



The Afghan Crisis and the Transformation of Regional Security Architecture in Central Asia (2021–2025)

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This article examines the Afghan crisis after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 and its impact on regional security in Central Asia. Afghanistan is closely linked to the Central Asian states geographically, historically, ethnically, politically, and economically; therefore, instability in Afghanistan directly affects the security environment of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Taliban takeover created new risks related to terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, organized crime, illegal migration, and the potential spillover of violence across Afghanistan's northern borders.

The study uses a qualitative case-study approach and focuses on the period from 2021 to 2025. It draws on scholarly literature, analytical reports, and policy studies produced by international organizations, regional security bodies, and research institutes. The article first provides a historical overview of the Afghan crisis, tracing its roots from the political upheavals of the 1970s and the Soviet intervention to the rise of the Taliban and the post-2021 security situation. It then analyzes the main channels through which the Afghan crisis affects Central Asia.

Special attention is paid to terrorist and extremist groups operating in Afghanistan, including ISIS-K, Al-Qaeda-linked networks, and regional militant organizations, as well as to narcotics production and trafficking along the Northern Route. The article argues that the Afghan crisis has intensified existing vulnerabilities in Central Asia, including weak border management, socio-economic pressures, ethnic tensions, and limited coordination among regional security institutions.

The article concludes that Central Asian states cannot address these threats separately. A more resilient regional security architecture requires intelligence-sharing, counter-terrorism coordination, stronger border control, pragmatic diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan, and joint counter-radicalization programs.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Central Asia, regional security, terrorism, extremism, organized crime, and security threats

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The Central Asian region is closely connected to Afghanistan geographically, ethnically, historically, politically, and economically. Since the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the Central Asian republics as independent states, their political and security trajectories have been deeply intertwined with developments in Afghanistan. The current Afghan crisis, which followed the withdrawal of international forces and the Taliban's return to power in 2021, has become one of the key factors affecting the security and long-term development of Central Asia. In this article, the term "Afghan crisis" refers specifically to the period after the international military withdrawal in 2021.

The political and security situation in Afghanistan under Taliban rule suggests that decades-long conflicts remain unresolved and continue to generate risks for neighboring states. The crisis affects the security environment of Central Asian countries through a range of destabilizing factors, including terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, organized crime, and potential migration pressures. These challenges pose a direct threat to peace, stability, and regional security. It is therefore important to examine how the ongoing Afghan crisis influences Central Asia and how the region responds to its spillover effects.

To address this research objective, the study employs a qualitative methodology based on a case-study design and focuses on the period from 2021 to 2025. The Central Asian states serve as the primary units of analysis. The empirical basis consists of secondary sources, including analytical reports by international organizations, regional security bodies, policy institutes, and scholarly publications. The analysis identifies, categorizes, and interprets key security risks – including transnational terrorism, narcotics trafficking, organized crime, and migration pressures – and traces their connection to the post-2021 situation in Afghanistan. This approach makes it possible to examine the mechanisms of security spillover and the varied responses of the Central Asian republics.

The article consists of four sections. The first provides a historical overview of the Afghan crisis, tracing key developments from the 1973 coup to the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s and examining the role of foreign interventions during the Cold War and the global war on terror. The second section analyzes the spillover effects of the Afghan crisis into Central Asia. The third discusses specific risks and challenges faced by the Central Asian states, including terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, and migration pressures. The final section offers policy recommendations aimed at mitigating the regional consequences of the Afghan crisis.

Historical Overview of the Afghan Crisis

The historical roots of the Afghan crisis go back to the political upheavals of the 1970s, which opened a prolonged period of instability that has continued, in different forms, to the present day. Several events of that decade are particularly important for

