

Engagement of Afghanistan in the Central Asian Integration:
comparative analysis of the regional countries

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Abstract. *This article examines the strategies of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in the context of Afghanistan's integration into regional economic and infrastructure projects in Central Asia. It explores the political and economic approaches of both countries, their involvement in cross-border initiatives such as transportation corridors, energy cooperation, and water management projects. Particular attention is given to the factors that facilitate or hinder Afghanistan's participation in regional integration processes. The study highlights the role of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan as key connectors between Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region while assessing the prospects for further collaboration.*

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Central Asia, regional integration, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, infrastructure projects, transport corridors, economic cooperation.*

Introduction

Central Asian countries take different approaches to involving Afghanistan in regional processes, reflecting their own national interests and historical contexts. Thus, *Kazakhstan* shows interest in economic cooperation with Afghanistan, considering it a key bridge for trade and cooperation with South Asia, while also taking into account the instability in Afghanistan and possible security risks, demonstrating caution in political involvement¹. *Kyrgyzstan* expresses concern about the potential spread of extremism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Still, it supports regional security initiatives, like Kazakhstan, which restricts its participation in political processes related to Afghanistan². *Uzbekistan* is actively seeking to integrate Afghanistan into regional economic and infrastructure projects. A special feature of Tashkent's current Afghan policy is that

¹ Нуриддин Султанмуратов. К вопросу о политике Казахстана по отношению к Афганистану// <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/150228.html>

² Муратбек Иманалиев. Афганский вопрос и Кыргызстан// https://mnenie.akipress.org/unews/un_post:23398

Uzbekistan sees Afghanistan as an organic, integral part of the entire Central Asia³.

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, like other countries in the region, have their perspectives on issues of regional integration. As the analysis reveals, despite the significant changes in Afghanistan's military-political situation in recent years, Dushanbe and Ashgabat continue to maintain their views on Afghanistan's participation in regional processes in Central Asia⁴.

Tajikistan's approaches to Afghanistan

For many years, Tajikistan has been talking about a threat coming from Afghanistan⁵. How much has this position changed since 2021, when the Taliban came to power?

It should be noted that historically, especially after the civil war (1992-1997), the Taliban leadership perceived the Taliban as a threat. Although under the first Islamic Emirate, the "Taliban" officially took a neutral position concerning the war in Tajikistan, some of the Taliban fought on the side of the opposition⁶. According to Tajik diplomats, E. Rahmon has since

³ Камбаров А.Х. Новая Центральная Азия во внешней политике Узбекистана. 14 августа 2024 г. https://uza.uz/ru/posts/novaya-centralnaya-aziya-vo-vneshney-politike-uzbekistana_624715

⁴"Taliban" for Tajikistan: Friend, Foe, or What? September 17, 2024 // <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/taliban-dlya-tadzhikistana-drug-vrag-ili-kak-/33121712.html>; Turkmenistan and Afghanistan: Expanding Multifaceted Cooperation for Peace and Prosperity // <https://arzuw.news/turkmenistan-i-afganistan-rasshirenie-mnogoplanovogo-sotrudnichestva-vo-imja-mira-i-prosvetaniya>; Shershah A. Afghanistan and Central Asian Countries in the Context of Ensuring Regional Security // International Relations. 2022. No. 3. P. 45-59. DOI: 10.7256/2454-0641.2022.3.27472 EDN: LVFNLO URL:

⁵Askerov M. I., Isaev L. M., Korotaev A. V. The Afghan crisis and the threat of Islamist extremism in Tajikistan// Asia and Africa today. - 2022. No. 12. pp. 16-22; Ityasheva D. R., Lushina A. A., Rakhimov K. Kh. Chekrygina D. D. The new regime in Afghanistan as a challenge to the security of the Republic of Tajikistan// https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/novyye-rezhim-v-afganistane-kak-vyzov-bezopasnosti-respubliki-tadzhikistan?utm_source=chatgpt.com; "Taliban" for Tajikistan: friend, enemy or what? September 17, 2024 // <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/taliban-for-tadzhikistana-a-friend-or-how-/33121712.html>

⁶See also: Gavrilkin A.V., Ibrahim M., Vadyushka V., Velinho Rodriguez. Terrorism in the Republic of Tajikistan from its origins to the present stage: threats, regulation and development scenarios// <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/terrorizm-v-respublike-tadzhikistan-ot-istokov-dosovremennogo-etapa-ugrozy-regulirovanie-i-stsenarii-razvitiya>; Archakov M.K. The Taliban Movement and the Naqshbandi Tariqah: New Threats for Central Asia// <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/dvizhenie-taliban-i-nakshbandiyskiy-tarikat-novye-ugrozy-dlya-tsentralnoy-azii>; The Taliban and Tajikistan Exchanged Threats// <https://stanradar.com/news/full/46753-taliban-i-tadzhikistan-perekinulis-ugrozami.html?page=3>; Askerov M. I., Isaev L. M., Korotaev A. V. Afghan crisis and the threat of Islamist extremism in Tajikistan // Asia and Africa today. - 2022. No. 12. P. 16-22.

