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Emerging Regional Split on Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

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Summary

The recent meeting in Tehran brought together Afghanistan's neighbours—Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Russia—for consultations to promote stability in Afghanistan and reduce regional tensions. The lack of participation by the Taliban, Islamabad's growing securitising of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and Central Asian States' formation of a new Contact Group on Afghanistan indicate an emerging regional split vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

Introduction

On 14 December 2025, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi hosted representatives of Afghanistan's neighbours—Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Russia—for consultations to promote stability in Afghanistan and reduce regional tensions. The Taliban were invited to the session but declined to participate. The meeting came in the wake of stalled diplomatic efforts to sustain the ceasefire between Pakistan and the Taliban, who have engaged in frequent border clashes, with Pakistan resorting to air strikes in the border provinces of Afghanistan, resulting in civilian casualties.

The Taliban's refusal to attend the meeting was based on their already being engaged with the major regional players bilaterally or in other established multilateral forums (such as the Moscow Format). Also, as Pakistan was attending, it was a chance to assert Afghanistan's autonomy in foreign policy decision-making, in view of the recent and intense clashes along the Durand Line. This is evident from the remarks made by Amir Khan Muttaqi, Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister, to Mohammad Reza Bahrami, Iran's Director General for South Asia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who visited Kabul on 17 December. During discussions, Muttaqi said:

Afghanistan has now passed a difficult phase and is moving rapidly toward development and that the country should no longer be viewed as a 'problem'. Our foreign policy is based on clear principles, and we support active, cooperative relations with countries in the region.¹

Intensified Iran–Pakistan Diplomacy

In November, Ali Larijani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, followed by Bahrami, visited Islamabad.² Their talks with Pakistan's high security officials focused on the security situation in Afghanistan and on closer bilateral coordination on counter-terrorism and border security. In an interview with journalists in Islamabad, Larijani said Iran is prepared to offer Pakistan a diplomatic blank cheque to help resolve issues with India and Afghanistan.³ In August, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's visit to Pakistan gave a new fillip to bilateral ties.

Although the regional meeting in Tehran on Afghanistan failed to issue a joint statement, it did issue a call for a coordinated regional framework to advance

¹ Ahmad Azizi, [“Iranian Diplomat Briefs Muttaqi on Meeting Skipped by Taliban”](#), *Amu TV*, 17 December 2025.

² [“Iran Offers Pakistan Blank Cheque Amid Afghan Tensions”](#), *Grand Pinnacle Tribune*, 28 November 2025.

³ [“Larijani Offers Pakistan Blank Check for Regional Peace Efforts”](#), *Zarin TV*, 27 November 2025.

sustainable security and to integrate Afghanistan as a key transit hub. The meeting also offered Islamabad a platform to articulate its security concerns and to influence regional discourse on Afghanistan. Tehran, for its part, is also keen to project itself as a constructive player espousing a ‘regional solution’ to regional crises at a time when Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have played a mediating and facilitating role between the Taliban and Pakistan. However, the deteriorating ties between Pakistan and the Taliban are shaping an emerging regional split *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan.

As part of this regional strategy, Iran also remains interested in maintaining a stable Kabul–Islamabad relationship, which stems from its own history of relations with Pakistan. These have seen several ups and downs on account of the escalating violence in Iran’s Sistan and Baluchistan province, bordering Pakistan, from the Salafi group Jaish-al-Adl targeting security personnel and establishments in the wake of the disorder following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Iranian security officials have increasingly blamed the intelligence services of regional rivals, especially Israel, for funding these outfits. After Iran and Pakistan had tit-for-tat missile strikes on terrorist targets on each other’s territory in January 2024, both sides have favoured greater bilateral engagement to tackle issues of cross-border smuggling, narcotics trade and the Baloch insurgency in their borderlands.

Central Asian States’ Preference for Pragmatic Engagement

Following the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, the neighbours of Afghanistan, from Uzbekistan to Iran, and China, adopted a de-securitised approach towards addressing the challenges emanating from Afghanistan. By concluding that an isolated Taliban-ruled Afghanistan would be a far bigger threat to regional security, they opted to maintain working diplomatic ties and engage the Taliban on counter-terrorism and border security. At the same time, functional cooperation on trade and connectivity was framed as essential to stabilise the country and utilise economic opportunities within a broader vision of collective security and mutually beneficial regional economic integration.

