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Central Asia's Growing Role in Building Peace and Regional Connectivity with Afghanistan

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Workers stand beside a gas pipe during a ceremony inaugurating construction of a section of the TAPI Pipeline project in Afghanistan. (Photo by Marat Gurt/Reuters)

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Summary

- The conflict in Afghanistan is too big and multivalent to be resolved by the United States alone. Instead, a regional approach is urgently needed, with the Central Asian states assuming a leadership role.
- Though the Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are not at present major players, they have much to offer in reinforcing any potential openings in Afghanistan's peace process by hosting regular diplomatic meetings, providing political support, and encouraging cross-border economic cooperation with Afghanistan.
- Uzbekistan, in particular, could further facilitate Afghanistan's integration into Central Asian diplomatic frameworks. The Tashkent Conference in March 2018, and subsequent activities, represented that country's pivot from isolation to regional engagement and established it as a credible regional consensus builder.
- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan individually and collectively can contribute to efforts to build a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan in a more stable and prosperous Central Asia, while serving as a land bridge to the populous and economically dynamic regions of South and Southwest Asia.
- Greater connectivity with Afghanistan through the air corridors and land-based transit routes of the Central Asian republics will help enlist Afghanistan as a partner for reaching new markets rather than as a threat and source of problems.
- A new US strategy for Central Asia that acknowledged the region's counterbalancing potential, both economically and politically, in support of Afghanistan would advance US goals and contribute to a just and lasting peace in Afghanistan and the region.

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report assesses recent initiatives by the five Central Asian republics and the Afghan government to establish a role for Afghanistan's northern neighbors, particularly Uzbekistan, as a mediator or host for Afghan peace process negotiations and to strengthen areas of economic and political cooperation in the region. The study was supported by USIP's Asia Center.

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Regional leaders, including the presidents of Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics, gather on stage at the June 2019 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. (Photo by /Shutterstock)

Introduction

The modern era of conflict in Afghanistan, dating from the start of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1979, has included major episodes of civil war, the establishment of the Islamic State of Afghanistan through the Peshawar Accord, and the cementing of the Taliban as a new regional power in southern Afghanistan in the 1990s. In response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on American targets by Taliban-sponsored extremists, this era has also included a US invasion of Afghanistan, followed by a new war in Afghanistan that continues to the present and has chiefly involved Afghan Army and NATO forces fighting Taliban insurgents. Neighboring and more distant states have sought opportunistically to support one or another political or fighting faction over the past forty years. Neighboring states are also concerned (though some disingenuously) about contagion from the radicalized groups and the cross-border opiate trafficking that continues to form a significant part of Afghanistan's economy.

For several years, the United States maintained an aggressive military posture in Afghanistan, seeking to eradicate the Taliban and subdue the fighting extremist groups at the same time it was spearheading efforts at reconstruction. The United States' original "light footprint" was gradually replaced by a "heavy footprint" that peaked in 2010, amounting to some hundred thousand US and forty thousand NATO troops. It is now back to a light footprint, mostly special operations forces.¹ Since the adoption of its South Asia Strategy in August 2017, the United States has clearly shifted to a negotiated, political settlement to the fighting.

Central Asia is not at the moment a major player in the future of Afghanistan, but US policy should not ignore the region. Central Asian countries can play a positive role in building an eventual peace in Afghanistan.

This pivot in US strategy has had significant repercussions among Afghanistan's neighbors and in the region more broadly. Most countries in the region fear both an indefinite US presence in Afghanistan and a precipitous withdrawal. The stated aim of the new peace-focused strategy is an orderly with-

drawal that leaves behind a stable Afghanistan, though one with a Taliban-inflected political order. That outcome may be acceptable to the United States, provided its key strategic objective of ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a haven for international terrorists is realized. A stable Afghanistan would in turn offer unprecedented opportunities for regional cooperation and development. In such a scenario, the five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—would have much to gain and also much to offer, politically and economically, in support of a stable, peaceful Afghanistan.

Even before the United States initiated its current peace-oriented strategy, several developments had caused a shift in the perspective of Central Asian nations' leaders toward Afghanistan. The region's cordon sanitaire approach to Afghanistan, which sought to prevent that country's problems from filtering across the region, had gradually evolved into one of greater engagement, based on the assessment that a more active role in trying to solve Afghanistan's problems was a better long-term strategy than seeking to insulate itself from these problems. This change in strategy was accompanied by rhetoric that sought to emphasize Afghanistan's historical Central Asian identity.

Though Central Asia is not at the moment a major player in the future of Afghanistan, US policy should not ignore the region. Central Asian countries can play a positive role in building and especially sustaining an eventual peace in Afghanistan. As crucial as India and Pakistan are to a sustainable peace in Afghanistan, as acknowledged by the United States' 2017 South Asia strategy, similarly persuasive arguments can be made about Afghanistan's northern neighbors. A refreshed and complementary Central Asia strategy could signal to the countries of this vital region and the wider world that they too have an important role to play in supporting a path to peace in Afghanistan. This signal is critically important at a time when most "regional" initiatives seem to overlook Central Asia, with talk of a new configuration (involving major states such as Iran, Pakistan, India, China, Russia, and the United States, plus Afghanistan) or a revived Quadrilateral platform (involving China, the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan). One exception to the general exclusion of Central Asian countries may be a possible C5+1+1 configuration, involving the Central Asian republics plus Afghanistan and the United States. The two strategies—one a new Central Asia strategy and the other the current South Asia strategy—could complement and reinforce one another, as well as ensure that those agencies implementing American foreign policy are sufficiently coordinated to promote a unity of purpose. A synchronized US strategy for South *and* Central Asia could create more favorable conditions for the United States to finally reduce its military presence and move into a more normal, long-term relationship with Afghanistan and the region.

AFGHANISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

(Map adapted from artwork by Peter Hermes Furian/Shutterstock)

This report reviews the recent major policy shifts that have resulted in a new geopolitical configuration in Central Asia and with it, an opportunity to reshape and realign US strategy. It also considers the many distinct ways in which the five Central Asian republics are contributing to efforts to build a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan in a more stable and prosperous Central Asia. An open question is whether recent devel-



opments genuinely represent a new era of Central Asian openness, in which a more peaceful Afghanistan could acquire a greater Central Asian identity, or whether peace in Afghanistan is more likely to be found through the South Asian capitals of Islamabad and New Delhi and should remain the focus of US strategy.

Dismantling the Cordon Sanitaire

The modern five countries of Central Asia were born in an unstable region. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the former Soviet republics in Central Asia that became independent countries had to rely on their own resources in dealing with a southern neighbor, Afghanistan, that was moving from insurgency to civil war. In the almost three decades since then, the Central Asian nations have gone through their own crises but have largely emerged from them stronger. Until very recently, they had collectively adopted a defensive position, the cordon sanitaire, against Afghanistan as a means of addressing their concerns that religious extremism, terrorism, and the narco-economy could overwhelm their fragile political systems. These concerns were greater or lesser, however, depending on how distant each country was from Afghanistan's borders and each country's perceptions of its particular vulnerabilities.

CONTAGION EFFECTS

As they have become more stable, the states of Central Asia have tended to adopt policies of greater engagement on the theory that such policies might contribute more effectively to Afghan and regional stability than defensive disengagement. Nonetheless, despite the US-led state-building attempt in Afghanistan, the problems that Central Asian states once feared have not only not disappeared, in some cases they have grown worse. Islamic extremism, drug

trafficking, and terrorism remain factors in Central Asian policy thinking and will certainly dominate once more if the current opportunity for peace, in which they are all invested, fails.

Islamic terrorism. Historically, displaced Uzbeks, Tajiks, and other Central Asian citizens have found refuge in northern Afghanistan during periods of mujahideen and Taliban rule. The cross-border traffic of Islamist groups goes back almost three decades, to when Central Asians would cross Afghanistan to attend madrassas (religious schools) and terrorist training camps in Pakistan. However, the increase in Islamic State Khorasan–claimed attacks inside Afghanistan has led to growing Russian allegations that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is making inroads into Central Asia via northern Afghanistan. Russian officials are also on record as saying that the United States supports ISIS infiltration of Central Asia, citing “mystery helicopters” transporting men and supplies. This narrative, rejected by both the Afghan and the US governments, is intended for domestic consumption in Russia, and little evidence exists to support a dramatic surge of ISIS in Afghanistan.² Though the Central Asian republics share Russia’s concern about the spread of extremist ideologies from Afghanistan, they have not publicly expressed the view that the United States has facilitated the movement of extremist groups out of Afghanistan and into neighboring territories.

The narco-economy. The cultivation of opium and the production and trafficking of heroin remain a multibillion-dollar industry and a chief concern of Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbors.³ According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Afghanistan Opium Survey for 2018, 263,000 hectares were under cultivation that year. This was a drop from the all-time-high of 328,000 hectares reported in 2017.⁴ The drop, however, was due to severe drought in Afghanistan rather than to any effective counternarcotic policies or improved rule of law. Afghanistan remains the world’s largest supplier of opium, accounting for about three-quarters of global production. While yields and prices fell in 2018 because of the drought and a supply glut, in 2017 heroin generated up to \$6.6 billion in exports for the Afghan economy, and the taxing of local farms involved in poppy cultivation contributes annually up to \$121 million to the Taliban and another \$63 million to other anti-government groups.⁵ Thus, in addition to adding significantly to the Afghan economy, opiate production and distribution serve as a steady source of revenue for the Taliban and other armed groups battling the Afghan government and its international allies. According to UNODC, the illegal trafficking in opiates from Afghanistan affects every part of the world except Latin America.

Opiates produced in Afghanistan, mainly in the form of heroin, find their way to Central Asia and Russia in large quantities. Between 2011 and 2015, as many as 74.5 tons of pure heroin annually followed the so-called northern route from Afghanistan into Central Asia and Russia.⁶ The proposed infrastructure projects involving road and railway connections between Afghanistan and Central Asia have raised concerns that the drug trade could potentially benefit from such improvements in transport. However, observers have noted that corruption, the complicity of security forces, and the economic and social crisis in some Central Asian states may be more important factors in fueling Central Asia’s drug problem than improved infrastructure and better trade relations with Afghanistan.⁷

National and transnational extremism. While the Central Asian states frequently express their fear of extremism migrating from Afghanistan to Central Asia, they are also aware that

AFGHANISTAN AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS (2018)

	Population (millions)	GDP (billions US)	Afghan Imports (millions US)	Afghan Exports (millions US)
Afghanistan	37.2	\$19.4		
Kazakhstan	18.3	\$170.5	\$790.80	\$4.40
Kyrgyzstan	6.3	\$8.1	\$0.50	\$0.02
Tajikistan	9.1	\$7.5	\$95.80	\$3.40
Turkmenistan	5.9	\$40.8	\$385.40	\$0.90
Uzbekistan	33.0	\$50.5	\$553.90	\$2.20

Source: World Bank's World Development Indicators (population and GDP); and Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (trade).

homegrown extremism colors their international reputation, particularly when reports surface of Central Asian nationals fighting alongside ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The primary drivers of extremism in Central Asia as a whole have been linked to economic stagnation, repressive regimes, and to some degree the rediscovery of political identities.⁸

The Central Asian states have provided a fertile ground for ISIS recruitment, particularly in the Fergana Valley, which traverses Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. It is estimated that close to five thousand Central Asian foreign fighters have traveled to Iraq and Syria, of whom 1,500 are from Uzbekistan alone.⁹ Those who survive and return home bring back extremist ideologies and firsthand combat experience. The punitive actions of Central Asian governments often go beyond the targeting of ex-combatants to affect religious groups and politically marginalized populations. The crackdown on religious and political activities further deepens resentment toward the state.

Alarm bells sounded long ago in Central Asia, Moscow, and the European capitals over the rapid expansion of local and ISIS-inspired extremism in Uzbekistan and beyond. Measures such as those proposed by the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to combat extremism have called for “unified and concerted efforts” to focus on terrorism, extremism, and transnational organized crime.¹⁰ However, these regional frameworks fail time and again when it comes to implementing coordinated counterterrorism policies.

