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Foreword

The contributions in this issue provide insight for the final quarter of 2025 into the diverse issues shaping Central Asia. These contributions range from the region's diplomatic strategies at global institutions to its engagement with complex geopolitical and regional realities.

Central Asia is in the process of defining its role in global affairs, and this role could be further amplified through the adoption of unified positions. An example of this was the participation of the five Central Asian presidents at the UN General Assembly, where they all advocated for the UN institutional reform, particularly the restructuring of the Security Council. They also emphasised the importance of respecting international law, presenting themselves as responsible actors, and positioning their countries as potential bridges between the West and the East.

At the same time, Central Asian states are balancing regional stability with the realities of managing relationships with their neighbours and global powers. A particularly unpredictable factor has been the rise of the Taliban, which has added an additional layer of complexity to the region's geopolitical dynamics. Central Asia's cautious yet necessary engagement with Afghanistan, driven by both security concerns and connectivity goals, reflects the intricate nature of regional diplomacy.

While the Central Asian countries have stressed the need for respect for international law, including human rights, it would be unrealistic for them to ignore the political realities in neighbouring Afghanistan. These countries must navigate not only through the criticism of human rights violations by the Taliban regime. In this issue, we highlight how the Taliban measures have affected vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls, in the case of an internet shutdown. But the Central Asian countries take into account more pragmatic considerations of security, economics, and also the impact of isolation on the Afghan people themselves. Engagement with the Taliban, in this context, is driven more by pragmatism than by acknowledgement of its policies.

Beyond regional concerns such as Afghanistan's stabilisation or multilateral issues like water diplomacy and climate resilience, Central Asian countries are also paying attention to developments in other parts of the world. One key issue is their stance on the conflict in Palestine. In this issue, we examine how Central Asia emphasises the humanitarian aspects of the situation rather than offering outright criticism of Israel.

The following articles offer a closer examination of how Central Asia is dealing with these challenges. The papers in this volume capture a moment of transition for the region. While Central Asia holds potential to influence global stability and cooperation, this issue reveals that the region still has a long way to go. Central Asian states must address internal challenges in order for their external proclamations to be seen as authentic positions, rather than mere political posturing.

When the Screens Go Dark: How the Taliban's Internet Shutdown Affected Afghanistan's Women and Girls

Grace Bell

Key Takeaways

- Afghans took to the streets on the evening of October 1, celebrating the lift of the Taliban's 48-hour internet and cellular shut down. While there was no official reason given for the country-wide ban, previous similar shutdowns were aimed at preventing pornography and opposite-sex interactions.
- The temporary ban had harsh consequences on the nation—from impeding earthquake disaster relief efforts and restricting access to aid, to shutting down online businesses and grounding flights to and from the country.
- Those most negatively impacted by the shutdown were Afghan women and girls. Facing increasingly restrictive policies governing their freedom of movement, education, and employment, women and girls have turned to the virtual world to try to supplement much of what they have lost. Online businesses, educational courses, social services, and more were disrupted during the blackout.

Introduction

On September 30, 2025, the Taliban shut down internet and cellular networks across Afghanistan.¹ The Afghan people were largely left without any connection to the outside world, with flights and businesses disrupted and access to emergency services restricted. Thankfully, the blackout was short-lived, and service returned just two days later.²

There was no official reasoning for the shutdown.³ However, this follows similar bans across northern Afghanistan in September, enacted "to prevent immoral activities," supposedly over concerns about pornography and online interactions between men and women, in their strict interpretation of Sharia law.⁴

While this shutdown may have been temporary, the consequences of the 48-hour internet blackout show us what exactly is at stake. Women and girls, facing ever increasing restrictions since the Taliban retook power in 2021, are further isolated and threatened when they are cut off from internet and cell service.⁵ Social support networks break apart, education is stymied, and suffering is further hidden from international aid and awareness.



A man tries to use Google on his smartphone amid total telecom shutdown across the country, in Kabul, Afghanistan, September 30, 2025. REUTERS-Sayed Hassib

The Ban

The internet shutdown came amidst a background of turmoil and devastation in the country. Since taking over power in 2021, the Taliban has severely restricted the lives and freedoms of women and girls. They have forbidden girls over the age of 12 from getting an education, restricted women's employment, and even banned books written by female authors on university campuses.⁶ The Taliban's flagrant violation of human rights and strict interpretation of Sharia law has led to international isolation, as foreign aid has been cut and NGO and IGO access has been restricted.⁷

What's more, an earthquake in eastern Afghanistan in early September killed over 2,200 people and left over 13,000 buildings damaged or collapsed.⁸ The impact of the earthquake was felt especially hard by women and girls. Timely medical care was impeded, as women were barred from seeing male doctors without a chaperone. Bans on female aid workers and women's medical education, coupled with restrictions to mobility, left many without relief supplies and assistance.⁹ Just a month into recovery efforts, the internet and cellular ban hit Afghans where it hurt—aid teams deep in eastern Afghanistan lost connection, and relief efforts were hindered.¹⁰

The country-wide internet and cellular ban is just the latest escalation of increasingly restrictive laws governing the media and internet. The Taliban has recently banned Youtubers from posting content, and the display of faces on TV has been prohibited across many provinces.¹¹ Multiple sources within the Taliban reported that the shutdown was ordered by Afghanistan's leader, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada.¹² Mr. Akhundzada, who has led the Taliban since 2016,¹³ had previously ordered an internet crackdown affecting about half of the country's 34 provinces in mid-September.¹⁴ The supreme leader ordered governors to cut off Wi-Fi access in their provinces to curb the "misuse of the internet".¹⁵ What began in the north of Afghanistan, engulfed the entire country for the two-day ban.

The international community has largely condemned the ban, describing it as a major setback to the country's current international isolation and human rights crises.¹⁶ The UN called on authorities for the expeditious restoration of connectivity.¹⁷ Human Rights Watch pointed to the serious harms of the ban on people's rights and livelihoods.¹⁸ Smriti Singh, Amnesty International's Regional Director for South Asia, called the internet shutdown a "reckless move" with "far-reaching consequences for delivery of aid, access to healthcare, and other essential services". Perhaps more telling, Singh continued to speak to the importance of communication and access to information for the protection and promotion of human rights, saying that "by tightening [the Taliban's] chokehold on the flow of information", the Taliban is "making sure that the world doesn't get to know about the ongoing violations inside the country".¹⁹



An Afghan street vendor speaks on his phone after telecom and internet services resumed in Kabul, Afghanistan, October 1, 2025. REUTERS-Sayed Hassib

While short, the shutdown was destructive. Flights were grounded, with travel agents unable to provide updates. All international transfers were halted, barring vital economic assistance—including from family members working abroad—from entering the country. Online merchants, and others whose livelihoods depend on the internet and cellular, were left without work. As previously mentioned, earthquake recovery efforts were hindered, leaving many in need of essential disaster relief. And what's more, the shutdown offered an alarming glimpse at the precarious position of women and girls in the country.

Women in the Dark

When the Taliban cut off internet and cell service, they silenced women and girls across Afghanistan.²⁰ A study done by UN Women, UNAMA, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in April 2025 found that three-quarters of women reported having no influence over decisions within their communities, half reported no influence within their extended families, and a quarter reported no influence within their own households.²¹ UN Women also reported that 14% of women left their homes only once a week (compared

to 2% of men), and only 41% left their homes at least once a day (compared to 88% of men), as of June 2025.²² Women are banned from secondary and higher education, most employment, and many public spaces, such as the park, gym, and sports clubs.²³ This continued isolation and violations to basic human rights has taken a severe toll on women's mental health. Perhaps unsurprising but no less appalling, a survey conducted by UN Women in July and August 2025 found that roughly three-quarters of Afghan women described their mental health as "bad" or "very bad".²⁴

As women are increasingly isolated from their communities and confined to their homes, the virtual world offers some comfort and connection. An online presence allows women to feel seen and heard when they are not offered those basic rights in person. Phone calls and direct messaging supplement in-person connection. As access to education has been taken away, women and families have turned to online education and study groups for themselves and their children. Social services, such as information and access to aid and reporting mechanisms for gender-based violence survivors, are found online. In-person work is replaced by online businesses, providing a vital source of income for many women and their families. For those who did have service, it offered a way to circumvent, or at the very least slightly offset, the Taliban's harsh restrictions.²⁵



A woman carries a child as she walks past a damaged house following a deadly magnitude-6 earthquake that struck Afghanistan on Sunday, in Mazar Dara, Kunar province, Afghanistan, September 2, 2025. REUTERS-Sayed Hassib

Conclusions

The Taliban's country-wide internet and cellular ban was an escalation of existing laws restricting online use. The ban displays how the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia law has led the country into a backslide. Social, technological, and economic progress has been stymied by extreme violations to basic human rights. The short blackout offered a startling glimpse at the consequences of shutting down the internet and cell service in the country—the economic impacts, the threats to physical and mental well-being, the restriction of travel, and much more.

