

The Spectre of Afghanistan

Security in Central Asia

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The Central Asian Policy Response to Security Threats from Afghanistan

Development, Defence and Diplomacy

The Central Asian republics' policies to deal with heightened security anxieties about Afghanistan can be grouped into three broad strategies: contributing to its stability via socio-economic development; maintaining a military buffer zone; and expediting a negotiated peace process. The three are not mutually exclusive and are context-specific. The situation in Afghanistan, the domestic political exigencies and the dynamics of regional and international affairs influence the pursuit of these three strategies by each of the Central Asian countries.

Statements to the effect that 'an improvement of the socio-economic situation in Afghanistan is the key factor of stability and security in Central Asia',¹ have been common in the speeches made by regional leaders since the mid-2000s. They are closely tied to the US strategy of bolstering peace by connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia, via a myriad of commercial and trade links resulting in an economic zone of shared prosperity.² It is doubtful whether Central Asian presidents sincerely embrace the tenets of liberalism in international relations, but the prospect of the West investing massively in transborder infrastructure projects and of profits from market opportunities in an opened-up Afghanistan are surely attractive in their eyes. The question of their own generosity and openness, as well as the actual efficacy of the connectivity schemes in expediting sustainable development in Afghanistan, is a matter of debate.

Military containment of Afghan threats has entailed two approaches since 2014: building up border defences and cooperation with the government in Kabul, in bolstering the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). As noted in Chapter 2, activating buffer zones in adjacent territories

populated by ethnic Tajiks, Turkmens and Uzbeks has not been a preferred policy choice so far.

Even before the attacks of 11 September 2001, all Central Asian states concurred that the Afghan conflict had no military solution and could be settled only through peaceful political negotiations ‘in order to establish a broad-based, multi-ethnic and fully representative Government.’³ The Tashkent Declaration of 1999 is still invoked today as a basic reference point for many bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives in which the Central Asian states are involved. A major variable among individual countries is their readiness to engage with the Taliban who had been officially designated as a terrorist organisation in the region after 2001.

The Development–Security Nexus

The significance of Central Asia to the stabilisation and reconstruction of Afghanistan was well captured in the five-year National Development Strategy adopted by the government in Kabul in 2008, with active encouragement by its Western backers. The document envisaged the establishment of Afghanistan as a land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia, with specific strategic outcomes including:

- expanded trade in energy covering a significant part of Afghanistan’s energy needs and replenishing its coffers through transit fees;
- greater flow of goods, services, investment and technology across the border supporting Afghan economic development; and
- improved border management and customs cooperation reducing trans-border crime.⁴

Taking stock of Central Asia’s overall contribution to this vision a decade later, a group of prominent experts representing all Central Asian republics and their colleagues from Germany, Turkey and the United States, observed: ‘No particular interest has been shown or noticed from Central Asia to involve in the country’s development so far.’⁵ The experts’ judgment is almost certainly too harsh, but it does reflect the reality that despite verbal commitment to transforming Afghanistan into a regional hub of economic activity, the region’s governments have acted rather cautiously and selfishly, focusing on their own national interests, avoiding risk and at times exploiting the weakness of their southern neighbour.

Regional Trade

After the overthrow of the Taliban and the opening of the country, Afghanistan's foreign trade grew strongly. Between 2002 and 2010, its exports increased three-fold and imports five-fold. Trade deficit rose from 9 per cent of GDP to 35 per cent in 2010. The volume of trade was bolstered by the presence of the international coalition, and it was the United States and other international donors who covered the imbalance in commercial exchange.⁶ In the first half of 2009, the United States established several new transit corridors for delivery of nonlethal goods to its forces in Afghanistan (and ANSF) via Central Asia. Known as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), this combination of ports, depots, highways and other elements of transport infrastructure, was to serve as a skeleton for a thriving civilian commercial hub over the five year horizon. Washington, the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) competed with each other to present a magnificent picture of imminent economic benefits accruing from such connectivity: acceleration of GDP growth from 8.8 per cent to 12.7 per cent per annum; raising of exports by \$5.8 billion; generation of 771,000 full-time jobs, and so on.⁷

As Tables 3.1 and 3.2 show, trade between Afghanistan and Central Asia did increase by 370 per cent between 2008 and 2016. However, this growth was driven by the Western largesse, and was not necessarily beneficial to the former. In most cases, Afghanistan actually lost ground as an exporter of goods to Central Asia, both in absolute and relative terms. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan ran huge trade surpluses but the nomenclature of commodities they sent to Afghanistan remained limited: the former exported mostly wheat and flour, while the latter two specialised in fuel and electricity. Essentially, the Central Asian countries have followed the lucrative business model developed between 2001 and 2014, profiting from procurement orders by the Afghan government, the remaining US forces, and aid and development organisations. A high point may have been reached in 2012, when the US government spent US\$1.3 billion in Central Asia in support of ISAF operations; US\$820 million of that sum went to Turkmenistan for fuel purchases to be used in Afghanistan.⁸ Kyrgyzstan received US\$218.1 million, a substantial portion of which went to a local contractor supplying Russian-made jet fuel to Bagram air base.⁹ In other words, the spikes in Afghan import statistics do not reflect the organic and sustainable growth of trade with Central Asia.

State agencies and interests have dominated the exchange on both sides; a dense network of private companies conducting trade according to market rules

has simply failed to materialise. According to one interview-based study, there is little mutual interest between merchants in Afghanistan and Central Asia; moreover, 'Afghan traders wishing for closer ties with Central Asian and Russian suppliers . . . believe that the current trade regime in Afghanistan is governed by the presence and priorities of the international forces based in Afghanistan'.¹⁰ Tariff and non-tariff barriers have remained. While the quality of roads improved in the decade since the mid-2000s, thanks to the NDN, other measurements of connectivity either stayed static or plummeted. Afghanistan's indicators of cost involved in trading across borders deteriorated by 20 per cent, Tajikistan by 17 per cent and Kazakhstan by 8 per cent.¹¹ 'Non-standard' border trade, in which small merchants shuttle between Afghanistan and its neighbours, peddling small volumes of products – with a major positive impact on the livelihood of local communities – has remained underdeveloped.¹²

The electric energy sector provides an instructive tale of how Central Asia has contributed positively to stability in Afghanistan, while also showing the motivations for, and limitations to, this contribution.

Table 3.1 Afghanistan's trade with Central Asian countries in 2008

	Export (\$ m)	Import (\$ m)	Trade balance (\$ m)	Share in Afghan import (%)	Share in Afghan export (%)
Kazakhstan	0.34	152.52	-152.18	5.05	0.06
Kyrgyzstan	0.03	5.17	-5.14	0.17	0.01
Tajikistan	6.31	37.18	-30.87	1.23	1.17
Turkmenistan	10.63	12.54	-1.71	0.42	2.01
Uzbekistan	1.52	168.70	-167.18	5.59	0.28

Source: Authors' calculations based on World Bank data.

Table 3.2 Afghanistan's trade with Central Asian countries in 2016

	Export (\$ m)	Import (\$ m)	Trade balance (\$ m)	Share in Afghan import (%)	Share in Afghan export (%)
Kazakhstan	3.99	621.62	-617.64	9.51	0.67
Kyrgyzstan	-	0.08	-	0	-
Tajikistan	0.89	79.68	-78.79	1.22	0.15
Turkmenistan	1.75	355.40	-353.65	5.44	0.29
Uzbekistan	0.41	399.14	-398.73	6.11	0.07

Source: Authors' calculations based on World Bank data.

