



Letty Phillips

THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE AND THE (OTHER) AUTHORITARIANS: Afghanistan-Central Asia relations since 2021



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Since the Taliban's return to power, they have invested heavily in building diplomatic relationships with the five states of Central Asia — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. During the Islamic Republic, Central Asian governments – avowedly secular in outlook since they became independent nations – frequently sounded warnings over the threat that Islamic extremism posed to their own security and to the security of the wider world. Cracking down on Islamist opposition at home has been a consistent priority for the states of Central Asia. And yet they now appear interested in drawing closer to the Emirate. They have made diplomatic visits and hosted Emirate officials in return, announced numerous regional trade deals and promoted massive regional projects to deliver energy and transportation infrastructure. As AAN guest author Letty Phillips* explores, this suggests that pragmatic economic and regional interests have trumped earlier concerns. This report finds that the benefits of regional trade and the viability of proposed 'megaprojects' are nevertheless less concrete than the states involved might acknowledge. It asks what the diplomatic relationships at play reveal about the growing sense of illiberal solidarity between the Emirate and its neighbours, arguing that the ideological differences between the Emirate and Central Asia are perhaps less significant than the shared tendencies towards authoritarianism that unite them.

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INTRODUCTION

The effort to build relationships with the five states of Central Asia has become a defining element of the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's (IEA) foreign policy. In July 2025, its official mouthpiece, Al-Emarah News, explicitly laid out this strategy, [describing](#) it as “a new and distinct era in Afghanistan’s foreign policy” in which regional engagement was “the cornerstone of the country’s diplomatic framework.” It is difficult now to argue that, as was said during their first Emirate, the Taliban “have no foreign policy”¹ or that they have “little understanding of the evolved processes of modern diplomacy.”² The second Emirate might be uninterested in accommodating the demands of Western powers, but it is not isolationist. Even its reclusive leader does not want to be at the helm of an isolated state: “Afghanistan wants positive relations with its neighbours based on mutual benefits and within the framework of Islamic principles,” IEA Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada said in his 2023 Eid message ([X](#)).

“It is striking,” wrote the social anthropologist Andrea Schmitz in 2022, “how quickly the governments in the secular states of Central Asia have decided to prioritise pragmatism in their dealings with the de facto Islamist regime of the Taliban.”³ For many observers, it is the theocratic nature of the Emirate that makes Central Asian states’ openness to dealing with it surprising. The regimes of Central Asia have spent well over twenty years sounding warnings over the threat of Islamist extremism and blaming internal unrest on dangerous Islamist terrorists, including those based over the border. “They have sought to associate all political opposition with increasing Islamic radicalisation, reflected in general signs of Islamicisation,” the political scientist John Heathershaw wrote, arguing that this allowed the regimes to garner foreign support for domestic oppression.⁴

¹ See Olivier Roy, ‘Has Islamism a future in Afghanistan?’ p210, in William Maley, ed, *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, Hurst, London, 1998.

² William Maley, [The Foreign Policy of the Taliban](#), Council on Foreign Relations, February 2000.

³ See Andrea Schmitz’s article published by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), [Central Asia’s Muslims and the Taliban](#), 3 March 2022.

⁴ John Heathershaw and David Montgomery, [The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics](#), Chatham House, 2014, p7.

That rhetoric has changed: the IEA is not dismissed as a regime of terrorists but acknowledged as a necessary partner for Central Asia. The shift in rhetoric is reflected in the engagement between Central Asian states and the Emirate's leadership. As Schmitz argued, pragmatism is the overarching theme of Central Asian foreign policy towards Afghanistan: the political alternatives to the Emirate are few and stability – whether under a theocratic government or not – is more appealing to the Central Asian states than further conflict in Afghanistan. Consequently, they have chosen to engage with the Emirate.



Shoppers from Afghanistan visit the Airtom Free Trade Zone near the Amu Darya on the Afghan border with Uzbekistan.

Photo: Vyacheslav Oseledko/AFP, 16 August 2025

This report assesses this engagement and the relationships between Afghanistan and the five states of Central Asia, beginning with an overview of the political relationships before moving on to consider the security concerns of Central Asian states. The report details and analyses trade, both licit and illicit, and various regional infrastructure megaprojects that might – or might not – be built. Finally, it considers arguments on the other ways in which relationships between states can help a regime to survive, asking whether these apply to the Emirate and what they might suggest about its future prospects.

POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

In September 2025, the Emirate government remained unrecognised by any country, with the exception of Russia, which announced that it would recognise the regime and accepted an Emirate ambassador to Moscow in July 2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation [statement](#)). Nevertheless, there has been a creeping normalisation of relations with the Emirate by many states. At least 17 countries have embassies in Afghanistan, according to the [Caspian Policy Centre](#), and most Asian states host an Emirate-appointed diplomat as chargé d'affaires. Some, including Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and China, in addition to Russia, have accepted an Emirate representative at the ambassadorial level. A smaller group of countries – Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan – have also removed the Taliban from their lists of proscribed organisations ([Guardian](#)).

The Central Asian states have not recognised the Emirate – aware of the risks involved in breaking the international consensus on recognition – but they advocate for engaging with the regime on a de facto basis. Their diplomatic relationships with the Emirate are pragmatic and represent three shared beliefs: firstly, that there is no realistic alternative to the current Taliban regime, secondly, that the stability of Afghanistan is in Central Asian interests, and thirdly, that regardless of the regime in power, the Central Asian states require a relationship with Afghanistan.

Despite these shared beliefs, there are differences in the political and diplomatic approaches of the Central Asian states towards Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are keenest to engage with the Taliban, while a relationship with the Emirate is less relevant to Kyrgyzstan's interests, and Tajikistan is the least willing to build a relationship with the Emirate.

Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the three Central Asian regimes that have engaged most actively with the Taliban so far, have taken a common approach. They have attempted to maintain a political relationship with Kabul, despite the change of regime and to take advantage of the new security situation in Afghanistan to intensify their economic relationships.

This has required something of an about-face for Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in their attitude to the Taliban. Uzbekistan supported the United Front/Northern Alliance

against the Taliban in the 1990s and former president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, addressing a NATO summit in 2002, described Afghanistan as having been “a training ground of fanatics, extremists and terrorists of all stripes.” He “extended [his country’s] words of appreciation for the USA for taking the lead and shouldering the main burden of disrupting the strongholds of international terrorism” (transcript of his speech [here](#)).

Map 1: Afghanistan and its neighbours



Map for AAN by Roger Helms

Tashkent hosted US military and contractors providing logistical services from 2001 to 2005 at its Karshi-Khanabad base ([BBC](#)) and according to a 2013 [study](#) by the Open Society Justice Initiative, also permitted the use of its airspace and airports for flights associated with the CIA’s extraordinary rendition operations. Kazakhstan, likewise, collaborated with the US, as former president Nursultan Nazarbayev reminded

US President Donald Trump in a 2018 [statement](#): “From the very first days after 9/11, Kazakhstan very steadfastly supported the US fight against terrorism, and we continue to collaborate closely in Afghanistan with [the US].”

Turkmenistan, in contrast, in accordance with its foreign policy of positive neutrality, avoided condemning the Taliban even during the first Emirate. Nevertheless, in the Republic era, it supported NATO troops by allowing American military planes to fly through Turkmen airspace and refuel in Ashgabat ([Eurasianet](#)), while Turkmenistan’s membership of NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme allowed American forces and contractors in Afghanistan to buy Turkmen fuel tax-free ([Eurasianet](#)).

All three states have accepted the IEA’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Amir Khan Muttaqi, as the Taliban’s chief diplomatic representative and generally accord him the status that any other foreign minister receives. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan both dispatched their own foreign ministers to meet Muttaqi in Kabul in October 2021 ([Hasht-e Subh](#)). Turkmenistan then invited him to Ashgabat in January 2022, according to an IEA Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) [statement](#), while Uzbekistan hosted Muttaqi in Tashkent in July 2022 ([Khama Press](#)). Kazakhstan dispatched its minister of foreign affairs to Kabul in December 2021 ([Kabul Times](#)) and Deputy Prime Minister Zariq Zhumangarin visited Kabul to meet Muttaqi in April 2025 (IEA [statement](#)).

Likewise, all three countries allow some level of IEA diplomatic presence in Afghan embassies and consulates in their countries, while having active embassies of their own in Kabul. In early 2022, the Turkmens accepted a Taliban-appointed charge d’affaires at the Afghan embassy in Ashgabat, according to a MOFA [statement](#). The embassy in Tashkent is led by a Taliban appointee, accepted by the Uzbek government as Afghanistan’s ambassador ([ToloNews](#)). Astana has accepted a Taliban-appointed charge d’affaires (Kazakh [MOFA](#)).

Finally, in a further demonstration of pragmatism, these three countries have attempted to make partnerships with figures in the Emirate leadership who have some sway over their countries’ chief concerns – trade, security and development of infrastructure. Chief among these is the IEA’s Minister for Industry and Commerce Nuruddin Azizi. He met Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at a trade conference in Tashkent in June 2025 ([Hasht-e Subh](#)), met Kazakhstan’s President Tokayev at a trade conference in Astana in May 2025 ([ToloNews](#)) and led a trade delegation to Ashgabat in March 2024 ([Times of Central Asia](#)). Deputy Prime Minister for Economic

Affairs Abdul Ghani Baradar is also a popular partner. In the first six months of 2025, he met the Turkmen Deputy Prime Minister in Azerbaijan ([TOLONews](#)), the Kazakh Minister for Foreign Affairs in Kabul ([Al-Emarah](#)) and Uzbekistan's Prime Minister in Tashkent ([Al-Emarah](#)).