As one scholar has noted, “They routinely fail to address the multiple and complex ways that these activities intersect. This is a serious oversight. It makes collective security initiatives incapable of appropriately countering local and regional security threats.”¹¹

While there is greater recognition of and willingness to participate in good forms of cooperation across Central Asia with respect to the grave threats radicalization and terrorism present, when it comes to understanding the root causes and finding workable national and regional solutions, bad and sometimes outright ugly failures come to light.¹² Police action, repression, and punitive measures alone have failed to produce meaningful progress. However, on the whole, Central Asia has fared far better in preventing ISIS-sponsored and ISIS-inspired attacks than the Middle East or even Europe. This is perhaps due more to a relatively smaller ISIS presence in Central Asia than in the Middle East, and not necessarily to better policies per se.¹³

Recent Policy Reorientations toward Greater Stability

Several major recent policy reorientations on the part of the United States, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan could, if leveraged properly, help address the problems in Afghanistan that have limited the prospects for increased economic cooperation in the Greater Central Asia region to foster greater regional stability. The important policy shifts are Uzbekistan’s greater openness and adoption of a leadership role in the region with the accession to the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016, and Afghanistan’s and the United States’ turn toward peace-centered strategies beginning in 2018—but as Afghan president Ashraf Ghani’s bid for peace is key to the success of other countries’ efforts, the discussion starts there.

PRESIDENT GHANI’S PEACE AGENDA

The Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation has become the main forum and vehicle for Afghanistan to conduct peace efforts to end the violence in Afghanistan.¹⁴ At the first meeting of the Kabul Process, in June 2017, attendees urged all groups to start peace talks. Without an effective policy directive, however, the anemic urging bore no fruit. That changed at the second meeting of the Kabul Process, in February 2018, when President Ghani announced that he was prepared for unconditional talks with the Taliban. The Taliban did not respond to this outreach. Nonetheless, after the United States initiated talks with the Taliban that did not include the Afghan leadership, Ghani announced in November 2018 the creation of an Advisory Board for Peace, citing a need to “focus attention on the peace process.”¹⁵

The Advisory Board, which the president himself chairs, sought representation, through a rushed and widely criticized process, from leading political actors, including former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, and from “all thirty-four” of Afghanistan’s provinces. A Government Negotiation Team, led by the president’s chief of staff (later elevated to a minister), was simultaneously formed to work under the guidance of the Advisory Board.¹⁶ Both the Advisory Board and the team are subjects of intense debate and controversy: the Advisory Board, for example, has met only a few times since its first meeting on December 17, 2018.¹⁷ The Negotiation Team

The United States introduced its new strategy for South Asia in 2017. The regional element of the policy focused on Pakistan, but had little to say about Central Asia—a lacuna noted by Central Asian policymakers.

has failed to garner respect from Afghans, to meet the Taliban in person, or to attend any of the recent talks between the Taliban and the United States or the Taliban and Afghan groups in Abu Dhabi, Moscow, and Doha.¹⁸ Under pressure from the United States and from Afghan opposition and civil society

groups, the Afghan government has indicated a willingness to reconsider the composition of the Negotiation Team to ensure broad-based acceptance across Afghanistan.¹⁹ When intra-Afghan dialogue finally took place on July 7 and 8, 2019, in Doha, where some Afghan officials met with the Taliban alongside other Afghans, the outcome was a joint statement that broadly outlined a road map for the peace process.²⁰

About the same time the Advisory Board and Negotiating Team were created, President Ghani appointed (then later replaced) Muhammad Umer Daudzai, a potential presidential hopeful and former minister of interior, as head of the Secretariat for the High Peace Council (HPC) and presidential envoy for regional peace.²¹ With this move, Ghani eliminated a potential political competitor while also boosting the HPC's standing after a period of dormancy (the HPC was established in 2010 but has been inactive for the most part, though never disbanded). Widely criticized for lacking political weight and capacity, both the Advisory Board and the Negotiation Team effectively operated in parallel with the HPC. With the recent appointment of Abdul Salam Rahimi as State Minister for Peace Affairs, the fate of multiple entities with duplicative peace-related mandates remains unclear.²²

After outmaneuvering his critics in this fashion, President Ghani convened a consultative loya jirga in April 2019, which brought together some 3,200 delegates from across the country, who adopted a twenty-three-point declaration endorsing Ghani's agenda for peace. The loya jirga also brought to light internal rifts within Afghanistan, as it was boycotted by almost all major political actors. (The few exceptions included the National Unity Government's chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah.)²³ To complicate things further, the consultative loya jirga called for the creation of yet another bureaucratic layer in the form of a full-fledged government ministry in charge of peace.²⁴ Creation of this layer, however, seems to be the only tangible outcome of that costly exercise.

THE UNITED STATES' SOUTH ASIA STRATEGY

The United States introduced its new strategy for South Asia in August 2017. The strategy called for “a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan,” but made this contingent on military gains.²⁵ The regional element of the policy focused on putting pressure on Pakistan so that it would reduce support for the Taliban and encourage them to enter into negotiations. The US strategy had little to say about Central Asia—a lacuna noted by Central Asian policymakers.²⁶

A year later, after mixed results on the battlefield, the United States set aside its long-standing policy of not talking directly to the Taliban without the participation of the Afghan government and began discussions with the movement's political office in Doha. In September 2018, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed the US State Department's special representative



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meets with Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, and former president Hamid Karzai at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on June 25, 2019. (Jacquelyn Martin/Reuters)

for Afghan reconciliation and given a mandate to negotiate with the Taliban the terms of a possible US military withdrawal from Afghanistan in exchange for a commitment to ensure that Afghanistan will not become a haven for international terrorists. Khalilzad's mandate also included urging the Taliban and the Afghan government to agree on a cease-fire and begin negotiating a future political settlement.