Regional Energy Cooperation

In 2009, US officials estimated that Afghanistan urgently needed 500 megawatts (MW) of electricity to be injected into its north-east power system, reporting approvingly, that ‘Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have stated their willingness to promote stability in Afghanistan by supplying electrical power.’¹³ Energy deliveries from Central Asia grew steadily. Between April 2015 and March 2016 (the year 1394, according to Afghanistan’s Solar Hijri calendar) imports accounted for 80 per cent of total grid supply; Afghanistan’s three northern neighbours covered 78 per cent of these imports.¹⁴ Such expansion was made possible by two factors: a political decision by Kabul and its international backers to bring power to the major cities in the north as quickly as possible and in a no-expense-spared manner; and sudden surplus of electricity created by the disintegration of the Central Asian Energy System (CAES). The CAES was a complex network of gas pipelines and electric power networks, as well as energy producing facilities, developed during Soviet times, which acted as a resource-sharing and coordinating mechanism underpinning regional energy security. In the 2000s, isolationist policies focused on full self-reliance and self-control led to its disruption. Uzbekistan in particular, used its geographic and technological advantages to block electricity and energy supplies to other states, in order to influence foreign policies of the latter.¹⁵ Between 2003 and 2011, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan went off the unified grid and their energy exchange collapsed. According to local estimates, the volume of regional energy trade decreased by 73 per cent between 1995 and 2016.¹⁶ Thus, without bolstering production capacity, the Central Asian republics had electricity to sell to Afghanistan.

And sell they did, often at inflated prices and using hastily erected low capacity transmission lines. For much of the 2010s, Uzbekistan provided more than a third of Afghanistan’s imported electricity and charged around US\$0.1 per kilowatt hour (kWh). Given the high transmission and distribution costs, along with average electricity tariff for consumers of US\$0.08–US\$0.12 per kWh, Uzbek electricity proved to be rather uneconomical.¹⁷ On the one hand, the flow of energy from Central Asia to important urban centres in the north-east and north-west, who now enjoy better access to electric power than other parts of the country bar Kabul,¹⁸ has undoubtedly bolstered political stability and regime legitimacy. On the other hand, costly imported energy has begun to place a ‘huge burden on [the] unstable economy of Afghanistan and its people.’¹⁹

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan operate unsynchronised supply lines, necessitating the construction of expensive convertor stations in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan insist on constraining the Afghan side's ability to synchronise domestic generation plants and standardise national transmission facilities, thus complicating the expansion and integration of its power network 'in a rational way'.²⁰ The sustainability of Central Asian supplies in the immediate future is questionable. Uzbekistan's generation capacity at thermal plants is stretched to the limit, and Tajikistan is energy-deficient in winter months when the demand is at its highest in Afghanistan. Domestic needs in these two countries trump contractual obligations to Afghanistan, which was illustrated by Dushanbe's decision to cut off export in October 2013, due to national shortages. The completion of a nuclear plant in Uzbekistan by 2028, and Roghun hydro power station in Tajikistan by 2033, could resolve these issues but in the meantime disruptions in supply and bickering over prices continue to occur regularly. In late 2017, Turkmenistan announced the doubling of the price of power exports to Afghanistan. When Kabul declined the demand, Ashgabat switched off supplies to four Afghan provinces for two days in a strong-arm negotiations tactic.²¹

One expert characterised the relationship between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan in the energy sphere as 'stable but not reliable, as the Afghan government struggles to do business with its Uzbek counterpart . . . Neither side perceives the other as a trustworthy partner'.²² As long as the United States and other external stakeholders mediate and pay for expensive Uzbek electricity, cooperation continues. External money may dry up soon however. Between 2002 and 2018, USAID disbursed more than US\$1.5 billion in funds to develop the Afghan energy sector, and the Department of Defence threw in another US\$527 million. Other donors may have contributed up to US\$4 billion. A sizeable portion of this money went to finance transmission and connectivity projects with Central Asia. The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) questioned the efficiency and probity with which the money was spent, making a special comment about the adverse effects that the over-reliance on power imports would have on financial sustainability of the Afghan national electricity company, Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS).²³

Critics of the strategy of importing more electricity from Central Asia have pointed out that the flow-on effect in rural areas has been negligible.²⁴ 'These huge power lines, however, made no stops – the communities that lost farmland as these high towers had been put up had received financial compensation but did not actually receive any electricity from them,' wrote an American anthropologist observing the towering stanchions that brought energy from Uzbekistan and commenting on the mixed feelings of villagers 'forced to look on a daily basis at the metal giants lurking above their homes while filling up

containers with diesel for smoky, ageing home generators or simply going without power at all.²⁵ In Afghanistan, the question that is frequently asked is why regional transmission projects are given priority over the development of indigenous generation, creating long-term dependency on imports.²⁶

One such project is CASA-1000, a high-visibility project of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation program (CAREC), which joins together five Central Asian republics with Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Mongolia, Pakistan and six international development institutions (ADB, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, International Monetary Fund, Islamic Development Bank, United Nations Development Programme, and WB).

CASA-1000 was first conceived in 2005, envisaging the supply of 1,000 MW to Pakistan and 300 MW to Afghanistan. Its original completion date was 2012. Having faced political and technical difficulties, the deadline moved to 2016 and then 2020. At the end of 2018, the WB, which is the US\$1.17 billion project leader and chief financier, reported that construction of the 1,227 kilometre-long high voltage transmission lines and converter stations had not actually started, and rated overall risks associated with the scheme as 'high'.²⁷ This probably means that another postponement of CASA-1000 is in the offing.

Poor coordination among the stakeholders has been one of the factors dampening CASA-1000's progress. At the outset, its strongest cheerleaders were Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and lending organisations with the capital to invest. The US government came on board promoting the venture as beneficial to Afghanistan's stability and energy security and running community support programs on the ground.²⁸ Uzbekistan, under Islam Karimov, resolutely opposed the scheme, resenting competition and benefits accruing to regional rivals. Afghanistan was lukewarm and eventually decided not to receive electricity through this project, as it would require additional expenses that could be better used to build its own hydroelectric power plant.²⁹

The change of position by Tashkent in November 2018, when it announced the removal of objections to CASA-1000 was good news for the project. Nonetheless, questions remain as to what extent projects like this serve commercial interests of external stakeholders, rather than the stated purpose of stabilising and reconstructing Afghanistan. Would the projected US\$40–45 million a year in transit fees be a sufficient return on investment? In what seems to be a lesson drawn from the CASA-1000 experience, CAREC has recently resolved to pay greater attention to aligning national strategies with the international financial institutions' preferences, in the pursuit of regional cooperation.³⁰

Economic Assistance, Transport Solutions and Hydrocarbon Projects

The Central Asian republics have consistently signalled their approval of the continuous effort by the international community to render financial support to peace, state-building and development in Afghanistan. Their representatives participated in all global donor conferences, from London in 2006 to Brussels in 2016, as well as countless lesser fora. At the same time, they have not been particularly generous in providing assistance to Afghanistan themselves.

Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs recorded the following activities for the period spanning 2008 to 2014: a grant of US\$2.4 million to fund the construction of one school in Samangan and one hospital in Bamian, and road repairs in Kunduz; humanitarian and emergency aid totalling US\$17 million; and a US\$50 million program to train 1,000 Afghan students in Kazakhstan between 2010 and 2020.³¹ In December 2014, Kazakhstan adopted the law 'On official development assistance'. Its first project carried out in line with international standards for providing official development assistance (ODA), targeted Afghanistan where it sought to expand women's economic independence and rights. Other partners in this US\$0.4 million program included Japan and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).³² In 2017, Nursultan Nazarbaev issued a presidential decree on the main principles of ODA for the next three years, which identified Afghanistan, alongside four Central Asian states, as a priority recipient of Kazakhstan's aid; the 'creation of a belt of good-neighbourliness athwart the perimeter of Kazakhstan's frontiers', being the chief rationale behind such decision.³³ Kazakhstan is likely to remain the only Central Asian state to channel regular development assistance to Afghanistan, however modest, in the near future.

Despite a flurry of positive political statements, high-level official talks, trade fairs and exhibitions and the signing of a framework agreement between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan on the encouragement and mutual protection of investment in 2012, the flow of capital between the two countries has remained virtually non-existent. Risk-averse Kazakhstani entrepreneurs invested a miserly US\$0.3 million between 2005 and 2018 in Afghanistan.³⁴

Kazakhstan has served as a key chain in the NDN network since 2010. While US cargoes have transited from its Caspian ports to Afghanistan by rail via Uzbek territory without too much difficulty, the same cannot be said about Kazakhstani goods. Tashkent has periodically slapped high tariffs on Kazakh grain and flour destined for Afghanistan and denied access to its railway system,

citing congestion. Out of desperation, Kazakh authorities advised its exporters to use a route via Turkmenistan which, while much longer, would reduce the delivery time to ten to twelve days, down from twenty to thirty days.³⁵ To be fair, Tashkent has supported a radical plan of improving connectivity by building a new Mazar-e Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar railway line proposed by Kazakhstan and Russia, who are reportedly ready to provide at least some financing.³⁶ Given the tentative price tag of US\$3 billion this line does seem to be the latest in a series of pipe-dream projects promising to turn Afghanistan into a transport connector between Europe and South Asia, with less than average chances of success given that the United States and the European Union are not likely to be involved.

Kyrgyzstan's involvement in the stabilisation of Afghanistan via development, exists solely in the discursive realm. As a report by the main government think tank put it, 'our state has been declaring its readiness to implement closer cooperation with Afghanistan for a long time. Dimensions such as energy, transit and transport, training specialists in different areas, and sales of electricity are voiced', before concluding that 'real action is not taking place at present'.³⁷ Kyrgyzstan did not even open an embassy in Kabul until 2013. Joint statements from official meetings are painful to read as they are short on substance, big on platitudes and highly repetitive. Communiqués from negotiations held in November 2017 and August 2018 were identical:

During the talks, the sides discussed the current state and prospects for the development of Kyrgyz–Afghan relations in which special attention was paid to the widening and deepening of cooperation in the trade/economic and cultural/humanitarian spheres, including the question of rendering support to ethnic Kyrgyz residing on the territory of Lesser and Greater Pamirs in Afghanistan.³⁸

Should CASA-1000 be finished, Kyrgyzstan's economic relations with Afghanistan may acquire some substance, but so far they have been negligible.

A similar verdict can be passed for the case of Tajikistan, with important caveats. As mentioned above, even in the absence of CASA-1000, the republic exports significant quantities of energy to Afghanistan. In 2017, Dushanbe sold US\$50 million worth of electricity to Kabul, which accounted for 78 per cent of its total exports to Afghanistan.³⁹ A strategic bridge built with US funds in 2007, increased the throughput capacity of a border crossing at Lower Panj from five trucks a day to 1,000. The bridge was actively used by the international coalition prior to 2014 to supply ISAF and ANSF and has been designated by CAREC as a mainstay of the 'Corridor 5' project, which is supposed to serve transit trade between Afghanistan on the one hand and China, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan,

Kazakhstan and Tajikistan on the other hand. An ADB audit conducted in 2015 called Corridor 5 'the most challenging CAREC corridor' listing the reluctance by Tajik authorities to issue visas and road passes to Afghan truck drivers (due to concerns such as narcotics and smuggling), huge waiting times at the Lower Panj crossing point, and a ban by Kyrgyzstan on third party truck transit through Karamykon the Kyrgyz–Tajik border, as reasons for the route's underperformance.⁴⁰

The Aga Khan Network (AKN) sponsored the construction of five smaller bridges in the 2000s–2010s. In Aga Khan's words, these bridges 'give people an opportunity to unite in order to exchange the best practices in societal development. You may acquire the best possible experience in education, health, economic development, finances and agriculture across borders'.⁴¹ The Afghan governors of Balkh and Badakhshan – Atta Mohammad Nur and Shah Waliullah Adeeb, respectively – registered their appreciation in a more down to earth form, praising the creation of small border markets next to the bridges,⁴² although the combined annual turnover of these border markets may not have exceeded US\$10 million.

Similarly to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan does not fly high as a provider of investment or technical assistance to its southern neighbour. An economist from the Tajik Academy of Sciences argued, in 2013, that Tajikistan could help Afghanistan in areas such as seed technology, livestock quality improvement, silk production, veterinarian control in northern provinces, tourism and the running of free economic zones.⁴³ Practically nothing from this reasonable bucket list has been realised so far.

One area of cooperation which looked promising in the early 2010s was the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan railway project (TAT), which was touted by the leaders of the three states as being 'of great importance for the strategic, political and economic interests of all parties' eventually opening 'a new corridor between Central Asia and world markets through the sea ports on the coast of the Indian Ocean'.⁴⁴ In reality, Tajikistan would be the main beneficiary from the project, as it could allow it to overcome transport blockade imposed by Uzbekistan. The country's Ministry of Transport reported in 2014 that 423 kilometres of tracks, fifteen stations, 235 kilometres of electric lines, eight locomotives and accompanying infrastructure were lying idle because Tashkent had severed all rail transit.⁴⁵ A 160 kilometre-long bypass (with 143 kilometres on Afghan territory) costing US\$243 million, would resolve Tajikistan's predicament. The bulk of the financing was to come from international donors working on the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The ADB made a tentative commitment of US\$100 million, and Presidents Hamid Karzai, Emomali Rahmon and Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov

attended a ceremony in March 2013 launching the construction and burying a time capsule with a pithy message to future generations. In late 2015 the ADB halted the credit line saying that ‘we do not intend to finance construction of a railway in a country [Afghanistan] where security is not guaranteed’, adding: ‘We will probably return to this project when the security situation in Afghanistan improves.’⁴⁶ This may never happen now that Tajikistan and Uzbekistan experienced a rapid and radical thaw in bilateral relations in 2018, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Turkmenistan hosted the Seventh Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) ministerial gathering in 2017, where it took an opportunity to stress the need for ‘further advancing regional economic cooperation as an effective means to achieve economic prosperity in Afghanistan.’⁴⁷ The final declaration listed seven priority investment projects in energy and transport, in four of which Turkmenistan plays a pivotal role: the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline (TAPI); Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan 500 kilovolt (kV) power transmission line (TAP-500); TAT, and the Lapis Lazuli corridor.

