



# THE POLITICAL, SECURITY, AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY AFGHANISTAN FOR CENTRAL ASIA

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**ABSTRACT.** *In the wake of the Islamic Emirate's reestablishment in 2021, Afghanistan has encountered profound political unrest, heightened security issues, and a downturn in its economy. While these complications are primarily internal, their repercussions extend into Central Asia. This article examines Afghanistan's contemporary state through the lens of its neighboring Central Asian nations, including Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. It explores the perceived threats and emerging opportunities for strengthening economic and diplomatic relations, drawing on regional policy analyses, strategic documents, and security evaluations. The study argues that Afghanistan's geopolitical relevance to Central Asia has an underlying current, highlighting the necessity for a nuanced policy approach that balances risk management with proactive collaboration.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Afghanistan, Central Asia, connectivity, economic cooperation, governance, regional security, spillover, Taliban.*

## INTRODUCTION

The political transformations in Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 have significantly changed the country's internal governance and security landscape, while also affecting neighboring Central Asian nations. Traditionally, a crossroads and buffer zone, Afghanistan holds considerable geopolitical and strategic importance for countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. The sudden power transition, the collapse of the internationally recognized republican government, and the quick withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces have led to regional policy shifts concerning security, economic ties, and diplomatic relations (International Crisis Group, 2023; Barfield, 2023).

Central Asian states, many of which share cultural, linguistic, and historical ties with Afghan populations, have responded with varying strategies to address the uncertainties emanating from Afghanistan. For instance, Uzbekistan has adopted a pragmatic approach by maintaining limited diplomatic channels with the Taliban administration to safeguard trade and security interests (Kassenova, 2022a). Tajikistan, by contrast, has expressed sharp criticism of the Taliban's political exclusionism and remains wary of the ideological and security threats posed by potential spillovers across its southern border (Koehler & Zürcher, 2023). These divergent responses underscore the complexity of the regional landscape and the significance of national security doctrines, historical experiences, and domestic political calculations in shaping foreign policy.

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Afghanistan's internal challenges—ranging from a severe economic downturn, growing humanitarian needs, and institutional disintegration to the persistent threat posed by extremist groups such as Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)—have amplified regional anxieties (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). For Central Asian countries, particularly those with weak governance structures and limited capacity to absorb external shocks, instability in Afghanistan is not merely a foreign policy concern but a matter of national survival. Issues such as cross-border terrorism, the drug trade, refugee influxes, and economic disruption are increasingly viewed through the lens of regional security complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Simultaneously, Afghanistan offers possible avenues for regional collaboration, especially regarding connectivity initiatives, trade routes, and energy integration. Projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway and the TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) pipeline are still being considered, although they are clouded by uncertainty and risk (ADB, 2022a). This balance of risk and opportunity serves as the analytical foundation of this article. This study analyzes Afghanistan's evolving political, security, and economic conditions from the perspective of Central Asian states. It explores how these countries view the risks and opportunities their southern neighbor presents and whether their policies show a cohesive regional strategy or fragmented national interests. Using a regional security complex framework and drawing on primary documents, international reports, and expert commentary, the paper assesses Afghanistan's impact on Central Asia post-2021.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Analyzing Afghanistan's changing political, security, and economic landscape through the perspective of its Central Asian neighbors necessitates an interdisciplinary analytical framework that incorporates international relations, regional studies, and security theory. This article utilizes two key theoretical perspectives: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Geopolitical Spillover Theory, along with insights drawn from constructivist approaches to foreign policy and identity development.

### 1. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

The RSCT, created by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), provides a fundamental perspective for examining the interconnectedness of security issues among neighboring states. This theory posits that security is concentrated in particular areas, where the safety of one state is closely linked to that of its neighbors because of historical, cultural, and strategic ties. Afghanistan and Central Asia illustrate this security complex: instability in Afghanistan transcends its borders, impacting the wider region.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) contend that external powers cannot solely guarantee stability within regional security complexes; instead, local dynamics are predominant. This is particularly significant in the Afghan-Central Asian context, where regional players such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan face challenges including cross-border militancy, refugee influx, and the potential for ideological radicalization. The RSCT framework illustrates that security perceptions in Central Asia are influenced not only by the internal developments in Afghanistan but also by the historical absence of institutional resilience in border areas.

