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# Turkmenistan's Pragmatic Diplomacy: Navigating Engagements with the Taliban-Led Afghanistan Since 2021

*Abdul Wasi Popalzay\**

## **Abstract**

*Turkmenistan's foreign policy toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is characterized by its longstanding doctrine of positive neutrality, emphasizing economic engagement, regional security cooperation, and diplomatic pragmatism. This study critically examines Turkmenistan's evolving approach to the Taliban, assessing its diplomatic strategies, economic interests, and security considerations. While Turkmenistan has prioritized infrastructure projects, particularly the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, challenges arise due to Afghanistan's unstable political landscape and the threat posed by Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). The study also explores Turkmenistan's security policies, including intelligence-sharing and border security cooperation, while maintaining its non-alignment stance. The findings suggest that Ashgabat's strategy is driven by pragmatic economic interests rather than ideological alignment with the Taliban. Policy recommendations highlight the need for greater multilateral engagement, enhanced regional security cooperation, and expanded economic diplomacy to ensure stability and sustainable engagement with Afghanistan. The paper concludes that while Turkmenistan's neutrality serves as a diplomatic advantage, it also poses limitations in responding to emerging threats. The future of Turkmenistan-Taliban relations will depend on Afghanistan's internal governance trajectory and broader regional geopolitical shifts. This research contributes to the scholarly discourse on Central Asian diplomacy, emphasizing Turkmenistan's role in regional stability amidst Afghanistan's uncertain political and security landscape.*

**Keywords:** *Turkmenistan, Taliban, Afghanistan, neutrality, economic diplomacy, security cooperation, TAPI pipeline, regional stability*

## **Introduction**

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the country has undergone a profound political transformation, reshaping regional diplomatic and security dynamics. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces and the subsequent establishment of the Taliban-led government have led to significant challenges, including governance instability, human rights concerns, and international isolation. In this context, neighboring states have responded with

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varying diplomatic strategies, with some refusing recognition while others opting for pragmatic engagement. Among Afghanistan's immediate neighbors, Turkmenistan has distinguished itself through its adherence to a policy of "positive neutrality," engaging with the Taliban administration without official recognition. Given Turkmenistan's 744-kilometer border with Afghanistan, its strategic economic interests, and its historical emphasis on non-interference, its foreign policy towards Afghanistan provides a critical case study in pragmatic diplomacy (Kucera, 2021).

Turkmenistan's diplomatic approach is shaped by its geopolitical constraints and economic imperatives, making an unconditional but cautious engagement with the Taliban government a necessity rather than a political endorsement. While most of the international community has remained skeptical about formal engagements with the Taliban, Turkmenistan has maintained its energy partnerships, infrastructure projects, and border security cooperation with Afghanistan. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, a long-anticipated regional initiative, has been a central component of this engagement, alongside electricity exports and trade partnerships (Daly, 2022). These dynamics raise important questions about the role of neutrality in small-state diplomacy, the realist motivations behind Turkmenistan's engagements, and the potential risks and benefits of this pragmatic approach.

This study seeks to explore how Turkmenistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan has evolved since the Taliban's return to power and to assess the strategic, economic, and security considerations that underpin this engagement. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How does Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality influence its relations with the Taliban? (2) What are the economic and security motivations driving this engagement? (3) What are the risks and challenges associated with Turkmenistan's diplomatic approach? To address these questions, this study applies Realism and Pragmatism in Foreign Policy Analysis, emphasizing that Turkmenistan's strategic engagement with the Taliban is driven by economic security rather than ideological alignment. Furthermore, the Neutrality Doctrine in small-state diplomacy is used to examine how Turkmenistan's non-interference policy allows it to engage with contested regimes without drawing geopolitical backlash (Morgenthau, 1948; Dunne & Schmidt, 2022).

## **Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy Framework and the Principle of "Positive Neutrality"**

### *Defining "Positive Neutrality"*

Turkmenistan's foreign policy is defined by the principle of "positive neutrality," a doctrine that has guided its international engagement since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This unique policy was formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) through Resolution 50/80 on December 12, 1995, granting Turkmenistan official status as a "permanently neutral" state (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1995). As the only country in the world with UN-endorsed neutrality, Turkmenistan has built its foreign relations on non-alignment, non-interference in military conflicts, and diplomatic engagement. Over the years, its neutrality has been reinforced through constitutional amendments in 1995, the 2005 foreign policy doctrine, and the 2016 constitutional reform, further solidifying its commitment to non-military alliances and regional cooperation (Anceschi, 2020). Unlike its Central Asian neighbors, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which engage in multilateral security organizations, Turkmenistan abstains from alliances like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) while simultaneously pursuing economic partnerships, security cooperation, and humanitarian diplomacy (Bohr, 2016).

The implications of Turkmenistan's neutrality policy are particularly significant in conflict-prone regions, where the country has positioned itself as a diplomatic mediator. One key example is Turkmenistan's engagement with Afghanistan, where it has facilitated peace negotiations and promoted economic initiatives without directly involving itself in military conflicts. In 2017, Turkmenistan hosted an international conference on Afghanistan's stability, providing a platform for dialogue between Afghan factions and international stakeholders (Korybko, 2018). Additionally, despite concerns over the security risks posed by its 744-kilometer border with Afghanistan, Turkmenistan has chosen diplomatic engagement over militarization to manage relations with Afghan authorities, particularly following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 (Stronski, 2021). This diplomatic approach extends to Turkmenistan's economic policy, particularly in the energy sector, where its neutrality has allowed it to engage in multilateral projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline. This project exemplifies how Turkmenistan leverages its neutral status to foster regional economic connectivity while avoiding geopolitical entanglements between India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (Peyrouse, 2018). Moreover, Turkmenistan actively provides humanitarian aid to conflict-affected populations, as seen in its medical and food assistance to Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power, reinforcing its role as a neutral but responsible regional actor (Kassenova, 2022).

