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Central Asia - Afghanistan Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities



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Reviewers: Meirat Omarov, Candidate of political science;
Aidar Kurmashev, PhD in political science.

Authors: Mukhit Assanbayev, Nargiza Umarova, Hamza Boltaev

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The scientific publication examines Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's commitment to maintaining strong relations with Afghanistan amid the implementation of independent foreign policies. It emphasizes the recognition of Afghanistan's stability as essential for regional security and cooperation.

Targeted at policymakers, researchers, and academics, this scientific publication offers a valuable resource for those interested in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan relations with Afghanistan, political collaboration, and regional connectivity.

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Authors







Mukhit Assanbayev	Nargiza Umarova	Hamza Boltaev
Candidate of Political Science, Chief Expert at the Department of International Security, The Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Astana, Kazakhstan)	Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced International Studies, University of World Economy and Diplomacy (Tashkent, Uzbekistan)	Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced International Studies (Tashkent, Uzbekistan)

Foreword and acknowledgements

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are committed to maintaining strong diplomatic and neighborly relations with Afghanistan. This dedication is reflected in their continued engagement with Afghanistan despite international sanctions, guided by independent foreign policy strategies. Central Asia's strategic location has historically intertwined these countries with Afghanistan through shared cultural and economic ties. Recognizing Afghanistan's stability as vital for regional security and prosperity, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, along with other regional players, prioritize cooperation to uphold this stability.

Both nations approach this cooperation pragmatically, carefully balancing concerns over security, economic interests, and management of crucial resources. They view Afghanistan not primarily as a threat but as an important corridor linking Central and South Asia, as well as a key participant in managing shared water resources. Collaborative efforts addressing water challenges alongside political and economic partnerships are seen as essential to ensuring long-term development and regional harmony.

Water resource management forms a critical aspect of these regional interactions, particularly concerning rivers originating in Afghanistan that flow into Central Asia. Issues of water scarcity and competition create significant hurdles for sustainable growth and cross-border collaboration. Afghanistan's intentions to increase water usage upstream risk intensifying shortages downstream, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated dialogue and jointly developed frameworks to ensure fair and sustainable distribution of these vital resources.

1. Political Cooperation between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan: New Horizons of Interaction

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan actively engage with Afghanistan as part of their sufficient foreign policy aimed at fostering stable and constructive neighborly and diplomatic relations. Beyond economic and infrastructural collaboration, political cooperation forms a central pillar of their regional strategy, emphasizing dialogue, mutual trust, and conflict resolution mechanisms. The enhancement of multilateral diplomatic frameworks alongside bilateral cooperation presents significant potential for the advancement of deeper political partnerships, facilitating coordinated efforts on security, governance, and counterterrorism.

New horizons of interaction are evident in strengthened collaboration on the broader regional agenda since intensified political engagement aims to support Afghanistan's stabilization, promote regional security, and foster a conducive environment for sustainable development. Aligning political objectives with economic support of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan contributes to constructing a more cohesive and resilient regional order centered on peace, stability, and shared prosperity.

Despite the sanctions, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan are actively interacting with this country, proceeding from the necessity of conducting their own foreign policy line toward it.

The geostrategic position of the countries of Central Asia has historically linked them with Afghanistan within a single cultural and economic space. In this connection, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other Central Asian countries share the vision of the necessity of preserving stability in Afghanistan, since this directly affects the security of the region. This, in particular, was noted following the results of the 1st meeting of the Special Representatives of the countries of Central Asia in Tashkent on 26 August 2025 (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025).

It is quite natural that the approaches of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to cooperation with Afghanistan have much in common. Thus, Uzbekistan from the outset sought close political and economic ties with its southern neighbor, viewing its stability as the most important foundation for the security and stability of the entire Central and South Asian region. At the same time, Uzbekistan is one of the few countries that has consistently advocated recognizing Afghanistan as an integral part of Central Asia, calling on the international community not to allow the isolation of this country.

During the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit held on 17 September 2021, which took place almost immediately after the Taliban came to power, Uzbekistan's leader Sh. Mirziyoyev called for the unfreezing of Afghanistan's state assets and proposed holding regular high-level SCO-Afghanistan meetings to advance dialogue and cooperation (Saida, 2025).

