

Special Report
Three Years of Taliban Rule



AFGHANISTAN'S ROCKY ROAD TO RE-EMERGENCE: Central Asia's Kabul-Stoned Path South

By Dr. Eric Rudenshiold



CASPIAN POLICY CENTER SPECIAL REPORT

Cover photo: Stock photo

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Out of the headlines, Afghanistan is undergoing a silent crisis that is adding impetus for the Taliban government to seek assistance and to normalize relations near and far. The detritus of its long-term conflict, an economy in disorder, climate and water instability are but some of the existential factors that simultaneously burden the country's leadership and aggravate the outlook for its 41 million inhabitants and for its neighbors in Central Asia.

The end of the third, [UN-led "Doha Process" conference on Afghanistan](#) in June 2024 confirmed that little is changing, as Afghanistan won't be recognized internationally or enabled to further develop and integrate economically so long as the Taliban restrict the rights of women and girls. Afghanistan remains [one of the poorest countries in the world](#), facing persistent [economic isolation](#) and [deteriorating living standards](#).

The unstable plight of their southern neighbor is not lost on the leaders of Central Asia. Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has repeatedly drawn attention to the ["serious" situation](#)

[in Afghanistan](#) in order to prevent a humanitarian crisis, as well as to create conditions for long-term stabilization. Afghanistan also represents a potential pathway to lucrative trade markets in South Asia, as well as access to seaports for landlocked Central Asian producers. All five of Central Asia's leaders have undertaken efforts to assist Afghanistan in one way or another, a situation hard to imagine three years ago.

The collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government and culmination of the war in Afghanistan in 2021 also brought an end to most serious international development efforts and froze multilateral attempts to integrate the war-torn country into the broader South and Central Asian community. The summer and fall of 2021 saw the recoil of international engagement in the fragile country, as the Taliban emerged triumphant and fears of resurgent terrorism resurfaced. Particularly in bordering Central Asia, security concerns were paramount in the wake of the U.S. and international forces' departure. Today, a very new page has been turned, despite the difficult start.



Present-day Kabul suffers regular power outages and food shortage under Taliban leadership. (Stock photo)

Uncertain relations with the new government in Kabul in the days after war's end, concerns over the need to reinforce border security, and fears for the potential spread of Taliban-inspired jihadism gave pause to Central Asian leaders and any thought to efforts at reconciliation. Additionally, Ghani's lack of popularity was in part the result of ethnic-Uzbek and -Tajik insurgents who were frustrated over widespread corruption, the incumbent's electoral legitimacy, a marginalized civil society, and growing religious piety.

Qualms that similar societal frustrations in Central Asia could prove sympathetic

to spillover influences from Afghanistan resulted in only limited and cautious engagement across the Amu Darya River border in 2021.

The international community shares concerns with the Central Asians over the Taliban government but holds fair treatment of Afghan women and girls as a prerequisite for closer relations. Unacknowledged by the international community due to its controversial polices, the Taliban government hosts few diplomatic missions and remains under investigation by the [International Criminal Court for alleged human rights violations](#) against its citizens.

However, despite its [pariah status](#) and its unabashed [human rights abuses](#), humanitarian assistance has continued to the beleaguered country, albeit at a much [slower pace](#). With over seven billion dollars provided by international donors since the Taliban takeover, including over four billion in basic humanitarian support, [Kabul is reliant on foreign aid](#). Much of this aid has been channeled to Afghanistan through conduits in Central Asia. For Central Asian capitals, this has both reinforced a critical role and imperative as purveyor of relief to their southern neighbor, and also required regular engagement between Kabul and its northern neighbors.

For the internationals, engaging through a Central Asian conduit has proven a convenient mechanism. For Central Asia, relations with the Taliban government is also an imperative in order to address critical regional concerns, such as the environment and water rights, counterterrorism, narcotics trafficking, migration, and trade access to the global south. However, the Central Asians have adopted differing approaches to engagement with Kabul.