However, while Turkmenistan's "positive neutrality" has provided stability and diplomatic leverage, it has also faced criticism for its limitations. One major concern is that its strict adherence to neutrality restricts its political influence in regional security dynamics. Unlike Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which actively participate in collective defense mechanisms, Turkmenistan's isolation from security alliances limits its ability to address regional instability (Anceschi, 2020). Additionally, balancing relations with global powers such as Russia, China, and the United States presents a challenge, as neutrality requires diplomatic flexibility while avoiding dependence on any single state. Russia has at times exerted pressure on Turkmenistan to align with its regional security interests, while China's large-scale investments in Turkmen gas infrastructure raise concerns about economic overdependence on Beijing (Bohr, 2016). The most pressing challenge stems from the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, which has tested Turkmenistan's neutrality policy. While Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have taken a cautious stance toward Taliban governance, Turkmenistan has maintained diplomatic relations with the group, a move that has drawn criticism from Western countries and Afghan opposition groups, who view such engagement as tacit legitimization of the Taliban regime (Stronski, 2021). To put it briefly, Turkmenistan's "positive neutrality" remains a defining feature of its foreign policy, enabling it to navigate geopolitical complexities, promote economic cooperation, and contribute to regional stability. By abstaining from military alliances while engaging in energy diplomacy, security partnerships, and humanitarian efforts, Turkmenistan has established itself as a neutral actor in Central Asia. However, the evolving regional and global landscape presents new challenges, particularly regarding Afghanistan, Russia-China relations, and economic dependency. To sustain its neutral stance while ensuring National Security, Turkmenistan must continuously adapt its foreign policy approach to address emerging geopolitical shifts, maintain diplomatic flexibility, and safeguard its economic and security interests (Anceschi, 2020).

### **Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy towards Afghanistan Before and after 2021.**

Turkmenistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan has historically been guided by its doctrine of "positive neutrality," emphasizing non-interference, regional stability, and economic cooperation. This policy, officially adopted in 1995 and recognized by the United Nations in 1996, dictates that Turkmenistan avoids political entanglements while fostering diplomatic and economic engagement (Avrasya, n.d.). Unlike other Central Asian nations, Turkmenistan maintained formal relations with Afghanistan under various governments, including the first Taliban regime (1996–2001) and subsequent administrations backed by the United States and NATO (Caspian Policy Center, n.d.). Even during

the first Taliban rule, Turkmenistan remained one of the few countries to engage with the regime without granting formal recognition, largely due to economic interests, particularly energy trade and infrastructure projects. Under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–2021), bilateral relations strengthened with increased cooperation in the energy and transportation sectors, particularly through initiatives such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project, which was signed in 2010 as a cornerstone of regional economic integration (Amu TV, 2023). In addition to TAPI, Turkmenistan played a critical role in Afghanistan's post-2001 economic reconstruction, supplying electricity to several Afghan provinces and investing in transportation projects, such as the Torghundi-Herat railway and the Aqina railway connection, which were intended to enhance trade and connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan (Caspian Policy Center, n.d.). Unlike neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which maintained security-focused policies, Turkmenistan remained largely uninvolved in security matters, reinforcing its neutrality doctrine (Avrasya, n.d.).

With the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Turkmenistan swiftly adjusted its foreign policy to accommodate the new reality while maintaining its core principle of neutrality. Unlike most international actors, Turkmenistan did not sever diplomatic ties or impose political conditions on the Taliban but instead engaged with the new regime while avoiding official recognition (ORF, 2024). One of the most notable shifts was Ashgabat's decision to accept Taliban-appointed diplomats, allowing a Taliban charge d'affaires to operate in Turkmenistan, signaling a commitment to continued engagement (Amu TV, 2023). Economic cooperation remained the primary driver of Turkmenistan's Afghanistan policy post-2021, particularly regarding the TAPI pipeline project, where Turkmen officials engaged Taliban leaders to ensure its completion. Despite security concerns that slowed progress, the Taliban reaffirmed their commitment to safeguarding the pipeline, recognizing its economic significance for Afghanistan's integration with Central Asia (Avrasya, n.d.). In addition to TAPI, Turkmenistan continued supplying electricity to Afghan provinces such as Herat and Jowzjan, even as the Taliban struggled to manage financial transactions due to international sanctions (Caspian Policy Center, n.d.).

While maintaining economic cooperation, Turkmenistan took measures to strengthen border security following the Taliban takeover. Unlike the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which experienced tensions and cross-border incidents, the Turkmen-Afghan border remained stable, largely due to Ashgabat's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. Multiple Taliban delegations were hosted to discuss regional stability, trade, and border security (ORF, 2024). However, despite its pragmatic engagement, Turkmenistan's policy faces several challenges. The lack of

international recognition for the Taliban complicates Ashgabat's ability to implement large-scale projects like TAPI, as global financial institutions remain hesitant to invest in Afghanistan under Taliban rule (Avrasya, n.d.). Additionally, Turkmenistan faces geopolitical pressure from major powers, particularly the United States, which remains skeptical of Central Asian engagement with the Taliban. The absence of human rights considerations in Turkmenistan's policy has also raised concerns, particularly regarding the Taliban's suppression of women's rights and minority groups (ORF, 2024). To be brief, Turkmenistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan before and after 2021 reflects a consistent application of its neutrality doctrine, focusing on economic cooperation, regional stability, and diplomatic engagement. Prior to 2021, Turkmenistan engaged with successive Afghan governments pragmatically, emphasizing economic projects like TAPI and energy trade, while avoiding political interference. Following the Taliban's return to power, Ashgabat adjusted its approach by engaging with the Taliban leadership without official recognition, continuing economic collaboration, and strengthening border security. This pragmatic strategy has enabled Turkmenistan to maintain stability along its border while safeguarding its economic interests in energy and infrastructure development. However, the long-term effectiveness of this approach remains uncertain due to geopolitical pressures, security concerns, and the Taliban's ongoing international isolation. Ultimately, Turkmenistan's engagement-first approach sets it apart from other Central Asian states, highlighting the resilience of its neutrality-based foreign policy despite shifting regional dynamics.