Similarly, Kazakhstan proceeds from the necessity of preserving Afghanistan's security and stability, advocating the prompt establishment of channels of constructive engagement with the Taliban regime (Assanbayev, 2025). Over the past two years, Kazakhstan has significantly intensified its participation in the process of restoring Afghanistan's economy and is taking part in the implementation of important trade-economic and transit-transport projects in that country. As a result, today Kazakhstan's bilateral cooperation with Afghanistan has acquired a stable and multidimensional form. From humanitarian supplies to joint infrastructure projects and economic missions, Kazakhstan is building its relations with Afghanistan within the framework of a pragmatic partnership (Bapiev, 2025).

At the same time, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan adhere to a pragmatic approach, finding a balance between security requirements and economic opportunities. This approach is based on a strategic vision of Afghanistan not as a source of security problems but as a potential land bridge linking Central Asia with South Asia (Komilov & Aslanov, 2025).

Thus, the political cooperation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with Afghanistan aims to ensure regional security and develop trade and economic ties, within which contacts are maintained with the Afghan authorities and the international community, including for the purpose of implementing joint projects in the field of transit and transport infrastructure development. It should also be noted that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are committed to working jointly with all countries interested in interaction with Afghanistan.

Driving Principles Behind the Political Cooperation with Afghanistan of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

In the context of an unstable geopolitical situation in the world, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan pay special attention to promoting security and stability in Afghanistan, supporting that country's sustainable development, and fostering good-neighborly relations in the region. The course toward achieving these objectives is determined by the following aspects.

Firstly, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan view cooperation with Afghanistan as a key element in maintaining stability in Central Asia and, in this regard, will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, since they regard this policy as part of a broader strategy for maintaining stability in the region (Bapiev, 2025).

Secondly, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are interested in establishing channels of constructive dialogue between Afghanistan and the international community, but will continue to adhere to a principled approach toward Afghanistan, promoting international dialogue with the Islamic Emirate in coordination with the international community, above all with the United Nations. As Abdulaziz Kamilov, Special Representative of the President of Uzbekistan for foreign policy issues, states in this regard, *"a full-fledged dialogue with the participation of Taliban representatives in international formats is simply indispensable today"* (UzDaily.uz, 2025, June 2).

Thirdly, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan believe that the advantages of developing transit potential and trade between the countries of Central and South Asia through the territory of Afghanistan outweigh the risks and challenges. Therefore, Astana and Tashkent are actively participating in the restoration of Afghanistan's economy and in the implementation of important trade-economic and transit-transport projects in the region. Notably, in the coming years, both countries – Kazakhstan (Kalmykov, 2025) and Uzbekistan (Komilov & Aslanov, 2025), each separately – intend to increase the volume of their bilateral trade with Afghanistan to 3 billion US dollars.

Fourth, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan seek constructive dialogue with Western countries regarding engagement in Afghanistan in order to promote realistic approaches to the country's sustainable future. They also consider it necessary to

orient international initiatives toward restoring Afghanistan's economy, stabilizing the situation in the country, and ensuring its sustainable development. At the same time, both countries proceed from the understanding that the process of settling the intra-Afghan dialogue should be directed toward reaching an agreement with the current Afghan authorities, rather than opposing them. Rizoion (2025) notes, *"including for the reason that today there is a revision of the narratives about security, threats, and challenges to the region that were previously systematically imposed by Western countries and have themselves been rendered obsolete by them."*

Thus, the diplomatic activity and foreign policy of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan toward Afghanistan are based on the principles of mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs. The main goal is to overcome the challenges to regional stability through preventive diplomacy and dialogue, both at the bilateral level and within regional and international cooperation formats.

Why Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are Committed to Bilateral Engagement with Afghanistan

The bilateral format of cooperation is a priority direction for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, allowing them to interact directly with Afghanistan without the need to assume political and ideological commitments (put forward by the international community toward the Afghan authorities). This enables the minimization of risks associated with the lack of international legitimacy of the current Afghan authorities and also facilitates direct engagement on key issues, including border protection, infrastructure development, and the creation of trade corridors.

In addition, the bilateral format of cooperation accelerates decision-making compared to multilateral mechanisms, which often require the coordination of numerous interests and have a complex bureaucratic structure.

Thus, unlike multilateral formats, bilateral cooperation represents a more rational and adaptive form of interaction between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. It facilitates effective intergovernmental cooperation on a wide range of issues, minimizing political risks and enabling a focus on specific sectors such as transport and logistics, trade and energy, food security, humanitarian assistance, and border security.