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developed a particularly hostile attitude towards the "Haqqani" network.

After the "Taliban" returned to Kabul in August 2021, Tajikistan became the only country in the region to take a publicly critical stance towards the "Taliban". Already in September 2021, E. Rahmon posthumously awarded the Ismaili Somoni Order to the leaders of the Northern Alliance of Tajiks, Ahmad Shah Massoud and B. Rabbani, who were enemies of the Taliban⁷.

Another major irritant was the activities of the "Jamaat Ansarullah" group, which also fought on the side of the opposition in the 1990s, then settled in Badakhshan, Afghanistan, declared its goal of overthrowing the regime of E. Rahmon, and began to commit terrorist attacks in Tajikistan. The Afghan Taliban's ties to this group, which has been involved in protecting the Afghan-Tajik border since September 2021 and changed its name to "Tehreek-e Taliban" Tajikistan in July 2022, further increased the Tajik government's hostility towards the "Taliban"⁸.

Moreover, the Islamic fundamentalist regime established in Afghanistan poses a threat to the authorities of the Republic of Tajikistan. Traditionally, E. Rahmon takes a tough and uncompromising line about "Islamists," viewing them as a challenge to the secular regime. Today, concerns about the radical ideology of the DT have increased against the backdrop of growing religiosity in Tajik society. In particular, in social networks, the majority of religiously minded young people in the Republic of Tajikistan not only welcome the ultra-conservative policy pursued by the movement but even consider it a role model in their country.

In these circumstances, Dushanbe has become a hub for anti-Taliban activity of the former leaders of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (*IRA*) and the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (*NRF*), including the holding of the "Herat Security Dialogue" with the participation of officials of the former

⁷Awarding of Burkhoniddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud with the Order of Ismoili Somoni, 1st degree. 02.09.2021 <https://www.mfa.tj/ru/main/view/8535/nagrazhdenie-burkhoniddina-rabbani-i-akhmada-shakha-masuda-ordenom-ismoili-somoni-i-stepeni>

⁸Secret negotiations. Tajikistan asks the Taliban to eliminate Ansarullah// <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32830999.html>

Afghan regime and leaders of all resistance forces, including the leader of the NRF, Ahmad Massoud. Following the event held in 2023, the participants called for the development of a unified action plan to combat the "Taliban Movement".

Part of this policy is Dushanbe's refusal to accept "Taliban" diplomats. The Afghan embassy in the country, with the active support of local authorities, continues to be headed by Ambassador Mohamad Zahir Aghbar, who openly opposes the regime in Kabul and was appointed by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) government. It should be noted that early reports that the Afghan consulate in Khorog had come under the control of the "Taliban" were denied by Tajik Foreign Minister S. Mukhriddin in February 2024⁹.

The open opposition of the "Taliban" has brought Dushanbe certain political and diplomatic dividends, financial assistance and security assistance. In October 2021, E. Rahmon held meetings with EU leaders in Brussels and visited France, where, during negotiations with E. Macron, special attention was paid to the Afghan problem¹⁰.

At the same time, the need to stabilize relations with the new regime in Kabul is associated with both Tajikistan's interests in border protection, internal stability, and external security, as well as its economic interests in utilizing Afghanistan's market potential (electricity exports and supplies within the CASA-1000 project) and transit opportunities through Afghan territory in the directions of South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Dushanbe is particularly wary of being left out of the trade routes being developed through Afghanistan and participation in other promising projects. Of particular interest to Tajikistan is the Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan railway project, which will connect the country with the markets of South Asia. In this regard, it is worth noting that in August 2024, the Ministry of Transport of Tajikistan signed a protocol with the Korea International Cooperation Agency on conducting a feasibility

⁹Tajikistan Foreign Ministry: "Afghan Consulate in Khorog is not under Taliban control." February 17, 2024 <https://eurasiatoday.ru/mid-tadzhikistana-konsulstvo-afganistana-v-horoge-ne-podkontrolno-talibam/>

¹⁰The President of Tajikistan held talks in Brussels// <https://old.asiaplustj.info/news/tajikistan/politics/20211011/president-tadzhikistana-provel-peregovori-v-bryussele>

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study for the construction of a 30-mile Tajik section of the railway¹¹.

Signs of mutual pragmatism also began to appear in the restoration of trade and transportation. Trade relations and customs operations continued, although the border with Afghanistan was formally closed. In September 2023, by decree of President E. Rahmon, border markets in Khorog, Darvaz, Vanj, and Ishkashim (*GBAO*) were reopened, which was regarded as a sign of normalization of relations between Dushanbe and Kabul. In September 2023, six markets on the Afghan-Tajik border were resumed. According to the results of 2023, trade turnover between the two countries amounted to \$ 97 million, which is 15% more than in 2021 (\$ 82 million).

