



## Introduction

"The current geopolitical situation highlights a growing convergence of Chinese interests toward its neighbor, Tajikistan. Despite a challenging, predominantly mountainous terrain and the lack of energy resources, Tajikistan could benefit from Beijing's agreements with the Afghan Taliban regime. This collaboration enables the revival of a historically stalled project: the China-Turkmenistan connection via Afghanistan and Tajikistan, which would enhance the flow from its Turkmen supplier. Additionally, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could be expanded with an auxiliary route providing access to Afghanistan.

However, the lack of security remains one of the main threats to the project. Russia's hasty withdrawal from the region, prioritizing its interests in the war in Ukraine, has forced the PRC to replace Moscow as the security guarantor in the area. This development is not entirely favourable for Beijing, which is more interested in pursuing profitable activities. Security is crucial for China's interests, as it not only ensures the continuity of its import flows in this unstable region but also helps prevent any potential contact between Islamist militants in the area and the restive autonomous province of Xinjiang, where protests by the Muslim Uyghur ethnic group are frequently suppressed with violence.

Tajikistan's situation will require an additional effort from China if it aims to achieve its objectives. The country's political instability has worsened since the beginning of the succession race for the current president, Emomali Rahmon, with various contenders manoeuvring for position and seeking allies among the ruling elite to seize power. Meanwhile, most of the population must rely on smuggling and the informal economy to survive in a socially and territorially divided country, where the corruption of elites has significantly drained resources since the end of the civil war.

## Afghanistan and the new regional configuration

The recent agreements between the Afghan Taliban government and China open a promising alternative to the traditional connections of the People's Republic of China with its Central Asian suppliers. These agreements could significantly reshape regional dynamics by providing a more direct and efficient route for accessing Turkmenistan's energy resources, a country with vast natural gas reserves and a key player in Central Asia's energy sector. Specifically, this new route through Afghanistan has the potential to become a strategic alternative to the current corridors passing through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan is one of the main Central Asian gas suppliers alongside Kazakhstan. According to official Chinese government sources, it is estimated that since its inception in 2009, more than 500 billion cubic meters of gas have been delivered. The pipeline spans over 1,800 kilometers and has an annual capacity of 60 billion cubic meters.<sup>1</sup> (image 1).



Image 1: The Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline. Source:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central\\_Asia%E2%80%93China\\_gas\\_pipeline](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Asia%E2%80%93China_gas_pipeline)

<sup>1</sup> «China-Central Asia gas pipeline transports over 500 billion cubic meters of natural gas», accessed 10 January 2025, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/statistics/202411/19/content\\_WS673bd780c6d0868f4e8ed270.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/statistics/202411/19/content_WS673bd780c6d0868f4e8ed270.html).



## **Security is a key element of regional projects**

However, the economic viability of these corridors depends on achieving stable security conditions in a region marked by instability. The primary concern for the PRC is security and counterterrorism. Indeed, through investments and commercial and economic agreements with Afghanistan, Beijing seeks to align the Taliban regime with its interests and sever ties with extremist and terrorist groups that pose a threat to its border regions.

It is not only economic interests at stake; China fears that the spread of Islamist movements promoted by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), and the Islamic State group (ISIS/ISIL)<sup>3</sup> could spark unrest in the troubled region of Xinjiang.

These terrorist incursions, carried out by exploiting the porous mountainous borders, also enable the financing of these groups through smuggling, drug trafficking, and other illegal activities, often involving Tajikistan as a transit point for distribution across Central Asia, Russia, and Europe.

Tajikistan's weakness prevents effective crackdowns on and cessation of such criminal activities, compelling China to intervene to prevent the problem from reaching its own borders. Beijing's involvement in security operations has increased following Russia's withdrawal from the region—a role traditionally played by Moscow, which is now redirecting its economic and military resources to the conflict in Ukraine.

Although China seeks the contribution and engagement of all Central Asian countries in the fight for regional security and stability through summits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the reality is that Beijing is the most economically solvent and the most invested in resolving the issue. Moreover, Tajikistan's economy is heavily dependent on the PRC.

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<sup>3</sup> «CPC | China, Russia, and Great Power Politics in Afghanistan and Central Asia», Caspian Policy Center, accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/guest-contributions/china-russia-and-great-power-politics-in-afghanistan-and-central-asia>.

