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PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS AFTER 2021: THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's return to power fundamentally transformed the geopolitical architecture of Central and South Asia. While the immediate Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands face active conflict, this research monitors the changing roles of global powers and Central Asian neighbors in response to the shifting power dynamics. The study contends that external actors possess broader geopolitical significance beyond the bilateral Af-Pak tension. China pursued transactional engagement linked to regional connectivity and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, while Russia gradually expanded diplomatic relations with the Taliban government. Moreover, India adopted a pragmatic regional approach through alternative trade corridors such as Chabahar and reconciled with the new Taliban government. In the thesis, particular focus is given to Uzbekistan's policy of regional economic connectivity, "extraordinary desecuritization," and how these policies are institutionalized via the Trans-Afghan corridor and cross-border energy projects.

Keywords: Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, Taliban regime, external actors, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, regional economic connectivity, Trans-Afghan corridor, transboundary hydropolitics.

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Introduction

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's return to power fundamentally reorganized the geopolitical framework of Central and South Asian regions. For decades, Pakistan's foreign policy establishment anticipated that a friendly, ideologically aligned Taliban government in Kabul would secure its western frontier and provide the required "strategic depth" against India. However, the post-2021 reality has sharply contradicted these expectations. Instead of stability, the region has witnessed severe border clashes and the weaponization of trade and refugees. As southern transit corridors became paralyzed by these bilateral disputes, the resulting geopolitical vacuum quickly drew in surrounding great and middle powers.

The rising instability along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border directly threatens the broader stability of South Asia and Central Asia. Consequently, the increasing active involvement of external actors including China, Russia, India and Central Asian states proves that the Af-Pak conflict possesses broader geopolitical significance beyond bilateral tension. Furthermore, this situation is highly relevant for Uzbekistan and Central Asia due to the region's geographic proximity and its growing emphasis on economic connectivity. This study investigates how these external powers are navigating the regional vacuum, and specifically examines how Uzbekistan's paradigm of "extraordinary desecuritization" is transforming Afghanistan from a buffer zone into a functional land bridge for Eurasian trade integration.

China: transactional diplomacy

The People's Republic of China's current strategy in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region is built on transactional diplomacy and it offers Kabul and Islamabad diplomatic and financial backing in exchange for the protection of Chinese interests. This approach is built upon the "all-weather" strategic partnership with Pakistan and institutionalized through mechanisms such as the Pakistan-China Joint Military Cooperation Committee. This relationship is characterized as

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“iron-clad” and involves deep military integration. Through it, Beijing has been supplying high-tech military hardware such as Type 054A frigates, diesel-electric submarines, surface-to-air missiles and has even been jointly manufacturing the JF-17 combat aircraft.¹ Historically, Pakistan served as an intermediary for Chinese interests in Afghanistan. However, due to the perceived decline of Pakistani influence and the evolving regional security architecture, China has initiated direct diplomatic channels with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. A significant milestone in this diplomacy occurred at the Great Hall of the People on January 30, 2024 when President Xi Jinping officially accepted the credentials of the Taliban-appointed ambassador, Asadullah Bilal Karimi.² This act signifies a de facto acceptance of the Islamic Emirate’s authority, even though Beijing describes this as normal protocol rather than formal recognition. This relationship is fundamentally conditional. China Beijing requires the Taliban to secure their territory and eliminate threats from groups like TIP/ETIM, in exchange for political and economic support. Despite the fact that the Taliban have moved Uyghur fighters further from the Xinjiang frontier, China remains skeptical of the Taliban’s verbal guarantees. Hence, the Chinese government continues demanding that these individuals must be apprehended and formally extradited to China.³

The economic dimension of this trilateral relationship is dominated by the CPEC which is the \$62 billion flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The CPEC project provides China with an alternative to the Malacca Strait and is designed to link Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar Port. Since 2021 (NATO’s withdrawal and Taliban assuming the government), Beijing has been aiming to stabilize its western periphery and it has pursued an extension strategy (CPEC 2.0) to integrate Afghanistan into this network. A major step in this direction was in January 2023, when the Taliban entered a 25-year oil extraction

¹ Riccardo Rossi, “Geopolitics of China-Pakistan’s Relations,” *European Eye on Radicalization* (2025): 10.

² Shivam Shekhawat, “Understanding China’s Engagement with Afghanistan Under Taliban 2.0,” *Organisation for Research on China and Asia* (2025): 7, 12, 16.

³ Bahram Kalviri, “Containing the Spillover: Afghanistan as China’s Immediate Frontier Risk,” *Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies* (2026): 4.

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agreement in the Amu Darya basin with the Chinese company CAPEIC. Nevertheless, this agreement, which represents a total planned investment of \$540 million, was canceled in mid-2025 by the Taliban due to the CAPEIC's unfulfilled commitments. China's pursuit of Afghanistan's trillion-dollar mineral reserves, particularly lithium and copper, is driven by its goal to dominate the global supply chain for clean energy and electric vehicle batteries. A prominent example is the Chinese firm Gochin, which proposed a \$10 billion investment to develop Afghanistan's lithium sector.⁴ Beyond mining, the Taliban is reportedly implementing a nationwide facial-recognition surveillance network. The Taliban government has mapped Kabul with over 62,000 cameras and initial reports linked the project to the Chinese tech giant Huawei and Dahua companies.⁵ The Taliban is strategically using Chinese economic involvement to shift the power balance in the region. The Taliban wants to bypass Pakistan's frequent trade blockades and transit restrictions by getting China to invest in mines and roads. This strategy actively reduces Islamabad's leverage over Kabul and allow the Taliban to pursue a goal of economic self-sufficiency through direct resource deals with China.⁶

Despite China's significant regional goals, its strategy is severely hindered by the intensifying conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the growth of militant groups. Both ethnic separatists like the BLA and religious insurgents like the TTP now treat Chinese infrastructure and staff as high-priority targets. This was demonstrated through various militant attacks, such as the 2021 bombing of a bus at the Dasu dam project that killed nine Chinese engineers. Additionally, ISKP actively sabotages Beijing's interests, as seen in the December 2022 raid on Kabul's Longan Hotel.⁷ These strikes are designed to sabotage Taliban's efforts to achieve domestic and international legitimacy through economic development.

