

Pragmatism beyond divides: Central Asia's engagement with Afghanistan

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Since 2022, the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) have been reassessing their policies towards Afghanistan. They no longer regard it primarily as a threat to regional security and stability but rather as a significant partner with whom they are willing to pursue a constructive relationship. Cooperation with Kabul is deepening in the fields of energy, trade, infrastructure, and transport. The Central Asian countries are also providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

Their approach to their southern neighbour reflects a broader diversification of the foreign and economic policies of Central Asian states, as well as an increasing openness to collaboration with regional partners. In this context, Afghanistan holds considerable importance, as it could potentially serve as a gateway to South Asian markets. This would help reduce Chinese and Russian influence over Central Asian economies. Relations between the Central Asian states and Kabul are therefore pragmatic in nature, and further political and diplomatic rapprochement is likely in the future, including the possible recognition of the Afghan authorities.

Regional strategy towards Afghanistan

Maintaining positive or at least functional relations with the government in Kabul is a priority for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These countries are currently working towards developing a joint strategy in this regard. The states of the region were among the first to establish contacts with the Taliban, who have remained internationally isolated since taking power in Afghanistan in 2021. The process of normalising relations accelerated particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In response, the Central Asian countries began diversifying their foreign relations and placing greater emphasis on regional integration.

The year 2024 proved particularly significant. Uzbekistan hosted the first ambassador of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in the region, while other Central Asian states removed the Taliban from their lists of terrorist organisations. In recent years, Central Asian leaders have discussed the Afghan issue both during consultative meetings of the five presidents and in the presence of actors from outside the region. On 26 August this year, Tashkent hosted the first meeting of the Central Asian states' special representatives for Afghanistan (with Turkmenistan absent), during which participants agreed to formulate a common policy towards Kabul.

The Central Asian states avoid issues that could negatively affect dialogue with the Taliban, focusing instead on expanding economic and security cooperation, which they regard as essential to the stability and development of the entire region. They consider Afghanistan a key partner, as transport and trade routes passing through its territory could provide access to South Asian markets. Human rights concerns, including women's rights – raised by the West as arguments against recognising the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – carry little weight from the perspective of the Central Asian states.

The threats arising from the system of Islamic fundamentalism reintroduced by the Taliban in Afghanistan do not pose a challenge in relations with the IEA. While Central Asian countries recognise radical Islam as a threat, they focus more on local Islamist organisations designated as terrorist, as well as groups linked to Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP), against which they are willing to cooperate with the authorities in Kabul.

Areas of cooperation

None of the Central Asian states officially recognises the Taliban government, yet most have established political and diplomatic relations with it. Uzbekistan is the most actively engaged, and its approach may be interpreted as de facto recognition of the regime without granting it de jure status. In August 2024, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov visited Kabul, making him the highest-ranking political figure to do so since the Taliban assumed power. Since September 2024, an official ambassador of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has been stationed in Tashkent – a rare occurrence for a government that remains officially unrecognised. Given the close diplomatic cooperation, Uzbekistan is expected to become the first Central Asian state to grant formal recognition to the Taliban government.

Afghan chargé d'affaires are posted at the embassies in Ashgabat, Astana, and Bishkek. Of these three capitals, only Ashgabat – historically the closest neighbour to Kabul – has developed strong political ties with the Taliban. For Turkmenistan, as for Uzbekistan, Afghanistan is a key regional partner. In contrast, the Kazakh authorities avoid using the term 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' and limit cooperation to practical matters, primarily trade and communication. Kyrgyzstan is the least engaged of all the regional states in its relations with Afghanistan. The government in Kabul likewise does not prioritise relations with Bishkek, focusing instead on deepening ties with more influential regional players.

Tajikistan represents a distinct case, as it maintains the weakest relations with the Taliban and has adopted the most cautious stance towards radical Islam. President Emomali Rahmon's government has never had cordial relations with its southern neighbour, and the president himself has repeatedly warned against the Taliban, describing them as a serious threat. Nevertheless, Dushanbe may find it necessary to cooperate with the Afghan government for security reasons, as such cooperation could help to mitigate the risks of both terrorist attacks by ISKP and the recruitment of Tajik citizens into Islamist militant groups.