The other two Central Asian nations, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, are much less keen to collaborate with the Emirate. Kyrgyzstan shows little appetite to engage: it shares no borders with Afghanistan and unlike Kazakhstan has no interest in positioning itself as a regional arbitrator. Yet it has not been overly critical of the Emirate. The Kyrgyz government appears happy to maintain relatively infrequent diplomatic contacts with Afghanistan, as it did during the former Republic governments. It has provided some humanitarian aid to Afghanistan ([24.kg](#), a Kyrgyz news agency); it also sent the Kyrgyz Minister for Economy to Kabul in January 2024 to meet Muttaqi, according to a MOFA [statement](#), and has removed the Taliban from its list of proscribed organisations in order to “secure regional security and further develop the ongoing dialogue,” according to an official [statement](#) from the Kyrgyz foreign ministry.

For Tajikistan, the idea of collaborating with the Emirate is unappealing. It was a key supporter of the Northern Alliance in the 1990s and responded to the Taliban's second takeover by deploying additional troops to the Afghan border and allowing some opposition figures, particularly old comrades from the 1990s, to take shelter in Tajikistan. It has not allowed the Emirate to send a representative to the embassy in Dushanbe and has been consistent in its calls for a more inclusive government in Kabul. In line with this approach, official visits and meetings have been rare.

SECURITY CONCERNS

With the return of the Taliban in 2021, some observers revived concerns about the spread of militancy from Afghanistan into Central Asia. This has been reinforced by reports from the United Nations that the Emirate tolerates the presence of militant groups focused on overthrowing the Uzbek and Tajik regimes, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Jamaat Ansarullah (also known as the Tajik Taliban).⁵

However, the extent to which these groups pose a threat is questionable. “The narrative of a constantly-growing threat does not fit well with reality,” wrote Noah Tucker and Ed Lemon in a 2024 [report](#), arguing that much of the violence in Central Asia attributed to “terrorism” is motivated by local power struggles and political dynamics. Tucker and Lemon point out that there have been only 19 attacks in the Central Asian region since 2008 and that the volume and content of propaganda messaging in Central Asia by militant groups has declined since the peak levels of 2014.

In the case of the IMU, the risk it presents to Uzbekistan has diminished, in part because some groups previously affiliated with the IMU have merged into Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which the Emirate is fighting, or have joined the Pakistani Taliban. A small rocket attack from Afghan territory into Uzbekistan took place in April 2022, which was claimed by ISKP rather than the IMU ([CACI](#)).

Likewise, there have been no successful attacks by Jamaat Ansarullah in Tajikistan since 2021. However, the Tajik government has stated that in April 2023, members of a militant group crossed into Tajikistan from northern Afghanistan to carry out “terrorist operations” (Tajik MOFA [statement](#)). In response to this, Tajikistan has repeatedly called for the establishment of a “security belt” around Afghanistan ([EurasiaNet](#)). The group is a point of contention between the Emirate and the Tajik government because reports indicate that Jamaat Ansarullah remains affiliated with the Taliban.⁶

⁵ See UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team reports; the February 2025 report is available [here](#).

⁶ According to the February 2025 UN Sanctions Monitoring team [report](#) (para 97), Jamaat Ansarullah “had [time period unspecified] training camps in Khost Province with Al-Qaida engineers and weapons instructors, and a special military centre in the Kalafgan district of Takhar Province to train Central Asian and Arab fighters.” The Taliban also reportedly chose to use Jamaat Ansarullah to provide security in five border districts of Badakhshan in July 2021, as the Republic was falling. See [RFE/RL](#), [Long War Journal](#).

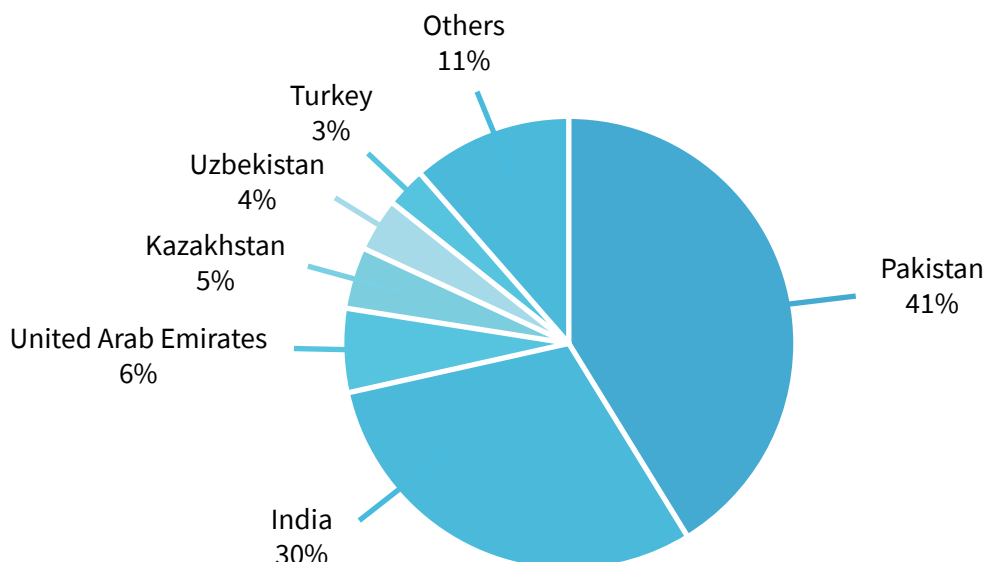
ISKP represents a greater concern for the regimes of Central Asia. According to the UN, it is recruiting from amongst Central Asian nationals, with a particular focus on Tajik nationals, who were reportedly involved in IS-claimed attacks in Moscow in 2024 ([BBC](#)). The movement's focus, however, remains elsewhere: it may recruit from Central Asia, but attacks claimed by ISKP in the region are very rare and the connection between supposed ISKP members in Central Asia and the group's leadership is unclear ([Combating Terrorism Centre](#)). Moreover, countering ISKP is a shared issue for the Emirate and Central Asia and consequently they seek to cooperate on this and collaborate on security. Senior security and intelligence officials from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have met both Minister of Defence Muhammad Yaqub and Minister of the Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani. The Uzbek delegation, led by the head of the State Security Service, met Haqqani during a two-day visit in July 2025, according to [Al-Emarah](#). A Turkmenistan delegation, led by their foreign minister, also discussed security for Turkmen pipeline projects with Yaqub during a two-day visit to Kabul on 30 and 31 October 2021 ([News Central Asia](#)). Tajikistan sent the head of the State Committee for National Security, Samumim Yatimov, to Kabul to meet Emirate officials in August 2024, though no official record of the visit was ever released ([Eurasianet](#)).

ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIPS

Formal trade

Under the Republic, trade between Afghanistan and Central Asia was relatively small. In 2019, according to a [World Bank study](#), trade between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan and Afghanistan was “embarrassingly low... a mere shadow of its realizable potential.” The Afghan National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) figures for [2019](#) show that trade was dominated by *imports* to Afghanistan from Central Asia: they totalled USD 1.5 billion, while exports were only USD 76 million.⁷ Afghanistan’s chief exports to Central Asia, according to NSIA, were dried fruits, fertiliser and sheepskins, although energy drinks featured in the top three exports to both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. From Central Asia, Afghanistan’s major imports were energy – liquid gas, petroleum products, electricity – and wheat flour.

Figure 1: Afghan exports by destination, March-August 2025



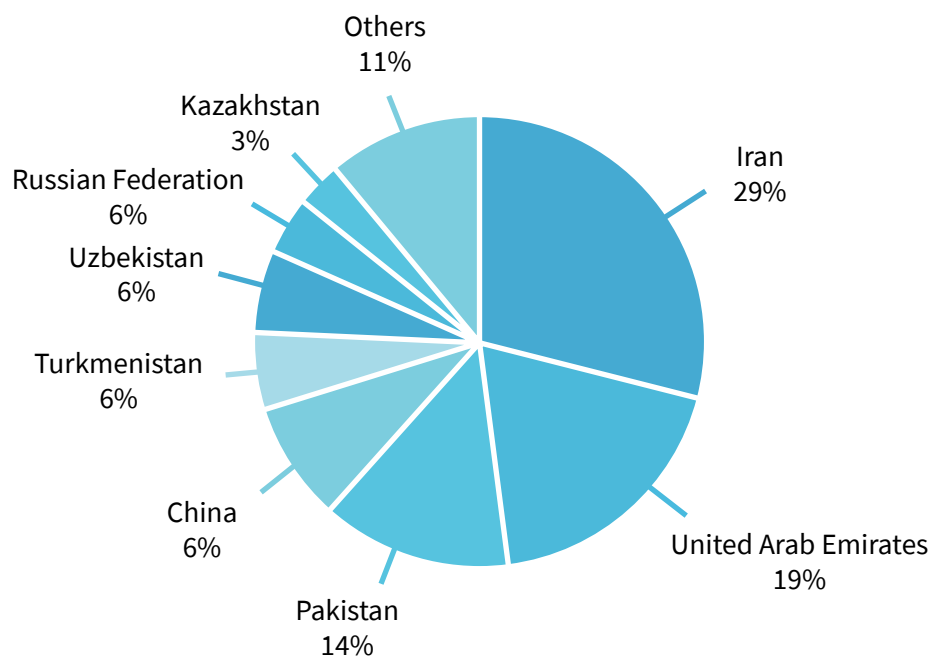
Source: ASYCUDA (Automated System for Customs Data), via the World Bank ‘Afghanistan Economic Monitor’, August 2025, p5

⁷ Figures for 2019 are more representative of the general picture of trade with Central Asia during the Republic era than figures from 2020 due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Under the Emirate, it is difficult to assess the overall value of trade with Central Asia. Statistics are patchy and there is limited data available, meaning that comparisons between the Republic era and the current situation are difficult. However, the available information suggests that trade with Central Asia still remains less significant than that with other countries in the region.