### **Continuity and Change in Turkmenistan's Regional Diplomacy**

Turkmenistan's foreign policy is defined by its principle of Positive Neutrality, allowing the country to engage with regional actors such as Uzbekistan, Russia, China, and Iran while maintaining strategic autonomy. This approach facilitates economic cooperation and diplomatic relations without aligning too closely with any single power. Historically, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have experienced tensions over water resources and border demarcation; however, in recent years, relations have improved significantly. Both countries have collaborated on infrastructure projects, including railway links, and have expanded cross-border trade, reflecting a shared interest in regional cooperation (Central Asia's Middle Corridor Expansion, 2024). In contrast, Turkmenistan's relationship with Russia is more complex. While historical ties exist, Turkmenistan has sought to reduce over-reliance on Russian energy markets by diversifying its export destinations. However, recent developments indicate a rapprochement, with Turkmenistan engaging in strategic partnerships with Russia to counterbalance China's growing influence (Turkmenistan-Russia: The Breakthroughs and Limits

of Cooperation, 2020). China has emerged as Turkmenistan's largest trading partner, playing a pivotal role in the country's energy sector. The Central Asia–China gas pipeline exemplifies this partnership, allowing Turkmenistan to export significant volumes of natural gas to China (Foreign Relations of Turkmenistan, n.d.). This relationship underscores Turkmenistan's strategy of engaging economically with dominant regional players while retaining policy independence. Additionally, Iran remains a crucial partner due to shared cultural and historical ties. A key aspect of their economic cooperation is the agreement for Turkmenistan to export natural gas to Turkey via Iran, illustrating a trilateral energy partnership that enhances regional energy security (Turkmenistan Reaches Deal with Turkey, 2025).

Balancing regional cooperation with strategic autonomy remains a cornerstone of Turkmenistan's foreign policy. The country actively participates in multilateral projects such as the Lapis Lazuli corridor, which connects Afghanistan to Turkey through Turkmenistan, promoting regional trade and economic integration (Lapis Lazuli Corridor, n.d.). At the same time, Turkmenistan remains steadfast in its neutral stance, avoiding geopolitical conflicts while preserving its sovereignty (Turkmenistan Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation, 2024). This diplomatic strategy allows Turkmenistan to benefit from regional partnerships without compromising its national interests. Ultimately, Turkmenistan's regional diplomacy exemplifies a nuanced approach that harmonizes economic collaboration with the preservation of strategic autonomy. By engaging in pragmatic partnerships and multilateral initiatives, Turkmenistan strengthens its economic prospects while maintaining its position as a neutral actor in a complex geopolitical landscape (Turkmenistan's Shift Towards The Moscow-Tehran-Beijing Axis, 2025).

## **Diplomatic Strategies in Turkmenistan-Taliban Relations**

### *Official Recognition vs. De Facto Engagement*

Turkmenistan's approach toward Afghanistan under Taliban rule is shaped by its long-standing policy of "Positive Neutrality," a principle that has guided its foreign policy since its independence. This strategy allows Turkmenistan to engage with the Taliban on pragmatic grounds without granting official recognition to the regime. Given the geopolitical and economic stakes, Turkmenistan's diplomatic strategy revolves around balancing engagement and non-recognition, particularly in political dialogues and economic collaborations. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Turkmenistan has maintained a policy of de facto engagement while withholding official recognition. This approach aligns with its broader strategy of non-interference and neutrality in regional conflicts (Anceschi, 2020).

Unlike some of its Central Asian neighbors, which have expressed concerns over Taliban governance and its implications for regional stability, Turkmenistan has opted for a pragmatic engagement strategy focused on securing its national interests, particularly in trade, energy cooperation, and border security (Daly, 2022). A key aspect of this policy is Turkmenistan's decision to accept Taliban-appointed diplomats without formally acknowledging the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government. In March 2022, Turkmenistan received the credentials of Fazal Muhammad Sabir, the Taliban's chargé d'affaires in Ashgabat, marking a significant shift in diplomatic relations without direct recognition (The Diplomat, 2024). This move highlights Turkmenistan's intent to maintain functional ties with the Taliban while avoiding the political ramifications of full diplomatic recognition, which could strain its relations with the broader international community. Turkmenistan's stance contrasts with regional actors such as Uzbekistan, which has also engaged with the Taliban but has been more vocal about its expectations regarding an inclusive government in Afghanistan (Kucera, 2021). By adopting a neutral stance, Turkmenistan aims to preserve stability along its 800-kilometer border with Afghanistan while ensuring uninterrupted economic and trade relations.

