes humanitarian diplomacy, continuously providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people since the Taliban's assumption of power, remaining the largest humanitarian donor¹⁷⁵, including 50 tons of medical supplies, 60 million vaccine doses, 40,000 tons of wheat and other humanitarian deliveries. This course establishes a new regional power dynamic that allows India to consolidate its position as Afghanistan's key partner. In this position, India maximally benefits from the situation without exposing itself to risk while continuing to strengthen its influence.

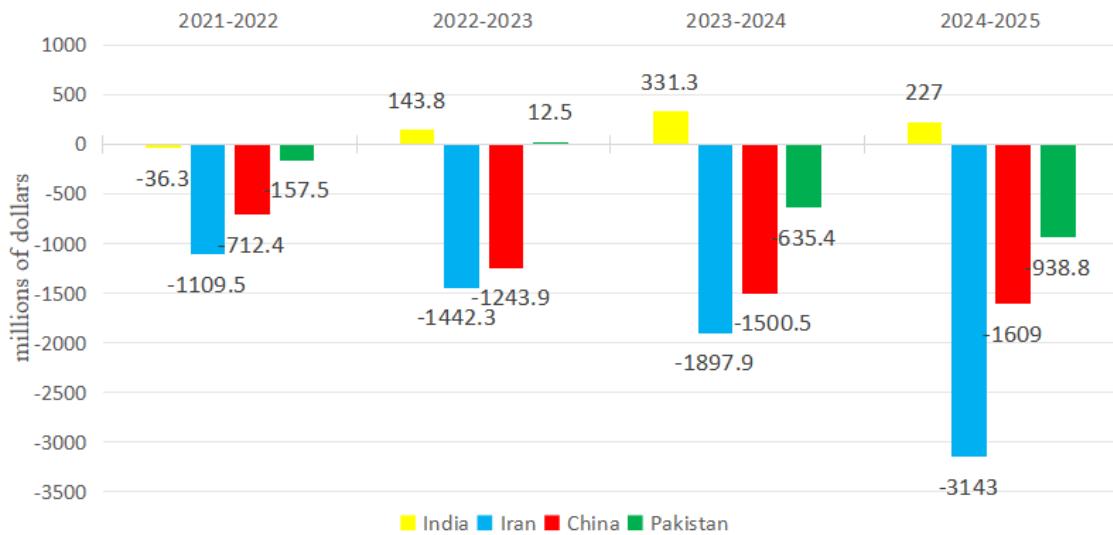
¹⁷² National Statistics and Information Authority, Afghanistan. (n.d.). <https://nsia.gov.af>

¹⁷³ National Statistics and Information Authority, Afghanistan. (2023). Trade statistics 2023 [PDF]. <https://nsia.gov.af:8443/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Trade-Statistics-2023.pdf>

¹⁷⁴ National Statistics and Information Authority, Afghanistan. (2024). Annual trade statistics 1402 [PDF]. <https://nsia.gov.af:8443/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/84-1402.pdf>

¹⁷⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, India. (n.d.). Question No. 630: Indian investments in Afghanistan.

Trade balance of Afghanistan with main partners between 2021-2025



Geopolitical motivations

Indian activity in the region is primarily motivated by the necessity to contain other regional actors, such as China and Pakistan. The coincidence of Amir Khan Muttaqi's visit to India with the escalation of the Afghan-Pakistan border conflict provided New Delhi with an opportunity to strengthen diplomatic positions and demonstrate readiness for engagement with Afghanistan against the backdrop of its weakening relations with Islamabad.

Additional tension emerged from the sharp deterioration of India-Pakistan relations following a series of suicide attacks by the "Taliban of Afghanistan" in Islamabad on November 11th 2025 in which Pakistan authorities also accuse Indian authorities of involvement. Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Asif declared this "one of the worst examples of state-sponsored terrorism by Indian authorities in the region" and stated Pakistan's readiness to conduct military operations on two fronts. Previously, commenting on events of October 9th, he had already characterized Afghanistan as "India's proxy". Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif also accused New Delhi of "instigating" the Afghan Taliban, intensifying confrontational rhetoric. For Pakistan, such

accusations help construct a narrative portraying India as a competitor exploiting unstable political conditions to pressure Islamabad. This discourse, in turn, contributes to further hardening of Pakistan's foreign policy position.

New regional power configuration

Against this backdrop, India is particularly concerned about potential redistribution of regional power balance, primarily due to rapidly improving relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh. On April 17th, the first meeting at the foreign minister level occurred in Dhaka between Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar and Bangladesh's new leadership, marking rapid political warming. Following the change of power in Bangladesh, Dhaka began actively developing ties with Islamabad. Beyond economic and educational cooperation, defense interaction is notably expanding. In January, high-ranking military officials from both countries held talks in Rawalpindi, discussing joint exercises, personnel training, and potential defense supplies. The Pakistani army characterized Bangladesh as a "brotherly country", which could alter South Asia's power configuration.

The Bangladesh-Pakistan rapprochement is largely supported by China, for which both countries constitute key elements of regional strategy, particularly in logistics and military presence. Beijing effectively facilitates closer coordination between Dhaka and Islamabad. For India, this creates the risk of a new sub-regional alliance capable of weakening its influence both in South Asia generally and in Afghanistan particularly.

Concurrently, China deepens strategic partnership with Pakistan through the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In September of this year, at a meeting between the two prime ministers, agreements worth \$8.5 billion were signed within CPEC's second phase¹⁷⁶, along with approval of an Action Plan for 2025-2029. These projects strengthen infrastructural and economic connectivity between the two countries, excluding India from transport-trade routes.

¹⁷⁶ Associated Press. (2025, September 5). Pakistan, China investment agreement, Beijing. <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-china-investment-agreement-beijing-70ca7b7098c11acf9a9d520328476c68>

The expansion of China-Pakistan cooperation to the level of a “community with a shared future”¹⁷⁷ creates risks of geo-economic isolation for India, for which developing ties with Afghanistan becomes a strategic instrument for maintaining access to Central Asia and balancing China’s regional influence. In this political configuration, developing ties with Afghanistan becomes not merely an instrument for expanding Indian influence, but rather a survival mechanism and means of preserving access to Central Asia and countering the China-Pakistan axis.

External challenges to Indian strategy

Furthermore, India faces another geopolitical dilemma that reached its peak in September of this year with Washington’s decision to suspend India’s sanctions waiver for Iran’s Chabahar port. This decision, though temporarily mitigated by the extension of sanctions exemption beyond October 30, 2025, threatens Indian interests. India’s \$370 million investment¹⁷⁸ in this port last year reflects its strategic significance as a counterweight to the China-Pakistan axis being strengthened at the neighboring Gwadar port. Thus, Indian activity represents a forced reaction to growing external constraints caused by other regional states’ increasing influence.

Nevertheless, cooperation between India and the Taliban remains limited. New Delhi is still unprepared for formal recognition of Taliban authority due to their non-observance of human rights, particularly regarding women. Symbolically, at the October 10 press conference between the two ministers, not a single female journalist was permitted, provoking widespread public resonance among Indian media.

Evidently, despite reputational risks and domestic political constraints, India is nonetheless prepared to pursue more pragmatic solutions for the sake of long-term foreign policy results.

¹⁷⁷ Government of Pakistan. CPEC action plan 2025-2029 [PDF]. <https://cpec.gov.pk/brain/public/uploads/documents/ActionPlan2025-2029.pdf>

¹⁷⁸ Institute for Advanced International Studies. (2025, October 24). Uzbekistan weighs risks of Chabahar investment. <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/uzbekistan-weighs-risks-of-chabahar-investment>

Conclusion

New Delhi's willingness to engage in dialogue with the unrecognized Taliban regime, despite evident contradictions regarding human rights and reputational costs domestically, demonstrates the acuteness of the regional political situation. India effectively acknowledges that under current conditions it lacks the capacity to choose partners.

At the same time, the gradual political rapprochement between India and Afghanistan does not signify a course toward official recognition of the Taliban government. Rather, it reflects India's pragmatic response to the shifting balance of power, directed toward preserving and expanding its influence in Afghanistan.

In the near term, India will likely continue deepening economic and humanitarian relations with Afghanistan without political recognition, awaiting the current regime's achievement of some degree of international legitimization. This position allows India to minimize risks while maintaining Afghanistan within its sphere of influence.

The critical question is whether India can transform rapprochement with Kabul into long-term strategic advantage. For now, the Afghan direction appears more as an attempt to minimize losses in a region where the balance of power is determined by other, more decisive actors.

POLITICS: COMMENTARIES

RUSSIA AND THE TALIBAN: POLITICAL RAPPROCHEMENT

11th November, 2024

Islomkhon Gafarov, Political Analyst (CPR)¹⁷⁹

Aziza Mukhamedova, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS, CASAS)

On April 17, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation suspended the ban¹⁸⁰ on the activities of the Taliban movement within the country. By this decision, Russia officially removed the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations. Moscow's motivations may lie in the following factors:

First, under conditions of international sanctions, Russia is prioritizing the development of relations with countries of the Global South, where Afghanistan plays a key role as a transit territory.

Second, Afghanistan may become a new export market for Russia. The two sides plan to increase their trade turnover to **\$3 billion this year**¹⁸¹.

Third, the Russian Federation is interested in Afghanistan's substantial reserves of natural resources, including lithium, copper, and rare earth elements.

Fourth, Moscow may view the Taliban as an important partner in the fight against the terrorist network ISIS-Khorasan, especially following the events at Crocus City Hall.

* Published: Gafarov, I., & Mukhammedova, A. (2025, April 19). *Russia and the Taliban: Political rapprochement*. Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS).

<https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/russia-and-the-taliban-political-rapprochement/>

¹⁷⁹ PhD in Political Science, Political Analyst at Center for Progressive Reforms, Senior Lecturer at UWED

¹⁸⁰ RBC. (2025, April 17). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/04/2025/6800f0fb9a79477fb06eae15>

¹⁸¹ RIAMO. (2024, August 24). Habibullin: RF i Afghanistan uvelichat tovarooborot do 3 mlrd dollarov v 2025 godu [Habibullin: Russia and Afghanistan will increase trade turnover to \$3 billion in 2025].