⁴ Makhdom Karam Shah, "Mining for Influence: China's Mineral Ambitions in Taliban-Led Afghanistan," *South Asian Voices* (2024): 4-5.

⁵ Bloomberg, "Taliban Says Huawei to Install Cameras to Locate Militants," *Bloomberg*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-25/taliban-says-huawei-to-install-cameras-to-locate-militants>

⁶ Amit Kumar and Veena Ramachandran, "China-Taliban Security Ties: A Reimagining of South Asia's Security Discourse," *Asian Security* (2025): 191, 331.

⁷ Sadiya Iqbal and Waheed Ahmad Khan, "China's Policy Towards Afghanistan in the Aftermath of the US Withdrawal," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* (2025): 301.

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Moreover, the direct confrontations between Afghanistan and Pakistan further hinder China's geopolitical ambitions. The military escalation on February 26, 2026 which witnessed Pakistan launch airstrikes into Nangarhar and Paktia and presented Beijing with a major strategic crisis. In response, China actively engages in "Beijing Triangle diplomacy" and it attempts to mediate the crisis between Islamabad and Kabul.⁸ However, this lack of a stable security environment has delayed the expansion of CPEC into Afghanistan and led to the suspension of major projects. For instance, the road construction for the \$3 billion Mes Aynak copper project only began in July 2024 after a 16-year delay and is once again paralyzed by ongoing regional instability.⁹ Ultimately, while China seeks to project itself as a regional stabilizer, its broader BRI vision remains hostage to the volatile political realities of the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier.

Russia: spheres of influence

Russia's security strategy since 2021 is based mostly on defensive realism and focuses primarily on protecting its interests in Central Asia. Most of the time Russia has been maintaining a practical relationship with the Taliban and has essentially turned Afghanistan into a "northern buffer" to block the growth of the ISKP. The March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack (which killed over 140 civilians) was a major turning point for Russia's regional strategy. This tragedy prompted President Vladimir Putin to declare that cooperation with the Taliban was a "necessity, not a choice". He argued that the Taliban is the only force on the ground capable of consistently weakening ISKP (the group responsible for the attack) and preventing further terrorism from spilling into Russia and its Central Asian neighbors.¹⁰ Moscow's strategic response to the 2021 Taliban takeover involves a calculated effort to use the regime change as a way to "increase

⁸ Islomkhon Gafarov and Bobur Mingyasharov, "The Beijing Triangle Diplomacy: Between Islamabad and Kabul," *Islamabad Post*, June 1, 2025, <https://islamabadpost.com.pk/the-beijing-triangle-diplomacy-between-islamabad-and-kabul/>.

⁹ Barnett R. Rubin, "Chinese Peacemaking Efforts in Afghanistan," in *China and the Middle East* (2024): 29-30.

¹⁰ Abdul Wasi Popalzay, "Russia's Strategic Engagement With the Afghan Taliban Post-2021: A Realist Appraisal of Geopolitical Interests, Security Calculus, and Regional Diplomacy," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 0(0) (2025): 5-7.

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alarmism in Central Asia”, according to analyst Dr. Akram Umarov. This manufactured sense of crisis provides the necessary geopolitical excuse for Russia to strengthen its military and political presence in the region. In fact, this serves Russia as a primary driver for extending base agreements and intensifying CSTO-led exercises in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹¹

On July 3, 2025 Russia officially recognized the Taliban government which can be regarded as a major move toward institutional hedging in a changing global order. On that day, Russian Ambassador Dmitry Zhirnov presented official credentials to the Taliban’s Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Kabul while the Taliban flag was ceremonially raised at the embassy in Moscow. The Kremlin effectively shattered the international consensus that used non-recognition as a tool to pressure Kabul for concessions. Russia’s formal recognition of the Taliban has completely changed the local political landscape and possibly triggered a “bandwagoning” effect among neighboring states. For example, political analysts like Islomkhon Gafarov argue that this historic move is forcing regional neighbors to re-evaluate their isolationist stances to secure their own national interests. Central Asian states like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan emerged as primary examples of this trend. For example, Uzbekistan’s president held a high-level meeting with Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar on the exact day of Russia’s formal recognition. Thus, it signalled a clear readiness to normalize bilateral ties.¹² Consequently, these actions confirm Russia’s success in designing a post-American order in Eurasia.

Nevertheless, the 2026 military escalation between Afghanistan and Pakistan has revealed the structural limitations of Russia’s regional influence. According to Ruslan Suleymanov, this “open war” contradicts the Kremlin’s projection of an anti-Western regional order and it demonstrates that Russia cannot effectively control or mediate between its core allies. Despite the symbolic weight of its historic recognition of the Taliban government in 2025, Russia remains a

¹¹ Akram Umarov and Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, “Where Russia’s Afghanistan Policy Went Wrong,” *The National Interest* (July 15, 2022).

¹² Islomkhon Gafarov, “Russia’s Taliban Recognition Signals Potential Domino Effect,” *Geopolitical Monitor* (July 11, 2025).

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marginal player when it comes to resolving deep-seated regional wars. Russia's attempt to act as a mediator was flatly turned down by both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Instead of turning to Russia, the two countries sought help from Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, who successfully led the mediation efforts and secured ceasefire agreements.¹³ This rejection proves that Moscow does not actually have the economic or political leverage needed to resolve major regional conflicts. Ultimately, Russia's recognition of the Taliban provided no real influence in the face of actual cross-border clashes.

