

# Central Asia Opens the Door to Afghanistan

Central Asia is actively engaging Afghanistan on several fronts, but it will take discipline to realize those plans.

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The Central Asia states are redrawing the boundary of their region, so the cartographers will have to run to keep up.

“Central Asia” as a defined place of states and borders is a recent idea, dating to the immediate post-Soviet period when the former republics of Soviet Central Asia – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan – declared that Central Asia should include the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan. In 2018, Central Asia is again growing to include the neighbor to the south, Afghanistan.

Central Asia is actively engaging Afghanistan on several fronts, all of which will be necessary if Afghanistan is to join its neighbors as a “normal country.” But projects will need to be executed in a disciplined fashion, unlike efforts such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas **pipeline**, which since 1995 has generated political maneuvering but no gas.

Central Asia and Afghanistan are the “in between” states and must hang together, as the man said, so they can deal successfully with the regional hegemons, Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran, and solicit balancing by the regional influencers, the United States, the EU, Turkey, and India.

Connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia will most immediately offer Afghanistan a northern route to Central Asia, across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, and on to Europe. The northern option will motivate Pakistan and Iran to upgrade their infrastructure, secure their territory, and reduce corruption if they want to take part in the export of Afghanistan’s abundant **minerals**, estimated to be worth more than \$3 trillion.

And offering Afghanistan a northern aperture will enable Kabul to be more assertive in its dealings with Pakistan over Islamabad’s sanctuaries for the Taliban and Haqqani Network. It will offer Afghanistan some strategic depth, the irony of which will probably be lost on Pakistan.

Most importantly, becoming part of Central Asia will expand Afghans’ mental vistas as they see the success of positive role models like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

It seems like a curious lash-up: **middle income**, multiethnic, secular Muslim societies with industry and infrastructure, and the very definition of a failed state, riven by religious extremism, tribalism, and criminality. But that’s not how the locals see it, according to regional observer, Dr. S. Frederick Starr, who says, “It is accepted as given that Afghanistan is part of Central Asia.”

And the connections between the states predate the Soviet Union, the most common reference for the configuration of the region. The Soviets used borders to divide the peoples of a region governed previously by khanates and emirates and without fixed borders. They then installed a north-south transportation system, oriented to Moscow (and the region still lacks good east-west transport links).

As a result of the Soviet borders, each Central Asian state is multiethnic, and Afghanistan is no different as it hosts Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz, and Uzbek is recognized by the Afghan constitution as an **official language**. These links of language and culture will ease the integration of Afghanistan into Central Asia, as the people on both sides of the Amu Darya see it as not a barrier, but a pathway.

And the local people are eager to explore their shared history: In 2016, an Uzbek delegation restored and landscaped the tomb of **Alisher Navoi**, the national poet of Uzbekistan, who is buried in Herat, Afghanistan. The Uzbeks also reconstructed the Herat mausoleum of the painter, **Kamoliddin Behzod**.

So, what are the Central Asian countries doing?

Initially only those countries with healthy natural resource endowments – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan – will be able to put “bucks on the ground.” Of these, Turkmenistan’s neutrality may make it slow to engage with Kabul, though regional initiatives may draw it out. In the near term, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as the Central Asian countries with the largest economy and the largest population, respectively, will take the lead.

In Afghanistan, **Kazakhstan** provided developmental assistance, military medics, and Explosive Ordnance Disposal units for demining missions. And Kazakhstan, together with Uzbekistan, provided early and **continuing** support for U.S. requests to ship military equipment to Afghanistan, allowing the coalition to avoid the on-again, off-again transit routes through Pakistan. The military shipments were also a valuable proof of concept demonstration of the cooperation required for a regional transport system.

And since 2015, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan have worked to improve **trade ties** and more recently created a **joint transit company** to facilitate trade between the countries.

In Uzbekistan, the transfer of power to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, with the death in 2016 of longtime leader Islam Karimov, has seen a flurry of diplomatic activity as Tashkent upgraded ties to its neighbors.

In March, Uzbekistan welcomed Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on his second visit to the country and hosted a **conference** that declared “strong backing for the National Unity Government’s offer to launch direct talks with the Taliban, without any preconditions.” Tashkent then offered to host peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban. Uzbek President Mirziyoyev set the tone for the event when he declared, “Afghanistan’s security is Uzbekistan’s security.”

