

Uzbekistan's Strategic Hedging: Navigating the Geopolitical Costs of Afghanistan's Qush Tepa Canal

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Abstract: The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 presented Uzbekistan with a complex strategic dilemma regarding relations with the Taliban-led government, notably addressing its implications for regional stability and development. This paper explores Uzbekistan's approach to Afghanistan's unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral initiatives bringing major powers into the region. It examines how Uzbekistan is navigating these dynamics by fostering economic interdependence within the region, now including Afghanistan in its strategies. Historically, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan excluded Afghanistan from its treaties, particularly those related to water resources. In hindsight, this decision to exclude Afghanistan, an upstream country, was not strategically advantageous. However, Uzbekistan is reevaluating Afghanistan's regional role, viewing it as both a challenge and an opportunity. This study focuses on three critical issues shaping Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan: 1) Uzbekistan's domestic issues, 2) regional cooperation, and 3) international cooperation. This is particularly significant in an era of weaponized interdependence, whereby states use interconnected relationships to balance between competing powers. Uzbekistan along with other Central Asian countries have found common ground to ensure no bigger power has leverage over them, resorting to economic interdependence. By adopting an economic interdependence approach to promote sustainable peace in the region, this paper examines Uzbekistan's role in politically and economically stabilizing Central Asia through strategies for economic growth.

Keywords: Amu Darya River, economic regional interdependence, Qush Tepa Canal project, transboundary water management, Afghanistan-Uzbekistan relations, Central Asia

Qush Tepa Canal is a canal being built in northern Afghanistan, an upstream country, to divert water from the Amu Darya, a transboundary river. The Amu Darya, one of Central Asia's longest rivers, spans 1,578 miles (2,540 km), if traced from its primary source, the Panj River in the Pamirs, Tajikistan.^[1] The history of the Qush Tepa Canal project is complex. It

was initiated in the 1970s under Afghanistan's President Mohammed Daoud Khan but was halted following the Soviet Union's invasion.^[3] Water treaties regarding the Amu Darya were established between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, dating back to 1946. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new agreements were established by the newly independent states. In the early years of independence, the management of the Amu Darya, among other issues like border demarcation, became a source of tension between Central Asian nations.^[4] This led to these countries, upstream and downstream, collaborating on treaties for water management – with the exception of Afghanistan. Despite being one of the upstream contributors, providing 30 percent of the water to the Amu Darya, Afghanistan was not included in any of the new agreements.^[5]

Both in 1970s and now, under the Taliban, the motivation behind building the canal remains to irrigate an estimated 550,000 hectares (equivalent to more than 2,100 square miles) of desert land.^[6] This development could effectively increase Afghanistan's arable area by a third, potentially enabling the nation to achieve self-sufficiency in food production for the first time since the 1980s, according to Afghan authorities and analysts.^[7] From a humanitarian perspective, the construction of the Qush Tepa Canal can serve to alleviate conditions in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, addressing food shortages and severe drought. Taliban officials claim they do not intend to utilize an amount that would threaten water security for others, instead stating that they will only take what is necessary to improve livelihoods in Afghanistan.^[8]

However, for Uzbekistan, this canal will exacerbate its own water scarcity, representing an economic and existential crisis for both itself and Uzbekistan.^[9] Uzbekistan is the world's leading cotton producer, and is a major contributor to Uzbekistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – any threat to this industry would have devastating ramifications for the entire country.

In response to Afghanistan's establishment of the Qush Tepa Canal, Uzbekistan has been playing a key role in bridging a polarized world to establish sustainable peace in the region. This is strategically framed to tame the region into regional economic interdependence while Uzbekistan hedges its political stance between major global powers. To map the paper's structure, I will begin with the historical context of the Uzbekistan and Afghanistan relationship to provide a viewpoint of Afghanistan's estrangement from the region despite shared borders, resources, and geographic strategic allocation, enabling deeper understanding of Uzbekistan's foreign policy framework. I will then discuss Uzbekistan's international cooperation and engagement to foster regional economic interdependence, including its strategic hedging that ensures leverage for its national interests and avoids power asymmetries, especially for the context of Qush Tepa Canal. I will finally analyze the interplay of major power rivalries in the region through sanctions, tariffs, and the involvement of China, Russia, and the West, which are competing to establish a sphere of influence.

Uzbekistan's Domestic Issues

Historical Context of Uzbekistan – Afghanistan Relationship

During the Soviet-Afghan War, many Soviet soldiers deployed by the Soviet Union were Turkic, originating from mostly what are now independent Central Asian Republics (CARs), including Uzbekistan.^[10] The Turkic Uzbek soldiers shared cultural, linguistic, and religious ties with the Uzbek population in northern Afghanistan. This bridged the people and brought

a sense of familiarity. In 1979, the Soviet Union installed its own regime in Afghanistan, known as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), similarly to the one the U.S. installed between 2001-2021, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.^[11] In both eras, the governments were backed by foreign influence, the Soviet era was supported by the Soviet Union, predominantly by Moscow, while in 2001, the country was backed by NATO, primarily by Washington. Many Uzbeks fought under the Soviet flag against the Mujahideen, a western backed militant group.^[12] However, the Soviet-backed government faced resistance from western-backed proxies engaged in a national, religious, and ideological battle against Soviet influence.