India: the reversal of strategic depth

India's current engagement with the Taliban represents a major shift toward realpolitik and indeed, it has moved from a complete break in ties to a policy of pragmatic realism. After closing its embassy in August 2021, New Delhi has hitherto pursued functional cooperation with the Taliban. A key turning point was the October 10, 2025 Joint Statement, because it officially restarted bilateral talks and included a shared condemnation of the April 2025 Pahalgam attack. In this explicit condemnation, the Taliban pledged to prevent Afghan territory from being used for strikes against India.¹⁴ Furthermore, India announced the upgrade of its technical mission to a full-fledged embassy in Kabul in October 2025. Following this, in mid-January 2026 senior Taliban official Mufti Noor Ahmad Noor formally assumed his role as the Chargé d'Affaires at the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi.¹⁵ Although this does not constitute official de jure recognition, it represents a deep pragmatic engagement driven by India's urgent security needs to counter terrorism. Specifically, India seeks to neutralize the resurgence of anti-India militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed

¹³ Ruslan Suleymanov, "The Afghanistan-Pakistan War Poses Awkward Questions for Russia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Carnegie Politika)* (April 1, 2026).

¹⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "India-Afghanistan Joint Statement (October 10, 2025)," https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40193/India_Afghanistan_Joint_Statement_October_10_2025

¹⁵ The Independent, "First Taliban-Appointed Diplomat Arrives in India to Take Charge of Afghanistan Embassy in Delhi," *The Independent*, January 9, 2026, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/taliban-diplomat-afghanistan-embassy-mufti-noor-ahmad-b2898281.html>. See also Dr. Anwesha Ghosh, "India's Aid Boost to Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan and the Evolving Delhi-Kabul Engagement," *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 2026, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=14213&lid=8638.

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(JeM) and ensure that Afghanistan does not once again become a central base for regional extremism. India is strategically employing soft power to present itself as a more reliable, development-focused partner in the region than Pakistan. India positions its support as “people-centric” rather than regime-oriented and it has built substantial local trust through consistent deliveries of essential goods like wheat and vaccines. This humanitarian approach was further increased via the October 2025 Joint Statement. According to it, India committed to building an Oncology Centre and a Trauma Centre in Kabul, establishing five maternity clinics across Paktika, Khost, and Paktia, and donating twenty ambulances to the Afghan people. The Union Budget 2026-27 further reinforced this commitment with plans for new hospitals and clinics alongside a 27% increase in financial aid to Afghanistan. In particular, it has boosted India’s Afghan allocation from Rs 100 crore to Rs 150 crore.¹⁶ India’s economic engagement with Afghanistan is a strategic move to bypass Pakistani territory to neutralize Islamabad’s historical reliance on trade blockades. India and Afghanistan collaborate to create a humanitarian corridor and trade route that makes the Attari-Wagah border crossing unnecessary for their bilateral commerce. This is being achieved through the resumption of the Air Freight Corridor, heavy investment in Iran’s Chabahar Port and the integration of Afghanistan into the massive International North-South Transport Corridor. These projects connect Kabul to global markets via the India-financed Zaranj-Delaram highway and they systematically erode Pakistan’s geographic monopoly over Afghan transit.¹⁷ The Taliban is using its relationship with India as a strategic tool to reduce its reliance on Pakistan and demonstrate its independence from Pakistan’s military leadership in Rawalpindi. The “enemy of my enemy” approach has sparked deep concerns in Pakistan about being geographically surrounded and this strategic encirclement marks a significant loss of the “strategic depth” scheme Pakistan once hoped to maintain in Afghanistan.

¹⁶ Ghosh, “India’s Aid Boost to Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan.”

¹⁷ New Lines Institute, “India’s Evolving Role in Afghanistan,” *Middle East Center, New Lines Institute*, December 2, 2025, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/middle-east-center/indias-evolving-role-in-afghanistan/>.

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In October 2025, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif accused the Taliban of turning Afghanistan into a "colony of India" and serving as a proxy for New Delhi to conduct a low-intensity conflict against Pakistan.¹⁸ However, a critical assessment reveals that deep-seated ideological gaps (specifically India's opposition to the Taliban's Deobandi roots and historical ties to extremist networks) act as a major barrier to any genuine strategic alliance. Consequently, New Delhi maintains a strictly transactional relationship with Kabul. The government of India focuses on securing its western borders and providing essential aid but it continues to firmly withhold the political legitimacy the Taliban desperately needs.¹⁹

The United States: rapprochement and legacy of withdrawal

The fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was caused by a defective diplomatic agenda. That previous framework mostly prioritized short-term political narratives over long-term stability in the region. The Doha Agreement basically functioned as an instrument of surrender. Because it systematically delegitimized the central government by means of denying it a seat at the table and excluding the mandatory release of 5,000 insurgents. This massive release provided the Taliban with vital battlefield reinforcements and assisted in seizing control once the withdrawal was complete.²⁰ The collapse was hastened by a misguided belief that withdrawing military forces would lead to achieving peace. As a result, the subsequent reliance on "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism (striking from a distance without a local presence) has proven to be a failure. However, without human intelligence (HUMINT) on the ground and local intelligence networks, the US has lost the necessary instruments to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for groups like al-Qaeda and IS-KP.²¹

¹⁸ Saman Ayesha Kidwai, "India, Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban: Evolving Dynamics," *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses* (2025).

¹⁹ Chietigi Bajpae, "India Is Seeking to Reset Relations with the Taliban - but Can This Rapprochement Last?," *Chatham House*, October 15, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/10/india-seeking-reset-relations-taliban-can-rapprochement-last>.

