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SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Implications for Central Asia, Europe
and Global Stability

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About the Series 'Neighbourhood Perspectives'

Neighbourhood Perspectives is a paper series on Afghanistan written from the perspective of her neighbouring countries to bring together a mosaic of different perspectives and also highlight the different historic experiences of various actors. Mr. Gafarov wrote the fifth paper in this series which examines the security situation in Afghanistan and its impact on Central and South Asia, the Middle East, Russia, China, and Europe

List of Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
FAF	Free Afghans Front
FDM	Freedom and Democracy Movement
FU	Freedom Uprising
FTT	Free Tigers of Turkistan
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
NATO	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
NFF	National Freedom Front
NIFMA	National Islamic Freedom Movement of Afghanistan
NRF	National Resistance Front
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PF	Patriotic Front
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SRC	Supreme Resistance Council
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
UN	United Nations
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
US/NATO	United States/North Atlantic Treaty Organization
WNFF	Western Nooristan Freedom Front
WU	Wolf Unit

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1 Abstract

This study examines the security situation in Afghanistan and its impact on Central and South Asia, the Middle East, Russia, China, and Europe. The paper provides an overview of the significant events in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, focusing particularly on the situation leading up to the Taliban's return to power. The analysis delves into the ideological foundations of the Taliban, which underpin the state's internal and external policies. The Taliban's ambiguous stance towards various terrorist organizations is explored in depth. Additionally, the paper evaluates the Taliban's interactions with regional and global actors, including Pakistan, Iran, China, India, Russia, the Central Asian countries, and the European Union. The author concludes with pertinent recommendations for the European community on strategies to address the evolving situation in Afghanistan.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

The European side is primarily concerned with issues of

- Radicalization,
- Drug trafficking, and
- Human rights.

Meanwhile, the Taliban has shown interest in

- Accessing the European market through Turkiye.

Especially in areas such as fruits, vegetables, carpets, marble, saffron, and others, where Afghanistan has a competitive advantage. Due to its geographical location, Turkiye can play the role of a connecting link in this context.

2 Introduction

The issue of stability and security in Afghanistan is crucial for maintaining peace in both regional and interregional dialogues and represents one of the most pressing global challenges. According to the theory of the regional security complex (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, the security of one state affects the security of an entire region. Sometimes, the security of certain so-called buffer states, located between regions, can influence the security of two or more regions. Security operates on three levels: national, regional, and global. The situation in Afghanistan is a prime example of how security issues within a country can escalate to regional and global significance. Consequently, this issue remains a high priority for the international community, necessitating thorough monitoring and analysis of ongoing events.

Additionally, the Taliban, based on ideological grounds, could not hand over bin Laden, who held significant influence in the Islamic world. These actions led to the deployment of American forces, followed by NATO forces, into Afghanistan (Maizland, 2023).

Initially, the United States and NATO aimed to eradicate the global terrorism network. However, after toppling the Taliban regime, the US focused on establishing a democratic government in Afghanistan. From 2002 to 2004, a transitional government led by Hamid Karzai was in place. Karzai was elected president for the terms 2004-2009 and 2009-2014. Ashraf Ghani then served as president from 2014 to 2019 and from 2019 to 2021. Both leaders relied heavily on US support and sought to build democratic institutions in the country. However, their administration failed to gain control over the entire nation. The prolonged conflict with the Taliban exhausted Kabul and its allies.

2.1 First Taliban Government

The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan triggered a new civil war in the country, which resulted in the Taliban coming to power. Taliban forces were formed in Pakistan and, according to some reports (Waldman, 2010), were linked to Pakistani intelligence services. From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban controlled Afghanistan, a regime recognized by Pakistan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. The Taliban's close association with terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda deteriorated Afghanistan's image in the eyes of the international community.

2.2 After 2001: The twenty Year War

The September 11, 2001, attacks drew the attention of the United States to the Al-Qaeda network, whose leaders found refuge in Afghanistan. The administration of President George W. Bush demanded that the Afghan authorities hand over those responsible for the attacks. However, the Taliban authorities refused. The extradition of Osama bin Laden under external pressure was seen as a humiliation of the country's national sovereignty.



The security of one state affects the security of an entire region. Sometimes, the security of certain so-called buffer states, located between regions, can influence the security of two or more regions.

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver



2.3 Shifting Priorities of US and NATO:

It should be noted that over the course of the 20-year war, the priorities of NATO countries and the United States shifted significantly, preventing them from maintaining constant focus on Afghanistan. The West faced its own internal political issues and underwent fundamental changes in foreign policy.