At the same time, the multilateral format is often linked to broader geopolitical interests and collective decision-making, which complicates and slows down interaction. In these circumstances, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are oriented toward a more pragmatic approach through bilateral channels.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan's Approach to Afghanistan: Fostering Stronger Ties Through International Cooperation

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan assess the situation in Afghanistan as a crucial factor for regional and international stability. In this regard, the issues of countering transnational threats (terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration) and preventing the spread of the zone of instability from Afghanistan to the territory of the countries of the region require the joint efforts of the international community and Afghanistan's neighboring states.

To counter transnational threats, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are interested in more active cooperation both with Afghanistan and with neighboring countries – Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Iran, and Pakistan – as well as with external actors such as Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and others.

In this context, Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's interaction with Afghanistan within the framework of international cooperation includes the following:

Firstly, strengthening dialogue on the Afghan issue within the "Central Asia+" format and defending the interests of the region before leading foreign-policy partners (Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, and others).

Secondly, forming and advancing a cross-cutting agenda on the situation in Afghanistan on the platforms of regional and international organizations such as the C5+1, the CICA, the SCO, the CSTO, the OIC, the OSCE, and the UN. Acting in this vein, "Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are interested in ensuring a broader arc of stability, security, and sustainable development in Eurasia" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, 2025), and also seek to give their policy toward Afghanistan international legitimacy, especially on some contentious issues.

Thirdly, engagement with the United States and the European Union in Afghanistan in order to jointly provide economic and humanitarian-technical assistance to the Afghan authorities. In addition, close interaction with Western countries will allow Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to participate in shaping a common vision regarding the situation in Afghanistan and the development of transit-transport routes aimed at linking the economies of Central and South Asia, including on the issue of developing Afghanistan's rare-earth minerals.

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2. On the Question of the Prospects for Developing the Southern Transit Corridor through Central Asia

The foreign policy of the Central Asian countries regarding transport communications focuses on streamlining processes and lowering expenses associated with international freight transportation. This approach aims not only to facilitate smoother cross-border trade but also to enhance the region's overall transit potential. In this regard, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are playing pivotal roles due to their strategic geographic locations and well-developed infrastructure. Both countries are actively driving initiatives to diversify existing trade routes and establish new transit corridors, thereby broadening the range of options for transporting goods through the region. Their efforts significantly contribute to strengthening Central Asia's position in global logistics and expanding its role as a key transit hub between East and West.

The advancement of the southern transit route is considered a top priority because it aims to establish reliable and efficient transport corridors linking key global economies such as China, India, and the European Union. Special emphasis is placed on maximizing the transit capabilities of Iran and Afghanistan, as these countries offer landlocked Central Asia not only access to open sea routes but also entry to growing and lucrative markets.

Two strategically important projects deserve special attention for their potential to dramatically reshape the transport and logistics framework of Central Asia, positioning the region as a central hub for trans-Eurasian transit.

In December 2024, construction began on a railway linking China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan along the route "Kashgar – Torugart – Makmal – Jalal-Abad – Andijan", with a total length of 532.5 km. Work is also underway on the construction of the "China – Tajikistan – Uzbekistan" highway. Both transport arteries have the potential to be extended to the Caspian Sea, providing access to the South Caucasus and Turkey in a manner similar to the Middle Corridor, to Iran with access to Turkey and Europe via the Southern Railway Corridor, or to the Persian Gulf, as well as to Afghanistan with access to South Asia. Such a combination of routes will enable the Central Asian states to significantly increase the export of transport services, thereby improving their economic situation.

However, it should be emphasized that following the construction of the "China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan" railway and its extension to the Turkmenbashi port on the Caspian Sea, a substantial reorientation of freight flows from the "China – Kazakhstan – Caspian Sea ports – Middle Corridor" route toward Europe to the southern branch of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, passing through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, is not expected" (Kholmatov & Ergashev, 2025). It follows that the improvement of the Middle Corridor is necessary only for the two Central Asian countries with direct access to the "Caspian Sea – Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan" – as the shortest and most convenient route for mutual trade with the EU. For the other republics of the region, it will serve as one of several alternative transport routes to external markets.

