

CENTRAL ASIA'S AFGHAN REALITY: WHAT THE U.S. MIGHT BE MISSING

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The August 31–September 1 Shanghai Cooperation Organization ([SCO](#)) [summit in Bishkek](#) offered a revealing snapshot of Afghanistan's changing role in the region. The massive SCO gathering brought together the leaders of China, Russia, India, Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus. Its expanded SCO Plus meeting added Azerbaijan, Armenia, Egypt, Laos, Mongolia, Türkiye, Togo and Vietnam, alongside the UN and other organizations. U.S. Special Envoy for South and Central Asia Sergio Gor was in Bishkek meeting Central Asian leaders, while former U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad was engaging Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Kabul. The juxtaposition is revealing: Afghanistan may have receded from Washington's formal strategic agenda, but it has not receded from the calculations of the states surrounding it, or from every channel of U.S.–Afghan interaction.

BACKGROUND: The precipitous U.S. departure from Afghanistan in 2021 altered the form of U.S. involvement, but it did not change the geography that had made Afghanistan central to Washington's engagement with Central Asia. [Afghanistan shares approximately 2,329 kilometers](#) of common land and water borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, while all five Central Asian states remain exposed to security, economic, and connectivity issues pertaining to Afghanistan. After 2001, Afghanistan became a central organizing factor in Washington's engagement with Central Asia, shaping security cooperation, military access, border assistance, counterterrorism policies and regional diplomacy. The withdrawal changed that equation, but not the underlying geography. Since 2021, Uzbekistan has been particularly active in treating Afghanistan not only as a security concern but as a potential connecting link between Central and South Asia. The [Termez Dialogue](#), launched in May 2025 as a permanent platform is perhaps the clearest example of this approach. Its second meeting in June 2026 moved toward practical mechanisms for political dialogue, connectivity, transport and logistics, climate adaptation, and cultural-humanitarian cooperation. Rather than treating Afghanistan solely as a security perimeter, Tashkent is attempting to embed the Afghan question within a broader architecture of regional connectivity. This institutionalization also began to acquire a specifically Central Asian format in August 2025, when Uzbekistan convened the first meeting of Central Asian [special representatives on Afghanistan](#), which agreed to establish a regular Contact Group for coordinated regional dialogue on the Afghan issue. Institutionalization, however, is moving in both directions. In April 2026, Afghanistan itself initiated the [first Afghanistan–Central Asia Consultative Dialogue in Kabul](#), bringing together all five Central Asian states and proposing regular consultations, expert cooperation and a roadmap for cooperation in trade, transit, security and connectivity. The subsequent [Afghanistan–Central Asia Think Tank Forum](#) in June 2026 extended this process into the intellectual and policy sphere, explicitly seeking research-based proposals and locally generated regional narratives. Thus, Uzbekistan is building platforms through which Afghanistan can be incorporated into wider regional cooperation, while Kabul is simultaneously seeking to engage Central Asia on its own terms. Afghanistan remains an unavoidable geographic reality, but the institutional response to that reality is increasingly being shaped within the region itself.

IMPLICATIONS: Central Asian ownership, however, should not be confused with Central Asian consensus. Uzbekistan emphasizes connectivity, trade and regional integration; Tajikistan remains particularly attentive to border security, inclusive government, and militant threats; Turkmenistan prioritizes energy, transit and neutrality; Kazakhstan approaches Afghanistan through economic and diplomatic engagement; and Kyrgyzstan, although less directly exposed geographically, participates in wider regional security

discussions. These differences may explain why flexible regional mechanisms are emerging alongside existing multilateral institutions.