For instance, the U.S. began to pay more attention to the

rising power of China in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the situation in Ukraine. Consequently, the focus on President Ashraf Ghani's government diminished. **The West increasingly adopted the notion that the Afghan issue was primarily a problem for the Afghans themselves.** It became evident that the Taliban would eventually return to power (Maizland, 2023). Consequently, negotiations began in Doha between the warring parties to resolve the situation.



Figure 1: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has held separate meetings with negotiators from the Afghan government and the Taliban in Qatar

Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CH3W9LpAa7w/?img_index=1

2.4 Second Taliban Government

In 2020, US President Donald Trump signed an agreement to withdraw troops within 14 months. President Joe Biden followed through on this agreement, leading to the complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces by the end of August 2021 (Cambridge University Press, 2021). The US justified its decision by stating that the primary objective of the intervention was to combat terrorism. Indeed, Al-Qaeda's capabilities were significantly reduced during the US presence in Afghanistan. For instance, in 2011, Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the September 11 attacks, was localized and killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Additionally, the United States continued its counterterrorism activities against Al-Qaeda and, in 2022, eliminated its new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri (BBC, 2022).

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized that NATO forces entered Afghanistan with the US and would leave together.

- The conflict cost the **US over \$2 trillion**. Over 20 years, the **US lost 2,461 personnel, with 20,722 wounded**. Additionally, around 4,000 private military contractors were lost on the US side. (Cambridge University Press, 2021)
- On the **Afghan side**, approximately **66,000 soldiers** and over **46,300 civilians were killed**. (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

2 Trillion USD

•The conflict cost the US over \$2 trillion. Over 20 years, the US lost 2,461 personnel, with 20,722 wounded.

American Journal of International Law, 2021

However, the regime established by the US proved too fragile to sustain itself. The start of negotiations in Doha involving the Taliban demonstrated that President Ashraf Ghani's government had failed to unify the political will of the entire nation. The Kabul administration collapsed spontaneously before the complete withdrawal of American troops, leading to the Taliban's return to power.

Furthermore, Al-Qaeda and ISIS networks became more active in the country (Mir, 2023). This indicates that international forces did not fully achieve their objectives: Afghanistan did not become democratic, and global

terrorist networks were not entirely defeated. The US left Afghanistan in an unstable and chaotic state. The Afghan issue has once again raised significant concerns on the international community's agenda.



Figure 2: Al Qaeda leader Al-Zawahiri killed by US drone strike in Afghanistan
 Source: <https://www.instagram.com/skynews/p/CgvvogwMLwb/>



Figure 3: NATO Press Release, Joint Press Point by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, US Secretary of State
 Source: <https://www.instagram.com/jensstoltenberg/p/CNqHlrrOno/>

3 Taliban's Shift from ideological to rational & political

The Taliban's return to power has shown significant changes in their behaviour compared to their previous regime. It is evident that the Taliban have revised their strategy and are now constructing a more rational and predictable governance. However, the core ideology of the Taliban remains unchanged, indicating the potential for a return to their former policies at any time.

3.1 A Tale of two books

Islam plays a fundamental role in shaping the Taliban's ideology. The Taliban adhere to the Deobandi school of the Hanafi branch of Islam, advocating for the revival of Islam based on the Quran and Sharia law. Additionally, the Taliban's ideology incorporates the codes of Pashtunwali, which are norms governing the everyday life of the Pashtun people. In 2006, Taliban leader Mullah Omar published his book "Loyha," which became a primary source of Taliban doctrine, combining the principles of the Deobandi school and Pashtunwali. In 2016, the current leader, Haibatullah Akhunzada, published the book "Rohnamudhoe Amir al-Mu'minin Baroye Mujahedin" ("The Guide, Leader of the Faithful, for the Mujahideen"), which discusses the objectives of jihad, societal norms, and obedience to the Amir (head of state). Today, the political, economic, and social life in Afghanistan is deeply influenced by the principles outlined in these books (Khaydarov, 2024).

- In 2021, ISKP orchestrated a bombing in **Kabul Airport**, resulting in the deaths of **169 Afghans and 13 American soldiers**.
- In March 2024, ISKP conducted an attack in **Moscow at the Crocus City Hall**, killing over **150 people**.

Haibatullah Akhunzada, the supreme leader of the state with the title of Amir, wields absolute authority, encompassing political, religious, and military power. Although Kabul is the official capital, the Amir's residence is in Kandahar, effectively making it the true capital. For a long time, the Taliban's governance was characterized by a horizontal power structure, but it is now transforming into a vertical power hierarchy.