It is evident that, despite tense political relations, Afghanistan is becoming one of Tajikistan's main foreign trade partners. In particular, since 2022, Afghanistan has surpassed Iran to become Tajikistan's third-largest trading partner in Asia, after China.

In a significant shift in bilateral relations, the Taliban have abolished visa requirements for Tajikistan and granted benefits to Tajik drivers transporting goods through the country. Kabul said that under their rule, the volume of goods and vehicles passing through Sherkhan Bandar, the main customs crossing with Tajikistan, has increased by 90% compared with the previous government.

For its part, Tajikistan has provided its territory to countries to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghans. Thus, the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, E. Rahmon, regularly calls on the world community at international platforms to expand the volume of humanitarian aid to the neighboring country. In his speech at the fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia in 2023, the leader of the Republic of Tajikistan emphasized that "Tajikistan will continue to provide its border infrastructure and logistical

¹¹B. Panier. Tajikistan's Afghan Conundrum. November 25, 2024. [tps://www.fpri.org/article/2024/11/tajikistans-afghan-conundrum/](https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/11/tajikistans-afghan-conundrum/)

capabilities for the delivery of targeted aid to the people of Afghanistan¹². "

In February 2022, commentators noted that Tajikistan was supplying electricity to Afghanistan despite the complex political situation, and that an agreement on electricity supplies for 2022 was signed in Tashkent between Tajikistan's "Barqi Tojik" and Afghanistan's "Brishno" Energy Company. This contract was part of more favorable conditions related to ensuring Afghanistan's energy security, which is 70% dependent on electricity imports from developing countries.

A critical, promising trans-regional infrastructure project that unites Afghanistan and Tajikistan is the construction of the Central Asia–South Asia Transmission Line (CASA-1000).

Notably, in February 2024, the World Bank announced the resumption of the CASA-1000 project, which envisions the use of hydroelectric power plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to supply electricity to Pakistan (1,000 MW) and Afghanistan (300 MW)¹³.

The gradual convergence of the positions of the parties was also demonstrated by the fact that in March 2024, experts from the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies in Kabul, in the article "A Look at the Relations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Tajikistan presented an analysis of the development of relations, emphasizing common interests and significant potential for the implementation of mutually beneficial economic projects, and called for the resumption of open political contacts between Kabul and Dushanbe¹⁴.

On November 20, 2024, Taliban Deputy Spokesman H. Fitrat made a statement on improving political relations with Tajikistan, noting that the parties had "established an exchange of visits by delegations and intensified contacts between business circles." "Tajikistan is a neighboring Muslim country, we want to have good relations, and we hope that progress will be achieved in our relations in the future," he said¹⁵.

¹²Speech at the Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia// <https://mfa.tj/ru/main/view/13361/rech-na-pyatoi-konsultativnoi-vstreche-glav-gosudarstv-tsentralnoi-azii>

¹³ There is the same.

¹⁴A look at the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's relationship with Tajikistan. March 2024. <https://csrsaf.org/en/?p=5220>

¹⁵The Taliban announced their intention to establish "good relations with Tajikistan." November 20, 2024. <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20241120/v->

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The desire to improve relations between the Taliban and Tajikistan is also evidenced by the fact that since the spring of 2022, contacts between the security services of the two countries have begun to advance in connection with the launch of ISIS-Khorasan missiles into the territory of the Republic of Tajikistan (*May 7, 2022*), as well as the strengthening of ISIS propaganda in the Tajik language.

In November 2023, representatives of the Taliban special services arrived in Tajikistan for negotiations at the invitation of the Tajik side, which was related to the attempted terrorist attacks by Jamaat Ansarullah militants in September 2023, which the State Committee for National Security had thwarted. Dushanbe tried to persuade this organization to lay down its arms through the Taliban. Still, in response, the Jamaat members agreed to reconcile only if the Tajik side achieved the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country.

Nevertheless, contacts between security structures were established on May 14, 2024, when a representative of the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan arrived in Kabul for negotiations. In August 2024, an unannounced visit to Kabul by the head of the Tajik State Committee for National Security, S. Yatimov, took place, during which, as reported, on the instructions of E. Rahmon, issues of strengthening ties between Tajikistan and the Taliban were discussed¹⁶.

In this context, analysts and commentators are increasingly asking why Dushanbe continues to refrain from open and more trusting contacts with Kabul. The explanations given by experts essentially repeat the assessments of 2021, when a discussion was launched about why Emomali Rahmon needed to pursue a strict policy towards the Taliban.

Firstly, the Tajik leader's position as a defender of the interests of "Tajiks worldwide" received broad support in Tajikistan three years ago, strengthening the legitimacy and image of the government. However, it is difficult to say to what extent this factor remains relevant today and holds back reconciliation with Kabul.

