



A ROAD UNTRAVELED

A change in policy or inevitability? Afghanistan and Central Asia's relationship after NATO's withdrawal

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This policy brief explores the security relationship between Central Asia and Afghanistan along with the prospects for future engagements in light of the recent developments, especially the disintegration of the Afghan security sector. It also looks at how Central Asia and Afghanistan can find common ground for military-to-military cooperation, if any, what might be the security challenges, and how those challenges could be addressed.¹

A history of Central Asia's security relations with Afghanistan

The Western-backed Afghan state collapsed in August after the foreign forces withdrew from the country. With that collapse, Afghanistan's security sector also disintegrated. This crumbling complicates any security relationships between Afghanistan and its neighbours, especially the Central Asian states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Compared with the other neighbours, the Central Asian republics' self-defined security relations with Afghanistan are quite new—until 1991, the Soviet Union was the sole architect of those relationships. Geographical proximity, however, makes security a common phenomenon for Central Asia and Afghanistan. Despite the 2,387 kilometres of common border, Afghanistan and the Central Asian nations share common religious, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. This encourages people-to-people contacts, which also emboldens mass coethnic migration in times of crisis.² Many Afghan Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks live in Afghanistan, particularly in the northern areas that border Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. They speak the same languages spoken in their ancestral Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The ethnolinguistic commonalities and geographical vicinity motivate a preference for migrating to these countries rather than other states in times of crisis.

These peculiarities enabled Central Asian nationals to assume a role during the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan, as the Red Army's spokespersons, and as advisers to the Communist governments in Kabul because they knew the language and partly the culture.³ The people-to-people contacts have enabled Central Asian republics, especially the three

frontier countries of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, to engage in Afghanistan's politics through relations with the central government and local powerbrokers based primarily in northern Afghanistan.⁴

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and its breakdown in 1991 marked the beginning of the Central Asian republics' independent security relations with Afghanistan. Although still influenced by Russia, Central Asian leaders took charge of designing their new relationship with Afghanistan. During the 1990s apocalyptic era in Afghanistan, numerous Central Asian militant groups and fighters fleeing repressive regimes in their home country found Taliban-controlled Afghanistan a safe haven.⁵ Thus, the Central Asian leaders perceived Afghanistan as a hotbed of insurgency, from where Central Asian militant groups posed a security threat to their fragile governments.⁶ In this era, the Central Asian states' security policies revolved around creating a buffer zone in northern Afghanistan by supporting Afghan factions in blocking the instability spillover into Central Asia.⁷

The civil war and Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the 1990s provided more manoeuvring room to the Central Asian militant groups based in northern Afghanistan, thus increasing security concerns, especially for the three frontier states. To some extent, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan became involved in the Afghan conflict by supporting the coethnic Afghan Tajiks and Uzbeks against the Taliban. Threat assessments and perceptions encouraged Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to support the Northern Alliance, composed of the ethnic Tajik and Uzbek militias, against the Taliban, training and supporting Central Asian fighters in Afghanistan.⁸ Turkmenistan, however, adopted a policy of neutrality.⁹

1 The project "A Road untraveled? Options, Scenarios, and Recommendations for Future International and Regional Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS). This brief is part of a series discussing the implications of the US withdrawal for bilateral relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

2 Syed Haider Bukhari and Naudir Bakht, "Central Asia–Afghanistan relations under the shadow of great powers politics", *ISR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 11 (2013).

3 *ibid.*

4 Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, "The Afghanistan–Central Asia relationship: what role for EU", *EUCAM Working Paper* (2013).

5 Ekaterina Stepanova and Javid Ahmad, *Militant Terrorist Groups In, and Connected To, Afghanistan: Terrorism in Afghanistan: A Joint Threat Assessment* (East West Institute, 2020).

6 Anna Gussarova, "Perception and Reality: Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia and Afghanistan", (Almaty, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019).

7 Bukhari and Bakht, 2013.

8 Rollie Lal, *Central Asia and Its Asian Neighbors: Security and Commerce at the Crossroads* (Rand Corporation, 2006).

9 Interview with Barmak Pazhwak, Senior Program Officer, Asia, United States Institute of Peace (with Rajab Taieb), 17 July 2021.