By the late 1990s, the Mujahideen, once supported by the West, had transitioned into power brokers in Afghanistan's government after establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Many of these figures were well known in the region. For example, Atta Mohammad Noor, a former Mujahideen commander, later became the governor of Balkh, a province bordering Uzbekistan.^[13] Similar to the Tajik experience following independence, post-civil war governance in Afghanistan saw former warlords integrated into political leadership, with the memory of their roles as warlords erased.^[14] In Afghanistan, the integration of the Mujahideen in certain places of power proceeded smoothly, however, at a regional level, it strained relations with Uzbekistan. These tensions stemmed from lingering memories of the war and betrayal – betrayal because the Northern Alliance, provinces located in the North of Afghanistan, had consisted of large number of Mujahideen fighting the Soviets. The Northern Alliance fighters were predominantly of Turkic origin with similar culture and language, fighting a Soviet army that was also predominantly Turkic. This fostered a sense of betrayal following the Afghan-Soviet war.

From the Uzbek perspective, the Mujahideen and the Taliban shared similar motives, with little distinction between them—both were considered terrorist entities. Both groups aimed to expel foreign influence and resist the spread of liberal values supported by external powers. Their tactics included attacks on civilians, destruction of homes, and widespread violence. In the case of the latter, the Soviet-backed Afghan government also engaged in oppressive measures including disappearances.

Following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Uzbekistan emerged as an independent state. During this period of uncertainty, the Uzbek government adopted an authoritarian approach to maintain stability and limit external influences, aiming to avoid Afghanistan's fate. Uzbekistan became part of the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), a European Union (EU) program established in 1991- 2006 to provide technical and financial assistance to post-Soviet states, members include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.^[15] Since inception, there had been only a handful of projects that have been considered successful but received a lot of criticism due to weak implementation and a lack of oversight. [[16]]; [17]].

After September 11, 2001, Uzbekistan felt sympathetic to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, even allowing the establishment of an American airbase.^[18] As Uzbekistan grappled with terrorism, Russia faced its own internal troubles in Chechnya, while U.S. intelligence sharing had the potential to improve resistance against global terrorism. However, due to U.S. interference in Uzbekistan's internal affairs, the Uzbek government later demanded that American forces be withdrawn from Uzbekistan in 2005.^[19]

Since then, much has changed. With Afghanistan falling under Western powers' sphere of influence, Uzbekistan aligned itself more closely with Russia. This alignment grew as the Russia's power increased in the region through economic re-stabilization, including the sale of gas, and increasing economic cooperation with the European Union (EU).^[20] For example, the Partnership for Modernization (PfM), launched in June 2010, aimed to promote Russia's economic modernization and technological development while strengthening the EU-Russia cooperation framework. ^[21] The PfM was suspended following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014.^[22] This severed the EU's relationship with the region as well by reducing EU technical assistance through Russia-led projects, pushing them toward Chinese or Russian alternatives. ^[23]

After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, often referred to as 'Taliban 2.0,' – with the first Taliban (1996–2001), referred to 'Taliban 1.0' – there was reluctance by the international community to engage with the new government. The situation only changed when major global powers such as China and Russia green-signal (with caution) engagement with the Taliban. These powers had their own national interests that dragged their sphere of influence along with them. China sees Afghanistan as a strategic geographic location for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia needs China for its war in Ukraine.^[24] Russia alone did not have the capability to wage a war against Ukraine and its allies, therefore needing China and its partners to back them militarily. China, also facing economic pressures from the West, view its indirect contribution to the conflict and weakening of Western economies as beneficial, as it would make them dependent on China once again. This China-Russia Condominium has set others to forge their own path for their national interest by taming Afghanistan under the Taliban, creating regional economic interdependence. In return, the Taliban would receive the semblance of a recognition that they yearn from the international community, without legitimately being recognized. States avoid recognizing them to avoid compromising their stance in the international community. Against this backdrop, Uzbekistan is carefully navigating its relationships with major powers in the region, such as Russia and China, to cautiously engage with this window of opportunity, which is shaping both regional and international power structures.

