

# POLICY BRIEF

89, NOVEMBER 2023

## Cross-border relations between Central Asia and Afghanistan in the Taliban era: Security and connectivity implications for the region

by Mélanie Sadozai

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper aims to provide a possible answer to security issues in Central Asia following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 by recognizing regional connectivity and cross-border contacts as a key solution. This study is based on a solid knowledge of the Central Asian region developed during eight years of extensive fieldwork (2014-2023), including five years of research along the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan (2018-2023), and one-year of research along the border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan (2022-2023).

This paper suggests that, in order to ensure peace and stability in the region, it is important to support and foster localized cross-border activities as well as regional connectivity projects. This paper proposal builds on the words of Secretary General Helga Schmid (2023) who, on 26 July 2023 in Washington D.C., emphasized that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sees "more willingness for regional cooperation" from Central Asian partners.

This paper looks at the only two borders of northern Afghanistan which are currently accessible for research purposes: the 1,374 kilometre- (app. 854 mile-) long border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, more specifically the section in the Badakhshan region, and the approximately 150 kilometre- (app. 93 mile-) long border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan in the Termez area. The remaining section of the northern border of Afghanistan is shared with Turkmenistan, which is difficult to access due to travel restrictions imposed on foreigners by the latter country; even reliable secondary data is not easy to gather and mostly relies on sources from Afghanistan.

The principal objective at the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan should be to ensure that borderland communities are not confined within national borders or prevented from engaging in the people-to-people contact which has historically benefited them. The main objective at the border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan should be to ensure that cross-border trade and humanitarian aid persists.

**Dr. Mélanie Sadozai** is a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) of the George Washington University (2022-2023). She received her Ph.D. in Political Science and International Relations from the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Cultures (INALCO/Sorbonne Paris Cité) in Paris, France. Her work, based on ethnographic methods and extensive fieldwork since 2014, focuses on cross-border relations in remote areas of Afghanistan and Tajikistan in the Pamirs. Her research interests include everyday life along the border, remoteness and connectivity in high mountain regions, relations between the Taliban and Central Asian governments, and the geographical history of the border and the Pamirs. She has published academic pieces in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, the *Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, and *Problems of Post-Communism*.

© 2023 OSCE Academy in Bishkek. All rights reserved.

The views expressed and the conclusions reached in this brief are exclusively those of the author and are not necessarily shared or endorsed by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

Extracts of this Policy Brief may be quoted or reprinted without special permission for academic purposes provided that a standard source credit line is included. Academy Policy Briefs and submission guidelines are available on-line at <https://osce-academy.net/en/research/publication/policy-briefs/>.

The OSCE Academy's Policy Briefs became possible with financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Academy's Cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

## Introduction and Policy Challenge

Researching the political developments along the northern border of Afghanistan posits genuine policy implications, especially for the Central Asia states involved in border management and cross-border turnover. Additionally, connectivity and cooperation, particularly between Central Asia and European States, remain essential to the broader Eurasian security architecture (Daminov 2023; Khan and Mihr 2023). The main obstacle to bringing stability along border areas between Central Asia and Afghanistan is the little interest shown towards supporting cross-border contacts. Attention should be paid to the following issues:

- 1. Region-led initiatives.** It should be noted that the war in Ukraine is obscuring the new dynamics arising in Central Asia since the Taliban came back to power in the summer of 2021. As Russia continues to deploy its military in Ukraine, Pakistan and China are becoming more involved in Central Asia. These two countries are filling the security vacuum created by the United States' withdrawal and Russia's shift to the West, while supporting regional connectivity. This is exemplified by the Trans-Afghan Railway project aimed at connecting Uzbekistan to Pakistani ports, as well as China's Belt and Road Initiative covering Central Asia, and the "Lapis Lazuli" corridor linking Afghanistan to Turkey via the South Caucasus region (Alekbberli-Museyibova 2023). Additionally, although with limited results so far, China and the Taliban have been working towards physically connecting the Chinese and Afghan territories by building a road in the Wakhan Corridor, thus overcoming the constraints of high mountain terrain (Uddin 2023). Some of these routes materialize at two important border crossing points (BCP) between the Central Asian region and Afghanistan. First, at the "Sher Khan Bandar" BCP linking the province of Khatlon (Tajikistan) to the province of Kunduz (Afghanistan). Second, at the "Airatom" BCP linking the Surkhandarya province (Uzbekistan) to the Balkh province (Afghanistan).
- 2. Limited stability assessment in the border regions.** To date, the official narrative of the