As figure 1 above, shows, rather than Central Asia, Afghanistan trades more with Pakistan and India, which received 41 per cent and 30 per cent of Afghan exports respectively between March and August 2025.⁸ Imports to Afghanistan show a similar bias (see Figure 2, below) with Central Asia outgunned by Iran (29 per cent), the UAE (19 per cent) and Pakistan (14 per cent) in the same five-month period.

Figure 2: Imports by country of origin, March-August 2025



Source: ASYCUDA (Automated System for Customs Data), via the World Bank 'Afghanistan Economic Monitor', August 2025, p4

However, the IEA has placed a heavy focus on increasing trade between Afghanistan and Central Asia. The financial benefits the regime accrues from this trade may be modest in comparison to trade with other countries, but they are growing and are not insignificant. Customs duties represent a crucial revenue stream for the IEA because inland tax revenues plummeted with their assumption

⁸ See the [Afghanistan Economic Monitor](#), World Bank, August 2025, p4.

of power in 2021. Both imports and exports fell in late 2021 following the Taliban's takeover, according to the [World Bank](#), which [reported](#) in mid-2025 that imports were increasing year-on-year but that overall trade volumes remained lower than before the change of regime. Despite this drop, customs revenue has increased, accounting for more than 53 per cent of revenue in 2024 according to the [World Bank](#), because the regime is better able than Republic-era governments to centralise revenue collection.⁹ For example, under the Republic customs and transport duties were skimmed off at the border and on the highways by customs officials and traffic police – with money channelled to higher-ups – as well as by the insurgents, with only a quarter to a third of revenue estimated as reaching the treasury. Under the Taliban, duties are instead collected at the point of entry under the authority of customs officials. The duty extracted from each truck has also increased since the Republic era.

Uzbekistan

Trade between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan has been increasing since 2001. During the Republic, it reached a peak in 2020, with Uzbekistan exporting goods to Afghanistan worth a total of USD 588 million, including USD 154 million in electricity and USD 217 million in wheat flour, according to NSIA figures. By comparison Afghanistan's exports to its neighbour were tiny, amounting to just USD 1.1 million in 2020.¹⁰

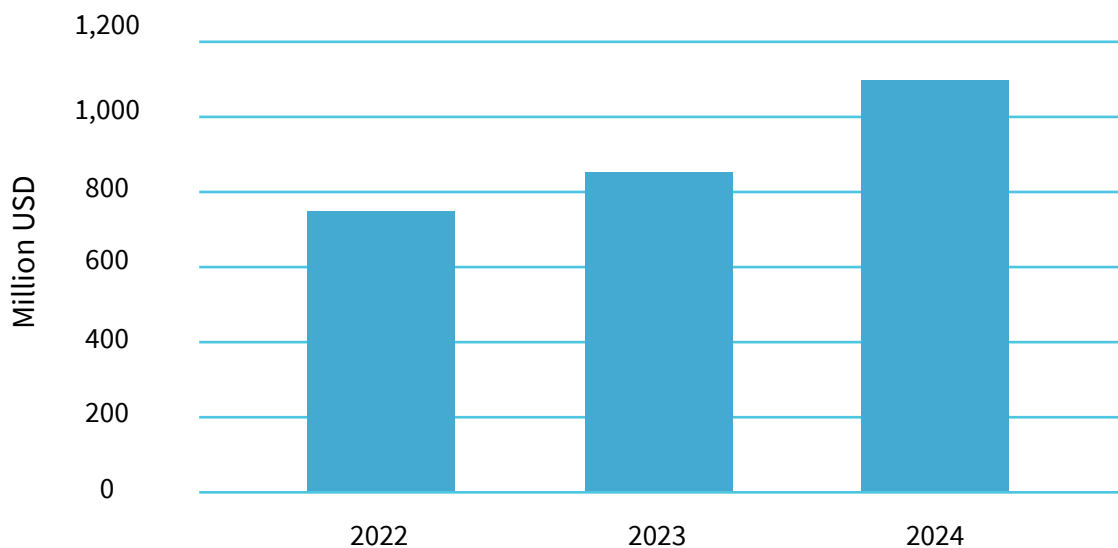
The fall of the Republic has not deterred Tashkent from its plans to expand and strengthen economic cooperation with Afghanistan, as set out, originally, in a [decree](#) from President Mirziyoyev in 2020. Both Afghan and Uzbek officials appear keen to promote increased trade, with a series of bilateral meetings in 2024 and 2025 that have ended with commitments to expand it. Afghanistan's acting Deputy Prime Minister Baradar met President Mirziyoyev in July 2025 and made a public [statement](#) welcoming the increase in trade, while Mirziyoyev said his government wanted to grow trade further and would try to facilitate smoother export processes for Afghan goods transiting Uzbek territory.

⁹ For more on cross-border trade and revenue collection, see Kate Clark, [Taxing the Afghan Nation: What the Taleban's pursuit of domestic revenues means for citizens, the economy and the state](#), September 2022, AAN and; David Mansfield, [Changing the Rules of the Game: How the Taliban Regulated Cross-Border Trade and Upended Afghanistan's Political Economy](#), XCEPT Research, July 2022.

¹⁰ Figures derived from [Volume of Trade Turnover – Annual](#), National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, accessed 1 July 2025.

In line with the rhetoric, trade between the two nations has continued to grow since 2021. The bulk of trade is made up of Uzbek exports to Afghanistan (see Figure 3 below). These have increased significantly: they were worth USD 756 million in 2022, USD 857 million in 2023 and USD 1.1 billion in 2024.¹¹

Figure 3: Uzbek exports to Afghanistan 2022 to 2024



Source: [Volume of Trade Turnover – Annual](#), National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, accessed 1 July 2025

The value of Afghan exports to Uzbekistan is very small in comparison. For 2024, according to Uzbek state statistics, Afghan exports to Uzbekistan totalled just under USD 4 million, or just 0.36 per cent of Uzbek imports to Afghanistan.¹²

Trade with Afghanistan still represents a small proportion of foreign trade for Uzbekistan, whose major trading partners are China (accounting for 18.9 per cent of trade turnover), Russia (17.6 per cent), Kazakhstan (6.5 per cent), Turkey (4.5 per cent) and South Korea (3 per cent).¹³ Afghanistan, meanwhile, accounts for only 1.7 per cent of Uzbek foreign trade. That is the same as France (1.7 per cent) and smaller than Germany (1.8 per cent).

¹¹ Volume of Trade Turnover – Annual, [National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan](#), accessed 1 July 2025..

¹² Volume of Trade Turnover – Annual, [National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan](#), accessed 1 July 2025.

¹³ Volume of Trade Turnover – Annual, [National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan](#), accessed 1 July 2025.

When viewed in the longer term, the recent increase appears even less noteworthy. In 2009, trade with Afghanistan made up only 3 per cent of Uzbekistan's total foreign trade, while Afghanistan's average share of Uzbek trade between 2009 and 2020 was 2.4 per cent. Even under the Republic, Afghanistan was not a significant trade partner for the Uzbeks and the trade benefits on offer for Tashkent then dwarf those available now for two reasons: the boom in rent to the Afghan economy,¹⁴ as well as Uzbekistan's position on the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) that supplied US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, with some 60 per cent of NATO's fuel supplies arriving via the NDN in 2021 according to [EurasiaNet](#).

The chief gains for the Afghan state are derived from customs revenue. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how much revenue is collected at the border crossing at Hairatan in Balkh province because neither government has made the information public. However, Ministry of Finance data published by the [World Bank](#) reported that the Hairatan crossing accounted for 10 per cent of the total revenue collected at border crossings in 2022. The Balkh Province Customs Department said it had collected AFN 9 billion (USD 130 million) in revenue that year ([Al-Emarah](#)). That is slightly higher than the ten per cent of customs revenue collected at Hairatan in 2022 reported by the World Bank. However, it is broadly consistent with the World Bank's assessment and with figures from the [NSIA](#), which reported that the Balkh Provincial Customs Department processed USD 923.5 million of imports and USD 56.4 million of exports in 2023-24. The revenue that can be generated from trade with Uzbekistan is therefore small in comparison to trade with Pakistan or Iran: revenue collected at crossings with Pakistan accounted for 52 per cent of all revenue collected at border crossings in 2022, while 31 per cent of this revenue came from crossings with Iran in 2022, according to the World Bank data.

The modest increases in trade have been accompanied by other shifts that may help trade to grow in the future. Following a visit from Uzbek Prime Minister Abdullah Aripov in August 2024, the Afghan Ministry of Commerce and Industry [announced](#) that the visit had ended with USD 2.5 billion in trade deals, although the commerce ministry did not specify how many of these deals were between private sector actors and how many were between the two states. Later in August 2024 Uzbekistan

¹⁴ This refers to the vast amounts of unearned foreign income that flowed into Afghanistan as a result of spending by international forces, military support to the Republic and international aid. Among other dynamics, it tended to weaken Afghan domestic production and suck in imports. For more, see Kate Clark's AAN's report, [The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering inequality, poverty, and lack of democracy through the 'rentier state' lens](#), 2020.

[inaugurated](#) the Termez International Trade Centre (TITC), also known as the Airitom Free Zone, a free trade zone at the Hairatan border crossing ([Pravda Vostovka](#) news). According to Uzbek [legislation](#), Afghan citizens can work in the Termez International Trade Centre and lease businesses there, staying in the zone for up to 14 days without a visa. The legislation also specifies plans to run a bus service to the centre from Mazar-e Sharif and offer healthcare to Afghan citizens in the private clinic already established there. According to [VOA News](#), a month after it was inaugurated, ie September 2024, Afghan traders occupied only five per cent of the business units within the centre. The rest were empty.