¹⁶The head of the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan made an unpublicized visit to Kabul in August. September 13, 2024. <https://www.centralasian.org/a/33118588.html>

Secondly, the status of a frontline state before and after the return of the Taliban to power brought Dushanbe numerous diplomatic, economic, and other resource benefits, as well as extensive assistance in the security sphere, which, over the years of independence, is estimated by Western experts to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The United States, the EU, NATO countries, Russia, China, and other parties provided the Tajik side with military equipment, uniforms, and built facilities for border troops deployed along the Afghan border. Since 2002, the US government alone has allocated more than \$300 million for the repair and reconstruction of 12 border posts, nine border crossings, and 3 training centers, the provision of border surveillance equipment, night vision devices, jeeps, sniffer dogs, etc. It was evident that in such a situation, the question of how reconciliation with Kabul will affect international assistance from partners, especially from Western countries¹⁷, remains essential for the Tajik leadership.

Thirdly, against the backdrop of a strict religious policy and the Tajik authorities' fight against radicalization, normalization of relations with the radical theocratic regime of the Taliban may have an ambiguous effect on maintaining socio-political stability in the country, as well as Dushanbe's relations with the West. It was Tajikistan that became the vanguard in the fight against Islamic radicalism emanating from Afghanistan, since, after a five-year civil war, the Taliban could easily find supporters inside Tajikistan. At the same time, international organizations and foreign governments generously financed social programs and educational projects in Tajikistan so that the people could resist radical and extremist ideas. In this regard, the Tajik authorities fear a reduction in the financial support provided over decades aimed at improving the socio-economic situation in the country.

¹⁷The United States and Russia will build border posts on the Tajik-Afghan border for millions of dollars//<https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20220511/sshai-rossiya-postroyat-pogranposti-na-tadzhiksko-afganskoi-granitse-za-millioni-dollarov>; The United States provided technical assistance to Tajik border guards in the amount of more than \$2 million: <https://avesta.tj/2013/04/11/ssh-okazali-tehnicheskuyu-pomoshh-tadzhikskim-pogranichnikam-na-summu-bolec-2-mln/> Avesta.tj; The US presented border equipment to Tajikistan// https://www.bbc.com/russian/rolling_news/2013/03/130306_rn_tajikistan_usa_equipment

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In general, the potential for economic cooperation and interaction in the fight against terrorism encourages Tajikistan to develop trade and economic ties, consider the prospects for participation in trans-Afghan energy and transport projects, and restore contacts between intelligence services and the Taliban.

At the same time, a more decisive turn by Tajikistan towards normalizing relations with Kabul could create several serious challenges for the country's leadership. *First*, as noted above, Tajikistan has been an active recipient of foreign aid in recent years, including from Western governments and international organizations, to combat radical extremist ideology. A positive shift in relations with Kabul could trigger an adverse reaction from donors, which could lead to a reduction in the volume of financial, humanitarian, and technical assistance. *Second*, Tajikistan remains deeply concerned about extremism and instability emanating from Afghanistan. Many Tajiks are wary of the Taliban regime, due to their experience when border regions suffered from the threat of Afghan militants. In this situation, misunderstanding and discontent among the population could develop into protest sentiments, especially if the economic situation begins to deteriorate.

The dual nature of such relations puts the leadership of Tajikistan before a choice: on the one hand, it is necessary to maintain stable ties with neighboring Afghanistan to ensure border security and develop trade and economic ties, on the other hand, to continue supporting the population and not to lose foreign aid, which plays a vital role in supporting the economy. In other words, Tajikistan faces a dilemma of prioritizing strategy: to continue a challenging course towards the Taliban, but to remain on the sidelines of regional processes, or to initiate contacts with the Taliban and face some internal problems.

It is worth noting that, to a certain extent, the Afghan vector of Tajikistan's foreign policy influences the national interests of Uzbekistan, and this influence is manifested in several directions.

The first is regional security. Stability in Afghanistan is directly linked to the security of Central Asia, including Uzbekistan. Tajikistan, which has a long border with Afghanistan, serves as a buffer between unstable Afghanistan

and Uzbekistan. Tajikistan's cooperation with Afghanistan on security issues helps prevent the spread of extremism, terrorism, and drug trafficking.

Secondly, economic cooperation and transport corridors are of interest to Uzbekistan, which aims to develop its trade and economic ties. With Afghanistan, primarily through transport corridors. Stable Tajik-Afghan relations contribute to the improvement of logistics routes through Tajikistan, which opens up new opportunities for Uzbekistan and additional routes to the markets of South Asian countries.

Third, water resources. Central Asia depends on transboundary water resources. Cooperation between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in water projects can significantly impact the water supply in the region, including in Uzbekistan. Stability and agreements between these countries help avoid water conflicts.

Fourth, migration and humanitarian issues. If the situation in Afghanistan worsens, Tajikistan may become a transit country for refugees, which will also affect Uzbekistan. Established trustworthy contacts between Tajikistan and Afghanistan can minimize migration risks.