government of Tajikistan frames the border shared with Afghanistan as a zone of danger for the country and beyond (Asia-Plus September 15, 2023). Yet, no reliable data or evidence has proven that instability stems directly from this border nor that the terrorist groups gathered in northern Afghanistan have traversed into Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, or Turkmenistan on a large scale. Reports show that Central Asian border travel is not prioritized by drug traffickers in Afghanistan (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2020), and the academic literature demonstrates that radicalized individuals targeting Central Asia do not come from Afghanistan nor from the border areas (Tucker 2022). In addition, as an answer to these identified issues, the focus of Tajikistan has been on security and border management. In August 2023, Tajikistani authorities have declared that more border checkpoints have been built and that the Tajikistani section of the border has been moved closer to the officially demarcated border with Afghanistan, now at a distance of 12 kilometres (Asia-Plus August 7, 2023). These initiatives have overlooked solutions which do not imply direct control and surveillance of borders, while the academic literature has clearly identified and pointed out the challenges faced by European-Central Asian partnerships on border management (Daminov 2023; Matveeva 2006; Schlegel 2017). A probing example is shown in Tajikistan, where issues related to the overall architecture of security forces, namely corruption, lack of internal collaboration, implication of officials in drug trafficking, and governmental distrust, have impeded progress in developing a functional border management system (Schlegel 2017).

- 3. The lack of connectivity along borders impacting borderland communities.** The main threats commonly identified in Central Asia pertain to drug trafficking and armed militants prospering in Afghanistan. As mentioned above, these issues are largely used by the President of Tajikistan, who has identified the border with Afghanistan as a

menace in his official narrative (Nourzhanov and Saikal 2021, 62). Another significant aspect remains disregarded: the economic situation of borderland populations. A series of programs was launched in the 2000s to reconnect both banks of the Pyanj River, which marks the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and create activities to improve these groups' quality of life. Activities included "cross-border markets and bridges, medical cross-border programs, tourism infrastructure, and energy provision through cross-border power grids and irrigation systems" (Sadozai 2023). Most of these programs were implemented by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The three and half-year (February 2020-September 2023)-long suspension of these cross-border contacts—and lack of connectivity thereof—due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of relations between Tajikistan's government and the Taliban has created recurring economic stress on border populations. Such an observation was already underlined one year after the closure of this border (Sadozai 2021). As a result, these groups may be tempted to turn to illegal trafficking to survive and overcome poverty (International Organization for Migration 2020).

## Policy Change

In order to achieve sustainable stability in the borderlands of Central Asia and Afghanistan, three reasonable options can be considered as starting points for policy adjustment.

The first step is to support regional and people-to-people connectivity projects implemented by local or regional actors. Authors, whether in academia or policy-making circles, have argued that stability in Afghanistan stems from regionally grounded cooperation (Rytövuori-Apunen and Usmonov 2016; Zhou 2022) often coupled with the promotion of localized cross-border trade (Gerstle 2006; Price and Hakimi 2019; Sherbut, Kanji and Hatcher 2015). However, these recommendations have barely materialized, except under the efforts of non-governmental organizations with a devel-