Afghanistan and Uzbekistan have also agreed two Preferential Trade Agreements. The first came into force on 1 October 2024, cancelling import duties in both countries for 14 categories of goods.¹⁵ The second removed import duties on more categories of goods as part of a cooperation programme between the two states [announced](#) by the Uzbek Ministry of Investment, Industry and Trade in June 2025 ([Ministry of Investment, Industry and Trade statement](#)).



IEA border guards watch as their Uzbek counterparts inspect a lorry at the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Friendship Bridge in Hairatan, Balkh province.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 27 October 2021

¹⁵ [Tashkent and Kabul Agree on Trade Preferences](#), Gazeta.Uz, 13 June 2025.

Turkmenistan

Trade with Turkmenistan is less significant in terms of material benefits than trade with Uzbekistan. This was also the case under the Republic-era governments. In 2019, Afghanistan imported USD 410 million of goods on which customs duty was paid from Turkmenistan. NSIA figures from the agency's statistical [yearbook](#) for 2019 show that these imports were almost entirely dominated by natural gas and petroleum products, followed by fertiliser and electricity. The Republic also imported USD 280 million of duty-free goods from Turkmenistan, of which USD 180 million were petroleum products, oil and other fuels. From Afghanistan, exports totalled USD 899,000; the top exports were chicken feed and food products, in addition to animal skins and energy drinks.

It is difficult to assess the current value of trade between the two states and the benefits each derives from it, because the Turkmen government releases very little information on imports or exports. However, trade seems to have remained at a similar level to the Republic era. According to the Ministry of Commerce, as [reported](#) by ToloNews, 2023 saw USD 481 million of trade between the two countries, of which USD 477 million were imports to Afghanistan. The [World Bank](#) in 2024 estimated that 5 per cent of Afghanistan's customs revenue was collected at the two crossings with Turkmenistan, Torghundi (Herat province) and Aqina (Faryab province). Traffic at the two crossings is not high: Aqina sees approximately 200 freight trucks a day and Torghundi about 150.¹⁶ At both crossings, trucks are charged USD 150-200, depending on size and cargo, giving an estimated annual revenue for road cargo of USD 7.8 million at Aqina and USD 8.2 million at Torghundi, according to the UN's Logistics Cluster figures.¹⁷

If these trade values are accurate, Afghanistan appears to be a minor trading partner for Turkmenistan. The Turkmen economy is based around the export of natural gas and oil, which accounted for almost 90 per cent of exports according to the [World Bank](#) in 2024 and its top three trade partners – China, Russia and Turkey – absorb 84

¹⁶ See [Afghanistan Land Border Crossing of Aqina \(Turkmenistan\)](#), and [Afghanistan Land Border Crossing of Torghundi \(Turkmenistan\)](#), Logistics Cluster. (The Logistics Cluster is a coordination mechanism supporting humanitarian actors as part of the cluster system established by the UN's Inter Agency Standing Committee). Data is updated regularly, last accessed September 2025.

¹⁷ The calculation is based on the estimated number of trucks per day at each crossing, multiplied by the estimated fees per truck, multiplied by the operational days per week, multiplied by the operational weeks per year.

per cent of all trade. Exporting gas to China is the single most important priority for Turkmenistan, as 96 per cent of gas exports went to China in 2022.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Turkmen officials and businessmen have met senior IEA leaders to discuss increasing trade between the two countries. The Ministry of Finance reported that it had met the Turkmen Ambassador to Kabul in February 2024 to discuss increasing trade. “Their delegations came and spoke to the financial, commercial and transit sectors. It was a very good step, we are in favour of increasing our trade with Turkmenistan,” said IEA spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed in an interview with [ToloNews](#). In May 2024, the Ministry of Commerce [announced](#) on X that Turkmen and Afghan businessmen had signed more than 10 contracts and Memoranda of Understanding at a meeting in Herat convened by acting Minister for Industry and Commerce Nuruddin Azidi, following a state visit by Azidi to Turkmenistan where he met Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov in March 2024.

Kazakhstan

Although it does not share a border with Afghanistan, Kazakhstan is the Emirate’s third most significant trade partner in Central Asia. During the Republic era Kazakhstan derived benefits by acting as a transit zone for NATO troops and commodities, including emergency landing and overflight rights for NATO planes, but trade was minimal. Exports to Afghanistan accounted for less than 1 per cent of Kazakhstan’s exports in 2013; by 2019, according to the NSIA, the value of exports to Afghanistan had reached USD 515 million.¹⁹ The majority of exports were wheat flour, gas and petrol. Afghanistan exported goods worth USD 2.9 million to Kazakhstan; dried fruits accounted for some USD 2.8 million of the total exports.

Trade remains small today. Official Kazakh trade statistics show that exports to Afghanistan made up only 0.7 per cent of Kazakh exports and 0.03 per cent of imports in January – May 2024.²⁰ Nevertheless, both sides claim that bilateral trade is flourishing. In October 2024 the two sides signed a bilateral agreement aiming

¹⁸ See World Bank, [Turkmenistan Economic Report](#), December 2024, p24.

¹⁹ See Nargis Kassenova, ‘Kazakhstan’s Policy Toward Afghanistan’, in *Afghanistan and its Neighbours After the NATO Withdrawal*, ed Amin Saikal and Kirill Nourzhanov, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016, p99.

²⁰ For all figures on trade, see Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, [Foreign Trade Turnover of the Republic of Kazakhstan](#), January – May 2025.

to increase trade to USD 3bn annually at a business forum in Almaty.²¹ However, statistics suggest this will be a difficult goal, as the total volume of trade between the two in 2023 was USD 600 million and from January to May 2025, Afghanistan's share of Kazakh exports dropped to 0.55 per cent, while imports remained the same as 2024 (0.03 per cent).²²

Kyrgyzstan

Trade between Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan has been limited in the past, restricted by a lack of ground routes between the two, with China and Russia Kyrgyzstan's primary trade partners. There is an established trade route between the Kyrgyz city of Osh and Afghanistan's Faizabad in Badakhshan, running via Tajikistan, but the volume of licit trade on this route is small and the markets on either side unattractive for traders from the other nation due to long distances and high transport costs in comparison to the value of goods.

In 2019, trade volumes between Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan were small: Afghanistan imported USD 223,224 of Kyrgyz goods and exported USD 148,398 worth of goods to Kyrgyzstan, according to the NSIA. Most imports from Kyrgyzstan were basic food products and seeds, while the NSIA statistics showed that Afghanistan exported only dried apricots to Kyrgyzstan.²³

Trade volumes between Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan have increased sharply since 2021, although trade remains modest for both parties in comparison to trade with other partners. The total volume of exports to Afghanistan from Kyrgyzstan for 2024, according to the Afghan Ministry of Commerce, was USD 66 million – USD 59 million in exports and USD 7 million in imports ([ToloNews](#)). The sudden increase is largely due to a spike in fuel exports from Kyrgyzstan. Under the Republic governments, Afghanistan imported very little fuel from Kyrgyzstan but the first shipments of Kyrgyz fuel arrived in Kunduz soon after the Taliban took power ([Pajhwok](#)). However, the quality of these shipments is in question; some commentators have attributed the increase to Kyrgyz efforts to dump poor-quality fuel produced in southern

²¹ Press release from the Office of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, [Serik Zhumangarin opens Kazakhstan-Afghanistan business forum](#), 22 October 2014.

²² See Eldaniz Gusseinov, [Kazakh-Afghan Relations: The Competition for Trade and Connectivity in Central Asia](#), Royal Society for Asian Affairs, 2024.

²³ See [Afghanistan Trade Statistics Yearbook](#), 2019, NSIA, p299.

Kyrgyzstan and noted that substantial amounts of substandard fuel have been returned by Afghan customs officials ([IntelliNews](#)).



Workers unload flour from a freight train from Uzbekistan at the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border station in Hairatan, Balkh Province.

Photo: Atif Aryan/AFP, 5 March 2025

Despite the relatively small trade balances, both sides are keen to promote a growth in trade. Kyrgyz officials met the IEA's charge d'affaires in Bishkek in September 2024 and both sides agreed to expand economic cooperation, though they did not specify how, according to a [statement](#) from the Kyrgyz Cabinet of Ministers (in Russian). At the Astana International Forum in May 2025 acting Minister for Industry and Trade Nuruddin Azidi met Kyrgyz leaders to discuss “enhancing trade cooperation,” with specific measures unclear in the official Kyrgyz [statement](#) (in Russian).

Tajikistan

Trade with Tajikistan does not reach the levels of trade with other Central Asian partners. In 2019, imports from Tajikistan were around USD 119 million, while exports reached USD 2.4 million. Imports were primarily electricity (USD 61 million) and cement (USD 44 million); exports were dominated by fruit, vegetables and seeds.

In the first six months of 2025, according to Tajikistan's national statistics agency and as reported by [Ariana News](#), trade between the two nations amounted to USD 40 million, an increase of 31 per cent on the same period in 2024. This has been fuelled by a rise in demand for electricity in Afghanistan and by better security conditions on the roads of north-eastern Afghanistan. As in the Republic era, the bulk of trade is cement and electricity exported from Tajikistan to Afghanistan; as with all Central Asian countries, the Tajik government allowed few Afghan imports into the country. The majority of Tajik trade enters at Shir Khan Bandar (Kunduz province); the volume of trade at Shir Khan Bandar is lower than other land borders, with some 100 trucks a day, according to [UN Logistics Cluster](#) data. It is not an efficient trade route for most goods because trucks from Tajikistan are required to unload and return to Tajikistan after transferring their cargo to Afghan trucks, which causes delays, increases costs and damages cargo.