Fifth, regional cooperation and integration. Uzbekistan actively promotes the idea of regional integration and cooperation in Central Asia. Stable relations between Tajikistan and Afghanistan contribute to the development of regional initiatives, such as transport, energy, and trade projects.

In general, the stabilization of Tajik-Afghan relations will not only contribute to the activation of bilateral trade and economic ties but also minimize threats and challenges to security, including on the border of the two countries. This will also enable us to secure genuine support from Dushanbe on the path of regional integration and cooperation, supporting regionally significant initiatives to develop transport, energy, and trade projects that meet Uzbekistan's long-term strategic interests.

Turkmenistan's approaches to Afghanistan

Recently, international experts and analytical circles have noted a significant increase in Ashgabat's activity in the Afghan direction, which maintains intensive contacts with the new leadership of Afghanistan. The Turkmen authorities view the

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Taliban as a political force that will dominate Afghanistan in the long term.

This is evidenced by the fact that "on August 18, just three days after the fall of Kabul, the Consul General of Turkmenistan in Mazar-i-Sharif met with the Taliban-appointed head of Balkh province. ... The statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan spoke of a "positive and constructive" meeting. It particularly emphasized the "brotherly nature" of relations between the peoples of the two countries¹⁸.

It is noted that Turkmenistan became the third country, after China and Pakistan, and the first in Central Asia, to accredit a Charge d'Affaires of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in Ashgabat. Notably, the inauguration ceremony of the Taliban diplomat was attended by Deputy Foreign Minister V. Khodjiev of Turkmenistan¹⁹.

Since the Taliban came to power in August 2021, Turkmen politicians have regularly held meetings with the Taliban leadership. Thus, on October 30-31, 2021, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, R. Meredov, paid a visit to Kabul. On January 14, 2022, a return visit of the Taliban delegation to Ashgabat took place, led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the IEA, A. Muttaqi. According to Afghan media reports, Ashgabat and Kabul express their readiness to: a) establish constructive business contacts and maintain close cooperation between the two countries; b) implement large joint infrastructure and energy projects in Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan also regularly provides humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. Additionally, on November 28, 2021, following the results of the 15th ECO summit, the "Ashgabat Consensus for Action" was adopted, which outlines a plan for addressing humanitarian issues in Afghanistan.

In turn, specialists from the Russian Institute of the Middle East note that the establishment of friendly relations between Ashgabat and the Taliban was facilitated by the unchanging "positive position" of the Turkmen side towards the

¹⁸Eurasianet: Turkmenistan's Cold Calculations Regarding the Taliban//
<https://inosmi.info/exclusive/69995-eurasianet-holodnyj-raschet-turkmenii-v-otnoshenii-talibov.html>

¹⁹The Taliban have appointed their ambassador to Turkmenistan. 03/17/2022
<https://fergana.agency/news/125490/>

Taliban. In particular, Ashgabat has always maintained good relations with the DT regardless of its views and ideology. In addition, Turkmenistan is the only state in Central Asia that interacts with the Taliban during their first rule.

Today, one of the key components of bilateral relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, given the limited water resources of Central Asia and the strategic importance of transboundary rivers such as the Amu Darya and Murghab, is water diplomacy. In the context of a changing climate and population growth, water resource management is becoming not only an environmental but also a geopolitical issue.

The historical context of this diplomacy is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries, including Turkmenistan, began to formulate their water management policies. Afghanistan, recovering from decades of conflict, is also seeking to develop its infrastructure, including hydraulic structures, which directly affects the flow of transboundary rivers – the main waterways – the Amu Darya, the largest river in the region, whose sources are in the mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan and whose water resources play a key role in Turkmenistan's agriculture, and the Murghab River, which also originates in Afghanistan and is used to irrigate lands in southern Turkmenistan.

In an attempt to resolve the water shortage problem, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are implementing joint projects to improve water supply and irrigation, such as the project to build reservoirs and canals on the Murghab River. International organizations such as the UN, the World Bank, and other structures provide support in developing water projects and improving dialogue between the countries. The key issue remains the lack of a full-fledged agreement on the distribution of the Amu Darya waters.

Meanwhile, these countries must contend with problems such as water shortages (the reduction of the Amu Darya flow, resulting from Afghanistan's construction of reservoirs and canals, including "Koshtepa", will harm Turkmenistan's agricultural sector); environmental risks (degradation of ecosystems in the Amu Darya delta, including the Aral Sea); and other challenges. Their long-term solution requires, first and foremost, strengthening coordination, i.e., establishing a

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permanent bilateral commission on water resources, as well as investments in infrastructure, such as projects for the rational use of water resources, and expanding international cooperation by attracting third countries and donor organizations to finance projects.

In general, water diplomacy between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan remains an essential tool for ensuring sustainable development and stability in the region. With the right policy, cooperation in the water sector can become the basis for expanding economic and political ties between the countries, as well as contribute to stability in Central Asia.