Transport constitutes a particularly important area of cooperation between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan – especially the trans-Afghan railway, which could potentially link South Asia through Uzbekistan with the Middle Corridor running via Kazakhstan, as well as the Northern Corridor passing through Russia. The project is of strategic importance to Tashkent, but it also holds significance for Bishkek, as it might be integrated with the

China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway line. Kazakhstan also regards the development of new transport routes as a priority in its relations with Kabul, viewing them as a means of gaining access to South Asian markets and thereby reducing its dependence on Russia. The construction of a railway line connecting Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan is also under consideration.

Energy partnership is another key area of cooperation. One of Turkmenistan’s primary objectives is the development of the TAPI gas pipeline, designed to connect the Galkynysh gas fields with Herat and, potentially – via Afghan territory – with Pakistan and India. On 20 October, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, the former president and still the most influential political figure in the country, visited Afghanistan to assess progress on a new phase of TAPI’s construction. His visit demonstrates that strengthening ties with Afghanistan – particularly in the context of the pipeline, a flagship project for the Ashgabat government – remains a priority for Turkmenistan. Moreover, Afghanistan continues to be a major importer of Turkmen electricity, with declared deliveries totalling 1.8 billion kWh in 2024.

Other countries are also benefiting from energy cooperation with Kabul – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan export electricity to Afghanistan. Water management is also of considerable importance. In May, Afghanistan signed an agreement with Uzbekistan on joint management of the Amu Darya river. This represented a significant step forward in relations between Kabul and Tashkent. Previously, the construction of Afghanistan’s Qosh Tepa canal, which diverts water from the Amu Darya, had raised concerns in Uzbekistan due to the potential impact on agriculture.

Economic cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia is gaining significance. This is particularly evident in the case of Uzbekistan – where bilateral trade in 2024 exceeded \$1.1 billion – and Kazakhstan, whose trade with Afghanistan reached \$545 million. In June this year, the Kazakh foreign minister visited the IEA to discuss cooperation in areas including trade, transport, and agriculture. Astana aims to raise trade with Afghanistan to \$3 billion annually, indicating that it views the country as a significant export market.

Prospects and external constraints

The Central Asian states are likely to deepen their relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, primarily owing to their interest in cooperating on economic, transport, and energy issues. This would allow them to continue diversifying their foreign and trade policies. Further diplomatic engagement and eventual official recognition of the Taliban government cannot be ruled out, particularly if Uzbekistan takes such a step and once the states of the region agree on a common strategy towards Afghanistan and tensions in Afghan–Tajik relations subside.

The development of a Central Asian strategy towards the IEA will depend on two external factors. The first concerns the strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which have been tense both before and after the Taliban’s rise to power. This tension culminated in a conflict that erupted on 9 October this year, triggered by accusations that Afghanistan was harbouring members of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on its territory. Although a ceasefire was agreed on 19 October, the situation remains unstable and peace talks have failed. The fragile truce between Kabul and Islamabad may not suffice for the Central Asian countries to pursue their plans for transport and energy routes leading to the southern parts

of the continent. Turkmenistan's ambitions are particularly at risk, as it considers development of the TAPI gas pipeline a priority – an endeavour dependent on peace along the Afghan–Pakistani border. Berdimuhamedov's visit to Afghanistan shortly after the ceasefire was signed may therefore be seen as Ashgabat's attempt to safeguard its own interests. The absence of armed conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan is also crucial for those states seeking to develop the trans-Afghan railway, notably Uzbekistan.

The second factor shaping the region's strategy towards Kabul is Russia, which has established official relations with the Taliban and recognised their government. While the Central Asian states also seek to normalise relations with Afghanistan, regional initiatives that exclude Moscow – such as the C5+1 formats and efforts at intra-regional integration – conflict with Russia's interest in maintaining its dominant position in this part of the world. Consequently, Moscow does not support the Central Asian countries developing an independent strategy towards Kabul; rather, it seeks to ensure that they coordinate their policies with Russia in this sphere.