<https://riamo.ru/news/ekonomika/habibullin-rf-i-afghanistan-uvelichat-tovarooborot-do-3-mlrd-dollarov-v-2025-godu/>

Fifth, the political rapprochement between the Russian Federation and the Taliban may serve as a response to U.S. actions regarding Afghanistan, particularly the visit of former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan **Zalmay Khalilzad** to Kabul in March of this year¹⁸².

Sixth, closer ties with Afghanistan may represent a component of the Russian Federation's grand strategy on the Eurasian continent, within which Afghanistan is seen as a state of key strategic importance.

Russia's removal of the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations sets a precedent that may influence the positions of other states, particularly those currently adopting a wait-and-see approach. Specifically, Iran, Pakistan, and India may intensify their partnerships with Afghanistan. Moscow is signaling its willingness to engage in dialogue with a *de jure* unrecognized government, which could encourage other countries to pursue more flexible policies toward Kabul. In the long term, this development has the potential to weaken the Taliban's international isolation.

Overall, the Russian Federation's policy toward Afghanistan may, in certain respects, align with the interests of the Central Asian countries. One of the most significant elements in this regard is Moscow's foreign policy perspective, which views Afghanistan as part of Central Asia. Russia could act as a partner in shaping a unified regional strategy toward Afghanistan.

¹⁸² The Independent. (2025, March 26). Trump, Taliban, Zalmay Khalilzad, Afghanistan, American hostages. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/trump-taliban-zalmay-khalilzad-afghanistan-american-hostages-b2720472.html>

IS RUSSIA FIRST TO RECOGNIZE THE TALIBAN?

23rd April, 2025

Islomkhon Gafarov, *Political Analyst (CPR)*

The year 2025 marked a new chapter in Russia-Afghanistan relations. On April 17, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation officially removed the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations. In May and June, business forums were held in Kazan and St. Petersburg, resulting in expanded access for Afghan citizens to the Russian labor market. On July 1¹⁸³, Taliban representative Gul Hassan arrived in Moscow and formally assumed his duties in the capacity of ambassador. According to Zamir Kabulov, Special Representative of the President of Russia for Afghanistan, Moscow intends to host the seventh round of consultations within the framework of the “Moscow Format” this autumn¹⁸⁴. The Russian side has stated that “Afghanistan will participate as a full-fledged member”. High-level statements of this kind, along with the formal accreditation of an Afghan diplomat with ambassadorial rank, may be interpreted as an implicit signal of the beginning of a recognition process – positioning the Taliban as a legitimate actor in international relations. Russia’s rapprochement with the Taliban is largely driven by trade and economic considerations. However, security imperatives are also playing a key role. As part of its counterterrorism efforts, the Russian government has announced its readiness to supply arms to the Afghan side¹⁸⁵. This development introduces a new dimension to bilateral engagement – arms trade – which has long been a distinctive feature of Russia’s foreign policy toolkit. In the long run, such cooperation may evolve into a broader partnership in the defense-industrial sphere, thereby strengthening bilateral ties and reorienting Kabul’s geopolitical focus more decisively toward Moscow.

* Published: Gafarov, I. (2025, July 2). *Is Russia first to recognize the Taliban?* Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS). <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/is-russia-first-to-recognize-the-taliban/>

¹⁸³ RIA Novosti. (2025, July 1). Posol [Ambassador]. <https://ria.ru/20250701/posol-2026562974.html>

¹⁸⁴ Azizi, A. (2025, July 2). Russia to host seventh round of Moscow Format talks on Afghanistan this fall. Amu TV. <https://amu.tv/183966/>

¹⁸⁵ Rahimi, H. (2025, July 2). Kabulov: Russia should arm the Taliban against ISIS. TOLONews. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-194855>

THE TALIBAN'S INVITATION TO COP29: CLIMATE DIPLOMACY AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

13rd November 2024

Aziza Mukhamedova, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS, CASAS)

In November 2024, the COP29 climate conference will take place in Baku, Azerbaijan. One of the most discussed aspects of the event is the invitation extended to a representative of the Taliban government. This decision has raised many questions, as the Taliban's government is not officially recognized by most countries and does not meet many international standards. Despite these challenges, the invitation has been issued, and there are several key reasons behind this move.

First and foremost, it is important to recognize that climate change is a global issue that requires cooperation from all countries, regardless of their political situation. In previous COP summits, representatives from countries with different political systems, even those in conflict or strained relations, have still come together to discuss urgent environmental issues. Climate change is not confined to any one country or region—it affects the entire planet. Solving it requires collaboration at every level.

The Taliban's inclusion in the COP29 agenda might also be linked to efforts to engage countries that, due to political isolation or internal instability, would otherwise be excluded from global discussions. Afghanistan, despite its challenging political situation, is facing serious environmental problems such as droughts, deforestation, and land degradation. These issues are directly connected to climate change, and involving the Taliban in the conference not only highlights the region's environmental challenges but also sets the stage for future cooperation on these issues.

* Published: Mukhammedova, A. (2024, November 13). *The Taliban's invitation to COP29: Climate diplomacy and political implications*. Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS). <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/the-talibans-invitation-to-cop29-climate-diplomacy-and-political-implications/>

Furthermore, the invitation to the Taliban could be part of a broader international strategy where climate diplomacy is used as a tool to open communication with isolated regimes. This move may indicate a growing recognition that to effectively address global challenges, the international community must be prepared to engage with different political realities. While the Taliban is not recognized by many countries, its participation in international forums like COP29 can help strengthen its diplomatic standing.

Another important aspect is the political dimension. The invitation to the Taliban can be seen as a step toward recognizing their government on the international stage. This event strengthens the Taliban's position, allowing them to demonstrate their ability to engage with the global community on important issues like climate change. While this invitation does not imply immediate official recognition, it could be interpreted as a signal that international actors are exploring ways for more constructive dialogue with the new Afghan regime, particularly on issues where cooperation is essential.

In summary, the invitation extended to the Taliban for COP29 is not just a diplomatic gesture aimed at involving all countries in tackling the climate crisis; it is also part of a broader strategy of an incremental recognition¹⁸⁷ Afghanistan and its government on the international stage. Ultimately, this event could play a significant role in shaping future relations between the Taliban and the rest of the world.

¹⁸⁷ Boltaev, H. M., & Fazliddin Djamalov. (2024). The Path Towards Incremental Recognition. Centre for Afghanistan Middle East and Africa (CAMEA) Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI).

ARE UZBEKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS ENTERING A NEW PHASE?

9th July, 2025

Mirjalol Murtozaev, Research Assistant (IAIS)

On July 3, 2025, within the framework of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Summit held in the city of Khankendi, Azerbaijan, a historic high-level meeting took place between the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan¹⁸⁸, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and the acting deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of Afghanistan's Interim Government, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. This marked the first official high-level engagement between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. The meeting, held on the sidelines of the ECO Summit, reflects the growing dynamism of Uzbekistan's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. While Uzbekistan has gradually intensified its diplomatic outreach toward Afghanistan since 2021, this encounter signals the opening of a new chapter—one characterized by direct dialogue at the highest levels of leadership. This development demonstrates not only Uzbekistan's sustained interest in Afghanistan but also its broader strategic objective of strengthening and activating its regional diplomacy. Uzbekistan's proactive approach indicates a deliberate effort to expand its role as a stabilizing actor and constructive partner in regional affairs, particularly concerning the Afghan direction.

This suggests that Uzbekistan is not only engaging in direct dialogue with Afghanistan but is also beginning to utilize its diplomacy through international platforms. It is likely that Uzbekistan will continue to demonstrate activity in such

* Published: Murtozaev, M. (2025, July 9). *Are Uzbekistan-Afghanistan relations entering a new phase?* Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS). <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/are-uzbekistan-afghanistan-relations-entering-a-new-phase/>

¹⁸⁸ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2025, July 3). Official statement. Official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8297>

multilateral formats. In particular, Afghanistan's participation may be expected at the upcoming Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit scheduled to take place in China on August 31 and September 1, 2025. Uzbekistan has long advocated for the revival of the "SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group" within the framework of the organization¹⁸⁹. Developments in this direction appear increasingly likely. Moreover, opportunities are emerging for Afghanistan to be involved in processes within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States and other regional bodies, with Uzbekistan potentially playing a facilitating role. Uzbekistan promotes a cooperative and balanced political approach to the Afghan issue, grounded in international consensus. This evolving strategy is elevating Uzbekistan's relations with Afghanistan to a new level while simultaneously enhancing the scope and sophistication of Uzbek diplomacy itself. The consistency in this approach indicates that Uzbekistan is committed to supporting Afghanistan's integration into the international community through constructive and inclusive engagement.

It is unlikely that Afghanistan will be able to fully reintegrate into the international community in a short period of time. In this regard, Uzbekistan is contributing to the process by supporting a gradual, step-by-step approach. High-level meetings of this nature may serve as a model for other countries, encouraging greater international attention toward Afghanistan and potentially leading to an increase in humanitarian assistance - particularly in support of the Afghan people.

Furthermore, Uzbekistan has expressed¹⁹⁰ its intention to advance an initiative titled "Communicating the Real Situation in Afghanistan within the United Nations Framework." This proposal aims to foster a more informed and pragmatic international dialogue about developments in the country.

During the bilateral meeting, the two sides focused on several key areas of cooperation:

¹⁸⁹ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2025, July 4). Official statement. Official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/7372>

¹⁹⁰ UzA. (2025, July 3). O'zbekiston Prezidenti Afg'oniston bilan savdo-iqtisodiy hamkorlik masalalarini muhokama qildi [President of Uzbekistan discussed trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan]. https://uza.uz/uz/posts/ozbekiston-prezidenti-afgoniston-bilan-savdo-iqtisodiy-hamkorlik-masalalarini-muhokama-qildi_736721

First, in the field of transport connectivity, the importance of the Trans-Afghan Railway Project was once again emphasized. Both sides agreed on the need to accelerate the project and intensify practical steps toward its realization. The railway corridor is expected to link Uzbekistan with Pakistan's Peshawar and, ultimately, the ports of the Indian Ocean via Afghanistan. The project's major advantages include significantly reducing transportation costs and shortening delivery times, making it a strategic asset for regional trade.