Uzbekistan, having embarked on a proactive foreign policy of deepening cooperation with Central Asian neighbours since the 2016 power transition, has been at the forefront of expanding bilateral ties with Afghanistan, which have continued to strengthen after the Taliban takeover in 2021. In August 2025, special representatives from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on Afghanistan met in Tashkent and announced the establishment of a new permanent regional platform: the Contact Group on Afghanistan. Central Asian States view their security as being closely linked to Afghanistan and are keen to adopt a unified

approach to engaging Afghanistan as a partner on key issues, including transboundary water management, border security, transport, logistics and the environment. Their regional initiative thus seeks to sidestep the influence of other actors driven by competing interests and geopolitical rivalries.

At a time when Pakistan is securitising Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, for its own reasons, the Central Asian States remain committed to utilising Afghanistan as a gateway to new economic and trade opportunities, enhanced connectivity through the Southern logistics route to the Indian Ocean.⁴ Islamabad's frequent closures of border crossing points to coerce the authorities in Kabul have also affected the landlocked Central Asian States, prompting Uzbekistan to take greater interest in utilising Iran's Chabahar Port. The inaugural trilateral political consultations between Iran, India and Uzbekistan, held in Tehran in September 2025, underscored the need to deepen cooperation on connectivity, the strategic use of Chabahar, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).⁵

The rising frequency of infiltration by terrorists into Tajikistan, resulting in armed clashes with Tajik border guards, threatens to undermine the nascent diplomatic engagement between Tajikistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban assured Tajik authorities of its full cooperation, while blaming the attack on an unnamed armed group which, it said, was "striving to create chaos and instability in the region and to sow distrust among countries".

China and Pakistan's Growing Securitisation of Afghanistan

For both Russia and China, Afghanistan, together with Central Asia, constitutes a unified geopolitical space, the first circle of external security and stability, and is considered crucial for Eurasian connectivity projects. The emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan in 2014 and imperatives of security in the north-western Chinese region of Xinjiang, especially in the post-US withdrawal context, led Beijing to seek a more "proactive position" in Afghanistan.⁶

Notably, Pakistan has remained an influential factor in China's approach towards Afghanistan, given Pakistan's close ties with the Taliban. In a dual-track approach linking economic engagement to strengthening security cooperation, China has sought to build leverage over authorities in Kabul. On the one hand, Beijing seeks to

⁴ ["The Contact Group on Afghanistan – Central Asia Formulates a Regional Position"](#), *The Times of Central Asia*, 10 September 2025.

⁵ ["First Trilateral Political Consultations between Iran, India, and Uzbekistan held in Tehran"](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs IRI, 18 September 2025.

⁶ Orange Wang, ["Proactive Approach to Taliban Helps Safeguard Security in Northwest China: Envoy"](#), *South China Morning Post*, 10 January 2024.

benefit from its investment in large-scale projects in Afghanistan's mineral extraction, energy and infrastructure sectors, which it also considers crucial to improving the security environment. The Taliban, for their part, are keen to utilise the demonstrative effect of Chinese economic activities to attract other regional and international players. Pakistan has thus become an outlier in securitising Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, while other neighbouring and regional countries continue to prioritise pragmatic engagement.

At the same time, China shares Pakistan's concerns about the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which poses growing security risks to Chinese personnel and projects in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Beijing also shares Pakistan's objectives in propping up forces in Afghanistan, which can limit India's role in the country. For Beijing, a marginalised Indian role in Afghanistan will render India's opposition to CPEC ineffective and reduce its ability to influence the connectivity landscape of Central Asia.⁷ The recently upgraded diplomatic and commercial engagement between the Taliban and New Delhi has alarmed Islamabad, which is levelling accusations of Indian support for Afghan militants. This may further convince Islamabad to support armed opposition forces in Afghanistan.

Since 2017, China has used a foreign minister-level trilateral mechanism to ease strained ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan and press for cooperation in tackling the terrorist threats to China's domestic and overseas projects. After the Taliban takeover, the trilateral consultations resumed in 2023.⁸ A key agenda item of discussions has been the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan, to enhance trilateral cooperation in security and connectivity. Given China's longstanding policy of non-interference in internal affairs, Beijing is using its economic leverage in Afghanistan through Pakistan to build leverage. However, the conflict between Pakistan and the Taliban has escalated in the wake of TTP attacks targeting Chinese projects and nationals in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, Beijing has found it challenging to maintain its position as a neutral facilitator and mediator, creating space for other actors in West Asia, mainly Qatar and Turkey, to play a role in establishing a ceasefire in October 2025.