The shutdown also made clear the distinct effects such a ban has on women and girls. Facing increasingly restrictive policies governing their freedom of movement, education, and employment, women and girls have turned to the virtual world to try to find a substitute for much of what they have lost. Women's online businesses were shut down. Online

education was unavailable. Social services, such as access to gender-based violence reporting and resources, were inaccessible. As many face extreme isolation within their communities, women and girls' social networks were broken apart. While the shutdown was only temporary, UN Women reminds us that "the message was clear: in Afghanistan, this valuable gateway to learning, expression, and services for women and girls can be shut down at any moment".²⁶

Policy Recommendations

- It is absolutely vital that the Taliban maintain internet and cellular networks across Afghanistan, in addition to removing restrictions to social media and television channels. This is one amongst a broad range of offenses to human rights committed by the Taliban, and is only one of many necessary policy changes to restore these human rights, particularly for women and girls.
- Greater international awareness is crucial. As the Taliban's actions push Afghanistan further into international isolation, we cannot abandon the Afghan people. The need for increased scrutiny and attention is more important now than ever. No news is not good news.
- Beyond support to non-governmental organizations and other aid organizations in the region, the international community can support women and girls in Afghanistan by supporting their online businesses, their access to online education, and other essential services offered online, through donations, purchases of goods, and volunteerism.

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Taliban's Engagement in Central Asia: A Push-Pull Strategy

Francesco Pagano

Key Takeaways

- **Afghanistan as a regional connector:** Afghanistan has re-emerged as a strategic bridge between Central and South Asia, positioning itself at the crossroads of trade, energy, and infrastructure projects.
- **Pragmatic engagement by Central Asia:** Central Asian states are cautiously engaging with the Taliban government out of necessity—driven by geography, connectivity goals, and security imperatives—while maintaining skepticism about the Taliban's long-term reliability.
- **Geopolitical balancing:** Engagement with Kabul is influenced by broader regional dynamics involving Russia, China, and Pakistan; Central Asian states are pursuing pragmatic cooperation without formal recognition, seeking to hedge against risks while preserving strategic autonomy.

Taliban's Recognition: A Game-Changer for Central Asia

In early July 2025, the Afghan Taliban government, under the leadership of Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, announced that Russia had become the first major country to formally recognise their rule. Russian officials confirmed this step and signalled Moscow's intent to engage in development, trade and counter-terrorism cooperation with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Such move marks a significant de-facto recognition shift regionally (e.g. working relations such as investing, accepting diplomatic representatives), but without a de-jure formal recognition as a legitimate government. For example, Kazakhstan removed the Taliban from its terrorist list in late 2023, Kyrgyzstan followed in 2024, and Russia in April 2025 took further steps toward recognition. Despite the international outrage on the Taliban's restrictions and policies against women rights and minorities, Central Asian prioritised regional connectivity and enhancing counter-terrorism.¹

To grasp the Taliban's influence in Central Asia, it is important to analyze their relations with China and Russia, two major regional powers with distinct priorities. China aims to ensure stability in Afghanistan to protect the Belt and Road Initiative² trade routes and curb extremism near Xinjiang,³ while Russia is primarily concerned with containing security threats that could spill over into its Central Asian sphere of influence. The Taliban has used this dynamic to its advantage, engaging both countries diplomatically and positioning itself as a central actor in regional security and economic connectivity.⁴

Russia plays a pivotal role in this shift; with Russian green light, Central Asian states were incentivised to tailor their relations with the Taliban, precisely on closer cooperation in connectivity and resource-projects such as the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway,⁵ the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline,⁶ and the Central Asia-South Asia Power Project (CASA-1000)⁷ electricity transmission scheme. These efforts promise to link Central Asia to South Asian markets and leverage Afghanistan's sizeable mineral and hydrocarbon potential. From a security standpoint, Central Asian

governments view cooperation with the Taliban as a possible counterbalance to common regional security threats, particularly the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP).⁸ For this reason, the Taliban-led regime of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is presenting itself as more stabilising and responsible force compared to their 1990s' version, particularly when it comes to regional security. This shift, from a purely new-realist perspective, is an opportunity for Central Asian states, particularly in an historical time, to tackle terrorist and criminal activities crossing the Afghan borders, and resulting into major security concerns.⁹ Recognising the Taliban is a strategic game-changer for the entire region – and the Taliban need this lucrative shift.



Author's own map of geographical positioning of Afghanistan vis-à-vis Central Asia

Partial Alignment: Between Games of Strategy and Doubts

The Taliban's diplomatic outreach is primarily centered on economic cooperation, with a strong emphasis on infrastructure development and expanding trade. This is partially driven by the financial crisis faced by the Taliban due to sanctions, frozen assets, reduced foreign aid, water crisis, and lack of international recognition; such variables tailored an economic-oriented foreign policy in the area, breaking their political and economic isolation.¹⁰

Uzbekistan took the lead among Central Asian states in engaging with the Taliban, hosting a delegation led by Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi in Termez in September 2021. The visit resulted in a security and trade protocol, reciprocal diplomatic representation, and the expansion of economic cooperation. Uzbekistan convened a fourth meeting of Afghanistan's neighboring foreign ministers in Samarkand on April 13, 2023, to address developments in Afghanistan and promote regional coordination. With the Russia-Ukraine conflict disrupting traditional trade routes – and three of Uzbekistan's eight transit corridors running through Russian territory – Tashkent has intensified efforts to diversify its connections. In August 2024, the Uzbek Prime Minister visited Kabul to explore trade and investment opportunities, resulting in 35 memorandums of understanding valued at approximately \$2.5 billion. Bilateral trade subsequently reached \$860 million. Uzbekistan has also assumed a pivotal role in regional infrastructure projects. In July 2023, it joined Afghanistan and Pakistan in signing a trilateral agreement on the Trans-Afghan Railway, a \$6 billion project designed to connect Mazar-e-Sharif with Pakistan's seaports, enhancing Central Asia's access to the Indian Ocean.¹¹

Kazakhstan chose to keep its embassy open in Kabul following the Taliban's return to power. The two countries exchanged ambassadors, reinforcing diplomatic engagement. Since 2023, three business forums held in Astana, Almaty, and Kabul have produced

agreements totaling around \$1.5 billion. In April 2024, Kazakhstan's Prime Minister headed a delegation to Kabul for the Afghanistan–Kazakhstan Business Forum, which explored investment opportunities in the chemical, mining, and metallurgical sectors. Bilateral trade reached \$700 million in the first nine months of 2024, a 14% increase over the previous year, with expectations that trade could rise to \$3 billion within five years. Kazakhstan has also partnered with Turkmenistan on the creation of a logistics hub in Herat, Afghanistan, and has shown interest in joining the Trans-Afghan Railway project, originally agreed upon by the Taliban, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan in 2021, as a means to secure access to South Asian and the Gulf markets.¹²

Traditionally pursuing a policy of neutrality, **Turkmenistan** has maintained steady relations with the Taliban since the 1990s. Nevertheless, it continues to serve as a key supplier of oil and gas to Afghanistan, with annual trade exceeding \$500 million. Turkmen investments in the country amount to more than \$1.5 billion, encompassing major infrastructure ventures such as the TAPI gas pipeline. In 2024, senior Taliban officials met with Turkmen leaders to revive progress on the TAPI project, sign memorandums of understanding worth \$200 million, and discuss potential energy transit routes that could link Russia to South Asia through the Afghan territory. Additionally, in September 2024, the two sides concluded a \$7 million agreement to advance three railway projects, underscoring Turkmenistan's continued commitment to regional connectivity through Afghanistan.¹³

Sharing a 1,360-kilometer border with Afghanistan, **Tajikistan** initially emerged as the most outspoken critic of the Taliban,¹⁴ insisting on the formation of an inclusive government that reflected ethnic and gender diversity. Dushanbe also hosted several anti-Taliban figures, a move that drew sharp criticism from Kabul. Despite these political tensions, practical economic cooperation continued. Tajikistan maintained electricity exports to Afghanistan and, in September 2023, the two countries opened five joint border markets to promote local trade. Work also resumed on the Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi–Sher Khan Port railway project — originally signed in 2019 — aimed at improving transport links between Afghanistan and Central Asia. Furthermore, bilateral trade reached \$120 million in 2024. Recently, an informal meeting between senior Tajik security officials and Taliban representatives indicated a tentative warming of relations.¹⁵ Tajikistan, still views Kabul with suspicion, due to unresolved tensions around anti-government armed groups and contentious water-diversion projects such as the Qosh Tepa Canal, which threatens the flow of the Amu Darya River that feeds key Central Asian agriculture and hydro-power systems.¹⁶

Concerned about the situation of the Afghan Kyrgyz minority living in the Pamir region, **Kyrgyzstan** initiated early engagement with the Taliban. In September 2021, Deputy Chairman of Kyrgyzstan's Security Council, Taalatbek Masadykov, met with the Taliban's Foreign Minister to discuss bilateral cooperation. Talks on trade and transit soon followed, with Kyrgyzstan emerging as a key transit route for Afghan exports to China and as an active participant in the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project. In September 2024, Cabinet Chairman Akylbek Japarov met with Taliban representatives to explore expanded collaboration in trade, transport, energy, and agriculture. Meanwhile, some members of the Afghan Kyrgyz community, struggling with economic hardship and limited access to education, have requested relocation to Kyrgyzstan. In a related move, the Taliban established the new "Pamir" district to provide administrative recognition and support for the Kyrgyz minority.¹⁷

Monitoring the Trends through Q3–2025

As explained earlier, Moscow's official recognition of the Taliban in July paved the way for Central Asian states to engage in the name of interests and regional stability.