Shifts in Domestic Relations

Three major events reshaped Uzbekistan's foreign policy since its independence. The first major shift occurred in 2014 with NATO's formal conclusion of combat operations in Afghanistan.^[25] While this marked a partial withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, Afghanistan remained a focal point of great power rivalry. Adversarial powers, such as Russia and China, used this transition to expand their influence in the region. However, the continued presence of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan kept the country at the center of geopolitical contention.^[26]

The second major shift came with the death of long-time Uzbek leader Islam Karimov in 2016 and the rise of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Under Karimov's nearly three-decade rule, Uzbekistan followed an isolationist policy, avoiding deep regional and global engagement.^[27] However, Mirziyoyev's leadership pushed for a political and economic openness, fundamentally changing Uzbekistan's foreign policy framework.^[28] One example of this transformation was the liberalization of Uzbek academia. Before 2017, for example, political science courses and literature were heavily restricted, reflecting the regime's control over ideological discourse. However, following Mirziyoyev's reforms, universities began offering political science programs, albeit within certain controlled limits.^[29]

The third major shift was Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine's invasion in 2014, which significantly altered the geopolitical dynamics of the post-Soviet space.^[30] By 2017, Uzbekistan's decision to pursue a more open diplomatic strategy was shaped by the understanding that the backing of a big power in the region was necessary, especially amidst evolving regional geopolitics. The country carefully navigated between Russian influence and opportunities to engage politically and economically on a global scale.

Reasons for Uzbekistan's Diplomatic Engagement with the Taliban

Security concerns also play a significant role in shaping Uzbekistan's approach toward the creation of the Qush Tepa Canal. Although Uzbekistan has other levers to utilize, such as cutting off Afghanistan's electricity supply, doing so would create a hostile environment between the two countries, potentially leading to conflict—a scenario Uzbekistan aims to avoid for three key reasons. First, the Taliban are a proscribed terrorist organization, linked with Al-Qaeda. The Taliban's military capability could cause significant damage to Uzbekistan. Uzbek air defense capabilities are not sufficient to stop the guerrilla tactics that the Taliban resort to during combat. The Taliban's years of combat experience puts them at a significant advantage compared to Uzbekistan's inexperienced soldiers. Uzbekistan's military heavily relies on Russia as its primary arms supplier and security partner, however, now that Russia is preoccupied with its own war in Ukraine, additional support is difficult to come by.^[31] Therefore, any rise of hostility between the Taliban and Uzbekistan will force Uzbekistan to deal with hostilities alone, which is unlikely to result positive outcomes. This is particularly so given Uzbekistan's increasing Islamization and the subsequent rise in sympathy for the Taliban's ideology among Uzbeks.

These domestic religious dynamics represent another angle of security concerns shaping Uzbekistan's approach. In recent years, Uzbekistan has witnessed a revival of Islamic sentiment, partly fueled by investments from Arab states seeking to restore its historical status as a center of Islamic learning and culture.^[32] This resurgence has led to growing pockets of domestic sympathy for the Taliban. In 2021, large crowds in Registan, Samarkand, gathered to celebrate the Taliban's victory, viewing it as a symbolic expulsion of foreign forces from Afghanistan. This support shows the delicate balance Uzbekistan must strike between ensuring national security and managing the rising influence of external religious ideologies. Ignoring these sentiments or taking an aggressive stance against the Taliban could risk alienating portions of its own population and triggering domestic unrest.

Lastly, in addition to prioritizing economic security and embarking on the Qush Tepa Canal project, the Taliban reclaimed Payghambar Island (Prophet's Island), a disputed territory along the Uzbek-Afghan border.^[33] Shortly after, Uzbeks recaptured the island, though security concerns remained. This is especially pressing given Uzbekistan's pursuit of membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), being one of the only CARs without membership, to facilitate deeper integration into global markets for long-term economic growth.^[34] However, ongoing territorial disputes jeopardize its accession to the WTO.

For decades, Uzbekistan operated under a largely state-controlled economic model, limiting its engagement with the global economy. However, as global trade dynamics evolved, the country recognized the necessity to diversify its economic base. Sectors like cotton production and natural resource extraction, once pillars of the Uzbek economy, have become less sustainable due to growing water scarcity further exacerbated by projects like Qush Tepa Canal. Therefore, it is in Uzbekistan's interest to invest in a cordial relationship and mitigate

any conflict with Afghanistan by promoting a deep regional economic interdependence. Engaging with the Taliban in mutually beneficial projects would not only occupy their focus but also outweigh the cost of taking on projects that would be detrimental to the region or its neighboring country.