Additionally, concrete initiatives such as the development of the Termez International Trade Center were discussed. This platform would allow Afghanistan - particularly its agricultural sector - to utilize Uzbekistan's transit infrastructure for exporting goods to Central Asia and Russia.

Second, Uzbekistan expressed interest in investing in several key sectors of the Afghan economy¹⁹¹. Among the priority areas mentioned were the construction of the Balkh-Herat-Kandahar railway, cement and textile production, electronic governance systems, salt processing, and the establishment of oil refining facilities. These investments would not only stimulate Afghanistan's economic revitalization but could also position Uzbekistan as one of the country's leading foreign investors.

Third, Mullah Baradar emphasized that bilateral trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan has already surpassed \$1 billion and expressed his desire to increase it to \$2 billion in the near future¹⁹². This projection appears realistic, considering that by the end of 2024, the total volume of trade between the two countries exceeded \$1.13 billion - a 30.7% increase compared to 2023. Of that total, \$1.09 billion accounted for Uzbekistan's exports of goods and services to Afghanistan. During the first five months of 2025, bilateral trade grew to \$622 million, marking a 62.8% increase compared to the same period the previous year. In this context, the opening of Uzbekistan's trade houses in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, along with the signing of the

¹⁹¹ Rahimi, H. (2025, July 4). Mullah Baradar meets Uzbek, Turkmen officials on regional cooperation. TOLONews. <https://tolonews.com/business-194885>

¹⁹² Rahimi, H. (2025, July 4). Mullah Baradar meets Uzbek, Turkmen officials on regional cooperation. TOLONews. <https://tolonews.com/business-194885>

Preferential Trade Agreement in June 2025, serves as concrete evidence of an increasingly proactive and structured trade diplomacy between the two countries.

Fourth, the dialogue concluded with an agreement to establish a joint working group that will convene quarterly to coordinate the implementation of previously agreed commitments. This development is expected to bring strategic coherence and institutional continuity to bilateral cooperation efforts.

In conclusion, this inaugural high-level meeting between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan could serve as a foundation for future steps aimed at gradually integrating Afghanistan into regional cooperation frameworks. By connecting Afghanistan to trade and transit corridors and attracting investment flows, such efforts may contribute to the country's internal stabilization. In this context, Uzbekistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan can be seen as a clear example of pragmatic diplomacy focused on tangible and constructive outcomes

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SOCIETY

BUILDING AFGHANISTAN'S FUTURE THROUGH EDUCATION, CONNECTIVITY, AND ISLAMIC LEGITIMACY

25th September 2024

Aziza Mukhammedova, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS, CASAS)

Dr. Farhana Qazi, Religious Scholar and Associate Professor¹⁹³

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Afghanistan today stands on the edge of a generational turning point. The collapse of women's education, the weakening of regional trade, and the persistence of cultural isolation have created a dangerous mix. Yet within this crisis lies a possibility: to rebuild Afghanistan's stability through three pillars: education, connectivity, and Islamic legitimacy. Taken together, these foundations can provide the country with a durable path toward peace, prosperity, and inclusion.

Education is the frontline of Afghanistan's struggle for survival. When girls are barred from schools and universities, not only just their futures stolen, but the nation's economic and social capital is dismantled. A society that denies education to half its population condemns itself to stagnation. Schools should not be considered as classrooms only; in fact, they are engines of resilience, equipping families and communities with the skills to navigate adversity. Historical experience shows this clearly. In the early 2000s, as Afghan girls returned to school in large numbers, literacy rates increased, and households benefited from improved health and higher income levels. The reversal of this progress since 2021 represents a human tragedy as well as an impending economic disaster. Reopening educational access for women and girls is therefore not an abstract right but a strategic necessity. Without it, Afghanistan risks producing a generation deprived of the very tools required to rebuild the country.

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Cultural heritage tours

But education alone cannot sustain stability. Afghanistan must be reconnected with its neighbors. Regional connectivity offers both opportunity and leverage. The proposed Trans-Afghan railway, linking Central Asia with South Asia, symbolizes this vision. Beyond the physical rails, connectivity means trade corridors, cultural exchanges, and shared markets that anchor Afghanistan in interdependence rather than isolation. Uzbekistan's advocacy for infrastructure and people-to-people diplomacy underscores this point. When goods, students, and ideas flow across borders, the appeal of extremism and exclusion diminishes. Connectivity provides the infrastructure of peace, transforming geography into opportunity. For Afghanistan, integration into regional networks is existential.

Yet even with education and connectivity, one barrier remains: legitimacy. No policy, however rational, can succeed in Afghanistan without cultural and religious grounding. This is where Islamic engagement becomes indispensable. The Qur'an and Sunnah provide ample support for women's pursuit of knowledge. Islamic scholars across the region must engage their Afghan counterparts, offering reasoned fatwas that affirm education as a religious duty. Such religiously credible endorsements can open doors that external pressure cannot. Fatwas carry authority in ways that international appeals never will. To secure progress, reforms must be rooted in Islamic reasoning that resonates with Afghan society. Mobilizing ulema, providing religiously sanctioned solutions for women's travel and study, and ensuring educational initiatives are embedded within an Islamic framework are critical for sustainability.

The fusion of these three pillars, education, connectivity, and Islamic legitimacy, creates a roadmap for Afghanistan's recovery. Scholarships and online programs can bridge immediate gaps, ensuring Afghan women are not cut off from learning. Teacher-training programs can sustain quality and expand reach, especially in rural areas. Regional infrastructure projects can open corridors of trade and opportunity, while also binding Afghanistan into cooperative networks that reduce incentives for conflict. Religious dialogue can provide the cultural legitimacy that makes reforms sustainable, turning what might otherwise be foreign impositions into accepted norms.

The implications stretch beyond Afghanistan. For Central Asia, an educated and connected Afghanistan can unlock markets and reduce insecurity along its borders. For South Asia, it promises trade routes and stability in a region too often hostage to conflict. For the broader Muslim world, supporting Afghan women's education within an Islamic framework is a test of credibility. If Muslim nations cannot uphold the right to knowledge as a religious duty, then their appeals to shared values will ring hollow. Conversely, if they succeed, they will demonstrate that Islamic reasoning can be harnessed to advance progress rather than obstruct it.

To transform this vision into reality, three conditions are essential. First, institutionalization. Universities, ministries, and regional organizations must establish dedicated units to manage scholarships, online learning platforms, and cultural exchanges. Second, sustainable financing. Long-term commitments, rather than one-off donor projects, are necessary to ensure that initiatives survive political transitions. Third, monitoring and accountability. Success must be measured not by announcements but by enrollment figures, graduation rates, and the number of partnerships that materialize.

The stakes are stark. If these measures are pursued with seriousness, Afghanistan can still build a foundation for stability. But if they are delayed or diluted, the cost will be severe: radicalization, poverty, and regional instability that will not stop at Afghanistan's borders. The human cost, borne most heavily by women, will be matched by a geopolitical cost paid by all neighbors.

What Afghanistan needs now is not sympathy but strategy. The region possesses the tools: railways that link economies, classrooms that train generations, and a faith tradition that affirms learning as a sacred duty. To combine them is to give Afghanistan a future. To neglect them is to watch a generation slip away. The choice, though urgent, is still open. The question is whether the region has the resolve to act before it is too late.

Forging Regional Alliances: A Path to Advancing Women's Rights in Afghanistan

11th September, 2024

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Since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, the efforts of international organizations, in collaboration with local stakeholders, have proven ineffective in achieving desired outcomes. Recognizing the urgent need to address the denial of women's rights to higher education, employment, and access to public spaces, it is essential to formulate novel ideas and approaches supported by a cohesive strategy. It has never been more crucial to foster collaboration among Central Asian countries and establish a common approach to assisting Afghan women. This entails developing a regionally driven strategy through enhanced ties between Western countries and Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors to seek viable solutions.

Thus, the research question of the paper is: "How can regional collaboration between Western countries and Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors be effectively fostered to address the denial of women's rights in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and achieve desired outcomes in higher education, employment, and access to public spaces for Afghan women?" For example, the obligations outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and further elaborated by the Committee on the Elimination on the Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provide a framework for protecting women's rights. Although Afghanistan is a party to core UN treaties, it is widely agreed by experts and scholars¹⁹⁵, that the

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country is continuously violating many of those core rights of women, including CEDAW. While the general recommendations help clarify the obligations, Afghanistan's non-compliance persists. *Despite the significance of CEDAW in safeguarding women's rights, its potential is diminished by various shortcomings that prevent Afghan women from benefiting from the intended protections.*

Although these obligations are not legally binding, they carry authority and provide *strong recommendations* for Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's disregard for these obligations resulted in violations, compounded by the absence of robust enforcement or sanction mechanisms hindering Afghan women from asserting their rights.

Additionally, other UN mechanisms, such as the Special Rapporteurs, also contribute to the protection of Afghan women rights. The Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Afghanistan focuses¹⁹⁶ specifically on harmful practices and the situation of women conducting visits to the country and engaging with local stakeholders¹⁹⁷.

While these bodies have the potential to offer legal and social protection, their effectiveness is limited. Their operations primarily revolve around gathering information and issuing statements, *often falling short of providing adequate legal protection due to enforcement issues and the lack of effective sanction mechanisms*¹⁹⁸.

Why are still there many shortcomings in helping Afghan women to get access to education, work and basic human rights?

¹⁹⁵ CEDAW Committee. (n.d.). Gender persecution: Institutionalized violations of women's human rights in Afghanistan.

¹⁹⁶ Relief Web. Situation of human rights in Afghanistan: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan (advance edited version).

<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/situation-human-rights-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-afghanistan-advance-edited-version>

¹⁹⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.). Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-afghanistan>

¹⁹⁸ Qazi Zada, S. (2021). Legislative, institutional and policy reforms to combat violence against women in Afghanistan. *Indian Journal of International Law*, 59, 257–283.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40901-020-00116-x>

Despite large organizations' active engagement in reporting, organising conferences, and statements, progress remains elusive due in part to the Taliban's entrenched resistance to change.

