

Prospects for Azerbaijan's Outreach to Afghanistan

A Case for Baku to Engage with Taliban 2.0

Ruslan Suleymanov

In August 2023, I had a chance to visit Afghanistan and assess the situation in the country on the ground after two years of renewed Taliban rule. Among other things, I had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the current Taliban leadership, as well as representatives of local ethnic minorities, including the Qizilbash (Afshars) that are ethnically very close to the Azerbaijani people. My assessment is that Azerbaijan and Afghanistan have an almost wholly underappreciated potential to develop relations, notwithstanding the evident constraints.

Evolution of the Relationship

In the Summer 2022 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, Mirwais Balkhi provided an overview of the multifaceted history of ties between Afghanistan and Azerbaijan, and so there is no need to get into this subject here, except to underline that in December 1991, Afghanistan became one of the first countries to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, with diplomatic relations established in November 1994.

As Balkhi correctly indicates, between the periods of Taliban rule, Afghanistan viewed Azerbaijan "as a prosperous country that deftly manages its foreign policy by building various coalitions to offset centrifugal pressures." This appears to be the judgment of the present-day Taliban, as well.

Baku, in its turn, considered relations with Kabul to be an important element of its foreign policy. "Afghanistan is our brotherly country and our peoples for centuries have lived in an atmosphere of peace and friendship," noted Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev in December 2014.

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Two years earlier (in November 2012), Afghanistan opened its embassy in Baku. In late 2020, Azerbaijan, in its turn, announced the opening of its embassy in Kabul. However, the new ambassador (Ilham Mammadov, appointed in July 2021) has not reached the Afghan capital yet due to the volatile political situation in the country.

Until the return of the Taliban, Baku and Kabul had begun to develop their economic relations, both in the context of bilateral ties and via multilateral formats involving third countries like Georgia, Türkiye, and Turkmenistan within the framework of the international transport corridor Lapis Lazuli (see details below).

Along with this, Baku helped Kabul to protect its security within NATO's Resolute Support Mission and to address terrorism and drug-trafficking threats. Furthermore, Azerbaijan helped Afghanistan to promote its version of the "ASAN Xidmet" service, which has been successfully implemented there (see details below).

It is worth mentioning that *all* successive governments of Afghanistan—from the very beginning of the establishment of relations with Azerbaijan—have expressed their support to Baku's policy regarding the conflict over Karabakh. For instance, in September 2020, when the Second Karabakh War began, Afghanistan's government unequivocally demanded "the end of the occupation in Nagorno-Karabakh" and supported "the efforts by the people and government of Azerbaijan and other nations of the world in this regard."

At the same time, over the past decade, Baku and Kabul have demonstrated positive dynamics in bilateral economic relations. Thus, according to the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, from 2010 to 2014, the trade turnover between the two countries increased from \$69.4 million to \$275 million, or by 296 percent.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic, and then the change of power in Afghanistan, severely shook the strong ties between Baku and Kabul. Nevertheless, the two states retain a potential for interaction. Zabihullah Mujahid, spokesman for the interim government of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," confirmed to me the desire of the Taliban to comprehensively develop relations with Azerbaijan and, in particular, to ensure the security of the Azerbaijani diplomatic mission in Kabul. This ought to be taken at face value, albeit cautiously.

Current Situation in Afghanistan

Over the past two years, after the change of power in Afghanistan, the most pressing challenge for the new government formed by the Taliban remains the high level of poverty.

In 2019, according to the UN, 6.3 million Afghans were considered to be in need of humanitarian assistance; now, the number is 28 million. At the moment, 97 percent of

the population (estimated at 34 million) lives below the poverty line, while 20 million people face acute hunger.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that the United States and its allies have stopped financial assistance, which previously provided 75 percent of the budget of Afghanistan. In addition, \$9.5 billion of Afghan sovereign reserves are held frozen in U.S. and other Western banks.

All in all, with foreign banks refusing to facilitate transactions with the country, Afghanistan's economy shrank by 35 percent between 2021 and 2022, according to the World Bank.

However, over the past two years, the Taliban government has managed to improve the situation with the national currency. It has now been stabilized and is now just 7 percent lower against the dollar than it was the day before Kabul fell back into the hands of the Taliban.

In addition, one of the recent achievements of the Taliban is a fairly successful fight against corruption. The proportion of businesses that bribe customs officials is down from 62 percent to 8 percent, according to a recent World Bank survey.

The tightening of border controls has also led to a significant increase in registered exports and customs revenues. Thus, the total revenue for the year 1401 according to the Afghan calendar (from March 2022 to March 2023) amounted to \$2.3 billion, which is 10 percent more than two years earlier.

However, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remains extremely uncertain. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that Afghanistan needs \$4.62 billion this year for education, food, and health. At the moment, the country has received no more than 10 percent of this amount.