At the local level, trade with Tajikistan offers benefits for small-scale traders. This is due to the cross-border markets between Badakhshan province and Tajikistan, which allow Afghans to cross into Tajik territory without visas to trade goods in small 'free trade zones'. These are local affairs, first established in 2004, which generate profit for the small-scale traders involved but provide little revenue for the regime. Provided the value of goods traded is less than USD 1,000 and the total weight of goods under 50 kg, no duty is due on the Afghan side, although a June 2025 report suggest that the Tajik officials are charging customs on goods sold by Afghans ([ToloNews](#)). Afghan producers tend not to benefit because the vast majority of goods traded at these markets are re-exports produced in China, Kazakhstan and Russia, according to a 2019 [Chatham House](#) report. A 2016 IOM-sponsored [study](#) described the markets as "modest in scale, constrained by the low incomes of consumers on both sides of the river [the Amu Darya]."

ILLICIT AND INFORMAL TRADE

The return of the Taliban upended Afghanistan's political economy, destroying many of the old networks of patronage and power that were closely connected to regional economies to the north. The Emirate quickly managed to channel much of the former illicit trade in materials, such as fuel and minerals, via official border crossing points with Turkmenistan at Aqina and Torghundi, according to 2022 research by David Mansfield.²⁴ Many of the corrupt border officials who previously profited from illicit trade had fled or been replaced. To prevent corruption amongst its own officials, the Emirate frequently rotates its borders and customs officials, hoping to stop them from accumulating power at the expense of the centre and to stop them from exploiting connections in illicit networks.²⁵ It also promotes its own efforts to prevent trafficking of drugs and precious stones into Central Asia.²⁶

However, despite efforts from the Emirate's leadership, signs suggest that illicit cross-border trade with Central Asia continues at both formal and informal crossing points. Chief amongst these illicit networks is the drugs trade, according to the [UNODC](#), despite the ban on opium cultivation, trade and export in Afghanistan. There are two principal northern routes for heroin and synthetic drugs from Afghanistan to Russian markets: the first runs from Afghanistan to Kazakhstan via Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the second from Afghanistan to Kazakhstan via Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

It is difficult to assess the amount of Afghan drugs entering Central Asia since the Taliban's return to power. While the Emirate's drugs ban radically decreased poppy and opium cultivation, as UNODC [reported](#) in January 2025, some trade has continued, including to the north, in part from pre-ban stockpiles (the agency acknowledges methodological challenges since 2021). As [AAN](#) reported in July 2025, Badakhshan remained relatively unaffected by enforcement of the ban on cultivation, at least until 2024, which may be one reason that the northern routes

²⁴ See ALCIS and David Mansfield, [Changing the Rules of the Game: How the Taliban Regulated Cross-Border Trade and Upended Afghanistan's Political Economy](#), July 2022.

²⁵ For more on the Emirate's efforts to control peripheral commanders, see Fabrizio Foschini's 2024 [Ruling Uncharted Territory: Islamic Emirate governance in northeastern Afghanistan](#) on Taliban governance in northeastern Afghanistan for AAN.

²⁶ See [Trouble In Afghanistan's Opium Fields: The Taliban War On Drugs](#), Crisis Group, 12 September 2024.

remain active. Seizure data from Central Asian states suggests that the trade does persist, but that data cannot give a full picture of its scale because seizure patterns depend on state actors who are widely thought to collude in the drug trade.²⁷ The International Crisis Group, citing interviews with drug smugglers in Badakhshan and neighbouring Takhar, reported them claiming that “some of the country’s largest smugglers [have] shifted their bases from the south to northern Badakhshan province and expanded the opium trade along the so-called silk smuggling routes across the border with Tajikistan.”²⁸ It was a claim also made by [AAN](#) interviewees for its July 2025 report cited above, although with drugs being smuggled both north and south to Kabul and on to Kandahar and Helmand and the Iranian/Pakistani border.

Of all the Central Asian states, the drug trade is most prevalent into Tajikistan due to its long and porous border with Afghanistan.²⁹ Drugs cross this border both at the formal crossing at Shir Khan Bandar and at unofficial crossings in Badakhshan. UNODC identified increased opium and methamphetamine seizures since the return of the Taliban in some areas of southern Tajikistan. This was also reported by Tajik officials, who told Russian outlet [TASS](#) in 2024 that they had seen no sign of a reduction in the trade. For example, Tajik state sources reported the identification of a Tajik-Afghan drug smuggling network in Khatlon in June 2025 and the disruption of a second network in July 2025 ([Asia-Plus News Agency](#)). Tajik officials seized a large shipment of drugs on the Afghan border in June 2025, according to a [report](#) from official state outlet [Khovar](#), and also claimed to have been involved in ten exchanges of fire with drug traffickers on the border in the first six months of 2025 ([TOLONews](#)). Although such reports do not always give details on the drugs seized, the methamphetamine trade appears to be growing in scale, as reported by [UNODC](#) in 2023. Tajik state sources claim that, in 2024, the state seized 41kg more of synthetic drugs than in 2023, as part of a 59 per cent rise in the number of seizures ([AsiaPlus](#)). The majority of synthetic drugs are seized in transit from Afghanistan to China, according to Tajik sources.

²⁷ This point is supported by scholars of organised crime and political violence who point to the relative lack of violence in the Central Asian narcotics trade as a sign that criminal actors have co-opted the state into “relationships of mutual accommodation” from which agents of the state at all levels benefit. See Lawrence Markowitz and Mariya Omelicheva, [Understanding Organised Crime and Violence in Central Asia](#), USIP, 2021, p6.

²⁸ International Crisis Group, [Trouble In Afghanistan’s Opium Fields: The Taliban War On Drugs](#), 12 September 2024.

²⁹ For more on the difficulties of policing the Tajik border, see Franz Marty, [How the Taliban Guard Afghanistan’s Border \(and What It Says About Their Regime\)](#), *The Diplomat*, 8 August 2023.

Seizures of Afghan drugs also continue in Uzbekistan. Afghan drugs enter Uzbekistan directly across the border at Hairatan and indirectly via Tajik territory. Uzbek state sources reported the interdiction of drugs at Hairatan in February 2025 ([Gazeta](#)), in Samarkand in February 2024 ([Kun.Uz](#)), in Termez in October 2024 ([Kun.Uz](#)), at an unspecified location on the Tajik border in May 2024 ([Vaib](#), in Russian), in Samarkand in April 2024 ([UzDaily](#), in Russian) and in Termez in July 2022 ([Podrobno](#), in Russian).



Workers carry sacks of flour off a freight train from Uzbekistan, at the railway station in Hairatan, Balkh province. Photo: Atif Aryan/AFP, 5 March 2024

Relationships between representatives or affiliates of the state and the drugs trade are particularly prevalent in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, according to Marat and Botoeva, as indicated by the higher frequency of violence between state actors and traffickers in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.³⁰ State anti-trafficking agencies often disrupt smaller-scale shipments to give the impression that they are acting against the trade and to consolidate control, but observers report that Tajik borders and

³⁰ Erica Marat and Gulzat Botoeva, [Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Corruption in Central Asia](#), SOC Ace Research Paper 7, University of Birmingham, 2022.

customs officials continue to collect payments from traffickers at the Afghan border in return for safe passage.³¹ At the higher levels of government, regime officials in Tajikistan have also been accused of involvement in the trade by [UNODC](#), who reported that the Tajik Ambassador to Kazakhstan was arrested in possession of 63kg of heroin in 2000; in 2004, the director of Tajikistan's Drug Control Agency was arrested for illegal weapon possession and abuse of power.

On the Afghan side, while the clampdown on opium poppy cultivation has largely been in earnest, there is little doubt that some individuals within or affiliated to the Islamic Emirate continue to profit from the drug trade with Central Asia, according to experts interviewed by Hamid Azizi in a 2024 [study](#). In Badakhshan, the experts reported that lower-level commanders and local powerbrokers whom the central authorities were wary of angering remain involved in the opium trade. Taliban officials and commanders in some areas of Badakhshan permit locals to grow opium and sometimes strike deals with farmers to receive part of the profits in exchange for not eradicating their crops, as AAN [found](#) in a series of interviews in 2024. Connections within the Emirate also allow traffickers from the south of Afghanistan to operate in Badakhshan, where they rely on local intermediaries and networks to smuggle opium into Tajikistan.

³¹ Marat and Botoeva, [Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Corruption in Central Asia](#), p26 and p33.

PIPE DREAMS: REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Massive infrastructure projects – ‘megaprojects’ – form a major element in the bilateral and multilateral relationships at play between Afghanistan and Central Asia. They command an enormous amount of attention from both Central Asian regimes and the IEA leadership; senior figures from both sides meet to discuss them regularly, and they are often touted as examples of technical skill and progress that will bring massive profits to the stakeholders and nations involved. Yet analysts question the feasibility of these megaprojects, unpicking the projected benefits from the messy reality of project implementation. The economic geographer, Bent Flyvbjerg, refers to this as the “megaprojects paradox”: they are hugely popular amongst governments, international finance institutions and multilateral organisations, but are expensive, risky and typically fail to deliver the promised benefits.³²

This section of the report assesses the prospects of the four highest profile and most frequently discussed infrastructure megaprojects between Afghanistan and Central Asia: the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI), the CASA-1000 project and two regional railway connectivity projects.

The Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India pipeline (TAPI)

The TAPI pipeline is the longest running of the three projects. It is designed to link Turkmenistan’s gas fields with energy-hungry markets in Pakistan and India, with some 800km of the proposed 1800km pipeline crossing Afghan territory. The idea of a pipeline has been under discussion since 1995, when it was known as the ‘Trans-Afghan Pipeline’.³³ Theoretically, the project would offer huge benefits to the participating states. Turkmenistan would gain sales revenue, Afghanistan and

³² Bent Flyvbjerg, ed, *The Oxford Handbook of Megaproject Management*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, p11.