²⁰ Lisa Curtis, "How the Doha Agreement Guaranteed US Failure in Afghanistan," *Hoover Institution* (2021): 17.

²¹ Ahmad Zia Saraj and Jennifer A. Counter, "Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism Does Not Work. It's Time for a New Approach," *New Atlanticist* (Atlantic Council), December 11, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/over-the-horizon-counterterrorism-does-not-work-its-time-for-a-new-approach/>.

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Pakistan successfully ended its diplomatic isolation in mid-2025. It has been adopting a highly transactional approach toward the second Trump administration. Pakistan used specialized tactics to appeal to the personal and financial interests of the US administration. Most notably, Pakistan created a Pakistan Crypto Council and signed an agreement with World Liberty Financial. According to certain financial reports, this is a company in which the Trump family reportedly holds a 60 percent stake. In addition, Pakistan is trying to take advantage of the US President's desire for international prestige. Thus, Islamabad nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the mediation of a ceasefire in the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict.²² The recent US-Pakistan rapprochement has sparked a fresh US ambition to re-establish a presence at Bagram Air Base via discreet negotiations with the Taliban government.²³ President Trump explicitly stated that the US desires that air base because it is located merely an hour away from where China manufactures its nuclear weapons. Through this scheme Washington positions the base as a vital outpost for great power rivalry and plans to establish a permanent logistical hub that can counter the expanding footprints of Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia.²⁴ As of early 2026, the US is navigating the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict by balancing military support for Islamabad with economic pressure on Kabul. On February 28, 2026 the US government formally endorsed Pakistan's "right to defend itself" after a series of retaliatory airstrikes on several major Afghan cities. This endorsement signaled a return to an active military partnership with Pakistan. Simultaneously, Washington continues to apply economic pressure on Kabul. For instance, at the time of Taliban takeover in 2021 Da Afghanistan Bank held approximately \$9.5 billion in international reserves and \$7 billion of this total was deposited at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Until to this day, this

²² Adnan Aamir, "How Pakistan won over the US leadership after years of isolation," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute (July 25, 2025).

²³ Zach Montellaro, "Inside Pakistan's Turnaround with Trump," *Politico*, April 15, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/04/15/pakistan-trump-turnaround-00872711>.

²⁴ Islomkhon Gafarov, Shokhrux Saidov, and Alisher Akhmedov, "Trump Dreams of Bagram's Geopolitical Reemergence," *Geopolitical Monitor* (October 14, 2025).

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deposit is still currently frozen in American Bank and used as an economic coercion tool. The US government established the “Afghan Fund” in Switzerland in order to manage those frozen reserves and intended to utilize \$3.5 billion for the direct benefit of the Afghan public. However, these disbursements are strictly blocked until Kabul provides proof of central bank autonomy and anti-terrorist financial compliance. The United States has been treating the Afghan economy as a security issue and it uses this financial leverage as a mechanism to demand/pressure the Taliban for political concessions. This economic isolation strategy has worsened a humanitarian crisis that affects over 23 million people. In reality, this is certainly a dangerous and risky effort. It risks the transition of Afghanistan toward a pariah status and it further complicates long-term regional stability.²⁵

The Middle Powers: Qatar and Türkiye

The GCC states belong to a category of countries that practice de facto recognition through deep institutional engagement, especially when it comes to current Afghanistan. Even though the UN’s refusal to grant credentials prevents formal de jure recognition, these nations have adopted a model of recognition through economics.²⁶ GCC nations have bypassed Western diplomatic obstacles by establishing pragmatic ties with the Taliban. An analyst Dr. Rustam Makhmudov argues that the Taliban view the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf as a vital “bridge” to make connections with Western countries and global institutions. This strategy allows Taliban regime to negotiate for resources while it maintains its domestic conservative policies.²⁷ Qatar has been acting as the main gateway for international communication and it remains the most important facilitator in this relationship. Qatar utilizes financial diplomacy and neutral

²⁵ Martin A. Weiss, Clayton Thomas, and Jennifer K. Elsea, “Afghanistan Central Bank Reserves,” *Congressional Research Service* (Updated March 13, 2023): 1-2.

²⁶ Aidar Borangaziyev, “Recognition of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Between Law, Diplomacy, and Pragmatism,” *The Times of Central Asia* (May 20, 2025).

²⁷ Rustam Makhmudov, “The Middle East and its role in the Taliban’s strategy to gain international recognition,” *Valdai Club* (August 1, 2025).

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mediation to enhance its global reputation. The Taliban has maintained a political office in Doha, Qatar since 2013 and it continues to serve as one of the few Taliban's gateways to the West. 2020 Doha Agreement between the US and Taliban and several other peace talks, hostage/humanitarian negotiations occurred in Doha and Qatar being the main mediator demonstrates the profound role the country has in Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁸

On the other hand, Türkiye has been implementing contact diplomacy to lead efforts in rehabilitating the Taliban's global image. Türkiye expanded its diplomatic presence by opening a new consulate in Kabul. Indeed, Türkiye is pursuing a *fait accompli* strategy and arguing that the world cannot solve humanitarian or security issues without engaging the Taliban government directly. Furthermore, the Joint Statement on the talks of ceasefire between Afghanistan and Pakistan was signed on October 30, 2025. A key aspect is that this negotiation meeting was held in Istanbul and mediated jointly by Türkiye and Qatar.²⁹ Overall, Türkiye has been asserting itself as a critical regional mediator by directly intervening in regional conflicts like Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The influence of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations on Central Asia

The evolution of Uzbekistan's Afghan policy

Uzbekistan's relationship with Afghanistan has seen a complete reversal. It moved from an isolationist position towards a modern policy of "extraordinary desecuritization." During the early decades of independence under President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan prioritized a security-first doctrine and viewed its neighbor almost exclusively as a security threat. This doctrine typically focused on fortifying borders and containing religious extremism. Indeed, Afghanistan has been considered somewhat of a source of instability, and policymakers' defensive lens has often hindered regional economic cooperation and integration.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar, "Qatar's Mediation Efforts," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar*, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/foreign-policy/mediation/mediation>.