For Kabul, the emerging collaborative architecture may represent both an opportunity and a necessity. The April Consultative Dialogue was initiated by the Afghan side, but its timing is particularly significant given Afghanistan's increasingly constrained external environment. Tensions and armed confrontation with Pakistan have disrupted one of Afghanistan's principal trade and transit corridors, while the wider war involving Iran has created additional uncertainty around western routes and regional commerce. Against this backdrop, Kabul's turn toward Central Asia may amount to more than diplomatic activism. It can be understood as an effort to widen Afghanistan's room for maneuver by strengthening alternative northern connections to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and the wider Eurasian market. In this sense, the Afghanistan–Central Asia dialogue may function as a form of strategic insurance at a moment when some of Afghanistan's traditional routes and external options have become more vulnerable. Kabul is therefore increasingly seeking to participate in shaping the regional architecture around it. This does not automatically imply political convergence or recognition by Central Asian governments; rather, it reflects an attempt by Afghanistan's de facto authorities to turn geography into diplomatic and economic leverage.

The Bishkek SCO summit illustrates the wider environment in which this process is unfolding. The sheer composition of the gathering demonstrated the breadth of the Eurasian strategic conversation in which Afghanistan is situated. Afghanistan remained outside the summit, yet its political future and security implications remained part of the agenda. The [SCO's call for an inclusive Afghan government](#) showed that regional powers continue to attach political conditions to their vision of Afghan stability.

Uzbekistan used the same broader setting to advance institutional mechanisms of its own. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev highlighted Uzbekistan's initiative to establish a [Universal Center for Countering Security Challenges and Threats in Tashkent](#) under the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, indicating Tashkent's interest in strengthening the region's permanent capacity to address emerging security challenges. Together with the Termez Dialogue, the initiative illustrates a broader Uzbek strategy: institutionalizing regional cooperation rather than relying exclusively on ad hoc responses to individual crises. [Gor's presence in Bishkek](#) demonstrated that the U.S. remains engaged with Central Asia, but increasingly from outside the Afghan theater. His meetings with Central Asian leaders focused on strategic partnerships, economic and investment cooperation, transport, energy, critical minerals and the C5+1 framework. On September 5, [Khalilzad met Afghanistan's Foreign Minister](#) Amir Khan Muttaqi in Kabul to discuss Afghanistan–U.S. relations and opportunities for constructive engagement. Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry presented the meeting as part of discussions on bilateral relations, economic growth and self-reliance, while the U.S. State Department clarified that Khalilzad is no longer a government employee and was acting in a personal capacity. These engagements therefore should not be interpreted as evidence of a new official U.S. policy toward Kabul. Their significance lies elsewhere: the U.S.–Afghan relationship has not simply disappeared; rather, it now exists through channels considerably different from the military-centered relationship of the pre-2021 period.

The geometry of U.S. involvement is changing as Washington cultivates Central Asian partnerships without a military presence in Afghanistan, while Central Asian governments are simultaneously deepening practical engagement with Kabul through regional mechanisms. The U.S. does not necessarily need to sit at every table where Afghanistan is discussed. But understanding what those tables are producing may become increasingly important for a U.S. strategy that seeks to remain relevant in Central Asia.

The emerging regional architecture is not necessarily anti-American, nor does Central Asian engagement with Kabul imply recognition of the Taliban or alignment with China or Russia. Much of it is the practical consequence of geography, security concerns and economic necessity. The U.S. may therefore face a different Afghan question than it did before 2021. Previously, Afghanistan often shaped Washington's requirements for Central Asia. Increasingly, Central Asian approaches to Afghanistan, and Afghanistan's own efforts to engage Central Asia, may shape how the country connects to the wider region.

CONCLUSIONS: The U.S. left Afghanistan, but Afghanistan did not leave Central Asia. What has emerged since 2021 is neither a simple regional takeover of the Afghan question nor a disappearance of U.S. interest. Instead, Afghanistan is becoming embedded in a regional architecture being built from several directions: Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states are developing mechanisms for security and connectivity; Kabul is seeking to participate in that architecture on its own terms; and institutions such as the SCO are incorporating the Afghan question into a much broader Eurasian strategic conversation. Washington is still engaged with Central Asia, but increasingly without the Afghan theater as the organizing center of that engagement. At the same time, the U.S.–Afghan relationship has not simply disappeared. For U.S. policy, the challenge is therefore to recognize how the Afghan factor itself is changing. Afghanistan has not become less relevant to Central Asia; rather, Central Asia is increasingly determining what that relevance means.

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