Uzbekistan's Strategic Adaptation and Forward Strategy

Since the creation of the Qush Tepa Canal, Uzbekistan has been compelled to rethink its economic trajectory, particularly in response to the growing challenges of water scarcity. While the canal offers Afghanistan a vital agricultural resource, it has simultaneously intensified Uzbekistan's concerns over water management in a region already burdened by the environmental fallout of Soviet-era policies. To mitigate the anticipated decline in agricultural GDP, Uzbekistan has accelerated its shift toward fintech and technology-driven industries, reducing its reliance on water-intensive sectors. This transition is crucial as the Amu Darya River and the Aral Sea continue to diminish due to decades of mismanagement.^[35] Beginning in the 1960s, Soviet irrigation projects diverted vital water sources for large-scale agricultural production, leading to severe environmental degradation.^[36]

In addition to economic diversification, Uzbekistan is also responding to rapid population growth, which places further strain on national infrastructure and resources. The government has prioritized human capital development by expanding access to education and postgraduate studies, equipping the younger generation with skills tailored for a modern, technology-based economy.^[37] This strategic investment ensures that Uzbekistan remains competitive in the region while reducing dependence on agriculture and other resource-intensive industries. By fostering an educated workforce, the country is positioning itself as an emerging hub for innovation and economic modernization.^[38]

A key development in this strategy was the establishment of a trade house in Mazar-i-Sharif in 2025, spanning 220 square meters.^[39] This initiative has provided Uzbek entrepreneurs with a platform to introduce their products to the Afghan market, foster business partnerships, and expand trade opportunities. As a result, trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan surged from \$46.3 million in January 2024 to \$153.7 million in January 2025.^[40] This growing economic interdependence is not merely a means of boosting trade—it serves as a strategic tool to stabilize relations with Afghanistan and discourage territorial disputes. By deepening economic ties, Uzbekistan seeks to foster regional stability, ensuring that economic cooperation takes precedence over conflict.

Security Cooperation and Intelligence Sharing

Security remains a cornerstone of Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban, as regional stability hinges on managing shared threats from extremist groups. Additionally, intelligence-sharing agreements with the Taliban have emerged as a crucial tool for counterterrorism efforts, particularly concerning the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).^[41] Previously aligned with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the IMU has since become an adversary to the Taliban. By aligning security interests, Uzbekistan seeks to neutralize threats posed by extremist groups while reinforcing diplomatic engagement as a means of ensuring stability.^[42]

Beyond security cooperation, Uzbekistan has also taken proactive measures to address critical domestic challenges, particularly the issue of water scarcity. Recognizing the severity of the crisis, the government has launched public awareness campaigns urging citizens to conserve

water and adopt sustainable practices. Additionally, Uzbekistan has explored technological innovations and regional partnerships to enhance water efficiency and secure alternative resources. This multifaceted approach reflects Uzbekistan's broader strategy: balancing economic diversification, regional security, and sustainable resource management to safeguard its long-term stability and prosperity. While the risks of engaging with the Taliban persist, Uzbekistan's calculated strategy balances immediate security needs with long-term geopolitical positioning.

Regional Cooperation

Uzbekistan's internal stability is closely tied to regional stability, with one of the most pressing challenges being the oversight of the Taliban's ambitious projects like the Qush Tepa Canal. If the Taliban are part of regional cooperation such as the water agreement as well as trade agreements, this would be a calculated move that will lead to prosperity in the region. This would only be possible if the region was backed by a major power in the region, like China. This approach could appeal to the Taliban's long-standing desire for international recognition. In return, if they adhere to global standards, the recognition could unlock economic opportunities not only for Afghanistan, where 20 million people are at risk of famine, but also for the entire Central Asian region.^[43]

Beyond water governance, regional economic interdependence has long served as a geopolitical stabilizer, with successful models seen in the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Middle East is now also engaging in regional economic interdependence as a way of securitization ^[44]; ^[45].

ASEAN was founded in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore, partly as a response to the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. During this period, many ASEAN nations relied on the U.S. for security and economic support. The Vietnam War (1955–1975) reinforced this alignment, as the U.S. fought communist forces in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. However, following the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, communist victories in Mainland Southeast Asia (1975), and a gradual U.S. military withdrawal, ASEAN leaders recognized the need to diversify their international partnerships. The U.S. closed its military bases in the Philippines (1991–1992), further reducing its regional presence. At the same time, China transformed from a perceived threat to a regional partner. By the 1990s and 2000s, China emerged as ASEAN's top trading partner, surpassing the U.S. and Japan. The signing of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2010 further strengthened economic relations.

China's strategy of deepening economic and diplomatic ties with ASEAN parallels its current approach to Central Asia. Just as China shifted from being a perceived ideological and security threat in Southeast Asia to becoming a key economic partner, it is now pursuing a similar path in Central Asia by positioning itself as a regional leader and alternative to Russian influence.

Security cooperation also plays a critical role. In Southeast Asia, China aligned with ASEAN to counter Vietnam's regional dominance in the 1980s. In Central Asia, China is similarly expanding its security engagement, particularly through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), through which it collaborates with regional governments on counterterrorism, border security, and military exercises. This is especially relevant as

Russia's influence in Central Asia wanes due to its focus on the war in Ukraine, allowing China to take on a greater leadership role.