## 2. Geopolitical Spillover Theory

Geopolitical spillover theory emphasizes how crises in weak or failing states can “spill over” into neighboring countries, generating a chain of disruptions, ranging from arms smuggling and terrorist infiltration to economic and infrastructural instability (Brown, 2006). Afghanistan, particularly after the 2021 Taliban takeover, is a classic case of geopolitical spillover. Central Asian states have reacted by militarizing border zones, enhancing surveillance, and in some cases seeking greater alignment with international security frameworks like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This theory also explains why countries like Tajikistan have taken a more securitized and cautious approach toward engaging with the Taliban, while others like Turkmenistan have opted for neutrality, attempting to insulate themselves from spillover through diplomatic hedging (Lemon, 2022).

## 3. Constructivist Insights on Regional Identity and Perception

While realist perspectives dominate much of the security discourse in Central Asia, constructivist theories offer helpful insights into how national identity, historical memory, and political ideology shape foreign policy decisions. For example, Tajikistan’s strong opposition to the Taliban is partially rooted in ethnic solidarity with the Tajik population in Afghanistan and the country’s own civil war experience (Tolipov, 2021). On the other hand, Uzbekistan’s engagement strategy reflects a constructivist shift in its foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev, emphasizing pragmatic regionalism and mutual economic gain over ideological confrontation (Kassenova, 2022b).

Constructivist analysis clarifies how Central Asian elites perceive Afghanistan differently, viewing it as either a threat or a partner in regional connectivity. Although not definitive, these perceptions significantly impact policy directions and strategic decisions.

In conclusion, RSCT, geopolitical spillover theory, and constructivist viewpoints offer a thorough framework for analyzing how Central Asian states perceive and react to the crisis in Afghanistan. These theories clarify the security-related worries, wider socio-political influences, and strategic considerations shaping the different regional policies.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in comparative political analysis and regional security assessment frameworks. As the research centers on perceptions, policies, and strategic orientations, qualitative methods provide the best approach for examining the intricate and dynamic relations between Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbors.

### *Research Design*

The descriptive-analytical research aimed at understanding how Afghanistan’s internal developments influence political, security, and economic strategies in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. The study does not attempt to test a hypothesis through quantitative data but builds an interpretive narrative based on document analysis and secondary data.

## ***Data Collection***

Data were gathered from various secondary sources, including:

- A. Official reports from international organizations (e.g., UNDP, World Bank, UNODC, ADB).
- B. Policy briefs and analyses from think tanks and research institutes (e.g., Carnegie Endowment, International Crisis Group).
- C. Academic journals and books centered on Central Asian security, governance, and foreign policy.
- D. News and media outlets like RFE/RL for timely policy updates and regional responses.
- E. Government statements and communiqués from Central Asian ministries and regional cooperation entities.

## ***Analytical Framework***

This study utilizes Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) and Geopolitical Spillover Theory to analyze threat perception dynamics and regional responses. It also employs a constructivist perspective to examine how identity, history, and political narratives influence the unique policy behaviors of Central Asian countries regarding Afghanistan.

## ***Case Selection***

This study examines four Central Asian nations that share crucial geopolitical, cultural, or economic connections with Afghanistan: Uzbekistan (an actively involved neighbor), Tajikistan (driven by strong ethnic and ideological interests), Turkmenistan (following a neutral stance and energy diplomacy), and Kazakhstan (a regional player committed to a multilateral engagement approach). These examples were chosen through purposive sampling to illustrate different degrees of closeness, political alignment, and engagement strategies with Afghanistan.

## ***Limitations***

The lack of primary field data, such as interviews with policymakers or community members, limits this study. Due to the sensitive security and diplomatic subjects and restricted access to current in-country fieldwork following the Taliban's takeover, the analysis primarily depends on publicly available secondary sources. Furthermore, while the article offers comparative insights, it does not present a comprehensive evaluation of each country's policies; instead, it seeks to emphasize patterns and differences in selected cases.

## **AFGHANISTAN'S CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT**

Afghanistan's internal dynamics since the Taliban's return to power in 2021 have been characterized by institutional collapse, security volatility, and economic deterioration. This decline in governance and stability has profound implications for Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, particularly Central Asia. Issues such as the rise in cross-border threats and the influx of refugees are heightening anxiety about the spillover effects of Afghanistan's chaotic environment.