opment-focused agenda. The preferred strategy by Central Asian governments has rather been to reinforce border control support, which has not yet demonstrated a convincing link with stability in the region. There is thus a need to consider new avenues for sustainable security in the southern borderlands of Central Asia through connectivity and cross-border contact. Second, all of Afghanistan's northern borders should be open to trade, humanitarian aid, and the movement of cross-border communities for personal, medical, and/or work-related purposes. If borders are closed, they prevent people-to-people contact which worsens the quality of life and economic situation of borderland populations who are already impoverished (Sadozai 2021). Their wellbeing is also affected by the physical remoteness of their settlements (Kanji et al. 2012). The nexus between open borders and borderlanders' frustration with closed border situations is identified in the border studies literature (Ikotun, Akhigbe et Okunade 2021). For example, it is also observed along the nearby border between Pakistan and Afghanistan where communities strive for the permanent opening of the border (Muhammad, Aman and Nawaz 2023). This shows that the northern borders of Afghanistan are not an exception. The reopening of some of the four cross-border markets located on the border between the province of Badakhshan (Afghanistan) and the autonomous province of Badakhshan (Tajikistan) since 2 September 2023 is a positive sign that should continue to be supported. This is an important step in bringing permanent stability to the borderlands, as these markets have traditionally been beneficial for communities on both sides of the border.

Finally, following up on the previous point, financial investments should target cross-border trade facilities rather than border security management projects and infrastructure. Connected borders prove to be stable borders. The border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan remains open to humanitarian and trade traffic. In October 2022, a forum on the creation of a "Termez International Trade Center" outlined the potential of Uzbekistan-Afghanistan cross-border relations (Tolo News 2022). Once completed, the trade centre will allow Afghan citizens to enter the territory of



Uzbekistan without a visa for up to ten days, thus fostering investments and direct contact. The border areas of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan are currently secure and stable without any record of armed groups crossing it. The only incident at this border since the Taliban's takeover took place in July 2022 in the form of a rocket launch, which did not cause any casualties. The Islamic State of Khorasan Province claimed responsibility for the incident but this statement was dismissed by Taliban and Uzbekistani officials, who confirmed the border was stable (Eurasianet 2022).

Recent fieldwork conducted at Termez and Airatom, at the border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, has shown how connectivity is ensuring security and provides the most recent and reliable first-hand data about daily interactions at this border through the Termez Cargo Center (Hohmann et Sadozai 2023). This logistics terminal links Airatom (Uzbekistan) and Hairatan (Afghanistan). It opened in 2016 and comprises large facilities (warehouse storage, custom control, loading and unloading complex on a total of 40.4 acres). It allows for the shipping of significant humanitarian aid to Afghanistan through programs supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Additionally, the Center provides “transport and logistics services for customs clearance, cargo handling, storage of import-export and transit cargos” between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan (“O Kompanii [About the company]” 2018). The terminal also allows for trade turnover. In early July 2023, 12,306 tons of petrol products crossed into Afghanistan (Afghanistan Railway Authority, July 1, 2023) and Uzbekistan regularly receives fruits and vegetables from South Asia and South East Asia through Afghanistan (Hohmann and Sadozai 2023). The example of the border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan shows how an open and connected border enables development: should this border close, Afghans would not receive crucial humanitarian support and the Southern regions of Uzbekistan would not be supplied with food coming through Afghanistan.

## Recommendations

- 1. Invest** in projects to physically connect Central Asia and Afghanistan. Central Asian states should devote resources to supporting the efforts made by government and non-state actors in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who are working towards ensuring the continuity of cross-border contacts with Afghanistan. This includes promoting the consistent functioning of the cross-border markets between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, as well as permanent trade and humanitarian turnover at the Termez Cargo Center. These efforts may also entail supporting locally- and community-based initiatives along the border crossing points between Tajikistan and Afghanistan where cross-border markets take place, as well as cross-border healthcare and energy provision programs implemented by the AKDN.
- 2. Engage** at the bilateral or trilateral levels in work with non-state actors in and from Afghanistan. This can take the form of bilateral or multilateral meetings between the OSCE, officials from Central Asian countries, and non-state actors working in Afghanistan. It is worth noting that the goal is not to replicate the “Moscow format” consultations on Afghanistan which include a delegation of Taliban representatives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023). This would automatically prove that the Taliban are acknowledged as the leaders of Afghanistan. Instead, many non-state actors in Afghanistan, like the AKDN, have the means to support cross-border connectivity. Regarding the recent positive developments observed along the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in Badakhshan, Tajikistani authorities should continue ensuring that the border with Afghanistan remains open for cross-border markets and eventually resume all cross-border activities which were suspended in February 2020.
- 3. Do not follow** the “discourse of danger” defended by the authorities of Tajikistan when urging high-level engagement on Central Asia's security issues, but rather consider borders as connectivity devices.