Even as he made progress on issues between the United States and the Taliban, Khalilzad urged the Afghan government and the Taliban to form negotiating teams and begin to engage with each other.²⁷ Though this has not yet happened, perhaps the most dramatic recent meeting occurred in Moscow in February 2019. Taliban representatives sat around the same table exchanging views with a wide array of Afghan political actors (though not Afghan government representatives).²⁸ A meeting that would have included government representatives was scheduled to take place later in Doha in April, but planning for it halted when no agreement was reached on the composition of the Kabul delegation.

The apparent determination of the United States to withdraw responsibly from Afghanistan has helped align the region. Moreover, the United States, Russia, and China are slowly finding common ground in their different perspectives on the Afghan conflict.²⁹ Tensions between the

United States and Russia over Afghanistan, for example, have greatly eased.³⁰ But Central Asia as a region does not appear to be a coherent part of the strategic thinking about Afghanistan's future—though Ambassador Khalilzad did visit Tashkent in the context of his peace efforts. Without clarity on the role of the Central Asian states, it is difficult for regional countries to adjust their own strategies. Central Asian countries have expressed doubt as to whether the United States has clear aims and the firmness of purpose to allow its longest war to transition to a peaceful conclusion, albeit not in the form it originally wanted.³¹

UZBEKISTAN'S OPENING

Among the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has been most active in seeking a path toward improved regional integration. Shavkat Mirziyoyev's ascension to the presidency in Tashkent in 2016, following the death of President Islam Karimov, opened up prospects for important shifts in Uzbekistan's domestic and foreign policies. Mirziyoyev initiated a policy of opening up to the world and immediate neighbors, both politically and economically. He also initiated governance reforms and granted new freedoms to Uzbekistan's citizens. These waves of changes, sometimes called the "Uzbek Spring," have led to increased citizen participation in public life and national governance.³²

Uzbekistan, which borders all four other Central Asian countries, declared Central Asia to be the priority of its foreign policy. President Mirziyoyev has sought to increase trade with all these neighbors and reduce tensions, in particular with Tajikistan over water management, energy issues, and efforts to counter violent extremists. This reorientation has set the stage for Uzbekistan's renewed interest, over the past several years, in Afghanistan's peace process and in achieving greater economic connectivity with Afghanistan and Uzbekistan's other Central Asia neighbors. Uzbekistan sees Afghanistan, which is among the country's top eight trade partners, not just as an extension of Central Asia but as an opportunity to expand trade and commerce with South Asia. A conference on Afghanistan held in Tashkent in March 2018, on the heels of February's Kabul Process conference, cemented Uzbekistan's leading role in the promotion of deepened political and economic links between Afghanistan and Central Asia and indicated a strong interest in supporting Afghanistan's peace process.

The various regional forums to which Uzbekistan belongs—including the Asian Development Bank (ADB)—facilitated Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, the SCO, the C5+1 platform (the five Central Asian countries plus the United States, potentially becoming C6+1 with the inclusion of Afghanistan), and the Heart of Asia—Istanbul Process—have provided Uzbekistan with an opportunity to project leadership in areas of cooperation and mutual benefit.³³ These vehicles for exerting regional leadership build on Uzbekistan's experience in the mid-1990s under President Karimov, when the Afghanistan-focused 6+2 group was formed under the auspices of the United Nations.

Moreover, Uzbekistan has developed a multifaceted bilateral relationship with the United States, culminating in an official visit by President Mirziyoyev to the White House in May 2018. Recently, the United States and Uzbekistan successfully concluded their Annual Bilateral Consultation for 2019. President Trump highlighted the importance of new military, trade, and investment relations between the two countries.³⁴ Military cooperation, potentially entailing Uzbekistan's assistance to



The Freedom Bridge, also known as the Friendship Bridge, in northern Afghanistan is the only fixed link across the Uzbek–Afghan border. (Photo by Oleksandr Rupeta/Alamy Stock Photo)

US operations in Afghanistan, is key to these renewed relations. General Joseph Votel, US Central Command commander, visited Uzbekistan days before the official visit of the Uzbek president to Washington to finalize details on military cooperation. Uzbekistan continues to play an important role in the United States’ strategic calculus concerning Afghanistan.

All of these developments leave Uzbekistan well placed to advance a Central Asian initiative to coordinate with other peace and security-related forums concerning Afghanistan. Tashkent could also be a convenient location, both geographically and politically, for follow-up meetings to the Doha and Moscow talks and the potential merging of these US- and Russia-led tracks within an overarching Afghan peace process. Further, the integration of Afghanistan with its immediate northern neighbors—in the US and European calculus for Central Asia, by focusing on economic connectivity in addition to security cooperation—would incentivize the Central Asian republics to view Afghanistan as a partner for reaching new markets rather than as a threat and source of problems.³⁵

CONVERGING STRATEGIES?

The three major shifts in policy discussed above—President Ghani’s peace agenda, the United States’ peace-focused negotiations in Doha, and Uzbekistan’s newfound openness and leadership in promoting regional integration—could converge on a general agenda for peace, and shared strategies for getting there. A sign of this unexpected but possible outcome was the convening of the “Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Connectivity,” which highlighted a potentially new era in regional and international cooperation with Afghanistan. The March 2018 conference was attended by the United States, Russia, China, the United Nations, and twenty other countries and international organizations. Attendees endorsed the need for a political settlement to end the conflict in Afghanistan.³⁶ Cochaired by President Mirziyoyev and his Afghan counterpart, the forum brought together regional countries directly involved in the conflict (through proxies and other clients), as well as regional and global powers (which often are at odds with each other), to address the sources of and solutions to the long-standing conflict. Though largely symbolic, the conference culminated in a clear international consensus that was formalized in the Tashkent Declaration, which promised to pave the way for a regional agreement with specific security and economic cooperation goals in order to achieve greater regional peace and stability.