The Taliban's stance towards terrorist and extremist groups has evolved; however, it is important to note that the **ideological foundation of the movement remains closely aligned with currents such as Tablighi Jamaat, Hezb-ut Tahrir, Salafism, and Takfirism**. (Khaydarov, 2024) This close ideological proximity suggests that the Taliban may continue to maintain connections with these groups despite any surface-level changes in their policies.

3.2 Dual approach towards terrorism

The new Taliban regime exhibits a dual approach towards terrorist networks. On one hand, it combats the forces of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. On the other hand, it supports Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which conducts subversive activities in Pakistan. The Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaeda remains highly questionable. Despite ideological differences, instances of cooperation between the two through the Haqqani* network have been documented. However, there are currently tensions between the leaders of the Haqqani network and the Taliban leader H. Akhunzada. In 2022, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in Afghanistan, significantly diminishing the network's influence worldwide. **Currently, the Taliban undermine Al-Qaeda's image, viewing it more as a political rival.**

**The Haqqani network is a group affiliated with the Taliban. The clan was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani and operated in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the years of war (2001-2021). After the Taliban came to power, members of the Haqqani network assumed high-ranking positions in the Taliban government. It is important to note that the current leader of the Haqqani clan, Sirajuddin Haqqani serves as Afghanistan's Minister of Interior (Bobkin, 2022).*

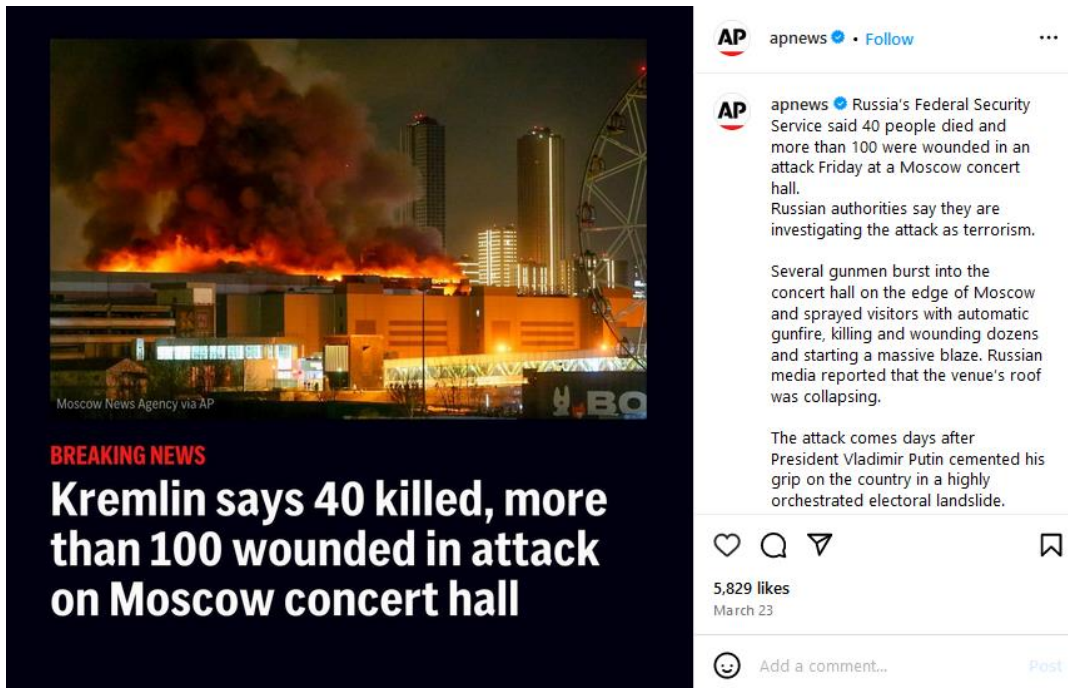


Figure 4: AP News "Russian authorities say they are investigating the attack as terrorism."

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/apnews/p/C41BjD0LTBg/>

3.3 Taliban and ISIS

A similar example is the Taliban's relationship with the Islamic State ISIS. In Afghanistan, the regional branch of ISIS, the Islamic State Khorasan Province - ISKP (*the historic geographical term "Khorasan" refers to a region comprising Iran, Afghanistan, parts of Northern Pakistan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia*), is very active. This terrorist organization is currently the most powerful in Afghanistan. In 2021, ISKP orchestrated a bombing in Kabul Airport, resulting in the deaths of 169 Afghans and 13 American soldiers. In March 2024, ISKP conducted an attack in Moscow at the Crocus City Hall, killing over 150 people (Bacon, 2024).