Turkmenistan's infrastructure and transport diplomacy in the Afghan direction also plays a vital role in the country's regional policy. The main projects and areas of cooperation include: 1) **transport corridors (the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan railway - the Serhetabat (Turkmenistan) - Turgundi (Afghanistan) line** was opened in 2018; the Kerki - Imamnazar (Turkmenistan) - Akina (Afghanistan) railway was completed in 2016. These routes facilitate the export of Turkmen goods and the transit of goods through Afghanistan to other countries of South Asia); 2) **road projects** (development of border crossing points and road infrastructure, facilitating cargo transportation); 3) **energy projects (TAPI (Turkmenistan -Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline: a key project** aimed at exporting Turkmen gas through Afghanistan. It is being implemented in difficult security conditions, but Turkmenistan remains committed to the project; 4) **electricity supplies** (Turkmenistan supplies the northern provinces of Afghanistan with electricity. Projects are being implemented to build power transmission lines, including the Kerki-Ymamnazar-Akina-Andkhoy lines).

Within the framework of trade and economic cooperation, Turkmenistan supports humanitarian projects, such as the construction of schools, hospitals, and other social infrastructure in the border areas of Afghanistan. Active trade in border markets and export of Turkmen goods (including food, oil products, and textiles)²⁰.

²⁰Turkmenistan and Afghanistan: Expanding Multifaceted Cooperation for Peace and Prosperity// <https://arzuw.news/turkmenistan-i-afganistan-rasshirenie-mnogoplanovogo-sotrudnichestva-vo-imja-mira-i-procvetanija>; Fabio Indeo. The Duality of Turkmenistan's

An analysis of Turkmenistan's current policy towards Afghanistan allows us to draw the following conclusions.

Firstly, Turkmenistan's "friendly attitude" towards the Taliban is a preemptive measure, which is conditioned by Ashgabat's desire to contain threats and challenges emanating from the territory of Afghanistan.

According to Russian experts, the Turkmen-Afghan border remains the "weakest link" in Central Asia in terms of terrorist threat²¹. For example, after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, two cases of clashes between Turkmen border guards and members of the Terrorist Movement were recorded.

In this context, one of the priorities for Turkmenistan in the Afghan direction is to ensure the security of the border with Afghanistan, the length of which is 700 km. To strengthen its borders in recent years, Ashgabat has purchased T-90S tanks, Mi-17-1V helicopters, Smerch MLRS from the Russian Federation²², HQ-9 air defense systems, anti-aircraft missile systems from Beijing²³, and became the first Central Asian country to purchase Bayraktar TB2 attack UAVs from Turkey²⁴. In 2021²⁵, it was reported that the Turkmen authorities were considering the possibility of building engineering structures, such as mesh fences and concrete walls, on the border with Afghanistan. This decision was due to concerns about the influx of refugees, mainly Afghan Turkmens living in the border areas. The main reason for strengthening the border is the desire to prevent illegal crossing and ensure security against the backdrop of the unstable situation in Afghanistan.

Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan// <https://cabar.asia/ru/dvoystvennost-vneshnej-politiki-turkmenistana-v-otnoshenii-afganistana> ; Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy - Achievements of 2024// <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2025/01/17/vneshnyaya-politika-turkmenistana-dostizheniya-2024-goda/>

²¹ Turkmenistan is the weakest link on the border with the Taliban. 08/16/2021 <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1629091920>

²²Khrolenko A. Turkmenistan is among the top three regional leaders in military power . 03/10/2021 <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20190815/Turkmenistan--v-troyke-regionalnykh-liderov-voennoy-moschi--12241329.html>

²³Who's in line for the "Arab Spring" . 02.02.2022.

https://vpk.name/news/576424_kto_v_ocheredi_za_arabskoi-vesnoi.html

²⁴Valyuzhenich D. Turkmenistan bought Turkish Bayraktar TB2 attack drones . 09.28.2021 <https://anna-news.info/turkmeniya-kupila-turetskie-udarnye-bespilotniki-bayraktar-tb2/>

²⁵Panfilova V. Turkmenistan fences itself off from Afghanistan with a concrete wall// <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1630963320#gsc.tab=0> ; Turkmenistan will build a new checkpoint on the border with Afghanistan // <https://rossaprimavera.ru/news/ad0b071a>

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Secondly, Turkmenistan is actively promoting the implementation of transnational energy projects through Afghanistan's territory to diversify export markets and reduce its dependence on China. Today, about 60% of Turkmen gas is sent to China (30 billion cubic meters out of 50 billion).

In this context, Turkmenistan attaches particular importance to the implementation of the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline project, which has been "systematically stalled" since the 2000s,²⁶ with an annual capacity of 33 billion cubic meters, as well as the TAP (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) power transmission line. These projects are of key importance for Ashgabat, since the implementation of large-scale transregional projects will contribute to:

1) a significant increase in the authority of the current political leadership of Turkmenistan in the country and on the world stage as a whole, as well as the implementation of Ashgabat's long-term course to strengthen its strategic positions in the macro-region of Central and South Asia ;

2) Increasing financial resources in the country's budget against the backdrop of its high energy dependence. According to the World Bank, 35% of GDP, 90% of exports, and 80% of the Turkmen budget depend on the sale of energy resources to foreign countries.

