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## The Emergence of Transit Afghanistan

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*In October 2025, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey agreed to jointly construct a railway between Afghanistan's cities of Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. This aligns with Kabul's integration goals with the evolving connectivity of the Middle East and Central Asia. It also runs parallel with Central Asian and Eurasian states' push to engage Afghanistan in the development of regional infrastructure.*

Afghanistan's neighbors are increasingly eager to engage Kabul on issues ranging from trade and transit to security. India is particularly interested in developing close ties with Afghanistan as the latter's ties with Pakistan, New Delhi's archrival, have recently deteriorated. Islamabad accuses the Taliban of supporting the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in carrying out attacks within Pakistan. As a result, border clashes and diplomatic tensions have become a new norm in the relationship between the two sides, where Islamabad has blamed the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021 for the growing influence of the Taliban on Kabul.

India seeks to tap into this rupture between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Before the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, India had been engaged in effective cooperation with the Afghan leadership, considering the country a transit territory to reach the Central Asian market. New Delhi's close ties with pre-2021 Afghan governments were also dictated by the need to sideline Pakistan, and perhaps even China which has always regarded Afghanistan as a lucrative investment territory. Therefore, it is no wonder that New Delhi has now carefully engaged with the Taliban, inching closer to officially recognizing its leadership, in order to deepen the divide between Kabul and Islamabad. This is exemplified by the recent hosting by New Delhi of the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.

At the same time, Afghanistan is eager to distance itself from its traditional economic dependence on Pakistan. For years, the porous border between the two sides has served as a lifeline for Afghanistan and was often used by Islamabad for powerful political leverage against the Taliban. For instance, in October 2025, Pakistan shut down the border for nearly a month resulting in damages and losses totaling some \$200 million for Afghan merchants, as the latter have used Pakistan and its ports as a transit for conducting global maritime commerce. With tensions now rising, Kabul is increasingly intent on diversifying its commercial relations with Central Asia, India, Iran, and others in order to lessen the existing dependence.

To facilitate diversified partnerships, in April 2024, Kabul hosted a trade fair together with Kazakhstan--the same year Astana and Kabul signed a roadmap to increase bilateral trade to \$3 billion in the coming years. In April 2025, the Kazakh side suggested opening Kazakhstan's trading house in Kabul. They also began showing interest in mining and resource extraction across Afghanistan, with Kazakh geologists and engineers traveling to



Afghanistan to explore potential deposits which could lead to future Kazakh investments. In addition, in September 2025, Astana announced it would join the Trans-Afghan Corridor project and pledged \$500 million to construct a 120-kilometer railway from Torghundi to Herat, which would facilitate Kazakhstan's outreach to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan's seaports of Karachi and Gwadar.

Uzbekistan's trade with Afghanistan reached \$1.1 billion in 2024 with plans to increase it to \$2 billion by 2025. When it comes to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, a core component of their cooperation with Afghanistan lies within the CASA-1000 project, which aims to supply Central Asian electricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tajikistan too strives to develop connectivity with Afghanistan, when in 2024 a protocol on developing a feasibility study for the Balkhi–Lower Pyanj railway was signed.

Afghanistan's overall trade with the Central Asian countries has reached an estimated \$1.7 billion but still represents only a fraction of existing potential. Indeed, persistent security challenges continue to hamper the expansion of trade. For instance, growing tensions along the Tajik-Afghan border following two border attacks led to the deaths of five Chinese nationals working on the Tajik-Afghan border and left another five injured. On December 1, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon condemned the attacks and instructed Tajik security forces to take effective measures to prevent a recurrence of such incidents. The following day, the foreign ministers of Tajikistan and Afghanistan held a phone conversation, amid Western media attention. Reports also alleged that Dushanbe sought Russian assistance in bolstering border patrols, although these allegations have been denied by Tajik officials. The audacity of the attacks is further highlighted by the fact that they coincided with the holding of the Russia-led CSTO Collective Security Council meeting in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan—an event intended to showcase regional security cooperation.

Beyond the security dilemma, another obstacle for Kabul is geography. Despite Afghanistan's outreach to Central Asia, Afghanistan's trade with Pakistan remains a powerful factor. Though it has fallen from approximately \$5 billion annually (at its peak in 2011) to just over \$1 billion in 2024, Pakistan remains the shortest route for Afghan merchants to reach maritime routes.

Another route to lessen Afghan dependence on Pakistan is through Iran, and Kabul has actively worked on this front. Indeed, the Taliban eyes the Chabahar port as a viable gateway and the Iranian government has [offered](#) various tariff cuts for Afghan merchants and products ranging from ports, storage, and docking charges. Given India's recent rapprochement with Afghanistan, the latter's focus on Chabahar, where New Delhi is heavily invested, seems a promising development.



## The Transit Afghanistan

The Taliban leadership is thus attempting to benefit from connectivity opportunities emerging in the heart of Eurasia and South Asia, as it is a way for Afghanistan to integrate into the global economy. Surprisingly, this is what the neighboring powers around Afghanistan are likewise interested in. Russia, India, China, Iran, and others all see a potentially improved security situation if Afghanistan is included in regional projects, especially since it is increasingly seen as a transit point between major economies and regions.