The Central Asian View

[Kazakhstan's President Tokayev](#) has said that securing the active participation of Afghanistan in interregional relations is crucial to regional stability. At the June 2024 Collective Security Treaty Organization meeting in Almaty, he announced that, "Kazakhstan has removed the Taliban regime from the terrorist list, based on the importance of developing trade and economic cooperation with modern Afghanistan

and understanding that this regime is a long-term factor."

Astana has provided food and other relief to Afghanistan over the years, continuing aid under the Taliban's rule. While concerned with potential terrorist threats that might emanate from Afghanistan, the Government of Kazakhstan has taken a pro-active approach to address some of the structural problems impeding the stabilization of Afghanistan's economy. Described as in "[crisis management mode](#)," United Nations Special Representative to the Secretary General Otunbayeva noted the country is beset by massive poverty and indications of growing unrest.

Double landlocked Uzbekistan has taken a pragmatic approach to relations with Kabul, focusing on providing international assistance and energy supplies, as well as constructing potential trade corridors across the country to Pakistan and international sea lanes. In January 2024, Tashkent and Kabul celebrated a [six-fold increase in bilateral trade](#) between the two countries, as well as agreed to numerous trade agreements to facilitate truck and rail transport to connect South and Central Asia.

Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev has strongly supported the development of a Trans-Afghan railway, recently securing Qatar's [financial support](#) for the 573-kilometer project connecting Uzbekistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan that might also include loans from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

Not sharing a border with Afghanistan, the Kyrgyz Republic maintains concerns

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over the potential proliferation of terrorism, but also the question of potentially [returning Pamiri Kyrgyz](#) from Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor. Nevertheless, Bishkek has supplied health and other emergency assistance to Afghanistan, since the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the fall of the Ghani government.

Tajikistan, on the other hand, has tense relations with the Taliban and is deeply concerned over the potential for terrorists to breach Dushanbe's remote borders shared with Afghanistan. Similarly, the Taliban have [accused Tajikistanis](#) of launching attacks within Afghanistan, claiming to have killed a number of Tajik citizens responsible for the incidents. Border [skirmishes and closures](#) notwithstanding, there are efforts by the two governments to [engage with each other](#) on issues of mutual concern. Tajikistan continues to supply power to Afghanistan, despite the latter's limited ability to repay its debts.

Rockets launched by Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) members hit both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan from across the border in Afghanistan in 2022, causing new concerns that the Taliban were unable to secure their borders or control terrorist elements. In a display of pique, while attempting to maintain delicate relations with Kabul, Tashkent responded by overflying Afghanistan with rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft. The Taliban government subsequently demanded the return of military aircraft grounded in Uzbekistan that were used in the impromptu airlift evacuating Afghan personnel during the fall of Kabul.



Screen shot from cell phone video on Twitter showing Uzbekistan's overflight of Afghanistan after the rocket attack. (Twitter photo)

Uzbekistan [responded by turning off power](#) it was supplying to Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most extensive engagement between a Central Asian government and the Taliban comes from Turkmenistan which has been both a provider of emergency aid and also a corridor for assistance to its southern neighbor. Providing food, energy, and other assistance, Ashgabat has also championed pragmatism as part of its non-aligned, neutrality status to discuss and engage with Kabul on difficult issues. Ashgabat has raised the specter of potentially accrediting an ambassador from Kabul, increasing bilateral and regional trade, as well as coordination on a variety of rail and energy projects.

As Russia's war with Ukraine has disrupted traditional trade and transit lines for Central Asia, sparking the development of the multi-modal Middle Corridor network of rail, road, and sea cargo routes, Afghanistan has become an interesting alternative overland prospect for its northern neighbors. No longer engaged in hot conflict, Afghanistan's roads and the opportunity for rail development make it an attractive



A Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) technical team was able to temporarily reconnect power lines on April 15 in Baghlan Province. Work is under way to permanently resolve the problem, said DABS. [Source: DABS/Facebook]

addition to Central Asia’s burgeoning trade transit system.