Uzbekistan, already in February, 2025, during a meeting with Uzbekistan's Prime Minister

Abdulla Aripov, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund, representing the Taliban government, urged Uzbek investors to participate in the rehabilitation of key infrastructure projects, notably the Mazar-e-Sharif–Herat railway, the second Salang Tunnel, the finalization of the Khalqalaar Bazard border market, and the Spin Boldak–Kandahar railway. Furthermore, Afghan citizens have been provided with a 15 day visa-free regime. These initiatives are viewed as essential for strengthening connectivity and transport cooperation and facilitating trade and economic cooperation between Central and South Asia.¹⁸ During this visit, the two countries signed several agreements to strengthen business and trade ties. One such agreement allows Tashkent to lift restrictions on the export of Afghan agricultural products, thereby increasing supply to the Uzbek market. Additionally, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have agreed to establish a joint market and a free economic zone; lastly, Uzbekistan has made investments across multiple sectors of Afghanistan's economy, including mining, agriculture, energy, and trade, and in March, both nations committed to boost their bilateral trade from \$1.1 billion to \$3 billion.¹⁹

Kazakhstan has followed similar paths. In July 2025, Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Murat Nurtleu visited Kabul to meet with Taliban officials, discussing cooperation in agriculture, digitalization, trade, and logistics. Notably, a memorandum was signed, reportedly pledging \$500 million in support for infrastructure and connectivity projects, allowing the movement of goods toward Pakistani seaports while reducing reliance on northern routes through Russia.²⁰

Turkmenistan, through a virtual meeting held recently between foreign ministers of Turkmenistan and the Taliban-led government of Afghanistan, has discussed about advancing the TAPI pipeline and strengthening regional economic, political and infrastructure cooperation; both parties committed to conduct regular consultations and technical meetings to expedite the TAPI pipeline's progress, enhance rail links, strengthen electricity transmission, and modernize regional transportation infrastructure.²¹

Tajikistan, on a different note, on August 24, 2025, was involved in an exchange of fire which has erupted along the border with Afghanistan, near the Panj River, in the Afghan province of Badakhshan and Tajikistan's Shamsiddin Shohin district. The immediate trigger was a dispute over gold-mining operations on the Afghan side of the border, involving Chinese companies, and changes to the riverbed that threatened Tajik farmland and water flows. According to Afghan sources, one Taliban fighter was killed and four wounded; Tajikistan did not confirm any casualties. The skirmish reflects longstanding structural hostility between Tajikistan and the Taliban regime, as well as Tajikistan's reluctance to recognise the Taliban, and its desire to shift the rivalry on a broader geopolitical scenario, such as mobilizing the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)²² for support like presence along the Tajik Afghan border. On this note, CSTO has consistently underscored the importance of containing instability in Afghanistan to prevent cross-border threats to Central Asia.²³ In this matter, rising evidence of militant infiltration, smuggling and illicit trafficking flows (e.g. weapons) through the Pyanj Valley needs to be monitored, as these activities could destabilise the border and the wider region.²⁴

Kyrgyzstan also followed a similar path of economic cooperation, such as bilateral trade, investment opportunities and joint projects in the energy, security, transports, and technology transfer in digitalization. An example is the development of the CASA-1000, which would allow Kyrgyzstan to export its excess hydroelectricity to South Asia. On August 13, 2025, Kyrgyz Minister of Economy and Commerce Bakyt Sydykov met in Bishkek with an Afghan delegation led by Acting Minister of Trade and Industry Nouredine Azizi. During the meeting, Sydykov emphasized the importance of cooperation and expressed Kyrgyzstan's interest in identifying new areas of mutual benefit. Both sides focused on promising economic sectors with potential for joint development and partnership. Security remains a pivotal area of cooperation; although Kyrgyzstan does not share a direct border with Afghanistan, it remains vulnerable to regional militant networks, illicit trafficking routes, and extremist propaganda, particularly messages from ISKP targeting Kyrgyz citizens.

Ethnic dynamics influence Kyrgyz policy decisions also in terms of Afghan Kyrgyz minority in the Pamir region, with an ongoing discussion about potential relocation initiatives. This adds a humanitarian dimension to a policy framework primarily shaped by security and economic priorities.²⁵



Taliban admire the view from the gardens of Qasir-e-Tape-Paghman Palace. - 17092021 - Afghanistan - Adrien Vautier - Le Pictorium

Policy Recommendations

Central Asian states are balancing their engagement with Afghanistan while securing their interests. However, ongoing security risks, potential shifts in Taliban leadership, and external geopolitical pressures could alter the region's engagement strategy. For instance, a consultative meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)²⁶ member states on Afghanistan was held in Tajikistan to stress the need for greater coordination among SCO members, its concerns about terrorist threats from Afghanistan and their impact on regional stability²⁷. Other geopolitical pressures include relations with Russia and China, as well as with Pakistan; on October 2025, intense fighting broke out along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the Taliban launching attacks on multiple Pakistani military posts after accusing Pakistan of air-strikes on Afghan territory, including Kabul. In retaliation, Pakistani armed forces claimed to have killed around 200 Taliban fighters and destroyed several border posts, while the Taliban claimed to have killed approximately 58 Pakistani soldiers. This is the sharpest escalation in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations since the Taliban's return to power in 2021.²⁸ Even though a ceasefire agreement was signed,²⁹ such escalations risk destabilizing the wider region and may introduce new geopolitical dynamics. Another notable development is India's strategic shift toward engaging with the Taliban after years of hostility. New Delhi has begun diplomatic outreach aimed at ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a base for militant groups threatening Indian interests. This engagement also encompasses cooperation in sectors such as mining, infrastructure, connectivity, water resource management, and visa facilitation. India's renewed interest in Afghanistan must be understood within the broader geopolitical context involving China,

Pakistan, Russia, and the United States.³⁰ All these sudden shifts and exchanges make the Taliban a volatile factor in the Central Asian – and more broadly, Asian – balance of power. Recommendations for the Central Asian states are as follows:

- Leverage growing cooperation in energy, infrastructure, and trade to quietly press for improvements in human rights, women's rights and participation, and minority protections, drawing attention to Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis.³¹
- Direct incoming regional investments toward sustainable and transparent sectors, such as renewable energy, transport corridors, and local industry, that promote inclusive growth and regional stability.
- Closely track evolving energy diplomacy, particularly projects like TAPI and CASA-1000, as shifts in these initiatives could reshape the regional balance, alter power alignments, and redefine Central Asia's connectivity outlook.



A humanitarian from the NGO Medecins Sans Frontieres during a visit to an IDP camp near Herat on December 1, 2021. – 01122021 – Afghanistan Herat – Adrien Vautier – Le Pictorium

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² The Belt and Road Initiative is China's strategic development plan aimed at strengthening economic cooperation among countries along the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Its goal is to promote the smooth flow of trade, improve resource allocation, and deepen market integration, ultimately building a regional framework for shared economic growth and mutual benefit.

³ Xinjiang is an autonomous region of China, occupying the northwestern corner of the country. It is bordered by the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Gansu to the east, the Tibet Autonomous Region to the south, Afghanistan and the disputed territory of Kashmir to the southwest, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the west, Kazakhstan to the northwest, Russia to the north, and Mongolia to the northeast. It is China's largest political unit. The region is known for violations of human rights committed by Chinese authorities.

⁴ Turgunbaeva, Aigerim, and Fayazuddin Ghiasi. "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia." *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, March 11 2025.