For Uzbekistan, it is far more efficient to establish transport links with Europe via Iran, as this lays the foundation for the full realization of the country's transit potential. The launch of the "China – Kyrgyzstan –Uzbekistan" railway and its further integration with the Iranian railway network within the framework of a unified SCO transport space (Umarova, 2025) will shorten the trade route between East Asia and Europe by 900 kilometers and reduce cargo delivery time by 7-8 days. As a result, the Southern Railway Corridor will become the shortest single-mode route connecting two economically developed macroregions. It's carrying capacity could increase from the current 1.8 million tons per year to 10 million tons per year. Transit routes from China via Iran are currently in the process of being established. In particular, work is underway to create the railway corridor "China – Kazakhstan – Uzbekistan – Turkmenistan – Iran – Turkey – EU", which leverages Kazakhstan's transit potential. Active steps are also being taken to develop the multimodal route "China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan – Turkmenistan – Iran – Turkey – EU", passing through Kyrgyzstan. Once the international highway from China to the Uzbekistan border via Tajikistan is completed, another efficient land route from China to Europe will be available. All Central Asian states are involved in these processes, allowing them to consolidate their efforts based on shared interests.

A similar multiplier effect is expected through the implementation of Tashkent's second strategic initiative – the construction of the Trans-Afghan (Kabul) railway corridor along the route "Termez – Naybabod – Maidanshahr – Logar – Kharlachi", intended to serve as a transport bridge between Europe, China, and South Asia.

Preliminary estimates suggest that by 2030, the potential cargo flow along this new route could reach up to 22 million tons per year, rising to 34 million tons per year by 2040. The majority of the cargo base will be formed through transit. The integration of the Trans-Afghan corridor with the high-altitude "China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan" railway, as well as with the Northern Corridor, could allow the Central Asian republics to attract an additional 5 to 20 million tons of transit cargo per year, while also providing them with direct access to ports on the Indian Ocean, which they urgently need. Progressive work is underway in this direction.

In 2023, at Uzbekistan's initiative, the process of forming the multimodal route "Belarus – Russia – Kazakhstan – Uzbekistan–Afghanistan – Pakistan – Indian Ocean ports" was launched, effectively realizing the idea of integrating the Northern and Trans-Afghan corridors. The new route, 5,532 km in length, will allow goods to be transported from northern Eurasia to South Asia in 20 days – three times faster than by sea.

Central Asian states have not yet developed a consolidated position regarding the development of Trans-Afghan transport communications. Their attention is divided between two potentially competing projects. Since 2018, Uzbekistan has actively promoted the concept of the Kabul corridor. In 2021, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan adopted a roadmap for the construction of the Trans-Afghan railway, with a preliminary cost of $6.9 billion. In 2023, a project office was opened in Tashkent to promote digital transport corridors, with branches in Kabul and Islamabad. On 17 July 2025, the parties signed a framework intergovernmental agreement in Kabul on the development of a feasibility study for the project (Uzbekistan Temir Yullari JSC, 2025, July 18).

Meanwhile, in July 2024, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan agreed on the joint promotion of another Trans-Afghan railway project along the route "Torgundi – Herat – Kandahar – Spin-Buldak", which will pass through the western provinces of Afghanistan (Primeminister.kz, 2024, July 20).

A month later, Turkmen–Afghan negotiations took place in Kabul, where the delegation of "Turkmendemiryollary" expressed its readiness to finance the construction of the railway from Torgundi station (Afghanistan) to Herat (Alemarahenglish.af, 2024, July 30). On 11 September 2024, Ashgabat began laying the first section of the announced project – the 22-kilometer railway line "Torgundi – Sanobar" (Turkmenportal, 2024, September 11).

On its part, Kazakhstan announced the allocation of $500 million for the construction of the "Torgundi – Herat" railway, planned as the first section of the western branch of the Trans-Afghan railway. The respective agreement was signed in Kabul on July 11, 2025, during a meeting between Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Murat Nurtleu and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Afghanistan for Economic Affairs. As Mullah Baradar stated, this railway project would enhance Afghanistan's transit capabilities and contribute to broader regional economic integration (Umarova & Polyakov, 2025).

The "Torgundi – Herat" trade route could be expanded in three directions simultaneously: toward the borders of Pakistan, Iran, and the Caspian Sea. The latter aligns with the concept of reviving the ancient Lapis Lazuli Corridor, which will connect Herat with Ashgabat, continue to the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi with access to the Baku International Sea Port, and then through Georgia to Ankara and Istanbul. This combination will enable Afghanistan to establish fast and reliable connections with Europe, while simultaneously reducing transit dependence on Iran, Pakistan, and, to a certain extent, Uzbekistan.