In assessing current relations between Afghanistan and its northern neighbors, there are many considerations which influence how these neighbors engage with one another. Among these factors, several issues of concern and areas of areas of opportunity stand out:

Issues of Concern: Energy

Among the most critical needs for Afghanistan is a stable supply of energy most of which is now largely imported from its neighbors. With domestic hydro-electric generation compromised by the region’s extensive drought and shifting rainfall patterns, Afghanistan must import most of its electricity.

In 2022, over 80 percent of its electricity at an estimated cost of [\\$220 million](#) came

from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. By 2024, some internal improvements dropped that figure to 70 percent, but the country’s debt level remains high, often running in the [tens of millions of dollars to its neighbors](#).

While the ability to address its energy bills is a challenge for Kabul, the government has made efforts to [pay down](#) on debt to its neighbors but faces “[severe revenue shortages that inhibit the ability to provide both domestically and externally generated electricity to the power grid.](#)” Cessations to energy can leave millions of Afghans [in the dark and winter cold](#).

This is exactly what happened during the record cold weather early in 2022 and again in 2023 that crashed Central Asian power grids, leaving millions without heat, electricity, and water.



The World Bank now estimates completion of the CASA-1000 project in 2027. (Source: CASA-1000)

Extreme cold snaps plagued the entire Central Asian region during the winter of 2021-2022, produced rolling blackouts and the interruption of energy supplies to dependent Afghanistan. Temperatures below minus [30 degrees Celsius](#) in regions of Central Asia in 2023, combined with low supplies of natural gas, disrupted regional power and as a result reproduced corresponding cuts to Afghanistan’s power supplies. In both cases, tensions between Kabul and its northern neighbors were exacerbated by the interrupted power. However, the grid failures in Uzbekistan alone resulted in domestic outages in nearly half of the country that winter.

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have, nevertheless, continued to provide energy supplies to Afghanistan, despite its repayment challenges. In fact, Turkmenistan [expects to significantly increase](#) the supply of electricity to Afghanistan via the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) power

transmission line that is under construction, further consolidating north-south energy and grid integration.

The World Bank and other international donors have agreed to restart the incomplete \$1.2 billion CASA-1000 project that seeks to transfer and sell surplus hydroelectricity from the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan across Afghanistan to markets in Pakistan. The project was [“paused”](#) after the Taliban takeover in 2021, though nearly all supplies were purchased and one-fifth of the construction was completed. The new arrangement will wall off Kabul from construction and operations of CASA-1000, but revenues will allow the energy-strapped country to purchase 300MW of electricity from its northern neighbors to help stabilize its grid.

Issues of Concern: Water

[Afghanistan](#) and [Central Asia](#) also face significant water shortages due to climate change, glacial melt, increasing desertification, and acute temperature rises. Afghanistan is ranked in the [top 12 countries](#) most vulnerable to climate change, running in 2024 historic levels of drought and dryness due to [40-55% less precipitation](#) than average.

Taliban officials have undertaken constructing the 175-mile long, 100-foot wide, sand-lined *Qosh Tepa* canal to pull drinking and agricultural water from the Amu Darya river. Kabul plans to irrigate 1.3 million acres of arid farmland from the new-found water supply, working towards sustainable agriculture and food supply.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are located downstream from the mouth of the new



Phase two of the Qosh Tepa Canal has already started, with the project moving rapidly. (Afghanistan official photo)

Afghan canal that is expected to divert [20-30 percent](#) of the river's overall volume. Since Afghanistan is not a signatory to any trans-boundary water-sharing agreement with its neighbors, there is no forum for overseeing these substantial withdrawals or to negotiate user obligations and quotas.