understanding the origins of the crisis. According to Barfield (2012), a turning point occurred on July 3, 1973, when Afghanistan's last monarch, Mohammad Zahir Shah, left for Italy. In his absence, Mohammad Daoud Khan engineered a coup and overthrew Zahir Shah after nearly four decades of rule (1933–1973). The political order established after the coup remained fragile. In 1978, the Saur Revolution brought the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to power, and the subsequent struggle among Afghan communist leaders, including Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, culminated in the Soviet military intervention of December 27, 1979, when Soviet troops stormed Tajbeg Palace. Earlier unrest, including protests linked to the activities of the "Muslim Youth" movement in 1975, had already contributed to the radicalization of the domestic political environment (Barfield 2012). To understand the external dimension of these developments, it is also necessary to consider the broader Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War, direct and indirect U.S. involvement in Afghanistan began before the Soviet military intervention. In July 1979, five months before Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, U.S. President Jimmy Carter approved a covert CIA operation, conducted in cooperation with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, to support the Mujahideen and other anti-government forces (MacEachin 2001; Parenti 2001). Washington sought to limit Soviet influence in a strategically important region located at the crossroads of South, Central, and West Asia. U.S. involvement included military and economic assistance to the Mujahideen and to Pakistan's military and intelligence structures. This assistance was provided through Operation Cyclone, one of the longest and most expensive covert operations of the Cold War (Akram 2021; Snider 2022).

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops on February 15, 1989, Soviet assistance to Afghanistan was gradually curtailed and eventually ceased by 1992 (Katz 2024). The resulting power vacuum led to an intense internecine struggle among Afghanistan's most influential factions, including those associated with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Ahmad Shah Masud, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Burhanuddin Rabbani. Armed clashes, including the shelling of Kabul by Hekmatyar's forces, caused severe civilian suffering and deepened the fragmentation of the Afghan state. The factions also relied on coercion, extortion, and informal payments to finance their political and military activities (Shahrani 2008).

The power struggles of the 1990s paved the way for the rise of the Taliban, which took control of Kabul in 1996 and further reshaped regional security dynamics (Sakhi 2022). However, the Taliban's control over Afghanistan was never absolute, and the Afghan conflict was never solely internal. Afghanistan has consistently remained a focal point of regional and global geopolitical competition (Schmidt 2014). In the contemporary context, Afghanistan continues to struggle under Taliban rule. The regime remains diplomatically isolated and financially constrained, which limits its access to international assistance and restricts its capacity to respond to the country's economic and humanitarian problems (Sullivan 2022). Regional actors such as Rus-

sia, China, and Iran have adopted different approaches to engaging with the Taliban, reflecting the complex geopolitical environment in which Afghanistan remains embedded¹.

Afghanistan after the Taliban Takeover (2021–2025)

Following the rapid withdrawal of international forces in August 2021, the Taliban regained control over Afghanistan, marking a new phase of political transformation and uncertainty. The movement quickly consolidated power, captured major cities and provinces with limited resistance, and established a de facto government. Although the Taliban promised stability and security, the new authorities have faced serious challenges in legitimizing their rule both domestically and internationally. As of 2026, the Taliban government remains only minimally recognized internationally: Russia became the first state to formally recognize it in July 2025, while most other countries continue to limit their engagement to pragmatic or technical contacts².

Afghanistan's humanitarian situation deteriorated sharply after the takeover. Widespread poverty, food insecurity, and the weakening of basic public services have affected millions of people, exacerbating civilian suffering and creating a volatile social environment. Economic contraction has hit both urban centers and rural communities, especially those dependent on foreign aid and remittances (Verma 2022). This humanitarian crisis threatens domestic stability and has significant regional implications for neighboring Central Asian states.

The Taliban's control over security also remains uneven. Although the movement claims to have restored order, extremist groups such as Islamic State–Khorasan and remnants of Al-Qaeda continue to operate in remote areas and parts of northern Afghanistan (Schroden 2025). Sporadic attacks, insurgent activity, and localized violence reveal the gap between the Taliban's claims of stabilization and the situation on the ground. These developments are particularly significant for Central Asia, where regional security has long been shaped by the interaction of domestic vulnerabilities, cross-border threats, and instability emanating from Afghanistan (Somzhurek 2018). The Taliban also faces difficulties in monitoring and regulating the activities of various armed factions, raising concerns that Afghanistan may again become a safe haven for transnational terrorist networks³.