Moreover, China's soft power and diplomatic engagement in both regions follow a similar trajectory. In ASEAN, China shifted from ideological confrontation to economic cooperation, gradually gaining trust. In Central Asia, China is presenting itself as a reliable partner, emphasizing mutual economic growth and regional stability rather than military dominance. This has allowed China to compete with Russia's traditional role in the region while avoiding direct confrontation. Extending this strategy to Central Asia, particularly by integrating Afghanistan, could help mitigate instability and promote cooperation. Economic integration not only balances regional power dynamics but also discourages zero-sum approaches to resource control.

Many Uzbeks initially feared that increasing Chinese investment could lead to economic dependence, political leverage, and potential challenges to Uzbekistan's sovereignty.^[46] However, these concerns have gradually diminished as China's investments have expanded beyond Uzbekistan, focusing on regional trade routes and infrastructure development.^[47] Through the BRI, China is positioning itself as a regional economic driver rather than solely concentrating on Uzbekistan.

Water Management Agreements

Uzbekistan understands the importance of engagement with Afghanistan. Central Asian nations have changed their approach and are now including Afghanistan in regional discussions, a shift from past exclusions of Afghanistan such as from the 1992 Almaty Agreement.^[48] This marked a significant milestone in the post-Soviet era, establishing a new framework for water allocation among the Central Asian republics following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This agreement was designed to address the complex and often contentious issue of water distribution in a region heavily reliant on shared transboundary water resources, particularly the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers. However, its exclusion of Afghanistan, one of the key upstream countries that plays a pivotal role in the region's hydrological system. By omitting Afghanistan, the agreement failed to account for the country's potential impact on water availability downstream, creating a gap in the framework that has since contributed to ongoing tensions and challenges in regional water management. This exclusion has become increasingly significant as Afghanistan's development projects, such as the Qush Tepa Canal, have the potential to alter water flows, further complicating the already fragile balance of water-sharing arrangements in Central Asia. Following the Taliban's launch of the Qush Tepa Canal project, Afghanistan has been consistently being incorporated into regional water talks, a significant step in cooperative water management to include the upstream countries.^[49]

Strategic Economic Projects Strengthening Regional Ties

So far, there have been four pathways created to regional prosperity, all of which require Afghanistan's cooperative involvement, transforming regional connectivity and economic opportunities. The first is the Trans-Afghan Railway, a major ongoing project connecting Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.^[50] This railway aims to establish a direct link from Uzbekistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan, providing Central Asian countries access to the Indian Ocean via Pakistani ports such as Karachi, Gwadar, and Qasim. With an estimated cost of \$4.95 to \$7 billion, the project is expected to be completed by 2027 and fully operational

by 2030.^[51] The key partners of this project include Russia, Kazakhstan, and Qatar.^[52] The railway is set to offer Central Asia an alternative route that bypasses Russia, reducing transportation costs by up to 40% and slashing travel time between Uzbekistan and Pakistan from 35 days to just 3-5 days. This transformative project not only enhances trade efficiency but also provides Uzbekistan with a significant opportunity to diversify its economy, reducing its reliance on agriculture. This Trans-Afghan Railway is mutually beneficial to all the parties involved. On October 19, 2024, Uzbekistan's transport minister announced that an agreement had been reached, and construction began in early 2025. This development marks a critical step in Uzbekistan's broader strategy to integrate into global trade networks and strengthen its economic resilience.

Second, the China and Afghanistan launched a direct freight train in early 2025 as part of the BRI.^[53] The Nantong-Hairatan railway line connects Jiangsu Province in eastern China to the dry port of Hairatan near the Uzbek-Afghan border, with goods taking approximately 20 days to reach their destination. The first shipment included 50 containers of commercial goods, marking a significant step in strengthening regional trade ties. This initiative complements the Trans-Afghan Railway by providing an additional route for goods to flow between Central Asia, South Asia, and beyond, further solidifying Afghanistan's role as a key transit hub in the region.^[54] Intertwining Afghanistan into this economic collaboration is carefully engineered by China, one of Uzbekistan's biggest investors, followed by Russia. Engaging Afghanistan means economic stability in the country, the region, and greater influence for China.

Third, the multimodal transport corridor is being developed to improve trade efficiency across South and Central Asia.^[55] This corridor aims to connect the two regions through a network of rail, road, and sea routes, with a focus on increasing trade and transit through Afghanistan. Proposed routes begin in Uzbekistan, run through Afghanistan, and extend to Pakistan, with shipments ultimately reaching the port of Jebel Ali in the United Arab Emirates. The estimated delivery time for this route is 20-25 days, and the preliminary cost of the project is \$5 billion.^[56] With a transit potential of up to 20 million tons of cargo, this corridor will link Europe, Russia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, demonstrating that cooperation with Afghanistan opens new opportunities not only for Uzbekistan but for the entire region. By integrating multiple modes of transportation, this corridor addresses logistical challenges and enhances the efficiency of cross-border trade, stepping forward towards regional economic integration.