Both Tashkent and Ashgabat depend upon the Amu Darya for water and hydro-power, using some [90 percent](#) of their water supply for agricultural use. Uzbekistan's President [Mirziyoyev noted](#) the impact of the Qosh Tepa canal to the region's leaders, citing its ability to "...radically change the water regime and balance in Central Asia.... We believe it is imperative...to study all aspects of the construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal and its effect on the water regime of the Amu Darya...". It is widely believed in Central Asia that tens of thousands of downstream inhabitants in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will experience

reduced water supply, even more so as the next phase of Tajikistan's [Rogun dam](#) is brought online and filled.

While the nearly 180-mile-long canal is only half completed, and not expected to be complete until [2028](#), the Tashkent leadership has sought to engage with the Taliban on the canal, its construction, and water conservation. As far back as 2018, Uzbekistan offered [technical assistance](#) on

the canal's construction, warning of the potential for leaks. In fact, a massive leak did occur in 2023, when the [walls of the canal](#) failed, spilling water that resulted in forming a 5.5 mile lake in the desert.

[Flash flooding](#) has, in fact, devastated swaths of northern Afghanistan in the spring of 2024, killing hundreds and displacing thousands. The government evacuated the wounded and displaced, but damage to towns and villages is long-term and particularly challenging to the country's agricultural sector.

Afghanistan is considered one of the world's most vulnerable places to the impacts of the climate crisis and, in addition to record spring floods in some regions, the country is also currently enduring its worst drought in 30 years. Some [25 out of 34](#) provinces are suffering from either severe or catastrophic drought conditions, [affecting more than half the population of 40 million](#).



The \$684 million canal breached its walls, creating a massive lake in October 2023. (Copernicus Sentinel satellite photo)

Issues of Concern: Food Security

More than one-third of Afghanistan’s population suffers from acute food insecurity, “[driven climatic shocks, and high food prices.](#)” Three-quarters of the country’s 34 territorial districts are undergoing severe or “[catastrophic drought conditions.](#)” Largely a by-product of poor irrigation systems and erratic weather, Afghanistan’s agricultural sector has struggled to feed the country. However, Taliban efforts in this sector have yielded a 13 percent increase in [2024 wheat harvests.](#) Heavy rains in some portions of the country both helped boost some regional yields while also wiping out production in other regions through mudslides and floods.

With a harvest in 2024 of 4.9 million tons of wheat grain, Afghanistan still has a deficiency of two million tons and largely depends upon Kazakhstan to make up its shortfalls. Afghanistan is the third-largest [importer of Kazakhstan’s wheat,](#) while Kazakhstan is also the top exporter of [flour to Afghanistan.](#) Astana is planning

to expand shipments of both wheat and flour to its southern neighbor.

Issues of Concern: Resurgent Terrorism

Terrorism is an ever-present concern among the leaders of Central Asia. Sharing a long and porous border with Afghanistan, the threat of militants crossing northward remains a security concern that has grown in the time since the U.S. withdrawal. Fighting [two insurgencies – ISIS-K and a National Resistance Front](#) composed of former government, military, and regional forces – the Taliban regime has been unable to quell the concerns of its northern neighbors since gaining control of the government.

Fears over a “[growing number of militants in northern Afghanistan](#)” and the spread of their influence are articulated by Tajikistan’s leaders, as Central Asian security forces have detained multiple suspected ISIS-K members. Tajik nationals who are said to be ISIS-K

extremists are largely credited with the terrorist attacks in [Iran](#), [Russia](#), and [across Europe](#). The Taliban-led Afghanistan is seen by some as a potential [“incubator” for terrorist groups](#), as ideologically aligned al-Qaeda and Tehrik-e-Taliban, along with ISIS-K and other non-aligned groups, operate with seeming impunity [inside the country’s borders](#). Moreover, members of [all Central Asian ethnic groups](#) have been recruited by ISIS-K, as the organization attempts to reincarnate itself.