⁵ The Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway project, a major infrastructure initiative aimed at connecting Central and South Asia through a new 573-kilometre railway line running from Termez in Uzbekistan, through Mazar-i-Sharif and Logar in Afghanistan, to Kharlachi in Pakistan. The project is estimated to cost between US \$4.8 billion and \$6 billion and is expected to reduce freight transit time by up to five days and lower transport costs by over 40 percent.

⁶ Discussed since the 90s, the TAPI Pipeline project is one of the biggest gas transit project in the region, and a potential move to invest and to make Afghanistan an important economic hub in the region.

⁷ CASA-1000) is a \$1.16 billion initiative currently under construction, designed to transmit surplus hydroelectric power from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The project is pivotal in the region in terms of energy security.

⁸ ISKP is an extremist militant group formed in 2015 as the Afghanistan-Pakistan affiliate of the Islamic State. It seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate across the historical region of Khorasan, which includes parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia.

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¹⁹ Syed Fazl-e-Haider. "Uzbekistan Seeks Stronger Cooperation with Afghanistan." *Jamestown*, May 21, 2025.

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²³ Special Eurasia OSINT Team. "Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan Increased Their Economic Cooperation." *Special Eurasia*, August 13, 2025.

²⁴ Special Eurasia OSINT Team. "The Tajikistan-Afghanistan Border Clash's Implication." *Special Eurasia*, September 3, 2025.

²⁵ Special Eurasia OSINT Team. "Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan Increased Their Economic Cooperation." *Special Eurasia*, August 13, 2025.

²⁶ SCO is a permanent intergovernmental body founded on June 15, 2001, in Shanghai by Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It evolved from the earlier "Shanghai Five" framework. In 2002, the SCO Charter was signed in St. Petersburg during the Council of Heads of State meeting and came into force on September 19, 2003. The Charter defines the organization's objectives, principles, structure, and key areas of activity. SCO official goals are to: strengthen mutual trust, friendship, and good-neighborly relations among member states; promote cooperation in politics, trade, economics, science, culture, education, energy, transport, tourism, and environmental protection; jointly maintain peace, security, and stability in the region; and support the creation of a democratic, fair, and rational international political and economic order.

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From Criticism to Pragmatism: Central Asian States and Taliban Recognition as of Q4 2025

Grace Bell

Key Takeaways

- Following Russia's official recognition of the Taliban in July, other Central Asian countries have made moves that indicate recognition may not be too far off.
- As the region considers a lasting Taliban regime, the debate over Taliban recognition centers around two key areas of concern in the region: economic fragility and regional stability.
- Central Asian countries must balance consideration of the grave human rights violations and oppression by the Taliban of its people against the severe consequences of international isolation on Afghan citizens.

Introduction

As the Taliban surpasses its fourth year since retaking control of Afghanistan, Central Asian governments have begun to reassess their stance towards the militant group. While there has been no formal recognition of the Taliban from any of the five Central Asian countries, increased cooperation and diplomatic recognition has marked a turn from criticism towards pragmatism.¹

Critical context in this matter may be gleaned by looking at these countries' largest regional neighbor. In July, Russia became the first country in the world to officially recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate governing body.² Russia was also the first country to sign an economic deal with the Taliban, providing Afghanistan with wheat, oil, and gas. Russia even removed the group from its list of banned terrorist groups earlier this year, despite being a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which continues to express deep concern over Taliban governance in the country.³ Russia's actions are an important consideration when assessing current and future engagement with the Taliban in the region, as it reflects how the region is adapting to what looks to be a longstanding regime.

Just a month after Russian recognition, Kazakhstan recognized a Taliban diplomat as Chargé of Affairs of the Afghan Embassy in Astana. The country has also removed the Taliban from its terrorist list, in a move informed by the understanding that the Taliban regime "is a long-term factor", according to Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.⁴ In July, Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Murat Nurtleu announced a plan to increase trade between the two countries to \$3 billion,⁵ augmenting the supply of agricultural products, fuel and lubricants, mineral fertilizers, and chemical industry goods.⁶ With diplomatic meetings between Kazakh and Taliban officials becoming increasingly more common, and trade agreements and infrastructure commitments in place, formal recognition seems just around the corner.⁷



A view shows the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan flag at the Afghan embassy, after Russia became the first country to recognise the Taliban government in Afghanistan, in Moscow, Russia July 4, 2025. REUTERS-Maxim Shemetov

Tajikistan is yet another country in the region that has become friendlier to the militant political group. This shift is a marked contrast from the country's historical stance toward the Taliban. Since the very genesis of the group, Tajikistan has been its strongest critic in the region.⁸ Following the Taliban takeover, President Emomali Rahmon vowed not to recognize the Taliban government, saying that it wouldn't recognize a government "formed through oppression".⁹ Yet in 2024, Tajikistan hosted a high-level Taliban delegation in Dushanbe, and sent a senior national security member of their own to Afghanistan following the Taliban's visit.¹⁰

While not official recognition, many of these actions may be considered implied recognition under international law. As can be understood from the term itself, implied recognition occurs when a country's actions imply recognition without them explicitly declaring so—a "quiet" recognition of sorts. These actions could include signing treaties, trade cooperation, or diplomacy with the group.¹¹ Kazakhstan's recognition of a Taliban diplomat, trade negotiations between the two countries, and various diplomatic meetings could all imply recognition at face value. However, a closer look at the nature of these occurrences is necessary to understand the motivations behind them. While the legal consequences of implicit recognition are much murkier, such recognition still holds incredible weight on the international stage, and is often used to navigate complex diplomatic situations, such as is the case of Taliban recognition among regional actors.¹²

A Question of Economic Security and Regional Stability

Regional pull towards Taliban recognition centers on two key considerations: economic motivation and security concerns. For one, fiscal considerations impel trade and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbors. Tied to this are concerns over regional

stability, both relating to opium production coming out of Afghanistan and domestic terrorism. While the initial Taliban ban of poppy farming stymied production rates, there are fears that poor economic conditions and limited viable alternatives may prompt Afghan poppy farmers to return to the trade, reinvigorating drug flows across Afghanistan's borders and into neighboring countries. Economic relief in the form of trade deals and regional cooperation may supplement lost earnings, dissuading a return to the drug trade. The threat of domestic terrorism is also a potential factor in increased regional diplomacy with the Taliban. Fears over domestic instability and radicalisation within Afghanistan push countries toward cooperation, rather than risk rising tensions spilling across their borders.



Members of the Taliban participate in a rally to mark the third anniversary of the fall of Kabul, in Kabul, Afghanistan, August 14, 2024. REUTERS-Sayed Hassib



An Afghan woman walks among Taliban soldiers at a checkpoint in Kabul, Afghanistan, July 6, 2023. REUTERS–Ali Khara

Regional economic and security motivations aside, the world largely remains against official Taliban recognition. For one, official recognition of the Taliban can be seen as condoning, and even promoting, the behaviours and actions of a sexist and domineering regime. In the UN Security Council's most recent resolution on the matter, resolution 2763 (2024), the Council called for all Member States to continue to follow the actions outlined in paragraph one of Resolution 2255 (2015).¹³ This paragraph dictates that all States should freeze Taliban funds and other financial assets, prevent the Taliban's entry or transit through their territories other than when necessary for judicial or reconciliation efforts, and prevent the supply or indirect supply of weapons and military equipment or related products to the Taliban.¹⁴ With all this in mind, the Council also recognized the need to ensure sanctions promote, and not detract, from the promotion of peace, stability, and the well-being of Afghanistan and its people.¹⁵ Following UN Security Council resolutions, the European Council has imposed an arms embargo, a ban on technical assistance related to military goods and technology, travel bans for individuals related to the Taliban, and an asset freeze for individuals and entities related to the Taliban.¹⁶ Closer to home, Tajikistan, in its initial rebuke of the militant group, cited concerns over regional stability and emphasized the need for an inclusive government in which all Afghan people are represented.¹⁷

Conclusions

While perhaps in the not-so-distant future, official recognition of a Taliban government still remains to be seen in any of the Central Asian countries. As put plainly by the Kazakh president, Central Asian countries are beginning to come to terms with what may be a long-standing Taliban reign. This means reassessing their stance towards the group, in what can be seen as a shift from condemnation to quiet diplomacy; from criticism to pragmatism.

Policy Recommendations

Perhaps with the same balance of realism and idealism, recommendations must balance a consideration of the grave human rights violations and oppression enacted by the Taliban on its people with the severe consequences of international isolation on Afghan citizens. Official recognition of the Taliban legitimizes the repressive and sexist regime.¹⁸ Yet international isolation of Afghanistan affects those already suffering under this oppressive regime—essential aid is withheld, economic situations become increasingly bleak, and regional instability prospers.