³³ After the Taliban captured Kabul in 1994, the Trans-Afghan Pipeline was much in the news with competition between the Argentinian company Bidas and the American UNOCAL, where Zalmay Khalilzad and Hamed Karzai were consultants, for a contract with the Emirate. See Paul Watson, [Afghanistan Aims to Revive Pipeline Plans](#), LA Times, 30 May 2002 and Teymur Huseyinov and Hasanali Karasar, [Saving Afghanistan: From Poppy To Pipeline](#), Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 20 April 2005.

Pakistan would receive transit fees and India would be able to alleviate its domestic energy shortfalls. However, the project has been repeatedly thwarted by the regional realities of conflict and insecurity, high costs, limited funding, tensions between the participating nations, particularly Pakistan and India and both in the 1990s and 2020s, questions about whether and how to do business with a Taliban government in Kabul.



Shoppers walk along the arcades at the Airtom Free Trade Zone near the Uzbek-Afghan border.
Photo: Vyacheslav Oseledko/AFP, 16 August 2025

Beginning at the supply end of the pipeline in Turkmenistan, energy market analysts have questioned Turkmenistan's ability to deliver on the promised 33bn cubic metres of gas, given the lack of technical expertise and personnel available in Turkmenistan and the regime's reluctance to invite either foreign expertise or foreign capital into the project.³⁴ Additionally, it is unclear whether construction of the pipeline in Turkmenistan is complete, as the Turkmen government has made contradictory claims on its progress. "The acquisition of direct proof of construction

³⁴ See Steve Mann, [Will a Taliban victory advance TAPI?](#), Atlantic Council, 20 September 2021.

remains a very difficult task,” wrote Luca Anceschi in 2017.³⁵ In September 2015, the government announced it had mapped 25km of the pipeline route, reporting in February 2016 that it had laid 6km of pipe shortly before announcing that it had not in fact chosen a route, later stating that stakeholders in the TAPI project had earmarked some USD 200m to fund feasibility studies and research the optimum route.³⁶ Bruce Pannier, writing for [RFE/RL](#) in 2019, questioned why the state continued to purchase pipes for TAPI construction if the pipeline had already been constructed as Turkmen officials claimed in an interview with [EuroNews](#) in 2018.

Moving downstream into Afghanistan, the first transit country, the pipeline’s prospects are equally opaque. The Afghan stretch of the pipeline is divided into four phases and work has begun only on the first section from Serkhetabad in southern Turkmenistan to Herat in western Afghanistan. Ministry of Mines and Petroleum officials told [TOLONews](#) in January 2025 that 2.9km of the pipeline within Afghanistan was complete and a further 3.4km stretch of the route was underway. The current construction is funded by a Turkmen loan to be repaid from Afghanistan’s share of the profits, according to a spokesman from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs interviewed by [TOLONews](#) in 2022. It is unclear how the IEA intends to fund the rest of its 774km stretch of pipeline – though a Ministry of Mines spokesman told [TOLONews](#) it was prepared to do so – or how it intends to repay Ashgabat’s loan if the pipeline is never completed. Proposed commitments from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Turkey (reported by [TOLONews](#)) have never been fulfilled and the Emirate knows it is highly unlikely to secure funding from international lenders. In 2025, a spokesman from the Ministry of Mines said that Turkmenistan was paying for Afghanistan’s share of the project ([TOLONews](#)), but he did not say whether the Turkmen would pay for the next three phases of the project in Afghan territory in addition to supporting the section of the pipeline that begins in Turkmenistan’s territory.

The pipeline would then pass through Pakistani territory. This presents serious security challenges, because it is supposed to enter Pakistan north of Chaman and run across the restive Balochistan province where an insurgency has led to attacks on gas pipelines ([Dawn](#)) and Chinese-funded infrastructure projects ([Khorasan](#)

³⁵ See Luca Anceschi, [Turkmenistan and the virtual politics of Eurasian energy: the case of the TAPI pipeline project](#), *Central Asian Survey* 36(4), 2017, pp409-29.

³⁶ Anceschi, [Turkmenistan and the virtual politics of Eurasian energy](#), p414.

[Diary](#)).³⁷ It is also problematic because of the deterioration in India-Pakistan relations, which means Delhi is wary of relying on a pipeline that runs across Pakistani territory ([Economic Times](#)). Perhaps indicating their level of interest in the project, Pakistan and India were both absent from the latest inauguration ceremony for the project held in September 2024 in Turkmenistan ([Xinhua](#)).

The Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000)

The CASA-1000 electricity project faces similar challenges. CASA-1000 is intended to be the first stage in the development of a Central and South Asian regional energy network, transferring electricity generated from hydropower projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. Afghanistan will benefit from transit fees in addition to an increased electricity supply. The project entails building a network of 4,264 power transmission towers across the four countries, in addition to two power converter stations in Pakistan and Tajikistan. Primarily funded by the World Bank, the project was first inaugurated in Tajikistan in 2016, before a second kick-off ceremony in Afghanistan in 2020 ([VOA News](#)). The World Bank suspended construction on the Afghan sector in 2021 before [announcing](#) in February 2024 that it would resume work in “a ring-fenced manner” to avoid any of its funding going to the Taliban regime.

As with the TAPI pipeline, questions swirl over the project’s progress. Construction of the transmission towers in Pakistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is complete, according to the project’s [website](#). In Afghanistan, however, only 18 per cent of the planned towers were built before the suspension of funding in 2021. Since the World Bank’s announcement in February 2024, it is unclear whether construction on the ground is actually taking place. Spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid [told](#) TOLONews in April 2024 that work would resume “in late April.” However, in June 2024, TOLONews [reported](#) that only the preliminary survey in Baghlan and Kunduz provinces had begun and there was no fixed date for construction to resume. A year later, in May 2025, the Afghan national power company Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) again [told](#) TOLONews that construction by an unnamed “foreign company” would “start soon.” Speaking in March 2025, officials indicated that

³⁷ For background on the insurgency in Balochistan and Punjab, see Ayusha Verma, Riccardo Valle and Imtiaz Baloch, [The Baloch Insurgency in Pakistan: Evolution, Tactics, and Regional Security Implications](#), CTC Sentinel 18/4, April 2025, pp 27-40.

the project in Afghanistan remained stalled. “If the World Bank funds the project, Afghanistan is fully prepared to resume the remaining work,” an Afghan Ministry of Energy spokesman [said](#) to TOLONews. In August 2025, DABS claimed again that work was underway in three areas of Afghanistan, without giving further details ([TOLONews](#)).



The inauguration ceremony of the TAPI pipeline project in the Tagtabazar district of Turkmenistan’s Mary province near the Afghanistan border.

Photo by Mohsen Karimi/AFP, 11 September 2024

For its part, the World Bank’s procurement plans for 2025 do not include any procurement for the Afghan section of the transmission line. The Bank’s most recent [Implementation and Status Results Report](#) (April 2025) states that there are “several implementation challenges... due to the banking and insurance industry not [being] prepared to take Afghanistan country risk.” In a 2025 [Project Restructuring Paper](#), the Bank does report that some pending contractor invoices in Afghanistan for USD 62m were “partially settled,” but it is not clear whether these invoices relate to construction carried out since the 2024 announcement. Finally, in its 2025 update to the [Community Resettlement Action Plan](#) relating to the proposed transmission

tower route in Afghanistan, which will require people living near the tower sites to move elsewhere, the Bank noted that construction work would begin in April 2025. It detailed efforts to engage with communities on the route of the transmission line; this seems to be the only progress as yet. The Bank also added that “the commencement of work will be subject to satisfactory implementation of the present Resettlement Plan, including payment of compensation as well as redress of community concerns.”

Apart from funding and construction concerns, analysts have consistently expressed doubts over the feasibility of CASA-1000.³⁸ The main issue is the lack of surplus power available for export from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both of which suffer from power shortages exacerbated by drought and poor maintenance at their major hydropower stations. Domestic power shortages in both countries mean they will likely charge Pakistan a high price per unit of power, which Pakistan may struggle to pay. The project also suffers from a lack of strategic leadership and cooperation; the CASA-1000 Secretariat was funded by USAID but this support ended in 2023 ([Business Recorder](#)) and the World Bank has made only a limited commitment to funding the secretariat in future.