Supposedly, the following several reasons contributed to the limited effectiveness of policies pursued by these organizations over the past three years:

Funding and support: Most of these organizations are partially or almost entirely funded and supported by Western countries including the United States. However, given the deep-seated scepticism toward Western involvement within the Taliban-led government, the legitimacy and effectiveness of these organizations are called into question. The Taliban and their supporters view such organizations with distrust, rejecting their interventions as unwelcome interference.

Cultural and ideological differences: Afghanistan has its unique culture, history with a strong religious component attached. The Taliban's decisions over this specific issue are generally based on their *specific* interpretations of Islam that are significantly divergent from the Western conceptions of women's rights. These cultural and ideological disparities might potentially pose significant barriers to mutual understanding and collaboration between Western countries and the Taliban.

Lack of direct influence [talks]: Despite substantial efforts and resources invested by a swathe of international organizations and human rights forums, the lack of direct political engagement and certain leverage over the present government remains obvious. As the Taliban's political and military grip over Afghanistan have been significantly strengthening over time, it is becoming seemingly challenging for the international community to apply coercive or direct pressure on Taliban them to protect women's rights. Additionally, the traditional tribal setup, particularly the centuries-old Pashtun tradition of convening local Jirgas, plays a significant role in decision-making processes. These Jirgas often operate independently of government directives, including those related to internal and domestic disputes, as well as women's rights. Their decisions may not align with official government policies, further complicating efforts to enforce and protect women's rights in Afghanistan.

Diminished international support: The U.S. hasty withdrawal and Taliban's subsequent takeover of power in 2021, prompted some countries to scale back or suspend their aid and support to Afghanistan. In addition, the limited international support and resources further undermined efforts to protect women and promote equality.

Lack of common strategy and methods: Many Afghan watchers agree¹⁹⁹ that a lack of consensus and strategy among organizations for Afghanistan-related issues as well as methodology have been a principal impediment for the progress in addressing women issue in Afghanistan. Also, the absence of a cohesive approach hampers collective action and coordination.

Despite the formidable challenges posed by the complex political landscape, cultural disparities, limited influence, and waning international support, alternative approaches hold promise. The Taliban's skepticism toward existing methodologies underscores the need for innovative strategies that transcend conventional tactics, such as reframing the discourse to move beyond vilification and fostering trust-building measures tailored to address the unique context of Afghanistan.

New vision needed

A new vision must be forged to advance women's rights in Afghanistan, incorporating strategic initiatives tailored to the complex socio-political landscape of the region:

Engagement with Neighbouring Countries: Women's rights organizations and forums should develop their collaboration with neighbouring countries bordering Afghanistan. Leveraging the existing cooperative relationships and pragmatic approaches of regional actors towards Afghanistan could prompt the Taliban to consider their views and proposals regarding women's rights. Additionally, these countries hold significant economic and political leverages towards Taliban, enabling them to promote women's participation in society through various economic assistance and trade agreements.

¹⁹⁹ United States Institute of Peace. (2015). Women's leadership roles in Afghanistan [PDF]. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR380-Women-s-Leadership-Roles-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

Local-Level Empowerment: Efforts to bolster women's rights should extend to grassroots engagement within Afghan communities. Civil society organisations can implement educational programs, training, and skill-building opportunities to empower women and foster leadership development. Strengthening women's position in society at the local level could catalyse attitudinal changes towards women's rights. Successful programs from other contexts offer valuable insights for Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, community-based education and vocational training by the *Baluchistan Education Foundation* can be adapted for Afghanistan with mobile schools or local centres offering similar services tailored to local needs.

Bangladesh's *Grameen Bank* model of microfinance, which provides small loans to women for starting businesses, could be implemented in Afghanistan to support women entrepreneurs.

Ethiopia's *Health Extension Program*, which trains local women as health workers, could be adapted to improve healthcare access in Afghanistan by training Afghan women as community health educators.

India's *Jagori* offers legal aid to women facing violence. Afghanistan could benefit from similar local resource centres providing legal support and advocacy.

Community-based initiatives like Nigeria's *Girls Education Project* involve local leaders to promote education. Involving Afghan community and religious leaders could help overcome cultural barriers and support women's education and rights. Engaging local communities, partnering with NGOs, and tailoring programs to local contexts will be crucial for success in Afghanistan.

Respect for Local Culture and Traditions: To garner support from the Taliban, it is important to frame discussions on women's rights in the context of local culture and traditions. Using religious and cultural arguments to demonstrate for the compatibility of women's rights with Islamic teachings can help overcome resistance. For example, the General Secretariat of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has already voiced concern over the Taliban's policies to ban women education and visited Afghanistan to check the situation of women's rights.

Development: knowledgeable experts about this issue widely agree upon despite the lack of infrastructure for online education in Afghanistan²⁰⁰, opportunities exist to facilitate women's access to education through scholarships. The regional countries could collaborate to establish educational facilities and scholarship programs in bordering cities, enabling Afghan women to pursue academic opportunities.

In light of evolving dynamics, there is a growing recognition that neighbouring countries including Uzbekistan are believed to adapt to the circumstances in Afghanistan to engage with a broader spectrum of stakeholders within the country. This entails reaching out to minority religious and ethnic groups, women, and other stakeholders, moving beyond exclusive focus on the Taliban. Emphasizing the urgency of resolving immediate risks regarding water and security challenges underscores the need for this strategic shift.

Addressing the Taliban's scepticism towards American and other Western civil society organizations requires a comprehensive approach. Collaboration with neighbouring countries, local-level engagement, and consideration of local culture are essential elements in laying the groundwork for constructive dialogue and positive changes in Afghanistan.

“A glimpse of light”

Presently, the Taliban experiences internal ideological splits²⁰¹. revealing contrasting perspectives on women's rights within the movement. On one hand, adherents, including the movement's leader Haibatullah Akhundzada, support strict restrictions on women's rights, similar to those imposed during the Taliban's previous rule. These individuals often adhere to maintain too conservative views regarding women's role in society. On the other hand, pragmatists within the Taliban recognize

²⁰⁰ Mukhammedova, A. (2024, May 17). Last month I had an online meeting with an extraordinary Afghan woman who exemplifies the true spirit of Afghan women - strong, determined, knowledgeable, and free [Status update]. Facebook.

https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1013599086764996&id=100043447415486&mibextid=WC7FNe&rpid=FvQ2RnKjzhcovUDU

²⁰¹ Ahmadzai, A. (2023, April 13). Will the Taliban revolt against its leadership? Foreign Policy in Focus. <https://fpif.org/will-the-taliban-revolt-against-its-leadership/>

the need to address women's rights within the framework of Sharia (Islamic law) norms acknowledging that there is room for limited advancements in women's rights – access to education and healthcare – while still adhering to their interpretation of Islamic principles.

The existence of the ideological divergence appears to provide a glimmer of hope for advancing women's rights in Afghanistan through an engagement with pragmatists within Taliban, fostering dialogue and seeking compromises that align with both international human rights standards and their interpretation of Sharia law. By involving the right actors and adopting a nuanced approach, there is a possibility of achieving tangible results in promoting and protecting women's rights in collaboration with the Taliban.

Conclusion

The prohibition of women from participating in education and the workforce in Afghanistan comes with significant repercussions. This exclusion is poised to have severe impacts on upcoming generations. In the near to medium future, these directives are anticipated to lead to the withdrawal of assistance, deepening poverty, and exacerbating the nation's economic decline. Although additional research is necessary to quantify the implications of these restrictions on women working and pursuing secondary education, there is a unanimous agreement that these regulations violate women's rights, undermine the country's welfare, and must be promptly revoked.

Now, more than ever, Afghanistan stands in urgent need of substantial international support, a vital lifeline that can only be guaranteed through the moderation of its current hardline policies. The escalating grip of the Taliban, coupled with the historical significance of tribal structures like the Jirgas in decision-making processes, underscores the complexity of the situation. In order to protect and advance women's rights, ensure access to healthcare, and foster a more inclusive society, it is imperative for Afghanistan to embrace a more moderate and inclusive approach.

International cooperation and support are crucial in this endeavor. By encouraging dialogue, promoting education, and advocating for human rights, the global community can help steer Afghanistan towards a path of progress and stability.

It is through collaborative efforts, diplomatic engagement, and a shared commitment to fundamental freedoms that the international community can play a pivotal role in shaping a more hopeful future for Afghanistan, one that upholds the rights and dignity of all its citizens, particularly its women and marginalized populations. In this critical juncture, the call for moderation and international solidarity resonates more strongly than ever as a beacon of hope amidst the challenges faced by Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding past setbacks encountered by international organizations, a shift in strategy presents renewed prospects for influencing the trajectory of women's rights in Afghanistan. Collaborating with neighbouring countries offers a pragmatic and culturally attuned approach to engage with the Taliban and address their scepticism. By leveraging economic, political, and cultural connections, organizations can exert influence and advocate for the rights of Afghan women. Additionally, initiatives at the local level that empower women within Afghan communities can contribute to enduring societal transformations. While the road ahead may be challenging, a recalibrated approach holds the potential to effect substantial change in the landscape of women's rights in Afghanistan. The crucial question remains: Will the international community seize this opportunity to forge a more effective and united front in support of Afghan women?



SOCIETY: COMMENTARIES

THE TALIBAN AND LITERACY: GENUINE EFFORT OR IMAGE-BUILDING STRATEGY?

11th November, 2024

Aziza Mukhamedova, Senior Research Fellow (IAIS, CASAS)

Recently, the Taliban government has appeared to ramp up promotions addressing literacy measures among population. The Ministry of Education states²⁰² that over 4,000 literacy classes have been established across the country in the current academic year alone. The ministry further reports that last year, it successfully set up more than 9,000 similar classes²⁰³, extending educational opportunities to tens of thousands of Afghans.

Ministry of Education spokesperson Mansoor Ahmad Hamza noted that in 2023²⁰⁴, the number of new literacy courses reached 4,583, with nearly 86,000 people actively participating in these learning programs. A year ago, the Ministry announced comparable achievements, citing the creation of over 9,000 classes attended by more than 49,000 students²⁰⁵.