Internationally, the Taliban's limited recognition has led to diplomatic isolation, sanctions, and restricted engagement from much of the global community. Regional actors, including Russia, China, and Iran, have adopted pragmatic approaches, engaging cautiously with the Taliban to safeguard their security interests and economic

¹ Katz M.N. 2024. Lessons of the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan. *Middle East Policy Council*. URL: <https://mepc.org/commentaries/lessons-soviet-withdrawal-afghanistan/> (accessed 13.03.2026)

² Ibid.

³ Sahibzada U. 2025. The Taliban's Internal Struggles and Path to Collapse. *Modern Diplomacy*. March 21. URL: <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2025/03/21/the-talibans-internal-struggles-and-path-to-collapse/> (accessed 13.03.2026)

investments (Stepanova 2022). Meanwhile, Central Asian neighbors face heightened risks stemming from potential terrorist spillover, drug trafficking, and refugee flows, underscoring Afghanistan's continued role as a source of regional instability (Schroden 2025).

In sum, while the Taliban has regained control over Afghanistan, the country remains affected by humanitarian, economic, and security challenges. Promises of stability and effective governance are constrained by institutional weakness, extremist threats, limited international legitimacy, and the continuing effects of decades of conflict. This complex environment sets the stage for analyzing how the ongoing Afghan crisis affects Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Afghan Crisis and its Spillover into Central Asia

The Afghan crisis has long posed challenges to regional security, but the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has intensified its spillover effects across Central Asia. Prolonged instability in Afghanistan has created conditions for terrorism, religious extremism, transnational drug trafficking, arms smuggling, epidemics, and environmental risks, all of which undermine regional peace and stability (Debata 2011). These threats interact with existing vulnerabilities within Central Asia itself, including weak governance, corruption, socio-economic pressures, ethnic tensions, unresolved border disputes, and environmental degradation (Debata 2017).

Terrorism and Religious Extremism

The rise of extremist and terrorist networks in Afghanistan has had a direct impact on neighboring Central Asian states. The Afghan crisis is closely linked to the broader challenge of international terrorism, which remains acute across several regions of the world. Afghanistan hosts a range of extremist organizations, many of which have the capacity to operate beyond its borders and therefore pose not only domestic, but also regional and international security threats (Dauren 2019).

A report by the U.S. Congressional Research Service identifies several key groups operating in Afghanistan, including Al-Qaeda, ISIS-K, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement⁴. Similarly, the Indian Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses points to the presence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Turkestan Islamic Party, and Jamaat, emphasizing the diversity of extremist actors in the country (Kokoshin 2022).

At the time of the Taliban's seizure of power in mid-August 2021, reports indicated that more than 4,000 jihadist militants were active in northern Afghanistan. These groups reportedly included militants originating from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan,

⁴ All prohibited in Russia as terrorist organizations. Thomas C. 2023. Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy. *Congressional Research Service*. URL: <https://www.nypl.org/research/research-catalog/bib/b21708436> (accessed 13.03.2026)

Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia's North Caucasus, China's Xinjiang region, and several Arab states (Rossi 2025). Many of them were believed to be linked to Al-Qaeda networks, formally operating under local Taliban commanders while retaining a considerable degree of autonomy.

The relationship between the Taliban and ISIS-K further complicates Afghanistan's security landscape. Although the Taliban and ISIS-K are ideological opponents, the Taliban lacks sufficient resources to fully suppress ISIS-K cells across the country. Russia's Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, has noted that the Taliban is engaged in a genuine fight against ISIS-K, which illustrates the complexity and fragmentation of the post-2021 security environment.

The diversity and scale of extremist groups in Afghanistan are significant, but these organizations differ in size, influence, territorial presence, and operational capacity. A central question for the international community, including Russia and its regional partners, is whether the Taliban is both willing and able to control these groups and prevent their activities from threatening neighboring states. Many experts remain skeptical about the Taliban government's capacity to effectively limit terrorist operations⁵.