The instability created by cross-border clashes between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which diverts the limited security resources of the Taliban, stands to benefit armed opposition and transnational terrorist groups in Afghanistan, creating renewed fears of spillover of insecurity in the broader region. For instance, in November 2025,

⁷ Hemant Adlakha, [“A Key Component of China's Strategy in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is to Make the Indian Role ‘Inconsequential’”](#), *Institute of Chinese Studies*, 18 October 2021.

⁸ Frank Tang, [“China Calls On Pakistan, Afghanistan to Help Fight Terror, Protect Chinese Interests in First 3-way Talks Since 2021”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 7 May 2023.

Chinese companies and nationals employed on projects in southern Tajikistan were attacked from Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province, which borders both Tajikistan and China.⁹ Subsequently, the Chinese embassy in Dushanbe advised Chinese companies and personnel to evacuate the border areas.

Facing renewed instability in the bordering regions, China has also enhanced its bilateral engagement with the Taliban to address security concerns. In August 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during his second visit to Afghanistan since 2022, called on the Taliban government to combat the Uyghur-separatist East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and to resume bilateral patrols in the Wakhan Corridor. In his meeting with the Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, Wang Yi stated,

Strengthening security cooperation between China and Afghanistan will provide a guarantee for economic cooperation, while deepening economic cooperation will also enhance Afghanistan’s security capabilities.¹⁰

In Kabul, Wang Yi also participated in the 6th China–Pakistan–Afghanistan trilateral foreign ministers’ dialogue, which resulted in no joint communique. Notably, the Chinese statement noted that,

The three parties should expand development cooperation, improve security dialogue mechanisms, deepen law enforcement and security cooperation, strengthen efforts to combat transnational terrorist activities and address the root causes of terrorism through comprehensive measures based on consensus.

There was no mention of extending the CPEC to Afghanistan, indicating the growing salience of security concerns.

India’s Regional Diplomacy on Afghanistan

In recent years, India’s growing institutionalised engagement with the Central Asian States through the India–Central Asia Dialogue at the Foreign Minister Level, which has been held regularly since 2019, the India–Central Asia Summit held in January

⁹ Yashraj Sharma, “[Tajikistan-Taliban Border Clashes: What’s Behind Them, Why It Affects China](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 26 December 2025.

¹⁰ Fan Cheng, “[China Calls for Joint Patrols on Afghan Border and Urges Taliban to Help Fight Terrorism](#)”, *South China Morning Post*, 21 August 2025.

2022, and the India–Central Asia Joint Working Group on Chabahar Port, has been framed within the vision of an integrated and stable extended neighbourhood.¹¹

India’s embrace of a geoeconomics-driven approach, as underlined by the “4Cs” framework prioritising commerce, capacity enhancement, connectivity and contact, and New Delhi’s renewed economic and humanitarian engagement with Afghanistan, aligns with the approach of the Central Asian States, which are keen to avoid being caught in geopolitical rivalries and to assert their independent role in shaping the regional agenda on Afghanistan.¹² The Central Asian States are emphasising a coordinated approach to developing a trans-Afghan transport and transit connectivity network, including gas pipelines and electricity transmission, to deepen economic interdependence and enhance the region's leverage over Kabul.

Iran, in a bid to enhance its transit role in Central Asia–South Asia connectivity, promptly reached out to the Taliban to help them utilise Chabahar as the reliable route to international markets and operationalise the Khaf–Herat railway line. As Afghanistan’s transit and trade via Pakistan remains suspended and Kabul wants to reduce its reliance on Pakistan, it opens opportunities for Iran to enhance its connectivity and logistics role for both Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Conclusion

The escalating conflict between Pakistan and the Taliban and Islamabad’s paranoia about growing India–Afghanistan engagement are pushing Pakistan to take an increasingly securitised view of the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Given that Pakistan has historically played a key role in Beijing’s Afghanistan policy, the two countries are likely to follow a coordinated approach towards Afghanistan. At a time when India is deepening its economic and political engagement with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, it stands to benefit from greater convergence and coordination with the neighbours of Afghanistan.

¹¹ Shubajit Roy, “[PM Summit with 5 Central Asian Heads Calls for Joint Group on Afghanistan, Stronger Ties](#)”, *The Indian Express*, 28 January 2022.

¹² Dana Omirgazy, “[Central Asian Countries Discuss Afghanistan at First Special Representatives’ Meeting](#)”, *The Astana Times*, 27 August 2025.

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