



POLICY BRIEF

Stabilization and Connectivity Uzbekistan's dual-track strategy towards Afghanistan

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This policy brief explores Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan in 2021 and beyond, in light of the ongoing U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The brief discusses how increasing uncertainty surrounding the nature and timing of the U.S. withdrawal could affect Uzbekistan's regional and domestic security. It examines Uzbekistan's future engagement with Afghanistan, highlighting key convergence areas around which Europe and Central Asia could cooperate in Afghanistan and find opportunities for broader engagement beyond the current peace process.

Before the nineteenth century's Russian colonisation of Central Asia and the 'Great Game,' Afghanistan and Central Asia had long been seen by outsiders and residents as a single cultural, civilisational and political space. Geopolitical tensions between the Russian and British Empires interrupted these historical ties for a century until the rise of Afghanistan's communist regime in the 1970s and the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the subsequent independence of Central Asian countries, and the civil war in Afghanistan divided the region once again: Afghanistan became perceived as a security threat from which Central Asian countries must protect themselves.

Since 2016, President Ashraf Ghani's vision of making Afghanistan the "transit roundabout" of the region, and similar proposals from the new Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who advocates for indivisible notions of regional security, stability, and prosperity, have raised new possibilities of convergence between the two countries and beyond. This converging space also presents a new entry point for the European Union (EU) to facilitate deeper regional economic reintegration, all the more important given the signs of U.S. interest in withdrawing from Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan and the Afghan Peace Negotiations: Engaging All Sides

Since 2016, Uzbekistan's leadership and their initiatives have contributed to opening up the country broadly, as well as bringing about closer ties with Afghanistan. This proactive policy

has led to a more dynamic relationship with Kabul, rooted in infrastructure and connectivity schemes and projects. Tashkent is playing a constructive role in the Afghan peace process, working alongside a handful of leading global and regional players attempting to stabilise Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan has begun reaching out to both sides of the conflict, maintaining warm relations with Kabul and gradually developing closer ties with the Taliban. At times this has been somewhat of a tightrope act and not without complication. In reaction to Tashkent's August 2019 state reception of figures from the Taliban's political office, Kabul issued a statement warning that similar future invitations would undermine peace efforts.²

Two days after the opening of the Doha-based Afghan peace negotiations in September 2020, the head of the Taliban's political office, Mullah Ghani Baradar, offered public assurances to Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries regarding threats to their security and economic interests.³ The Taliban's promises were remarkably detailed, with references to specific incidents and directed squarely at fears of spillover and cross-border violence. Baradar has even promised to look favourably on any proposal to move the talks to Samarkand. In return, Tashkent has continued to extend diplomatic legitimacy towards the Taliban, an approach that appears to be aimed at reducing risks stemming from the possible scenarios discussed below.

¹ The project "From Uncertainty to Strategy: What are the odds for future win-win scenarios in Afghanistan's Neighborhood?" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to develop and discuss likely scenarios for Afghanistan's neighbours, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Dr Timor Sharan and Andrew Watkins to discuss the implications of the US withdrawal and the ongoing Afghan Peace Negotiations on existing policy tools, strategic interests, and challenges for key stakeholders in- and outside of Afghanistan. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

² Qishloq Ovozi, (2019), "Uzbekistan Experiences the Pitfalls of Peacemaking in Afghanistan", Radio Free Europe, 24 August 2019.

³ Umida Hashimova, (2020), "Beyond the Intra-Afghan Talks, Uzbekistan Sees a Bright Future", The Diplomat, 21 September 2020.

Space for Cooperation: Complementary Interests

There is genuine space for collaboration and cooperation between the EU, U.S., Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, driven by complementary, rather than competitive, positions: all parties seek to establish new dynamics to preserve regional stability, pending the likely U.S./NATO disengagement from Afghanistan. After the 2014 U.S. military drawdown, the Afghan government under President Ghani has pushed for regional economic and trade integration, working closely with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Today, this orientation is taking place amid a recalibration of foreign relations meant to ensure Kabul's political survival, and now comes with active encouragement from the U.S. and EU. For the EU, encouraging Kabul's regional approach dovetails neatly with 2019's joint EU-Central Asia communication that promised partnership for resilience, prosperity, and interconnectivity.

Deepening Economic Cooperation

Tashkent foresees vast economic and political opportunities in Afghanistan, especially after a peace settlement, which is intertwined with its aspirational dream of establishing itself as the dominant power in Central Asia and beyond. This is evidenced by its offer to host future intra-Afghan talks, which could provide Uzbekistan with the potential to burnish its image as an up-and-coming regional power, garner international recognition and prestige, and allow it to influence Afghan politics. Tashkent already enjoys some economic power with its neighbour: in 2019, the total value of exports from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan surpassed half a billion dollars, with the potential for that amount to triple by 2024. Given the fertile ground of an already existing relationship, Uzbekistan's hopes and the EU's stated goals in Central Asia, the EU could easily fold its various regional engagements into broader Central Asia-Afghanistan-South Asia initiatives and dialogue, assisting Tashkent and Kabul alike.