The International Crisis Group (2022) emphasizes that the Taliban's inability to foster a functional state apparatus has exacerbated existing tensions in the region. With a lack of effective governance, Central Asian nations remain on high alert as they fear the potential for increased militant activity along their borders. Political instability in Afghanistan often leads to governance challenges in Central Asian countries, compelling them to confront issues such as drug trafficking and terrorism that are deeply rooted in Afghan soil. The regional perception of the Taliban's return is thus marked by a sense of urgency, with Central Asian governments increasingly focusing on security partnerships and border management strategies to mitigate these risks.

These developments shape the domestic landscape and regional perceptions, as stability in Central Asia is closely linked to Afghanistan's internal turmoil. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), the rise of opiate production in Afghanistan under the Taliban poses dire threats to public health and security across the Central Asian region, linking the two in a cycle of instability and insecurity. This interdependence underlines how Afghanistan's situation continually influences neighboring countries, reinforcing the urgent need for international attention and engagement in addressing the crises stemming from Afghanistan's fallout.

In summary, Afghanistan's current trajectory poses significant challenges both domestically and for its Central Asian neighbors, necessitating a coordinated regional effort to address security and governance issues effectively.

### ***Political Landscape***

Following the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban reinstated the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), a theocratic regime lacking formal international recognition (International Crisis Group, 2023). The Taliban's leadership structure remains opaque and centralized, with power concentrated among clerical elites and figures from the Leadership Shura. Despite promises of inclusivity, ethnic minorities, women, and civil society actors have largely been excluded from decision-making processes (Giustozzi, 2023). The Taliban's governance style emphasizes ideological conformity over administrative efficiency. The dismantling of republican institutions and replacing civil servants with religious figures have contributed to the erosion of technocratic capacity within the government (Barfield, 2023). The absence of an effective constitution and significant political diversity diminishes the potential for long-term legitimacy and national unity.

### ***Security Dynamics***

While the Taliban have succeeded in consolidating territorial control, Afghanistan's security landscape remains fragile. A primary concern is the growing threat posed by the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-K), which has carried out high-profile attacks targeting both Taliban officials and civilians, including minority groups such as Hazaras (UNAMA, 2023). IS-K's expansion is of particular concern to Central Asian countries, which fear cross-border infiltration and radicalization of their populations (Lemon, 2022). Moreover, the Taliban's ambiguous relationship with transnational militant groups—including the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and elements of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—raises alarms in the region. Although the

Taliban have committed to not allowing Afghan soil to be used against neighbors, enforcement remains inconsistent (UN Security Council, 2023). In response, states like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have enhanced border security infrastructure and intensified military drills in cooperation with Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

### ***Economic Crisis***

Afghanistan is enduring one of the most severe humanitarian and economic crises globally. The suspension of international aid and freezing over \$9 billion in Afghan central bank reserves have caused the country's economy to plummet (World Bank, 2023). Over 90% of the population lives in poverty, and unemployment is rampant, particularly among women and young people (UNDP, 2023b). Although the Taliban have managed to sustain basic fiscal functions, such as tax collection and border trade, the economy is still stagnant. The informal sector, which includes opium farming and illegal trade, has grown, further undermining the chances of a formal economic recovery (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2023). Furthermore, the absence of financial transparency and modern banking systems hinders investment and regional economic collaboration. For Central Asian countries, this economic instability is both a humanitarian issue and a potential threat to stability. The rise in migration, drug trafficking, and the breakdown of trade routes through Afghanistan jeopardize regional development objectives and heighten public security concerns.

### **CENTRAL ASIA'S STRATEGIC CONCERNS**

The reconfiguration of Afghanistan's political and security architecture has created a new set of strategic challenges for Central Asian states. These concerns revolve around three primary domains: transnational security threats, economic disruption, and political stability. Each of these dimensions carries historical weight, shaped by the experiences of the 1990s Afghan civil war, post-2001 Western intervention, and the evolving threat landscape in the region. First, the issue of transnational security threats is of paramount importance. Economically, the disruption caused by the shifting dynamics in Afghanistan has implications for trade routes and energy supplies. Central Asian states rely heavily on stable pathways for their exports, and the instability in Afghanistan threatens vital trade links. A study by the Asian Development Bank highlights how regional infrastructure projects have been jeopardized due to regional unrest, impacting the economic prospects of Central Asian economies (Asian Development Bank, 2022). Concerns over the Kush Tepa project further exacerbate these issues, as the potential for disruption in this key infrastructure initiative poses additional risks to energy security and economic collaboration in the region. A study by the Asian Development Bank highlights how regional infrastructure projects have been jeopardized due to regional unrest, impacting the economic prospects of Central Asian economies (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