TAPI has been on the drawing board for over twenty years. If completed, the 1,735 kilometre-long pipeline will deliver 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Turkmen natural gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India annually. By 2015, all technical documentation had been prepared and agreements signed among the four contracting countries. The project has received strong international support from the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, the Gulf countries and even Moscow, which has repeatedly stated that it would like to see Russian companies involved as sub-contractors. Washington’s position on the scheme’s significance and salubrious impact couldn’t be clearer: ‘The U.S. supports the TAPI project because we think it has the potential to be a transformative project for the entire region in terms of energy security for countries and commercial ties.’⁴⁸ Even the Taliban have come on board, saying that the movement ‘views the project as a vital foundational economic element for the country and considers its proper implementation as good news for the Afghan people.’⁴⁹ Turkmen opposition sources believe that Ashgabat, which maintained good working relations with the Taliban while they were in power, may have reached an informal understanding with the insurgents about the pipeline protection, in exchange for payment of US\$300–400 million a year.⁵⁰

Afghanistan stands to buy 5 bcm of gas from Turkmenistan at a competitive rate and receive up to US\$500 million in transit fees each year. The stumbling blocks to TAPI’s implementation are finances and the absence of a reputable

international operating company. The ADB (acting for Afghanistan), Pakistan and India have committed US\$1.5 billion to the US\$10 billion project, which means that Ashgabat has to come up with the remainder on its own. In desperation to diversify its gas exports away from China, the Turkmen government appointed its own gas company, Turkmengaz, as the project operator, revised the costs down to US\$7 billion in 2018, and announced that by the end of 2019 the Afghan section of the pipeline would be complete and gas deliveries would start. There is much apprehension about this timeline as well as unverifiable reports by the Turkmen government about fresh investors and the actual construction work performed on Turkmen territory.⁵¹

The story of TAP-500 closely follows that of TAPI. In 2013, President Berdimuhammedov approved a program of building fourteen new thermal power stations operating on gas which would add 3,854 MW to the country's generation capacity and increase its electricity export potential five-fold.⁵² The lion's share of this surplus is supposed to go to Afghanistan and Pakistan via a new transmission line running in parallel to TAPI. Just like TAPI, TAP-500 has been stalled by financial and security concerns and no actual work took place in Afghanistan as of late 2018. A long-term power purchase and sales agreement signed between Ashgabat and Kabul in 2015, envisages that the latter will have to buy TAP-500 electricity at the rate of US\$0.056 per kWh in 2019 and US\$0.071 in 2028, which is rather problematic given that Afghanistan struggled with US\$0.04 in 2017, as mentioned above.⁵³

The Lapis Lazuli corridor is a trade and transport route which starts in Aqina and Turghundi 'dry ports' in the Afghan provinces of Faryab and Herat, that used to thrive as entrepôts for ISAF supplies prior to 2014. It then proceeds to the seaport of Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan, crosses the Caspian Sea to Baku, whence it loops to the Black Sea before reaching Turkey and Europe. The inter-government agreement for this cross-modal transportation scheme was signed in Ashgabat on the margins of RECCA-VII in 2017, after three years of preparatory work. It was viewed as a coup for the United States, which positioned this particular corridor 'as the shortest, cheapest, and most reliable route for Afghanistan's trade with Europe', which happened to bypass Iran and Russia.⁵⁴ The first test caravan of nine trucks loaded with dried fruit and cotton left Herat for Turkey under the *Transports Internationaux Routiers* or International Road Transports (TIR) system through Turkmenistan in December 2018, revealing that there was still much to be done by way of reducing imposts and obtaining visas for drivers.⁵⁵ Whether this route could compete with the established transit corridors going through Uzbekistan and Iran might depend on the Afghan

government's ability to keep offsetting 50 per cent of transport costs of its exporters in the Lapis Lazuli corridor.

Turkmenistan doesn't have a regular aid program aimed at Afghanistan. However, it provided earthquake relief in 2015, built a maternity ward in Torghundi in 2016, and funded the construction of a mosque in Aqina in 2018. Small-scale trade or free people-to-people exchanges across the heavily militarised border don't occur, and Berdimuhammedov's constant references to 'the presence of all possibilities to widen cultural and educational scientific contacts', along with, 'the potential for mutually beneficial contacts between entrepreneurs', and 'the readiness to give Afghanistan effective support in its peaceful renaissance and socio-economic development', ought to be treated as statements of intent at best.⁵⁶

'Tashkent's major interest in the Afghanistan conflict is not economic, but political: to prevent the IMU from benefitting from the fighting in Afghanistan and from de-stabilising Uzbekistan,'⁵⁷ claimed one analytical report in 2015. This is a fair summary of Uzbekistan's stance under President Karimov, prior to his death in September 2016. Since then, the country has moved towards greater openness in economic relations, although the extent to which the portrayal of Afghanistan as a market opportunity corresponds with Uzbekistan's contribution to its development is a moot point.

Under Karimov, all foreign economic activity was tightly regulated by the state. Obsession with sovereignty, internal stability and total control over the flow of goods and people across borders severely constrained commercial interaction with foreign partners. Figures voiced by an Uzbek foreign trade official are instructive: in 2017, Uzbek capital was represented in about 600 joint ventures across Central Asia and Afghanistan. The figure for the latter was six, which was two less than in Tajikistan after two decades of intense confrontation between Tashkent and Dushanbe.⁵⁸ The head of the Balkh provincial Chamber of Commerce and Industries spoke with obvious frustration in 2013 about 'Uzbekistan's far-from-satisfactory business links with Afghanistan,' complaining that 'Afghan entrepreneurs were given bad treatment in Uzbekistan.'⁵⁹

Karimov's successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, advised in one of his earlier speeches that 'we [people of Uzbekistan] must guard our priceless treasure – peace and tranquility – like the apple of our eye. It's no secret that forces exist who want to destabilize [the country], sow hatred and conflicts and even spill blood.'⁶⁰ With this categorical imperative in mind, the new president has undertaken steps to develop economic ties with Afghanistan in a neo-mercantilist way. His strategy became evident during the official visit of Ashraf Ghani to Tashkent in December

2017. One of the tangible outcomes of the leaders' talks was the signing of forty commercial contracts worth US\$500 million – all about the increased export of Uzbek goods to Afghanistan.⁶¹ On its part, the Uzbek side agreed to reduce the price of electricity to US\$0.05 per kWh (which is not a huge sacrifice given that it simultaneously signed a deal with Tajikistan to import its energy at US\$0.02 per kWh) and cover half the costs of vocational training of one hundred Afghan specialists in Termez. Mirziyoyev presented a gift to the Afghan people in the form of twenty-five buses and three tractors which were gratefully accepted as 'Uzbekistan's contribution, within its ability, to the cause of economic reconstruction of Afghanistan that will expedite the improvement of life of the Afghan people and its return to the normal path of peaceful development'.⁶²

Tashkent has indicated its readiness to invest US\$500 million in a 657 kilometre Mazar-e Sharif to Herat railway line costing approximately US\$1.8 billion. The line is an extension of the Hairatan–Mazar-e Sharif project, which came into existence thanks to the NDN.