Fourth, the regional cooperation extends beyond economic efforts to support Afghanistan's smooth transition toward stability in the region. For example, Azerbaijan, a Turkic country and former Soviet republic, has taken significant steps to engage with the Taliban. Azerbaijan's engagement demonstrates the effort to stabilize Afghanistan and integrate it into international frameworks. In November 2024, Azerbaijan invited Taliban representatives to attend the COP29 Climate Change Conference, marking the first time the Taliban participated in a major United Nations event since regaining power.^[57] This invitation allowed Afghan officials to observe global discussions on climate change and engage in potential bilateral meetings, signaling a cautious yet strategic approach to diplomatic normalization. Azerbaijan's role in this process shows the importance of regional actors in helping the process of fostering dialogue and cooperation of the region with the Taliban, particularly as Central Asia seeks to balance security concerns with economic and environmental priorities.^[58] By leveraging economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement, Central Asia can ensure large-scale infrastructure projects like the Qush Tepa Canal serve as instruments of

progress rather than sources of conflict. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has provided governance training to Taliban officials.^[59] This initiative aims to strengthen Afghanistan's administrative capacity while creating a more stable governing structure that could, in turn, contribute to regional security. This collaborative approach to regional partnerships promotes sustainable development across Central Asia and beyond.

These developments enhance regional connectivity in driving economic growth and stability. The Trans-Afghan Railway, the Nantong-Hairatan freight line, and the multimodal transport corridor collectively represent a transformative shift in how Central and South Asia engage with each other and the wider world. By reducing dependency on traditional routes and fostering new partnerships, these projects not only boost trade but also promote political and economic stability in a region historically marked by fragmentation. For Uzbekistan, these initiatives are a strategic move to position itself as a central player in regional trade networks, while for Afghanistan, they offer a pathway to economic recovery and integration, a path that Taliban believe to mean to lead to official recognition.

International Cooperation

Competing Spheres of Influence

The intersection of influence between rival global powers often creates challenges, creating complexities that hinder national or even regional growth. This dynamic is evident in the case of Ukraine that finds itself in the midst of rivaling Russian and Western spheres of influence, where geopolitical tensions rise due to the clash of these competing powers. Uzbekistan navigating to avoid being overpowered by big powers has both the Russia-China condominium and Western influence present in the country, albeit to varying degrees.^[60] While the West's influence is much weaker, its presence still marks a form of deterrence and remains relevant for Uzbekistan's investments and global expansion.

China's expanding influence over infrastructure and trade projects is reshaping regional dynamics, and Russia is relied upon for security and political stabilization. Setting these influences in different spheres ensures their influence does not clash with one another, avoiding Ukraine's fate. Instead, Uzbekistan aligns external forces to create mutually beneficial economic and geopolitical advantages in the region.

Uzbekistan is strategically engaging the West's regional involvement as it is actively diversifying its partnerships to avoid overreliance on any single power. A key example is Canada's recent talks to open an embassy in Uzbekistan, signaling deeper diplomatic engagement. Moreover, Uzbekistan is strengthening its relationship with the European Union, as demonstrated by the EU-Central Asia Summit in Samarkand on April 3–4, 2025. This summit opened discussions on trade, security, and sustainable development, positioning Uzbekistan as a bridge between Central Asia and Europe.^[61] By balancing engagement with regional powers like China and Russia while simultaneously expanding Western partnerships, Uzbekistan is safeguarding its interests, establishing a more resilient foreign policy. This approach not only mitigates dependency risks but also unlocks new economic opportunities, reinforcing the country's role in regional stability. As Uzbekistan navigates these geopolitical tensions, it aims to maintain strategic autonomy that is essential for its long-term success on the global stage.

China and Russia Condominium

The Taliban's regaining power in Afghanistan in 2021 marked a major shift in the region's geopolitical landscape, allowing Russia and China to assert greater influence in the post-U.S. withdrawal era. Both nations have leveraged economic, military, and diplomatic tools to secure their strategic interests, often at the expense of Western influence. Russia has taken a pragmatic approach to the Taliban's rule, engaging in military exercises along Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to counter terrorist threats.^[62] Additionally, Russia has deepened economic ties with the Taliban, securing agreements for the supply of oil, gas, and wheat while negotiating a transit deal for liquefied natural gas (LNG) under the "Kazan Format."^[63]