In practice, extremist groups have already affected Central Asian security. For example, ISIS-K launched attacks from Afghan territory into Uzbekistan in April 2022 and into Tajikistan in May 2022, while also actively recruiting Uzbek- and Tajik-speaking militants. Radical religious organizations, including Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat, have expanded their activities, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, and are banned in several countries because of their extremist orientation (Debata 2022). These developments increase the risk of terrorist incidents and intensify social and political tensions across the region.

Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime

Transnational drug trafficking remains a major security concern, as Afghanistan has long been one of the world's largest producers of opium and heroin. Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have been exposed to drug-related crime linked to Afghan trafficking networks (Malysheva 2017). The spread of narcotics not only fuels organized crime but also undermines governance, weakens law enforcement, and destabilizes social and political structures in affected areas.

Although the Taliban briefly banned opium poppy cultivation in 2000–2001, which led to a sharp reduction in production, the effect was short-lived, and cultivation resumed after the Taliban's removal from power. Since then, opium production has become deeply embedded in Afghanistan's political economy. By 2021, it was estimated to account for a significant share of the country's economic activity and to remain one of the Taliban's important sources of revenue (Schroden 2025).

⁵ Kushkumbaev S. 2021. The War in Afghanistan Will Provoke a Migration Crisis in Central Asia. *Eurasia Expert*: URL: <https://eurasia.expert/voyna-v-afganistane-sprovotsiruet-migratsionnyy-krizis-v-tsentralnoy-azii/> (accessed 13.03.2026)

After regaining power in August 2021, the Taliban again announced restrictions on opium cultivation. However, analysts remain skeptical about the movement's capacity and willingness to enforce such measures consistently. Narcotics production and trafficking are closely connected to local livelihoods, patronage networks, and armed groups, which makes eradication difficult without large-scale international assistance. Such assistance remains limited because of the Taliban's lack of broad international recognition, sanctions, and the continuing humanitarian crisis (Debata 2017).

The persistence of narcotics production has direct implications for Central Asia. Trafficking along the so-called Northern Route – from Afghanistan through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan into Russia – fuels corruption, weakens border security, and facilitates the penetration of transnational criminal networks into regional economies and institutions. Both the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have identified drug trafficking as one of the most serious regional security threats, emphasizing its connection to extremist financing and cross-border instability⁶.

Thus, in the post-2021 context, Afghanistan's narcotics economy not only supports armed and informal power networks inside the country, but also aggravates regional instability by financing militant groups, strengthening organized crime, and weakening the governance capacity of neighboring states.

Regional and Geopolitical Pressures

The broader geopolitical environment further complicates Central Asia's security situation. The Russia–Ukraine conflict, which escalated in February 2022, has affected the regional balance of power, created tensions within the CSTO framework, and influenced the foreign policy calculations of Central Asian states (Sharifli 2022). At the same time, local crises – including border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and unrest in Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan – demonstrate the fragility of regional stability and the interaction between domestic vulnerabilities and external pressures (Murtazashvili 2022).

The Afghan crisis has produced multidimensional spillover effects in Central Asia, including terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking, organized crime, migration pressures, and geopolitical uncertainty. While many of these risks predate the Taliban's return to power, the period from 2021 to 2025 has intensified them and made regional security coordination more urgent. Central Asian states now face the challenge of safeguarding domestic stability while adapting to a more fragmented and competitive international environment.

⁶ CSTO. 2025. Strategic Reinforcement of the Tajik-Afghan Border. *Special Eurasia*. URL: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/04/19/csto-tajik-afghan-border/> (accessed 13.03.2026); CSTO. 2025. The CSTO Secretary General had a meeting with the Director of the SCO RATS Executive Committee. *Collective Security Treaty Organisation*. URL: https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/sostoyalas-vstrecha-generalnogo-sekretarya-odkb-s-direktorom-ispolnitelnogo-komiteta-rats-shos/#loaded (accessed 13.03.2026)

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has also complicated the functioning of existing regional security mechanisms⁷. The sanctions imposed on Russia, Western military and economic assistance to Ukraine, and the broader transformation of Eurasian geopolitics have affected the strategic environment in which Central Asian states operate. This has created a difficult situation for CSTO member states. On the one hand, Russia remains a key security actor in the region and a central member of the organization. On the other hand, Central Asian governments have sought to preserve room for diplomatic maneuver and avoid direct involvement in the conflict. Kazakhstan, for example, has consistently recognized Ukraine’s territorial integrity and has not recognized Donetsk and Luhansk as independent entities.