However, despite these ambitious claims, several critical questions make it challenging to fully evaluate the efficacy and truthfulness of these initiatives. For one, it remains unclear whether these programs include girls and women, whose rights to education in Afghanistan are severely restricted. There are also doubts about the accuracy of the data provided, as no independent sources outside the Taliban's official channels have confirmed the establishment of this many classes. In a climate of

* Published: Mukhammedova, A. (2024, November 11). *The Taliban and literacy: Genuine effort or image-building strategy*. Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS).

<https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/the-taliban-and-literacy-genuine-effort-or-image-building-strategy/>

²⁰² Tolo News. (2024, October 30). Over 4,000 literacy classes established across the country this year. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-191426>

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

restricted access to independent information, it is difficult to verify these figures and assess their transparency.

Nevertheless, despite these uncertainties, two potentially positive aspects of the Taliban's current policy emerge. First, the fact that literacy is gaining prominence as a government priority indicates a possible shift in their policy focus. Based on their official statements, it is evident that the Taliban is actively working to enhance the country's educational system and increase literacy rates. In turn, this could be a constructive step towards Afghanistan's long-term development, where literacy and basic education play essential roles in fostering economic growth and social stability.

Second, should the reported figures be partially exaggerated or inaccurate, their dissemination still suggests an effort by the Taliban to cultivate a more favourable image on the global stage. Spreading information about such initiatives may indicate a willingness to acknowledge the significance of international standards in human rights and education. Essentially, this could imply that the Taliban recognizes that, to engage sustainably with the global community, it must respect not only traditional Islamic norms but also values accepted in other countries. Such approach may be part of a strategy to legitimize their rule and gradually establish a more positive reputation worldwide.

In sum, although there are various concerns about the credibility and accessibility of information, the Taliban's claims regarding literacy improvements highlight some potentially positive trends in their governance. Enhancing literacy and advancing the educational system could represent meaningful steps toward Afghanistan's growth and stability, as well as reflect a willingness to adapt to and recognize international norms.

ECONOMIC, TRADE, INFRASTRUCTURE

THE MYTH OF THE TRANS-AFGHAN CORRIDOR

2nd June, 2025

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By many experts, the implementation of Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar railway, known as a Trans-Afghan corridor, is believed to be an important link connecting Central and South Asian regions. This project is ultimately expected to provide Central Asian countries with an access to Pakistan’s seaports of Gwadar and Karachi. Conversely, it will also open pathways for South Asian nations to enter the markets of Central Asia, Russia, and, eventually to Europe. Steps have already been taken toward the realization of this initiative. For example, the 75-km Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif railway line²⁰⁷, which constitutes part of the broader project, has been operational since 2011. Since 2023, a coordination office for the project has been functioning in Tashkent²⁰⁸. Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan continue to maintain the issue high on the agenda, both in trilateral and international formats, thereby elevating the project to the status of one of the region’s most prominent initiatives.

Despite being conscious about the complexity of this project’s implementation, Uzbekistan is eagerly pursuing it. Tashkent is thought to be more concerned about the completion of this project not because it provides Uzbekistan with a shorter possible rout to the world oceans but, the greater involvement of Tashkent in the project might

* Published: Gafarov, I., & Boltaev, H. (2025, June 2). *The myth of the Trans-Afghan Corridor. The Asia Today*. <https://theasiatoday.org/essays/the-myth-of-the-trans-afghan-corridor/>

²⁰⁶ PhD in Political Science, Political Analyst at Center for Progressive Reforms, Senior Lecturer at UWED

²⁰⁷ News Central Asia. (2024, March 4). Reconstruction of this 75km railway track will buttress Afghanistan’s integration with the Middle Corridor.

<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2024/03/04/reconstruction-of-this-75km-railway-track-will-buttress-afghanistans-integration-with-the-middle-corridor/>

²⁰⁸ Kun.uz. (2023, December 27). Construction of Trans-Afghan Railway to be accelerated. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/12/27/construction-of-trans-afghan-railway-to-be-accelerated>

give it a serendipitous possibility for achieving the concept of “Afghanistan is a part of Central Asia”²⁰⁹. That is, this project provides Tashkent with a huge platform for greater trade, financial and human-to-human collaboration with Afghanistan, specifically its northernmost regions.

The Legal Status of Afghanistan

For so long, Afghanistan’s instability has been the primary reason as to why the construction of the railway has not been completed. Today, the Taliban has succeeded in asserting control over the country though, Afghanistan’s lack of international recognition poses significant challenges to its participation in global projects that require legal accountability. Moreover, the continued operation of terrorist cells such as ISKP and al-Qaeda on Afghan territory raises concerns among potential stakeholders. In addition, the Taliban’s alleged connections with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan undermine trust in Afghanistan from both Central and South Asian states.

The Durand Line

Under current conditions, the Trans-Afghan Corridor appears feasible only in the limited format of the Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul route. Further expansion of the corridor seems increasingly problematic due to enduring tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ongoing border conflicts between the two sides have effectively placed them in a quasi-military standoff. Periodic closures of cross-border trade points further jeopardize the development of regional commerce. According to reports, in April, Pakistan deported over 80,000 Afghans²¹⁰, thereby exacerbating the socio-economic strain on Afghanistan’s already fragile economy. Such developments along the Durand Line will undoubtedly have a critical impact on the viability of the corridor’s full implementation.

²⁰⁹ Soltani, M. B. (2024, September 26). Uzbekistan's foreign minister criticizes global inaction on Afghanistan. Tolo News. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-190901>

²¹⁰ Deutsche Welle. (2025, August 4). Pakistan steps up deportations of Afghan refugees. <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-steps-up-deportations-of-afghan-refugees/a-72175041>

The Balochistan Factor

Even in the event of successful diplomatic efforts and the resolution of the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the issue of Baloch separatism – led by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which is designated as a terrorist organization in several countries – remains difficult to overlook. The seaports that Central Asian states seek access to, namely Gwadar and Karachi, are located in Pakistan's Balochistan province, casting doubt on the feasibility of regional ambitions.

Large-scale infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing internal connectivity in Pakistan are often met with hostility by the Baloch population, as such developments are perceived to increase Islamabad's power and mobility, particularly during critical situations. Likely for this reason, the BLA has targeted railway lines and instilled fear among the authorities of both Pakistan and China regarding the future of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is designed to link China's Xinjiang province with Pakistan's maritime outlets on the Indian Ocean.

The coordinated railway bombings in March of this year serve as a stark illustration of this threat²¹¹. Furthermore, on April 13, BLA militants attacked and killed eight Pakistani nationals on Iranian territory, a development that risks undermining bilateral trust. Pakistani officials suspect Indian involvement in the BLA's operations, arguing that India might benefit strategically from destabilizing Pakistan and thereby weakening Islamabad's regional standing. New Delhi, however, categorically denies all such accusations²¹².

Over the past year alone, the Baloch have carried out more than 150 attacks²¹³, many of which have primarily targeted Chinese nationals. This poses a significant threat

²¹¹ The Conversation. (2025, March 14). Who are the Baloch Liberation Army? Pakistan train hijacking was fuelled by decades of neglect and violence. <https://theconversation.com/who-are-the-baloch-liberation-army-pakistan-train-hijacking-was-fuelled-by-decades-of-neglect-and-violence-252120>

²¹² Times of India. (2025, March 16). Government trashes Pakistan bids to pin Baloch attack on India, rake up J&K at UN. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/government-trashes-pakistan-bids-to-pin-baloch-attack-on-india-rake-up-jk-at-un/articleshow/119057907.cms>

²¹³ The Conversation. (2025, March 14). Who are the Baloch Liberation Army? Pakistan train hijacking was fuelled by decades of neglect and violence. <https://theconversation.com/who-are-the-baloch-liberation-army-pakistan-train-hijacking-was-fuelled-by-decades-of-neglect-and-violence-252120>

not only to China's CPEC initiative but also to the aspirations of Central Asian countries seeking to realize the Trans-Afghan Corridor. A legitimate concern arises: if a powerful global actor like China – with substantial influence on the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean – is struggling to ensure the security of its infrastructure, how can the comparatively less influential Central Asian countries expect to implement their own strategic projects successfully? All of these factors collectively cast serious doubt over the future viability of the Trans-Afghan Corridor.

New Delhi's Perspective

The Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Corridor, often framed as a key component of the broader agenda to enhance connectivity between Central and South Asia, falls short of fully embodying this vision due to the absence of participation from South Asia's largest state – India. Instead, India has focused on developing an alternative route, the North–South Corridor, which utilizes Iran's Chabahar Port²¹⁴, thereby redirecting New Delhi's strategic attention toward Iran rather than Pakistan. As a result, India is pursuing a model of connectivity in which South Asia links to Central Asia indirectly, via the Middle East. This strategic divergence weakens the centrality of the Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar railway in regional discourse and complicates the realization of the overarching vision of Central–South Asian interconnectivity.

Iran's Aspiration

Iran's perspective closely aligns with India's strategic approach, as the Indian-led corridor provides Tehran with significant geopolitical advantages and influence in interregional dialogue. In addition, the development of the Chabahar Port under India's initiative enhances Iran's international image as a pivotal player in the grand connectivity projects of the Eurasian supercontinent. Furthermore, the potential removal of sanctions on Chabahar offers Tehran a rare opportunity to ease its broader economic and diplomatic isolation from the West. For these reasons, Iran is highly likely

²¹⁴ Caspian News. (2025, February 12). Indian official stresses importance of Iran's Chabahar port. <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/indian-official-stresses-importance-of-irans-chabahar-port-2025-2-12-0/>

to continue supporting India's initiative as a means of pursuing both strategic influence and economic reintegration.

Russia's Ambiguity

Under the constraints of international sanctions, Russia generally supports all available routes and alternatives for accessing the markets of South Asia. Both Pakistan and India hold strategic value for Moscow as key destinations for Russian oil and gas exports. While Russia expresses its support for the Trans-Afghan Corridor, it is also an active participant in the North–South Transport Corridor. However, Russia's interest in these initiatives appears to be predominantly economic. The development of connectivity corridors between Central and South Asia may also carry significant geopolitical implications, potentially offering Central Asian states new tools for diversifying the regional balance of power. Ultimately, the countries of the region could secure political and diplomatic backing from both India and Pakistan – nuclear powers in their own right. In such a context, Moscow may reconsider its current cautious posture and pursue full-fledged engagement in these projects.

