





Central Asia Aids Afghanistan

The region shares a common interest in expanding trade and marginalizing violent extremism

By per Concordiam Staff

Ethnic Turkmen women in Balkh province, northern Afghanistan, weave rugs. The presence of Turkmen, Tajiks and Uzbeks on both sides of the border stimulates contacts between Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbors.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

With a throaty whistle and flash of fresh blue paint, a diesel locomotive tugging a train of box and tanker cars rolls through a railway station in northern Afghanistan's Balkh province. The 75-kilome-

ter stretch of track from the Uzbek border to Mazar-e Sharif that opened in 2012, the first international railway in the nation's history, could be the start of a transportation revolution that helps solidify Afghanistan as a trade and communications hub. "This connects Afghanistan to the world," an 18-year-old high school student named Shakrullah told CNN at a demonstration of the new railroad. "I want trains for all the provinces of Afghanistan, not just for Balkh province."

The \$165 million railroad, part of a 2,000-kilometer network proposed by the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program, could not have happened without the support of Uzbekistan. Stability in Afghanistan is something the Uzbeks view favorably, an attitude shared by the other nations of Central Asia, all of which are playing a role in their neighbor's recovery from more than 30 years of conflict. Turkmenistan, for example, is sponsoring a transnational gas pipeline to supply much of Afghanistan's energy needs. Kazakhstan has provided Afghanistan with thousands of tons of badly needed wheat and \$50 million in university scholarships to train Afghan doctors and scientists. Police in Tajikistan have begun coordinating border security with their Afghan colleagues, and the Kyrgyz Republic is planning to transmit hydroelectric power to Kabul.

The challenge will be keeping that cooperative spirit alive. Central Asia watchers have laid out two scenarios regarding Afghanistan's near future. The less-promising scenario is one in which the five republics of Central Asia resign themselves to militant isolationism in the hope that any instability emanating from the south won't slither across the 2,000-kilometer border they share with Afghanistan. The more rational outlook for the region is one of productive engagement between Central Asia and Afghanistan that promotes economic integration, builds wealth and marginalizes violent extremism.

Although categorizing Afghanistan as an unofficial "sixth republic" of Central Asia rings hollow to most leaders of the region, few can deny that Afghans aspire to greater trade, security cooperation, educational exchanges and transportation links with their

wealthier northern neighbors. Assistance from these neighbors, countries that share cultural affiliations dating back to the days of the medieval Silk Road trading network, would help sustain an Afghan society seeking assurances that the departure of foreign troops in 2014 won't lead to turmoil.

"We have it in our collective power to prevent another nightmare scenario in Afghanistan," then-Kazakh Foreign Minister Yerzhan Kazykhanov wrote in a 2012 article about Central Asia's efforts to aid its southern neighbor. "To do so, we must look beyond 2014 and help Afghans help themselves."

BUILDING TRUST

Attempts to institutionalize multilateral cooperation have been numerous. In 2012, regional leaders attended a Heart of Asia conference in Kabul that led to the adoption of confidence-building measures to benefit Afghanistan and its neighbors. The measures, which encompassed such fields as infrastructure development, counternarcotics, counterterrorism, disaster management and international commerce, attracted vast support from nations of the region, some traditional rivals with a meager record of mutual cooperation. With the exception of Uzbekistan, all the Central Asian republics signed onto one or more of the confidence-building measures. Afghanistan and its partners followed up the Kabul summit with another in Astana, Kazakhstan, in April 2013.

"In view of the fragility and uncertainty of the political and security environment in Afghanistan and the fear of regional rivalry over influence flaring up again in the aftermath of international exit, or drawdown, after 2014, the successful holding of the Kabul 'Heart of Asia' can certainly be hailed as a success story for the Afghan government," the Afghanistan Analysts Network, an independent nonprofit policy research organization, concluded on its website.

Even when consensus is elusive on other topics, border management and combating narcotics have attracted widespread cooperation. NATO and Russia have played a productive role in encouraging those natural partnerships by jointly training more than 2,000 counternarcotics officers from Central Asia and Afghanistan in concert with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Turkish International Academy Against Drugs and Crime. The Central Asian Counternarcotics Initiative is building upon that training by setting up anti-drug task forces in the countries of Central





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Kazakh harvesters work in a wheat field just outside the village of Birlik. Exports of thousands of tons of Kazakh grain have helped sustain Afghans in times of shortages.

REUTERS



An Afghan man shops at a Kabul electrical goods store. The Afghan capital receives an uninterrupted supply of electricity, thanks to transmission lines from its northern neighbors.