²⁹ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement on the Talks Between Afghanistan and Pakistan Through the Mediation of Türkiye and Qatar, 30 October 2025" (October 30, 2025).

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Nevertheless, after the new administration in 2016, since then Uzbekistan has fundamentally reimagined its neighbor. Uzbekistan no longer views Afghanistan as a permanent threat but as a strategic “land bridge” that is indispensable for regional connectivity and access to South Asian seaports. Uzbekistan has adopted a policy of extraordinary desecuritization. This term coined by scholar Akram Umarov and it describes a framework that intensifies partnerships through the expansion of trade, economic, socio-cultural and educational exchanges.³⁰ Security concerns are not ignored in this new framework but are intentionally regarded as secondary to the primary goal of achieving regional economic growth. The relationship between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan reached a new milestone on June 11, 2025. Because President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the Taliban’s acting Minister of Industry and Trade Nuriddin Azizi have held a meeting. Both sides praised and celebrated the successful operation of the International Trade Center in Termez and the opening of specialized trade houses in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif in May 2025.³¹ These facilities serve as the institutional foundation for this new economic-centric agenda and fix Uzbekistan’s security in mutual economic interdependencies rather than isolationist containment. Central Asian states have adopted a trade-oriented pragmatic engagement with the Taliban government. Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan contends that Central Asian states prioritize this type of engagement with the Taliban to gain economic and regional stability because they remain relatively insulated from direct security threats. Tashkent and Astana largely view Taliban regime as a necessary partner to acquire access to the transit routes and new markets for their exports. On the contrary, Afghanistan’s another neighbor Pakistan is forced into a cautious and security-driven approach due to an immediate terrorism crisis. Border tensions and militant groups exacerbate the bilateral relations of Afghanistan and Pakistan. But Central Asian states possess

³⁰ Akram Umarov, “The ‘Afghan Factor’ in Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy: Evolution and the Contemporary Situation,” *Asian Affairs* 52, no. 3 (2021): 536-553, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2021.1957321>.

³¹ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “President of Uzbekistan underscores the importance of strengthening trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan,” *President.uz*, June 11, 2025, <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8220>.

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the geopolitical luxury to engage Kabul purely as an economic hub and pursue a path of regional economic integration.³²

The state visit of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Islamabad on February 5-6, 2026 strengthened bilateral ties with Pakistan.³³ This summit has transformed from a periodic dialogue to a permanent High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council. In the first summit of this council, a substantial package of approximately 30 strategic documents and a Joint Declaration was signed by the two nations' leaders. These agreements form thorough legal foundation for preferential trade, port access and industrial cooperation.³⁴ Notably, the adoption of a defense roadmap between Uzbekistan and Pakistan signals a strategic effort to synchronize security policies. It was aimed to protect transport corridors. One of the significant partnership traits is the ambitious goal to increase bilateral trade turnover to \$2 billion by 2029.³⁵ Analysts view this \$2 billion target as clear evidence of a pragmatic alignment and the potential for regional growth is now more important than individual security concerns. The Trans-Afghan railway is important for this integration, because it will create a direct link between Termez and Pakistani seaports in Karachi and Gwadar. Although there are several transport corridors available for Pakistan, only the Trans-Afghan corridor might be capable due to fewer security and cost issues.³⁶ This strategic maneuver, as noted by Kayrat Akhmedov, is expected to reduce transit costs by 40% and shorten delivery windows to a mere three to five days. This is a locomotive of interregional integration and Uzbekistan and Pakistan are betting that the sheer

³² Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan, "Afghanistan Under the Taliban: Contrasting the Regional Strategies of Pakistan and Central Asia," *Valdai Club* (April 2, 2025).

³³ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Meeting Held between the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Pakistan," *President.uz*, February 6, 2026, <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8924>.

³⁴ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Solid Package of Agreements Adopted between Uzbekistan and Pakistan," *President.uz*, February 5, 2026, <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8913>.

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, "Joint Declaration on the Outcomes of the State Visit of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan*, February 5, 2026.

³⁶ Ildar Yakubov, "Foreign Policy Priorities of Pakistan in Central Asia," *International Affairs: Interdisciplinary Scientific and Theoretic Journal* 3-4, no. 95-96 (2023), <https://international-affairs.uz/storage/01JHG6ZPC8MC69DYNQ82G2QE3R.pdf>.

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weight of a massive trade relationship will act as a stabilizing force in Afghanistan.³⁷

Transport Connectivity and Corridors

Central Asian states prioritize a direct land corridor through Afghanistan because it offers better logistical speed compared to existing maritime-linked routes and hasten the process of interregional connectivity. Prof. Dr. Abdusamat Khaydarov posits that despite the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) offers access to the Indian Ocean through Iranian ports like Bandar Abbas, it is structurally limited by higher operational costs and a significantly longer overland route compared to the Trans-Afghan alternative. Hence, he contends that the Trans-Afghan railway presents us with a real alternative because it connects Central and South Asia by the shortest land route and offers the most economical option. The proposed Trans-Afghan Railway, or “Kabul Corridor,” connects the strategic nodes of Termez, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul and terminates in Peshawar (Pakistan). This route (covering a distance of 600 to 760 kilometers) is set to fundamentally change the logistics of the region.³⁸ Analysis suggests that the Trans-Afghan corridor will reduce cargo delivery times between Pakistan and Uzbekistan from the current 35 days to just three to five days. Furthermore, the financial advantages are significant. For example, shipping a 20-foot container from Tashkent to Karachi is estimated to cost between \$1,400 and \$1,600. In fact, it is nearly half the (\$2,600-\$3,000) required cost via the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas.³⁹ Because of this, Central Asian states intend to break their historical geographical isolation and transform Afghanistan into a functional land bridge. The 6th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral foreign ministers’ dialogue on August 20, 2025 held in Kabul and agreed altogether in a formal commitment to

³⁷ Kayrat Akhmedov, “A New Stage of Strategic Rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Pakistan: Key Outcomes of the Summit of the Two Countries’ Leaders,” *Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies (ISRS)*, February 8, 2026, <https://isrs.uz/en/content/8/post/364>.