Beijing's Prudence

China pursues a clearly defined strategy for the expansion of global and Eurasian transport corridors under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which encompasses multiple routes rather than a single one. The Trans-Afghan Corridor could potentially be incorporated into this extensive initiative, particularly as it may link in the future with the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway and CPEC. If realized, the Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar railway would thus be rebranded as a segment of the BRI. Nevertheless, China does not rely on this corridor for access to the Indian Ocean, as it already possesses direct connectivity via CPEC. While Beijing does not oppose the Trans-Afghan initiative and sees it as a viable alternative, it remains unenthusiastic about assuming the role of primary financial sponsor, demonstrating a cautious and calculated approach.

Western Boycott

The idea of reconnecting Central and South Asia was originally championed by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her address in India²¹⁵. During their military presence in Afghanistan, the United States and its Western allies viewed the Trans-Afghan Corridor with significant enthusiasm. However, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the ensuing boycott of the country led to the loss of major financial donors, particularly the United States. At present, Qatar has emerged as a key backer of the initiative, attempting to fill the void left by Washington²¹⁶. Nonetheless, Qatar lacks the structural capacity to regulate international transportation systems. Its participation in the corridor is more likely aimed at enhancing its international image and diplomatic prestige rather than exercising real strategic influence.

There are, however, emerging signs of a potential re-engagement by the United States in Afghanistan-related projects. The visits of Zalmay Khalilzad and Adam Boehler to Kabul in March of this year may mark the early stages of direct dialogue between Washington and the Taliban²¹⁷, hinting at the possibility of future cooperation. If sustained, such interaction could pave the way for renewed American involvement in regional connectivity initiatives, including the Trans-Afghan Corridor. This development, while still tentative, may significantly alter the geopolitical calculus surrounding the project.

The Central Asian Dilemma

Central Asian countries lack a unified stance on the development of the Trans-Afghan Corridor. While Uzbekistan is more inclined toward constructing the railway line Termiz–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar, Kazakhstan considers alternative routes

²¹⁵ U.S. Department of State. (2011, July). <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168840.htm>

²¹⁶ Pro Reforms. (n.d.). Qatar's critical contribution to the success of the Trans-Afghan rail link. <https://proreforms.uz/publications/qatars-critical-contribution-to-the-success-of-the-trans-afghan-rail-link-332>

²¹⁷ BBC News. (2025, March 21). Taliban frees US man held in Afghanistan for two years. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgwlzkwmjzo>

into Afghanistan, including those passing through Turkmenistan²¹⁸. For Astana, relying solely on Uzbekistan for access to Afghanistan may carry political implications. In pursuit of regional leadership, Kazakhstan appears interested in diversifying its corridors rather than becoming overly dependent on Uzbekistan's foreign trade policy. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan may derive greater economic benefit from the North-South Corridor than from the Trans-Afghan route, given its established connectivity with Iran and the Persian Gulf.

As for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, they have shown limited enthusiasm for the Trans-Afghan project. Their direct borders with China make them more likely to favor CPEC as a viable route to maritime ports. This divergence of interests within the region hinders the formulation of a coherent strategy and complicates the resolution of financing issues. The lack of regional consensus threatens to fragment efforts, reducing the momentum and viability of the Trans-Afghan initiative as a collective endeavor.

Uzbekistan's Pragmatism

Uzbekistan is the most proactive country in advancing the idea of the Trans-Afghan Corridor. Tashkent has undertaken considerable efforts in this direction, having already completed the Termiz-Mazar-i-Sharif railway line. Uzbekistan approaches the project with pragmatic realism, fully aware of the many obstacles to its realization. The railway is seen not merely as a route to ocean access but also as a strategic component of Uzbekistan's broader policy toward Afghanistan. Tashkent consistently promotes the notion that Afghanistan is an integral part of Central Asia. By linking Afghanistan to the region through rail and road infrastructure, Uzbekistan envisions the country as a potential close economic partner, which could contribute to regional security and foster pragmatic economic trust between neighbors. Ultimately, however, Uzbekistan may, for the time being, prioritize access to seaports via Iran, recognizing it as the more immediate and feasible alternative. Nevertheless, the Trans-Afghan Corridor will remain on Tashkent's strategic agenda, particularly as a tool to shape its policy approach

²¹⁸ Astana Times. (2024, October). Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan to build Trans-Afghan corridor. <https://astanatimes.com/2024/10/kazakhstan-turkmenistan-to-build-trans-afghan-corridor/>

toward Afghanistan. The project serves both as a symbol of long-term regional integration and as a practical instrument of Uzbekistan's regional engagement.

Conclusion: Islamic Gateways

The relevance or irrelevance of the Trans-Afghan Corridor largely revolves around three Islamic countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Their bilateral relations and foreign policy decisions play a defining role in the fate of the continent's major transport projects. These states serve as critical gateways to Central and South Asia, the Middle East, China, and the Indian Ocean. Beyond their geographic and strategic positions, they are also linked by Islamic statehood and, notably, by varying degrees of isolation or estrangement from the democratic world. Furthermore, the Balochistan issue touches all three, creating a shared challenge that could necessitate coordination or even joint security arrangements. Given their geopolitical proximity, shared values, mutual challenges, and the international image each seeks to project, there is a significant possibility that these nations may pursue a collective understanding to establish order and advance international transport connectivity. Thus, the future of the Trans-Afghan Corridor will likely depend on the ability of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran to forge a cooperative approach rooted in common strategic interests and regional necessity.

MINERALS FOR RECOGNITION: THE TALIBAN'S SHADOW DIPLOMACY

6th June, 2025

Islomkhon Gafarov, Political Analyst (CPR)

Since the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan's mineral and extractive industries have assumed growing strategic importance in the broader context of sustaining the country's fragile economy. The abrupt loss of access to international financial assistance, the freezing of foreign-held assets, and the enforced curtailment of opium poppy cultivation have pushed the Taliban leadership to refocus on domestic resources, particularly the country's vast mineral reserves. Yet, there is little indication that the Taliban intend to pursue full-scale exploitation or large-scale export of these resources in the immediate term. Rather, their approach appears deliberately cautious, treating Afghanistan's natural wealth less as a means of short-term economic gain and more as a tool of political leverage and diplomatic bargaining on the international stage.

Afghanistan's Mineral Wealth

According to estimates by the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the total potential value of Afghanistan's mineral resources exceeds \$1 trillion. More than 1,400 deposits have been identified across all 34 provinces of the country. The Hajigak iron ore deposit alone is believed to contain up to 2 billion metric tons of high-grade ore²¹⁹. Even more significant is the Mes Aynak copper deposit in Logar Province, which holds over 12 million metric tons of copper – resources valued at more than \$50 billion on the global market²²⁰. Particularly noteworthy are the country's substantial lithium reserves,

* Published in: Gafarov, I. (2025, June 6). *Minerals for recognition: The Taliban's shadow diplomacy*. *Geopolitical Monitor*. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/minerals-for-recognition-the-talibans-shadow-diplomacy/>

²¹⁹ Alemara English. (2025, May 28). Hajigak mine: A hidden treasure in the heart of Afghanistan. <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/hajigak-mine-a-hidden-treasure-in-the-heart-of-afghanistan/>

²²⁰ Alemara English. (2025, May 28). Hajigak mine: A hidden treasure in the heart of Afghanistan. <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/hajigak-mine-a-hidden-treasure-in-the-heart-of-afghanistan/>

located primarily in the provinces of Ghazni, Nuristan, and Helmand. Afghanistan also possesses approximately 47 oil wells, with the majority concentrated in the Sar-e Pol, Sheberghan, and Amu Darya basins²²¹.

Official data indicate that the extractive sector has already attracted roughly 10 billion Afghanis (around \$110 million) in domestic investment, in addition to over \$7 billion in foreign direct investment. The mining sector has emerged as a vital source of employment, officially providing jobs for an estimated 150,000 Afghan citizens²²². This endows the industry with not only economic significance but also pronounced social relevance – especially against the backdrop of protracted unemployment and severely limited access to international assistance.

Beyond its economic significance, Afghanistan's mineral and extractive sector is acquiring a clear political dimension. In the context of a rapidly accelerating global transition to low-carbon energy and the growing demand for strategic resources – such as lithium, copper, and rare earth elements²²³ – Afghanistan's geoeconomic importance is on the rise. This potential has drawn the attention of a range of regional and global actors, including China, Russia, Iran, the Central Asian republics, Pakistan, and India

At the same time, the Taliban appear to be leveraging this external interest as a means of advancing their own political objectives. Bilateral engagement in exploration and extraction is often accompanied by negotiations over legal frameworks that, in the long term, may serve as a pathway toward the international recognition of Taliban rule. This may explain the Taliban's apparent reluctance to engage in full-scale exploitation of the sector. No external actor appears to have offered formal recognition in exchange for a comprehensive partnership in developing the fields. However, limited agreements with some foreign stakeholders have begun to emerge, indicating a cautious but strategic approach by the Taliban to align resource diplomacy with political objectives.

²²¹ Afghanistan International. (2024, February 28). <https://www.afintl.com/en/202402284601>

²²² Tolo News. (2024, April 11). <https://tolonews.com/business-188239>

²²³ Geopolitical Monitor. (2023, December 8). A brief history of US-China rare earth rivalry. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/a-brief-history-of-us-china-rare-earth-rivalry/>

External Players in Afghanistan

China. China has emerged as one of the most active external economic actors engaged in Afghanistan's mineral resource sector. The Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC²²⁴) is implementing a 25-year oil extraction agreement in Afghanistan's northern provinces. Simultaneously, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC²²⁵) continues to pursue the long-delayed Mes Aynak copper mining project, one of the country's most significant undeveloped deposits.

Particular attention is being directed toward the development of Afghanistan's lithium reserves. As the global leader in electric vehicle manufacturing and the largest producer and exporter of lithium-ion batteries, China views access to lithium as a critical component of its technological security. In this regard, active negotiations are underway between Chinese companies and Afghan authorities concerning the potential development of several lithium mining sites.

China's deepening involvement in Afghanistan's extractive industries also aligns with Beijing's broader strategy of integrating Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative²²⁶. This could facilitate the creation of new logistical corridors and enhance China's geoeconomic influence across Central and South Asia.

