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# Commentary

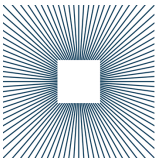
## Uzbekistan's intensified engagement on the Afghan issue – a hotbed of July Diplomacy

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In early July, a series of significant events related to Afghanistan underscored proactive Uzbek diplomacy. Following the Third Doha Conference from June 28 to July 1, Uzbekistan emerged as a focal point for the international community regarding the Afghan issue.

### **July 1: UN Secretary-General Visit**

On July 1, UN Secretary-General António Guterres met with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan. The discussions centered around increasing humanitarian aid and developing a unified international strategy towards Afghanistan.

### **July 4: SCO Summit Address**

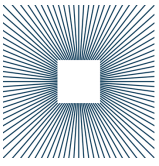
On July 4, President Mirziyoyev addressed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit, presenting Uzbekistan's stance on Afghanistan. He underscored Afghanistan's role in Central Asia, the diverse engagement strategies, and called for the resumption of the "SCO-Afghanistan" dialogue.

### **July 6: Turkic States Organization Summit**

At the Turkic States Organization summit, President Mirziyoyev emphasized the importance of unfreezing Afghanistan's foreign financial assets to enhance humanitarian aid. He also urged for a unified approach from the organization to address contemporary realities in Afghanistan. These engagements have positioned Uzbekistan as a key player in international efforts concerning Afghanistan, with its initiatives gaining recognition from significant international entities such as the UN, SCO, and Turkic States Organization.

### **Advocacy for a unified strategy**

Uzbekistan champions a unified global strategy for Afghanistan due to the disparate approaches currently taken by various countries. While Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran maintain close ties with the Taliban government, Western countries express significant concerns about the situation in Afghanistan, often trying to "sideline" the Afghan issue.



Pakistan's strained relations with Kabul and the pragmatic policies of Central Asian countries further complicate the scenario. These varying stances exacerbate Afghanistan's challenges, impacting its population.

Uzbekistan's proximity to Afghanistan makes it particularly invested in the country's stability, which is crucial for its own security, economic, and social interests. A unified global strategy could address key issues such as humanitarian aid, trade and energy projects, inclusive governance, and human rights, thereby enhancing Afghanistan's socio-economic conditions.

### **Uzbekistan's Principles on Afghanistan**

**Pragmatism in foreign policy.** Uzbekistan's policy acknowledges the Taliban's rule as a current reality, necessitating pragmatic engagement. Tashkent's approach focuses on the Afghan people's welfare rather than formal recognition of the Taliban government.

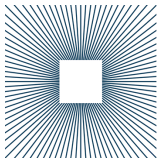
**Increasing humanitarian aid.** Uzbekistan advocates for economic stabilization, employment growth, and improvements in education and healthcare in Afghanistan. Calls for releasing Afghanistan's frozen assets align with this humanitarian focus.

**Building an inclusive government.** Uzbekistan supports the establishment of an inclusive Afghan government that respects the political will and rights of all ethnic and political minorities, viewing this as essential for stability.

### **Uzbekistan's Interests in Afghanistan**

**Security Concerns.** Security in Afghanistan is vital for Uzbekistan, as regional stability is interconnected. The rise of ISIS-K and other terrorist activities heighten Tashkent's security concerns, prompting calls for international dialogue on security through engagements within the UN, CIS, SCO, Turkic States Organization, and the Central Asian Heads of State Consultative Council.

**Access to seaports.** Geographical isolation drives Uzbekistan to actively seek access to seaports. Afghanistan serves as a vital transit route to Pakistani ports like Gwadar and Karachi, which are crucial for Tashkent's transport and logistics strategy. Hence, Uzbekistan is



advancing the construction of the Trans-Afghan Corridor and has established its coordination office in Tashkent in 2023 to oversee the project.

**Transit territory.** The Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway has significant potential to reshape trade routes in Central and South Asia, extending across the Eurasian supercontinent. Successful implementation could turn Uzbekistan into a critical transit hub for trade flows between North and South, and East and West. Russia and Kazakhstan are particularly interested in this corridor as a means to access South Asian markets. Furthermore, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway might integrate with this corridor, potentially catalyzing Uzbekistan's economic transformation.

A stable Afghanistan would enhance Uzbekistan's role as a key transit territory for the North-South corridor and Chabahar, thereby strengthening trade and economic ties between Uzbekistan, Iran, and India.

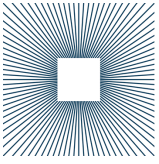
**New economic partner.** Stability in Afghanistan could also lead to its emergence as a significant economic partner and market for Uzbekistan. In the previous year, bilateral trade between the two nations reached \$784 million, with key exports including electricity, fertilizers, and dried fruits. The construction of the Kush Tepa canal according to international standards could transform the socio-economic landscape of northern Afghanistan, fostering economic cooperation in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and irrigation.

**International image.** The stabilization and prosperity of Afghanistan are crucial for enhancing Uzbekistan's international image. As a neighboring country, Uzbekistan's association with Afghanistan, which is often perceived as unstable and plagued by terrorism, could impact foreign investment inflows. Positive developments in Afghanistan's economy, security, human rights, and social life would likely improve the investment appeal of all Central Asian countries.

## **Conclusion**

July saw significant developments concerning Afghanistan. Following the Doha conference, Uzbekistan heightened activity on the Afghan

front. President Mirziyoyev's meetings with UN Secretary-General Guterres, and his addresses at the SCO and Turkic States



front. President Mirziyoyev's meetings with UN Secretary-General Guterres, and his addresses at the SCO and Turkic States Organization summits, brought the Afghan issue back to the forefront of the global agenda. Uzbekistan's principles on Afghanistan—advocating for a unified strategy, increasing humanitarian aid, engaging pragmatically with the Taliban, and promoting the formation of an inclusive government—received support from prestigious platforms such as the UN, SCO, and Turkic States Organization.