Following EU and UN Security Council resolutions, Central Asian countries must enact targeted sanctions and measures that affect Taliban leadership, but not the Afghan people as a whole. Further, these sanctions must not affect the administration of and access to vital humanitarian aid to the country. As a reminder, these sanctions include:

- A ban on the supply or indirect supply of all weapons or military-related devices and equipment, as well as technical assistance and training related to military technology and weaponry
- The freezing of all funds and financial assets owned by or benefiting the Taliban and those related to the group.
- A travel ban restricting the movement of Taliban officials and those related to the Taliban from entering or moving within their borders, except when necessary for judicial or reconciliation efforts.

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Central Asia on the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: Between Solidarity and Strategy

Francesco Pagano

Key Takeaways

- Central Asian governments' positions on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict are often nebulous, characterized mainly from solidarity statements, UN voting records, and limited public gestures.
- These governments generally seek to maintain a balanced diplomatic stance rather than take a definitive side.
- Their approach emphasizes concern for the humanitarian situation while avoiding criticism of Israel.

Executive Summary

The paper aims to examine the stances of Central Asian states regarding Israel and Palestine,¹ the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with a particular focus on the ongoing crisis in Gaza erupted in 2023.

Central Asia vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine

Central Asian states maintain multifaceted but varied relations with Israel and Palestine, combining economic, technological, and diplomatic cooperation with Israel and diplomatic or humanitarian engagement with Palestine.



Author's own elaboration.

Kazakhstan maintains multifaceted relations with both Israel and Palestine, encompassing trade, energy, defense, and diplomatic engagements; particularly, a combination of pragmatic economic cooperation, defense and technological collaboration with Israel, and diplomatic engagement with Palestine. Relations between Kazakhstan and Israel were formally in 1992 and have developed strong diplomatic and economic ties. Kazakhstan exports significant volumes of crude oil to Israel, accounting for approximately 10–25% of Israel's total oil imports;² in 2023, Kazakhstan exported goods worth around \$364 million to Israel, primarily crude petroleum, sulfur, and coal, and imported goods worth around

\$118 from Israel.³ Kazakhstan and Israel have engaged in defense, intelligence and security cooperation; since 2007, the two countries have collaborated on military modernization programs, including artillery rockets, unmanned aerial vehicles, simulators, command and control systems, advanced communications, and air defense radar systems, with a security cooperation agreement signed in 2014.⁴ Kazakhstan's relations with Palestine also date back to 1992, with formal diplomatic relations,⁵ highlighted by their common membership at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and economic relations. According to available data, in 2022, Kazakhstan exported \$259,000 to Palestine, primarily in dried legumes and flavored water, with exports rising from \$2,610 in 2017 to \$259,000 in 2022, an annualized growth rate of 151%. Conversely, in 2023, Palestine exported \$106,000 to Kazakhstan, mainly tropical fruits, low-voltage protection equipment, and other plastic products. Palestinian exports to Kazakhstan have declined over the past five years, dropping from \$173,000 in 2018 to \$106,000 in 2023, an annualized decrease of 9.36%.⁶

Uzbekistan also maintains multifaced relations with both Israel and Palestine. Uzbekistan and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1992. The two countries have developed strong ties in trade, technology, and cultural exchange. Israel has become an important partner for Uzbekistan in sectors such as agriculture, water management, and information technology. In 2021, Uzbekistan exported to Israel \$3.69 million, with clothing & foodstuffs being the largest part, and imported from Israel goods worth \$12.69 million, with electrical or electronic equipment and other machinery the largest categories. In addition, Uzbekistan and Israel have engaged in defense and security cooperation, including the sale of drones, small arms, spyware, and other military technology, indicating a degree of strategic collaboration.⁷ Uzbekistan and Palestine have maintained diplomatic relations since September 25, 1994, with both countries being members of the OIC; most of the collaboration has been enhanced in the aftermath of the 2023 intensification of the crisis, with Uzbekistan providing humanitarian support and medical assistance.⁸ Furthermore, in terms of economic cooperation, in 2023, Uzbekistan exported \$400,000 to Palestine, mainly in chocolate, confectionery sugar, and margarine. Exports have grown sharply over the past five years, increasing from \$594 in 2018 to \$400,000 in 2023, an annualized growth rate of 268%. Conversely, in 2023, Palestine exported \$465,000 to Uzbekistan, entirely in tropical fruits. Palestinian exports to Uzbekistan have also grown rapidly over the past five years, rising from \$0 in 2018 to \$465,000 in 2023, an annualized increase of 1,260%.⁹

Kyrgyzstan and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1992.¹⁰ Since then, the two countries have maintained a cordial but limited partnership, primarily centered on cultural and educational exchanges.¹¹ There is no evidence of defense or military cooperation, nor of any arms trade, between the two states. From an economic point of view, in 2023, Israel exported \$5.14 million to Kyrgyzstan, with key products including other furniture (\$1.23 million), broadcasting equipment (\$838,000), and beauty products (\$472,000). Over the past five years, exports from Israel to Kyrgyzstan have increased at an annualized rate of 23.5%, growing from \$1.79 million in 2018 to \$5.14 million in 2023. Conversely, Kyrgyzstan exported \$1.58 million to Israel in 2023, primarily consisting of other nuts, wood pulp lyes, and polyamides. Over the past five years, exports from Kyrgyzstan to Israel have increased at an annualized rate of 38.8%, growing from \$307,000 in 2018 to \$1.58 million in 2023.¹² Kyrgyzstan and Palestine established diplomatic relations in 1995. Since then, Kyrgyzstan has consistently supported Palestinian rights and provided various forms of assistance. Diplomatically, Kyrgyzstan has advocated for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Through to a two-state solution and Palestine's right to self-determination.¹³ From an economic point of view, in 2022, Kyrgyzstan exported \$2,320 to Palestine, mainly in therapeutic appliances, raw plastic sheeting, and other hand tools. Over the past five years, exports from Kyrgyzstan to Palestine have declined sharply, falling from \$79,300 in 2017 to \$2,320 in 2022, an annualized decrease of 50.7%. No available information was found on imports from Palestine.¹⁴

Tajikistan and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1992. The two countries have engaged in various forms of cooperation, primarily in the fields of agriculture, rural

development, and tourism,¹⁵ with limited diplomatic relations.¹⁶ In 2023, Tajikistan exported \$25,000 to Israel, mainly in processed tobacco, other electrical machinery, and electrical transformers. Over the past five years, exports from Tajikistan to Israel have decreased at an annualized rate of 33.3%, falling from \$190,000 in 2018 to \$25,000 in 2023. Conversely, in 2022, Israel exported \$621,000 to Tajikistan, primarily in telephones, sowing seeds, and insulated wire. Israeli exports to Tajikistan have also declined over the past five years, decreasing at an annualized rate of 8.56%, from \$972,000 in 2017 to \$621,000 in 2022.¹⁷ Tajikistan established diplomatic relations with Palestine always in 1992, and since then, the two countries have maintained a cooperative relationship, marked by mutual support in various international forums. Tajikistan has consistently advocated for the rights of the Palestinian people and has extended humanitarian assistance within its capacities. Notably, in August 2023, the Palestinian Embassy was inaugurated in Dushanbe, symbolizing the strengthening of bilateral ties between the two nations.¹⁸ From an economic point of view, only available information states that imports from Tajikistan to Palestine have shown significant fluctuations over the years. In 2009, reported imports were \$210, a sharp decline from \$15,000 in 2007. Looking at the broader trend, annual import data from 2004 to 2009 averaged \$19,500. During this period, the highest recorded imports were \$29,000 in 2004, while the lowest point was \$210 in 2009, highlighting the volatility of trade between Tajikistan and the State of Palestine;¹⁹ nevertheless, contemporary data would be needed for a proper assessment.