Afghanistan and Central Asia's security relations under the shadow of the anti-terror campaign

During Operation Enduring Freedom against Al-Qaida and the Taliban in late 2001, the Central Asian countries assisted the United States and NATO troops by providing logistical routes and facilities. In addition to geopolitical calculations and rent-seeking incentives, they hoped that the American overthrow of the Taliban would also weaken the Central Asian militant groups.¹⁰

In the 2000s, the Central Asian governments retreated from an active role and direct engagement in combating the security threats they had repeatedly voiced concerns about. Until 2020, there was no State-to-state military cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan other than the corridors that transport American–NATO supplies. This was partly because Central Asia's role was overshadowed by the massive material and human presence of the United States and NATO member countries in Afghanistan. It was also partly because Central Asia was not interested in engaging militarily in Afghanistan due to fear of retaliation. In the 2000s, Central Asia viewed its relationship with Afghanistan through the prism of the United States, and its minimal engagement was mainly due to Kabul's relations with Washington.¹¹

Over the past 20 years, the Afghan armed forces fought terrorism and extremism, including Central Asian extremist groups, on their own without any help from their northern neighbours.¹² Unlike in the 1990s, the Central Asia governments were not alarmed by any direct security threat from Afghanistan because they saw Russia as protective of the borders.¹³ Instead, the overriding concern became the narcotics smuggling into their countries that empowered local criminals and mafia.¹⁴ In Central Asia, mainly Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan did not play ethnic connections in their foreign policies towards Afghanistan.¹⁵

After two decades of massive international engagement, however, the instability spillover remains for Central Asia. The anti-terror campaign failed miserably: Not only did the Taliban eventually re-emerge as powerful as before, but numerous terrorist groups have established a foothold in Afghanistan, including the self-proclaimed Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK).

Today, northern Afghanistan is home to several Central Asian militant groups and fighters. Varying in size and operational capabilities, these groups include the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the East Turkistan Islamic Movement,¹⁶ the Islamic Party of Turkistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, the Hetob,

and Tas, the Central Asian Taliban, the Helafat, the Fatha, and the Kalkaly.¹⁷ With the recent developments in Afghanistan, the state's capacity and willingness to contain these groups remain unknown.

Although Central Asian leaders have been accused of using the terrorism threat as an excuse for repressing domestic political opponents,¹⁸ these groups launched terrorist attacks in most of the Central Asian republics throughout the 2000s. The occupation of several villages in Kyrgyzstan's Batken region by some 500 IMU fighters who had crossed over from Afghanistan, the clashes between radical groups and Turkmen security forces in 2008, a series of bombings and shootings in Uzbekistan in 2004 and 2005, and the terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan between 2011 and 2016 are only a few examples.¹⁹ Central Asia had been the third-largest region of origin for Salafi foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq who fought alongside the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).²⁰ Central Asian nationals fought alongside ISK in northern Afghanistan after its emergence in 2014.²¹ Following the defeat of ISIL, the Central Asian fighters mainly relocated to northern Afghanistan near the border with their respective home country.²²

Afghanistan and Central Asia's relationship amid the foreign forces drawdown: A change in policy or inevitability?

The 2014 drawdown of the American and NATO forces, the Doha deal between the United States and the Taliban in 2020 and, most importantly, the unconditional withdrawal announced by President Joseph Biden in April 2021 triggered radical shifts in the policies of Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Afghan elites realized that Afghanistan's neighbours and the regional powers have a much more vital role, which was undermined in the post-2001 era. Thus, they started reaching out to the northern neighbours and paid several visits to Central Asia.

For the Central Asian leaders, the withdrawal announcement added to their fear that the security threats from Afghanistan would be further emboldened.²³ They knew that radical changes would come about in Afghanistan without foreign forces and thus prepared themselves for the post-withdrawal situation by launching initiatives to help stabilize Afghanistan and cement relations with the parties to the conflict to protect the borders.²⁴ These included the 2016 international conference²⁵ in Tashkent for the Afghanistan peace process and the readiness of Turkmenistan to host and facilitate the peace process.²⁶

Some of the Central Asian states also signalled their interest in military cooperation. Afghanistan and Kazakhstan, for instance,

10 Bukhari and Bakht, 2013.

11 Pazhwak, 2021.

12 Tamim Asey, "Central Asia's stake in Afghanistan's war", *The Diplomat* (2015).

13 Interview with Gavin Helf, Senior Expert on Central Asia, United States Institute of Peace (with Rajab Taieb), 17 July 2021.