ISKP poses a threat not only in Afghanistan but also in Central and South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and globally. According to experts, the network comprises approximately 7,000 militants (Parwani, 2024), representing a significant danger. The Taliban are alarmed by such developments and view ISKP as a threat to their regime. Consequently, they are actively fighting against ISKP. However, ISKP's strength is also growing, partly because the Taliban have been pursuing a broad policy of Pashtunization since coming to power. This has led to discontent among national minorities, who feel marginalized and have joined ISKP, thereby enhancing its capabilities. In summary, **the conflict between the Taliban and ISKP is increasingly taking on a political dimension.**

4 Relations amongst neighbours

4.1 Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations

Regarding the terrorist organization Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), many experts believe that the Taliban supports its activities due to their ideological similarities and shared goal of establishing a similar system in Pakistan. Islamabad accuses the TTP of several terrorist attacks within Pakistan and pressures Kabul to refrain from supporting the group. It is possible that Kabul uses the TTP as a political tool against Islamabad to achieve equitable treatment from Pakistan.

The roots of the Taliban trace back to Pakistan, with significant support from the tribal areas before the establishment of both the first and second Taliban governments. The role of Pakistani intelligence agencies in the Taliban's rise to power is highly likely (Siddique, 2011). Consequently, Islamabad desires a loyal government in Kabul, embodied by the Taliban. Such loyalty would provide Islamabad with stability in the northwest, secure routes to Central Asia, establish a reliable ally against India, enhance Pakistan's geopolitical influence and capabilities, and address the unresolved border conflict with Afghanistan. Thus, the demand for loyalty from Kabul presents the greatest challenge to the Taliban's sovereignty. The Taliban clearly do not wish to be a "puppet" of any external power. This is likely why they use the TTP to signal to Islamabad that they are now a fully sovereign state, demanding equal treatment.

The TTP has carried out a series of terrorist attacks in Pakistan, prompting responses from Islamabad:

- Pakistan has not recognized the Taliban government, potentially positioning it as an inferior entity.
- Pakistan closes border trade checkpoints with Afghanistan, exerting economic pressure.
- Pakistan conducts airstrikes on TTP targets within Afghanistan without Kabul's consent.
- Islamabad decided to deport illegal Afghan migrants back to Afghanistan (Fahrney, 2023), thereby worsening the economic conditions in the country.

These developments exacerbate tensions along the Afghan-Pakistani border and drive transformations in Afghanistan's foreign policy (Gafarov, 2024). In summary, contemporary Afghan-Pakistani relations are an accelerant of Afghanistan's foreign policy. To avoid political and economic dependence on Islamabad, Kabul is actively engaging in foreign policy initiatives.

4.2 Afghanistan-Iran Relations

First and foremost, the Taliban is revisiting its trade and transportation sphere. While Pakistan was the primary external trade corridor, the current situation necessitates diversification of trade routes. Kabul is increasingly leaning towards Iran and its port of Chabahar. Afghanistan has signalled its readiness to invest around \$35 million in port development. This response from Kabul is welcomed by Iran, which seeks to collaborate with Afghanistan in combating the ISKP.

Kabul's diplomatic support for Tehran's actions regarding the Gaza situation has significantly strengthened bilateral relations. During periods of heightened tensions with Tel Aviv, Tehran requires international support. Under such circumstances, even Afghanistan might be perceived as an ally providing support. This is despite the fact that there is a conflict between Iran and Afghanistan over the use of the Helmand River, which led to border clashes in the spring of 2023 (NY Times, 2023). The Taliban extends such support, potentially leading to recognition from Tehran in the near future. Additionally, joint operation of the Chabahar port will require legal frameworks for partnership.

4.3 Afghanistan-China Relations

Another emerging partner for Afghanistan is China. Currently, Afghan-Chinese relations are evolving rapidly. In February, the leader of China accepted the credentials of Afghanistan's ambassador, demonstrating China's recognition of the newly formed state. China and Afghanistan are collaborating on constructing a new transport route through the Wakhan Corridor. Successful implementation of this project would connect China, Afghanistan, and Iran via a common trade corridor, strengthening trilateral Beijing-Kabul-Tehran relations. This could eventually make Afghanistan a crucial part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to create an alternative to maritime trade routes and develop land routes across the Eurasian supercontinent. In this context, Central Asian countries play a vital role as transit territories. However, regarding Central Asia, Beijing considers Russian influence. Especially under such conditions, with Russia under Western sanctions, it is increasing its economic presence in the region (Bradsher & Kurmanaev, 2024).

In the case of Afghanistan, China does not encounter interests from external powers. Additionally, in dialogue with Afghanistan, Beijing considers the national security factor in the Xinjiang region (Gafarov, 2024). Radical and extremist ideologies from Afghanistan could directly impact internal order in Xinjiang. Therefore, Beijing will invest in Afghanistan to build stable socio-economic conditions, which is forecasted to reduce radicalization significantly.