Turkmenistan's engagement with the Taliban has been evident through high-level meetings and negotiations focused on economic projects and border security. One of the most significant aspects of this engagement is the continuation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. This multi-billion-dollar initiative, which aims to transport Turkmen gas to South Asian markets, has been a central topic in bilateral discussions between Ashgabat and the Taliban administration (Eurasianet, 2023). In March 2024, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Chairman of the HalkMaslahaty (People's Council), held discussions with Haji Nooruddin Azizi, the Taliban's Minister of Commerce and Industry, to advance economic cooperation and regional stability (The Diplomat, 2024). The meeting underscored Turkmenistan's commitment to fostering economic ties despite the Taliban's political isolation. Such engagements demonstrate Turkmenistan's strategic interest in Afghanistan's economic recovery, which directly impacts the viability of its energy exports and transit routes. Additionally, Turkmenistan has worked closely with the Taliban on maintaining security along their shared border. This cooperation is crucial given the persistent threat of instability from non-state actors such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has targeted both Afghan and Central Asian interests in recent years (Daly, 2022). Turkmenistan has consistently emphasized the need for regional cooperation in counterterrorism while ensuring that its neutrality remains intact. While engaging with the Taliban, Turkmenistan has also sought to maintain

diplomatic flexibility by participating in broader regional discussions on Afghanistan's future. The country has engaged with international forums, including the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, where regional actors discuss strategies for stabilizing Afghanistan without formally endorsing the Taliban regime (Eurasianet, 2021). This balanced approach enables Turkmenistan to pursue its national interests while aligning itself with broader international efforts to address the Afghan crisis.

Therefore, Turkmenistan's diplomatic strategy in dealing with the Taliban reflects a carefully calibrated balance between economic pragmatism and political neutrality. By engaging with the Taliban without extending formal recognition, Turkmenistan safeguards its economic and security interests while avoiding the potential diplomatic fallout associated with legitimizing the Taliban government. Through high-level political meetings, trade negotiations, and border security cooperation, Turkmenistan has positioned itself as a key regional player in Afghanistan's economic recovery. However, its approach remains contingent on the evolving security and political landscape in Afghanistan. The success of this strategy will depend on the Taliban's ability to maintain internal stability, ensure regional security, and uphold its commitments to economic cooperation.

### **Security Cooperation and Border Stability**

Turkmenistan's security concerns over its 744-kilometer border with Afghanistan have significantly increased since the Taliban's takeover in 2021. While maintaining its long-standing policy of "Positive Neutrality," Ashgabat has recognized the necessity of proactively addressing border security, counterterrorism threats, and regional stability (Kucera, 2022). Given Afghanistan's volatile security environment, Turkmenistan faces risks stemming from non-state armed groups, drug trafficking networks, and militant organizations such as ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K), which has launched attacks targeting security forces in northern Afghanistan and Central Asia (OSW, 2024). The Taliban's control has raised concerns over the potential resurgence of extremist networks and the spillover of instability into Central Asia. In response, Turkmenistan has reinforced its border with military personnel, modernized surveillance infrastructure, and established new security outposts (Stronski, 2021). Unlike other Central Asian states, which have adopted a more confrontational stance, Turkmenistan has pursued direct diplomatic engagement with the Taliban to secure border stability. This engagement has included high-level security dialogues aimed at preventing cross-border militant infiltration and illicit trade, while at the same time maintaining a cautious distance from formal military alliances (Security Council Report, 2024).

A primary security concern for Turkmenistan is the growing presence of ISIS-K in northern Afghanistan, which has repeatedly targeted Afghan security forces and minority communities. The group's recruitment efforts among ethnic Turkmen communities in Afghanistan further exacerbate Ashgabat's fears of radicalization and regional destabilization (OSW, 2024). Despite these threats, Turkmenistan adheres to a policy of non-interference, refraining from direct military engagement in Afghanistan, in contrast to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which have bolstered their security ties with Russia. Instead, Turkmenistan relies on intelligence-sharing mechanisms and limited security coordination with the Taliban to counter ISIS-K threats. Although Turkmenistan is not a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), it has engaged in limited security consultations with CSTO states regarding border security, particularly in light of shared concerns with Tajikistan over the expansion of militant activities along the Afghan border (Security Council Report, 2024). Furthermore, while not a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Turkmenistan has participated in intelligence-sharing initiatives to counter terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking (OSW, 2024). These engagements reflect Ashgabat's growing recognition of the need for regional security coordination, despite its official policy of neutrality. Russia has played an increasing role in Turkmenistan's border security strategy. While Turkmenistan avoids direct military alliances, it has engaged in security consultations with Moscow, seeking strategic assessments of potential threats emanating from Afghanistan (Caspian Policy Center, 2023). Russia has also provided defense modernization support, including advanced surveillance technologies, to strengthen Turkmenistan's border security apparatus. These engagements highlight Turkmenistan's pragmatic approach—engaging selectively with key regional powers while maintaining its sovereign stance. Additionally, Turkmenistan has sought limited cooperation with China, primarily within the framework of the SCO's counterterrorism initiatives (OSW, 2024). Although Ashgabat remains wary of deep military entanglements, its willingness to engage in security dialogues with Russia and China demonstrates an evolving regional security calculus in response to the Taliban's rule.

Another key dimension of Turkmenistan's security concerns relates to refugee movements from Afghanistan. Following the Taliban's takeover, thousands of Afghans sought refuge in neighboring states, including Turkmenistan. However, Ashgabat has enforced strict border controls, permitting only a limited number of refugees to enter on humanitarian grounds (Kucera, 2022). Unlike Iran and Pakistan, which have hosted large Afghan refugee populations, Turkmenistan has been reluctant to accommodate significant numbers, citing security risks associated with the potential infiltration of extremist elements. Instead, Turkmen authorities

have intensified border surveillance to prevent unauthorized crossings while simultaneously engaging in humanitarian assistance efforts directed at Afghanistan. These efforts include providing food, medical aid, and energy supplies, reinforcing Turkmenistan's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban while maintaining its security priorities (Stronski, 2021). In brief, Turkmenistan's security strategy toward Taliban-led Afghanistan is shaped by its doctrine of neutrality, strategic engagement, and selective participation in regional security mechanisms. The country faces multifaceted challenges, including border security threats, counterterrorism concerns, and refugee movements, necessitating a delicate balance between diplomatic pragmatism and proactive security measures. While Turkmenistan refrains from joining formal military alliances such as the CSTO, it has engaged in regional security discussions with Russia, China, and the SCO, reflecting its evolving security approach. Moving forward, the sustainability of Turkmenistan's security posture will depend on its ability to navigate the complexities of Taliban governance, regional power dynamics, and the persistent threat of transnational militancy.