These developments have exposed the limits of existing regional security arrangements. The Kyrgyz–Tajik border clashes raised questions about the ability of regional institutions to prevent or manage conflicts among member states. The unrest in Karakalpakstan further highlighted the vulnerability of domestic stability in Central Asia. Taken together, these developments show that the Afghan crisis interacts with broader geopolitical pressures and internal regional tensions, making Central Asian security increasingly complex and multidimensional⁸.

Security Threats to Central Asia

In recent years, the socio-political situation in Afghanistan has become one of the major security challenges for the Central Asian states. The emergence of new threats is particularly acute because regional security in Central Asia is closely connected to broader international security dynamics (Kokoshin 2022). Regional and international actors with strategic interests in Central Asia remain concerned about the instability emanating from Afghanistan. Among the most serious threats are international terrorism, religious radicalism and extremism, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, illegal migration, and transnational organized crime (Abbasian 2022). These challenges are becoming increasingly diverse and transnational in character, affecting not only Central Asia but also wider regional and global security.

A particular concern is the ability of extremist and terrorist groups to shape the information environment and influence vulnerable social groups. Through propaganda, recruitment networks, and digital communication channels, such groups may undermine traditional cultural, moral, and social values, including the foundations of interethnic and interconfessional coexistence that have historically been important for Central Asian societies⁹.

⁷ Karin E. 2017. Central Asia and Radical Islam. *French Institute of International Relations*. URL: <https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/central-asia-facing-radical-islam> (accessed 13.03.2026)

⁸ Karin E. 2017. Central Asia and Radical Islam. *French Institute of International Relations*. URL: <https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/central-asia-facing-radical-islam> (accessed 13.03.2026)

⁹ Ibid.

Central Asia also occupies a significant place in Eurasian geopolitics, where the interests of regional and global powers intersect. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Central Asian states faced the complex task of building national statehood, restructuring their economies, and formulating independent foreign policies. One of the important dimensions of this foreign policy agenda was the need to respond to instability in neighboring Afghanistan and to prevent its negative effects from spreading into the region¹⁰.

The threats emanating from Afghanistan represent a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. They extend beyond national borders and may affect the broader South and Central Asian security space. The Afghan situation has had an adverse impact on the collective security of Central Asian states at the regional level. At the same time, it also affects the interests of regional and great powers, thereby influencing the wider system of international relations.

The roots of these challenges can be better understood through a retrospective analysis of Afghanistan's internal development since the 1970s. During the Cold War, Afghan society was drawn into an ideological confrontation shaped by the rivalry between competing models of political and social development. One pole was associated with socialist-oriented modernization, another with forces oriented toward cooperation with the Western capitalist world, while a third alternative emphasized religious solidarity and the construction of a just society based on Islamic norms (Akimbekov 2017). These ideological divisions, combined with foreign intervention and internal fragmentation, created long-term instability whose consequences continue to affect Afghanistan and its neighboring regions.

Thus, the Afghan crisis should be understood not only as a domestic conflict, but also as a source of cross-border security risks for Central Asia. Its consequences include the spread of extremist networks, narcotics trafficking, organized crime, arms smuggling, migration pressures, and the erosion of regional stability. This makes a retrospective and multidimensional analysis of Afghanistan's political development essential for understanding the current security challenges facing Central Asian states.

Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Regional Security in Central Asia

Enhancing Intelligence-Sharing and Counterterrorism Coordination

Central Asian states should strengthen intelligence cooperation through existing regional mechanisms, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (SCO-RATS) and the Commonwealth of Independent States

¹⁰ Bendarazsevszkij A. 2018. The New 'Great Game' in Central Asia. *Geopolitika.hu*. April 8. URL: <http://www.geopolitika.hu/en/2019/04/08/the-new-great-game-in-central-asia/> (accessed 13.03.2026)

Anti-Terrorism Center (CIS ATC). The 2018 memorandum of understanding between the SCO, CSTO, and CIS anti-terrorism bodies created an institutional basis for closer information-sharing on terrorist threats¹¹.