4.4 Afghanistan-India Relations

Another emerging partner for Afghanistan is India. In the current stage, India demonstrates significant ambitions for developing relations across the Eurasian continent. India views projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) negatively. Both China and Pakistan represent potential rivals for New Delhi, so India is developing its models of economic cooperation across the continent. A crucial element in this path is the International North-South Transport Corridor and Chabahar Port, which will connect India, Iran, and Russia. One of the branches of this corridor is planned to pass through Afghanistan, giving Kabul special significance in India's grand strategy. Additionally, it is highly probable that New Delhi will diplomatically approach the Taliban, considering the latter's conflicting relations with Pakistan. India's alliance with Afghanistan could serve as a political lever against Islamabad. India is also concerned about the intensification of ISKP activities in Afghanistan, as this terrorist organization is involved in subversive activities in India as well. Therefore, India is interested in conducting counter-terrorism measures in Afghanistan. After the parliamentary elections, it appears that N. Modi is pursuing a policy of realpolitik and national interests, with India likely to take specific actions regarding Afghanistan. For instance, India participated in the Third conference held in Doha from June 28 to July 1 (Parashar, 2024), where New Delhi emphasized its interests in security, economic development, counterterrorism, humanitarian aid, and investment.

4.5 Afghanistan-Russia Relations

When discussing Afghanistan's relations with Russia, it is worth noting that Moscow is close to establishing stable relations with Kabul. Immediately after the Taliban came to power, Russia intensified its relations with Afghanistan. The situation in the country concerns Moscow because it affects its interests in Central Asia. During the ongoing war in Ukraine, Moscow leans towards maintaining peace and stability in Central Asia and Afghanistan. However, Russia does not increase its military presence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Bobkin, 2022), indicating that the threat from Afghanistan to Russian interests is not heightened. On the other hand, perhaps Russia is paying more attention to the Ukrainian conflict.

Another factor in improving relations is the fight against terrorism. Recent events at Crocus City Hall have alarmed Russia that terrorism, specifically ISKP in Afghanistan, poses a serious threat to the country's internal security. This could lead to the establishment of strong anti-terrorism cooperation between Russia and Afghanistan. Currently, Moscow intends to remove the Taliban from the list of banned organizations in Russia (TASS, 2024) and leans towards considering the Taliban as a real political force in Afghanistan. Additionally, Afghanistan plays an important role as a transit territory in Russia's Greater Eurasia policy. In the context of Western sanctions, Moscow intends to export oil resources to South Asia. For example, oil exports from Russia to India increased to 40% in 2023 (Mint, 2023). Given this factor, Moscow is interested in the stability of Afghanistan, which serves as a "gateway" to South Asia.



Figure 5: Russia reported Friday that a "principal decision" had already been made to remove Afghanistan's ruling Taliban from Moscow's list of terrorist organizations.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DAXnN9eN3BQ/>

5 Central Asia Policies towards Afghanistan

Relations between Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia are dynamically evolving. It is noteworthy that the new Taliban has fundamentally changed its attitude towards Central Asia. This is evident in the fact that radical and extremist ideologies are not being exported from Afghanistan. However, the development of Islamic Sharia and values may garner some sympathy among the populations of the region. According to experts, Afghanistan is pursuing a strong anti-corruption policy, which contributes to meritocracy in the government. This is somewhat welcomed by the more religious layers of society in the Central Asian republics, posing a threat to the constitutional regime based on secularism (IAIS, 2024). In other words, there is a growing sentiment among these religious groups that a state governed by Sharia law is more desirable than one based on a secular constitution. The Taliban's anti-corruption stance strengthens their arguments in favour of this viewpoint.

5.1 Afghanistan-Uzbekistan

Currently, Uzbekistan is pursuing a proactive policy towards Afghanistan. Uzbekistan seeks to keep the Afghan issue on the agenda of the international community, as attention is directed towards situations in Ukraine, Gaza, or Taiwan, and it seems that the world is forgetting about Afghanistan. **Tashkent believes that the lack of attention to Afghanistan could lead to unforeseen consequences.** Therefore, it calls on the international community to increase humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. From Tashkent's point of view, the Taliban is a functioning force in Afghanistan; however, its international recognition requires a special coordinated approach from the international community. Issues of peace and stability directly affect the country's security. Given this factor, Tashkent has always sought to resolve the situation in Afghanistan.