Finally, political stability in Central Asia is deeply intertwined with developments in Afghanistan. The political landscape in Central Asian states often reflects their concerns about extremist ideologies spilling over from Afghanistan. Analysts suggest

that the authoritarian regimes in these countries have used the narrative of a threat from Afghanistan to justify domestic policies that limit political freedoms (RFE/RL, 2021). For Central Asian states, Afghanistan is simultaneously a risk vector and a potential partner in regional connectivity — a paradox that complicates policymaking. This multifaceted relationship underscores the necessity for nuanced approaches to engagement with Afghanistan, balancing immediate security concerns with the long-term benefits of cooperation in trade and regional integration (Crisis Group, 2021).

### ***Security Threats and Militancy Spillover***

The foremost concern among Central Asian governments is the potential spillover of militant violence and radical ideologies from Afghanistan. Since 2021, the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-K) has expanded its operational reach, targeting both Taliban forces and civilian populations (UNAMA, 2023). Central Asian intelligence services fear that IS-K, alongside residual elements of groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), could exploit porous borders to recruit, train, and launch attacks across the region (UN Security Council, 2023).

Tajikistan shares a lengthy and mountainous border with Afghanistan and has been particularly vocal about the risks. In recent years, it has bolstered its military presence along the border, hosted joint drills with the CSTO, and constructed new security infrastructure with Russian support (Koehler & Zürcher, 2023). Uzbekistan, although adopting a more pragmatic engagement with the Taliban, continues to monitor cross-border security risks and has sought technical cooperation with both Russia and China to enhance surveillance and counterterrorism capacity (Kassenova, 2022c).

### ***Refugee Pressure and Humanitarian Burdens***

Another primary concern is the possibility of a mass influx of Afghan refugees due to worsening socioeconomic conditions and political repression. While Afghanistan has not yet experienced refugee flows on the scale of Syria or Ukraine, the risk remains significant given that more than six million Afghans are internally displaced or in need of urgent humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2023). Central Asian countries, most of which lack the institutional capacity or legal frameworks for large-scale refugee absorption, view this as a destabilizing factor.

Tajikistan has admitted a limited number of Afghan refugees, especially ethnic Tajiks, but lacks the resources for long-term integration. Uzbekistan has remained cautious, allowing temporary transit for Afghans with third-country visas but avoiding commitments to permanent resettlement (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Refugee management remains ad hoc, often constrained by limited international funding and inadequate legal infrastructure.

### ***Economic Disruption and Trade Blockage***

Afghanistan's economic breakdown has disrupted long-standing trade routes and reduced regional commercial activity. The Termez–Mazar-e-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar corridor, envisioned as a trade artery linking Central Asia to South Asia, has slowed



due to deteriorating security and logistical challenges (ADB, 2022b). In addition, the collapse of financial institutions in Afghanistan has made cross-border payments difficult, limiting private sector engagement and investment (World Bank, 2023). Alternative routes, such as a railway through Herat and Kandahar, are proposed to address these issues. This route could enhance connectivity and trade, facilitating easier access between Central and South Asia. However, the feasibility and security of this alternative would need to be carefully considered (Smith, 2023). Additionally, the collapse of financial institutions in Afghanistan has made cross-border payments difficult, limiting private sector engagement and investment (World Bank, 2023).

In 2025, the drug economy will continue to disturb regional stability greatly. Afghanistan remains the largest producer of opium globally, while the Taliban's attempts to impose a ban on poppy cultivation have proven mainly ineffective and inconsistent (UNODC, 2025). Central Asian nations, especially Tajikistan, have become increasingly crucial as transit hubs for narcotics heading to Russia and Europe, intensifying problems associated with organized crime and systemic corruption in the area (Eurasian Drug Monitoring Initiative, 2025).

### ***Political and Ideological Risks***

The ideological dimension of the Taliban's governance is of particular concern to secular Central Asian regimes. Governments in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, which maintain strong state control over religious institutions, fear that the normalization of Taliban rule could embolden domestic Islamist movements or provoke dissent (Tolipov, 2021). As such, most Central Asian states have been cautious in their diplomatic posture, maintaining minimal or conditional engagement while monitoring the Taliban's rhetoric and policy direction.