Turkmenistan and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1993. Over the years, their bilateral ties have evolved, encompassing diplomatic engagements, economic and technological cooperation as part of strategic considerations aimed at balancing relations with neighboring countries.²⁰ From an economic point of view, in 2023, Turkmenistan exported \$215,000 to Israel, primarily in hand-woven rugs, nitrogenous fertilizers, and motor vehicles with parts and accessories. Over the past five years, Turkmenistan's exports to Israel have grown at an annualized rate of 10.3%, increasing from \$132,000 in 2018 to \$215,000 in 2023. Conversely, in 2023, Israel exported \$56,100 to Turkmenistan, mainly in sowing seeds, beauty products, and vaccines, blood products, antisera, toxins, and cultures. Israeli exports to Turkmenistan have declined sharply over the past five years, dropping at an annualized rate of 45.7%, from \$1,190,000 in 2018 to \$56,100 in 2023.²¹ Diplomatically, Turkmenistan established relations with Palestine in 2022, one year earlier, with current diplomatic relations going on.²² From an economic point of view, in 2022, Turkmenistan exported \$2,030 to the State of Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), with knit women's suits accounting for the entire value. This marked a significant increase from 2017, when exports were negligible, reflecting a remarkable annual growth rate of 359% over the five-year period. No available information was found on imports from Palestine.²³

Central Asia vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza

Central Asian nations maintain close economic ties with Israel but have generally taken cautious, pro-Palestinian positions in international forums since the Hamas²⁴ brutal attack on October 7, 2023, and Israeli brutal offensive on Gaza.²⁵ Following the escalation of violence, all five Central Asian states expressed concern over the situation in Gaza. At the United Nations, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan supported resolutions calling for a humanitarian ceasefire, while Turkmenistan abstained, adhering to its long-standing policy of "positive neutrality." Despite their largely symbolic alignment with the broader international community's stance on Palestine, these states have continued practical cooperation with Israel. Their official statements tend to mirror the dominant positions voiced at multilateral gatherings such as the UN, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), rather than initiating independent policy directions. Turkish President Erdoğan's efforts to unify Turkic countries under an anti-Israel position met with limited enthusiasm, particularly from Turkmenistan, which remains wary of involvement in geopolitical conflicts. At various summits in late 2023,

Central Asian leaders expressed positions that leaned toward humanitarian sympathy for the Palestinian's rights but emphasized neutrality and non-intervention.²⁶ In October 2023, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan voted in favor of a United Nations resolution²⁷ calling for a humanitarian ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, which was adopted on October 27 with the support of 120 member states. These Muslim-majority countries share a cultural and religious affinity with Palestine, while also placing significant importance on maintaining strong ties with Russia and China, both of which also voted in favor.²⁸ Turkmenistan abstained from the vote, maintaining its official position of neutrality.²⁹



Aftermath of Israeli Airstrike in Gaza, Palestine – Photo by Majdi Fathi/NurPhoto

Kazakhstan has reiterated call for ceasefires and humanitarian aid to Gaza at OIC 51st Ministerial Session, reaffirming its support for the efforts of the international community to stabilize the situation in the region.³⁰ Kazakhstan's President Tokayev condemned both terrorism and violence while calling for respect for international law, later pledging \$1 million in aid to Gaza.³¹ Furthermore, the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in coordination with Kazakhstan's diplomatic missions in Jordan and Israel and supported by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and Jordanian and Israeli authorities, evacuated six citizens from the conflict zone in the Gaza Strip on August 8, 2025.³² President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has expressed support for international peacekeeping efforts, including backing Trump's Gaza "peace plan"³³ and welcoming the ceasefire agreement and hostage release.³⁴ While generally passive participants in Middle Eastern diplomacy, Kazakhstan has sought to demonstrate humanitarian engagement; in addition to financial assistance, Kazakhstan has planned to deploy up to 430 troops to UN peacekeeping missions, precisely the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)³⁵ and the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO),³⁶ in the Middle East beginning in 2024.³⁷

Uzbekistan has expressed, through official statements, deep concern over the sharp deterioration of conditions in Gaza, its implication in the region and the violation of international humanitarian law (IHL),³⁸ urging all parties involved in the conflict to exercise restraint and avoid actions furthering tensions.³⁹ In 2023, Uzbekistan assumed a modest leadership role on October 27, when Foreign Minister Baxtiyor Saidov announced that he had hosted representatives from the diplomatic missions of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait,

Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel to discuss the situation in Gaza. The meeting received no press coverage, and the only available information about its participants and content comes from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' social media posts.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Uzbekistan has initiated a comprehensive support program for Palestinians displaced from Gaza amid the ongoing conflict with Israel. This initiative includes providing housing, healthcare, education, and financial assistance to Palestinian families evacuated from Rafah. The government has established a special fund to finance these programs, demonstrating a commitment to humanitarian aid and regional stability.⁴¹ While generally passive participants in Middle Eastern diplomacy, Uzbekistan has sought to demonstrate humanitarian engagement.

Kyrgyzstan calls on Middle East countries to completely cease military actions and to comply with IHL.⁴² Kyrgyzstan's President Japarov urged both sides to halt hostilities and protect civilians.⁴³ On October 23, just after the October 7 attack, Kyrgyzstan's parliament approved a motion to allocate one month's salary—around \$300 per member of parliament—to humanitarian assistance for Gaza. Of the 90 MPs, 76 participated in the vote, and 47 supported the proposal. Lawmakers noted that when Kyrgyzstan had faced attacks from neighboring states, foreign aid had been warmly received, and the country now sought to extend similar support to others in need.⁴⁴ Kyrgyzstan supports the ongoing efforts, Trump's Gaza "peace plan", to resolve the situation in the Gaza Strip, as stated by President Japarov's press secretary.⁴⁵

Tajikistan's President Rahmon took the strongest anti-Israel tone—criticizing Israeli actions in Gaza without referencing Hamas—though without proposing concrete measures,⁴⁶ apart from humanitarian initiatives such as the one carried out by the Islamic Organization for Food and Security (which included both Tajikistan and Kazakhstan) which distributed 200 tons of high-quality wheat flour have been dispatched to Gaza to help address the region's acute food shortage and targeting approximately 8000 families facing food insecurity.⁴⁷ Furthermore, during participation at the extraordinary Arab and Islamic summit held in Riyadh, Tajikistan condemned the Israeli Knesset's decision to prohibit the activities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees as a clear violation of international law and reiterated the need for all parties to resolve disputes through negotiations and diplomatic channels.⁴⁸

Turkmenistan was the only Central Asian country not to issue a statement on the violence in Israel and Gaza,⁴⁹ with its leadership refraining entirely from commenting, consistent with its neutrality doctrine. Nevertheless, in November 2023, Turkmenistan sent humanitarian aid to the State of Palestine, reflecting its commitment to humanitarian principles and international cooperation. The aid, authorized by President Serdar Berdimuhamedov, was delivered through the Charitable Foundation for Assistance to Children in Need of Care named after Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. The shipment included medicines, medical supplies, children's clothing, bedding sets, footwear, food products, and other essential goods.⁵⁰



A charity organization distribute food and drinking water to Palestinians in the Jabalia area in the northern Gaza Strip, in Jabalia, Gaza on May 12, 2025. Since March 2, Israel has completely closed its border crossings to humanity. Starvation crisis deepens in Gaza – Anadolu Agency

Closing Observations

The positions of Central Asian states have been shaped more significantly by the dynamics of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, given Moscow’s stronger influence over the region compared to Israel. Nevertheless, Israel remains an important actor within Central Asia’s multivector foreign policy framework. At the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly that took place in September 2025, Central States countries again displayed a largely cautious approach in their references to the crisis; on one hand, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan mentioned Gaza or Palestine in their statements but without using the term genocide,⁵¹ indicating a formal acknowledgment of the brutal situation without adopting highly confrontational language; on the other hand, Kyrgyzstan not only referred to Palestine and Gaza, but also openly called for the end of the genocide,⁵² while Turkmenistan did not mention any actor involved in the crisis, in line with the above mentioned policy of strict neutrality.⁵³ Thus, overall, Central Asian states seem to adopt a measured and cautious stance, reflecting their interest in multivector diplomacy, maintaining relations with Israel, Western countries, Russia, and regional actors, while showing some formal alignment with international concern for Palestinian civilians and their rights.

Policy Recommendations

- Central Asian states could position themselves as neutral mediators in the historical Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Gaza crisis, leveraging their credibility to host constructive dialogue between the two states, with the aim to facilitate regional dialogue.
- Central Asian states should, on one hand, engage with Israel while promoting, and nudging t the respect for basic international law and human rights⁵⁴ through economic, trade, and diplomatic leverages such as limiting or suspending all military

and energy trade (e.g. Kazakhstan continuous supply of raw material).⁵⁵

- On the other hand, they should support Palestinian political development by reinforcing existing collaborative channels, encouraging political transitions in Gaza that marginalize extremist actors such as Hamas and strengthen the role of the Palestinian Authority. These measures would signal principled diplomacy without compromising neutrality.
- Central Asia could provide venues for high-level peace dialogues, bringing together a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including opposition voices from Israel, to enhance trust and create conditions for concrete conflict resolution.