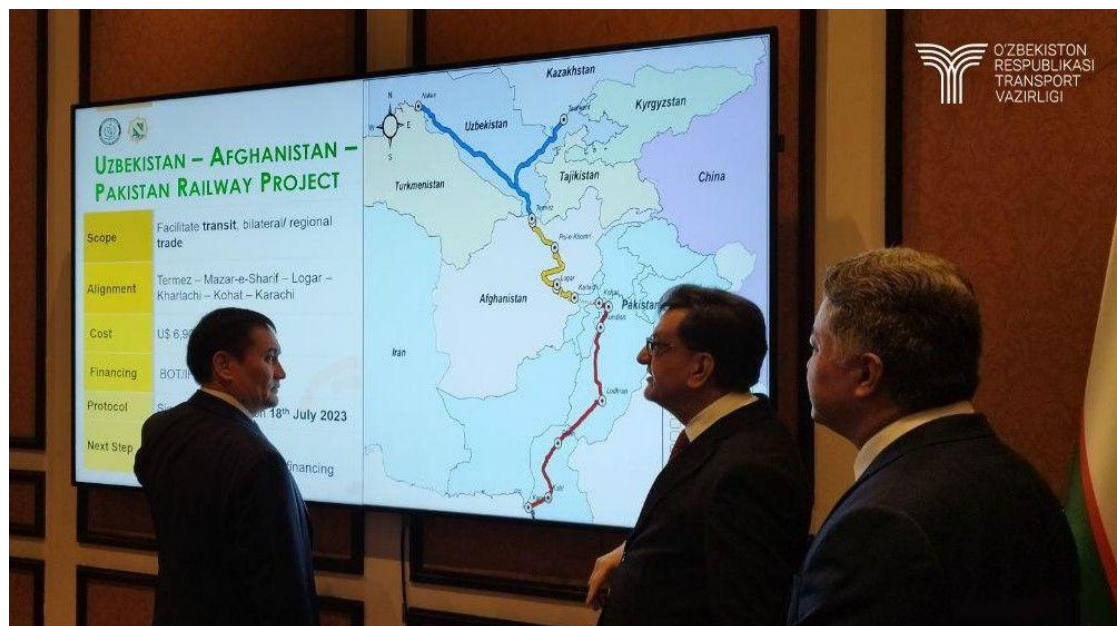
Central Asia’s response has been to strategically engage with the Taliban government, particularly on infrastructure as it relates to economic development issues, but to rebuff formal security cooperation with Kabul. Dushanbe has continued to express [deep concern](#) over the Taliban government, but has re-established [some ties mostly at regional levels](#), due to shared economic interests.

Tensions between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan over the 2022 [rocket attack](#) and the [return of U.S. aircraft](#) used by Afghanistan’s now defunct air force have at times flared, but both countries continue to maintain cordial – if at times strained – relations. Where once Central Asian leaders cautioned the need to prepare for [“external shocks and](#)

[the worst-case scenario,”](#) most dire fears have dissipated somewhat, being replaced now with a cautious partnership developing that is focused around infrastructure development.

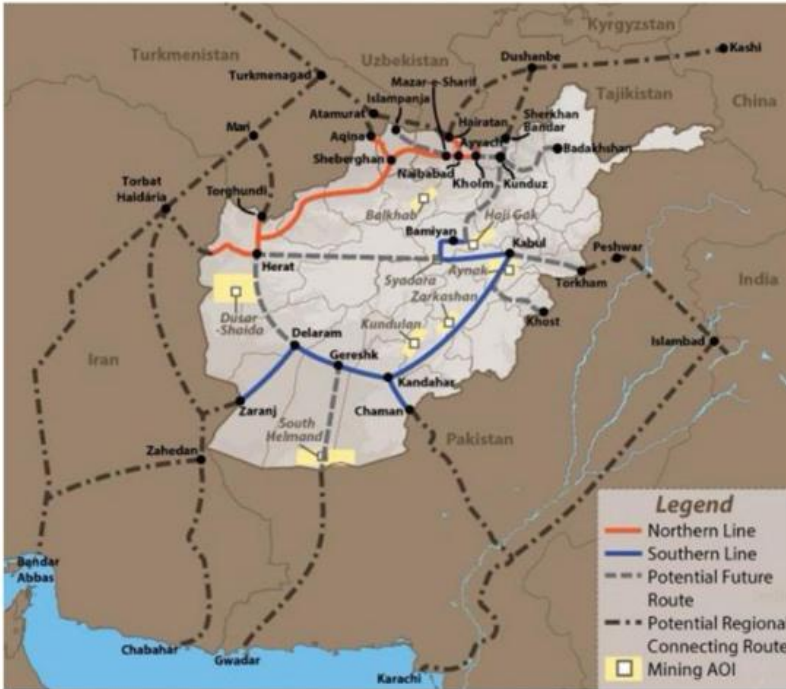
Issues of Opportunity: Rail Infrastructure