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor began operating in 2018, modeled on the ancient route of the Great Silk Road. Recently, Azerbaijan has been actively strengthening its political and economic ties with the Taliban government, engaging in the creation and development of promising trade and transport routes toward South Asia.

On 2 July 2025, on the sidelines of the Organization of Economic Cooperation summit in Khankendi, Azerbaijan, Afghan Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdul Ghani Baradar met with Azerbaijani Prime Minister Ali Asadov, during which Baku's readiness to increase trade with Afghanistan was emphasized (Alemarahenglish.af, 2025, July 2).

The potential for developing supply flows along the South Asia –Caucasus – Europe route was also considered. In effect, this involves expanding the Lapis Lazuli Corridor to Pakistan and India, which would allow the route participants to capture transit cargo from India and the EU. At the same time, this creates a potential risk for the viability of the multimodal corridor "Belarus – Russia – Kazakhstan – Uzbekistan – Afghanistan –Pakistan – Indian Ocean ports", which could result in Uzbekistan losing transit flows.

There is a high probability of integrating the Lapis Lazuli Corridor with the western Trans-Afghan railway along the route "Torgundi – Herat – Kandahar – Spin Buldak", promoted by Ashgabat and Astana as an alternative to the Kabul corridor, which would also conflict with Uzbekistan's interests.

In terms of length, the Kandahar route from the Turkmenistan border to Pakistan (926 km) is longer than the Kabul corridor (647 km); however, it could potentially branch off toward Iran from the western Afghan province of Nimroz, giving the future transport artery an important advantage. Nevertheless, neither Ashgabat nor Astana has committed to this turn toward Iran. Based on official rhetoric, their main goal is access to the Pakistani market, and through it, by sea, to India and the countries of the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan already have a railway connection with Iran, launched in 2014.

Turkmenistan, as the initiator of the alternative Trans-Afghan corridor, is already concerned about its utilization. The choice of Kazakhstan as a partner, bordering Russia, which is highly interested in delivering its products, especially hydrocarbon resources, to the vast South Asian market, is not accidental. Since 2000, Russia, in partnership with India and Iran, has been implementing the International North–South Transport Corridor, which has three transit routes: western, through Azerbaijan; trans-Caspian, across the Caspian Sea; and eastern, through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Reports indicate that a fourth route is expected to emerge, which, from Moscow's perspective, should be the Trans-Afghan railway (Izvestiya.iz, 2024, November 19).

Just a year ago, the Afghan authorities called on Russia and Kazakhstan to join the implementation of this project (TASS.RU, 2023, August 3). The proposal was accepted, with each side having its own motives. Astana supports the construction of both railways because it provides flexibility in choosing a transit country for

connection with Afghanistan, and, in the presence of competition, allows for favorable tariff conditions. A second benefit for Kazakhstan will be its role as a link between Russia and the Central Asian republics bordering Afghanistan. It is precisely this factor that prompted Ashgabat to pursue a long-term partnership with Astana on the Trans-Afghan track.

Thus, the proactive policy of the current Afghan government to expand Afghanistan's transit capabilities on the one hand, and the prioritization of the southern transit route by some Central Asian countries on the other, have brought the region's relations with Kabul to a qualitatively new level. The Central Asian "five" are rapidly developing trade, economic, and investment cooperation with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is implementing a number of joint projects in partnership with the Taliban, the key one being the construction of the railway from Termez to Kharlachi. Over the past year, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have also stepped up their activity, proposing their own variant of the Trans-Afghan corridor with access to Pakistani ports. Both projects will account for potential freight flows from Northern Eurasia to South Asia, thereby providing a stimulus for the region's economic development.

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3. Qush-Tepa Canal Project: Challenges and Opportunities

Achieving regional and international recognition, compounded with the political support from the Afghan community being an utmost importance, in our view, the current Afghan government seems to believe that the successful completion of the Qush-Tepa canal might be the most needed domestic project to signal the international community about the capacity and the competence of the government for delivering such a big infrastructure project.