India. India has demonstrated growing interest in importing Afghan copper and iron ore, as well as in potential cooperation in uranium extraction. Against the backdrop of New Delhi's ambition to transform India into the world's third-largest economy and consolidate its status as a global power, the development of the national nuclear sector has assumed strategic importance.

The escalation of the Kashmir crisis in 2025²²⁷, coupled with Pakistan's display of comparable military and technological capabilities, has further reinforced India's

²²⁴ Kabul Now. (2023, January). Taliban signs \$540 million oil deal with China. <https://kabulnow.com/2023/01/taliban-signs-540-million-oil-deal-with-china>

²²⁵ Goal Fore. (2024, July 27). China resumes work at Afghanistan's Mes Aynak copper mine after 16-year delay. <https://news.goalfore.com/detail/69050/china-resumes-work-at-afghanistans-mes-aynak-copper-mine-after-16year-delay.html>

²²⁶ Geopolitical Monitor. China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/tag/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>

²²⁷ Geopolitical Monitor. (2025, May 25). Geopolitics of the Indo-Pakistani four-day war. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/geopolitics-of-the-indo-pakistani-four-day-war/>

determination to enhance its nuclear posture as part of a broader regional deterrence strategy.

In this context, Afghanistan is increasingly viewed as a potential partner in the supply of uranium resources. It is conceivable that, should favorable terms be offered – particularly discounted access to strategic materials such as uranium – India might consider a degree of political rapprochement with the Taliban, possibly extending to partial recognition of their authority. Such a move would not only secure India's access to critical minerals but also provide a geopolitical lever to exert pressure on Pakistan, especially in light of the continued strain in Islamabad-Kabul relations.

Russia. The Russian Federation is exploring avenues to reestablish its presence in Afghanistan's energy sector, particularly in oil and gas exploration and production, with a focus on the country's northern provinces – Sar-e Pul, Balkh, Kunduz, and Baghlan. These regions, historically linked to the Soviet Union, represent potential zones of renewed Russian economic influence. In May 2025, the Russian company Inteko Group signed an agreement with Afghan authorities on joint oil extraction and processing, marking a step toward deeper energy cooperation²²⁸.

Beyond the economic dimension, Russia is pursuing broader geopolitical objectives aimed at reinforcing its influence in Central Asia and neighboring regions amid a shifting balance of power. Moscow's return to Afghanistan's energy sector is thus part of a larger strategic effort to solidify its regional presence and counterbalance the growing involvement of other major powers in the region.

Iran. Iran maintains considerable influence in Afghanistan's western provinces and is positioning itself to play an active role in transport and logistics projects related to the transit of Afghan mineral resources. Tehran is particularly focused on leveraging its transport infrastructure – most notably the port of Chabahar – as a strategic corridor for exporting Afghan raw materials to markets in the Middle East, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Rather than prioritizing direct involvement in resource extraction, Iran's approach centers on controlling key transit routes. This strategy enables Tehran to

²²⁸ Mohammadi, H. (2025, May 18). Russian company signs deal with Taliban to extract oil in Afghanistan. Amu TV. <https://amu.tv/174802/>

expand its economic footprint in the region and strengthen its role within emerging multilateral logistical frameworks. By positioning itself as a critical intermediary in regional trade, Iran seeks to enhance its geopolitical relevance amid evolving patterns of connectivity and commerce.

Pakistan. Pakistan maintains active ties with Afghanistan's southern regions and has shown a marked interest in energy cooperation. Islamabad is particularly focused on the Ab-e-Istada – Ghazni area, which hosts significant reserves of iron ore and coal with substantial industrial value. At the strategic level, Pakistan continues to support participation in two major regional energy initiatives²²⁹ – the TAPI gas pipeline and the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project. These efforts are vital to addressing persistent energy shortages in Pakistan's northern provinces. However, despite its interest in Afghanistan's resource base, Islamabad remains cautious and is also exploring alternative energy import routes. This prudence reflects concerns over the Taliban's unpredictability and the potential for Kabul to leverage energy cooperation as a political tool, possibly imposing conditions or restricting access during periods of bilateral tension.

Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan possesses considerable potential to engage in the joint development of Afghanistan's mineral deposits, including hydrocarbons and non-ferrous metals, particularly copper. Energy cooperation could become a key component of Tashkent's policy in northern Afghanistan – a region historically and culturally linked to Central Asia.

Uzbekistan's advantages in this context are threefold. First, the two countries have extensive experience of cooperation in the energy sector, as Uzbekistan has historically provided Afghanistan with assistance in this domain. This foundation of trust and technical collaboration strengthens prospects for broader resource-based partnerships. Second, given that Afghanistan's extractive industry remains underdeveloped, Kabul can rely on Uzbekistan's logistical and processing capacities – particularly the Ayratom Special Economic Zone in Termez – for mineral processing and

²²⁹ Mohammadi, H. (2025, May 18). Russian company signs deal with Taliban to extract oil in Afghanistan. Amu TV. <https://amu.tv/174802/>

subsequent export through Uzbek territory. Third, Uzbekistan is well-positioned to help build Afghanistan's human capital by training specialists such as geologists, engineers, and energy experts, while also supplying its own technical and engineering support to facilitate exploration and production efforts.

Conclusion

The extractive sector has emerged as one of Afghanistan's primary sources of revenue in the current phase of its development. Beyond its economic significance, it also carries important social dimensions, particularly through the creation of employment opportunities. Afghanistan's abundant mineral wealth – especially in lithium, copper, and uranium – has attracted considerable interest from both regional and global actors.

However, the Taliban authorities have shown a measured and strategic approach to fully exploiting these resources. It appears that the mineral sector is being treated not merely as a source of income, but as a geopolitical tool in pursuit of international recognition. To date, no single foreign actor has been granted exclusive access or preferential contracts in the sector. This suggests that the Taliban leadership may be seeking more than financial returns – they seem intent on leveraging mineral concessions for political dividends. And the involvement of multiple international actors in the sector indicates that Kabul is seeking not the recognition of a single power, but rather broad-based legitimacy from a diverse array of states.

ECONOMICS AND INFRASTRUCTURE: COMMENTARIES

WHY IS THE CROSS-BORDER ECONOMIC ACTIVITY CRUCIAL FOR BOTH?

4th July, 2025

Fayoziddin Bakhridinov, Research Assistant (IAIS)

It is becoming increasingly clear that Tashkent is taking a more pragmatic approach in its relations with war-torn, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which remains unrecognized by much of the international community. This pragmatism is most evident in the growing economic and social ties between the border regions. Uzbekistan sees Afghanistan not only as a key player in regional security but also as a potential strategic transit corridor that could provide access to South Asian markets in the future. Furthermore, Afghanistan may serve as a promising market for Uzbekistan's products and goods. For this reason, Tashkent is attempting to prioritize economic interests even against the backdrop of ongoing challenges from Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan, which has openly embraced the stance that "Afghanistan is an integral part of Central Asia", seeks to gain significant benefits through broader cooperation in areas such as transboundary water resources, counterterrorism, transportation connectivity, and trade integration. Additionally, in his April 1, 2024 interview, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasized²³⁰ that stabilizing Afghanistan is in the shared interest of both Central Asia and the European Union. The Taliban administration received this message warmly, expressing its intention to pursue a policy based on "sincere neighborhood and mutual interests" with Uzbekistan - a clear example of the current diplomatic momentum.

* Published: Bakhridinov, F. (2025, July 4). *Why is the cross-border economic activity crucial for both?* Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS). <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/why-is-the-cross-border-economic-activity-crucial-for-both/>

²³⁰ Hakimi, B. A. (2022, July 30). Pakistan reaffirms support for 'regional connectivity, infrastructure'. Tolo News. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-179186>

Therefore, Tashkent's pragmatism appears to be rooted in the idea that, if ideological considerations can temporarily be set aside, broad economic cooperation with Taliban-led Afghanistan could lead to deep integration between the two neighbors. A practical step in realizing this vision was the opening of the Termez International Trade Center in Surkhandarya in 2022, which has significantly boosted freight traffic between the two countries. It's worth noting that in 2024, the total volume of trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan reached \$1.1 billion²³¹, of which over \$1 billion consisted of Uzbek exports to Afghanistan. In March, both nations agreed to increase this trade volume to \$3 billion²³², indicating that the majority of bilateral trade is driven by Uzbekistan's exports²³³.

However, in June 2025, local media and other sources reported that the Taliban's so-called "morality police" banned Afghan women under the age of 40 from working in the Termez Free Economic Zone²³⁴. The ban, reportedly lacking clear legal basis, especially targeted women working without a male guardian ("mahram"). As a result, the purchasing power within the zone might in future see substantial decline, should not only women entrepreneurs but also female consumers become scarce. Naturally, such measures pose a serious risk to bilateral trade relations and Tashkent's strategy of fostering regional stability through economic engagement.

While Uzbekistan's pragmatic approach to Afghanistan is driven by economic interests and the ambition to strengthen its regional transit role, maintaining this approach will depend heavily on how the Taliban's ideological stance evolves in future. If the ideology continues gaining dominance in the country, it could not only weaken Uzbekistan-Afghanistan relations but also undermine broader regional integration efforts that Tashkent is pursuing today.

²³¹ Jamestown Foundation. (2025, May 21). Uzbekistan seeks stronger cooperation with Afghanistan. <https://jamestown.org/uzbekistan-seeks-stronger-cooperation-with-afghanistan/>

²³² Tashkent Times. (2025, March 3). Uzbekistan and Afghanistan vow to bring two-way trade to \$3 billion. Tashkent Times. <https://tashkenttimes.uz/national/14779-uzbekistan-and-afghanistan-vow-to-bring-two-way-trade-to-3-billion>

²³³ Azzam, M. A. (2025, March 13). Afghanistan-Uzbekistan relations: A new era of economic cooperation. Tolo News. <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-193429>

²³⁴ Sirat, S. (2025, June 13). Taliban bar women under 40 from Afghan-Uzbek border market, traders say. Amu TV. <https://amu.tv/180110/>

IS THE TRANS-AFGHAN CORRIDOR UZBEKISTAN'S STRATEGIC CHOICE?