There are three foci of rail development for Afghanistan that promise sustainable, long-term change. The first, from Turkmenistan, seeks to extend rail connectivity between Turghandi to Herat City and from Andakhoi-Shabarghan to Mazar-e- Sharif. The second rail effort, led by Uzbekistan, is an estimated \$7 billion “Trans-Afghan” railway project that seeks to extend Afghanistan’s existing rail network from Mazar-e-Sharif to Kabul and then to Paktia province in Pakistan. This effort is designed to reduce transit times for goods transiting the country, to lower costs for freight traffic, and to enable Afghanistan to join regional trade networks. But the project requires



Government of Uzbekistan plans railway plans through Afghanistan to Pakistan. (Official photo)

AFGHANISTAN NATIONAL RAILWAY PLAN (ANRP)



- Developed by Afghanistan Railway Authority
- Total route length- 5500 km
- Main line in a ring shape
- Southern Mainline: mineral freight focussed line of Standard Gauge
- Northern Mainline: commercial freight focussed line of dual (Russian and Standard Gauge)



The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program's rail overview.

extensive and expensive tunneling that will take time to complete, though [Tashkent expects the project to be completed in three years.](#)

The [third rail development effort is led by Kazakhstan](#) that seeks to construct rail lines that, like Uzbekistan's plan, connect Termez to Mazar-i-Sharif, but Astana also seeks to connect Herat with Kandahar and then Spin Buldak. These proposals are linked to the further development of dry ports in Aqina (Faryab province) and Towrgondi (Herat province). The latter port would include a logistics hub for general freight coordination and an oil terminal that would help move up to [one](#)

[million tons](#) of [Russian oil to markets in South Asia.](#)

Rail and attendant road infrastructure through Afghanistan will help Central Asian countries connect to South Asia and the sea lanes. For Afghanistan, increased connectivity facilitates ready access to international trade, energy, and food, as well as an opportunity to try to counter the impact of the country's restricted economic partnerships.

Issues of Opportunity: Trade and Transit

Uzbekistan has been a comparatively active trade partner with its southern



Kazakhstan and Afghanistan have increasingly engaged with one another on trade, foodstuff, and energy issues. (Official photo)

neighbor, seeing a six-fold increase in bilateral trade in 2023, [reaching \\$266 million](#), but in the first half of 2024, total trade volume has [grown to \\$448.3 million](#). Tashkent has also pushed for transportation of its trade goods across Afghanistan to markets in Pakistan, growing that overland corridor largely through truck convoys. However, trade with the Taliban is by no means normalized. Dozens of Tajik truck drivers who transported coal to Afghanistan in May 2024 were not allowed to travel home, stranding approximately [100 trucks at the border](#).

Turkmenistan has been the other active trade and transit partner with Kabul, particularly as Ashgabat is [again pursuing the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India \(TAPI\) pipeline project](#) that would transport Turkmen gas across Afghanistan to Pakistan and finally India.

First proposed in the 1990s, TAPI has suffered from a lack of international investment and an unstable security situation in Afghanistan.