14 Pazhwak, 2021.

15 Helf, 2021.

16 Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan's Security Situation and Peace Process: Comparing U.S and Russian Perspectives* (East West Institute, undated).

17 Stepanova and Javid, 2020.

18 Gussarova, 2019.

19 Andrey Kazantsev and Thomas F. Lynch III, *Afghanistan in the Regional Security Interplay Context* (East West Institute, 2020).

20 Dauren Aben, "Regional security in Central Asia: addressing existing and potential threats and challenges", *Eurasian Research Journal*, vol. 1, No. 1 (2019), pp. 51–65.

21 Rubin, undated.

22 Stepanova and Javid, 2020.

23 Interview with Nematullo Kutbedinov, researcher with the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (with Rajab Taieb), 9 August 2021.

24 Interview with Edda Schlager, journalist in n-ost (with Rajab Taieb), 28 August 2021.

25 "Tashkent conference backs Afghan government's peace offer" (2018). RFE/RL.

26 Shubham Bose, Shubham, "Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan offer to host future rounds of Afghan peace talks", *RepublicWorld.Com* (2020).

signed a cooperation agreement in June 2021, which enables joint military exercises, equipment modernization, logistical and technical support, battle training, and military intelligence sharing between the two countries.²⁷ The Afghan government also signed five agreements with Tajikistan in March 2021, including a security agreement.²⁸ Expanding bilateral security relations with Uzbekistan²⁹ and discussing mutual interests with Kyrgyzstan³⁰ and Turkmenistan³¹ are new regional developments since the departure of Afghanistan's main strategic partner. The initiatives and agreements are products of Central Asia's and Afghanistan's interests in closer cooperation.

However, the realization of these initiatives had been a big question mark from the beginning due to the Central Asian move to cautiously build ties with both sides of the Afghan conflict and hopefully avoid any single difficult choice in the future. Until the recent developments, Central Asia's security position towards Afghanistan had been ambivalent, aiming to please both the government and the Taliban.

While expanding relations with the Afghan government, some of the Central Asian leaders also had shifted from supporting militias against the Taliban to nurturing close relations with the most potent anti-government movement that eventually ousted the administration of President Ashraf Ghani on 15 August 2021. In their first official visit to Central Asia in 2018, a Taliban delegation travelled for five days to Uzbekistan to discuss the security of regional projects, withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, and the Afghan conflict.³² In July 2021, a Taliban delegation visited Ashgabat and discussed security and border protection with Turkmen officials.³³ Of the three frontier states, only Tajikistan avoided meeting and hosting the Taliban. Instead, it reinforced its border to prevent any possible threats.

With the fall of Kabul and the Taliban's return to power, security relations between Central Asia and Afghanistan have entered a new phase. The Central Asian states appear to have adopted a defensive policy for the past two decades. For the sake of border security, they each cooperated and established relations with all conflicting parties. They engaged in state-to-state relations with the Afghan governments, provided logistical facilities and routes to the American and NATO forces, and, since 2014, met Taliban delegations and signalled their willingness for cooperation. They also avoided entering any significant security cooperation with the Afghan government that would put them in danger of retaliation in the worst-case scenario, such as the collapse of the state that has just transpired.

Afghanistan and Central Asia beyond 2021

With Ashraf Ghani's escape from Afghanistan, his government collapsed. The Afghan security and defence forces trained, advised, and equipped by the American and NATO forces over the past 20 years had melted away. The disintegration of Afghanistan's security sector ought to increase Central Asia's fear of insecurity spillover from Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have already taken defensive measures at the border and conducted a joint military drill with Russia amid the peak of fighting in Afghanistan in July and early August 2021.³⁴ They fear that the Taliban victory could increase the level of religious extremism among their own populations.³⁵

Of the five republics, only Tajikistan has taken a different position. It has repeatedly called for the formation of a government that includes the coethnic Tajiks. This has soured its relationship with the Taliban government, however. Drawing attention away from domestic problems, Tajik nationalism and pleasing Russia seems to be the most critical issues constituting Tajikistan's current position.³⁶