Afghanistan has long played a crucial role as a transit corridor in geopolitics. Historically, various Iranian dynasties viewed the territory as a crucial passage for reaching the riches of the Indian subcontinent. During the colonial era, the British viewed Afghanistan as a connection to Central Asia and a strategic buffer against the southward expansion of the Russian Empire. Further back, major imperial powers including the Timurids, Mongols, Greeks, and Macedonians were all keen to establish direct control over the region and its commercial and transit potential.

It is therefore not a far-fetched claim that the instability and fall out of Afghanistan's participation in major regional infrastructure projects during the last 30 years have been an exception in Afghanistan's history of connectivity. Surely, previous Afghan leaderships attempted to play an active role in developing regional trade networks. For instance, in 2017 a \$2 billion Lapis Lazuli Agreement was signed between Kabul, Baku, Tbilisi, Ankara, and Ashgabat. The problem, however, was the lack of security due to the Taliban resistance against the then government. With the latter now in power officially, prospects of transregional trade through Afghanistan seem more promising.

For instance, in October 2025, 22 delegations from Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey signed a trilateral agreement on the joint implementation of a railway project between the Afghan cities of Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. The agreement, reached at a regional meeting of the International Union of Railways (IUC) held in Istanbul, could pave the way for the transit route linking East Asia with the Middle East and Europe. Each participating country will provide financial, technical, and human resources for the project. The first practical step will be the development of a \$10 million feasibility study.

The project fits into the Five-Nation Railway Corridor (FNRC) concept, which links China with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, and eventually Turkey and the EU market. The FNRC was conceived in the early 2000s and is essentially a 2,100-kilometer project which, with Afghanistan included, can offer serious competition to other routes such as the Middle Corridor, which runs through Central Asia and the South Caucasus.



The prospects of the FNRC are now more promising than ever. In 2026, Iran and Afghanistan plan to finish the last section of the railway, 225-kilometers, running from the city of Khaf to Herat. This will facilitate trans-border commerce between the two countries. If completed and then extended to other northern areas of Afghanistan, the railway could serve as a link to Central Asia all the way to China. Tehran is betting on development of this project as it would fit into its efforts to broaden its engagement with East Asia, especially China, which is considered by the Islamic Republic as an economic lifeline and a tool to minimize Western sanctions.

The Taliban government is also looking at building the 1,468-kilometer Mazar-i-Sharif–Herat–Kandahar railway project. Approved in 2023, the Taliban attempts to position Afghanistan and the proposed railway as the shortest route from India to Russia. This way Kabul will be positioned not only as a nodal point for east-west trade, but also the north-south direction, where the Moscow-sponsored INSTC aims to play a central role. The International North-South Transport Corridor runs from Russia to Iran and India; its eastern branch (via Central Asia) is what interests Afghanistan the most.

It is within this growing focus on connectivity through Central Asia and further to China and Russia that Tehran has made major moves to improve relations with Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In June 2025, Tehran and Ashgabat [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding on boosting shipping and logistics coordination.

Earlier in January, Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian visited Tajikistan, in what became a historic trip, reversing a negative trend that had characterized their bilateral relations since the 1990s. The two sides [signed](#) 22 memorandums of understanding covering infrastructure, trade, and other areas, prompting both governments to describe the improving relationship as “strategic.” Tajikistan, a landlocked country, seeks better access to major markets and is therefore particularly interested in Iran’s Chabahar and Bandar Abbas ports as links to the outside world.

Iran’s strategic ambitions extend well beyond Central Asia. An emerging component of this agenda is a transit route linking China to Iran via Central Asia. On May 12, 2025, senior railway officials from Iran, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Turkey convened during a [meeting](#) in Tehran to discuss the development of a transcontinental rail network. On May 25, 2025, the first freight train from Xi’an, China, [arrived](#) at Iran’s Aprin dry port, marking the official launch of a direct rail link between the two countries.

### **The Gulf Perspective**

The signing of various infrastructure agreements with the Taliban government highlights continued practical cooperation with the de facto Afghan authorities on cross-border infrastructure. Though this all takes place amid persistent security concerns, there is growing understanding on the part of Central Asian countries, as well as India and others, that a disengaged Afghanistan is far more dangerous than an economically integrated one.



This paves the way for Afghanistan to play a more active role in regional diplomacy and infrastructure development and creates favorable conditions for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, as they will benefit from the gains of Afghanistan's greater participation in regional and global trade. Given the Gulf countries' influence over Pakistan, one way to encourage this engagement would be for the Gulf states to facilitate a dialogue between Kabul and Islamabad to prevent further tensions. Pakistan remains a core transit route for Afghan merchants and a viable pathway for the Gulf countries to build closer economic ties with the landlocked Afghanistan. The Gulf states' mediation would be welcome given their role in facilitating prisoners exchange between Russia and Ukraine or Pakistan and India. Areas the Gulf monarchies could be interested in range from infrastructure projects and resource extraction to construction of dry ports across Afghanistan's territory. The latter point could be especially interesting given Afghanistan's reintegration in Eurasian and South Asian connectivity.

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