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Strategic Realism Guides
Uzbekistan's Taliban Engagement
By
Gulf State Analytics



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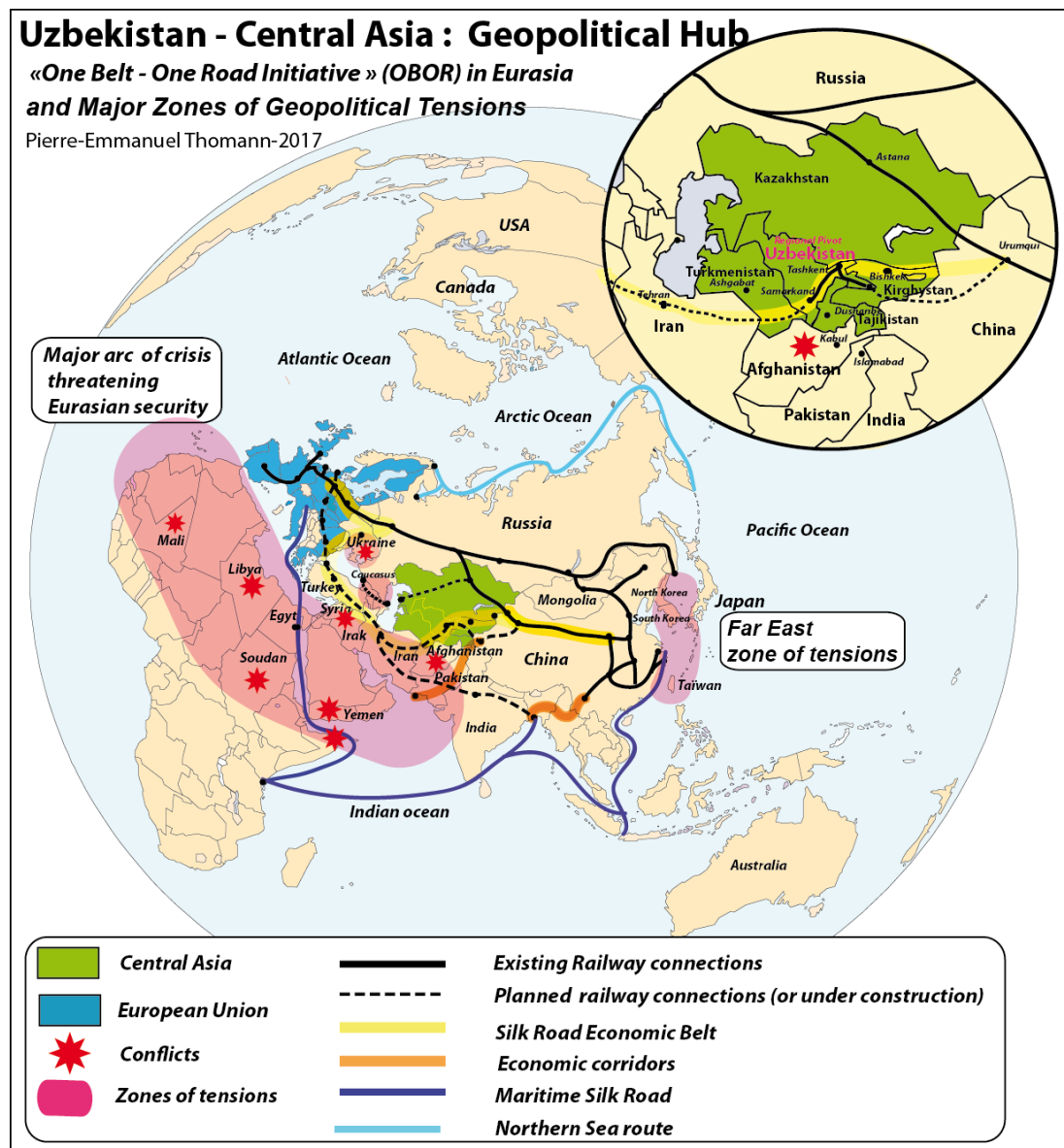
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Executive Summary