### **Economic and Infrastructure Diplomacy**

Economic and infrastructure diplomacy in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is shaped by regional energy and trade initiatives, particularly the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project, energy exports, and connectivity efforts. The Taliban's control since August 2021 has presented both opportunities and challenges for these projects, impacting regional cooperation, security dynamics, and economic stability. While Afghanistan's strategic location positions it as a key transit hub, security risks, financial constraints, and geopolitical complexities hinder sustainable progress. This paper critically examines the prospects and challenges of economic diplomacy under Taliban rule, with a focus on the TAPI project and Afghanistan's broader energy and trade engagements. The TAPI gas pipeline project, originally conceptualized in the 1990s, aims to transport 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. Afghanistan is expected to receive 5 bcm for domestic consumption, while Pakistan and India will each receive 14 bcm (Global Energy Monitor, n.d.). For Turkmenistan, a country heavily reliant on gas exports, TAPI serves as a diversification strategy to reduce dependence on China, its primary gas buyer (Putz, 2023). Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, views the project as a critical economic opportunity, potentially generating \$500 million annually in transit revenue (Kumar, 2022). Meanwhile, Pakistan and India seek to secure reliable gas supplies to meet growing domestic energy demands. Despite security and governance concerns, the Taliban has

expressed strong support for the TAPI project, recognizing its potential economic benefits. First, the pipeline presents a vital revenue source for Afghanistan's struggling economy, which suffers from high unemployment, banking sector crises, and international aid reductions (World Bank, 2023). Second, TAPI aligns with broader regional connectivity initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) electricity project, both of which aim to integrate South and Central Asian economies (Sharma, 2023). Third, the Taliban has actively engaged with regional actors, meeting Turkmen officials in 2022 to discuss security assurances and land acquisition for the pipeline (Putz, 2022). Their commitment to providing security guarantees and a stable investment climate could enhance investor confidence.

However, several challenges hinder the pipeline's realization. Security risks remain the most significant obstacle, as militant groups like Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) continue to target critical infrastructure (Giustozzi, 2023). Past projects in Afghanistan have faced delays, sabotage, and militant attacks, raising concerns about TAPI's operational viability. Additionally, the lack of international recognition for the Taliban government complicates funding efforts, as Western investors and multilateral institutions hesitate to engage without clear governance guarantees (World Bank, 2023). Moreover, US and European sanctions on Taliban leaders restrict financial transactions, limiting foreign investment flows. India's strategic concerns and reluctance to engage with the Taliban diplomatically further challenge TAPI's prospects, as its participation remains uncertain (Mishra, 2022). Lastly, technical and infrastructural limitations, including Afghanistan's rugged terrain, outdated road networks, and lack of skilled labor, create logistical hurdles for the pipeline's construction (Sharma, 2023).

Beyond TAPI, Afghanistan is positioning itself as a transit hub for regional energy and trade networks. The Taliban has sought to expand bilateral energy agreements with Turkmenistan, Iran, China, and Pakistan, focusing on securing trade routes and energy supplies. Turkmenistan remains a key energy partner, supplying electricity and gas to Afghanistan, with both countries emphasizing the expansion of bilateral trade. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) power transmission project is another critical initiative aimed at improving Afghanistan's electricity grid and energy security (Global Energy Monitor, 2023). Similarly, China has deepened its economic engagement, investing in Afghanistan's mining sector and energy infrastructure. In 2023, the Amu Darya Basin oil extraction agreement was signed, allowing a Chinese company to extract oil from Afghan reserves, marking one of the first significant foreign investment deals under the Taliban (Xinhua, 2023). Iran has also maintained strong economic ties with Afghanistan, providing fuel, electricity, and trade facilitation. The Chabahar Port

project, initially developed as a joint India-Iran-Afghanistan initiative, remains crucial for Afghanistan's trade diversification efforts, though India's future role remains uncertain (Pant, 2023).

Pakistan remains Afghanistan's largest trading partner, despite political tensions over the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Cross-border trade and transit agreements continue, and discussions on bilateral energy cooperation and electricity supply are ongoing (Mitra, 2023). However, Afghanistan's trade diplomacy faces multiple constraints. International sanctions, banking restrictions, and financial isolation limit foreign direct investment and trade payments, making it difficult for Afghan businesses to engage in the global market (World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, infrastructure deficiencies, including the lack of modern railways, highways, and energy grids, hinder Afghanistan's ability to integrate fully into regional economic frameworks (Giustozzi, 2023). Lastly, political uncertainties with key actors, including India's reduced engagement, Pakistan's security concerns, and Iran's balancing strategy, further complicate Afghanistan's long-term trade and connectivity prospects (Sharma, 2023). Thus, Afghanistan's economic and infrastructure diplomacy under Taliban rule presents both opportunities and challenges. The TAPI pipeline remains a flagship project, yet security risks, financial constraints, and geopolitical complexities continue to hinder its full realization. While the Taliban has actively promoted energy exports, trade agreements, and regional connectivity initiatives, factors such as infrastructure deficits, governance issues, and diplomatic tensions pose serious limitations. Afghanistan's ability to integrate into regional economic networks will depend on improvements in security, diplomatic engagement, and investment climate reforms. Unless these challenges are addressed, Afghanistan's economic potential will remain constrained, despite its strategic location and resource wealth.