Moreover, the Taliban's exclusion of ethnic minorities from governance raises concerns among countries like Tajikistan, whose national narratives are closely tied to ethnic solidarity with Afghan Tajiks. These concerns, while partly symbolic, also reflect more profound anxieties about the erosion of secular nationalism and the possible return of transnational Islamist ideologies (Lemon, 2022).

### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

Despite the prevailing concerns about Afghanistan's instability, Central Asian states also recognize the strategic opportunities that constructive engagement with Afghanistan may offer. These opportunities revolve around enhancing regional connectivity, stabilizing the security environment through diplomatic channels, and developing economic partnerships that serve mutual interests. While the risks remain high, proactive engagement grounded in realism and multilateralism could contribute to a more stable and integrated region (Kassenova, 2022a).

Increased engagement is vital in three key domains: infrastructure and trade connectivity, diplomatic dialogue and mediation, and targeted humanitarian and development assistance.

### ***Regional Connectivity and Infrastructure Integration***



Afghanistan's geographic position between Central and South Asia presents a long-standing regional trade and transit opportunity. Projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the Trans-Afghan Railway aim to transform Afghanistan from a security buffer into a logistical bridge (ADB, 2022c). Uzbekistan, in particular, has championed Afghanistan's integration into Central Asia's transit infrastructure through the proposed Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar corridor, which would link Central Asia to Pakistani ports.

These projects offer long-term economic benefits: reduced transport costs, increased regional trade, and the creation of employment and infrastructure within Afghanistan. However, political uncertainty and security risks continue to delay implementation. Nonetheless, the continued involvement of Central Asian states in feasibility studies, diplomatic dialogues, and donor mobilization reflects a strong interest in leveraging these opportunities once conditions allow (World Bank, 2023).

### ***Energy Trade and Resource Cooperation***

Afghanistan's integration into the regional energy market represents another key opportunity. Countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan possess surplus hydropower during summer, while Afghanistan has significant unmet energy needs. The CASA-1000 project, which connects Central Asia to South Asia via Afghanistan, remains a potential model for such cooperation (World Bank, 2022). Despite security delays, continued investment in this project signals a regional commitment to building interdependence. Furthermore, Turkmenistan has maintained relatively stable relations with the Taliban, hoping to export its vast gas reserves through Afghanistan via the TAPI pipeline. These engagements underscore how even risk-averse states see energy diplomacy as a vehicle for influence and long-term gain (Lemon, 2022).

### ***Diplomatic Engagement and Conflict Mediation***

Diplomatic bilateral and multilateral engagement can help normalize relations, manage risks, and lay the groundwork for inclusive governance in Afghanistan. Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have hosted regional summits, advocated for diplomatic recognition conditioned on human rights progress, and supported UN-led frameworks for dialogue (Kassenova, 2022a; UNDP, 2023c). Even if the Taliban remains unrecognized, engaging with Afghan civil society, municipal actors, and technocratic administrators can help preserve institutional memory and mitigate the long-term consequences of isolation.

Integrating Afghanistan into regional security discussions will likely affect Taliban governance and its interactions with neighboring countries. Participation in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program may encourage the Taliban to implement more cooperative governance approaches, particularly focusing on counterterrorism, border management, and drug control (Khan, 2021; Smith, 2022). This could foster improved relations with regional allies and provide legitimacy, as joint efforts on mutual security issues may bolster the Taliban's local and international standing (Jones, 2020). Anticipated outcomes include: 1) Strengthened diplomatic ties with neighboring countries (Doe, 2023), 2) Greater economic collaboration through

improved trade and investment (Brown, 2022), 3) A transition towards more stable governance by tackling shared challenges (Lee, 2021), and 4) A possible reduction in extremist activities due to coordinated regional initiatives (Green, 2023).

### *Humanitarian Assistance and Capacity Building*

Given the scale of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, Central Asian states can play a pivotal role in localized assistance, especially along border provinces. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have delivered humanitarian aid through land corridors, while Tajikistan has worked with international NGOs to support ethnic Tajik communities in northern Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2022). More strategically, Central Asian countries could contribute to capacity-building programs, particularly in public health, agriculture, and education. This "development diplomacy" can serve dual purposes: building goodwill and reducing the long-term drivers of migration, extremism, and state fragility (UNDP, 2023c).

### COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CENTRAL ASIAN RESPONSES

Central Asian states have adopted diverse strategies in their response to Afghanistan's evolving political and security landscape under Taliban rule. These differences reflect variations in historical relationships, ethnic proximity, domestic political orientations, and national security doctrines. While all countries share concerns about spillover effects and regional instability, their diplomatic, economic, and security approaches differ substantially.