Regional railway projects

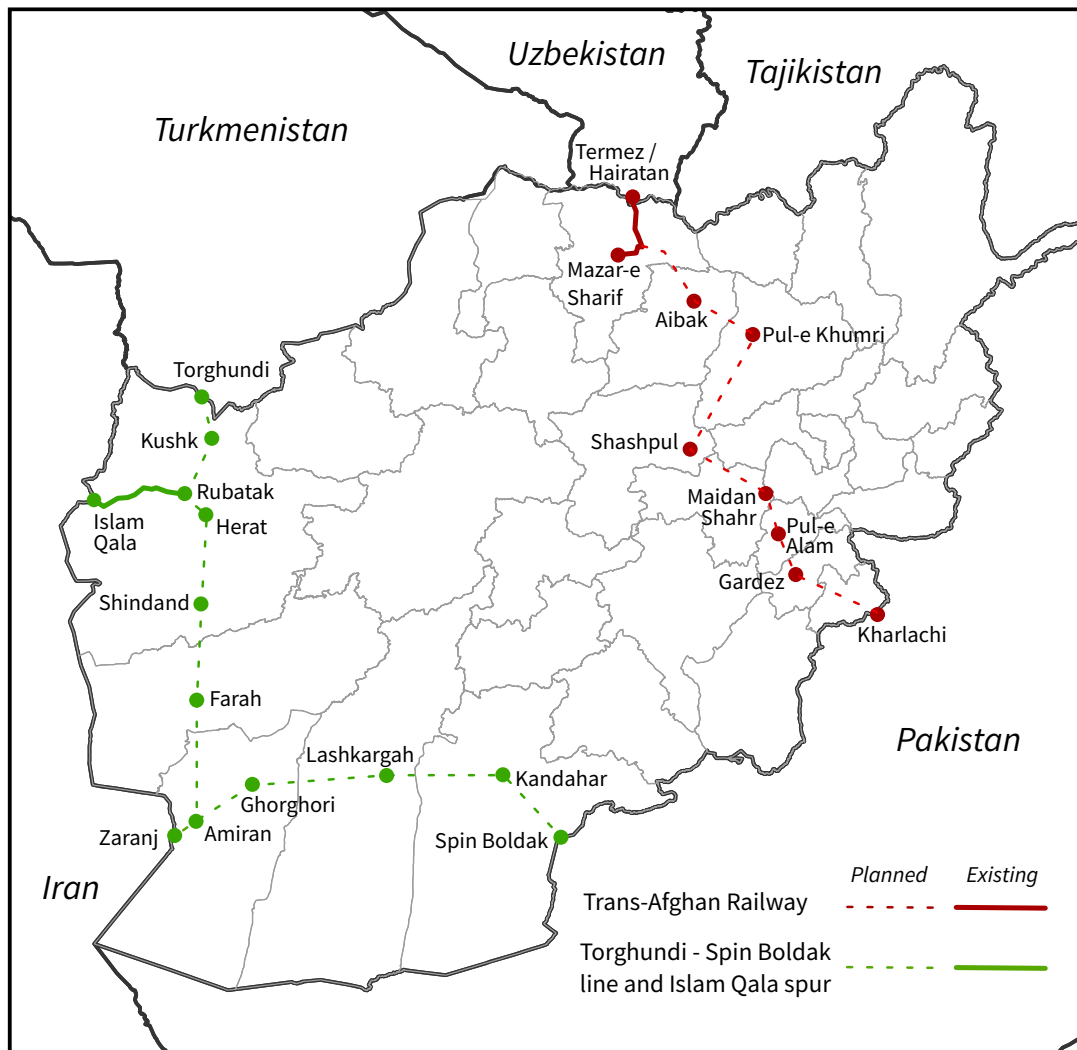
Finally, the IEA is placing great emphasis on regional railway projects in partnership with Central Asian states. Afghanistan has a small rail network, with four connections to Iran, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Before the Taliban takeover, according to a 2021 Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) [assessment](#), the volume of goods arriving by rail was low and mainly came via Uzbekistan to the border at Hairatan in Balkh province; smaller volumes of goods arrived via Turkmenistan at Aqina and Torghundi. CAREC reported that Republic-era governments hoped to expand Afghanistan’s rail network into a ring connecting the country’s major cities with border crossings and enabling regional transit traffic, but made little progress towards these goals.

The IEA has adopted a similar goal to expand and develop the country’s rail networks, which seems to be shared by Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

³⁸ See, for example, Casey Michael, [Coming This Spring: A CASA-1000 Photo Op](#), The Diplomat, 18 March 2016; Casey Michael, [CASA-1000: Finalised or Fantasy?](#), The Diplomat, 12 January 2016; and Bruce Pannier, [The Prospects of TAPI and CASA-1000](#), RFE/RL, 8 May 2016.

The Emirate has signed deals with Central Asian states relating to two trans-Afghan lines: Torghundi – Herat – Spin Boldak, and Termez – Hairatan – Maidanshahr – Kharlachi. The first line would connect Turkmenistan to Pakistan, with a line running from Torghundi in Turkmenistan, via Herat in western Afghanistan, through Kandahar to Spin Boldak on the border with Pakistan. This builds on an old stretch of railway between Torghundi and Herat. The second line, known as the Trans-Afghan Railway Project (TARP), would extend the existing rail link between the Uzbek/Afghan border towns of Termez and Hairatan to Maidanshahr in Wardak province, then through Logar and Paktia to the Kharlachi border crossing with Pakistan’s Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, with the aim of ultimately connecting to the Pak port city of Karachi.

Map 2: Regional railway projects



Map for AAN by Roger Helms

The first set of deals relates to the Torghundi-Spin Boldak line, which appears to have seen greater progress although its completion remains far from certain. In February 2025, the IEA and the Turkmen government signed an agreement to develop the Torghundi-Herat section of the line, which included efforts to improve the existing Aqina-Andkhai connection ([TOLONews](#)). In April 2025, a visiting Kazakh delegation signed an agreement of cooperation with the IEA to begin work on the Torghundi – Herat section of the line ([Office of the Kazakh Prime Minister](#), in Russian). In July, the IEA and Ashgabat agreed that Turkmenistan would invest in new warehouses and cargo facilities at Torghundi ([Pahjwok](#)). However, funding for the projects within Afghanistan is unclear and there seem to be no plans relating to financing the line beyond Herat. Kazakhstan has pledged USD 500m to support the project, according to a [statement](#) on X by the Deputy Prime Minister’s office, but Kazakhstan’s Deputy Minister for Transport, Maksat Kaliakparov, told journalists in September 2025 that “work is still underway to attract investments” to complete the project ([Ferghana News Agency](#)). This may be difficult, given the international sanctions which hamper investment in Afghanistan.

The TARP project, linking Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, has been under discussion for years, but remains theoretical. It was instigated in 2018, when officials from Uzbekistan, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kazakhstan agreed to form a consortium and raise funds for the project ([Kun.Uz](#)). In 2020, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed an agreement on the project, seeking USD 4.8 billion in loans from international institutions to fund it ([Andalou Agency](#)). Remarkably, despite worsening security in Afghanistan in 2020 and 2021, construction plans were drawn up in February 2021 and a feasibility study announced in July of the same year, just weeks before the fall of the Republic ([The Diplomat](#)).

The IEA picked up where the Republic left off. Trilateral working group meetings resumed in 2022 ([The News](#)), with what the Afghan Embassy in Pakistan [tweeted](#) was an “historic protocol” between the three states in July 2023. In 2025, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan signed a tripartite agreement to begin a feasibility study on the TARP; IEA officials told [TOLONews](#) that they aimed to complete the railway by 2027, in an article that suggested the projected costs could be as much as USD 7bn.

So far, there is no sign of the USD 4.8 – 7 billion funding required. According to [The Diplomat](#), the feasibility studies already done were funded by Uzbekistan, but the Uzbek government will not be able to fund the entire project. In 2020, Uzbekistan’s President Mirziyoyev issued a [decree](#) instructing his officials to create a working

group with the other governments that would try to attract international funding, but the consortium was unsuccessful; in 2025, they were continuing to seek funding, according to the Uzbek Deputy Minister for Transport Jasurbek Choriev, who acknowledged the challenge in an interview broadcast on Uzbek television (available on [YouTube](#)) but said that there was “interest” in the project from possible funders.



IEA security personnel walk along the railway tracks near the Qosh Tepa Canal in Hairatan, Balkh province, on the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border.

Photo: Atif ARYAN/AFP, 5 March 2024

There are other issues affecting both proposed lines. Firstly, there is ongoing friction over the management and operation of the existing Hairatan to Mazar-e Sharif line. It is currently managed by SogdianaTrans, a subsidiary of Uzbekistan Railways. The Afghanistan Railways Authority (ARA) has long pushed for Afghan operators to take control of the route, arguing that this would be cheaper and more profitable for Afghanistan and that Sogdiana does not maintain facilities on the line properly. Late 2022 saw a dispute that ended with the suspension of operations on the line after the IEA announced it had appointed a mysterious Kazakh firm to take over operations in Sogdiana’s place ([EurasiaNet](#)). In February 2023, freight traffic resumed when

the IEA signed an extension to Sogdiana's operating contract, which was renewed again in April 2025. The TARP and the Turghundi – Spin Boldak lines will have more stakeholders and be much longer, so this is likely to be a thorny point of contention in both projects.

Afghanistan also lacks the technical capacity and trained staff needed to operate the railways, according to a 2021 CAREC [assessment](#) of Uzbekistan's railways. It reports that most freight from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan is transferred to trucks at Hairatan or Termez because this is the quickest and cheapest method of bringing it into Afghanistan due to "operational difficulties," brought about because there are so few trained and well-managed staff on the Afghan side of the line. The IEA's renewal of Sogdiana's contract in 2025 illustrates the lack of technical capacity within Afghanistan, which may prove problematic if the Afghanistan Railways Authority is to manage two additional long routes through Afghan territory.

Uncertain security may also prevent investors from committing to the projects and, if they do, may make construction more difficult. ISKP has vowed to attack the TARP railway project and anyone working on it, because – according to an audio message on the Uzbek Telegram channel Tawhid News – the movement sees the project as a conspiracy to spread democracy in Afghanistan ([EurasiaNet](#)).

Afghanistan's geography also presents problems for building the lines, particularly the TARP, which would have to run through Afghanistan's high-altitude Salang Pass and require the construction of 360 bridges and multiple tunnels ([Times of Central Asia](#)).

Finally, if the lines are completed, ongoing tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan may mean that rail border crossings are intermittently closed, as existing land border closures have been since the Taliban's return to power. Those closures have been due to clashes between border forces, trade disputes, or concern over security threats. The main border crossing point at Torkham has been repeatedly closed for several weeks, causing an estimated loss of three million dollars in bilateral trade every day it is closed ([Tribune](#)). The much smaller border crossing at Kharlachi, where the TARP is due to cross, was closed for seven months in late 2024 and early 2025 ([Khaama Press](#)). Such closures would drive up costs, create unpredictable delays and make the rail route less attractive for Central Asian traders.

CLUBS OF AUTOCRATS: REGIONAL CONNECTIONS AND REGIME SURVIVAL

A survey of the trade relationships in the region and of the major regional megaprojects suggests that the prospective economic benefits are less certain to materialise than any of the regimes might hope. However, these connections remain important for all sides. For the Central Asian states, transit routes to the south have become more important following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Oil and gas export routes via Russia are now problematic, so Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan must seek alternative export routes and markets for their primary products.