5.1.1 Transit Priority

Additionally, Afghanistan is a priority transit country for Uzbekistan to reach the trade ports of the Indian Ocean, such as Gwadar and Karachi. Since 2010, Uzbekistan has been involved in the construction of the **Trans-Afghan corridor along the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar route** (Burna-Asefi, 2022). The implementation of this railway will become a connecting "**artery between Central and South Asia**", which is likely to improve the socio-economic life of Afghanistan. However, current Afghan-Pakistani relations hinder Tashkent's plans in this regard.

5.1.2 Water Diplomacy

An important issue in modern Uzbek-Afghan relations is the construction of the **Kush Tupa Canal** in northern Afghanistan. The **285 km canal** (Abdullaev & Akhmedov, 2024) is intended for the development of agriculture in the northern part of the country. **In case of full operation of the canal, the volume of the Amu Darya River may decrease by 30%, posing a significant challenge to the western regions of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.** Uzbekistan urges the Taliban to build the canal according to international standards, thus avoiding an impending catastrophe in the water sector. However, it seems that the Taliban is building the Kush Tupa Canal not only to improve agriculture but possibly also to exert political pressure on the countries of Central Asia and enhance the country's international image in the event of its successful implementation.



Figure 6: Kush Tupa Canal - being built in northern Afghanistan to divert water from the Amu Darya

Source:

https://www.instagram.com/emranwadan/reel/C66ezfQ_N6Jq/

5.2 Afghanistan-Kazakhstan

In the context of the Taliban's Central Asian foreign policy direction, there has been a rapprochement in relations with Kazakhstan. In early June of this year, Astana removed the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations, leading to a strengthening of ties between the parties. According to available data, the Vice Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Serik Zhumangarin, currently oversees the country's Afghan policy. Zhumangarin's visit to Kabul in April of this year elevated the relationship to a new level (Satubaldina, 2024).

On June 10, 2024, the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU) organized an international conference titled "Afghanistan in New Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Realities", which was attended by scholars and experts from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.

The conference outcomes (ICSD, 2024) indicated that Kazakhstan's policy towards Afghanistan is characterized by two factors:

1. **Market Outlet.** Kazakhstan has become the food bank of the Central Asian region and Afghanistan. With Russia preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan has quickly solidified its economic presence in the region and Afghanistan. For instance, last year, Kazakhstan exported approximately 0.5 million tons of wheat to Afghanistan (Forbes, 2024). The trade turnover between the two parties reached \$1 billion in 2023, with plans to increase this figure to \$3 billion (APK Inform, 2023) in the near future.

2. **Transit Corridor.** Amid the escalating Ukrainian crisis, Astana seeks to diversify its trade and economic dependence away from Russia. Consequently, Kazakhstan views Afghanistan as a new logistical route to access the seaports of South Asia. Astana is more inclined to cooperate with Afghanistan through Turkmenistan rather than Uzbekistan, which may cause some instability in the financing of the Trans-Afghan Corridor project. Thus, Astana aims to have as many trade and logistics routes as possible, minimizing its dependence on Russia or Central Asian countries.



Figure 7: A top-level Kazakh delegation, led by Deputy Prime Minister Serik Zhumangarin, visited Kabul in April 2024
 Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DAXnN9eN3BQ/>

5.3 Afghanistan-Tajikistan

Among the countries of Central Asia, Tajikistan has pursued the most skeptical policy towards the Taliban. Dushanbe initially accepted refugees from Afghanistan and supported the opposition led by A.Masoud. Dushanbe cannot disregard the interests of the Tajik minority in Afghanistan. Tajikistan's policy in this regard could impact the political situation within Afghanistan. However, later Tajikistan began to acknowledge the reality and started perceiving the Taliban as a functioning force in Afghanistan. As of today, a consular office of the Taliban is operating in Badakhshan (Khorog) (ASIA-Plus, 2023). Although Dushanbe has not established political contacts

with Kabul, active trade relations are ongoing between the parties. Tajikistan exports cement, gas, gasoline, and essential goods to Afghanistan. Additionally, Afghanistan is becoming a transit territory for the export of agricultural products to Pakistan (SPUTNIK, 2024). This development could lead to improved political relations between the parties.

Tajikistan remains cautious towards Afghanistan, considering issues of radicalization and extremist ideologies. For instance, since 2022, the terrorist organization Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT) (CSRT, 2022) has been operating in Afghanistan, seeking to establish an Islamic state based on Sharia law in Tajikistan. Moreover, the radicalization in Afghanistan influences Tajikistani citizens, with a noticeable trend of

individuals from Tajikistan joining ISKP. The events at Crocus Hall in Moscow are a clear example of this. ISKP, which has become the main rival of the Taliban, is increasing its ranks with residents from Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries. Therefore, if Afghanistan was previously a threat to Central Asia, now there is a reverse threat, as residents of the region pose a threat to the Taliban's authority.