Historical Overview and Legality of the Project

The main source of water in Central Asia for both agriculture, everyday use, and energy generation is the Amu Darya and Syr Darya Rivers. Thus, the regulation of this life and death source is very important. There are two main regulatory sources in practice for managing water usage in Central Asia. First, the 1992 UN "Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes" (United Nations treaty collection, 17 March 1992), to which only three Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, are the signatories. Second, the 1992 Agreement (Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia, 18 February 1992) between five Central Asian nations "on Cooperation in the Field of Joint Management on Utilization and Protection of Water Resources from Interstate Sources," neither of which oversees Afghanistan. Although the country has joined neither the agreement nor the convention, Afghanistan has some historical agreements with its former neighbour, the Soviet Union. In 1946, Afghanistan signed an agreement with the former Soviet Union for regulating the usage of the Panj river, the main tributary of the Amu Darya (Panfilova, 2023). According to which, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union agreed upon using 9 km^3 out of 19 km^3 of water for the former. In 1977, the soviets tried to negotiate with Afghanistan to minimize the 1946 quota to 6 km^3; however, Afghanistan disagreed, and the sides could not reach an agreement. Due to protracted conflicts and war in the country, Afghanistan's annual water usage was about 2 km^3. Thus, the absence of Afghanistan within existing legal frameworks for the regional water regulations further complicates the matter.

Current construction status

Starting from March 2022, the Qush-Tepa canal construction appears to represent a crucial developmental effort by the current Afghan administration, aimed at showcasing its ability to stimulate economic growth in Afghanistan. Around 5,500 individuals (The Economist, February 16, 2023) are involved, and supported by 3,300 units of technical machinery, the project is continuously advancing its construction objectives.

Although the initial canal construction concept dates to the 1970s, the feasibility analysis of the project was initiated and realized by USAID only in 2018. The Afghan government has so far been trying to convince both its immediate neighbours, who might be gravely affected by the project, and the international community that the Qush-Tepa canal's primary objective is to facilitate irrigation across an estimated 550,000 hectares of land in northern Afghanistan (German Economic Team, 2025). The approximate length of the canal is about 285 km, with a 100-meter width, and 6.5 to 8.5 meters depth. The canal also boasts a maximum discharge capacity of 650 cubic meters per second (m3/s).

Diverted from the Amu Darya's riverbed situated in Kunduz Province, the canal is expected to draw over 10 billion (Water, Peace and Security, 2023) cubic meters of water from the Amu Darya upon its completion. Along with the canal itself, the plan also includes the construction of three reservoirs for water storage and hydroelectric power generation, anticipated to have a capacity to store up to 9 cubic km (km3) of water. Some estimates speculate the potential cost of the project to be around $700 million (German Economic Team, 2025).

According to a construction plan, the canal is expected to be completed in three phases. On 11 October 2023, the "National Development Company" of Afghanistan officially announced (Stanikzai, 2023) the completion of the first phase of the canal construction. The first phase of the project cost about $91m, while funds for the remaining two phases are expected to be generated from the "selling of mines, particularly the Dar-e-Souph Mine" (Located in Kokcha Valley, Badakhshan region of Afghanistan). The construction of the canal is run by the project's main contractor, Afghanistan National Development Company, with more than 200 local subcontractor companies, some 5,500 people, and over 3,300 "bits of machinery".

When completed, the canal will have a capacity of diverting "650 cusec (cubic meters per second) of water" from the Amu Darya River.

Demographic change

Long-lasting practice of forced eviction (HRW, 2021) of the local communities, predominantly minority religious and ethnic groups, in the northern provinces of Afghanistan has even been increased after the fall of Ghani's government in Kabul in August 2021. Such practices were said to be common in Balkh, Faryab, and Jawzjan provinces. Such an artificially driven measure is claimed (Afghanistan International, 2022, November 25) to be a common practice for the Afghan government against the backdrop of Qush-Tepa construction. The completion of the Qush-Tepa project, mixed with a potentially improved irrigation system, will increase the agricultural capacity of the northern provinces. This, in turn, might even speed up the forced transformation of the demographic landscape of the northern provinces through the unfair land distribution scheme of the Afghan government, predominantly giving preferences and certain rights to those who are loyal to them. Some claim that giving lands only *"to insurgents transferred from Pakistan"* and to the people who are not indigenous residents of the area. The claims further state that the purpose is *"to change the demographic structure and erase the identity of the region".*

Geopolitical risks

The speedy construction of this project might probably trigger some unseen geopolitical tensions between Afghanistan and other riparian nations – Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, although the latter seems not so much enthusiastic about taking a lead, facing up to the reality and actively engaging with the former to at least minimize the consequences of the unregulated usage of Amu Darya by any third party in our case Afghanistan. Given that both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are located on the downstream of the Amu Darya River basin, in most cases, their interests converge. The project's geopolitical consequences could increase the geopolitical tensions in the region in the following ways:

First, the climate-driven tensions. Climate change is increasingly playing a greater role in shaping the way the Central Asian nations operate. The last winter and summer were respectively the coldest and the hottest ones in the last several decades (Kun.uz, 2023, January 14). The northern Turkmenistan and the south-

western regions of Uzbekistan are already experiencing these dramatic changes driven by climate caprices; therefore, the Afghan authorities' vigorous pursuit of this project might further fuel the issue. Furthermore, since last year, Uzbekistan has already been suffering from the worst drought in its recent history, caused by the combination of both climate change and transboundary water issues. As both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan experience bad incidents regarding the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan dating back to the Taliban's early takeover of Afghanistan when it's fighters fired several missiles into Uzbekistan in April 2022, and the border skirmish between the fighters in Afghanistan and Turkmenistan border forces in 2014 (Soliev, 2015), the incidents of this kinds may well repeat themselves over the unregulated transboundary water resources between related parties.

Second, geoeconomically induced tensions. This project could potentially turbocharge the possible conflict between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan due to the latter's potential economic downturn caused by a disbalance relative to the population growth and appropriate economic opportunity. Currently, the share of agriculture in Uzbekistan's economy is huge (World Bank Data, 1987-2024), although the country is consciously moving away from the heavy dependence on this sector. On top of this, the demographic landscape also needs urgent attention as the population growth fuels the increase in the labour force. According to "The Global Economy" (1991-2023), Uzbekistan had a 14.04 million labour force in 2022, and it's well on the rise now. The combination of those factors could even further disrupt the normal life in the region's most populous country.

Socio-Economic Challenges for Central Asia
Adverse Water Shortage (Impact on Agriculture)

While the Qush-Tepa canal offers considerable potential for stimulating Afghanistan's domestic economic development, its operation could pose a significant risk of adverse transboundary impacts. The project's full water diversion capacity, estimated at 13 km^3 annually from the Amu Darya River (Feasibility Study Main Report, 2019), might alter regional hydrology with a potential detrimental consequence for downstream nations. A primary concern is the timing of the water abstraction, with over 80% projected to occur during the critical regional planting season.

Furthermore, the canal's implementation would triple Afghanistan's current water usage from the river, increasing it from the existing 5 km^3 to a substantially higher volume. This is particularly significant given that the Amu Darya basin constitutes nearly half of the nation's renewable water resources. Compounding this vulnerability, Afghanistan's susceptibility to recurrent droughts and floods is amplified by insufficient water storage capacity and related infrastructure.

Afghanistan's increased extraction from shared water resources poses significant challenges for downstream riparian states, particularly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. These nations are highly dependent on the Amu Darya, relying on it for over 80% of their renewable water supply, which is predominantly allocated to agricultural irrigation (Umirbekov, Akhmetov & Gafurov, 2022). Adapting to this new hydrological reality would necessitate a multi-year, capital-intensive effort by both countries to reduce their water dependency. This would involve either modernizing irrigation infrastructure for greater efficiency or reducing the extent of irrigated land.

Apart from these hydrological pressures, Central Asia is currently experiencing accelerated climate change. The average temperature level in the region surpasses the global average. Having already risen by 0.5°C over the past thirty years, regional projections indicate a further increase of 2.0°C to 5.7°C by 2085 (SIPRI, 2018). This vulnerability, in turn, diminishes water volumes in key rivers, lakes, and reservoirs. The resultant hydrological regime will be characterized by intensified water stress, accelerated glacier melts leading to short-term flood risks, and a critical long-term reduction in glacial runoff. Consequently, the combination of decreased water availability and more frequent heatwaves poses a substantial threat to agricultural productivity and regional food security.

According to the SIC-ICWC, riparian states in the Amu Darya basin receive only half of their water allocation during dry years, a deficit that has already precipitated significant socio-ecological consequences. Over recent decades, water irregularity has led to the abandonment of approximately 150,000–200,000 hectares of irrigated land in the lower basin. Concurrently, an estimated 400,000 individuals have migrated from northern Uzbekistan, a trend largely attributable to environmental degradation and water scarcity (Abdullaev & Akhmedov, 2024). The impacts are projected to be most acute in regions with high dependency on the river's flow, such as the Uzbek provinces of Karakalpakstan, Khorezm, and Bukhara. Furthermore, agricultural lands in Kashkadarya (75–85% impact) and Surkhandarya (55–65% impact) are expected to face severe water shortages, triggering widespread soil degradation in both cultivated and pastoral areas (Gafurov et al., 2023).