By 2011, Hairatan on the Afghan–Uzbek border was a boom town serving as the gateway for perhaps half of Afghanistan's external trade. This high volume was achieved by handling about 40 per cent of ISAF fuel and gear transit. The seventy-five kilometre railway linking Hairatan with Mazar-e Sharif (the first in Afghanistan) was financed by an ADB grant and constructed by the Uzbek state rail monopoly on a noncompetitive single source basis. With sixty-two check posts, round the clock armed patrols, fencing, watchtowers and security cameras, it is probably one of the most heavily protected transport lines in the world.⁶³ Tashkent retained operational control over the railway, collected customs duties in Hairatan, and banned access by Afghan exporters to its rolling stock. Following the NATO withdrawal, Hairatan has hit hard times becoming a barometer of economic depression in Afghanistan's north.⁶⁴ With rail traffic down by 48 per cent between 2012 and 2014, and the port of Hairatan accounting for just 20 per cent of Afghan imports in 2017,⁶⁵ plans to extend the railway to Herat looked increasingly unlikely. An independent evaluation commissioned by the ADB in 2015 found that the Hairatan–Mazar project had been executed hastily and without a link to a long-term master plan for Afghanistan's transport development, overestimated the demand for freight, underestimated operational costs, and pronounced it 'less than likely sustainable'.⁶⁶ The offer of US\$500 million by Tashkent, should be seen as a sweetener and an inducement for Kabul to lobby aid providers to deliver the bulk of the cash – a tactic quite similar to Turkmenistan's efforts in pushing its mega-projects through. As one Uzbek expert put it, 'there is absolutely no doubt that donor states and international

institutions must implement their obligations in order to improve the socio-economic situation in Afghanistan.⁷⁶⁷

In general, it can be safely said that, lofty rhetoric notwithstanding, the Central Asian states' attempts to mitigate security risks in Afghanistan by contributing to its development have been rather half-hearted. Instead, they have sought to capitalise on the many needs of the neighbouring country and resolve their own issues by taking advantage of the billions of dollars in donor funding made available by the West. In light of the imminent decline of the international community's interest in Afghanistan chances are that the regional zone of prosperity with Kabul at its core will not materialise. Many of the 'connectivity' projects contemplated in the early 2010s may never be implemented, and those that do could change their course and go around Afghanistan rather than traversing it. Potentially sounding the death knell for the NDN legacy schemes, the Uzbek government suggested in September 2018 that an integrated system of managing transport flows across Central Asia be created under the aegis of the SCO.⁶⁸ Some of the new transit initiatives associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative will be considered in Chapter 4.

'Fortress Central Asia': Military and Security Response to the Afghan Crisis

Between 2001 and 2014, the Central Asian republics relied on NATO and ANSF to contain threats affecting them from the Afghan soil. In the post-ISAF period, when the security situation patently worsened, they might have felt compelled to give extra support to the National Unity Government to compensate its diminished ability to fight the insurgents. This hasn't happened. The region's governments 'hoped to benefit from a secure Afghanistan and the new economic opportunities that presented', wrote Ivan Safranchuk, 'however, the Central Asians do not want to share in Afghanistan's insecurity. Their basic interest is to store problems on the Afghan side of the border, preferably with a buffer zone between them.'⁷⁶⁹

There exists a universally strong resentment against any kind of direct military involvement in the Afghan conflict across Central Asia. In her fascinating ethnographic study, Madeleine Reeves noted that for historical and geopolitical reasons the Afghan border is an 'exceptional' boundary beyond which lies darkness: 'For my interlocutors in the Ferghana Valley, Afghanistan was often the contrastive other against which civilization and development were charted; and

the Afghan–Tajik and Afghan–Uzbek borders often served as referents for the kind of borders that should properly be closed to dangerous seepages of people and ideas.⁷⁰ In 2008, Astana approved the dispatch of four officers from the country’s peacekeeping battalion (KAZBAT) to ISAF headquarters. Political and public backlash was so strong that the normally pliable upper house of the national parliament blocked the initiative. By contrast, KAZBAT’s five-year deployment on a NATO mission in Iraq stirred no resentment at all.⁷¹

Kazakhstan is the only country in the region to maintain a semblance of military-security cooperation with Kabul. It undertook to train seventy-five law enforcement officials as part of the 1,000 student intake between 2010 and 2020 as mentioned above. Astana remitted US\$2 million to the Afghan National Army Trust Fund (ANATF) in 2016 – a widow’s mite that nonetheless earned Nazarbaev praise from the US President Donald Trump for sharing the American burden in bolstering Afghan security.⁷² Two bilateral meetings of high-level security officials in 2013 and 2017, issued duplicate statements about the desirability of training of Afghan junior military personnel in Kazakhstan and advantages of potential ‘exchange of information or opinion on the security situation’⁷³ with no discernible action ensuing.

Other Central Asian republics do even less by way of practical cooperation with Afghanistan on security matters. Normally it takes external agency and funding to bring them together. For example, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has provided a US\$4.6 million grant to Tajikistan for the purposes of effective management of its border with Afghanistan, part of which was spent on ‘knowledge co-creation’ between the two countries’ security bodies.⁷⁴ In 2009, the OSCE set up the Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe, which occasionally offers short-term joint courses for Tajik border troops and Afghan border police.⁷⁵

Turkmenistan alone in Central Asia has a dedicated joint commission with Afghanistan on security issues. Set up in 2013, it meets once a year mostly to discuss the safety of infrastructure projects. Since 2015, analysts have noted a change in Ashgabat’s behavior which apparently lost confidence in Kabul’s ability to improve or even affect the situation in northern Afghanistan.⁷⁶ The Berdimammedov government, obsessed with TAPI, has been reported to negotiate directly with local actors including district heads, village chiefs and, as mentioned before, even the Taliban. One particular interlocutor are the *arbaki*, tribal community militia forces which for a while were nurtured by the United States as the ‘Critical Infrastructure Police’ before proving to be too predatory, disruptive and disloyal to the central authorities.⁷⁷ One expert summed up the

dynamics of Ashgabat's Afghan stance as follows: 'It looks like they've seen the situation degenerate to such an extent that they're willing to make some sacrifices in the neutrality policy.'⁷⁸

Storing up problems on the Afghan side of the border entails the robust defense of this border. The Central Asian countries have historically relied on a combination of national measures and international cooperation in achieving this objective. The declining input of the United States has been pronounced in the post-ISAF period. American security aid to the region plummeted from a high point of US\$255 million in 2012 to US\$19 million in 2018 – a drop of 93 per cent, the most recent figure falling below the 2001 level.⁷⁹ Even lavish assistance during the 'fat years' did not necessarily contribute to the upgrade of the regional defence, counterterrorism and counter-narcotics capacities in the most efficient way because the underlying rationale behind Washington's generosity was gaining physical access to local facilities and balancing Moscow and Beijing.⁸⁰ At present Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan prioritise self-sufficiency while the others engage in collective security arrangements more readily when devising measures to contain the Afghan threats.

The deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan after 2014, has caused Ashgabat to embark upon an ambitious reform of its armed forces using its hydrocarbon revenues. Details are scarce but analysts have commented on a move away from a conscript-dominated army and the improved quality of special units, 'which may provide Turkmenistan with an enhanced capability to take on the militant forces threatening the country's border.'⁸¹ Berdimuhammedov appointed the country's head of state security as the Minister of Defence in 2015, ostensibly to tighten control over all uniformed services. He also launched an expansive rearmament program sourcing modern equipment from at least eight foreign states, including Turkey, China and Russia.⁸² The resumption of military ties with the latter is particularly noteworthy as it came after a decade of deep freeze. The Russian Defence Minister visited the country in 2016 and apparently reached an understanding on training Turkmen military personnel, operational drills and information exchange, in addition to weapons supply.⁸³ In 2017 the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement and several additional protocols; one Russian expert claimed that in 2018 over twenty such documents were in force, amounting to Moscow's guarantee to help in a crisis situation.⁸⁴

Defending oneself according to one's own means and seldom compromising on national interest was the essence of what Bernardo Fazendeiro called 'defensive self-reliance' by Uzbekistan under Karimov.⁸⁵ Following his death the new government may have started to reconsider its position in the context of the