China, similarly, has engaged with the Taliban to advance its economic and strategic interests, particularly regarding Afghanistan's vast mineral resources. By integrating Afghanistan into its BRI, China has strengthened economic ties with Afghanistan. The Taliban's 25-year oil extraction deal with China's Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC) in 2023 indicates Beijing's willingness to invest in Afghanistan despite the inherent risks.^[64] However, due to the Russia and China condominium, China and Russia are able to pull these deals and are not as afraid of Islamic extremism spreading into the Xinjiang region.^[65] Russia and China's growing economic and military engagement reflects their efforts to consolidate control, while at the same time limiting the influence of Western nations.^[66]

In the context of the Qush Tepa Canal project, this geopolitical maneuvering has significant implications for smaller states in their sphere of influence. The canal is a major Taliban-led initiative aimed at diverting water from the Amu Darya River. Russia and China's growing influence in Afghanistan could play a decisive role in shaping the future of the canal. On one hand, their economic and strategic investments in Afghanistan can provide the Taliban with the resources and legitimacy needed to complete the project, potentially exacerbating water scarcity issues downstream and increasing the regional tensions. On the other hand, Russia and China's vested interests in maintaining stability in Central Asia could lead them to mediate between Afghanistan and its neighbours, ensuring the canal's construction does not escalate into conflict. Currently, it seems to be the latter, as the Qush Tepa Canal project's completion date appears to be delayed year by year, suggesting that China and Uzbekistan may have reached an agreement with the Taliban regarding new trade routes. This delay could indicate a strategic compromise aimed at balancing regional water-sharing concerns while advancing economic interests.

Moreover, the Russia-China condominium's ability to engage with the Taliban without facing constraints from Western states positions them as key players in determining the canal's trajectory. Their involvement could either facilitate a cooperative framework for water-sharing or further complicate the situation by prioritizing their own strategic and economic interests over regional stability. Ultimately, the creation of the Qush Tepa Canal underscores the broader struggle for influence in Central Asia, with Russia and China's actions likely to shape not only the project's outcome but also the region's geopolitical and environmental future.

The Role of Regional Powers in Shaping Afghanistan's Future

The involvement of Russia and China in Afghanistan indicate the broader trend of regional powers exerting influence in the absence of Western leadership. Both countries have used economic and military tools to stabilize the region while advancing their own interests. For

instance, Russia's military exercises and energy agreements with the Taliban demonstrate its commitment to maintaining a security buffer in Central Asia and securing new trade routes.

Moreover, when it comes to countries engaging with the Taliban, the region is no longer intimidated by the international community's pressure to avoid engagement with the group, despite its well-documented human rights abuses and designation as a terrorist organization. The first ministry that was taken down after Taliban took over in August 2021 was the Ministry of Women Affairs.^[67] According to the Human Rights Watch, Afghanistan is facing the world's most severe women's rights crisis as it ranked last on the Women, Peace and Security Index. Afghan women and international officials labeling it "gender apartheid." This level of systemic oppression has not been seen since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 75 years ago, with the only comparable period being the Taliban's previous rule from 1996 to 2001.^[68]

Especially since the U.S. is largely responsible for the Taliban's rise to power through the Doha Deal, Uzbekistan has adopted a foreign policy approach that echoes China's principle of non-interference in the internal matters of other countries.^[69] This strategy reflects an effort on Uzbekistan's end to avoid external entanglement in domestic affairs. By aligning itself with this principle, Uzbekistan aims to maintain stable diplomatic relations, foster regional cooperation, and avoid the pitfalls of geopolitical rivalries that often arise from external meddling. This approach not only strengthens Uzbekistan's position as a neutral and pragmatic actor but also aligns with its broader goals of ensuring regional stability and economic development. In doing so, Uzbekistan demonstrates a commitment to respecting sovereignty while pursuing its own strategic interests in a complex and interconnected geopolitical landscape.

Sanctions

The impact of Western sanctions on Russia has had profound and often counterintuitive effects on Central Asia and the Caucasus. While one of the primary goals of these sanctions was to restrict trade with Russia, the region has experienced a significant trade boom with Moscow since 2022. This surge has been largely driven by the rerouting of European exports, which declined in direct shipments to Russia but increased dramatically through Central Asia and the Caucasus. According to a June 2024 Oxford Economics report, exports to Russia rose by 5% in Georgia, 30% in Kazakhstan, and an astonishing 193% in Armenia. This growth was fueled by a marked increase in imports from the European Union across the region.^[70] Research from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development highlights that goods subject to Western export controls—imposed as part of sanctions against the Kremlin—have formed a disproportionate share of this rerouted trade. Notably, reports of white goods, such as washing machines and refrigerators, being shipped through the region so Russia could extract dual-use components made international headlines.^[71]

Central Asia's role in softening the blow of Western sanctions extends beyond trade. The region has become a critical hub for Russians seeking access to goods and financial services no longer readily available at home.^[72] Uzbekistan has also contributed to Russia's war efforts, with Uzbek producers supplying cotton pulp to Russian gunpowder factories, which manufacture ammunition and artillery rounds for Russian troops in Ukraine. Between January and August 2023 alone, Russia imported cotton pulp worth \$7.2 million, 87% of which came from Uzbekistan.^[73] The region's complicity in helping Russia evade sanctions and sustain its war effort has drawn criticism from the international community. As the West grapples with

the effectiveness of its sanctions regime, the role of Central Asia in this complex web of trade, finance, and geopolitics will continue to be a tension.