### ***China's Interests: The Cornerstone of the SCO Summit***

At the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit held in Pakistan, the progressive shift of influence from Russia to China as the leading power in the region became evident. Beijing's strategic and economic priorities dominated the institution's agenda, overshadowing Russia's positions and influence. This shift underscores China's growing power in Central Asia and its consolidation of leadership in multilateral forums like the SCO, which has long surpassed the relevance of Moscow-led institutions.

Organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which for years symbolized Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space, are in noticeable decline. The CSTO, designed as a military alliance to ensure regional stability, has shown limitations in addressing recent crises. Similarly, the EAEU has lost momentum due to economic fragmentation among its members and increasing international sanctions against Russia.

One of the most prominent underlying issues at the recent SCO summit in Pakistan was the enduring conflict between New Delhi and Islamabad. Their historical rivalry continues to deeply shape the region's dynamics<sup>4</sup>.

India, in its bid to strengthen its influence in Central Asia, is focusing on the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), an ambitious trade route passing through Iran that connects South Asia with Russia. This corridor, besides aligning with Russian interests, provides India with a strategic pathway into the region, circumventing geographical constraints and Pakistan's obstruction efforts (image 3). Pakistan is actively blocking India's access to the region not only due to their rivalry but also because the Indian proposal undermines Pakistan's interests.

The success of India's proposal would significantly impact the strategic ambitions of the corridor linking China with Pakistan.

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<sup>4</sup> «La Organización de Cooperación de Shanghái se reúne en un Pakistán en horas bajas», Real Instituto Elcano, accessed 11 January 2025., <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/la-organizacion-de-cooperacion-de-shanghai-se-reune-en-un-pakistan-en-horas-bajas/>.

This corridor not only represents a fundamental economic route but also a geopolitical component that strengthens China's influence in the region. Nevertheless, Beijing approaches its relationship with New Delhi cautiously, fully aware that India is one of the few regional players capable of challenging its hegemony in Asia.



Image 3: North-South Transport Corridor . Source: Sputnik  
<https://noticiaslatam.lat/20230518/corredor-internacional-norte-sur-1139595574.html>

India's options face considerable challenges that greatly reduce the likelihood of success. The international sanctions imposed on Iran and Russia<sup>5</sup>, two of its key partners in energy and infrastructure cooperation projects, significantly limit its ability to advance initiatives that could counterbalance China's influence.

Moreover, these sanctions hinder the financing, logistics, and execution of joint projects, placing India at a disadvantage compared to China's ability to mobilize resources and forge alliances.

<sup>5</sup> «La Organización de Cooperación de Shanghái se reúne en un Pakistán en horas bajas», Real Instituto Elcano, accessed 11 January 2025., <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/la-organizacion-de-cooperacion-de-shanghai-se-reune-en-un-pakistan-en-horas-bajas/>.

Another key factor in the conflict between Pakistan and India is the prolonged dispute over the Jammu and Kashmir region, a strategic territory that has been a source of tensions. This conflict not only has regional implications but could also directly impact the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a project under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also named the New Silk Road (image 4)



Image 4: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Source: CGTN  
<https://espanol.cgtn.com/news/3d4d7a5830456a4d7a457a6333566d54/p.html>

The geographical proximity of Jammu and Kashmir to the CPEC route makes it a particularly sensitive area for Beijing, as any escalation of the conflict could jeopardize the security of trade routes, infrastructure projects, and China's investments in Pakistan. This adds an additional layer to Beijing's interest in maintaining a delicate balance in its relations with India, fully aware that its positioning in the region must be carefully

managed to avoid antagonizing New Delhi, a key player in Asia's geopolitical dynamics. For China, any prolonged instability poses a challenge to its economic and strategic ambitions, underscoring the need to adopt a prudent and calculated foreign policy in its interactions with both countries.

### ***Central Asia's connectivity problems***

Both Russia's and China's proposals for the creation of economic and energy corridors address a historical challenge in the region due to its geographic situation.

As developed by writer Paul Collier<sup>6</sup>, one of the main obstacles for countries to achieve economic growth is the lack of access to the sea and the difficulty of coexisting with neighboring states. Central Asian countries are characterized by tense interrelations that often fluctuate unpredictably, depending on the peculiar dynamics of alliances and rivalries among their presidents. These tensions are rooted in historical disputes over the control and use of water and energy resources, as well as ethnic conflicts stemming from the arbitrary delineation of borders.

Additionally, Central Asia is the most landlocked region in the world, compounded by geographic barriers such as the mountain ranges to the east and deserts to the south and west.