The Tashkent Conference also triggered a series of follow-up visits and exchanges between high-level Afghan and Uzbek officials, including meetings in Kabul in October 2018 between Uzbek foreign minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and Afghan president Ashraf Ghani and his predecessor Hamid Karzai, and chief executive officer Abdullah Abdullah.³⁷ Most recently, on March 5, 2019, Afghan national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib visited Tashkent for a meeting with Viktor Makhmudov, secretary of the National Security Council of Uzbekistan.³⁸

Such meetings are essential to make progress on the declaration points that require bilateral actions. Historically, high-level meetings have often resulted in limited outcomes as the machinery of government often fails to follow through on the decisions of political leaders with concrete actions.

In light of the changing dynamics of the Afghan conflict and the United States’ willingness to work with the region, the Tashkent Conference, and to some extent recent Moscow meetings, could complement US efforts. The Afghan government sees Tashkent as central to its peace process approach, hoping to leverage the cooperation of its northern neighbors to reduce Pakistan’s influence. In a recent meeting with the Uzbek foreign minister, President Ghani underlined that the Tashkent Conference was “aligned with Afghan government’s peace initiative” and was a “model of regional cooperation.”³⁹ Though the Tashkent Conference reflected an international and regional consensus on the desire for a political settlement in Afghanistan, it did not commit the parties to take concrete and measurable actions toward achieving peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. In such conferences, the US policy position sets the tone, as the United States contributes by far the largest share of international security and economic assistance to Afghanistan.

A Region of Opportunity

As part of the engagement strategy, each Central Asian country has sought ways to contribute to stability in Afghanistan while positioning itself to take advantage of the potentially huge benefits to be reaped from greater economic development and connectivity should a peaceful Afghanistan allow these isolated countries easier access to the world.

UZBEKISTAN

The reforms and openness advanced by Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev have enabled that country to emerge as a leading regional player, exerting influence in various regional forums to which the country belongs, such as CAREC, the SCO, and the Heart of Asia Process. Uzbekistan's history of regional leadership extends back to the mid-1990s during the presidency of Islam Karimov, who was instrumental in proposing the UN-backed 6+2 initiative to find a peaceful solution to the Afghan problem.

A regional platform to address Afghanistan-centered issues with cooperation from the country's six immediate neighbors plus the United States and Russia (the 6+2 format) is critically needed. Because of the ongoing complexities of the separate US- and Russia-led peace tracks, a Central Asian city such as Samarkand, which has rich historical significance for the wider region, could provide both a venue for and the necessary Uzbek–Central Asian regional leadership to the peace process in Afghanistan. Both the 6+2 and the C5+1 (with Afghanistan included in both) frameworks could be good candidates. A 6+2 regional forum configuration, cochaired by the UN, could be revived, among several other options. What brings hope to Uzbekistan's ability to be an effective regional broker is its renewed relationship and credibility with Afghanistan as well as with the great powers, such as the United States and Russia, and its more immediate neighbors. For instance, when President Mirziyoyev visited Washington to meet with President Trump in May 2018, he succeeded in improving relations with the United States without undercutting Uzbekistan's relations with Moscow and Beijing.⁴⁰

KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan is the other relatively large major Central Asian republic that has flexed its political muscle in support of Afghanistan and regional stability. Shortly after Afghan president Ghani's visit to Tashkent in December 2017, Kazakhstan, the first Central Asian state to land a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, utilized part of its one-month presidency of the Security Council in January 2018 to highlight the importance of building a regional partnership between Afghanistan and Central Asia and strengthening the linkages between security and economic development in this pivotal relationship. According to Kairat Umarov, Kazakhstan's permanent representative to the UN, "Until we made it a top priority again [on the Security Council], Afghanistan was merely a second or third order concern of the Council."⁴¹

In early January 2018, Ambassador Umarov led a Security Council visit to Kabul (the council's first since 2010) to learn how the council could further assist efforts on the ground. The delegation also used the opportunity to convey, in Umarov's words, "the need to view Afghanistan not

Because of the ongoing complexities of the separate US- and Russia-led peace tracks, a Central Asian city could provide both a venue for and regional leadership to the peace process in Afghanistan.

as a threat to security in the region but as an important partner.” He added, “It is critical to integrate the economies of Afghanistan and neighboring countries, including the Central Asian States, through enhanced interaction and connectivity, by implementing regional infrastructure, trade, investment, transit and

transportation projects.”⁴² Umarov stressed that the council’s visit achieved a “breakthrough” by recognizing that “you cannot fence off Afghanistan” and that, on the contrary, “achieving greater regional connectivity is essential to building sustainable peace.”⁴³

Shortly after the visit, Kazakhstan convened a special session of the Security Council to confirm a new, heightened level of cooperation on political, security, and economic matters between Afghanistan and Central Asia. “Regional cooperation offers opportunities to address common concerns, including counter-terrorist financing, improving border security, fostering dialogue with religious institutions and leaders, and countering human trafficking and drug smuggling,” explained UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his remarks to the council.⁴⁴ Kairat Abdrakhmanov, Kazakhstan’s foreign minister, further pointed out in his country’s presidential statement that little progress could be made on border management, counternarcotics efforts, economic development, and other important issues without Central Asia’s involvement.⁴⁵

The session also reiterated the support of the Security Council’s fifteen members for earlier UN General Assembly and Security Council resolutions on Afghanistan. Both the Security Council’s visit to Kabul and its special session on Afghanistan demonstrated the heightened investment of Kazakh political leadership in the Afghan peace process, buttressing Kazakhstan’s longer-standing economic and development assistance engagement with respect to Afghanistan.

TAJIKISTAN

Tajikistan convened two noteworthy international meetings in 2018 that addressed issues of central concern to Afghanistan and the broader region. The first, the High-Level International Conference on Countering Terrorism and Preventing Violent Extremism, held in early May in Dushanbe, brought together some four hundred delegates from forty countries and thirty international organizations. In reference to the meeting’s Dushanbe Declaration, Farhod Salim, Tajikistan’s ambassador to the United States, recalled the Joint Action Plan for Central Asia (November 30, 2011) as the first comprehensive regional framework within the UN’s broader Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.⁴⁶ A few months after the Dushanbe meeting, Kazakhstan’s foreign minister, Kairat Abdrakhmanov, presented the “Code of Conduct Towards Achieving a World Free of Terrorism,” which contained ten straightforward measures that countries can commit to in the fight against terrorism, at a signing ceremony at the United Nations. The document, which was closely related to the themes addressed in Dushanbe, was signed by the foreign ministers and representatives of more than seventy nations.⁴⁷

The second Tajikistan-hosted meeting, the High-Level International Conference on the International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development, took place in June. It brought together representatives of governmental, international, business, and civil society

organizations, as well as scientists and experts, to promote integrated water resource management plans and the implementation of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's water-related Sustainable Development Goals. Tajikistan's shared use of the massive Amu Darya river basin with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan and the common hydropower transmission lines project (CASA-1000) it shares with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kyrgyzstan make its demonstrated leadership on water management issues timely.

