



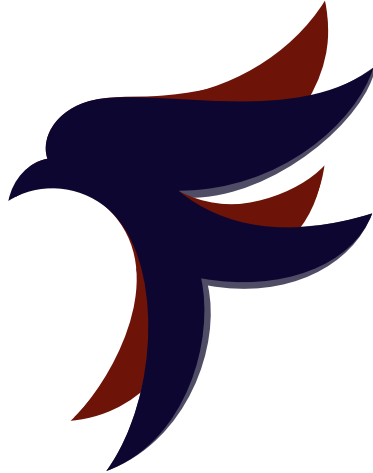
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EURASIA PROGRAM

# NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN AND THE NEW THREAT TO CENTRAL ASIA

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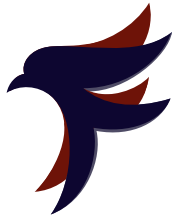
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May 2022



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Bruce Pannier



## ABSTRACT

The contest for control of northern Afghanistan between the Taliban, the Islamic State, and other terrorist groups is a major security concern for the states of Central Asia. Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have relied on the Taliban to prevent non-state actors from operating in northern Afghanistan and launching cross-border attacks. In recent months, however, the Islamic State has bombed mosques near the border with Central Asia, and claimed to have launched a rocket attack into Uzbekistan. The deteriorating situation in the region demonstrates the limits of Central Asian states' security strategies, and highlights that they have few options in dealing with a new threat on their border.



Photo of the Hairatan to Mazar-i-Sharif railway, taken in 2013.  
(Flickr/Special IG for Afghanistan Reconstruction)

## INTRODUCTION

The Taliban are losing control in northern Afghanistan to the Islamic State. In April 2022, the terrorist group carried out a series of bombings at Shia mosques in Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif, killing dozens.<sup>1</sup> The Islamic State released a video of a purported rocket attack from Afghan territory toward military targets in Uzbekistan, although the Taliban and Uzbekistan challenged the claim.<sup>2</sup>

The deteriorating security environment in northern Afghanistan is bad news across the border in Central Asia. Since regaining power, the Taliban have repeatedly assured the governments there (i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) that they would not allow Afghan territory to be used for attacks against Afghanistan's neighbors. This understanding with the Taliban provided a measure of stability in the chaotic aftermath of the American withdrawal last summer.

Central Asia's connectivity with Afghanistan is much greater than it was when the Taliban were in power in the late 1990s. As a result, Central Asian governments can't ignore what's going on across the border. The potential gains from expanding trade with countries in South Asia and further away now seem to outweigh the risks of working with the Afghan militant group, though this looks to be tested as violence increases. The Taliban have rivals in northern Afghanistan who are bombing mosques and exploiting its mistreatment of ethnic minorities there. Central Asia's brief respite from Afghan concerns might be coming to an end.

## THE CONTEST FOR NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN

On April 21, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) carried out bombings of Shia mosques in Mazar-i-Sharif, some 60 kilometers from the border with Uzbekistan, and in the city of Kunduz, some 50 kilometers from the border with Tajikistan. Nearly 80 people were killed.

ISK also claimed responsibility for an apparently botched attack targeting Uzbekistan. On April 18, ISK posted a video on the internet that the group said was evidence of a rocket attack launched on Uzbekistan from the Afghan border town of Hairaton.<sup>3</sup> The Taliban quickly denied the ISK claim. Uzbek presidential spokesman Sherzod Asadov released a statement on April 19 saying, “information disseminated by some Telegram channels about the alleged rocket fire from the territory of Afghanistan ... is absolutely untrue.”<sup>4</sup>

The Islamic State’s *Amaq* news agency released a statement, claiming that ten rockets had been fired at a military site on Uzbek territory and posted a photo of a militant who carried out the attack.

On April 20, Uzbekistan’s *Gazeta* news website published an interview with Taliban deputy spokesman Inamulla Samangani.<sup>5</sup> He said a group of ISK militants did fire rockets from Hairaton toward Uzbekistan, but none of the rockets made it across the Amu-Darya, the river that divides Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Samangani noted, “Their (ISK militants) location has been established. Two or three of them were detained with several rockets.” He added that “two or three rockets” were fired, but repeated these rockets “did not reach the border of Uzbekistan.”