The recent history of Central Asian republics is closely tied to Moscow, which developed communication routes oriented northward to serve its economic, commercial, and energy interests. The region's independence created opportunities to negotiate with other powers drawn to its resources. The United States attempted unsuccessfully to exploit Caspian resources due to the instability in Afghanistan, which prevented the completion of a corridor terminating at southern Pakistani ports, effectively isolating Iran. Subsequently, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reignited interest in Central Asia's gas and oil reserves, leading to significant investments and logistical challenges. The success of these efforts has positioned China as the dominant power in the region.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Collier, *El club de la miseria: qué falla en los países más pobres del mundo* (Turner, 2009), <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/libro?codigo=844485>.

The war in Ukraine and European sanctions forced Moscow to seek new alternatives for exporting its energy resources, one of its main revenue streams. Russia's strategy involves developing a corridor connecting Moscow to its ally Tehran and its crucial access to the sea, prioritizing agreements with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. These countries, in addition to being resource producers, are interested in new export routes and serve as transit nations to Iranian ports.

The current energy configuration in Central Asia, redefined by the search for the best access to the sea, represents, as we have seen, a competition between Russian interests with the North-South Corridor and China's proposal through Pakistan. Beijing's agreements with Kabul could ultimately tip the balance in its favor.

### **Tajikistan: The Most Unstable Country in Central Asia**

Following the civil war (1992–1997), the country has been led by Emomali Rahmon. The president has progressively hardened his rhetoric and authoritarianism. A clear example is the marginalization of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), which played a key role in forming the new government after the civil war but is now sidelined.

Rahmon has filled the ruling elite with family members and close associates from Kulob, his birthplace, who have gradually assumed key positions of power and leadership over the country's main enterprises. To silence dissenting voices, Rahmon has positioned himself as the savior who rescued the nation from civil war, presenting himself as the sole guarantor of stability and the only way to prevent the violence of another armed conflict<sup>7</sup>. This serves as a stern warning to those demanding greater freedoms and democracy freedoms and democracy in a country where human rights are in jeopardy, especially in the most human rights are in question, mainly in the most disadvantaged regions, and there are accusations of persecution of minorities and repression of critical voices<sup>8</sup>.

"This has led to a clear example of nepotism, where the ruling elites and their close associates exploit the privileges of their positions for excessive personal enrichment. The

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<sup>7</sup> Ferrán Izquierdo y Francesc Serra, «La sociología del poder en Asia Central», en *Poder y regímenes en Asia Central* (Barcelona: Bellaterra, 2018), 11-51.

<sup>8</sup> «Tajikistan: Rights Group Documents Persistent Abuses in Mountainous Autonomous Region | Eurasianet», accessed 10 January 2025, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-rights-group-documents-persistent-abuses-in-mountainous-autonomous-region>.

revenues from the sale of the country's limited resources benefit a small elitist social class.

### **The Complex Presidential Succession**

The race to succeed Emomali Rahmon, the last remaining leader of the generation of presidents who oversaw the independence of Central Asia's former Soviet republics, is already underway. Among the best-positioned candidates are his own children, who hold significant positions within the country.

His eldest daughter, Ozoda, holds the position of chief of staff in the presidential office, while her husband, Jamoliddin Nuraliev, is a prominent banker. Other daughters also hold influential roles: Rukhshona is a career diplomat, and her husband, Shamsullo Sohibov, is a powerful oligarch controlling key sectors such as transportation, trade, media, and finance. Similarly, Tahmina and her husband, Zarifbek Davlatov, own a company with a monopoly on issuing airline tickets. Parvina holds a senior oversight role in the pharmaceutical sector<sup>9</sup> and his son, Rustam, serves as the mayor of Dushanbe. The frontrunner is his son Rustam, who has begun forging alliances and striking deals to eliminate potential adversaries in his bid for the presidency, leveraging his privileged political standing (Image 5).

However, a formidable challenge may come from the partnership of Ozoda and Nuraliev, who boast greater experience and education. The uncertainty surrounding the succession has reached such levels that significant purges are taking place within the regime's upper echelons, allegedly in response to unclear suspicions of uprisings.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Galiya Ibragimova, «Alleged Coup Plot in Tajikistan Linked to Pre-Transition Jitters», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed 9 January 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/08/tajikistan-coup-or-transit?lang=en>. (Consulted 09/01/2025)

<sup>10</sup> Ibragimova. (Consulted 09/01/2025)



Image 5: Emomali Rahmon with her son Rustam. Source: Acca Media

<https://acca.media/en/3982/tajikistan-emomali-rahmon-prepares-his-son-for-his-post/>

### ***Possible change in the Tajik security guarantor***

Russia and China stand as the principal international backers of Emomali Rahmon, recognizing that maintaining stability in Tajikistan and the region hinges on the continuation of the authoritarian regime—a system both powers align with ideologically.