Uzbekistan plans to build on its past efforts in Afghanistan. In 2011, it completed an Asian Development Bank **project** to extend its rail line from the entrepot of Termez to Mazar-i-Sharif, which is now responsible for about half of Afghanistan’s **imports**.

Tashkent recently **pledged** \$500 million to the construction of the \$1.8 billion, 657 km rail line from Mazar-i-Sharif to Herat in the northwest, near the borders of Iran and Turkmenistan.

In 2009, Uzbekistan commissioned a 150 megawatt electric transmission line from Tashkent to Kabul, and in March 2018 it **announced** it would soon start work on the 260-kilometer Surkhan-Pul-e-Khumri line to increase electricity exports to Afghanistan by 70 percent. Just for good measure, Mirziyoyev ordered that the rate for electricity deliveries to Afghanistan be dropped from \$0.076 to \$0.05 per kilowatt.

During Ghani's first visit to Tashkent in December 2017, the governments **confirmed** 20 bilateral agreements in numerous areas, such as protection of the Termez–Hairaton bridge (the “Friendship Bridge”), the implementation of the Mazar-i-Sharif–Herat railway line, the implementation of the construction of the Surkhan-Pul-e-Khumri power transmission line, legal assistance in civil, family and criminal cases, mutual assistance in customs matters, and cooperation in customs, agriculture, higher education, and air traffic control. The Afghan and Uzbek business communities followed suit by signing \$500 million in contracts.

High-profile infrastructure projects get the most attention, but cooperation in areas like family law, trade, and education have the most potential to positively shape the environment for young citizens of the region. In this vein, the Tashkent State University of Law plans to become the **center** for legal studies in Central Asia and has enrolled students from Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, South Korea, and Azerbaijan in its English-language curriculum, and plans to enroll students from Afghanistan. In addition to growing future generations of advocates who think regionally, the English-language instruction will orient the students away from Russia and to North America and Europe.

What do the region's leaders want? They want to create a zone of trade and tolerance.

Central Asia and Afghanistan must become adept at protecting their sovereignty by balancing among outsiders who may be tempted to consider the region a consequence-free zone in which to contest rivalries. Concerted effort will be required to keep Russian and Pakistani intrusions at bay, while ensuring Saudi Arabia and Iran settle their hash elsewhere. The region's united leaders must ensure China's Belt and Road Initiative doesn't make them subject to Beijing's predatory **creditor imperialism** by being the only option for infrastructure development, so the international community's support for regional efforts such as the **CASA-100** hydropower project and the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman transport and communication **corridor** must not falter.

The record of the international community in Afghanistan since 2001 can charitably be described as “uneven.” It's time to let the neighbors — who have more at stake than the United States and its coalition partners — apply their cultural affinity and local knowledge to economic growth and opportunity that will offer the young a future other than narcotics trafficking or terrorism.

On May 16, Mirziyoyev will meet President Donald Trump in Washington, D.C. It will be Mirziyoyev's opportunity to explain to the American leader the vision *for* the

region, *by* the region, and to solicit appropriate support by the United States, the EU, and international institutions, such as the World Bank, for the enlarged Central Asia.

What should Washington do?

First, support the region's sovereignty and self-determination. The United States can do this by encouraging multilateral projects to improve infrastructure, connectivity, good governance, and security coordination, so the region can act as a unit in the face of challenges such as Russia's arming of the Taliban. Remarks by American officials that the U.S. and Russia have a **shared interest** in Afghanistan's stability raise doubts locally about America's understanding of Russia's true intentions in the region and are what the diplomats call "unhelpful."

Second, encourage a collective security mindset by supporting the work of groups like the Uzbek-Afghan **joint security commission**. Collective security won't necessarily take the form of troop deployments as Uzbekistan refuses to host foreign military bases or deploy troops outside its territory, and Turkmenistan is neutral, but it will foster productive habits of mind.

Finally, good governance should take precedence over feel-good action, like publicly critiquing each country's presidential elections. Encouraging good governance from the bottom up is smart long-term thinking and more likely to elicit cooperation of the incumbent administrations, who also want to be productive and responsive, if they feel the U.S. government isn't actively working to undermine them.

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