These back-to-back diplomatic-expert forums in Dushanbe have drawn greater regional and global attention to how the Central Asian states might better contribute to peacebuilding activities and strengthening regional cooperation and connectivity with Afghanistan. That increased world attention is expected to translate into enhanced resources and political support for Central Asia in pursuing these goals.

OTHER REGIONAL INITIATIVES

Through the ADB-facilitated CAREC program, with additional support from the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) and the Heart of Asia forums, Central Asian countries have begun to expand their trade and transport ties with Afghanistan. In particular, "hard" investments in transport infrastructure along CAREC Corridors 3 (connecting Afghanistan and all five Central Asian republics), 5 (connecting Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and western China), and 6 (connecting Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan), along with new "soft" instruments (e.g., the ADB-facilitated Cross-Border Transport Agreement, signed by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan), have accelerated cross-border economic exchanges in one of the least economically integrated regions of the world.⁴⁸ In January 2018, Eklil Hakimi, then Afghan minister of finance, announced that as part of a new trade and transit agreement between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan would reduce transit fees for Afghan goods by 50 percent; now charging only \$1,250 per container of goods that travels through Uzbekistan.⁴⁹

Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have also exerted regional and broader international leadership relative to Afghanistan by hosting two RECCA conferences, one in November 2017 in Ashgabat and one in March 2012 in Dushanbe. Both focused on regional energy cooperation. Afghanistan could serve as a major conduit for energy flows from low-population-density, energy-rich Central Asia into densely populated and energy-poor South Asia. Beginning in December 2005, successive RECCA conferences have provided a regional platform for Central, South, and Southwest Asian foreign and economic ministers to engage their counterparts in Kabul with the aim of forging a consensus around concrete policies and investment project opportunities, centering on Afghanistan, that would deepen cross-border economic relations. At RECCA-VII in Ashgabat, for instance, a ministerial statement was signed for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan 500-kilovolt line (TAP-500), while the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India Natural Gas (TAPI) Pipeline Company reported on its recent contract with an engineering firm to commence design and survey work. Once implemented, the latter megaproject (estimated to cost \$22.5 billion) is expected to accelerate regional economic interdependence and demonstrate the value of regional cooperation.

Earlier, the RECCA-V gathering in Dushanbe lent support to the Central Asia–South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project's newly established national working groups dedicated

to the project's implementation. CASA-1000, as the project is known, will bring hydropower from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan via new electrical transmission lines to Afghanistan and Pakistan and is expected to net Afghanistan up to an estimated \$175 million annually. It will also generate indirect employment opportunities for more than one hundred thousand people and link the economies of Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.⁵⁰ Similar tangible benefits are projected for other priority trade facilitation, natural resource extraction, and transport initiatives, including:

- a cross-border transport agreement among Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan;
- efforts to promote customs harmonization and cross-border economic zones after RECCA-V; and
- the Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transport Route agreement, signed at the November 2017 RECCA conference, which will connect Afghan traders with regional markets in Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey and help Afghan traders reach more distant markets.

Alongside the work of the eleven-member-nation CAREC initiative and the fourteen-member-nation Heart of Asia Process, RECCA has succeeded in sustaining a dialogue on Afghan regional economic priorities that matter to the states of Central Asia and other regional development partners on seven occasions since 2005. Moreover, the forum's inclusive approach to regional cooperation has succeeded at harnessing the talents and resources of regional governments and international agencies. Increasingly, scholars, the business community, and civil society organizations have become involved, too. Finally, through the sponsorship of exhibitions featuring private-sector products; initiating a new RECCA Chamber of Commerce and Industry that includes chambers of commerce from all five Central Asian states, Afghanistan, and their regional neighbors; and by engaging business leaders in policy dialogue, RECCA has created new opportunities for facilitating private investment and innovative regional public-private-partnerships. At the same time, if this critical regional platform is to lock in the economic cooperation gains achieved in recent years, as manifested in greater openness and cross-border commercial exchange, a far more serious commitment to and skillful follow-through on regional investment projects and policy priorities agreed to at the RECCA conferences are urgently needed. Rigorous economic impact analyses for all regional investment projects and closer collaboration between and among RECCA, CAREC, the Heart of Asia, and other regional bodies and informal platforms would enhance Afghanistan's economic and political ties with its northern neighbors and beyond.

NEW REGIONAL MEGAPROJECTS

As evidenced by the proliferation since 2005 of regional cooperation forums that have helped strengthen cross-border commercial ties between the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, regional economic cooperation has facilitated essential advances in the areas of trade and infrastructure connectivity. By 2016, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan boasted two of the highest trade volumes with Afghanistan, estimated at \$700 million and \$500 million, respectively. Today, more than 50 percent of Afghanistan's trade is with its immediate neighbors.⁵¹ Trade is expected to pick up as average regional transit costs decrease as a result of initiatives such as the Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transport Route agreement. This agreement, reached in November

2017, built on earlier Afghan transit and trade agreements with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and with the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In terms of critical infrastructure development that could directly enhance Central Asian-Afghanistan trade and transit ties, the World Bank–supported Trans-Hindukush Road Connectivity Project is only about a year behind schedule. By November 2020, it is expected to rehabilitate the 86-kilometer Salang Pass (and its 2.8-kilometer tunnel) connecting the south of Afghanistan with the country’s north—and, by extension, with Afghanistan’s northern neighbors.⁵² Similarly, a Memorandum of Understanding recently signed by Afghanistan, China, the Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan will extend the reach of the region’s optical fiber network, driving down the cost of internet usage and expanding the potential of the region’s knowledge economy.