In Turkmenistan, the agricultural sector is critically dependent on the Amu Darya River, with the majority of its irrigated areas supplied by its flow. The country diverts over 30% of the river's water via the Karakum Canal, which is essential for sustaining irrigated agriculture in regions such as Lebap and Dashoguz. A significant reduction in the Amu Darya's flow would therefore disproportionately impact rural communities and the agricultural sector, particularly the state-managed cotton industry.

The socio-economic vulnerability of the region is already acute. As per the World Bank, approximately one-third of Central Asia's population lacks reliable access to safe water (Sara & Proskuryakova, 2022). This baseline scarcity underscores the far-reaching implications of the Qush-Tepa project. In Uzbekistan, a nation where one-third of the population is directly dependent on the Amu Darya for irrigation water, an estimated 7.8 million people currently reside in districts susceptible to flow reductions from the canal. This figure is projected to rise to 8.7 million by 2030, based on current demographic trends. The exposure is similarly high in Turkmenistan, where 47% of the workforce is employed in an agricultural sector that is fundamentally reliant on the river.

Development Project or Blackmailing?

The most crucial aspect of the Qush-Tepa project development process in Northern Afghanistan could be the speedy development of the canal, which the Afghan government is trying to dig without any regard to the construction rules and standards most prevalent today. Current political leadership seems to believe that upon completion, the Qush-Tepa canal is expected to be an important undertaking by the government to provide a reliable source of income for the inhabitants of the northern regions of Afghanistan, since the canal is believed to generate (Qooyash, 2024) up to $ 500 million annually, according to the experts.
Interestingly, the Afghan leadership appears to believe that the project could be regarded as a source of hope for a war-torn society, along with its potential for manipulating the neighbouring countries for the end goal of attaining a certain level of political acknowledgement. As the second phase of this grandiose water project is underway (Eurasianet.org, 2024, April 2) since last October, and according to the principal developer of the project, the National Development Corporation of Afghanistan, the excavation work has progressed by 30 % so far, the Taliban leadership is well underway to achieve its foreign policy priorities.

Obviously, the canal project may purely be devoted to the well-being of the people, as the backers of it put it. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence casting doubt on the narratives about the sole developmental purpose of the project. Thus, several decisions made by the Afghan government regarding this project, such as the selected location for the canal and seemingly hasty construction, suggest that political motivations may be influencing it. This motivation appears to be linked to the Taliban's eagerness to gain recognition first from neighbouring countries and eventually from the international community. In this respect, Uzbekistan, as a downstream nation, could be most affected by the project.

Decision makers in Uzbekistan might also be looking at the Qush-Tepa challenge through the legal lens, which is the possibility of official recognition of the current Afghan government as the legitimate representative of the Afghan people. However, such a risky move could provoke a strong backlash from the international community.

Qush-Tepa: An Opportunity?

Analysing the popular discourse both among decision-makers and academicians in Uzbekistan indicates that Afghanistan is regarded as a part of Central Asia. The most common phrase manifesting this approach is likely to be the expression, such as "Afghanistan is an integral part of Central Asia". The materialisation of this common approach might require the policymakers in Tashkent to look at the canal's construction as a potential for opening the door for the countries of Central Asia, including the Taliban government, to legally include Afghanistan in the greater Central Asia Water System and to further involve Afghanistan in the region of Central Asia. The legal frameworks of water regulation and the infrastructure cooperations could play a key role in this endeavour.

What is Uzbekistan's strategy?

To minimize or even nullify the potential challenge the project might pose, Uzbekistan is actively trying to come up with a practical and pragmatically driven approach. So far, this strategy is manifesting itself through both the active involvement in the construction process itself and increasing economic collaboration with Afghanistan (Economic convergence). In this way, Uzbekistan is hoping to convince the Afghan officials of potential alternatives, such as the development of the northern regions of Afghanistan via increased trade with Uzbekistan's bordering regions with the country (like the Termez cargo Centre and free bordering economic zones) and overall boosted trade cooperation with all Central Asian Countries. Also, Uzbekistan is quite active in the agriculture and irrigation-oriented as well as connectivity-leaning infrastructure developments in Afghanistan. Moreover, Tashkent seems to boost its imports from Afghanistan, expecting it might even boost the mutual interdependency with Kabul. Such a pragmatic strategy could be dubbed an economic convergence.

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