In turn, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, the longest-in-power president in Central Asia, is trying to exploit the current wave of Tajik nationalism in response to fighting between the Taliban government and resistance in Panjshir valley in Afghanistan.³⁷ His position has been primarily rhetorical.³⁸ Tajikistan appears unlikely to engage militarily in Afghanistan because it cannot afford to.³⁹

The Central Asian governments do not feel any high conventional threat from Afghanistan because they anticipate that Russia will defend their borders through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). They seem more concerned with significant displacement, refugees, and mass migration (possibly with some militants) looking to cross a northern border.⁴⁰ Hence, Central Asia is likely to continue its defensive approach.⁴¹ This makes any military engagement in Afghanistan by a Central Asian country, even Tajikistan, unlikely. In the worst-case scenario of a new full-fledged civil war, Tajikistan might support the Afghan Tajik militias in northern Afghanistan, rhetorically.⁴² The other Central Asian states, even in such a scenario, are likely to only protect their borders.⁴³

The Central Asian states' armies are powerful enough to deter conventional threats. Guarding their respective southern border is among their core functions.⁴⁴ Despite the perceived concerns, there has been no case of conventional threat against Central

27 "Afghanistan, Kazakhstan sign military cooperation agreement", Ariana News (2021).

28 "Afghanistan, Tajikistan Ink MoUs as Ghani Arrives in Dushanbe", Salam Watandar (2021).

29 "Foreign minister meets with deputy prime minister of Uzbekistan", Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021).

30 "President Ghani holds talks with Kyrgyzstan president, discusses bilateral ties", Reporterly (2021).

31 "Kabul, Ashgabat agree to expand regional connectivity, trade", Pajhwak Afghan News (2021).

32 "Afghan Taliban delegation visits Uzbekistan to talk security, power lines", Reuters (2018).

33 "Taliban holds talks with Turkmen officials in Ashgabat amid deteriorating Afghan security" (2021). RFE/RL.

34 Kutbedinov, 2021.

35 Schlager, 2021.

36 Interview with Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, Founding Director, Center for Governance and Markets (with Rajab Taieb), 14 October 2021.

37 ibid.

38 Schlager, 2021.

39 Murtazashvili, 2021.

40 Helf, 2021.

41 ibid.

42 Kutbedinov, 2021.

43 Helf, 2021.

44 ibid.

Asia other than religious extremism over the past two decades.⁴⁵ The five republics can live with any government in Kabul, as long as the security headaches remain within Afghanistan's borders, they are not threatened directly, and their trade and transit with South Asia are not disrupted.⁴⁶

Each Central Asian country, especially Uzbekistan, has opened up from their long-running closed status in recent years. Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's approach of connectivity and trade with the world has led to an intelligent and collective regional economic approach, especially for Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan for trade and transit with South Asia and other countries via Afghanistan.⁴⁷ They now see Afghanistan as an integral part of this region, without which trade becomes extremely difficult for Central Asia.⁴⁸

Central Asia's trade policy cannot be realized when Afghanistan is at war. It thus has a great interest in helping to stabilize Afghanistan. A Central Asian role, however, will not be military but an economic and diplomatic one. Ashgabat's and Tashkent's trade ambitions with South Asia and big regional projects could be jeopardized by Afghanistan's fragility and weak governance. For Central Asia, it matters less who rules in Afghanistan than the existence of a strong government.⁴⁹ Hence, they are expected to work with and help any group in Afghanistan that can address their needs.

Although Tajikistan has also been expanding trade and transit ties with Afghanistan, its current political position towards the Taliban seems at odds with its economic policies.⁵⁰ Tajikistan has been left out of that circle of its more pragmatic neighbours, which might cause trouble in the future. However, given Tajikistan's poor economy and domestic issues, it will likely refrain from conflict with the new Afghan government.

Central Asia's bitter experience of engagement in Afghanistan during the Soviet Union era and the CSTO's mandate make it reluctant to enter any military or security cooperation with Afghanistan for the sake of stability. That treaty protects Central Asia against foreign threats as long as each country does not have any military cooperation outside of the CSTO.⁵¹ The security cooperation agreements that were signed between the Ghani government and some of the Central Asian states seem to have been part of a wait-and-see policy. With the collapse of the Ghani government, the Taliban government remains the only actor in Afghanistan that Central Asia will deal with. Thus the wait-and-see policy has ended.