³⁸ Abdusamat Khaydarov, “Problems and Prospects of Cooperation Between Central and South Asia,” *International Congress-2022 Future Dynamics in Asia* (May 14-15, 2022): 127, 132.

³⁹ Rustam Makhmudov and Akram Umarov, “Assessing the Prospects of Afghanistan as a Transport Corridor Between Central Asia and South Asia,” *Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS)* (2023): 59-60.

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extend the CPEC into Afghanistan. This action was explicitly intended to accelerate the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (UAP) railway and connect China's industrial powerhouse with the transit potential of Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, a western Trans-Afghan railway corridor is rapidly developing as a serious alternative to the central Kabul route. This corridor spans exactly 687 kilometers and connects Torghundi (on the Turkmenistan border) with Herat, Kandahar and Spin Boldak (on the Pakistani border).⁴¹ For this project Kazakhstan has emerged as a leading financier and in early 2026 it expressed its preparedness to cover the entire budget (cost of around \$7billion) for this western route. Astana is motivated to strengthen its position in INSTC transit and has a strategic need to diversify its logistics away from northern routes through Russia.⁴² Despite these ambitious major infrastructure plans, it turned out to be difficult to build unified regional trade network due to systemic security and geopolitical barriers. Pakistan has increased its diplomatic outreach in Central Asia and promotes itself as the main maritime gateway to the Indian Ocean via its Gwadar and Karachi ports.⁴³ However, this ambition is being obstructed by substantial instability and local insurgencies. For instance, the insurgent groups in Balochistan create a high-risk environment that deters investment and Gwadar logistics hub became their target and was labeled as an exploitation tool. This perception has directly triggered consistent attacks on infrastructure and foreign workers. Moreover, the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has escalated to state of "open war" and frequent airstrikes or trade suspensions (border closures) led to 40 percent drop in bilateral trade from 2024 to 2025. In addition to compounding all, the border regions experienced a massive 279.8 percent rise in terror-related incidents between 2021 and 2024.⁴⁴ These persistent security

⁴⁰ Hamza Boltayev and Aziza Mukhammedova, "CPEC on the Threshold of Central Asia: New Horizons for Uzbekistan via Afghanistan," *Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS)*, August 29, 2025, <https://iais.uz/en/outputnew/cpec-on-the-threshold-of-central-asia-new-horizons-for-uzbekistan-via-afghanistan>.

⁴¹ Nargiza Umarova, "Why Are Central Asian Countries Accelerating Their Strategic Initiatives in Afghanistan," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 20, 2026, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13931-why-are-central-asian-countries-accelerating-their-strategic-initiatives-in-afghanistan.html>.

⁴² Umarova, "Why Are Central Asian Countries Accelerating Their Strategic Initiatives in Afghanistan."

⁴³ Ayjaz Wani and Rajoli Siddharth Jayaprakash, "Can Pakistan Break the Connectivity Barrier to Central Asia?," *Observer Research Foundation*, February 20, 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/can-pakistan-break-the-connectivity-barrier-to-central-asia>.

⁴⁴ Wani and Jayaprakash, "Can Pakistan Break the Connectivity Barrier to Central Asia?"

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threats have effectively turned proposed transit corridors into dangerous zones. They indirectly created a permanent physical and political barrier that blocks full integration, even though Central Asian countries are showing a strong commitment to financial support.

Cross-border energy projects: TAPI & CASA-1000

Modern cross-border energy projects in the 21st century serves as strategic geoeconomic bridge and they connect Eurasia's vast resources with South Asia's (particularly Pakistan) high-demand, energy-deficient economies. According to Dr. Ildar Yakubov, countries like Pakistan face a critical energy deficit that can only be satisfied through significant imports. Therefore, Afghanistan has emerged as the essential connective link that is needed to connect Central Asian suppliers with South Asian industrial hubs.⁴⁵ The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline functions as the main pillar of this regional energy strategy. This infrastructure is a 1,814-kilometer artery and was built with capacity to deliver 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually. Throughout its 30-year commercial period the gas is allocated with 5% for Afghanistan, while Pakistan and India split the remaining 95% equally. In parallel, the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) project attempts to utilize seasonal hydroelectric power from Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic. This \$1.2 billion dollar project delivers 1,300 megawatts of electricity to South Asia and is expected to generate approximately 4.6 billion kilowatt-hours of annual revenue for the regional market.⁴⁶ These energy projects attempt to create a network of mutual economic dependence across Hindu Kush. They bypass traditional maritime routes and establish a direct (shorter) overland link to the Arabian Sea.

However, severe geoeconomic weaknesses have constrained these massive projects. Charles Walsh observes that the current "open war" between Pakistan

⁴⁵ Yakubov, "Foreign Policy Priorities of Pakistan in Central Asia," 1, 4.