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³⁶ On 29 May 1948, the Security Council, in resolution 50 (1948), called for a cessation of hostilities in Palestine and decided that the truce should be supervised by the UN Mediator, with the assistance of a group of military observers. The first group of military observers, which became known as the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), was the first peacekeeping mission established by the United Nations. UNTSO Military Observers remain in the Middle East to monitor ceasefires, supervise armistice agreements, prevent isolated incidents from escalating and assist other United Nations peacekeeping operations in the region. In the Middle East, groups of UNTSO military observers are today attached to the peacekeeping forces in the area: UNDOF on the Golan and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

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their homes, many because of Israeli actions that amount to war crimes. These are all grave violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention and customary international humanitarian law. Furthermore, West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza remain under Israeli occupation, and the Israeli settlements violate international humanitarian law. Settlements, annexations, and related actions such as violence and vandalism have caused serious humanitarian harm and has violated bases of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

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UN Reform in Focus: Central Asian Contributions to the 80th General Assembly Debates

Umedjon Majidi and Anna Sobko

Key Takeaways

- All five presidents of the region participated and articulated a shared agenda centered on UN reform, international law, sustainable development, and regional connectivity.
- Kazakhstan led calls for Security Council reform and stronger participation of responsible middle powers. Its history in nuclear disarmament, peace mediation, and preventive diplomacy gives credibility to its reform agenda.

Introduction & Background Context

The 80th session of the UN General Assembly convened against a turbulent geopolitical backdrop, with member states publicly questioning the Organization's capacity to respond to multiple, overlapping crises. The High-Level Week and General Debate (23–29 September 2025) became a visible forum for calls to make the UN “more just and effective,” with specific demand lines focusing on Security Council reform, climate justice, and improved institutional delivery.¹

Central Asia arrived at the Assembly more coordinated than ever before. Over the past decade, its five republics have moved from being peripheral participants to active contributors to multilateral dialogue. The region's growing diplomatic confidence has been shaped by recent achievements, including the creation of a UN Regional Centre for the Sustainable Development Goals for Central Asia and Afghanistan in Almaty, and preparation for the Third UN Conference on Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) scheduled to be hosted in Turkmenistan.²

Central Asian Engagement at UNGA–80

All five presidents—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—addressed the General Debate. Their statements, though distinct in tone, converged on shared themes: the need for Security Council reform, respect for international law, and the strengthening of sustainable development and connectivity frameworks.³

For Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the priority is greater representation for middle and small states. For Uzbekistan, it is about integrating Central Asia into global decision-making and development frameworks. For Tajikistan, reform is tied to climate and water security. For Turkmenistan, it is linked to embedding neutrality and a culture of trust. The message from Astana, Tashkent, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Ashgabat is consistent. Reform is not a matter of prestige or symbolism. For them, reform of the UN is a strategic necessity, vital not only for the effectiveness of global governance but also for the survival, security, and prosperity of Central Asia itself⁴.

Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev argued that “the United Nations must reflect today's multipolar world,” calling for expansion of Security Council membership and greater representation of middle powers.⁵ His remarks echoed global reform demands,

aligning Central Asia with broader coalitions seeking more equitable decision-making structures.

Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev highlighted the importance of UN coordination in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and called for "practical cooperation over declarations." Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov focused on water security and transboundary cooperation, both central to regional stability.



Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev addressing the United Nations General Assembly. UN Photo-Cia Pak

From Reform Rhetoric to Development Action

Beyond rhetorical commitment, Central Asian delegations took an opportunity at the General Assembly to secure concrete partnerships. Bilateral meetings between regional leaders and UN agencies advanced agreements on transport, energy, digital connectivity, and climate adaptation. Kazakhstan alone signed memoranda worth €3.5 billion in sustainable investment projects.⁶

These engagements reflect a pragmatic understanding: UN reform must deliver tangible development benefits. For landlocked and climate-vulnerable states, institutional changes matter only if they improve access to finance, trade, and resilience tools.

The region also reaffirmed connectivity as a peace and development priority. Central Asian leaders called for a UN-supported regional platform on sustainable transport corridors and logistics. Such initiatives are seen as vital to integrate the region's economies and reduce dependency on a single route or market.

The preservation of international law was another shared priority. Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon urged the international community "to respect and protect the norms of international law that are under increasing pressure."⁷ Turkmenistan's President Serdar Berdimuhamedov declared 2026 the "Year of International Law", positioning Ashgabat as

a moral advocate for global legal order.⁸ These appeals highlight an awareness that the rules-based system remains vital for small and medium-sized states whose security and prosperity depend on predictable international norms.

On climate change, all five presidents reiterated commitments to renewable energy, water conservation, and glacier protection. Tajikistan, home to 60 per cent of Central Asia's water resources, urged stronger UN assistance for transboundary water management.⁹

Importantly, unlike some reform proposals that focus narrowly on institutional restructuring, Central Asia's approach connects governance reform with delivery capacity. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan framed UN reform as a matter of efficiency, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to development needs rather than a purely political question. President Tokayev's address captured this logic by stressing that "reform must make the UN more effective in resolving the problems that affect ordinary people."¹⁰

Prospects and Challenges

While Central Asia's visibility has grown, significant constraints remain. Regional coordination often depends on external mediation, and domestic political differences limit long-term integration. None of the region's states hold significant leverage in the ongoing negotiations over Security Council reform.

Nevertheless, Central Asia's collective diplomacy is gaining credibility. By combining legal, developmental, and institutional reform narratives, the region positions itself as a constructive stakeholder in shaping the UN's evolution. Its approach is incremental, consensus-based, and development-oriented, it may prove more effective than radical proposals that risk deadlock.

Policy Recommendations

- **Institutionalise Regional SDG Delivery:** Expand the mandate of the Almaty SDG Centre to include technical support and data coordination for landlocked developing countries.
- **Enhance UN-Regional Partnerships:** Strengthen the UN's preventive diplomacy offices in Central Asia with capacity for climate and connectivity mediation.
- **Operationalise Legal Education Initiatives:** Support Turkmenistan's "Year of International Law" with UNDP-sponsored programmes promoting rule-of-law awareness.¹¹ In parallel, advance Tajikistan's call for strict adherence to international law by proposing that the General Assembly consider proclaiming an International Year of Legal Literacy, aimed at strengthening global understanding of legal norms and their role in maintaining peace and development.¹²
- **Encourage Middle-Power Dialogue Mechanisms:** Create a rotating consultative platform within the UNGA for responsible middle powers, ensuring consistent input into reform debates.

Endnotes

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Central Asia's Collective Diplomacy at UNGA-80

Anna Sobko

Key Takeaways

- All five Central Asian presidents addressed the 80th UNGA General Debate, signaling the region's unified intent to shape global multilateralism.
- All five speeches commonly emphasized respect for international law, institutional reform, connectivity, and resilience.
- Each leader converged on normative principles, and also pushed distinctive national and regional proposals.
- The region is increasingly positioning itself as a potential bridge across divides, especially via "responsible middle powers" and legal frameworks..

Introduction

The 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly convened under the theme "Better Together: 80 years and more for peace, development and human rights."¹ The High-Level General Debate ran from 23 to 29 September 2025, although the session formally opened earlier in September.² What makes UNGA-80 particularly significant is its timing, coming at a moment when international cooperation is under strain from global crises, institutional fatigue, and declining trust in shared norms.



Credit: UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Once viewed mainly as a geopolitical crossroads between larger powers, Central Asia is now beginning to assert a more active and independent role on the global stage. All five republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan) were present at the General Debate, delivering speeches and submitting substantive proposals. Their collective presence offers insights into how small and mid-sized states seek to reposition themselves in a fragmented world.

Central Asian Perspectives in Global Debate

The fact that all five presidents took the podium is itself significant: in a fractured era, that coherence signals ambition. Yet their speeches revealed both shared themes and country-specific issues.

Kazakhstan (President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev)

In his address, President Tokayev warned that “serious violations of international law have become ‘a new normality,’” a trend which “undermines global stability and erodes confidence” among states and peoples.³ He urged that the UN be “empowered ... to make it more adjustable to the realities of today’s unpredictable world,” and called for “comprehensive reform” of the UN, especially to restructure the Security Council so that “major powers of Asia, Africa and Latin America should be represented ... and the voices of responsible middle powers ... amplified.”⁴ Tokayev frames middle powers as potential “bridges” when major powers are divided.⁵

Uzbekistan (President Shavkat Mirziyoyev)

President Mirziyoyev began by underscoring the weakening role of institutions: “the role and place of international institutions are weakening; confrontations, conflicts, and wars are intensifying ... economic and humanitarian crises are deepening.”⁶ He reiterated Uzbekistan’s support for the UN80 Initiative and the Pact for the Future, and pushed for reform of the Security Council to “effectively address current threats ... and protect interests of developing countries.”⁷ On domestic transformation, he cited a dramatic drop in poverty—from 35 % to 6.6 %—and rise in higher-education enrollment from 9 % to 42 %, as evidence that internal reform and global goals must go hand in hand.⁸ He called for a World Summit on Professional Education and a global mechanism on transit connectivity to protect landlocked states’ interests.⁹

Kyrgyzstan (President Sadyr Japarov)