Afghanistan, for its part, has few other sources of revenue, and diplomatic isolation has reduced the aid that propped up the economy during the Republic era. Clearly, the Emirate's relationships with Central Asia have so far helped it evade international pressure and defray the considerable costs associated with its decision not to comply with various international norms. These costs include UN and especially US sanctions that, despite limited waivers, are hobbling the Afghan economy, in particular because they cause problems for banking (see AAN's dossier on the economy [here](#) and a November 2023 report on the Afghan economy [here](#)). Scholarship on sanctions finds that, if they are to succeed in forcing a regime to change its behaviour, there must be a broad multilateral consensus on their imposition so that the targeted regime cannot find a 'black knight' – a powerful sponsor who bolsters an autocrat via financial, diplomatic or military support – to compensate for any harm done.³⁹

The regimes of Central Asia cannot provide anything like the staggering sums of money that flooded into Afghanistan from the US and its allies in the form of aid, military support and spending by the foreign armies during the Republic, but they are willing partners in trade and the modest benefits accruing from that are helping to keep the Afghan economy moving. Afghanistan's neighbours to the north are, crucially, also willing to encourage non-state firms and interests to

³⁹ For example, see Daniel Drezner, [How not to sanction](#), *International Affairs* 98/5, 2022, pp1533-52; Bryan Early, [Unmasking the Black Knights: Sanctions Busters and Their Effects on the Success of Economic Sanctions](#), *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7/4, 2011, pp381-402.

invest in Afghanistan and trade with the Emirate. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have hosted or facilitated meetings between their citizens and Afghan businessmen to sign agreements on trade with private sector firms. Afghan Minister of Commerce Nuruddin Azizi told [TOLONews](#) in August 2025 that the latest joint private sector meeting with Uzbekistan had resulted in 45 deals worth over USD 20 million; Kabul has hosted three joint trade fairs with Kazakh private sector firms and in an interview with [TOLONews](#), Azizi claimed that 17 trade agreements were signed at the April 2025 Kazakh-Afghan fair.



The Emirate's special representative, Sayed Zaher Shah, meets a trader in his office in the Airitom Free Zone.

Photo: Vyacheslav Oseledko/AFP, 16 August 2025

The relationships with Central Asia are therefore important for the Emirate's survival. Scholars of authoritarianism have looked at the importance of regional relationships for authoritarian leaders in Central Asia; Maria Debre argues that these regimes find membership in "clubs of autocrats" that are useful for shoring up their own power. She also found that authoritarian regimes who have ties to other authoritarians are less likely to break down.⁴⁰ However, the Emirate remains excluded from Central

⁴⁰ Maria Debre, [Clubs of autocrats: Regional organizations and authoritarian survival](#), *The Review of International Organisations* 17/1, 2021, pp485-511.

Asia's chief regional organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). It was founded in June 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to promote peace and cooperation amongst the member states, with a key objective of countering the risk of insecurity from Afghanistan. Afghanistan was awarded observer status in 2012 and, for a few years, an Afghanistan-focused contact group met sporadically; since 2021, the Emirate's representatives have not attended SCO summits and the contact group has been inactive since 2017.

The SCO's members are divided on how best to deal with the Emirate and typically prefer to negotiate bilaterally with its leadership. Nevertheless, on several occasions, they have called for the establishment of an inclusive government in Afghanistan, for example, in July 2024, when members said such a government should involve "multiple representatives of all ethnic and political groups of Afghan society is the only way towards attaining lasting peace and stability in that country" (SCO [statement](#) issued following a summit in Astana).

Calls for inclusive government represent pressure on the Emirate, but the SCO's own principles go some way towards ensuring that it will not intervene directly to force the Emirate to change. The SCO's foundational declaration has six components that member states share as principles. These principles focus on respect for state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference, based on the rights of member states to regulate their own domestic affairs and select their own domestic political systems. The members agree, according to the political scientist Thomas Ambrosio, on the "absolute pre-eminence of states to regulate their domestic politics and to defend their domestic political systems."⁴¹

In addition to the more obvious, pragmatic benefits that having good working regional relationships with Central Asia provide for the Emirate's survival, they also represent an opportunity for the Emirate to rebrand itself. Scholars agree that authoritarians are unable to rely solely on repression and coercion to stay in power and must therefore try to generate some form of legitimacy amongst their populations. Debre argues that they can do this by using regional connections to other autocracies, which offer "ideational" resources that help regimes survive, such as values, ideas and knowledge. These resources can be deployed to bolster a regime's legitimacy amongst its population as part of a branding exercise, as

⁴¹ Thomas Ambrosio, [Catching the 'Shanghai Spirit': How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia](#), *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, 2008, pp1321-44, p1330.

argued by the political scientist Mariya Omelicheva in a [paper](#) on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.



Men watch a cargo train carrying fuel at the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Friendship Bridge in the border town of Hairatan, Balkh province.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 23 June 2025

The Emirate's behaviour suggests it does see its foreign relationships as an opportunity to create a positive image of itself through such a branding exercise. In public statements on regional connections, the Emirate uses its large-scale infrastructure projects to stress Afghanistan's integration into the region, countering the perception that it is isolated internationally. [Interviewed](#) by TOLONews in July 2025, acting Deputy Minister for Economy Abdul Latif Nazari said that "some countries, whose names [I] won't mention, tried to isolate Afghanistan from international political and economic changes... thanks to our intelligence, we were able to integrate our economy with the region's [economy]." Nazari cited progress on the TAPI and CASA-1000 projects as evidence that those countries' plotting had failed.

The Emirate is also keen to promote itself as independent and self-reliant and it uses regional relationships to underline this. Promoting regional trade deals and

the economic benefits of developing regional infrastructure are key elements in this narrative of self-sufficiency. Self-reliance and sovereignty was also a core theme for President Ashraf Ghani, but the Emirate adds an element of religious exceptionalism to the narrative, since it believes itself to be the sole example of true ‘Islamic government’ and this is typically tied to the narrative on self-reliance. An [editorial](#) published in Al-Emarah in July 2025, for example, described the shift away from “an economy dependent on foreign aid and Western merchandise” to “an Afghanistan, under the stewardship of the Islamic government, on the brink of economic self-sufficiency.” Economic progress, the editorial continued, “transcends the mere activation of domestic industries and production” and includes cross-border industrial and trade relationships. Minister of Commerce Azizi is a major exponent of this plan, as he told [Reuters](#) in 2024: “We’ll start a national self-sufficiency programme, we’ll encourage all government administrations to use domestic products.... We will support any item which can help us for self-sufficiency.” Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Baradar, likewise, claimed in a May 2025 [speech](#) at an industrial showcase that Afghanistan had achieved economic self-sufficiency in 138 sectors. The TARP, according to a July 2025 [editorial](#) in Al-Emarah, is part of the Emirate’s efforts “to leverage [infrastructure projects] to advance Afghanistan’s economic self-reliance,” while a September 2024 [editorial](#) on TAPI describes the economic benefits of the pipeline and ends by stating that “the Islamic Emirate remains committed to achieving economic self-sufficiency for Afghanistan.”

It is unclear, however, if this type of branding exercise can actually produce legitimacy for a regime. Political scientist Lisa Wedeen argued that nation-branding for Syria’s authoritarian leaders was initially successful precisely because it did not try to generate legitimacy, but simply to produce compliance: it functions by saturating public discourse with the regime’s rhetoric, with “monotonous slogans and empty gestures, which tire the minds and bodies of [the population].”⁴² This sense of fatigue kills the potential for opposition and prevents alternative ideas and discourses from emerging in the public space. In combination with its willingness to deploy repression to throttle any opposition to its rule, this may be all the Emirate requires.

⁴² Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1999, p6.

CONCLUSION: AUTHORITARIAN FUTURES

The political scientist Alexander Cooley, in a 2013 [essay](#), described the Central Asian regimes' efforts to "forge an international front of anti-democrats" through regional tools such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. At that time, it would have seemed strange to think that the Taliban might one day be a useful collaborator in these efforts, but now they seem to be a valued partner for the regimes to the north. Despite the Emirate's stated commitment to ensuring Afghanistan is an Islamic state, this is not actually the defining feature of the Emirate's political model for Central Asian onlookers. In fact, the Emirate and the regimes of Central Asia share another key political assumption: they all find authoritarianism to be a useful method of governance and this has allowed a shared illiberal solidarity to develop amongst them.

The support of other authoritarians protects the Emirate's leadership from international pressure over its exclusion of women and girls from social and political life, its refusal to allow participatory politics or political opposition and preference for allocating domestic resources to expanding its security forces over investing in social services. The economic benefits it accrues from trade with Central Asia – growing, yet still modest – also help protect the Emirate from some of the financial consequences of its policy choices. These protections may, in the longer term, prove insufficient. If the much-vaunted regional megaprojects fail to materialise or deliver their promised economic benefits, the Emirate may find itself in greater difficulties if it cannot attract investment or aid from other sources.

Scholars like Schmotz and Tansey find that regime stability is increased by diplomatic ties and trade between autocracies, which reduce the likelihood of autocratic breakdown. "For autocratic survival, it makes a crucial difference whether autocracies are linked with other autocracies, and these links are particularly potent at the regional level," they conclude.⁴³ The relationships between Afghanistan and Central Asia are therefore not encouraging for those who would prefer the Taliban to moderate their policies. It is even less encouraging for those who would prefer that the Taliban regime simply collapses.

⁴³ Alexander Schmotz and Oisin Tansey, [Regional autocratic linkage and regime survival](#), European Journal of Political Research 57/3, 2018, pp662-86, p682.

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Cover: Then acting IEA Minister of Mines and Petroleum, Hedayatullah Badri, walks with Turkmenistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Rashid Meredov, during a visit to the TAPI pipeline site at the Turghundi border in Kushk district, Herat province

Photo: Mohsen Karimi/AFP, 12 October 2025