3) Turkmenistan's entry into the potential giant energy markets of South Asia. According to the International Energy Agency, India currently ranks third in global energy consumption. By 2040, energy consumption in India is expected to double, from today's 64 billion cubic meters to more than 200 billion cubic meters, and dependence on energy imports is projected to increase from 76% to 90%.

At the same time, the presence of several factors hinders the implementation of these cross-border projects, in particular: **a)** the persistence of terrorist threats on the territory of Afghanistan despite the relative stabilization of the security situation in the country; **b)** the lack of international recognition of the current Taliban authorities in Kabul and the refusal of

²⁶Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan – and the contours of “Greater Central Asia”/
<https://nic-pnb.ru/analytics/uzbekistan-turkmenistan-afghanistan-i-kontury-bolshoj-czentralnoj-azii/>

international financial institutions to invest in these projects against this background; **c)** obstruction from third countries that are not interested in the diversification of Turkmen energy supplies.

Thirdly, the Turkmen leadership believes that the establishment of lasting peace in Afghanistan will open up significant opportunities for Ashgabat to transform Turkmenistan into a “transport and logistics hub” connecting East and Central Asia with the Persian Gulf, South Asia and the EU. In this regard, Ashgabat has been actively promoting the idea of “Turkmenistan – the heart of the historical Silk Road” in recent years. Particular attention is paid to the implementation of the TAT railway projects “Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan” and the “Lazurite Corridor” (Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey).

Within the framework of this course, immediately after the Taliban came to power in Kabul, the construction of the Akina-Andkhoy railway was resumed, which is part of the TAT project (400 km long). However, the lack of financial resources among the parties, as well as Tajikistan's political will to participate in this project, dampens the prospects for implementing TAT.

Ashgabat also shows great interest in the construction of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, as this route will allow the country to break out of transport isolation and diversify its transit flow²⁷. In case of successful implementation of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor project, Turkmenistan will receive significant dividends from turning the country into an international trade transit hub. According to experts, approximately 80% of cargo from South Asia to Europe is expected to be transported through this corridor in 16 days, compared to 20 days via the port of Karachi.

Along with economic benefits, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor will form a route that bypasses Russia, thereby reducing Ashgabat's political and financial dependence on Moscow.

Overall, despite the increased interaction between Turkmenistan and the Taliban, Ashgabat does not have significant opportunities to influence the situation in

²⁷E. Guseinov. Turkmenistan's Policy Towards Afghanistan: Balancing Risks and Untapped Opportunities. April 23, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/turkmenistans-afghanistan-policy-balancing-risks-and-untapped-opportunities/>

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Afghanistan. However, by implementing ambitious trans-regional projects, the Turkmen leadership seeks to maintain stable relations with the new Afghan government.

At the same time, experts note that ignoring Turkmenistan's interests in the implementation of large infrastructure projects in Afghanistan may hinder the formation of a regional consensus regarding the development of the situation in Afghanistan.

It is worth noting that the intensification of Turkmen-Afghan interaction aligns with Uzbekistan's national interests, which involve measures to maintain its security and prevent threats emanating from Afghanistan, including border protection and cooperation with neighboring countries. At the same time, the intensification of contacts between Ashgabat and Kabul allows the Uzbek side to:

- continue the line of developing a unified regional approach to the development of the situation in Afghanistan;
- to strengthen Turkmenistan's interest in supporting Uzbekistan's initiatives to integrate Kabul into regional economic processes;
- Increase the interest of the Taliban Movement in establishing mutually beneficial cooperation with the countries of Central Asia.

In general, the intensification of Turkmen-Afghan cooperation certainly contributes to strengthening Uzbekistan's national interests, enabling Tashkent to play a more active role in shaping regional policy, fostering constructive relations with Kabul, and promoting Afghanistan's economic integration into regional projects.

Conclusions

The positions of two Central Asian countries on Afghanistan's involvement in regional integration processes, as considered in this article, reveal some common approaches for both countries, as well as differences in the implementation of their interests in Afghanistan.

This analysis is reflected in the table below.