Another no less topical issue for Afghanistan traditionally remains security.

The Taliban can certainly take credit for the fact that the country has become safer in the past two years. Afghanistan became much safer after having witnessed more than 40 years of almost continuous civil war. The number of violent events in the most of the country's provinces have been reduced by 100 percent since September 2021, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a non-governmental crisis group.

According to the Australian Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), which compiles the Global Terrorism Index, in 2022 there were 75 percent fewer terrorist attacks in the country than a year earlier. However, according to the IEP, Afghanistan still ranks first in the ranking of the most dangerous countries in terms of terrorism.

Terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-Khorasan) continue their activities, mainly in Afghanistan. The latter is an ideological enemy of the Taliban and periodically attacks Taliban leaders.

Thus, as a result of attacks by IS-Khorasan terrorists, in January and March of this year on the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the “Islamic Emirate” of Afghanistan, located in the specially guarded government quarter of Kabul, a total of more than 20 people were killed.

In parallel with this, rebel detachments of the Ahmad Massoud-led National Resistance Front (NRF), which opposes the Taliban, continue to operate in more than 10 provinces of Afghanistan. However, its capabilities are severely limited. Thus, one can conclude that, all in all, the Taliban completely controls the entire territory of Afghanistan.

The situation with women’s education is of particular concern to the international community. As a result of the introduction in March 2022 of a ban on education for older girls, the UN claims that 80 percent of the 2.5 million school-age girls living in Afghanistan are not receiving an education. Restrictions related to women’s access to work cause additional concern—even among Taliban allies. Today, no woman has the opportunity to work in Afghan government structures. Moreover, since December 2022, Afghan women have been banned from working in non-governmental organizations, and in UN structures since April 2023. An additional shock was connected to the ban imposed in July 2023 on the work of women’s beauty salons, which employed thousands of women across the country. As a result, the International Labor Organization has stated that women’s employment in Afghanistan has fallen by 25 percent since the Taliban returned to power.

Thus, in March 2023, Roza Otunbayeva, the UN Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), noted that Afghanistan is now the “most repressive country in the world regarding women’s rights.”

That being said, Taliban 2.0 today is different from the Taliban that ruled Afghanistan from 1996-2001. For instance, it has abandoned the medieval practice of public executions, moved away from harboring international terrorists, and declared a war on drugs that may actually be successful.

Thus, even excluding the possibility of establishing formal diplomatic relations, Azerbaijan today has many other ways to at least try to establish contact with the Taliban regime. If Baku chooses to engage in what can be called a “constructively ambiguous” manner, and in time comes to makes an informed judgment that such first contacts can be deemed as successful, then surely this could serve as a factor in Baku’s deliberations about whether moving on to something more serious would be warranted.

Certainly, keeping a close and watchful eye on Taliban conduct—particularly on its willingness and ability to keep the promises it makes—would be critical.

Foreign Contacts of the Taliban Government

A special subject for the pride of the Taliban is the opening of their embassies in various countries. Embassies operate in two formats. The Taliban have appointed their diplomats to a number of Afghanistan’s embassies. For example, to embassies in Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, China, and Russia. The second format is countries where the previous government’s diplomats now cooperate with the Taliban government and remain active in their postings abroad. Such examples are Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

Mawlawi Abdul Kabir, the political deputy of the prime minister in the caretaker government, during a ceremony on Afghanistan’s independence day in August 2023, said that the “Islamic Emirate” has embassies in 16 countries around the world.

The desire to turn the country into a trade crossroads of the Silk Road region dictates the interest in establishing trade relations between Central and South Asia through the territory of Afghanistan.

So far, we are talking only about road transport, because work on laying a railway network is not moving forward. In addition, an important achievement is the availability of air links with many countries.

For the most part, the new Taliban government is trying to strengthen its contacts with adjacent countries like Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, etc. Also, Russia, Türkiye, and some Arab countries (e.g., Qatar and the UAE) are trying to level up their presence in Afghanistan. From the very beginning of its return to Kabul, the Taliban have emphasized that they are prone to cooperate with all the interested parties, as the country’s problems cannot be resolved without foreign aid.

There are some successful examples of interaction between the new interim government of Afghanistan and the outside world. For instance, in July 2022, an Emirati company named GAAC was awarded a license to operate the ground services for the Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar airports.

Also, in January 2023, Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC) signed an oil extraction deal with the Taliban caretaker government. CAPEIC will invest \$150 million a year in Afghanistan under the contract.

Of particular interest to Azerbaijan is the fact that a large Turkish presence remains in Afghanistan. Türkiye remains the only NATO member state to operate a working

embassy in Kabul, while Turkish state-affiliated schools still operate and continue to educate Afghan girls. To date, 7,400 pupils have been educated in Turkish schools.