While Tashkent is open to EU and U.S. encouragement and engagement, it is also positioning itself as a partner for Chinese regional interests – and Western powers need to appreciate this multipolar approach to diplomacy and development. Uzbekistan hopes to serve as a transit hub for Russian and Chinese goods and, to a lesser extent, domestic products, with several railroad projects underway. The Uzbek national railway now extends beyond the border crossing of Hairatan into Afghanistan, connecting with the critical city and commercial hub of Mazar-i-Sharif. There have been plans to extend this line to Herat city in western Afghanistan, bordering Iran, which would connect Central Asia to ports on the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the construction of an Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway – for which Uzbekistan has promised financial contributions – will provide Uzbekistan further leverage to influence access to South Asia, Iran, and the Middle East. This will also allow Uzbekistan to pursue an export- and tariff-oriented economy with access to major international transportation corridors, including the ports of Chabahar in Iran and Gwadar in Pakistan.

Tashkent's vision can only be achieved if the war in Afghanistan concludes peacefully – which in today's context, means a lasting peace settlement between Kabul and the Taliban. Uzbek policymakers understand that a peaceful Afghanistan can best serve their economic interests in developing the multinational construction of energy lines, railways, major connectivity projects, and other infrastructure.



Major international rail routes in Central Asia, 2019

Source: Martin Russell, "[Connectivity in Central Asia, Reconnecting the Silk Road.](#)" EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2019, accessed September 12, 2019.

Strengthening Security Cooperation

President Mirziyoyev's concept of indivisible regional security guided the 2017 Samarkand and 2018 Tashkent regional security conferences, with the latter fully focused on Afghanistan. Unlike Russian attempts to influence Afghanistan, Tashkent's engagement has not reflected Moscow's pessimistic assessment of the Afghan peace process and the inescapability of the worst-case scenario of state collapse.⁴ Indeed, Uzbekistan is notable in the region for the near-absence of public discussion of worst-case scenarios. Its diplomatic language instead focuses singularly on the potential benefits and incentives of a possible "peace dividend." In private conversations, Uzbek policymakers have been critical of Russia's push for institutionalising the Collective Security Treaty Organization further, which they see as more of a platform for expansionism rather than an effective way to fight terrorism. They fear that Russia is concerned about Central Asia pulling away from its domain of influence, and might exaggerate threats about Afghanistan's instability so as to inflate the need for Central Asian countries to rely on Russian security assistance.

⁴ See the [Russian Policy Brief](#) as part of this series.

Still, religious extremism and radicalisation remain significant challenges for Uzbekistan and Central Asia, and the country's leadership has not lost sight of potential spillover from Afghanistan. Destabilising forces such as the Haqqani network, Al Qaida, ISIS and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) continue to endanger regional security. For years, and even as it engages more deeply with the Taliban, Uzbekistan has taken a pro-active policy towards transnational jihadist groups. The government has already begun signalling its willingness to engage, potentially even reconcile, with IMU and ISIS fighters in Afghanistan and Syria, encouraging them to return to their countries of origin. The same attitude underlies Tashkent's approach to the Afghan peace process: Uzbekistan would like to see not only the reintegration of ex-Taliban combatants but broad de-militarisation and control of small arms in Afghanistan.

The results of this reintegration-oriented, optimistic set of policies remain to be seen. Notably, Tashkent's approach extends beyond the focus on border control and counterterrorism that defines other Central Asian states under Russia's security orbit; the EU could encourage this strategy more widely across the region. As noted above, it is not clear to what extent Uzbekistan is preparing for worst-case scenarios that may unfold in Afghanistan after a U.S.-NATO military withdrawal or the Afghan government's possible erosion of international support. What is clear is that Tashkent has avoided public speculation about many of the concerns other states are actively debating.

Recommendations

- The EU and Uzbekistan could collaborate more effectively to promote enduring stabilization in Afghanistan. They could build on their shared interest and engagement with the Afghan peace process to explore longer-term priorities and concerns. Given its decisive role in supporting Afghanistan as well as its regional diplomacy, the EU is well-placed to encourage connectivity between Central Asian and South Asian forums and initiatives.
- Utilising several pre-existing regional diplomatic formats, the U.S. and the EU should further encourage and leverage economic reintegration and "interregional cooperation" on issues-based subjects impacting Central Asia, including climate change and the implications of COVID-19 on regional development and security. These formats ought to move beyond multi-stakeholder consultations and should ultimately introduce a collaborative mechanism to encourage concrete implementation of shared goals. In one positive step, Central Asian states have already invited Afghanistan to upgrade its role in the EU-Central Asia High-Level Political and Security dialogue (HLPSP) from a guest and observer to that of a full-fledged participant.
- Presently, Central Asian countries are competing with one another over trade, transit, and energy routes to gain the interest of investors. The EU Strategy on Central Asia and Afghanistan should build on recent positive developments and reflect on new opportunities by pushing for "interregional connectivity". It is essential that Afghanistan is included in this long-term planning and benefits from these initiatives.
- Tashkent's plan to convene a regional conference on connectivity next year (as a follow up to the Bucharest 2019 EU – CA connectivity conference) is an excellent opportunity to progress discussions on cooperation. The EU should ensure that additional issues, e.g. physical infrastructure, integrated border management and trilateral projects for training and education of Afghans in Central Asian educational institutions (with particular focus on women) in line with the new EU Strategy on Central Asia will also make it on the agenda.

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About the cover photo

Uzbek soldiers walk to the Friendship Bridge outside the southern town of Termez, December 12, 2001. REUTERS/Shamil ZhumatovAS

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