The *Gazeta* article continued that some “Afghan media” were not only reporting the rocket attack did happen but that Uzbek warplanes crossed the border in the wake of the attack and flew as far as Mazar-i-Sharif. It added that Uzbek military helicopters were also seen over the Amu-Darya and Hairaton. The report included links to videos of what were purportedly the Uzbek military aircraft.

A separate article mentioned that people in and around Termez, the Uzbek city across the Amu-Darya from Hairaton, confirmed there were Uzbek warplanes flying over on April 18.<sup>6</sup> One local resident, speaking under condition of anonymity to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Uzbek service, said some rockets had landed on Uzbek territory, and another resident said Uzbek warplanes were regularly flying over the area in the days after the rockets were fired.

**Stability in northern Afghanistan will be important if the Taliban hope to maintain their informal truce with their northern neighbors.**

Since regaining power, the Taliban have repeatedly assured the governments in Central Asia that they would not allow Afghan territory to be used for attacks against Afghanistan’s neighbors. That is really the foundation of the understanding the Central Asian states have with the Taliban. Samangani repeated this promise when speaking about the ISK rocket attacks, but he also confirmed that ISK did in fact use Afghan territory to try to attack Uzbekistan.

Stability in northern Afghanistan will be important if the Taliban hope to maintain their informal truce with their northern neighbors. However, the predominantly ethnic Pushtun Taliban are already finding it difficult to bring this region—inhabited mainly by Afghanistan’s ethnic minorities—under control. And Central Asia governments are more concerned about some of the Taliban’s allies in northern Afghanistan than ISK. Jamaat Ansarullah, for instance, is a terrorist group from Tajikistan that claimed responsibility for a suicide bomber attack in the northern Tajik city of Khujand in September 2010 that killed



A member of Taliban leadership visited the Balkh province to express condolences with families and victims of the April 21 attack on a mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif. (Twitter/Inamullah Samangani)

four people.<sup>7</sup> The Tajik government launched a crackdown on suspected Jamaat Ansarullah members and since then the group has been operating alongside the Taliban in northern Afghanistan.

Tajikistan has never opened communications with the Taliban. President Emomali Rahmon is the only leader of countries bordering Afghanistan who was in power the first time the Taliban controlled Afghanistan. His government helped the forces of ethnic Tajik Ahmad Shah Masoud to resist the Taliban in the late 1990s. Rahmon would find it difficult to change his position toward the Taliban now, particularly since his government continues vilifying and repressing more moderate Islamic groups inside Tajikistan.

Tajik officials have warned for years about foreign militant groups in northern Afghanistan, including Jamaat Ansarullah. After the Taliban returned to power, the Tajik government strengthened its forces along the Afghan border.

It also conducted a series of military drills near the border, including exercises with Russian and Uzbek forces. Rahmon gave awards to the Taliban's bitter foes of the late 1990s, Rabbani and Masoud, after the two men were killed. Masoud was assassinated on September 9, 2001 and Rabbani on September 20, 2011.<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Zahir Aghbar, the last Afghan ambassador to Tajikistan from former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government, is still at the Afghan Embassy in Dushanbe and is allowed, occasionally, to speak publicly about former government soldiers' continued resistance against Taliban rule.

In September, the Taliban sent reinforcements, including Jamaat Ansarullah fighters, to guard sections of the Tajik border.<sup>9</sup> This predictably increased the Tajik government's hostility toward the Taliban.



## RADICAL ROOTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Jamaat Ansarullah was once the Tajik wing of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group formed by Uzbeks who fought on the side of the Islamic opposition during the 1992–1997 Tajik civil war. The 1997 Tajik peace accord that ended the war called for the opposition to disarm by summer 1999, which left the foreign fighters in the Tajik opposition in a precarious situation.