⁴⁶ Abdusamat Khaydarov, "Problems and Prospects of Cooperation Between Central and South Asia," *International Congress-2022 Future Dynamics in Asia* (May 14-15, 2022): 134. <https://usam.arel.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Tam-Bildiri-Kitabi-Asia-v.2.pdf>

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and the Taliban regime has created severe setbacks that render such multilateral efforts almost impossible to achieve in the near future.⁴⁷ This border instability leaves billions of dollars of infrastructure investments in a state of limbo (on hold).⁴⁸ The reason is that these projects require a level of security that currently does not exist. Stakeholders use high-level trilateral diplomacy to maintain momentum in spite of current regional paralysis. The foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan held a summit in Kabul on August 20, 2025 and in this meeting they officially agreed to extend the CPEC into Afghan territory.⁴⁹ This strategic extension consists of adding energy pipelines in the broader CPEC framework. Although large-scale multilateral projects remain delayed, localized bilateral energy diplomacy and bilateral efforts are showing remarkable resilience. The most prominent example is Uzbekistan's commitment to constructing the Surkhan-Pul-i-Khumri power line (500 kV transmission line in Afghanistan) is actually remarkable. This \$150 million initiative is a 260-kilometer transmission project and its primary purpose is to integrate Afghanistan into the unified energy system of Uzbekistan.⁵⁰ President Shavkat Mirziyoyev during the Tashkent International Investment Forum on June 11, 2025 held a meeting with Nuriddin Azizi (minister in Afghanistan) and he specifically identified the Surkhan-Pul-i-Khumri power line as a top priority to strengthen trade and economic cooperation with Kabul.⁵¹ Once it is completed, this transmission line will increase the supply of electricity from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan by 70 percent and will probably reach to six billion kilowatt-hours in total volume annually.⁵² This change demonstrates a broader trend in policymaking where stable, high-impact bilateral agreements are proving more effective than large-scale multilateral plans for regional integration.

⁴⁷ Charles Walsh, "How the Afghan-Pakistan Conflict Impacts Central Asia's Trade Ambitions for the Region - Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, March 24, 2026, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/24032026-how-the-afghan-pakistan-conflict-impacts-central-asias-trade-ambitions-for-the-region-analysis/>.

⁴⁸ "What Happened to the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Natural Gas Pipeline?," *Commonspace.eu*, October 24, 2025, <https://www.commonspace.eu/news/what-happened-turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-tapi-natural-gas-pipeline>.

⁴⁹ Boltaev, "CPEC on the threshold of Central Asia: New horizons for Uzbekistan via Afghanistan."

⁵⁰ Umarov, "The 'Afghan Factor' in Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy," 545.

⁵¹ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "President of Uzbekistan underscores the importance." <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8220>.

⁵² Khaydarov, "Problems and Prospects of Cooperation Between Central and South Asia," 134.

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Integration & The 2026 Escalation

The contemporary security environment in Central and South Asia requires transition from traditional military threats to complex non-traditional challenges. The control of natural resources and water politics (hydropolitics) now act as the primary determinants of regional stability. This shift is most evident by the intense diplomatic friction surrounding the Taliban's Qosh Tepa Canal. This massive hydraulic infrastructure project is a unilateral effort to redraw the regional water balance without discussing/following established international law. Dr. Rustam Makhmudov posits that the scale of the infrastructure is immense. The canal is engineered to a scale of 285 kilometers in length, 100 meters in width and 8.5 meters in depth.⁵³ The Qosh Tepa Canal is constructed to divert roughly 10 billion cubic meters of water annually from the Amudarya to irrigate 550,000 hectares in northern Afghanistan. Afghanistan is not a party to existing regional water-sharing agreements such as those managed by the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination. Since Kabul is not a party to the 1992 Almaty agreement, the canal has created a significant diplomatic and legal stalemate. Dr. Rustam Makhmudov warns that the Amudarya's downstream flow could drop by 15 to 30 percent. This reduction threatens to eliminate up to 250,000 agricultural jobs and worsen the salinity of soil in Uzbekistan.⁵⁴ Yet, despite these grave environmental and economic threats, Central Asian countries are sticking to their policy of economic engagement partly due to the great raw materials game. Central Asian states believe that if they isolate the Taliban over water, they will lose out on the massive profits from mining and transit projects to competitors like China.⁵⁵ Dr. Anri Sharapov estimates the unexploited natural resources of Afghanistan to be worth between \$1 trillion and 3 trillion dollars. These reserves contain massive amounts of copper, gold and lithium. Lithium

⁵³ Rustam B. Makhmudov, "The Return of the Taliban to Power as a Factor in the Transformation of Threats and Challenges to Regional Security," *World Economy and International Relations* 69, no. 2 (2025): 66, 68, 71.

⁵⁴ Makhmudov, "The Return of the Taliban to Power," 66, 68, 71.

⁵⁵ UWED and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, "Afghanistan under the Taliban - How Do Neighbours and Powers respond to them?" (*Proceedings of the Tashkent Conference*), August 27, 2024.

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happens to be so abundant that international analysts have dubbed Afghanistan the “Saudi Arabia of lithium” and it is apparent amidst the global shift toward electric vehicles.⁵⁶ The opportunity for Central Asian countries to serve as the primary processing and transit corridor for these resources creates a powerful incentive to resolve water conflicts through practical cooperation instead of open hostility.

The trend toward regional autonomy is being accelerated by the loss of value of international systems and the historical failure of Western intervention. Scholar Dr. Ulugbek Khasanov argues that the collapse of the US-backed Afghan government in 2021 was a decisive failure of “blueprint” modernization. He contends that these modernization attempts failed because they attempt to impose external political models on a society without understanding its deep ethno-cultural, religious and tribal values. Moreover, this breakdown has led to the devaluation of international mechanisms (as Dr. Khasanov calls it) and in a sense, regional actors lost their faith in Western-led international legal and political institutions.⁵⁷ Devaluation of international mechanisms means that, because global institutions like the UN or NATO could not prevent the rapid 2021 collapse, many regional leaders nowadays believe these international systems are no longer reliable. As traditional diplomatic instruments lose their effectiveness, CA states have been forced to switch to a strategy of rational diplomacy.⁵⁸ The withdrawal of the international community has pushed Afghanistan to be increasingly marginalized on the global stage. Sodiq Safoyev, First Deputy of the Senate of the Republic of Uzbekistan, warned in August 2024 that the international community is dangerously negligent in its approach to the situation in Afghanistan. He contended that expanding humanitarian assistance to Afghan people and developing a unified international strategy toward Afghanistan

⁵⁶ Anri Sharapov, “Afghanistan: A New Page in the Study,” *Journal of the University of World Economics and Diplomacy (UWED)* (May 2023): 21-22.