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- ✦ Despite no formal recognition of the Taliban, Central Asian states have opted for strategic, interest-based diplomacy with the regime in Kabul, acknowledging its staying power.
- ✦ Cross-border militancy, drug trafficking, and extremist threats have compelled the Central Asian republics to maintain functional ties with the Islamist government in Kabul to enhance border and counterterrorism cooperation.
- ✦ Uzbekistan has emerged as a proactive Central Asian actor in engaging the Taliban.
- ✦ Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov's historic August 2024 visit to Kabul made him the highest-ranking foreign official to visit post-US Afghanistan, symbolizing Tashkent's leadership in regional engagement vis-à-vis the "Taliban 2.0".
- ✦ Driven by geography, economic necessity, and regional power alignments, Tashkent has pursued pragmatic cooperation with Kabul while avoiding formal recognition.
- ✦ Uzbekistan views deeper economic ties with Afghanistan—through trade centers, transport links, and visa liberalization—as tools to secure domestic stability and security while projecting regional influence.
- ✦ Tashkent's introduction of a 15-day visa-free entry for Afghan citizens demonstrates its willingness to facilitate people-to-people and commercial ties with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.
- ✦ As Russia recently extended recognition to the Taliban on 3 July 2025, Uzbekistan faces a complex calculus balancing opportunity and risk.
- ✦ Despite robust engagement, Tashkent might not rush into formal recognition of the Taliban, mindful of broader geopolitical dynamics and reputational risks.
- ✦ If Uzbekistan recognizes the Taliban, it will likely be framed as a step toward stability and connectivity—not an endorsement of the Islamic Emirate's ideology or governance.

Key Picture: Central Asia - Geopolitical Map (2017)



Source: [Eurocontinent](https://www.eurocontinent.com)

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan four years ago, the Central Asian republics have been compelled to recalibrate their foreign policy strategies in response to a fundamentally altered geopolitical environment. The end of the US-led occupation ushered in a period of heightened uncertainty along Afghanistan's northern frontier, forcing regional governments to confront a host of emerging security, political, and economic challenges.

In this evolving regional landscape, Central Asian states have had an urgent need to develop coherent approaches to counterterrorism, drug trafficking, and border management. As a result, Central Asian republics have adopted a pragmatic posture toward the Taliban. These countries have chosen to, in varying degrees, engage with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan not out of ideological alignment, but based on recognition that the "Taliban 2.0" is unlikely to fall in the upcoming future, and therefore it is pragmatic to cautiously accommodate the Islamist regime. In sum, diplomacy, driven by strategic calculation, has shaped the Central Asian republics' engagement with the Taliban since August 2021.

1. Engagement Without Recognition: A Cautious Diplomatic Balance

To date, none of the Central Asian republics have formally recognized the Taliban regime, despite their wide range of engagements with the Islamic Emirate since its return to power four years ago. These interactions—ranging from high-level talks to pragmatic cooperation on issues such as border control and trade—have unfolded without the conferral of official recognition, reflecting a careful balancing act between realpolitik considerations and the desire to avoid international criticism or domestic backlash.

Russia's decision on July 3 to formally recognize the Taliban marked an important development in regional diplomacy vis-à-vis post-occupation Afghanistan.¹ Given the historical, political, and security interdependencies that bind Central Asia to Moscow—rooted in shared Soviet legacies and reinforced by ongoing cooperation within institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—it now seems increasingly probable that the Central Asian states may follow Russia's lead in fully normalizing ties with the Taliban.

This is particularly plausible when one considers the extent to which these republics have consistently aligned their approaches to post-U.S. Afghanistan with those of the Kremlin, often viewing Moscow as both a strategic guide and a stabilizing force in their immediate neighbourhood, especially given threats from extremist organizations such as Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Having faced threats of jihadist terrorism from such groups for many years, security considerations inform Uzbekistan's views on the Taliban. Alongside other Central Asian republics, and in alignment with Russia, Tashkent increasingly regards the Islamic Emirate as a potential buffer against the further proliferation of extremist ideologies and insurgent operations across the post-Soviet space. Uzbek policymakers assess that a functioning authority in Kabul—however imperfect—may be better positioned than a security vacuum to contain destabilizing actors such as ISKP and IMU and prevent them from exploiting Afghanistan as a launchpad for regional infiltration.

Should formal recognition occur, it will be framed less as an endorsement of the Taliban's domestic governance and more as a calculated step toward securing regional stability, managing border threats, and maintaining economic connectivity in a volatile landscape. For Central Asian republics, the calculus appears to be shifting—from waiting for broader international consensus to accepting the de facto realities on the ground and shaping their own engagement strategies accordingly.

2. Uzbekistan Leads Central Asia's Taliban Diplomacy

Uzbekistan, which shares an 144-kilometer border with Afghanistan, has emerged as a leading actor among the Central Asian republics in its engagement with the “Taliban 2.0.”² Soon after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Tashkent moved swiftly to establish pragmatic ties with the new regime, hosting Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi and signing a bilateral protocol aimed at enhancing security cooperation and expanding economic relations.³ This diplomatic outreach has since evolved into broader regional initiatives.