It remains important to surpass the official narrative of the Tajikistan government which frames the border with Afghanistan as being highly dangerous, and which is a position guided by national interests above all else. Concepts such as “terrorism” or “extremism” stemming from Afghanistan have been weaponized by the authorities to justify measures taken to tackle domestic issues with the use of force. The OSCE’s Central Asian partners should instead focus on how cross-border contacts between borderland communities can benefit populations on both sides, and ultimately secure the region.

- 4. Consider** Afghanistan as a regional hub for trade and transit rather than as a locus of danger. The daily trade and humanitarian border crossings taking place between Airatom and Hairatan through the Termez Cargo Center, ensured by government and non-government actors such as the United Nations, should be considered a prime example of successful cross-border connections with Afghanistan which can occur when a border is open to traffic. A possible solution would be to support other logistics facilities along the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, where the Sher Khan Bandar BCP could be used to build a similar transit centre. This BCP is already used for commercial traffic through trucks in and out of Afghanistan and also allows for passenger crossings, mostly Afghans living in Tajikistan on route to visit their relatives (Sadozai 2023).

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Centre for European and Eurasian Studies at the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Cultures (INALCO/Sorbonne Paris Cité) in Paris, France, as well as the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington D.C. The author would like to thank Hanna Dave at the George Washington University Center for the language editing.

## References

- Afghanistan Railway Authority (@afghanrailway), “Khat Âhan Hairatân-Mazâresharif emroz. Emroz shanbe az tariq khat Âhan Hairatân-Mazâresharif 207 wâgon amwâl tejârati ke wazn majmo’i ân 12306 tan wa bakhsh ziâd ân mawâd nafti ast ba...” [Hairatan-Mazari Sharif railway line today. Today Saturday, 207 wagons of commercial goods with a total weight of 12,306 tons and most of it being petroleum products...], Twitter (July 1, 2023), retrieved October 28, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/afghanrailway/status/1675188915123400704>
- Alekberli-Museyibova Nuray, “Revitalization of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor: From Afghanistan to Europe”, The Jamestown Foundation (July 10, 2023), retrieved October 11, 2023, from <https://jamestown.org/program/revitalization-of-the-lapis-lazuli-corridor-from-afghanistan-to-europe/>
- Asia-Plus, “Tadjikistan uvelichil do 100 kolichestvo pogrampostov na granice s Afganistanom” [Tajikistan has increased the number of border checkpoints to 100 at the border with Afghanistan], Asia Plus (August 7, 2023), retrieved October 27, 2023, from <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20230807/tadjikistan-uvelichil-do-100-kolichestvo-pogrampostov-na-granitse-s-afganistanom>
- Asia-Plus, “‘We feel an increase in the activity of various terrorist groups in Afghanistan,’ says Tajik leader”, Asia Plus (September 15, 2023), retrieved October 9, 2023, from <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20230915/we-feel-an-increase-in-the-activity-of-various-terrorist-groups-in-afghanistan-says-tajik-leader>
- Daminov Ildar, “EU-Central Asian Cooperation on Border Management, Migration and Mobility” in Kashif Hasan Khan and Anja Mihr (eds.), Europe-Central Asia Relations. New Connectivity Frameworks (Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 249-270.
- Eurasianet, 2022, “Uzbekistan pours scorn on claims of ISKP attack”, Eurasianet (April 19, 2022), retrieved October 11, 2023, from <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-pours-scorn-on-claims-of-iskp-attack>
- Gerstle Daniel J., “Bridging the Panj: Forging a peacebuilding livelihoods strategy on the Afghan-Tajik border”, Journal of Peacebuilding and Development, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2006), pp. 35-48.
- Hohmann Sophie and Sadozai Mélanie, “Le danger aux frontières ? Que disent les terrains entre l’Asie centrale et l’Afghanistan ?” [Danger along borders? What does fieldwork between Central Asia and Afghanistan tell us?], Esprit (October 2023), retrieved October 11, from <https://esprit.presse.fr/actualites/sophie-hohmann-et-melanie-sadozai/le-danger-aux-frontieres-44859>
- Ikotun Omotomilola, Akhigbe Allwell and Okunade Samuel, “Sustainability of Borders in a Post-COVID-19 World”, Politikon, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2021), pp. 297-311.
- Kanji Nazneen, Sherbut Graham, Fararoon Romin and Hatcher Juanita, “Improving quality of life in remote mountain communities”, Mountain Research and Development, Vol. 32, No 3 (2012), pp. 353-363.
- Khan Kashif Hasan and Mihr Anja, 2023, “Introduction: Background to the Book” in Kashif Hasan Khan and Anja Mihr (eds.), Europe-Central Asia Relations. New Connectivity Frameworks (Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 1-8.
- Matveeva Anna, “EU stakes in Central Asia”, Chaillot Papers (July 2006), No. 91, 125 p. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Kazan Declaration of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, Kazan, September 29, 2023”, mid.ru (September 29, 2023), retrieved October 11, from [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1906997/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1906997/)