⁵⁷ Ulugbek Khasanov, “Will Afghanistan Pass the Test of Peace?,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, July 24, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/afghanistan-a-test-for-peace/>.

⁵⁸ Ulugbek Khasanov, “Central and South Asia: Some Models of Regional Relationships,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, May 15, 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/central-and-south-asia-some-models/>.

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remained a priority task for both regional and global actors. Senator Sodik Safoyev called for a unified international strategy to prevent the resurgence of radical elements in Afghanistan and mentioned that Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian states perceive it as beneficial in seeing Afghanistan emerge as a stable and prosperous country.⁵⁹ The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan intensified and the strategic shift in the region reached a boiling point in late February 2026. Development analysts Eldaniz Gusseinov and Rassul Kospanov describe this situation using the paradox “war as integration”. They pointed out that although Pakistan launched Operation Ghazab Lil Haq (Wrath for the Truth) for military reasons, the actual result was the total shutdown of vital southern border crossings at Chaman and Torkham.⁶⁰ This military disruption ended the historical structural dependency of Afghanistan on the Pakistani state. The collapse of southern trade routes is clearly visible in the data: bilateral commerce plummeted from 2.46 billion dollars in 2024 to 1.77 billion dollars in 2025. Paradoxically, this southern disruption triggered a rapid economic turn towards the northern side. The conflict squeezed a decade’s worth of planned transition into just a few months and it resulted in a 77 percent increase in trade volumes between Afghanistan and Central Asian states.⁶¹ Southern maritime access was blocked for the Taliban regime due to the ongoing conflict, thus it forced Afghanistan to permanently link its economic future to the integration frameworks of its northern neighbors.

Conclusion

In the ruins of the strategic depth doctrine, a new reality has emerged. In its place I identified a new paradigm where constant border tension and the rise of militancy have forced a rapid economic turn toward the north - Central Asia. I

⁵⁹ Sodik Safoyev, “Uzbekistan Is Concerned that Issues Related to the Situation in Afghanistan Have Moved to the Periphery of the International Agenda,” *Dunyo Information Agency*, August 2024, <https://dunyo.info/uzk/Fakt/sodik-safoyev-uzbekistan-obespokoen-tem-cto-voprosov-svyazannye-s-razvitiem-situacii-v-afganistane-ushli-na-vtoroy-plan-mezhdunarodnoy-povestki>.

⁶⁰ Eldaniz Gusseinov and Rassul Kospanov, “War As Integration: How the Pakistan-Afghanistan Conflict is Pulling Kabul into Central-Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, March 24, 2026, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13942-war-as-integration-how-the-pakistan-afghanistan-conflict-is-pulling-kabul-into-central-asia.html>.

⁶¹ Gusseinov and Kospanov, “War As Integration,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* (March 24, 2026).

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argue that this evolution from an expected alliance to open hostility has completely changed how neighboring countries and global powers plan their strategies in the region. Military escalation in late February 2026 and Operation Ghazab Lil Haq effectively severed the primary southern Torkham and Chaman transit corridors. The military escalation played as a decisive shock that effectively severed Afghanistan's long-standing economic reliance on Pakistan. Moreover, I argue that via those tensions Pakistan hindered the process of becoming the central maritime hub for the Eurasian heartland.

I also analyzed that the breakdown in Pakistan-Taliban relations created a geopolitical vacuum that quickly drew in great and middle powers and turned it into one of their great power competitions. For instance, I found that China accelerated its efforts to integrate the region into the Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, Russia pragmatically strengthened ties with Afghanistan to contain extremism and expand influence. The United States, however, supported Pakistan's security actions but simultaneously pressured Kabul through economic sanctions and frozen assets. Pakistan's neighbor India used the crisis to deepen direct engagement with Afghanistan and strategically bypass Pakistan. Meanwhile, middle powers such as Qatar and Türkiye played crucial diplomatic roles by mediating ceasefires and filling the vacuum left by declining Western involvement.

Moreover, I contend that the most significant outcome of the conflict was the acceleration of Central Asian connectivity through a process described as "War as Integration". Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are pursuing an extraordinary desecuritization policy that prioritizes economic integration over security concerns. This strategy included advancing projects such as Trans-Afghan railway and Surkhan Pul-i-Khumri power transmission line. I conclude that the Taliban administration operates as a rational and autonomous actor that prioritizes its own regime survival over the strategic needs of its former patron/sponsor. Concurrently, as many government officials of Uzbekistan have

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noted many times, I strongly advise that the international community cannot persist in its diplomatic isolation of Kabul/Taliban. Because the systemic devaluation of international mechanisms only encourages more radical factions and humanitarian crises.

In addition, I contend that the continued financial strangulation of Afghanistan via frozen bank assets harms the civilian population and restricts the development of legal economic sectors. I firmly believe that true regional stability demands Afghanistan's integration into the formal global economy (IMF, WTO, etc.). As Afghanistan turns northward and integrates with Central Asia, I assume the traditional geopolitical center of gravity will shift decisively away from Pakistan. Overall, I conclude that the future of regional stability now depends mostly not on the directives of external superpowers, but on the ability of regional actors to manage transboundary threats, secure critical supply chains and navigate the risky consequences of the ongoing military tensions.

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