



Now in its second year of power, there is little evidence that the Taliban have managed to gain total control of Afghanistan. Whilst they remain the dominant power in the country, the growing volume of problems emanating from the country cast a worrying shadow across the heart of Eurasia. For Central Asia in particular, the picture is concerning as the governments in the region have sought for the most part to embrace the Taliban tightly while at the same time facing a growing terrorist threat from within the country's borders.

In the immediate wake of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, Central Asian leaders were hesitant and concerned. In many cases, they fell back on Moscow as their partner of choice with Russia leaning heavily into historical relationships. Arms sales were rushed through to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, while Russian forces undertook joint exercises with Tajik and Uzbek forces. The longstanding Russian base in Tajikistan was strengthened while politically Moscow highlighted its support for its Central Asian partners.

Turkmenistan proved the exception to this rule instead strengthening early its relationship with the Taliban. This followed a longstanding approach by Ashgabat to seek to engage with the Taliban. Throughout the Republic government the country had been considered as a location for negotiations between the Taliban and government, while there were persistent rumours that the Taliban would open its second 'embassy' in the capital.

But as the Republic fell apart, this engagement picked up a public pace with senior Taliban figures visiting Ashgabat twice in the first half of 2021.

This was translated almost instantly into visible support once the Taliban took power with Ashgabat affirming their desire to construct a railroad between the two countries and reviving once again the optimistic vision of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. Projects the Taliban were keen to embrace highlighting their ability to rule the country and bring major infrastructure to fruition. There has been little progress on both since they took power.

At the same time, Ashgabat's early embrace of the Taliban was quickly replicated in every other Central Asian capital except Dushanbe. While the others all decided to accept Taliban rule and quickly assessed there was little prospect of an opposition rising or the Republic returning to power, in Tajikistan they chose instead to offer a home and support to the parts of the Republic government that wanted to stay in the region to frustrate Taliban rule.

With the passing of time this approach has only hardened, with even Dushanbe deciding that some engagement with the Taliban was acceptable in the form of electricity sales to help power electricity-poor Afghanistan. Other Central Asians have leaned in further. Uzbekistan has not only rekindled its trade relationship, but also cast visions of major infrastructure tying Afghanistan not only to Central Asia but acting as a key conduit for Uzbekistan to connect with Pakistan, India and South Asian waters.



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But there are problems underpinning these relationships too. The active bolstering by Uzbekistan in particular of the Taliban has played badly at home. A strongly secular government which aggressively pursues many forms of what it assesses as religious extremism at home, the government in Tashkent has come under some criticism by those who say there is a danger in promoting a successful theocratic state next door. Uzbeks note with concern the growing evidence of religious expression within their country and worry what it might lead to.

More tangibly, there is the growing evidence that extremist groups in Afghanistan see Central Asia as an important target. While the Central Asian groups that had traditionally fought alongside the Taliban have for the most part kept their peace against their traditional adversaries in Central Asia, there have been rumblings within about their restiveness at Taliban rule and growing fears that the new authorities in Kabul might turn them over to Central Asian governments as part of an agreement to ensure more investment.

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his concern is something that the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) has noted and sought to profit from. A growing volume of extremist material supportive of ISKP is now published in Central Asian languages, featuring imagery of Central Asian leaders and attacking the Taliban's engagement with them. Cells linked to the group have been found to be planning an attack on the Turkmen Embassy in Kabul, while rocket attacks claimed by the group were launched from Afghan territory towards Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Whilst these attacks were largely unsuccessful, they caused major consternation in Tashkent in particular where they were interpreted as demonstrating the limitations of the government's engagement with the Taliban as a stabilizing force in Afghanistan.

And these concerns around militancy go deeper. A pair of attacks in late 2022 against a Chinese hotel and Kabul airport were linked to an ISKP cell of Tajiks. This highlighted a wider trend of Central Asians who had fought in Syria alongside ISIS returning to Afghanistan to join ISKP. The Central Asian contingent of ISIS in the Levant had always been a highly worrying group which included numerous fanatical suicide bombers, senior security officials who defected from national security forces to fight alongside the group as well as women and children. Links from these networks have been found in prominent terrorist attacks and plots in Turkey, Sweden, Russia and Germany.

Currently, the region has not yet suffered major economic backlash from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but questions exist now about what kind of support Moscow would be able to provide in the event of more trouble

The dilemma that Central Asia finds itself in as the second year of Taliban rule grinds on is how are they going to manage a situation which is getting more dangerous with authorities in Kabul which seem unable to provide adequate assurance. 2022 was a tumultuous year for Central Asia more widely, started with unprecedented large-scale instability in Kazakhstan, followed by equally troubling violence in Uzbekistan, a large-scale border clash between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that led to dozens of deaths, and a continuing crack-down in Tajikistan's Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), the border region with Afghanistan. All of this highlighted the deep fissures that exist not far below the surface in Central Asia which widespread militancy could take advantage of and exacerbate.

There are also questions about how much the region wants Russia to help them anymore given the high levels of local unpopularity of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. China remains a reticent security actor that is interested only in its direct security concerns, while the west is a distant partner that is only able to provide some support. As time passes, the trouble and instability in Afghanistan is only likely to deepen further. And while ISKP seems far from being able to actually establish a Caliphate and replicating the success of its Levantine parent, Central Asia is likely to be a continuing focus for the group as it seeks supporters and funding from a region which offers it a very easy narrative adversary. This atop the continuing groups of Central Asian militants resident in the country under Taliban protection will provide a constant source of concern for Central Asian leaders who have little faith in the Taliban's ability or desire to entirely deal with these problems.