After bombings in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on February 16, 1999, the Uzbek government launched a crackdown that saw thousands of Muslims imprisoned.<sup>10</sup> Many fled and some went to Tajikistan where Uzbeks who had fought in the Tajik opposition were still based. They formed the original IMU and announced their goal was to overthrow Uzbekistan's government.

Unwelcome in Tajikistan, the IMU made incursions into southern Kyrgyzstan in summer 1999. The following summer, the group made inroads into southern Kyrgyzstan and eastern Uzbekistan. Under pressure from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the Tajik government moved to close down IMU sanctuaries in Tajikistan's mountains and the Taliban provided the IMU shelter in northern Afghanistan.

The Taliban had reasons for helping the IMU. The Uzbek government helped its enemies—the forces of ethnic Uzbek Afghan field commander Abdul Rashid Dostum in Mazar-i-Sharif. Even after the city fell and Dostum fled, Uzbekistan continued to do what it could to oppose the Taliban. The IMU campaigns of 1999 and 2000 distracted the Uzbek government's attention from Afghanistan.

The IMU remained in Afghanistan in the summer of 2001 and were still there after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The IMU suffered heavy losses in the U.S. bombing of northern Afghanistan in November 2001. Most survivors fled to Pakistan's tribal areas. After the IMU claimed responsibility for the June 2014 attack on the Karachi airport, Pakistan's military launched operations against militants in the tribal areas.<sup>11</sup> Many of the IMU fled back into Afghanistan. Some joined IMU bands

that had remained there under the command of Jamaat Ansarullah, while others linked up with Taliban units in northeastern Afghanistan.

Most IMU militants that remained in Pakistan's tribal area were led by Usman Ghazi, who swore allegiance to the Islamic State. Ghazi's IMU group also returned to Afghanistan in 2015, some to the Zabul area where they were annihilated in November 2015. Another IMU group loyal to the Islamic State went to Herat and also suffered heavy losses. The surviving Uzbek militants scattered across northern Afghanistan.

**The Islamic Jihad Union is believed to still be active in northern Afghanistan and at least was allied with the Taliban. The group also aims to overthrow the Uzbek government, but it has not claimed any attacks in several years.**

The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), formed in 2005, is another IMU splinter group. The Islamic Jihad Union is believed to still be active in northern Afghanistan and at least was allied with the Taliban. The group also aims to overthrow the Uzbek government, but it has not claimed any attacks in several years.

Katibat Imam al-Bukhari—another IMU spin-off—was created in the Afghan-Pakistani border area in 2011. Many of its militants went to Syria in 2014 and fought alongside al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. By 2016, however, most left for northern Afghanistan and were believed to be operating in the Faryab and Jowzjan provinces that border Turkmenistan.

## BAD TALIBAN GOVERNANCE HELPS THE ISLAMIC STATE

The Islamic State benefits from the Taliban's failures and missteps. Just weeks after the Taliban regained power, videos and reports about ethnic Pushtun Taliban evicting ethnic Turkmen and Uzbeks from their homes and seizing their livestock started coming from northern Afghanistan.

In January 2022, the Taliban arrested Makhдум Alem, an ethnic Uzbek Afghan Taliban commander in the northern Faryab Province who played a large role in convincing local leaders and elders to side with the Taliban in the last months foreign forces were in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> The Taliban said Alem was suspected of involvement in a kidnapping.

Alem's arrest sparked a revolt among the largely ethnic Uzbek population in the Faryab provincial capital Maimana. Four people were killed in the shooting that broke out. Residents of Maimana eventually disarmed the Pushtun Taliban fighters and forced them to march out of the city. The Taliban sent reinforcements, reportedly including a squad of suicide bombers, to Faryab.<sup>13</sup> The stand-off lasted for four days before a truce was negotiated, but in the meantime the Taliban angered some of ethnic Tajiks in northern Afghanistan by arresting Qori Wakil, an influential local ethnic Tajik leader. The Taliban did not say what the charges were against Wakil.