5.4 Afghanistan-Turkmanistan

Turkmenistan maintains increasingly close relations with the Taliban. Even with the construction of the Kush Tepa Canal, the Turkmen side has not shown a significant reaction.

The main focus of cooperation between the parties is the TAPI gas pipeline project (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India). It should be noted that Turkmenistan was negotiating the prospects of this gas pipeline with the first Taliban regime (1996-2001). If Turkmenistan manages to build this gas pipeline, the country could export gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and most importantly, to India, which is Ashgabat's ultimate goal. However, the current strained Afghan-Pakistani and Pakistani-Indian relations hinder the project's implementation. Despite this, Turkmen-Afghan relations are developing positively. On the other hand, the implementation of the project is influenced by Iran, as the development of TAPI could significantly impact Tehran's position, which sees itself as an energy exporter to South Asia.

Another project connecting Turkmenistan with Afghanistan is the development of the TAP (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) (NG, 2024) power transmission line, which has great potential to supply electricity to the northern regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

An additional area of cooperation is participation as a transit territory in major international transport corridors. Turkmenistan and Afghanistan serve as transit routes for Russia and Kazakhstan to the markets of South Asia, specifically Pakistan and India. Furthermore, both countries are links in the giant Indian North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project. This situation requires Ashgabat and Kabul to develop friendly relations, which is currently being observed.

5.5 Afghanistan-Kyrgyzstan

The situation in Afghanistan is crucial for Bishkek based on **four principles**:

- Firstly, security in Afghanistan directly impacts the entire Central Asian region, including Kyrgyzstan.
- Secondly, ethnic Kyrgyz live in the Greater and Lesser Pamir regions (RGRU, 2024), which Bishkek cannot ignore.
- Thirdly, **Afghanistan represents a market as well as a transit territory for selling Kyrgyz electricity**. This

means the implementation CASA-1000 project (Boltaev, 2024), which will connect Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan through the transmission of electricity. The Taliban welcomes both projects: TAPI and CASA-1000, as their implementation will improve the country's social life and give the Taliban a new image in the eyes of the international community.

- Fourthly, **Bishkek views Afghanistan as an opportunity to access seaports in South Asia**. The construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is highly likely to connect with the Trans-Afghan corridor, establishing a trade link in the form of an arc between Central and South Asia.

Currently, Bishkek approaches the Taliban's rule from a realpolitik perspective. The country's Foreign Minister stated, **"Whether we like it or not, there is a de facto authority in the form of the Taliban. We do not have official contacts, but unofficially we maintain contact through our embassy in Kabul and conduct consultations with them"**. (KAKTUS, 2023)

In general, the countries of Central Asia have different approaches to the Taliban. Each side tries to establish contact with Afghanistan based on its national interests. Therefore, there is a lack of a unified approach and strategy towards Afghanistan among the countries in the region. However, it has become clear that they perceive the Taliban as a real and functioning force in Afghanistan. Based on this, they pursue a proactive policy in the Afghan vector.

TAPI

If Turkmenistan manages to build this gas pipeline, the country could export gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and most importantly, to India, which is Ashgabat's ultimate goal.

Regarding Afghanistan, the Taliban is striving in every possible way to gain recognition of its authority from the countries in the region. However, these countries are not paying sufficient attention to the issue of de jure recognition of the country. Most likely, regional countries will take this step only after the political climate around Afghanistan changes. The question of recognizing the Taliban's authority will most likely be coordinated and agreed upon by the international community.

At this stage, Central Asian countries are focusing more on improving social and economic conditions and increasing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. These two factors can ensure stability and security in the country, which is a priority interest for Central Asian countries.

6 Afghanistan and European Union: Methods vs Goals

The European side has great doubts about the Taliban's power in Afghanistan. Concerns about radicalization, extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, freedom of speech, human rights, particularly women's and girls' rights, and the rights of minorities shape the European perspective on the Taliban.

According to reports, Afghanistan does not allow the education of girls and women beyond a certain level, and there is heavy censorship that restricts freedom of speech. Additionally, the Taliban prohibits civil activism and peaceful demonstrations. According to some reports, the cultivation of opium in Afghanistan has reportedly increased by 32%, although the Taliban has demonstrated resistance to opium cultivation. For instance, in May of this year, the Taliban destroyed opium fields in the Badakhshan district, leading to discontent among local farmers. Unfortunately, clashes ensued, resulting in casualties among the local population as the Taliban used firearms to suppress the demonstrations. This action by the Taliban may have been a political message to European countries, indicating their opposition to opium cultivation. However, the European side has focused more on the methods employed by the Taliban in Badakhshan rather than their goals. This suggests that the European side is focusing more on human rights in relation to the Taliban and the perception of them as a real force in Afghanistan may still take a little time.