For Russia, which played a significant role in Tajikistan's civil war, the country provides a source of cheap labor through Tajik migrant workers and serves as a rare ally in its "near abroad," where sentiment against Moscow is increasingly critical. Additionally, Rahmon represents one of the few remaining vestiges of the Soviet legacy, and Tajikistan remains one of the few nations hosting a Russian military presence.

However, the previously analyzed recent developments could mark a turning point in how national security responsibilities are managed in Tajikistan. China's strong ties with its Tajik neighbor, coupled with Russia's strategic prioritization of the conflict in Ukraine, are shaping a scenario that will profoundly impact Tajikistan's foreign policy.

The partial withdrawal or weakening of Russia's military presence, traditionally a counterweight to Tajikistan's growing economic and strategic dependence on China, signals a new chapter in the region's power dynamics. This shift presents a critical challenge for Tajikistan, a small nation now at a crossroads: to deepen its ties with Beijing—accepting the risks of increased dependency, exemplified by projects

like the Belt and Road Initiative and its extensive infrastructure investments—or to sustain an active partnership with Russia to balance external influences on its territory.

The outcome of these decisions will not only shape Tajikistan's political and economic future but could also redefine the balance of power in Central Asia, a strategic region where Chinese and Russian interests intersect.

## Conclusions

Tajikistan's geostrategic importance is poised to increase significantly if China's ambitious commercial and economic agreements in Afghanistan develop as Beijing envisions.

From a diplomatic perspective, the cooperation between the Taliban regime and Xi Jinping's government signals a pivotal shift in international dynamics. This rapprochement marks the end of Afghanistan's prolonged isolation and paves the way for other nations, drawn by Afghanistan's vast natural resources, to reassess their stance toward the Taliban regime.

Resources like rare earth elements, lithium deposits, and other critical raw materials position Afghanistan as a key player in future global supply chains.

From an economic standpoint, there is potential to expand the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by including an Afghan branch, which could significantly benefit Tajikistan's interests. This alternative gains traction given the instability in northern Pakistan caused by its ongoing conflict with India, posing challenges to the security and viability of the existing corridor.

Connecting through the Afghan branch also offers a strategic opportunity by establishing a shorter, more efficient route linking Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, with a possible outlet at the Gwadar port in Pakistan. This new route would not only diversify logistical options but also complement the current corridor linking China with Central Asia through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

This infrastructure would benefit other regional exporters by addressing Central Asia's historical challenges of landlocked geography and rugged terrain. By integrating such connectivity, landlocked Central Asian nations could overcome commercial isolation, reduce transportation costs, and enhance competitiveness in global markets.

Additionally, strengthening these links would promote regional development and contribute to the political stabilization of areas long marked by tensions and conflicts.

For Tajikistan, this emerging landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, its geographical proximity and historical ties position it as a natural partner to facilitate trade and logistics in the region. On the other hand, growing Chinese influence and deeper cooperation between Afghanistan and Beijing could heighten tensions in an already complex space where strategic interests of powers like Russia and the United States converge.

However, Tajikistan's current situation tempers optimism. The country remains economically and militarily dependent on China and Russia, two powers that have been critical in sustaining Emomali Rahmon's authoritarian regime. In light of recent geopolitical changes, Rahmon must navigate whether to accelerate or delay the shift in the country's security guarantor.

Dushanbe remains the weakest economy in Central Asia, severely limiting its ability to pursue independent policies or tackle domestic socioeconomic challenges.

The president's authoritarian policies have not only isolated Tajikistan democratically but also hindered its development. These repressive measures have deterred foreign investment and stifled the creation of a favorable environment for economic growth and innovation.

Compounding these issues is the growing increase in power of Rahmon's family, which for decades has exploited its privileged position to consolidate control over the country's resources and institutions. Internal disputes within the president's inner circle over succession have further fueled tensions in a context where political and economic power is concentrated in a small ruling elite. Meanwhile, much of the population lives in precarious conditions, struggling to survive with limited resources and opportunities for progress.

In this scenario, Tajikistan's future will depend heavily on its ability to diversify alliances, promote economic and social reforms, and foster more inclusive development. Yet these goals appear challenging to achieve under the current model, which perpetuates inequality, stifles progress, and leaves the nation vulnerable to external influences.

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