The ISK is seeking to capitalize on the growing dissatisfaction among ethnic Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks against Taliban rule in northern Afghanistan. Already in October 2021 there was a report on ISK attempting to find new recruits among the ethnic minority groups of northern Afghanistan near the Tajik border.<sup>14</sup> Some citizens of Tajikistan had left for Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State starting in 2014. The Islamic State's "minister of war" was Gulmurod Khalimov, a colonel in the elite OMON unit of Tajikistan's Interior Ministry until he defected to the Islamic State in 2015. Khalimov released several videos denouncing Tajik authorities, whom he called "dogs," for their harsh treatment of the country's Muslims and urged citizens of Tajikistan join

Islamic State. Khalimov was reportedly killed in 2017, though rumors he is still alive continue to this day. And Islamic State claimed an attack on foreign bicyclists in Tajikistan in July 2018 that left four of the victims dead.<sup>15</sup> The five attackers were all Tajik nationals.

A recent report said ISK efforts to recruit ethnic Tajiks in northern Afghanistan and in Tajikistan continue and that the group is openly talking about overthrowing the Tajik government.<sup>16</sup> The report also noted ISK is putting a new emphasis on releasing material in Tajik and Uzbek languages as part of this recruitment campaign.

**The ISK is seeking to capitalize on the growing dissatisfaction among ethnic Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks against Taliban rule in northern Afghanistan.**

Another report in December said ISK was looking for new recruits among the Uzbek population of northern Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> ISK propaganda reportedly stresses that the Taliban are a Pushtun movement that does not respect the culture and traditions of the minority groups in northern Afghanistan. And ISK propaganda also targets the Uzbek government for its cooperation with the Taliban.

ISK briefly had a foothold in northern Afghanistan in 2016 when a disaffected ethnic Uzbek local Taliban commander in the northern Jowzjan Province named Qari Hikmat swore allegiance to the Islamic State and carved out an ISK area in the Darzab district. Hikmat gathered some of the fighters from Usman Ghazi's IMU who had participated in the disastrous attacks on the Taliban in Herat Province in 2015. Until he



The Vanj and Chomarchi Bolo bridge between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. (Flickr/Ninara)

was killed in April 2018, Hikmat's ISK group fought battles against the Taliban and Afghan government forces and even extended the ISK area of influence into the neighboring Faryab Province, where Hikmat was killed. A new ISK leader was named (Qari Habibul Rahman), but the group vanished from reports after Hikmat's death.

This is another problem the predominantly Pushtun Taliban face in northern Afghanistan—ISK propaganda appeals not only to local

minority populations, but to foreign Central Asian fighters as well. The Central Asians are mostly Tajiks and Uzbeks, well-armed and battle-hardened, whose sympathies could be expected to lie with their ethnic kin in any disputes in northern Afghanistan. The Taliban might see them as a potential threat, particularly if ISK is successful in finding recruits among the local Tajik and Uzbek populations of northern Afghanistan.

## NORTH OF THE BORDER



Uzbek and Kazakh ambassadors to Kabul alongside representatives from Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan met with Taliban leadership on April 23, 2022 to discuss ties with the Central Asia region. (Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

The increasing violence in northern Afghanistan, and the knowledge that ISK are behind much of it, must be disconcerting to the Central Asian governments who were hoping peace with the Taliban might be a guarantee for safety at home.

Since August 2021, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have sent official delegations to Kabul to meet with Taliban representatives. The deputy chairman of Kyrgyzstan's Security Council, Taalatbek Masadykov, was on a regional tour that included a visit to Kabul in April 2022 and he led the Kyrgyz delegation that was there in late September 2021. The Turkmen and Uzbek foreign ministers have travelled to Kabul to meet with representatives of the "Afghan government." None of the Central Asian governments called it the "Taliban government."

But it is no surprise that ISK would choose to attack Uzbekistan—the country has the closest ties with the Taliban of all the Central Asian states. After Shavkat Mirziyoyev became Uzbekistan's president in late 2016, the Uzbek government readjusted its policies toward Afghanistan. Mirziyoyev's special representative for Afghanistan, Ismatulla Irgashev, met with

Taliban representatives in November 2018 in Moscow, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov met with Taliban representatives in Doha in March 2019, and in August of that year, Uzbekistan hosted a Taliban delegation for talks in Tashkent that were followed by visits to the ancient Silk Road cities of Samarkand and Bukhara.