In addition to progress in the “software” of regional economic cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan, four “hardware” mega-infrastructure initiatives are also witnessing tangible gains.

The **TAPI Pipeline** project has begun to shift from technical surveys (e.g., dealing with environmental and social impact assessments, land acquisition plans, geotechnical surveys, and unexploded ordinance surveys) and procurement to construction activities.⁵³ With development of the Galkynysh Gas Field in Turkmenistan estimated to cost \$15 billion and the pipeline itself to run another \$7.5 billion, the completed TAPI project is projected to export, over three decades, up to 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. It is also expected to generate thousands of construction jobs and around \$400 million in annual revenue for the Afghan treasury.⁵⁴

Technical and economic surveys for the new **Five Nations Railway Corridor** connecting China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran are about 50 percent complete, according to the Afghanistan National Railway Authority.⁵⁵ The estimated cost of the railway is \$2 billion, and roughly half its 2,100-kilometer length will lie in Afghanistan. Some analysts view the likelihood of Afghanistan securing the necessary financing for its segment, even with some ADB support, as “optimistic.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the project has significant potential to spur job creation and larger trade volumes between the participating countries. It is also engaging other neighboring Central Asian states beyond the five main beneficiary countries. For example, a Memorandum of Understanding recently signed by Afghanistan and Uzbekistan details a new international consortium (including banks, international development organizations, and national governments) in support of the rail segment between Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat, and Afghanistan and Turkmenistan recently agreed to build a new “main and loop” railway in Aqina, Afghanistan, just across the Turkmenistan border.⁵⁷

With the completion of most procurement packages for the **CASA-1000** transmission line (with the exception of Pakistan’s portion of the line from Torkham to Nawshehra) and with the project’s public awareness component well under way, the final phase of construction is about to commence with the contracting out of the large (563-kilometer) Afghan portion of the line to the Indian firms Kalpataru Power Transmission Limited India and KEC International India.⁵⁸ Another environmental and social impact assessment is now urgently needed for this estimated \$1.2 billion project, but already CASA-1000 has started to confirm the high expectations for deepening regional energy cooperation between Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan by increasing cross-border hydropower electricity trade from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Overall, the transmission line will result in the creation of a Central and South Asian energy market.



A woman walks by a wall in Herat, Afghanistan, that was painted with portraits ahead of the TAPI Pipeline groundbreaking ceremony in February 2018. (Photo by Jalil Rezayee/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

The Central Asian and Afghan elements of **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** have begun to expand opportunities across Eurasia for broadening trade, constructing infrastructure, and promoting cultural exchange. As part of its Memorandum of Understanding with China, Afghanistan welcomed, in September 2016, a commercial freight train with goods valued at \$4 million that had been transported some 7,300 kilometers in fourteen days from eastern China by way of a winding route through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.⁵⁹ The BRI will eventually provide access to the Arabian Sea for landlocked Central Asian countries—though this will also require the cooperation of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan.

Along with the five Central Asian republics, Afghanistan is now exploring other BRI-related regional economic cooperation projects in the areas of energy development, natural resource extraction, and financial services, among others. China has pledged investments totaling more than \$100 billion to the countries of Greater Central Asia, to be sourced, in part, from a \$40 billion Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Inevitably, each of the new regional economic megaprojects has faced and will continue to face numerous political and operational hurdles in several critical areas.

The transformative potential of the regional megaprojects makes their pursuit worthwhile. They are slowly knitting together the region's distinct national economies with prospects for "win-win" trade and investment opportunities.

Security remains at the top of the list of concerns of Afghanistan's neighbors. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan estimates civilian casualties during 2018 to be 10,993 (3,804 were killed and 7,189 injured), a 7 percent increase over 2017.⁶⁰ Apart from the human dimension, the need to provide extra

security for the mega-infrastructure projects greatly increases their building and operating costs.

Afghanistan continues to rank near the very bottom in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (172 out of 180 countries in the 2018 ranking). Despite the Ghani administration's stated commitment to reducing graft, **corruption** continues unabated and can be expected to divert scarce public and private resources away from the megaprojects discussed above, especially during procurement and project implementation phases.⁶¹

When the above Greater Central Asia regional projects reach Afghanistan, developers must contend with rugged, mountainous terrain, deep valleys, and a relatively dry climate with limited rainfall. In many parts of the country, **public infrastructure** is still limited or in need of rehabilitation, further complicating efforts to navigate Afghanistan's often **inhospitable topography** and raising the costs of doing so. **Other operational issues**, such as indemnity payments to private landholders along the proposed pipeline and railway, ensuring the reliability of transmission routes in Afghanistan, and the need to train a local workforce both for the creation and maintenance of the new regional development initiatives, will have associated costs.

These barriers notwithstanding, the economically and politically transformative potential of each regional economic megaproject makes the projects' steady and careful pursuit worthwhile. They are slowly knitting together the region's distinct national economies with prospects for "win-win" trade and investment opportunities and increased interdependence. This is perhaps why yet another regional forum, the India–Central Asia Dialogue, was convened in January 2018 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The foreign ministers of India, Afghanistan, and the five Central Asian republics met to express their commitment to creating "real opportunities for expanding economic cooperation" and to "assist[ing] in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan through the implementation of joint infrastructure, transit and transport, [and] energy projects, including regional cooperation and investment projects."⁶²

From the expected improved levels of trust generated between the nations and peoples of Greater Central Asia, each of the megaprojects can contribute to growth in regional social capital and political stability, and thereby directly benefit the interests of Central Asian states eager to more skillfully manage their integration into a dynamic but uncertain global economy.

Recommendations

The openness of the Central Asian republics to cooperate politically and economically among themselves and with Afghanistan, along with significant policy shifts in Afghanistan and the United States for finding a peace settlement to Afghanistan's decades-old conflict, presents a new, unique, and win-win opportunity for Afghanistan, the region, and the United States.