### **Balancing Regional and Global Pressures**

Turkmenistan's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan reflects a strategic effort to balance regional economic imperatives with international diplomatic pressures. The global non-recognition of the Taliban complicates Ashgabat's foreign policy, requiring it to maintain pragmatic economic and security cooperation while adhering to its long-standing policy of "positive neutrality." Navigating relations with key international actors—such as the United Nations (UN), the United States (US), and the European Union (EU)—has become a critical aspect of Turkmenistan's approach, given the international community's reluctance to formally acknowledge the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government. This engagement carries profound implications for regional stability, economic development, and Ashgabat's standing in global diplomacy. The UN

plays a significant role in shaping Turkmenistan's diplomatic calculus concerning Afghanistan. Despite its non-recognition of the Taliban, the UN acknowledges the necessity of humanitarian aid and regional cooperation to mitigate Afghanistan's worsening crisis (United Nations, 2023). Turkmenistan has positioned itself as a regional facilitator by coordinating with UN agencies to ensure the flow of humanitarian assistance through its borders. Moreover, projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline have been tacitly supported by the UN, which views regional economic integration as a stabilizing force (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA], 2023). However, Ashgabat must align its diplomatic engagements with UN resolutions on human rights and counterterrorism, ensuring that its interactions with the Taliban do not violate global mandates on governance and security. The US has maintained a policy of non-recognition toward the Taliban while imposing financial restrictions that limit Afghanistan's access to global markets. However, Washington has not actively opposed Turkmenistan's engagement with Afghanistan, particularly in the economic sphere (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Historically, the US has supported Turkmenistan's energy security initiatives, viewing projects like the TAPI pipeline as instrumental in reducing regional dependence on Russian and Iranian energy supplies (Kazemi, 2023). While Turkmenistan has reassured Washington that its cooperation with the Taliban is economically motivated rather than ideological, the US remains cautious. Concerns persist over whether such engagements could inadvertently strengthen an internationally sanctioned regime, leading to scrutiny over Turkmenistan's financial transactions with Afghanistan (U.S. Treasury Department, 2024).

Similarly, the EU has refused to recognize the Taliban but maintains limited engagement through humanitarian assistance and diplomatic dialogue. European policymakers have expressed concerns over human rights violations in Afghanistan, particularly the severe restrictions imposed on women's education and employment (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2023). Despite this, the EU recognizes Turkmenistan's role in ensuring regional stability and has encouraged energy partnerships that could help diversify European energy supplies away from Russia (Caspian Policy Center, 2024). However, EU policymakers remain wary of any actions that could be perceived as legitimizing Taliban governance. Ashgabat, therefore, continues to emphasize that its interactions with Afghanistan align with economic pragmatism rather than political endorsement (European Parliament, 2024). The global non-recognition of the Taliban has significant implications for Turkmenistan's foreign policy. First, it limits international financial support for major infrastructure projects, particularly the TAPI pipeline, as global financial institutions remain hesitant to invest in

Afghanistan under Taliban rule (Kazemi, 2023). Second, Turkmenistan's engagement with the Taliban carries reputational risks, particularly in its interactions with Western states that view direct engagement as a potential legitimization of the regime (The Diplomat, 2024). Third, the lack of an internationally recognized Afghan government complicates border security and counterterrorism efforts, as cooperation with the Taliban does not guarantee compliance with international security norms (Caspian Policy Center, 2024). Finally, regional integration remains a challenge, as Afghanistan's diplomatic isolation prevents its full inclusion in Central Asian economic frameworks (EEAS, 2023). To put it briefly, Turkmenistan's engagement with the Taliban represents a complex diplomatic balancing act. While Ashgabat seeks to maintain regional stability and economic cooperation, it must navigate the constraints imposed by international non-recognition. Its relations with the UN, the US, and the EU reflect a cautious diplomatic approach that prioritizes economic necessity while mitigating security and reputational risks. The long-term success of Turkmenistan's strategy will depend on the evolving geopolitical landscape and whether the Taliban can achieve broader international legitimacy. Until then, Ashgabat will continue to leverage its position as a neutral actor, balancing regional partnerships with global expectations.

## **Opportunities and Challenges in Turkmenistan's Engagement with the Taliban**

### *Opportunities for Turkmenistan*

Turkmenistan's engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan presents both strategic opportunities and significant challenges, particularly in economic collaboration, regional cooperation, and diplomatic leverage. One of the most substantial opportunities lies in economic benefits derived from trade agreements and energy projects. In May 2024, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan signed trade agreements worth \$200 million, aimed at enhancing economic activity and addressing Afghanistan's financial crisis under Taliban rule (Caspian News, 2024). A crucial component of this economic partnership is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, designed to transport Turkmen natural gas to South Asia. If completed, TAPI could generate substantial revenue for Turkmenistan, reinforcing its role as a key energy supplier. However, progress on the project has been hindered by security concerns and financial constraints, with its cost estimated at \$40 billion (Caspian Policy Center, 2023). Beyond economic incentives, Turkmenistan's engagement also strengthens regional cooperation in Central Asia. In May 2024, the Taliban reached an agreement with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to establish a logistics hub in western Afghanistan, which aims to

position Afghanistan as a critical transit center for regional trade, including Russian oil exports to South Asia (Reuters, 2024). Additionally, Turkmenistan has taken a diplomatic approach toward the Taliban, becoming one of the few Central Asian nations to accredit Taliban-appointed diplomats. In July 2024, a Taliban diplomat was formally recognized as Chargé d'affaires in Ashgabat, signaling Turkmenistan's pragmatic policy of engaging with the de facto authorities in Kabul to advance economic and political interests (Observer Research Foundation, 2024).