At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Dushanbe on September 17, 2021, barely one month after the Taliban seized Kabul, Uzbek President Mirziyoyev called for frozen Afghan assets in foreign banks to be unfrozen and for the new Afghan government to have access to them. Uzbekistan reopened the Termez border crossing with Afghanistan and the first cargo crossed into Afghanistan on September 1, 2021. Taliban representatives and Uzbek officials have met several times since in Termez to discuss customs regulations and other border matters. In December 2021, Uzbekistan sent technicians to help repair equipment at the Mazar-i-Sharif airport so it could resume operations (which it did at the end of March).

U.S. Marines guarding an exacuation checkpoint at Hamid Karzai International Airport in August, 2021. (Wikimedia/Zoozaz1)



## AN EYE TOWARDS THE FUTURE

The Uzbek government's attitude toward the Taliban is a striking change to Tashkent's position when the Taliban first seized power in Afghanistan in the 1990s. There was panic in Central Asia in September 1996 when the Taliban captured Kabul. The Uzbek government of then-President Islam Karimov was the loudest in warning of the dangers that would come from a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

It's likely that none of the Central Asian governments were pleased with the Taliban coming to power again in Afghanistan in 2021. All five countries had played some role in helping the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan. U.S. troops were stationed in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and French forces briefly used part of the Dushanbe airport in Tajikistan. But all five must have been considering the possibility during the previous decade as foreign forces in Afghanistan were gradually exiting the country that the Taliban could eventually be victorious.

During the 20 years the Taliban were not in power in Afghanistan, the connections with Central Asia grew and that is a huge reason why most of the Central Asian governments, and particularly the Uzbek government, are taking a more pragmatic approach to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan than they did in the late 1990s.

Power transmission lines were built to export electricity from all the neighboring Central Asian states to Afghanistan after 2001. Afghanistan imports 73 percent of its electricity.<sup>18</sup> Nearly 60 percent of that electricity comes from Uzbekistan (17 percent from Turkmenistan and 4 percent from Tajikistan). In 2018, construction started on a new 500-kV power line from Surkhon, Uzbekistan to Pul-e-Khumri in Afghanistan that, if finished, would boost Uzbekistan's electricity exports to its southern neighbor by an additional 70 percent.<sup>19</sup>

The Taliban said shortly after returning to power that Afghanistan could not pay for that electricity but would do so when it could. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have accepted this

and continue to send electricity to Afghanistan in what some view as a move to appease the Afghan militant group. However, the Central Asian governments are aware Afghanistan is experiencing a humanitarian crisis and cutting off electricity would anger not only the Taliban but millions of Afghan citizens who benefit from this electricity.

**The Central Asian governments are aware Afghanistan is experiencing a humanitarian crisis and cutting off electricity would anger not only the Taliban but millions of Afghan citizens who benefit from this electricity.**

When the Taliban were taking control over Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, the only Central Asian government that was not hostile toward the Taliban was Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan had just received UN-recognized status as a neutral state in December 1995 and while no one was sure what that meant at the time, the Turkmen government used it to proclaim its neutrality in the Afghan conflict when the Taliban seized Kabul. The country was guided by economic interests—namely, the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline that would carry some 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Turkmen gas annually to the three countries (Afghanistan 5 bcm, and Pakistan and India 14 bcm each). But the project was only possible if there was stability in Afghanistan.



Taliban fighters patrolling Kabul in August, 2021.  
(Wikimedia/VOA News)

Neutrality worked then, and Turkmenistan, while never formally recognizing the Taliban government, did allow the Taliban to open a representative office in the Turkmen capital Ashgabat, and construction of TAPI was more possible then than it has ever been since.