Building on this foundation, the countries of the region should develop secure and rapid intelligence exchange mechanisms to ensure timely alerts about imminent threats. A joint regional intelligence fusion center or a protected digital platform could facilitate real-time exchange of information on terrorist networks, foreign fighter movements, extremist financing, and cross-border recruitment channels. Regular joint counterterrorism exercises and specialized training programs would also improve the interoperability of security services and special forces. Such measures could help harmonize operational procedures, strengthen interagency trust, and improve communication during actual crises.

Strengthening Border Security Measures

Securing Central Asia's borders against terrorist infiltration, organized crime, and illicit trafficking remains a priority, especially given the vulnerability of border areas adjacent to Afghanistan. The states of the region should adopt integrated border management strategies combining infrastructure upgrades, advanced technologies, and interagency coordination. Governments should increase the number of border outposts and patrols in vulnerable mountainous areas, while also expanding joint patrols and intelligence exchanges with neighboring states. For example, coordination between Tajik and Afghan authorities along the Panj and Badakhshan border areas could help reduce the risks of infiltration, smuggling, and illicit cross-border movement.

Equipping border crossings and remote border areas with modern surveillance tools would significantly increase the effectiveness of border personnel. Many Central Asian states are already exploring technologies such as drones, sensors, and AI-assisted cameras for remote monitoring. Uzbekistan's investment in UAVs and electronic warfare capabilities, for instance, can be viewed as part of broader efforts to improve border surveillance and counterterrorism preparedness¹².

The use of aerial drones, ground sensors, and satellite-supported monitoring can help cover vast and hard-to-reach border regions and detect suspicious movements in real time. Another practical step is the wider adoption of biometric identification systems at immigration checkpoints. Biometric data – including fingerprints, facial recognition, and iris scans – allow authorities to verify identities against national and

¹¹ Geopolitical Report. 2025. Analysis of the Collective Security Treaty Organization CSTO in Central Asia: Perspectives and Challenges. *Special Eurasia*. URL: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/02/20/csto-central-asia-report/> (accessed 13.03.2026)

¹² Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban. 2022. *International Crisis Group*. URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia-pacific/afghanistan/326-afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban> (accessed 13.03.2026)

international watchlists with greater accuracy. The OSCE has promoted the use of biometric systems to interdict foreign terrorist fighters, noting that such tools make it possible to conduct rapid identity checks and flag suspects against international databases¹³.

Engaging Afghanistan Diplomatically for Security

Stability in Afghanistan is directly linked to Central Asia's security. For this reason, pragmatic diplomatic engagement with the Taliban remains necessary despite the absence of broad international recognition. Regional leaders have already begun to formulate a cautious common approach that can be described as "engage, but verify." Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for example, have supported informal dialogue with the de facto authorities in Kabul in order to assess their intentions, reduce uncertainty, and seek security guarantees. As President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has noted, communication with Afghanistan's current authorities can help develop a shared understanding of regional threats and explore areas of practical cooperation, including trade and transport connectivity, without necessarily implying formal political recognition¹⁴.

The CSTO also has a role to play in addressing potential spillover risks. It has conducted military exercises simulating crisis scenarios along the Afghan border and could further develop contingency planning in the event of cross-border violence or destabilization. At the same time, the positions of Central Asian states are not identical. While most CSTO and SCO members have opted for cautious engagement with the Taliban, Tajikistan has taken a more critical stance. President Emomali Rahmon has repeatedly emphasized that any Afghan government should be inclusive and should take into account the interests of ethnic minorities, including Tajiks¹⁵.

Central Asian diplomacy must therefore balance pragmatic engagement with security caution. The states of the region should encourage the Taliban to prevent the use of Afghan territory by terrorist groups, respect basic principles of inclusive governance, and maintain channels of communication with neighboring countries. At the same time, they should prepare coordinated regional measures to contain potential security fallout if the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates. This dual approach – diplomatic engagement combined with contingency planning – is essential for reducing the risks of instability spreading from Afghanistan into Central Asia.