22nd July, 2025

Mirjalol Mutrozaev, Research Assistant (IAIS)

The meeting of the foreign ministers of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan held in Kabul on July 17, 2025, marks an important turning point on the path of regional infrastructure **development**²³⁵. At the meeting, a trilateral agreement was signed on the preparation of a feasibility study for the Trans-Afghan railway. This event is not merely a logistical project, but rather the beginning of a new phase in Uzbekistan's foreign policy based on geoeconomic pragmatism and strategic reality.

Uzbekistan's interest in the Trans-Afghan railway project has, in fact, been revived against the backdrop of recent global and regional geopolitical changes. In recent years, Uzbekistan had been actively promoting plans to access South Asia through Iran's Chabahar port. This route was considered promising both in terms of regional diversification and for deepening direct economic ties with India. However, the geopolitical developments of recent months particularly the clashes between Iran and Israel, the worsening of Iran's relations with Western countries, and India's insufficient support for Iran during this process have begun to complicate the Chabahar access project. Moreover, signs of warming ties between China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan became evident during their trilateral meeting in Beijing on May 21 of this year. As a result of these factors, Pakistan's Gwadar and Karachi ports are increasingly being seen as a more stable and reliable alternative. In particular, the opening of a short and cost-effective route to these ports via the Trans-Afghan railway may serve as a solid basis for defining a new strategic direction for Uzbekistan's foreign trade. In addition, the

* Published : Murtozaev, M. (2025, July 22). *Is the Trans-Afghan Corridor Uzbekistan's strategic choice?* Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS). <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/is-the-trans-afghan-corridor-uzbekistans-strategic-choice/>

²³⁵ Tolo News. (2025, July 17). Kabul meeting highlights regional cooperation, Trans-Afghan Railway. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-195054>

Pakistani route may offer such advantages as economic efficiency, reduced transit time, and lower logistics costs. Additionally, the Pakistani route may also offer advantages such as economic efficiency, reduced transit time, and lower logistics costs.

The foundations of this railway agreement can be viewed in several stages:

First, despite existing security concerns regarding the Trans-Afghan railway, it is seen as a relatively shorter, more quickly implementable route that currently enjoys political will. The presence of stable dialogue between Tashkent and the current Afghan government is contributing to mutual interests between the two sides. Closer energy and transport ties with Pakistan could further elevate the project to a strategic **level**²³⁶.

Second, at a time when the relevance of traditional trade routes in the north is gradually diminishing, and the route through Iran via the Caspian Sea requires large-scale infrastructure investments, the Trans-Afghan transport corridor is becoming a new geoeconomic pivot for the entire Central Asian region. This project is emerging not only as a freight transportation system but also as a key to regional integration, energy diplomacy, and export strategy. The railway also opens the **opportunity** to transmit electricity through Afghanistan to South Asia²³⁷. In particular, the implementation of the CASA-1000 project could allow Uzbekistan and neighboring countries to increase export volumes and strengthen their presence in the energy market. Moreover, direct access to the ports of Gwadar and Karachi would enable Uzbekistan to establish stable links with strategic markets along the Indian Ocean. Additionally, this corridor would open pathways to the energy and investment projects of Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. This would lead not only to economic cooperation but also usher in a new phase of political and diplomatic engagement. From this perspective, the agreement signed in Kabul is not merely an infrastructure deal, but a forward-looking strategic political choice that integrates multi-layered interests.

²³⁶ Muwahed, M. (2025, July 18). Afghanistan hosts trilateral consultation with Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Tolo News. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-195064>

²³⁷ Saidov, B. [@bakhtiyor_saidov]. (2025, July 15). Announcement about Afghanistan-Uzbekistan cooperation [Post]. Telegram. https://t.me/bakhtiyor_saidov/2945

Third, the Trans-Afghan railway is not only a transport project, but a geoeconomic route that ensures Uzbekistan's access to the markets of South Asia, India, and the Persian Gulf. Through this route, cargo delivery time will be reduced from 35 days to 5-7 days, and container **costs** will decrease from \$900 to \$286²³⁸. Under such conditions, Uzbekistan can make its export-import operations more competitive and stable. Financial and political support for the project is also crucial. China's "Belt and Road" initiative, Russia's transit diplomacy, and Pakistan's port policy could be directly integrated into this project. This aligns with Uzbekistan's "multi-vector" foreign policy principle.

Fourth, at the Kabul meeting, the Uzbek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bakhtiyor Saidov, held talks with Afghanistan's Prime Minister Mullah Hasan Akhund, Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, and Interior Minister Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani - which is evidence of Tashkent's increasingly active foreign policy. These meetings can be seen as efforts to deepen consistent political dialogue with the Afghan government, strengthen economic trust, and build security guarantees. It also reflects the desire to view Afghanistan as an integral part of regional integration. Through this, Uzbekistan is implementing the concept of becoming a transit hub between Central and South Asia and serving as a "bridge" in regional diplomacy²³⁹.

Conclusion.

The Trans-Afghan railway project represents a real geoeconomic transformation in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. This initiative envisions not only transport infrastructure but also the creation of political trust, trade security, and regional balance. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's foreign policy consistently relies on geopolitical pragmatism and the priority of regional stability. Uzbekistan is shaping itself as a normative initiator and a country that defines strategic direction.

²³⁸ EU Reflect. (n.d.). The Trans-Afghan Corridor: A strategic manifestation of President Mirziyoyev's regional doctrine. <https://www.eureflect.com/the-trans-afghan-corridor-a-strategic-manifestation-of-president-mirziyoyevs-regional-doctrine>

²³⁹ Saidov, B. [@bakhtiyor_saidov]. (2025, August 10). Discussion on Trans-Afghan Railway project development [Post]. Telegram. https://t.me/bakhtiyor_saidov/2954

CPEC ON THE THRESHOLD OF CENTRAL ASIA: NEW HORIZONS FOR UZBEKISTAN VIA AFGHANISTAN

22nd July, 2025

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The recent trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in Kabul was a significant event in regional diplomacy. Organized by China, the meeting aimed to reduce tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and promote regional stability and economic cooperation, particularly through the expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan.

The sixth trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan took place on August 20, 2025, in Kabul. This dialogue, institutionalized in 2017, aims to strengthen political trust, coordinate the fight against terrorism, and promote economic integration between the three countries. Pakistani Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and Afghan Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi participated in the talks.

During the meeting, the parties focused on several key aspects. First and foremost, significant progress was made in reducing tensions between Islamabad and Kabul, which had previously faced an increase in militant attacks in Pakistan. China acted as a mediator in this process, hosting an informal meeting in Beijing, which led to improved relations and an agreement to upgrade diplomatic ties to embassy level.

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A key economic achievement of the meeting was an agreement to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan. CPEC is a multi-billion dollar project aimed at connecting China and Pakistan through a network of roads, railways, and energy pipelines. The expansion of the CPEC to Afghanistan is seen as an important step in stimulating trade, transit, and development in the region. The parties also reaffirmed their commitment to deepening cooperation in trade, transit, regional development, health, education, culture, and the fight against drug trafficking.

In the context of regional integration, it is worth noting that Pakistan and Afghanistan previously (in May) agreed on a joint feasibility study for the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (UAP) railway project. This project aims to improve regional connectivity with Central Asia, and Ishaq Dar's visit to Kabul a month before the trilateral meeting was related to the signing of a framework agreement on this project.

Thus, the meeting underscored the three countries' commitment to regional stability, economic development, and joint efforts to combat terrorism, with the expansion of the CPEC to Afghanistan becoming a central element in achieving these goals.

At the same time, the expansion of the CPEC to Afghanistan also has significant implications for Uzbekistan and its relations with Afghanistan. As a landlocked country, Uzbekistan is actively seeking to expand its trade routes and access to seaports. Afghanistan has historically been an important transit corridor for Uzbekistan, connecting it with South Asia and the Middle East.

Afghanistan's accession to the CPEC could provide Uzbekistan with new, more efficient and secure trade routes through Afghanistan and Pakistan to ports on the Arabian Sea, such as Gwadar. This would reduce Uzbekistan's dependence on existing routes and open up new opportunities for exports and imports. The CPEC project, which includes the development of infrastructure such as roads and railways, will contribute to overall regional connectivity, which is in line with Uzbekistan's long-term goals of integrating into regional economic processes and creating transport corridors connecting Central Asia with South Asia.

The aforementioned Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (UAP) railway project is a direct testament to Uzbekistan's desire to deepen ties through Afghanistan. The expansion of the CPEC to Afghanistan could complement and accelerate the implementation of this project, creating synergies for the development of transport infrastructure in the region. The Termez-Mazar-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway, which is part of this project, will significantly reduce the time and cost of freight delivery.

Economic stabilization and development in Afghanistan, stimulated by investments under the CPEC, will create new economic opportunities for the parties. This may include increased bilateral trade, joint investment projects, and the development of border infrastructure.

The impact on Uzbek-Afghan relations will be multifaceted. The expansion of the CPEC and joint infrastructure projects, such as the UAP railway, will inevitably lead to deeper cooperation between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. This will contribute to strengthening political dialogue, exchanging experiences, and jointly addressing regional issues. The economic stabilization of Afghanistan through the CPEC may also contribute to overall security in the region, which is a priority for Uzbekistan. A stable and prosperous Afghanistan reduces the risks associated with cross-border crime, extremism, and drug trafficking, which directly affect Uzbekistan's security. In addition, improved transport connectivity and economic development can help strengthen humanitarian and cultural ties between the two countries, given the presence of a significant Uzbek diaspora in northern Afghanistan.

Thus, the Sixth Trilateral Meeting of Foreign Ministers of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan is an important step towards strengthening regional stability and economic cooperation. The expansion of the CPEC to Afghanistan and the development of the UAP railway project open up new opportunities for all participants, including Uzbekistan. These initiatives not only promote economic development and integration, but also strengthen security and stability in the region, which is a key factor for long-term prosperity. Uzbek-Afghan relations, in turn, will receive a new impetus for development based on common economic interests and the desire for regional stability.

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IAIS remains deeply committed to fostering close cooperation with both internal and external contributors and to nurturing an open, respectful, and collaborative environment for future research and knowledge production.

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