Neutrality has not been enough to shield Turkmenistan from the violence in Afghanistan during the last eight years. Three Turkmen borders were killed along the Afghan frontier in February 2014, and three Turkmen soldiers were killed, and their weapons stolen in May that same year in an attack on a different section of the border.<sup>20</sup> It was never clear who was responsible for those attacks. But after those incidents the Turkmen government started to strengthen its forces along the Afghan border and purchasing new weapons from Turkey, China, and other countries. Turkmen border guards shot dead an Afghan civilian at the end of December 2021 and were involved in a shoot-out with Taliban forces in the same area several days later, though Turkmen government and Taliban officials quickly swept the matter under the rug.<sup>21</sup>

**A north-south route is particularly important to Central Asia now as the route to Europe through Russia is complicated by sanctions European countries imposed on Russia for the war on Ukraine.**

The Uzbek government seems to have taken a page from Turkmenistan's foreign policy book of the 1990s and views Afghanistan as a necessary transit country in plans for a brighter economic future. As a result, it finds it necessary to deal with whoever is in power in Afghanistan, at least so long as there is no threat against Uzbekistan that emanates from Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan is especially interested in construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif to Peshawar railway project. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan came to Tashkent for a conference in July 2021 on connectivity in South and Central Asia. He spent time on the sidelines discussing construction of the approximately 570-kilometer railway project with Uzbek President Mirziyoyev. The two discussed it again on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Dushanbe. Representatives of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan agreed in early February to a roadmap for the project.<sup>22</sup>

Uzbekistan has a rail connection to Afghanistan that runs from Termez across the Dustlik (Friendship) Bridge, built in 1982 to supply Soviet troops in Afghanistan. The railway originally went only a few kilometers inside Afghanistan, but an extension to Mazar-i-Sharif was completed in 2011. Construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif–Peshawar railway would connect Uzbekistan to Pakistani ports on the Arabian Sea, opening a long-desired north-south trade route between Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. The railway line through Uzbekistan to Afghanistan also connects to China, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, and to Europe as part of the former Northern Distribution Network that NATO used for supplying troops in Afghanistan. Such railway connections potentially mean millions of dollars for Uzbekistan just in transit fees.

A north-south route is particularly important to Central Asia now as the route to Europe through Russia is complicated by sanctions European countries imposed on Russia for the war on Ukraine. The conflict appears likely to drag on for some time and sanctions will likely become more severe as the conflict continues. A new trade route south would compensate at least somewhat for the partial loss of Central Asia's trade routes west.



## CENTRAL ASIA OUTSOURCING ITS SECURITY TO THE TALIBAN




The governments in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan will continue to pin their hopes on the Taliban bringing stability to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's response to the attempted ISK attack suggests that the Uzbek government, at least, is willing to go a little further in shoring up Taliban control when it is in both parties' interests.

The Uzbek government has not commented on reports the country's military aircraft were sent to the area of the alleged attack. If those reports are true, it raises some interesting questions. It seems unlikely Uzbekistan sent military aircraft over Afghanistan without informing the Taliban, or perhaps being requested to do so by the Taliban. That would suggest a new level of cooperation has been reached between the two parties, at least concerning ISK.

But if the Taliban cannot stop the violence in northern Afghanistan, or if some group does succeed in launching an attack from Afghan territory on a neighboring Central Asian state

or crosses the border into one of the countries to carry out terrorist attacks, it is difficult to see how that would not change the Central Asian governments' policies toward Afghanistan and the Taliban. An uneasy truce is easy to shatter and confidence can be hard to restore, but none of the Central Asian countries want ISK gaining control of areas in north Afghanistan near or on the border. And if the Taliban lose influence with the Central Asian militants allied to them, what would those Central Asian militants do next?

The Central Asian governments have been contending with the shifting political landscape in Afghanistan ever since they became independent in 1991. They are surely pondering various scenarios that could develop from the recent growing instability in northern Afghanistan. For the sake of Central Asia's security and hopes for expanded trade south, the best prospect at the moment seems to be support the Taliban and hope they can get a tighter grip on northern Afghanistan. 

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