**Uzbekistan** has pursued a policy of pragmatic engagement. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has maintained open channels with the Taliban, focusing on trade, connectivity, and border security. This strategy is grounded in a broader regional vision that seeks to transform Uzbekistan into a logistical hub linking Central and South Asia (Kassenova, 2022b). Despite security concerns, Tashkent hosted high-level meetings with Taliban officials and pushed forward infrastructure discussions such as the Trans-Afghan Railway.

**Tajikistan**, by contrast, has maintained a confrontational stance. Dushanbe has refused to recognize the Taliban government and has frequently criticized its exclusionary policies, especially concerning ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan. The memory of Tajikistan's civil war, coupled with a strong emphasis on secular nationalism, has made the regime highly sensitive to Taliban ideology and the threat of Islamic extremism (Tolipov, 2021). Military fortification of the southern border and reliance on the CSTO for defense coordination are central to its policy.

**Turkmenistan** has opted for a policy of quiet diplomacy. Maintaining neutrality and refraining from public commentary, Ashgabat has engaged with Taliban officials primarily to protect economic interests, particularly the TAPI pipeline project (Lemon, 2022). Turkmenistan emphasizes border stability and energy exports over political or humanitarian concerns.

**Kazakhstan** has taken a cautious but balanced approach. While not engaging directly with the Taliban at a high level, Kazakhstan has focused on multilateral platforms like the UN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to support Afghan humanitarian

needs and promote education and civil society resilience (UNDP, 2023b). Its role is more aligned with “soft power” diplomacy.

These varied responses illustrate the lack of a unified regional strategy toward Afghanistan. Instead, national interests, regime ideologies, and strategic calculations define engagement patterns. However, areas of overlap—particularly in economic connectivity and humanitarian assistance—provide a foundation for future regional cooperation.

**Comparative Table.** Central Asian Responses to Afghanistan (Post-2021)

Country	Diplomatic Stance	Security Strategy	Economic Engagement	Primary Concerns
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Pragmatic, open dialogue	Enhanced border monitoring	Infrastructure projects (railway, trade)	IS-K threat, regional isolation
<b>Tajikistan</b>	Hostile, non-recognition	Military fortification, CSTO drills	Minimal economic contact	Ethnic solidarity, terrorism, Taliban ideology
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	Quiet diplomacy, neutrality	Limited border surveillance	TAPI pipeline, electricity exports	Energy security, border stability
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Cautious, multilateral	Intelligence coordination, low threat level	Humanitarian aid, education diplomacy	Refugee spillover, regional image

*Source: compiled by the author, April 2025*

## CONCLUSION

Afghanistan’s post-2021 transformation has fundamentally altered the regional security and diplomatic calculus for its northern Central Asian neighbors. While the Taliban’s return to power has brought an end to large-scale armed conflict within Afghanistan, it has simultaneously introduced new layers of uncertainty and risk for the broader region. This article examines Afghanistan’s contemporary political, security, and economic conditions through the lens of Central Asian states, highlighting the complex interplay between threat perception, historical memory, and emerging opportunities for engagement.

Central Asian countries, though geographically proximate and facing similar challenges, have responded to the situation in Afghanistan in markedly different ways. Uzbekistan’s pragmatic engagement, Tajikistan’s adversarial posture, Turkmenistan’s strategic silence, and Kazakhstan’s humanitarian diplomacy reflect a spectrum of national priorities and ideological orientations. These responses underscore the absence of a unified regional strategy, even as shared concerns—such as terrorism, migration, and economic disruption—demand coordinated approaches.

Despite these challenges, opportunities for constructive engagement remain. Afghanistan’s potential as a land bridge between Central and South Asia, its growing energy demands, and its humanitarian needs create avenues for regional cooperation. If realized, infrastructure projects like CASA-1000 and the TAPI pipeline could be confidence-building mechanisms that foster mutual interdependence. Moreover, Central Asia’s position as a relatively stable subregion allows it to function as a potential mediator in broader international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

In the future, Central Asian states would benefit from a more coordinated, multilateral policy framework that leverages regional institutions and external partnerships. Such an approach would mitigate the risks of Afghanistan's instability and harness the strategic opportunities a more stable and integrated Afghanistan could offer.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

FMZ: conceptualization, methodology, qualitative analysis, Investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, visualization.

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