REUTERS

Asia to interdict opium and heroin passing mostly through Afghan, Tajik and Kyrgyz transit points. “The resulting counternarcotics network would link both the main narcotics source country, Afghanistan, with the key transit countries in Eurasia, many of which are also becoming large consumers of Afghan-based narcotics in their own right,” *World Politics Review* noted in a 2012 article.

When it comes to trade and investment, Central Asia, while pursuing its own financial interests, acts as a catalyst for Afghan revitalization. Uzbekistan followed up construction of the Mazar-e Sharif railway with a plan to extend tracks to Kabul and the Pakistani border, and Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan propose a Caspian Sea rail line that would provide landlocked Afghanistan with an alternate route to harbors and seaports. “We would be able to import and export to Russia, Turkey and even European countries,” Afghan Deputy Public Works Minister Noor Gul Mangal told reporters in 2012 as he

contemplated rail projects in the works.

TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) is a prospective 1,681-kilometer pipeline that would run from Dauletabad, Turkmenistan, through Herat and Kandahar to Pakistan and India. It opens Turkmenistan’s vast deposits of natural gas to the energy-hungry economies of South Asia. Afghanistan, as a land bridge between suppliers and consumers, would collect royalties on the transmission. Uzbekistan’s state energy corporation distributes power to Afghanistan using electrical lines paid for by the Asian Development Bank’s Central Asia-South Asia Regional Electricity Market. Likewise, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic want to sell electricity to their southern neighbor through a hydroelectric project financed by the World Bank and the Islamic Development Bank.

Cultural, social and education contacts between Afghanistan and the Central Asia republics have grown as well. Tajik engineers, doctors and nurses by the hundreds serve sections of



Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, left, walks with then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari during a summit in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe in September 2011. Cooperation in economics, education and security could help stem regional instability.

northern Afghanistan in which Tajik-speaking Afghans live. Kazakhstan's education exchange program that will send 1,000 Afghan students to Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Sanzhar Asfendiyarov Kazakh National Medical University in Almaty has earned praise from the international community. Such education exchange programs with highly regarded but lower cost Central Asian universities are being pursued more avidly. "Afghan students could be encouraged to go to Central Asian countries, in particular Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Tajikistan in the case of Tajik-speaking Afghans. The cultural similarities with Central Asian societies could help families feel more comfortable in sending young women abroad," noted a February 2013 European Union report titled "The Afghanistan-Central Asia relationship: What role for the EU?"

REMOVING BARRIERS

If there's one thing that prevents Central Asian nations from fully embracing closer relations with Afghanistan, it's the recent history of conflict in the country and the misconception that defines Afghanistan as an appendage of the Indian subcontinent psychologically removed from formerly Russian-oriented Central Asia. Spats among the five governments of Central Asia, including borders disputes in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, also contribute to disharmony. Some of the republics favor narrow bilateral deals with Afghanistan that frequently omit Central Asian neighbors. Although couched in the understated language of diplomacy, Central Asian officials tend to be dour about prospects of peace and stability in Afghanistan, partly reflecting their up-close knowledge of the Soviet occupation of the country that ended in 1989.

Western governments have inadvertently contributed to this sense of disunity. As the EU noted in a 2013 report on Central Asia: "The EU and its member states have



An Afghan police officer patrols the train station in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, part of a 75-kilometer railway built with the help of Uzbekistan. To help integrate the region economically, the Afghan government envisions a rail network spanning Central and South Asia.

differentiated between Central Asia and Afghanistan both at the level of policy planning and of programme implementation. Historically, the five Central Asian states have been viewed as one of the post-Soviet regions, while Afghanistan has either been aligned with South Asia or treated as a special case."

In an attempt to breach these geopolitical and diplomatic barriers, the EU and its allies are recognizing Afghanistan's significance as a territory that straddles South and Central Asia. The New Silk Road — a comprehensive plan to expand trade, transit and communications networks from the Indian Ocean to the Ural Mountains — is one such attempt to erase artificial boundaries. "The more Afghanistan is integrated economically into its regional neighborhood, the more it will be able to attract private investment, benefit from its vast mineral resources and provide economic opportunity for its citizens," said Robert Blake, assistant U.S. secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has adopted a broad, inclusive vision that attempts to dispense with provincial squabbles that have hampered past Central Asian cooperation. In its Astana Commemorative Declaration — the name evocative of Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the organization in 2010 — the OSCE envisioned a complete "security community" stretching east from Vancouver to Vladivostok, including Central Asia and Afghanistan.

As if channeling the "spirit of Astana," Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, at a meeting in March 2013, reiterated his country's plans to provide humanitarian and economic assistance to Afghanistan, suggesting the Mazar-e Sharif railroad won't be the country's last significant infrastructure project. "We will continue this kind of cooperation to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and to the region of Central Asia," Kamilov said. □