In turn, the Taliban is aiming to access the European market through Turkiye. Considering its internal potential, Afghanistan can export goods such as fruits, vegetables, carpets, marble, and saffron to the European market. **Afghanistan is currently considering the development of the Lapis Lazuli transport corridor via Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkiye. In the future, this corridor could become a primary route between Europe and Afghanistan,** contingent upon interest from European Union countries, particularly Germany and France.

In addition to this, European countries focus on humanitarian aid and development concerning Afghanistan. The EU provides substantial aid for the development and improvement of healthcare, education, and infrastructure in the country. For instance, last year, the EU provided humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan amounting to €156 million (European Commission, 2024).

The issue of refugees is the next priority for the EU regarding Afghanistan. According to data, around 1.6 million (ECRE, 2024) people left the country following the Taliban's takeover. In 2023, more than 100,000 Afghans (ECRE, 2024) lodged an application for international

protection in the EU. Issues of migration, the return of refugees, and the prevention of illegal migration are on the EU's agenda.

The stability and security of Afghanistan are fundamental aspects of the EU's foreign policy towards the country. The fight against terrorism, extremism, and radicalization is supported by the European side. The EU advocates for the establishment of an inclusive government in Afghanistan, which would transform it into a stable, peaceful, and prosperous country (European Council, 2024).

7 Recommendations

The situation in Afghanistan has far-reaching implications for the security architecture not only in Central and South Asia but also in the Middle East, Europe, and the world at large. The withdrawal of US and NATO forces has fundamentally altered the political landscape of the country. While the US and NATO may have concluded their military involvement in Afghanistan, the fight against terrorism continues. Despite changes in its internal and external strategies, the Taliban's ideology, rooted in Deobandi school and Pashtunwali, remains unchanged.

Regarding terrorism, the Taliban's stance appears ambivalent. On one hand, it combats groups like Al-Qaeda and ISKP, while on the other hand, it supports the TTP, possibly as a political lever against Islamabad. Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan have prompted Kabul to seek new trade partners, including Iran, with whom Afghanistan has begun cooperation through the Chabahar port. Additionally, this port could establish a format for cooperation involving India, Iran, and Afghanistan, which is likely to be significant in India's foreign policy post-parliamentary elections.

Major Eurasian players like China and Russia also show considerable interest in Afghanistan. Both countries are wary of the spread of radical and extremist ideologies and view Afghanistan as a transit country. While Beijing aims to extend its reach to the Middle East through Afghanistan, Moscow is intensively moving towards South Asia. In essence, Afghanistan is poised to become a "bridge" between the North and the South, the West and the East. Countries in Central Asia endeavor to keep the Afghan issue on the global agenda and express interest in joint cooperation through projects like the Trans-Afghan corridor, TAPI, and CASA-1000. However, they are concerned about issues like radicalization and the construction of the Kush Teppa canal, which could pose serious challenges in the region. Central Asian countries see achieving stability and security in Afghanistan through improving the socio-economic livelihoods of the Afghan people. Therefore, they call on the international community to strengthen humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

The European side is primarily concerned with issues of radicalization, drug trafficking, and human rights. Meanwhile, the Taliban has shown interest in accessing the European market through Turkiye. Especially in areas such as fruits, vegetables, carpets, marble, saffron, and others, where Afghanistan has a competitive advantage. Due to its geographical location, Turkiye can play the role of a connecting link in this context.

Based on this, the following recommendations are provided to Germany and the European side:

1. Increase monitoring efforts of events in Afghanistan. **Engage Uzbekistan's think tanks**, which are most informed about the situation in Afghanistan, to enhance the quality of analysis.
2. Pay attention not only to the situation within Afghanistan but also monitor events around the country: its diplomatic relations with countries such as Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, India, and the Central Asian republics.
3. Implement a coordinated approach in collaboration with Central Asian countries regarding the Afghan issue. Strengthen diplomatic dialogue on the Afghan vector and organize joint forums and international conferences involving experts from Germany, Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, China, Russia, Pakistan, India, and Iran.
4. Increase humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. Address stability issues in Afghanistan by improving the socio-economic livelihoods of society. Fund the construction of schools, hospitals, and other public facilities.
5. Attract **European companies to invest in projects such as the Trans-Afghan Corridor, TAPI, and CASA-1000**, which are aimed at improving the socio-economic life of the Afghan people.
6. Establish joint measures to combat radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. Enhance programs with Central Asian countries in this field and pay attention to the ideological foundations of terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

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