The failure of the Soviet invasion in the 1980s left Central Asia reluctant to military engagement in Afghanistan. The failure of the United States and NATO countries in stabilizing Afghanistan over the past two decades most likely has further

discouraged the republics from any future military engagement in Afghanistan. Central Asia does not see any benefit in military interventions with Afghanistan at all.⁵² At the same time, the Taliban government has repeatedly said it will neither allow any country to interfere in Afghanistan nor interfere in any other country's affairs. It has signalled good relations with Central Asia because it needs economic support and trade relationships.

In light of the latest developments, Central Asia seems to have two intertwined priorities in Afghanistan: peace and economic activity.⁵³ The Central Asian states' thirst for trade and transit with South Asia and Afghanistan's dire need for economic support provides the context for cooperation. Central Asia can meet part of Afghanistan's demand, and the government in Afghanistan can secure trade and transit routes. Hence, the approaches that the Central Asian states, excluding Tajikistan, are likely to take to help stabilize Afghanistan are economic contributions and diplomatic engagement. In an emerging protracted civil war, the Central Asian states, mainly Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are likely to be involved diplomatically to push for a political settlement.⁵⁴

Not surprisingly, Central Asia does not have any conflict in values with the new government in Afghanistan. They have much in common in terms of ideology—more so than with the former US-backed government.⁵⁵ The former Afghan democratic government was encircled by authoritarian countries, making cooperation difficult due to conflict in values. Despite the shared religion and language, the people-to-people contacts between Central Asia and Afghanistan were minimal over the past two decades due to the vibrancy of civil society and women's groups and free media in Afghanistan that were absent in Central Asia.⁵⁶ Such freedoms are likely to decrease under the new government in Afghanistan, however. Thus, diminishing human rights and democratic values will increase the chance for cooperation.

Military-to-military or significant security cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia likely will be limited to border security and the trade and transit routes. The Central Asian States, mainly Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, want the new government in Afghanistan to consolidate its power in the countryside to ensure security that will serve their interests. Even if that does not happen, the core of Central Asia's defensive policy is likely to remain the same.

45 Murtazashvili, 2021.

46 Pazhwak, 2021.

47 Schlager, 2021.

48 *ibid.*

49 Pazhwak, 2021.

50 Schlager, 2021.

51 Helf, 2021.

52 *ibid.*

53 Schlager, 2021.

54 Pazhwak, 2021.

55 *ibid.*

56 *ibid.*

Conclusion

Ethnic connections had been a component of the foreign policy of the Central Asian states of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan towards Afghanistan in the 1990s as they supported their coethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks in the fight against the Taliban. In the 2000s, the ethnic component was minimal, and they were hoping for stability in Afghanistan to allow their regional projects and trade and transit to thrive. In this period, the perception of security threats shifted from conventional concerns to religious extremism and drug trafficking and disruption in economic activities.

The five republics previously did not establish any military-to-military contact with Afghanistan and did not have any significant role in training and equipping the Afghan army. Nevertheless, they were engaged diplomatically and economically, highly likely patternly to continue in the future.

Subsequently, Central Asia's military involvement in and engagement with Afghanistan is expected to be minimal, with security policies focused on migration, terrorism, and the risk of disruption of trade and transit.

Recommendations

- Central Asia should contribute to Afghanistan's stability via economic contributions to avoid any mass migration of Afghans, among whom some militants might commingle to cross the borders.
- The Central Asian countries, especially Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, should engage diplomatically and encourage the Islamic Emirate to form an inclusive government that comprises all ethnic groups to mitigate ethnically motivated grievances. An inclusive government will decrease the potential for any new civil war and insecurity because all ethnic groups will see themselves in the government and sharing political power.
- Central Asia should include Tajikistan—and encourage it to join—in its de facto collective approach of refraining from conflict in Afghanistan and instead engage economically and diplomatically.
- The Islamic Emirate should establish a security sector that includes members of the former government security and defence forces to secure Afghanistan's border as well as to consolidate its power in the countryside.
- The Islamic Emirate should give more importance to Central Asia and, unlike the previous government, not undermine its vital role, especially its economic role. The previous governments were heavily reliant on the United States and the NATO countries, which are far from Afghanistan. Working with neighbours will be cheaper and more practical.

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