Afghan situation. President Mirziyoyev inherited the largest army in the region which had been bolstered by a significant donation of US military vehicles worth US\$150 million in late 2014, 'to support their efforts at counter terrorism and counter narcotics.'⁸⁶ Nonetheless, aside from one small National Security Service commando unit descended from a Soviet military intelligence brigade, the country's regular armed forces had problems with combat readiness, intelligence and command and control crucial in counterterrorist and counter-insurgency operations.⁸⁷ The new government started a program of reforms aiming at the creation of a smaller, but modern and highly mobile, army supplied by the indigenous military-industrial complex. It also confirmed its principled adherence to non-membership in any military blocs, inadmissibility of foreign bases and personnel on its territory, and permanent ban on peacekeeping operations beyond its borders.⁸⁸ The army manoeuvres held in the southern Surkhandarya and Qashqadarya regions in November 2018 – the largest in Uzbekistan's history – showed progress of these reforms and demonstrated that 'Tashkent treats the problem of the fighters' relocation from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan seriously.'⁸⁹

The course of self-reliance has not prevented Tashkent from seeking targeted collaboration with external actors on Afghanistan-related threats. The most important of them is Russia, which in 2016 agreed to sell armaments to Uzbekistan at domestic prices – a privilege that theretofore was accorded only to the CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) members. Russian experts have stressed that the 'military-technical cooperation aims, first and foremost, at repelling Afghan fighters,' citing deliveries of Mi-35 helicopter gunships 'ideally suited for the harsh operational theatre' and an agreement on the joint use of airspace for military purposes as concrete examples.⁹⁰ At the same time, Tashkent has been adamant that there is no chance of Uzbekistan's returning to the CSTO which it quit in 2012: 'The question of renewing our CSTO membership is not on the agenda ... There are no plans to discuss or review this matter in the future,' the country's Foreign Minister stated recently in a televised interview.⁹¹

By contrast, the CSTO is an essential element of the military and security strategy to contain threats from Afghanistan when it comes to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Since 2014, this bloc has paid increasingly close attention to Central Asia's southern borders. Its collective security strategy adopted in 2016 expanded the list of threats warranting immediate joint action to include terrorism, cross-border incursion of illegal armed formations and narcotics trafficking; Afghanistan was the only menacing country in the document mentioned by name.⁹² The CSTO's joint statement issued at the UN General Assembly in 2017 registered the members' particular alarm about:

[T]he Islamic State (ISIS) and the terrorist organizations connected with it in Afghanistan, as well as their proliferation around the country and the attempts to gain a foothold in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, which is creating numerous threats to security and stability in Central Asia.⁹³

The CSTO's principal military means of mitigating threats from Afghanistan consists of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force for Central Asia (CRRFCA) comprising 5,000 servicemen from mobile and light mountain infantry units stationed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. In theory they can deploy anywhere in the region within twelve to twenty-four hours, to support national security forces in a zone of crisis. The CSTO conducts military drills, expedites transfer of Russian weapons to member states, maintains an integrated database of terrorist groups and individuals, and carries out annual police and special service operations to intercept illegal migrants, monitor extremist recruitment in cyberspace and seize narcotics.⁹⁴ In 2018, the CSTO 'Canal-Red Dune' operation unfolded over four days in southern Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan astride the northern route of drug trafficking from Afghanistan and reportedly netted five tons of opium and forty kilograms of heroin.⁹⁵

Kazakhstan positions itself as an equal partner with Russia in the CSTO. It has been a driving force behind its many initiatives in Central Asia including the formation of CRRFCA.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, Nazarbaev has made it clear that while he supports and appreciates the bloc's activities in handling the problems of terrorism, trafficking and ISIS returnees proliferating from Afghanistan, he won't allow it to become overly politicised and acquire anti-NATO overtones.⁹⁷ Astana's agenda as the chair of the CSTO for 2018 included greater engagement with the UN, OSCE and SCO and enhanced risk monitoring in Afghanistan.⁹⁸

As smaller and weaker frontline states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are much more dependent on the CSTO and Russia in maintaining their border security. Moscow operates the 999th airbase in Kyrgyzstan which doubles as an air force component of the CRRFCA. In 2017 the bilateral Status of Forces agreement came into effect whereby the base and four other smaller Russian units 'together with the Armed Forces of Kyrgyzstan ensure the protection of sovereignty and security of the republic including the repulsion of military attacks on the part of international terrorist formations.'⁹⁹ In 2012, the Kremlin promised Bishkek US\$1 billion to modernise its armed forces. Only a portion of that money has been disbursed so far: between 2014 and 2018, Kyrgyzstan received US\$125 million worth of weapons.¹⁰⁰ In 2016, President Atambaev lobbied Moscow for the opening of a second base:

I told Putin that if you really want to think about common security then we are interested in building some contingency platforms in the south of the country. This would be real aid. This conversation first took place with the Russian Minister of Defence five to six years ago. Perhaps, the issue is that of finances. But I believe our position is the correct one. We don't need to strengthen the [already existing] Russian base in Kant. If any place is in need of protection then it has to be the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This is my principled position. I have bad premonitions about Afghanistan and whether Tajikistan will hold the blow from there.¹⁰¹

Atambaev took special pride in his country's contribution to the CSTO collective security recalling how a Kyrgyz infantry unit marched on foot through difficult terrain to a military exercise on the Tajik–Afghan border in 2016: 'This way we tested whether our soldiers can come to the assistance of our friends in Tajikistan if the situation became tense.'¹⁰²

Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU in 2015. Its southern border became the common customs and control zone for the entire organisation. Moscow allocated US\$48 million to upgrade and equip facilities there, which according to the commander of Kyrgyzstan's border guards, 'will enable us to increase the level of border security manyfold, adequately react to potential threats and challenges, and significantly decrease the level of conflict in border areas'.¹⁰³

Similarly to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan relies on Russia and the CSTO to a considerable extent to protect itself from Afghanistan's insecurities. In 2014, Moscow announced a long-term program of free arms transfer to the Tajik army worth 70 billion roubles which was equivalent to US\$1.2 billion at the time. Deliveries commenced in 2017 at the rate of around US\$100 million a year (slightly less than the country's entire military budget), featuring mostly refurbished stock from the Russian Central Military District.¹⁰⁴ The same year Russia's 201st base situated on the territory of Tajikistan, was formally directed to assist the Tajik armed forces in protecting the border with Afghanistan.¹⁰⁵ The base, the largest operated by Russia outside its borders and with 6,500 servicemen, was reinforced, received new weapons including heavy artillery and became otherwise 'optimized to support [Tajik] government forces covering the most dangerous segments of the border'.¹⁰⁶

Despite some effort by the United States and the European Union to enhance the capacity of the Afghan border police between 2009 and 2014, the Afghan–Tajik frontier remained woefully unprotected with just one patrolman assigned to every kilometre of border – 4.5 times lower than on the border with Pakistan, and 2.1 times lower than on the border with Turkmenistan.¹⁰⁷ On the other

side, Tajikistan had roughly ten times more manpower (16,000 – still only about half of the Soviet-era complement, and 16 per cent lower than the number of Russian border guards who were stationed there during 1992–2005), while remaining desperately short of weapons and facilities. When the Taliban captured Kunduz and overpowered border garrisons in Takhar and Badakhshan in 2015, Dushanbe was worried. Rahmon made it the first item on the agenda of his talks with Putin:

I would like to raise security issues in the CSTO zone of responsibility because the Tajik–Afghan border falls into this zone. The situation in Afghanistan is worsening every day. Fighting is taking place along 60 per cent of the border opposite the Tajik side . . . We are very concerned, so today I'd like to discuss the issues of ensuring security in the region in particular.¹⁰⁸