Another significant advantage of Turkmenistan's engagement strategy is its ability to maintain diplomatic leverage over the Taliban. By spearheading energy and infrastructure projects, Turkmenistan positions itself as an indispensable economic partner for Afghanistan, thereby enhancing its influence over Taliban policies. This leverage is particularly evident in the TAPI pipeline project, where Turkmen workers officially resumed operations in Afghanistan in March 2024, further solidifying bilateral relations (The Diplomat, 2024). Turkmenistan's engagement, however, is not without risks. The lack of international recognition of the Taliban government limits Afghanistan's access to international financial institutions and foreign direct investment, creating obstacles to sustaining large-scale projects. Furthermore, security concerns related to the presence of militant factions and internal divisions within the Taliban complicate the feasibility of long-term infrastructure projects (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024). In a nutshell, Turkmenistan's engagement with the Taliban is marked by a strategic balance between economic opportunity and geopolitical challenges. While energy trade, infrastructure development, and regional cooperation offer promising prospects, persistent security threats and the Taliban's contested legitimacy necessitate a cautious and well-calibrated approach. Ashgabat's pragmatic diplomacy may enable it to benefit from engagement with the Taliban, but safeguarding investments and ensuring stability remain critical hurdles in the evolving dynamics of Turkmenistan-Afghanistan relations.

### **Challenges and Risks**

Turkmenistan's engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan is shaped by a complex set of security threats, geopolitical constraints, and governance uncertainties. These challenges include the spillover of extremism, particularly the threat posed by Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), border volatility, the need to balance relations with major global powers, and the uncertainties surrounding the Taliban's governance and its implications for regional stability. A critical assessment of these issues reveals the intricate difficulties Turkmenistan faces as it attempts to maintain economic cooperation and security while mitigating potential risks. Turkmenistan shares an 804-kilometer border with Afghanistan, a frontier

characterized by porous terrain and limited security infrastructure (Wikipedia contributors, 2023). The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021 created a security vacuum that various militant groups have sought to exploit. IS-K, a faction of the Islamic State operating in Afghanistan, has been responsible for numerous high-profile attacks, particularly targeting Taliban forces, religious minorities, and diplomatic missions (Crisis Group, 2023). This presents a major concern for Turkmenistan, as the spread of IS-K's influence could destabilize border regions and potentially facilitate the infiltration of extremist ideologies.

The Taliban's ability to counter IS-K remains questionable. Despite their military campaigns against IS-K cells, reports indicate that the group has continued to expand its operations, particularly in northern Afghanistan, which borders Central Asia (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2023). The UN estimates that IS-K has intensified its recruitment efforts among disaffected Taliban fighters and local communities, leveraging economic hardship and ideological grievances to swell its ranks (UNSC, 2023). This poses a direct threat to Turkmenistan's security, as it increases the likelihood of cross-border attacks, smuggling networks, and the proliferation of radical ideology within its territory. Furthermore, the porous nature of the Afghanistan-Turkmenistan border has historically facilitated the movement of illicit goods, arms, and narcotics, exacerbating security vulnerabilities (Crisis Group, 2023). Turkmenistan has attempted to address these concerns by fortifying its military presence along the border and engaging diplomatically with the Taliban to ensure stability. However, given the Taliban's inconsistent governance and limited capacity to regulate extremist activities, the risk of security spillover remains high.

Turkmenistan's foreign policy, guided by its long-standing principle of neutrality, requires a delicate balancing act among global and regional powers. Russia, China, and Western actors each have distinct strategic interests in Afghanistan, creating a challenging diplomatic environment for Turkmenistan. Russia has historically maintained influence in Central Asia and views Afghanistan's security situation as directly affecting its southern borders. Moscow has expressed concerns over the resurgence of militant activity in Afghanistan, particularly IS-K's expansion, which it sees as a threat to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states (Murtazashvili, 2022). While Turkmenistan is not a CSTO member, it has maintained security cooperation with Russia, including intelligence-sharing and border security initiatives. However, engaging too closely with Russia risks alienating other regional partners, particularly China. China's strategic interests in Afghanistan revolve around its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and economic investments in regional connectivity projects. Turkmenistan is a key player in China's energy security strategy,

supplying significant volumes of natural gas through the Central Asia-China pipeline (Murtazashvili, 2022). China has also sought stability in Afghanistan to ensure the security of its investments, particularly in mining and infrastructure. Turkmenistan's economic ties with China necessitate cautious engagement with the Taliban, ensuring that instability in Afghanistan does not jeopardize its role as a transit hub for energy exports. Western actors, particularly the United States and the European Union, have taken a more critical stance toward the Taliban, particularly concerning human rights violations and the exclusion of women from public life (UNSC, 2023). While Western nations have limited direct influence in Afghanistan following the 2021 withdrawal, they continue to shape international policies on humanitarian aid and counterterrorism measures. Turkmenistan must navigate this geopolitical landscape carefully, as overt cooperation with the Taliban could lead to diplomatic friction with Western powers, potentially affecting its economic partnerships and international standing.