Nourzhanov Kirill and Saikal Amin, *The Spectre of Afghanistan. Security in Central Asia*, (London, IB Tauris, 2021), 236 p.

International Organization for migration, “COVID-19: Access Challenges and the Implications of Border Restrictions” (May 9, 2020), retrieved October 12, 2023 from <https://relief-web.int/report/world/covid-19-access-challenges-and-implications-border-restrictions>

Price Gareth et Hakimi Hameed, “Reconnecting Afghanistan Lessons from Cross-border Engagement” (London, July 2019), 52 p.

Rytövuori-Apunen Helena and Usmonov Furugzod, “Tajikistan’s Unsettled Security : Borderland Dynamics of the Outpost on Russian’s Afghan Frontier” in Helena Rytövuori-Apunen (ed.), *The regional security puzzle around Afghanistan: bordering practices in Central Asia and beyond* (Opladen/Berlin/Toronto, Barbara Budrich, 2016), p. 131-159.

Sadozaï Mélanie, “Opportunities and frustrations of a closed border regime between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in Badakhshan: Back to remoteness?”, *BorderObs*, (August 16, 2023), retrieved October 11, 2023, from <https://cbs.uni-gr.eu/en/resources/borderobs>

Sadozaï Mélanie, “Taliban at the Border: A New Regime Neighboring Tajikistan”, *Central Asia Program*, (October 2021), No. 267.

Schlegel Steve, *International Organizations and State Failure Prevention: The Dilemma of the OSCE Operations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan 1998–2017* (Baden-Baden, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017), 369 p.

Sherbut Graham, Kanji Nazneen and Hatcher Juanita, “Linking past and future: Cross-border development and quality of life in the Badakhshans”, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2015), pp. 255-271.

Tolo News, “First Part of Joint Market Opens on Border with Uzbekistan”, *Tolo News* (December 28, 2022), retrieved October 11, 2023, from <https://tolonews.com/business-181358>

Tucker Noah, “Foreign Fighters, Returnees and a Resurgent Taliban. Lessons for Central Asia from the Syrian Conflict”, *Security and Human Rights* (2022), p. 1-14.

Uddin Islam, “Chinese, Afghan foreign ministers discuss opening of strategic Wakhan Corridor”, *Anadolu Agency* (October 6, 2023), retrieved October 11, 2023, from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/chinese-afghan-foreign-ministers-discuss-opening-of-strategic-wakhan-corridor/3008982>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Voices of the Quchabar” - Understanding opiate trafficking in Afghanistan from the perspective of drug traffickers” (2020), 43 p.

“O Kompanii [About the company]” (2018), retrieved October 4, 2023, from <https://termezcargo.com/about-company/>

Zhou Jiayi, “Afghanistan and its neighborhood: A stocktaking of regional cooperation since the Taliban takeover”, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (December 15, 2022), retrieved October 11, 2023, from <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background-er/2022/afghanistan-and-its-neighbourhood-stocktaking-regional-cooperation-taliban-takeover>