President Japarov’s address was unusually candid: he declared that, this year, he would “speak openly and directly ... not only as a head of state, but also as an ordinary person.”¹⁰ He affirmed support for the UN-80 initiative and urged reform of the Security Council, criticizing that “the five permanent members ... can block any decision.”¹¹ Japarov also spotlighted sanctions imposed on Kyrgyz banks, arguing they stem from “false information” spread by NGOs—a rare moment of naming grievances.¹²

Tajikistan (President Emomali Rahmon)

President Rahmon’s address emphasized the fragility of the legal order: “the international community is witnessing disrespect for and violation of international law, which is the foundation of order, peace, and stability throughout the world.”¹³ He proposed proclaiming an International Year of Legal Literacy and called for strict resolution of disputes “within the framework of the law.”¹⁴ He also drew attention to digital technologies and AI for sustainable development, while underscoring rising threats such as cybercrime and terrorism. President Rahmon’s speech also reaffirmed his support for multilateralism, the Pact for the Future, and further UN reform.¹⁵

Turkmenistan (President Serdar Berdimuhamedov)

As a permanently neutral state, Turkmenistan's approach is more structural. President Berdimuhamedov called for the inclusion of a new agenda item, "Neutrality for Peace and Security," and pledged to submit a draft resolution on the role of neutrality in sustaining peace.¹⁶ He also proposed declaring 2028 the Year of International Law, aligning legal legitimacy with neutrality. He committed to convening a World Summit on a Culture of Peace and Trust, an International Day of Mediation, and an International Forum "Central Asia — A Space of Peaceful Coexistence" with the UN.¹⁷ Among development proposals, he floated a UN Decade of Sustainable Transport (2026–2035), energy connectivity resolutions, and a platform for digital integration based on equality and trust.¹⁸

Taken together, these interventions show Central Asia seeking both voice and leverage under a shifting global architecture.

Legal Framing: What the Statements Reveal

With these more specific quotations, the inferences can be sharpened about how Central Asia positions itself vis-à-vis legal order and institutional reform. A few leitmotifs stood out across these speeches:

Law as the anchor in an age of norm erosion

Presidents repeatedly invoked legal principle as the bulwark against arbitrariness. President Tokayev's stark "new normality" of breaches underlines this anxiety.¹⁹ President Rahmon's call for a legal literacy year and insistence that all disputes be governed by law highlights a normative strategy.²⁰ These are not rhetorical flourishes but signals: smaller states are staking their security on rules, not power. Law as shield against arbitrary power. The repeated phrase "within the framework of the law" (Tajikistan), and the critique of sanctions imposed on weak states, including Kyrgyzstan's criticism of unilateral pressure and enforcement measures arising from Russia-related sanctions, even when not formally labelled "secondary sanctions," reflect a regional instinct to use law as a shield against coercion and politicized measures.

Deep UN/UNSC reform as existential necessity

Reform of the Security Council was central to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan (explicitly), and Tajikistan. President Tokayev argued regional and middle-power representation must be institutionalized.²¹ President Mirziyoyev and President Japarov both pointed to the need to make the UN more responsive.²² Both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan link institutional innovation with legitimacy. The former insists every state should have a path to the Security Council, the latter frames Council expansion as essential to defend developing states' interests. Taken together, these positions outline a shared regional view that Security Council reform is not only a procedural matter but a cornerstone of a more equitable global order.

Connectivity, transit, and landlocked resilience

Uzbekistan's proposal for a "global mechanism" to protect transit corridors is directly tied to legal guarantees of transit rights.²³ Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan echo concerns about cross-border infrastructure, energy, and digital links. Uzbekistan frames transit security and logistics not just as infrastructure but as normative rights. Its call for a "global mechanism" to safeguard corridors suggests a legal dimension to connectivity.

Normative horizon for new domains

AI, digital equity, climate justice, and environmental integrity were all presented as domains requiring fresh legal frameworks. President Rahmon, for instance, emphasized that "cybersecurity must be an important component of collective security."²⁴ Turkmenistan's call for a digital integration platform grounded

in equality reflects an attempt to preempt dominance by big tech states.²⁵

Neutrality, mediation, trust-building

Turkmenistan's neutrality is not passive but strategic. By proposing a Global Code of International Trust, an International Mediation Day, and emphasizing neutrality as a functional norm, it seeks to reinsert norm-based diplomacy into crisis arenas.²⁶ Turkmen known proposals (e.g. Year of International Law, neutrality agenda) suggest an attempt to restore and strengthen normative approaches in areas like digital governance, mediation, and trust-building.

In summary, Central Asian presidents converged around a normative posture: law, structure, trust, and equitable connectivity. Their insistence on legal foundations is not incidental. In a time of rival power blocs and shifting rules, the Central Asian states view law as their main protection and the best way to defend smaller states' interests.

Recommendations

Given the aspirations and constraints articulated by the Central Asian leaders, several recommendations emerge for different actors:

For the UN system

- Base proposals for Charter amendments or new protocols on the actual wording used by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which points toward either an enlarged pool of non-permanent seats with rotation schedules ensuring universal participation over time, or a supplementary protocol creating additional, periodically elected seats not tied to regional groups.
- Incorporate 'legal literacy' objectives, reflecting Tajikistan's phrasing, into UN centennial and 2028 law promotion plans.
- The "global mechanism" on "Strengthening transport connectivity to achieve Sustainable Development Goals" proposed by Uzbekistan should be developed as a legal instrument (treaty or convention) rather than a loose cooperation forum.
- Incorporate legal capacity-building efforts, covering water law, AI regulation, and climate litigation into UN agency workplans, reflecting Tajikistan's and Uzbekistan's priorities.

For Member States

- Incorporate connectivity mechanisms in lawful frameworks
- Promote regional law institutions tied to UN networks

For regional cooperation in Central Asia

- Strengthen legal protections for transit rights through safeguards for cross-border infrastructure, energy, and digital corridors, and promote a global mechanism to uphold the legal foundations of connectivity.
- Build a Central Asia arbitration center or tribunal with accession to UN dispute mechanisms.
- Encourage civil society in the region to hold states accountable to their texts (e.g. transit, legal literacy, neutrality pledges).

Conclusion

The 80th session of the UN General Assembly marks not only an anniversary but a test of whether multilateralism can be recalibrated for a more fragmented, ambitious era. Central Asia's full and active participation signals that this region seeks not to be marginalized but to help shape the future. While some speeches are yet to be located, the pattern is clear: the region is staking its future on law, on credible institutions, and on expanded voice.

By projecting a unified yet differentiated voice anchored in international law, focusing on connectivity and environment, and advancing proposals for reform, the five republics stake a claim, that small and medium states still matter, especially when they act collectively.

If the UN system and global partners respond with seriousness, not tokenism, this could become a turning point in how Central Asia and similar regions engage with the architecture of global governance.

Endnotes

¹ General Debate of the 80th Session: https://gadebate.un.org/en?utm_source

² Idem

³ Statement by the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the General Debate of the 80th session of the UN General Assembly: https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/80/kz_en.pdf?utm_source

⁴ Idem

⁵ Idem

⁶ Statement by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev: https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8525?utm_source

⁷ Idem

⁸ Idem

⁹ Idem

¹⁰ Statement of Kyrgyz President at UN Assembly: https://en.kabar.kg/news/statement-of-kyrgyz-president-at-un-assembly/?utm_source

¹¹ Statement of Kyrgyz President at UN Assembly: https://en.kabar.kg/news/statement-of-kyrgyz-president-at-un-assembly/?utm_source

¹² Central Asia Shows Up at the UN: What Did the Region's Leaders Say?

https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/central-asia-shows-up-at-the-un-what-did-the-regions-leaders-say/?utm_source

¹³ Statement by the President of Republic of Tajikistan

https://www.mfa.tj/en/main/view/17597/statement-at-the-general-debate-of-the-80th-session-of-the-un-general-assembly?utm_source

¹⁴ Idem

¹⁵ Idem

¹⁶ Statement by the President of Turkmenistan: https://un.mission.gov.tm/news/152471?utm_source

¹⁷ Idem

¹⁸ Idem

¹⁹ Statement by President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/80/kz_en.pdf?utm_source

²⁰ Statement by the President of Republic of Tajikistan

https://www.mfa.tj/en/main/view/17597/statement-at-the-general-debate-of-the-80th-session-of-the-un-general-assembly?utm_source

²¹ Statement by President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/80/kz_en.pdf?utm_source

²² Statement by the President of the Republic of

Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev: https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8525?utm_source

²³ Statement by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev: https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8525?utm_source

²⁴ Statement by the President of Republic of Tajikistan

https://www.mfa.tj/en/main/view/17597/statement-at-the-general-debate-of-the-80th-session-of-the-un-general-assembly?utm_source

²⁵ Statement by the President of Turkmenistan: https://un.mission.gov.tm/news/152471?utm_source

²⁶ Idem

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