Conclusion

After the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, Uzbekistan stepped into a new era of independence, beginning to craft its own national identity. One of the most powerful symbols of this newfound independence was the adoption of a new flag, featuring three bold stripes of blue, white, and green, separated by thin red lines. Each colour on the flag holds a special meaning that reflects Uzbekistan's values and history. The blue stripe represents water, essential for life and historically the nation's lifeblood, especially in a region where water is scarce and precious. The white stripe symbolizes peace and stability, ideals that Uzbekistan has strived to maintain in a historically turbulent region. The green stripe stands for nature and prosperity, indicating the country's agricultural heritage and its hopes for a prosperous future. Finally, the thin red lines remind of the sacrifices and struggles endured to achieve independence and protect their nation.

However, today, the construction of the Qush Tepa Canal in neighbouring Afghanistan poses a significant threat to these very foundations that Uzbekistan's flag represents. The canal, which aims to divert water from the Amu Darya River, could drastically reduce the water flow into Uzbekistan, challenging the country's control over its most vital resource. Water scarcity could undermine Uzbekistan's agricultural sector, which is crucial for its economy, and disrupt the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on it. This, in turn, could threaten the nation's economic stability, symbolized by the green stripe on the flag. Moreover, the potential for conflict over water resources could destabilize the region, jeopardizing the peace and stability that the white stripe stands for. In this way, the Qush Tepa Canal not only threatens Uzbekistan's water security but also risks eroding the very principles and values that the nation's flag proudly embodies.

Uzbekistan has so far managed to navigate the complex regional dynamics by establishing economic interdependence, a strategy that has proven effective in maintaining stability and promoting cooperation. By prioritizing regional trade, infrastructure projects, and resource-sharing agreements, Uzbekistan has created a framework that encourages mutual dependence and reduces the chances of conflict. This approach has been particularly significant in dealing with Afghanistan, where the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has introduced new challenges.

While the countries investing in the region, including Uzbekistan, have not officially recognized the Taliban government, they share common values and interests that often distance them from Western approaches. These nations prioritize pragmatic engagement over ideological alignment, focusing on economic and security benefits rather than political conditions. This pragmatic stance is heavily influenced by China's foreign policy, which emphasizes respect for the sovereignty of recipient countries and a strict policy of non-interference in internal affairs. By adopting this approach, regional players have been able to maintain relationships with the Taliban without imposing political demands or addressing contentious issues such as human rights violations.

However, this strategy has its drawbacks. The emphasis on non-interference has led to the sidelining of critical issues, such as the Taliban's severe restrictions on women's rights and their erasure from public spaces in Afghanistan. These concerns have been largely ignored or

“swept under the rug” by regional actors in favor of maintaining economic and political stability. While this approach has allowed Uzbekistan and its neighbors to avoid direct confrontation with the Taliban, it raises ethical questions about the long-term consequences of prioritizing economic interests over human rights and social justice. Uzbekistan’s strategy of regional economic interconnectedness has provided short-term stability and fostered cooperation, but it also shows the delicate balance between pragmatism and principle in a region where geopolitical and humanitarian concerns often collide.

Through military cooperation, economic agreements, and strategic engagements, regional powers like Russia and China have exerted significant influence over Afghanistan, shaping its post-conflict trajectory in ways that align with their own interests. While their approaches differ as Russia focusing on security and counterterrorism, and China prioritizing economic investments and infrastructure projects, both nations share a common goal of stabilizing the region to safeguard their strategic and economic interests.

However, for Uzbekistan, the presence of Western powers in the region is seen as a crucial counterbalance. Uzbekistan is acutely aware of its history, particularly the decades of Soviet dominance, and is determined to avoid a repeat of being overshadowed by a single overpowering force. By maintaining a balance of power among Russia, China, and the West, Uzbekistan aims to ensure that no single actor dominates the region, thereby preserving its own sovereignty and strategic autonomy. This balancing act is not just about politics, it is also about securing economic opportunities while addressing security concerns, particularly in relation to Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan’s ability to navigate this complex geopolitical landscape will play a pivotal role in shaping not only Afghanistan’s development (and vice versa) but also the broader dynamics of Central and South Asia. By establishing regional economic interconnectedness and engaging with multiple global powers, Uzbekistan seeks to create a stable environment that benefits all parties involved. At the same time, it must carefully manage the competing interests of major powers to prevent conflicts that could destabilize the region.

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