The CSTO has adopted an interstate program of strengthening the Tajik–Afghan border, and Belarus and Armenia have even provided uniforms and trucks within its framework, but Russia has been slow in committing to action, despite another Taliban offensive in Kunduz in 2017. The main reason for this could be that Moscow would like to see the return of its own forces to guard the border, rather than help the Tajiks. Dushanbe has resisted this move, ostensibly in deference to the negative US position on the matter.¹⁰⁹ Rahmon has repeatedly voiced his frustration with the program's slow progress, which impeded his country's valiant fight against narcotics, terrorism, extremism, organised crime and other negative phenomena linked to the aggravated situation in Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ He may have found an alternative in China, which has agreed to construct eleven outposts of different sizes on the Tajik–Afghan border.¹¹¹ The details of the agreement, including its value and duration are not known but one of the outposts was already active in 2018, and Tajik border guard units displayed a few dozen military vehicles donated by China. This shouldn't be interpreted as a sign of growing Sino–Russian competition in their roles of security providers, because quiet understanding if not formal distribution of responsibilities exists between Moscow and Beijing, in shoring up Tajikistan's border security.¹¹²

China holds bilateral military drills with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at the rate of once every two or three years. Russia conducted fifty-one such events in 2018 alone.¹¹³ Moscow, Beijing and all Central Asian republics except Turkmenistan, have regularly participated in the joint SCO exercises once or twice a year since 2006, practicing both conventional warfare and antiterrorist scenarios.¹¹⁴ The CSTO and SCO have been trying to harmonise their operations in Central Asia vis-à-vis the Afghanistan problem to avoid

duplication and to deal with the intersection of terrorism, insurgency and organised crime in a holistic manner, with limited success so far.¹¹⁵

Since 2014, all Central Asian republics have worked hard to erect a military barrier between themselves and troubled Afghanistan. They don't have much trust in the ability of the US-backed government in Kabul to defeat insurgents and stabilise the country, and thus have abstained from committing resources to, and fostering meaningful cooperation with, the ANSF. The West's security footprint in Central Asia has shrunk considerably leaving Russia and in some instances China to underwrite defensive needs of regional states. What has been largely missing from the picture is the collective action by the Central Asian countries themselves, beyond bloc structures run from the outside. Some positive developments in that direction may have started to emerge in 2018; they will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Looking for Diplomatic Solutions to the Afghan Crisis

All Central Asian republics conduct active diplomacy in search of greater stability and security in Afghanistan. The venues for it include major international initiatives, multilateral consultation mechanisms and bilateral negotiations with Kabul. In addition to the UN, the most important Afghanistan-focused (and Afghanistan-led) forum frequented by the region's foreign policy professionals has been the Heart of Asia (HoA), launched in 2011 by fifteen countries who adopted six task forces on counterterrorism; counter-narcotics; disaster management; education; regional infrastructure; and trade, commercial and investment opportunities. Between 2011 and 2015, the HoA held five ministerial conferences, sixteen senior officials and twelve ambassadorial meetings, dozens of symposia, seminars and exhibitions and many other side events predominantly financed by the outer circle of supporting states and organisations such as the United States and the ADB. The actual practical outcome of these activities was negligible or at least intangible: 'All of these events have been instrumental in creating regional political coherence and a sense of amity among the HoA countries.'¹¹⁶ It is reasonably difficult to measure the extent to which Iran and Saudi Arabia, or India and Pakistan, laid aside their differences in the name of stabilising Afghanistan. One critical report warned about HoA turning into 'a charity organization that countries participate in to brand themselves as altruistic towards Afghanistan, or to please larger geopolitical powers.'¹¹⁷

Washington used to be the largest geopolitical actor the Central Asian republics tried to please within the HoA framework: ‘The Istanbul Process consciously aims to support the New Silk Road vision of the United States. It seeks to transform the recently constructed Northern Distribution Network ... into enduring enhancements in regional trade links between Central Asia and Afghanistan.’¹¹⁸ Muratbek Imanaliev, the former Foreign Minister of Kyrgyzstan and SCO Secretary-General, commented that in the early 2010s, the Central Asian elites were still happy to accept the image of improving Afghanistan cultivated by HoA, CAREC and RECCA, and were optimistic about its core role in connectivity projects, on conditions that the United States would provide security and financial sponsorship and Russia and China would support them politically. When neither condition was met, ‘the realization that the “Afghan problem” once delegated to the US ... must be taken up by themselves has started to form and take root in the Central Asian countries,’ argued Imanaliev, adding a further observation on how the region’s policymakers felt in 2014:

By and large, all assess the situation in Afghanistan correctly, anticipate its negative evolution, and offer their own vision of what that country should look like in future. A standard set of characteristics features a peaceful, stable and developing state. Nobody can say how this might be achieved though.¹¹⁹

The Central Asians’ quest for an optimal multilateral foreign policy mechanism vis-à-vis Afghanistan has exhibited a great deal of diversification since 2014. In 2015, five states and Washington formed a C5 + 1 consultative mechanism supported by a US\$15 million appropriation from the US Congress which, among other things, aims to ‘explore ways to strengthen cooperation in the promotion of a stable, peaceful, and economically prosperous Afghanistan.’¹²⁰ At the same time, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan became more active in the CSTO Foreign Ministers Council’s Working group on Afghanistan pushing for ‘a common approach and consolidation of efforts by Afghans and all interested parties,’ in order to defuse the poor security situation.¹²¹ The Afghanistan contact group in the SCO resumed its annual meetings in 2017, after eight years of inactivity, where four Central Asian republics alongside others, ‘exchanged opinions on issues related to the fight against security challenges and threats in the region as well as assistance in the rebuilding of Afghanistan as a peaceful, stable and prosperous state.’¹²²

Uzbekistan’s president Mirziyoyev provides a good example of the multivocality of Central Asian diplomacy. When visiting Moscow on a state visit in 2017, he said:

Tranquillity, peace and stability in Afghanistan are very important to us. We are going to help and support in every possible way everything that Russia is promoting vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Everything that is being done by Russia on Afghanistan is of great delight to us.¹²³

A year later Mirziyoyev came to Washington and met Trump at the White House. According to the official precis of their conversation,

President Mirziyoyev reaffirmed his full support for President Trump's South Asia strategy and discussed Uzbekistan's initiatives to strengthen bilateral cooperation, share burdens, and address regional security issues, including stability in Afghanistan ... President Mirziyoyev assured continued support for the Northern Distribution Network and its contribution to achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan ... [President Trump] offered political support and planning consultations regarding Uzbekistan's railroad and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan.¹²⁴

Tashkent feels confident and competent enough to incorporate Russia and the United States in its Afghan calculus: the former as a security guarantor, and the latter as a backer for lucrative infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, that just might arise from the rubble of the Obama-era NSR scheme. The United States may be reducing its own expenditure, but it retains a critical voice in how huge development funds are distributed, and all Central Asian republics are interested in keeping them flowing their way. Uzbekistan's Deputy Foreign Minister reflected the collective wish of his regional colleagues, when he said, 'It is exceptionally important that donor countries and international institutions did not lower their attention and assistance to Afghanistan.'¹²⁵

There are many 'platforms', 'formats' and 'dialogues' combining one or more of the Central Asian republics, on the one hand, and external actors, on the other hand, which touch upon the Afghan problem in one way or another. Practically all of them have limited lifespan, do not go beyond the routine exchange of information and are inconsequential to mitigating the local security concerns. Who would remember the 'Dushanbe Four' for instance which brought together Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia and Tajikistan ostensibly 'in support of the Afghanistan government's efforts at national reconciliation' and had an entire roadmap worked out to achieve that?¹²⁶ What is remarkable is the absence of intra-regional multilateral diplomacy focused on Afghanistan which is the result of deep-seated divisions among the Central Asian countries themselves. One of the few exceptions is the Afghanistan-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan counter-narcotics initiative (AKT), which was set up in 2012 and has featured regular

ministerial meetings and a handful of joint drug interdiction operations.¹²⁷ In December 2017, Tashkent proposed the creation of a new consultative Central Asia plus Afghanistan format (with a confusing designation of 'C5 + 1') 'intended to be an effective platform for discussing the entire range of regional issues, as well as developing joint measures for peace and sustainable development with the support of the United Nations.'¹²⁸ This intention had not borne fruit as of late 2018.