First, the Central Asian republics should band together collectively along the lines of C5+1+1 or a revamped version of the UN-backed 6+2 framework, so that they can provide growing political leadership in support of the Afghan peace process and development. Such an effort should directly reinforce the US-led Doha track and the Russia-led Moscow track, and contribute to a more inclusive and credible intra-Afghan peace process. The five Central Asian States, Uzbekistan in particular, have much to offer in assisting these concurrent initiatives related to Afghanistan's peace process by hosting regular follow-up meetings, giving regular political support, and encouraging regional confidence building through cross-border economic cooperation with Afghanistan. Collectively, the Central Asian states stand to benefit from engaging Afghanistan on larger-scale economic integration projects, from the Five Nations Railway Corridor to the TAPI Pipeline and CASA-1000 mega-energy projects. These large infrastructure projects allow Afghanistan to be seen as a partner in development rather than as a threatening breeding ground for violent extremist ideologies.

Just as the January 2019 India–Central Asia Dialogue brought Afghanistan into the traditional C5 formulation, it is encouraging that the C5+1 ministerial forum with the United States—under way since November 2015—is now entertaining the idea of including Afghanistan, too, possibly expanding into a C6+1 ministerial forum. Similarly, the US–Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement should integrate Afghanistan, in light of the potential mutual benefits to be derived by all parties from treating Afghanistan as an integral part of Central Asia.

Second, individually, but still in support of a stronger regional approach, each of the Central Asia states has a contribution to make to peacebuilding in Afghanistan and strengthening connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan. Uzbekistan could be encouraged to build on the momentum created by recent US peace efforts and the Tashkent Conference in March 2018 by pressing ahead with an institutional follow-up to the conference's commitments as outlined in the Tashkent Declaration. Specifically, it could formally propose cohosting with the UN a revamped 6+2 ministerial forum to coordinate peace and regional cooperation efforts with respect to Afghanistan. Initially, that effort might build on the recent US-Russia-China tripartite forum and its expected expansion to include Pakistan, India, and Iran. In consultation with the Afghan government and the UN, Uzbekistan may also consider establishing a secretariat and potentially headquartering the revamped 6+2 ministerial forum in Tashkent. In cementing its internal economic and political reforms, it could further invest in efforts that harness ongoing regional cooperation programs (e.g., through CAREC and the BRI initiative); in this regard it is promising to see that it will host the RECCA-VIII conference in 2020. Uzbekistan should be encouraged to increase bilateral trade and commerce with Afghanistan and the United States.

Kazakhstan should continue to exert influence politically in Central Asia by participating in major regional and global bodies, such as the SCO and the UN, and through its relations with major powers, especially Russia and China, in support of concrete measures to build peace and greater regional connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan (e.g., increased Kazakh wheat exports to Afghanistan). Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan should continue to assist completion of the CASA-1000 project and contribute to improved implementation of the ADB-facilitated Cross-Border Transport Agreement with Tajikistan and Afghanistan and strengthening of the CAREC Corridor 3.

Building on its two international conferences hosted in 2018, one on countering terrorism and one on managing water for sustainable development, Tajikistan is well positioned to promote innovative new measures for improved Afghan-Tajikistan bilateral cooperation and Afghan–Central Asia regional cooperation to combat violent extremism and improve opportunities for transboundary water sharing. As cochair of the Heart of Asia conference in 2019, Tajikistan should work with Afghanistan to maintain this important regional cooperation framework. Turkmenistan should continue to focus on accelerating implementation of the two major energy projects that traverse Afghanistan, the TAPI Pipeline and TAP-500, as well as the Lapis Lazuli Route, which will connect Afghan traders with regional and more distant markets.

Third, Afghanistan is encouraged to use the momentum from the Tashkent Conference, as well as from renewed US, Russian, and Chinese efforts, to move forward from the intra-Afghan dialogue convened in Doha in July 2019. Specifically, it should engage the majority of political actors from across the board and launch a national and truly inclusive (i.e., embracing the opposition, such as former president Hamid Karzai, and presidential rivals, such as former national security advisor Hanif Atmar and others) consultation process leveraging existing structures, including the Afghan president’s new Advisory Board for Peace, with the goal of getting the country’s political leadership and population behind a negotiated peace with the Taliban. To safeguard the gains of the past eighteen years, the Afghan government must ensure the rights and liberties of all Afghans, men and women, and take care that the Taliban become part of the new Afghanistan—not the other way around. Integral to this effort should be an ongoing dialogue between Afghanistan and its northern neighbors, one that regularly identifies concrete political and economic measures the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan could undertake to overcome obstacles and further the causes of peace and greater economic connectivity within the region.

Fourth, the United States should commit to ending its military activities in Afghanistan with the ultimate goal of bringing peace and justice to the Afghan people, not just executing a troop withdrawal plan. Recognizing that the Afghan war can end with the cooperation of both global and regional powers, the United States, Russia, and China should agree to convene a presidential summit involving the United States, Russia, China, and the Afghan government, along with the Central Asian republics and other important regional stakeholders, to agree on a peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict based on regional and wider international cooperation. In its annual bilateral consultations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the United States should encourage the inclusion of at least one standing agenda item dedicated to strengthening collaboration on cross-border economic ties with Afghanistan and the wider Central Asia region.

In addition to participating in a presidential summit, both Russia and the United States should support the proposed revival of the 6+2 ministerial forum to coordinate peace and regional cooperation efforts with respect to Afghanistan. As part of establishing stronger state-to-state relations with the Afghan government, neighboring countries should also cease providing the Taliban with political and other types of support and should welcome greater Central Asian support for peacebuilding and economic connectivity efforts in Afghanistan.

Fifth, beyond intergovernmental relations, business-to-business cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan should be enhanced through a new RECCA Chamber of Commerce and Industries and through measures to empower women entrepreneurs, such as joint training, regional trade fairs, and other cross-border economic cooperation activities. People-to-people and educational exchanges, including joint artistic and cultural performances, should also be expanded across the region as a means of facilitating greater social and cultural understanding in greater Central Asia.

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