¹³ OSCE. 2025. Supporting OSCE participating States to develop and implement systems to collect biometric data in order to responsibly and properly identify terrorists, including foreign terrorist fighters, in compliance with domestic law and international human rights. *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*. URL: <https://www.osce.org/node/478195> (accessed 13.03.2026)

¹⁴ CSTO, SCO Summits Presage Policy of Wary Tolerance of Taliban regime in Afghanistan. 2021. *Eurasianet*. September. URL: <https://eurasianet.org/csto-sco-summits-presage-policy-of-wary-tolerance-of-taliban-regime-in-afghanistan> (accessed 13.03.2026)

¹⁵ CSTO. 2025. The CSTO Secretary General had a meeting with the Director of the SCO RATS Executive Committee. *Collective Security Treaty Organisation*. URL: https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/sostoyalas-vstrecha-generalnogo-sekretarya-odkb-s-direktorom-ispolnitelnogo-komiteta-rats-shos/#loaded (accessed 13.03.2026)

Developing Counter-Radicalization Programs

Preventing the spread of violent extremism at the grassroots level is a long-term security investment for Central Asia (Chen 2023). Governments should implement comprehensive counter-radicalization and deradicalization programs that involve educators, religious leaders, and community organizations. One key pillar is education reform to inoculate youth against extremist ideologies. This includes updating school curricula to promote critical thinking, tolerance, and knowledge about the dangers of terrorism. Likewise, partnering with moderate Islamic scholars to teach authentic interpretations of religion can undermine the appeal of militant propaganda. Research on preventing violent extremism emphasizes that bolstering inclusive, quality education – both secular and religious – helps immunize communities against radical recruitment.

Community outreach and social programs are equally vital. For example, in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, pilot projects supported by the United Nations and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe have trained imams, social workers, and teachers to spot signs of radicalization and refer individuals to counseling instead of prison.

Finally, it is recommended that Central Asian governments collaborate to combat online radicalization and extremist propaganda that transcends borders. Militant groups often target young Central Asians via social media platforms, encrypted messaging apps, and slick video propaganda.

By investing in prevention through education, community resilience, rehabilitation of offenders, and strategic communications Central Asian states can reduce the pool of vulnerable individuals susceptible to extremist recruitment. This soft power approach to countering radicalization, coordinated regionally, will complement hard security measures and contribute to a sustainable decrease in the terrorist threat¹⁶.

Community outreach and social support programs are equally important. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for example, pilot projects supported by the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe have trained imams, teachers, and social workers to identify early signs of radicalization and refer vulnerable individuals to counseling and rehabilitation programs rather than relying exclusively on punitive measures. Such initiatives are particularly valuable because they shift the focus from reactive security responses to early prevention, social reintegration, and trust-building between communities and state institutions¹⁷.

¹⁶ A Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism. 2020. OSCE. URL: https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/a/7/444340_0.pdf (accessed 13.03.2026)

¹⁷ Briefing 2019. Rehabilitation and Reintegration in the Case of Extremist and Terrorist Groups: Psychological Training for Counsellors. *Penal Reform International*. URL: <https://www.penalreform.org/resource/rehabilitation-extremist-groups-psychological-training/> (accessed 13.03.2026)

Central Asian governments should also strengthen cooperation in countering online radicalization and extremist propaganda, which increasingly transcends national borders. Militant groups often target young people through social media platforms, encrypted messaging applications, and professionally produced video content. A coordinated regional approach should therefore include monitoring extremist online networks, developing counter-narratives, improving digital literacy, and engaging youth through credible community voices rather than relying solely on state messaging¹⁸.