In July 2023, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan signed a trilateral agreement to advance the Trans-Afghan Railway—an ambitious \$4.6 billion initiative, first proposed in 2017, that will stretch from the Termez crossing at the Afghan-Uzbek border through Afghanistan's Mazar-i-Sharif into Pakistan and connect to Karachi through a rail network.⁴ This 650-kilometer corridor will serve to enhance regional connectivity between Northern Eurasia and the Global South while helping land-locked Uzbekistan become an increasingly pivotal country from the standpoint of economic integration throughout Asia.⁵

3. Geostrategic Implications for Russia and China

Strategically significant, the Trans-Afghan Railway holds substantial geopolitical value for major Asian powers. By linking Central Asia to Pakistan's seaports, the railway offers Russia expanded access to Indian Ocean markets, effectively positioning the route as the de facto eastern branch of the North-South Transport Corridor. For Moscow, the railway represents a counterweight to Western-backed geo-economic initiatives in the region.

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This railway's strategic significance for Uzbekistan must also be understood within the context of trade projects linking China to Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and other Central Asian countries, further contributing to Tashkent's geo-economic leverage afforded by geography.^{6, 7} As such, Uzbekistan seeks to position itself as a pivotal hub in the evolving architecture of transregional economic integration—a factor that will further motivate Tashkent to strengthen diplomatic, economic, trade, and security relations with Kabul.

4. Building Bridges in the Region

Uzbekistan, which joins Kazakhstan in being the only two Central Asian states to have formally accredited Taliban-appointed ambassadors, has played a bridging role between Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and other countries. In April 2023, foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbours met in Samarkand for their fourth meeting to address issues pertaining to Afghanistan.⁸ Then, in a landmark move, Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov became the highest-ranking foreign official to visit Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in August 2024, signalling Tashkent's strategic intent to navigate and shape the evolving regional landscape.⁹

This momentum continued in February 2025, when a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar travelled to Uzbekistan to advance discussions on deepening economic integration, bilateral trade, and transport cooperation.¹⁰ During this period, Uzbek officials reaffirmed their commitment to completing the "Khalqlaar Bazar"—also known as the Termez International Trade Centre—located along the Afghan-Uzbek border, and announced the introduction of a 15-day visa-free regime for Afghan nationals, further underscoring Uzbekistan's intent to position itself as a key conduit for regional commerce and diplomacy.¹¹

5. Strategic Caution Amid Growing Influence

Looking ahead, Uzbekistan's leadership is likely to remain cautious about the implications of fully normalizing relations with the Taliban, particularly given the potential international consequences of aligning too closely with Moscow in formally recognizing the Islamic Emirate. While high-level engagement between Tashkent and Kabul is expected to deepen, the Uzbek government may refrain from taking definitive diplomatic steps until broader geopolitical conditions evolve.

Nevertheless, policymakers in Tashkent recognize the Taliban's growing influence in Central Asia—particularly in the realms of economic connectivity and regional security—leaving them with limited strategic alternatives. As a result, pragmatic engagement with the Islamic Emirate has become a necessity rather than a choice. Through sustained diplomatic outreach, infrastructure development, transit corridors, railway initiatives, and counterterrorism cooperation, Uzbekistan is poised to remain a key actor in shaping Central Asia's approach to post-occupation Afghanistan.

NOTES

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- ¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/03/world/asia/russia-afghanistan-recognize.html>
 - ² <https://apnews.com/article/uzbekistan-afghanistan-aripov-visit-4908818df58c75c91d9dd189a70ef53f>
 - ³ <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13850-the-new-russia-iran-treaty-implications-for-the-south-caucasus-region.html>
 - ⁴ <https://eurasianet.org/a-trans-afghan-railway-chugs-toward-reality-with-new-agreement>
 - ⁵ Ibid.
 - ⁶ <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-aims-to-deepen-central-asia-influence-with-new-railway-project/7930839.html>
 - ⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-afghanistan-freigh-train-link-taliban/33214113.html>
 - ⁸ <https://mepei.com/the-fourth-meeting-of-foreign-ministers-of-afghanistans-neighboring-states-a-greater-emphasis-on-inclusive-government-and-security/>
 - ⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/uzbekistan-afghanistan-aripov-visit-4908818df58c75c91d9dd189a70ef53f>
 - ¹⁰ <https://www.gazeta.uz/en/2025/02/24/uzb-afg/>
 - ¹¹ <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13850-the-new-russia-iran-treaty-implications-for-the-south-caucasus-region.html>