If constructed, the new pipeline is expected to provide Kabul with 500 million cubic meters of gas and \$400 million in annual transit fees, while TAP would generate \$100 million in [transit fees](#), as well as provide access to stable electricity. In addition, Ashgabat and Islamabad are also seeking to reinvigorate the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) project that would transmit Turkmen power across Afghanistan to Pakistan. Funding for both projects is held up due to the lack of an internationally recognized government in Kabul.

Since the U.S. withdrawal, [Kazakhstan has been ready](#) for “business contacts with Afghanistan,” according to President

Tokayev. Russia's war in Ukraine also motivated Astana to diversify its trade partnerships and routes, which made a natural opportunity for engagement with Kabul. Kazakhstan's provision of emergency food and other supplies in the period after the Taliban takeover helped forged a positive relationship between the two countries. As Kazakhstan has sought to pursue closer trade relations through Afghanistan to South Asia, Astana has softened its approach to engaging with Kabul, [taking the Taliban off its list of terrorist organizations](#).

While Kazakhstan has not recognized the Taliban government, trade between the two countries has grown substantially since the end of the war in Afghanistan. In 2022, trade volumes reached \$987 million, and, in 2023, twice as much as the previous year (\$474.3 million). Trade turnover in 2023 was estimated at \$1 billion. Astana has emphasized collaborative efforts for trade and reconstruction efforts, while disagreeing publicly on the Taliban's governing policies. Kazakhstan seeks to increase trade to [at least \\$4 billion in 2024-25](#).

Issues of Opportunity:

International Engagement

International engagement with Afghanistan is a critical factor. Despite some marginal improvements, the country's economy remains unstable and is expected to [continue to rely on humanitarian aid](#). Over half of Afghanistan's population will likely continue to depend upon humanitarian assistance in 2024.

Further complicating international engagement and despite the need for international assistance, the Taliban's leadership of Afghanistan remains officially unrecognized by any nation or international entity. That said, some countries are working directly with Kabul, while continuing to avoid official acknowledgement of the Kabul regime. Seventeen countries currently have embassies in Afghanistan, including all five Central Asian states, though they do not recognize the government. While the United States and Europe are adhering to a strict assistance-only policy, Afghanistan's neighbors are instead engaging with the new Kabul leadership.

The five Central Asian states are increasing trade volumes with their southern neighbor, including the export of energy and foodstuffs, while also seeking trade routes that cross Afghanistan into Iran and Pakistan. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are the primary portals for international assistance into Afghanistan



Humanitarian aid from Uzbekistan travels by rail to Hairatan, Afghanistan. (Photo credit: mfa.uz)

and also the focus of improved rail and energy connectivity proposals for enhanced routing to the south.

This neighborly engagement is pivotal for Kabul, as many donors suffer Afghan fatigue, frustration over the Taliban's obstinacy in violating human rights, and competing priorities. Overall, international assistance is on the decline, with [the United Kingdom cutting](#) three-quarters of its Afghan aid budget in 2023, paralleling [a reduction in German funds](#) from \$444 million to \$34 million. Of increasing concern to the United States is the [Taliban's diversion of millions](#) in humanitarian and reconstruction funds through imposed taxes and fees.

Overall, after three years of self-rule, the Taliban leadership faces significant challenges for its long-term prospects. Half of the country's population needs [humanitarian aid](#) amid massive food insecurity. However, the country's strategic location between Central Asia and potential trade routes and partners to

the south means that Afghanistan can offer attractive opportunities to its northern neighbors anxious to diversify their connectivity options. Likewise, as Kabul depends upon Central Asia for both food and energy supplies there is room for partnership and cooperation among the six countries.

Increased time and engagement with each other can build confidence in a positive and collaborative future. If the Taliban are able to ensure security for international development projects to move forward, some rail and energy projects could find willing donors.

However, until the Taliban change their restrictive and abusive governing practices, it is unlikely that western donors will reengage in the war-torn country beyond their limited, existing efforts. Facing existential challenges and in need of extensive cooperation, the Taliban leadership are under pressure to adapt and change its policies. Central Asia is motivated and could prove helpful in this adaptation.

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