By investing in education, community resilience, rehabilitation, and strategic communication, Central Asian states can reduce the number of individuals vulnerable to extremist recruitment. This preventive approach should complement, rather than replace, hard security measures. If coordinated at the regional level, it can contribute to a more sustainable reduction of terrorist threats and strengthen the broader security architecture of Central Asia.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this article shows that the Afghan crisis remains one of the most important factors shaping the security environment in Central Asia. Decades of conflict, foreign intervention, internal fragmentation, and political instability have produced consequences that extend far beyond Afghanistan's borders. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, these risks have become more acute, affecting the security calculations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and the wider region.

The Afghan crisis has acquired a systemic character. It is not limited to Afghanistan's domestic political instability, but is closely connected to broader regional and international security dynamics. The spread of radicalism, religious extremism, terrorism, transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and irregular migration poses serious risks to Central Asian states. These challenges threaten not only border security, but also social stability, interethnic and interconfessional relations, and the effectiveness of regional security institutions.

The main destabilizing factor for Central Asia is the continued activity of radical and terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan and, in some cases, extending their influence beyond Afghan territory. The presence of such groups increases the risk of cross-border infiltration, recruitment, terrorist attacks, and the spread of extremist propaganda. These developments are particularly dangerous for countries that share borders with Afghanistan or are connected to it through migration, trade, and informal networks.

¹⁸ Soliev N. 2023. The Digital Terror Financing of Central Asian Jihadis. *Combating Terrorism Center*. URL: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-digital-terror-financing-of-central-asian-jihadis/> (accessed 13.03.2026)

In this context, the security architecture of Central Asia should be strengthened at several levels: national, regional, and international (Stepanova 2022). At the domestic level, Central Asian states need to improve border control, law enforcement capacity, socio-economic resilience, and prevention policies. Special attention should be paid to education, counter-radicalization, and the involvement of qualified specialists in Islamic and religious studies. A better understanding of traditional Islamic knowledge can help reduce the influence of extremist interpretations and improve the religious environment in vulnerable communities.

At the regional level, bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral cooperation remains essential. Central Asian states should overcome mutual distrust and unresolved disputes in order to respond jointly to common threats. Border conflicts, historical grievances, and competing national priorities weaken collective security and create opportunities for external destabilizing influences. Terrorism and transnational crime cannot be effectively countered by any single state acting alone. They require coordinated intelligence-sharing, joint border management, counterterrorism cooperation, and diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan.

The Afghan crisis demonstrates the need for a more integrated and multi-level security architecture in Central Asia. Only coordinated regional action, supported by responsible international engagement, can reduce the risks emanating from Afghanistan and strengthen long-term stability in the region.

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Афганский кризис и трансформация архитектуры региональной безопасности в Центральной Азии (2021–2025 гг.)

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Центральная Азия, исторически выполнявшая роль буфера между крупными геополитическими силами, вновь оказывается в эпицентре потенциального кризиса. Приход к власти движения «Талибан» в Афганистане в 2021 г. не только изменил баланс сил в регионе, но и создал новые вызовы для соседних государств, поставил под сомнение начавшийся процесс интеграции Афганистана в центральноазиатское региональное пространство. Угроза эскалации конфликта на северных границах Афганистана, где сосредоточены этнические меньшинства и действуют радикальные группировки, ставит под угрозу и стабильность всей Центральной Азии. В статье рассматривается афганский кризис после захвата власти в стране движением «Талибан» в 2021 г. и связанные с ним вызовы безопасности в Центральной Азии. Статья содержит обзор истории афганского кризиса и проблем, возникших после прихода к власти «Талибана», а также анализ сопутствующих последствий кризиса для безопасности в Центральной Азии. Особое внимание уделяется таким проблемам, как терроризм, экстремизм, организованная преступность, региональное и геополитическое давление, а также угрозы безопасности. Авторы предлагают и практические рекомендации, включая расширение обмена разведывательной информацией, дипломатическое взаимодействие и инициативы по борьбе с терроризмом. Результаты исследования способствуют более глубокому пониманию меняющейся динамики безопасности в Центральной Азии и предоставляют аналитическую информацию политикам, экспертам по безопасности и международным организациям, работающим над снижением транснациональных угроз.

Ключевые слова: Афганистан, Центральная Азия, региональная безопасность, терроризм, экстремизм, организованная преступность и угрозы безопасности

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