The Central Asian states maintain strong bilateral ties with Kabul. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have special envoys on Afghanistan in their foreign policy executive. All republics use official visits, embassies and other forms of formal diplomacy to articulate their security concerns and offer advice to the Afghan government. At the same time, they realise the limits to this engagement: their interests on the ground, as one Central Asian expert put it, 'cannot be accomplished in any way other than through approbation from the US which has monopolized control over all processes in Afghanistan.'¹²⁹ One area where Central Asian statesmen and diplomats have been increasingly active since 2014, is the inclusion of the Taliban in the political process in Afghanistan.

The softening of the regional capitals' stance on the Taliban, was caused by the growing pessimism about the prospects of counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan, and the perception of the Taliban's utility in containing the much more acute threat of the IMU, ISIS-K and other international jihadi groups. They had to tread carefully though, because of the official designation of the Taliban as a terrorist organisation at home and the need to avoid jeopardising good relations with the government in Kabul. Karimov led the way in 2015. Having stressed that Uzbekistan always conducted relations with Afghanistan on the basis of respect to its national interests and non-interference in its domestic affairs, he gave the following counsel to the southern neighbour as a friend and wise senior statesman:

Today's situation in Afghanistan may be characterized as a low intensity conflict of opposing forces – primarily government troops and the Taliban. Quick withdrawal of the ISAF contingent and concomitant drop in external financial support to Afghanistan has exacerbated the situation. The logical result we can observe is that the vacuum created by the departure of foreign troops is being filled by aggressive terrorist groups squeezed from the Middle East ... It is imperative to resume the negotiations process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The sides must not link the commencement of the talks to any preconditions. Any circumstances should be the subject of negotiations and not an obstacle to them. Political will and readiness for mutual concessions and

compromise must also be present. Compromise and compromise again is what could lead the Afghan issue out of a deadlock.¹³⁰

All Central Asian republics have offered themselves as mediators for talks with the Taliban. Parallel to that, they have stepped up informal contacts with the rebels first, via special services and recently at the political level, as well – Turkmenistan’s deal with the Taliban over TAPI has been mentioned above. Tashkent refused to blame the Taliban alone for a bomb blast that destroyed a pylon of the power transmission line connecting Uzbekistan with the Baghlan province of Afghanistan. As a senior Uzbek diplomat explained, local Taliban commanders had approached DABS to electrify villages under their control via a small offshoot from the main line and only when their request was denied they blew up the pylon – they didn’t do that out of spite to Uzbekistan.¹³¹

Tajikistan has encouraged its southern neighbour to learn from the process of national reconciliation which put an end to the Tajik civil war of 1992–1997. At the same time, it has been more reticent than others on the issue of direct talks between the Kabul government and the Taliban because it views the latter as a Pashtun movement which would skew the ethnic balance of power in Afghanistan, if a power-sharing agreement is reached. This hasn’t stopped its security agencies from clandestine contacts with the Taliban for the purpose of intelligence gathering and keeping an eye on criminal gangs.¹³² Afghan authorities have repeatedly accused Dushanbe of supplying weapons to the Taliban (both directly and as agents for Russia), repairing their equipment and giving medical treatment to their wounded.¹³³ Tajik officials have vehemently denied these allegations,

which demonstrate shortsightedness, incompetence and a lack of elementary knowledge, cause deep regret, hinder the creation of a constructive atmosphere and the fulfillment of earlier agreements and, by doing so, do damage to bilateral relations based on the principles of friendship and neighborliness.¹³⁴

In 2017, the Afghan Ambassador in Moscow, an uncle of President Ghani, insulted Tajikistan by referring to it as a petty Russian mafia-state. Kabul had to issue an official retraction saying the diplomat’s words did not represent the policy of the Afghan government.¹³⁵

Conclusion

Building up a protective perimeter has dominated the Central Asian countries’ response to the evolving situation in Afghanistan in the wake of the NATO

withdrawal. Not having much confidence in the Afghan government's ability to rein in terrorists, rebels, bandits and drug traffickers on its territory, they use internal resources and international cooperation to better prepare their defences should the situation across the southern border deteriorate further. Among the external security providers, the role of Russia and China has grown, while that of the United States has receded.

The Central Asian republics played a significant role in stabilising Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014, by providing supplies and transit routes to the coalition forces and ANSF. They continue to do so, albeit on a reduced scale. Their contribution to sustainable development of Afghanistan is more equivocal. Despite the verbal commitment to achieving stability via economic means, it is more appropriate to see their approach as mulcting the donor community, in current instability, and planning for revenues through connectivity projects, once stabilisation does occur. With the exception of Turkmenistan, they are not prepared to commit serious resources of their own to energy schemes and transport corridors, the future of which hangs, for the most part, in the air.

The Central Asian leaders are fully committed to the idea of territorial integrity of Afghanistan. They have abstained from entertaining ideas about ethnic buffer zones on Afghan territory. Kabul enjoys Central Asia's wholehearted support in international diplomacy when it comes to maintaining the global focus on the Afghan issue and lobbying for development funds. Over the past few years regional capitals have been pushing actively for negotiations between the NUG and the Taliban for the sake of a peace deal. They are aware of their limitations – Central Asia will never have the leverage capacity of Pakistan or Iran in Afghan politics. However, its importance should not be underestimated. Central Asia figures prominently in the Afghanistan strategies of Russia, China and the United States, and this factor may act as a force multiplier for the region, if only temporarily. The next chapter will discuss the role of the Central Asian republics in the Afghan calculus of Moscow, Beijing and Washington.

As a final note, and keeping in mind that public opinion is not the main driver of policy decisions in Central Asia, it could be instructive to learn what ordinary people there make of their governments' stances on Afghanistan. In 2015–16, young people in four republics – unburdened by the troubling memories of the Soviet–Afghan war – were asked to pass judgment. The results showed that there was no public appetite for a radical revision of the status quo (Table 3.3). A plurality of respondents in Tajikistan who favoured closer relations with Afghanistan, once again illustrated the relative importance of ethnofidelity as a policy- consideration in that particular republic.

Table 3.3 Central Asian youth's opinion on relations with Afghanistan, (% of responses to the question 'What kind of relations should our country have with Afghanistan?')

	Closer	More restrained	The same as now	Hard to say	Refused to answer
Kazakhstan	10.6	28.8	51.2	1.5	7.9
Kyrgyzstan	6.1	31.7	50.6	4.2	7.4
Tajikistan	33.3	17.1	41.7	3.1	4.8
Uzbekistan	15.6	24.6	47.8	1.2	10.8

Adapted from: Botagoz Rakisheva, *Molodezh' Tsentralnoi Azii. Sravnitelnyi obzor*. Almaty: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017, pp. 81–84.

Notes

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