One of the most pressing challenges in Turkmenistan's engagement with Afghanistan is the uncertainty surrounding the Taliban's governance. Since their takeover in 2021, the Taliban have struggled to establish a cohesive and effective government, with internal factionalism and governance failures undermining their ability to maintain stability (Crisis Group, 2023). The Taliban's policies on human rights, particularly regarding women's education and employment, have led to widespread international condemnation and further diplomatic isolation (UNSC, 2023). This isolation has exacerbated Afghanistan's economic crisis, with limited access to international financial institutions and declining foreign aid worsening humanitarian conditions. As a neighboring state, Turkmenistan faces the risk of increased refugee flows and economic instability spilling over from Afghanistan, further complicating its security and development priorities. Moreover, the viability of regional economic projects, such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, remains uncertain due to governance challenges. While the Taliban have expressed support for the project, concerns about their ability to provide security guarantees for its construction and operation persist (Murtazashvili, 2022). Investors remain wary of the political and security risks associated with operating in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, which could delay or derail major infrastructure initiatives critical to regional economic integration. As a result, Turkmenistan's engagement with the Taliban is fraught with significant security, geopolitical, and governance-related challenges. The persistent threat of IS-K and the porous Afghanistan-Turkmenistan border pose direct risks to national security, necessitating heightened vigilance and diplomatic engagement. Geopolitically, Turkmenistan must navigate its relations with Russia, China, and Western actors, ensuring that its neutrality policy remains intact while advancing

its economic and security interests. Additionally, the uncertainties surrounding Taliban governance and Afghanistan's economic trajectory create further instability, affecting regional cooperation and infrastructure projects. While Turkmenistan has pursued pragmatic engagement with the Taliban to maintain stability and economic ties, the inherent risks necessitate a cautious and adaptive approach. Continuous assessment of Afghanistan's security landscape, diversification of economic partnerships, and regional cooperation mechanisms will be essential in mitigating the challenges posed by the Taliban's rule.

## **Conclusion**

Turkmenistan's foreign policy toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is primarily shaped by its long-standing doctrine of "positive neutrality", which allows Ashgabat to engage pragmatically with Afghanistan while avoiding entanglement in geopolitical conflicts. The key diplomatic strategies analyzed in this study reveal that Turkmenistan has prioritized economic diplomacy, regional security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. Unlike other Central Asian states that have maintained a more cautious or adversarial stance, Turkmenistan has focused on infrastructure projects and energy trade, particularly the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline (Kaczmarek, 2023). However, the Taliban's governance remains unpredictable, posing risks to these economic initiatives. Security concerns are another crucial aspect of Turkmenistan's policy, as instability in northern Afghanistan, particularly the presence of the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), threatens regional stability (Stronski, 2021). Despite its neutrality, Turkmenistan has engaged in border security cooperation with the Taliban, seeking to prevent cross-border threats while avoiding direct military involvement. The analysis suggests that Ashgabat's engagement with the Taliban is largely pragmatic, motivated by economic and security considerations rather than ideological alignment. Maintaining neutrality while ensuring diplomatic flexibility is a crucial policy consideration for Turkmenistan. Given the Taliban's unrecognized international status and Afghanistan's ongoing economic and humanitarian crises, Ashgabat must expand its multilateral engagement while safeguarding its strategic interests. To achieve this, Turkmenistan should strengthen its participation in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to enhance diplomatic dialogue and cooperation (Kucera, 2022). Engaging in track II diplomacy-informal diplomatic initiatives-could provide an avenue for Turkmenistan to mediate between Afghanistan and international stakeholders. Additionally, securing international funding for

infrastructure projects could help mitigate economic risks associated with the Taliban's governance (Malik, 2023).

Security remains a critical concern, particularly regarding cross-border terrorism and organized crime. While Turkmenistan refrains from direct military alliances, its security strategy should focus on intelligence-sharing mechanisms with neighboring states to monitor and counter extremist threats (Stronski, 2021). Establishing joint border security mechanisms with the Taliban could help in stabilizing the frontier and preventing the infiltration of extremist groups such as IS-K (Sultanov, 2022). Additionally, Turkmenistan should strengthen regional security dialogues with Russia and China, given their increasing role in counterterrorism efforts in Central Asia (Weitz, 2023). Economic diplomacy remains a powerful tool for Turkmenistan's engagement with Afghanistan. Beyond the TAPI pipeline, Turkmenistan should expand its electricity exports to Afghanistan, aiding in reconstruction efforts and fostering economic interdependence (Malik, 2023). Improving transport and trade infrastructure, such as increasing Afghan access to Turkmenbashi Port, could further integrate Afghanistan into regional trade networks (Kaczmarek, 2023). Encouraging private-sector investments in Afghanistan, particularly in reconstruction projects, could create economic incentives for stability while reducing Turkmenistan's dependence on state-to-state engagement. The trajectory of Turkmenistan-Taliban relations will be influenced by multiple factors, including the Taliban's governance evolution, regional security dynamics, and the broader international diplomatic landscape. If the Taliban secures greater legitimacy and internal stability, Turkmenistan's economic projects could gain more sustainability (Sultanov, 2022). However, continued international isolation and economic sanctions on Afghanistan could pose significant risks to Turkmenistan's investments and trade relations. From a regional security perspective, Turkmenistan's strategic neutrality will be tested if the threat from IS-K and other extremist groups intensifies. While Ashgabat has avoided military entanglements, it may need to reconsider its stance on regional security cooperation, particularly within SCO and CSTO frameworks (Kucera, 2022). Additionally, as major global powers redefine their engagement with the Taliban, Turkmenistan's diplomatic balancing act will become increasingly complex. Ashgabat must ensure that its engagement with Afghanistan aligns with both its national interests and international diplomatic considerations to prevent potential geopolitical repercussions (Weitz, 2023). Consequently, Turkmenistan's engagement with the Taliban reflects a pragmatic, risk-averse foreign policy that prioritizes economic cooperation and border security while avoiding ideological or military entanglements. The analysis highlights the importance of a flexible but cautious diplomatic strategy, recognizing both the opportunities and risks

associated with engagement in Afghanistan. Moving forward, a multi-pronged approach that includes enhanced security cooperation, economic diplomacy, and multilateral engagement will be essential to safeguarding Turkmenistan's interests. As Afghanistan's political and security landscape remains uncertain, Ashgabat must remain adaptive, ensuring that its neutrality remains an asset rather than a constraint in managing its evolving relationship with the Taliban.

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