SIMILARITIES		
1.	Border security priority	Both Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have stepped up security measures on their borders with Afghanistan. Both countries conducted military exercises and strengthened their defense capabilities.
2.	Humanitarian aspects	Both countries provided humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, supporting the population despite the uncertainty in relations with the new regime in Kabul.
3.	Avoiding open confrontation	Despite the different approaches, neither country went into open confrontation with the Taliban, preferring diplomacy or cautious tactical actions.
DIFFERENCES		
TAJIKISTAN		TURKMENISTAN
1.	Political position and rhetoric	
	President Emomali Rahmon has taken a tough stance, openly criticizing the Taliban for violating the rights of minorities, especially ethnic Tajiks, in Afghanistan. Tajikistan also supported the idea of an inclusive government.	Maintained neutrality and avoided criticism. Ashgabat established contacts with the Taliban, maintained dialogue and emphasized pursuing an economically oriented foreign policy in cooperation with the new Afghan authorities.
2.	Diplomatic approach	
	Tajikistan was in no hurry to recognize or establish diplomatic contacts with the Taliban; on the contrary, it actively supported the anti-Taliban opposition,.	Turkmenistan, on the contrary, actively interacted with the Taliban at the official level, met delegations, and emphasized the importance of implementing infrastructure projects of both a bilateral and regional nature.
3.	Military cooperation	
	Tajikistan has strengthened its cooperation with Russia, including within the framework of the CSTO, and China,	Turkmenistan, which remains neutral, has not sought the assistance of military alliances.
4.	Water security	
	Tajikistan is a country located in the upper reaches of the Amu Darya River basin. In this regard, the hydroelectric structures currently being built by the Taliban, including those on the Amu Darya River, do not significantly impact the country's water security interests. Moreover, Dushanbe had promising plans to build, together with the Afghan side, hydroelectric structures, including the Dashtijum	Turkmenistan, which is heavily dependent on water resources coming from Afghanistan, is seriously concerned about ensuring the country's water security, especially in light of the construction of the Kushtepa Canal in Afghanistan. According to various sources, five to six years after the canal is put into operation, the average water supply of Turkmenistan in the middle and lower reaches of the transboundary river is expected to decrease from 80% to 65%. In this regard, despite its strict neutrality earlier, the Turkmen Foreign Ministry, commenting on the issue of water projects in Afghanistan, advocated the need to use water

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hydroelectric power station on the Amu Darya River.	resources, taking into account the interests of all states in the region.
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As the table shows, despite the similarity in their cautious approach to the situation in Afghanistan, the strategies of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan differ. Turkmenistan, relying on its internationally recognized status of permanent neutrality, has focused on developing trade and economic ties with Afghanistan and promoting major infrastructure projects such as the TAPI gas pipeline and energy cooperation projects. This policy has allowed Turkmenistan not only to strengthen its economic position but also to maintain stable relations with all forces in Kabul, avoiding open political criticism and interference.

At the same time, Tajikistan has taken a more assertive stance, prioritizing security and national stability. Fearing the possible export of radical ideas and the growing terrorist threat, Tajik authorities have been vocal in their criticism of the Taliban's policies, particularly towards the Tajik minority in Afghanistan. Dushanbe has also sought to secure support from international partners such as Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) by increasing its military presence on the border.

Thus, the choice of strategies of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan reflects the difference in their foreign policy priorities: from pragmatic neutrality and economic gain to a focus on security and the protection of national interests.

Since we considered Afghan-Tajik and Afghan-Turkmen relations through the prism of Uzbekistan's national interests, it appears that Uzbekistan will continue to enhance several measures currently underway to ensure regional stability and protect its national interests in the future.

First, strengthen border security, which implies: a) strengthening border control and security infrastructure, including through organizing work with the local population in border areas; b) exchanging operational intelligence with neighboring countries in order to monitored prevent attempts by radical groups to penetrate Uzbekistan through the Afghan border; c) cooperation with international organizations in the fight against cross-border crime.

Secondly, to develop political and diplomatic relations, which envisages: a) maintaining a pragmatic and mutually beneficial dialogue with the government of Afghanistan; b) facilitating peace negotiations between Afghanistan and Tajikistan; c) active participation in regional initiatives such as the SCO, CICA (Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia), Central Asia+, etc.

Thirdly, to expand economic ties, which include a) the implementation of infrastructure projects such as the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway and the Surkhon-Puli-Khumri power transmission line; b) the promotion of interregional trade, actively using the capabilities of the Termez International Trade Center (ITC) free trade zone. and the International Transport and Logistics Hub in Termez, whose services are successfully used by various UN agencies, as well as countries in the region.

Fourthly, to provide humanitarian support, which involves: a) The implementation of humanitarian projects in Afghanistan to improve the standard of living and reduce the risk of radicalization of the population; b) assistance in the field of health care and education for the Afghan population, including the Educational Center for the training of Afghan citizens in Termez.

Fifth, strengthen regional cooperation by: a) participating in multilateral formats with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and other neighbors to develop a unified strategy for Afghanistan; b) encouraging the creation of joint economic and energy projects that will contribute to the stability of the region.

The primary objective of Uzbekistan is not only to safeguard its national interests, but also to establish Central Asia as a zone of stability and sustainable development, a key component of the foreign policy doctrine of President Sh.M. Mirziyoyev.

A pragmatic Afghan approach, combining diplomatic and economic measures with humanitarian components, will help minimize risks to national and, consequently, regional security. This approach will strengthen regional integration and consolidation processes, ultimately consolidating the trend

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towards transforming Central Asia into a single and independent subject of international relations.

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