All in all, the Taliban have managed to begin to gradually overcome their economic isolation. The countries of Central Asia, China, Türkiye, and the Arab states have shown that it is possible to cooperate with the new Afghan caretaker government.

At the same time, the absence of an inclusive government in Afghanistan with the participation of all ethnic minorities, as well as draconian laws regarding women and girls, remains a serious stumbling block to the development of relations with Kabul.

The Taliban are most criticized for banning university education for women and for girls after the sixth grade. For instance, Türkiye's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has called such decisions "inhumane and anti-Islamic."

In addition, the Taliban's relations with the outside world are complicated by the ban on the work of women in non-governmental organizations, as well as in UN structures. International observers estimate that if the NGO ban continues, 95 percent of Afghan women working in this sector will not be able to find another job.

Mutually-Beneficial Cooperation Between Baku and Kabul?

As noted above, Baku and Kabul had had a very positive dynamic in bilateral trade before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the change of power in Afghanistan in August 2021.

The volume of trade between the two countries in 2019 was equal to \$82.7 million, almost twice as much as were the figures for 2020.

Among the goods that Azerbaijan exported to Afghanistan are oil and gas products such as kerosene fuel, light distillates, gas oils, butane gas, as well as non-oil products such as sugar, milk, and cream.

However, in recent years, international transport communications began to play a tremendous role in bilateral economic relations. Thus, in November 2017, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye signed an agreement on the establishment of the Lapis Lazuli international transport corridor connecting these countries. The project, which is estimated to be valued at \$2 billion, is aimed at facilitating transit logistics and simplifying customs procedures.

National railroads and highways already form a significant part of it. In December 2018, the first cargo from Afghanistan arrived at the Baku International Sea Trade Port via this corridor. The first shipment of 175 tons included dried fruits and spices. "Being

part of this Agreement, Azerbaijan is glad to contribute for providing multiple options for Afghanistan in terms of transit and transportation,” Azerbaijani foreign minister Jeyhun Bayramov said in March 2021.

Also, for several years, the trilateral format of cooperation Azerbaijan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan had been developing very actively. In July 2020, the presidents of the three states outlined steps to facilitate joint trade. In the same month, a tripartite working group was formed to develop cooperation in the field of transport and communications.

In September 2020, negotiations were held between the heads of the working committees of Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and they decided to synchronize customs control procedures. Hence in January 2021, the representatives from the three countries in the joint Working Group signed a Road Map on expanding and deepening cooperation in the fields of trade and investment, energy, transport, logistics, telecommunications and information technologies, customs, and border issues.

Parallel to that, ongoing regional projects initiated by Azerbaijan, including the main strategic highway components such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, the new Baku International Sea Trade Port, East-West transport corridor, the new railway networks of Azerbaijan and Iran, and the North-South axis can be considered as a contribution to Afghanistan’s access to the world market.

Also, Azerbaijan has long been implementing the program of an international digital hub, which can also include Afghanistan. So, in May 2023, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan began laying a fiber optic cable along the bottom of the Caspian Sea. The project is conceived as part of the establishment of a fiber optic backbone connecting China and Southeast Asia with Europe via the Caspian Sea.

The installation of a fiber optic cable under the sea will make a significant contribution to the formation of the “digital Silk Road” between Europe and Asia. According to the original idea, internet traffic from Europe will be transmitted to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India through the territory of Azerbaijan.

But this is now all on standby, with regards to Afghanistan. All in all, in the year 2022, the level of trade between Afghanistan and Azerbaijan amounted to only \$805,000—the lowest figure in the history of bilateral relations. This is largely due to the lack of any diplomatic contacts in the wake of the return of the Taliban to ruling the country. It is difficult to see how such a low figure is in the economic interest of either country.

Security Above All

Azerbaijan has always paid great attention to ensuring security on Afghan soil. As a matter of fact, Baku sent an Azerbaijani peacekeeping contingent as a part of the NATO

missions. At the final stage of its Resolute Support mission, 120 Azerbaijani servicemen, together with their Turkish counterparts, performed their duties at Kabul International Airport until the end of August 2021.

Together with Ankara, Baku also actively took part in the process of reconstruction of Afghanistan within the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process initiated by Türkiye in November 2011.

Parallel to that, in 2008, Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) entered Afghanistan actively and worked closely with the Afghanistan Natural Disaster Management Authority. As Balkhi emphasized, this kind of assistance “strengthened Afghanistan’s trust in Baku.”

In this regard, Baku’s experience in the Second Karabakh War could also be useful for Afghanistan’s national army which is being updated now by the Taliban. Azerbaijan’s victory in the 44-days war “demonstrates what a relatively small army can achieve on the battlefield if trained and equipped properly for its own needs,” as Balkhi reckons.

Along with this, it should be mentioned that, in July 2016, the governments of the two states reached, in Baku, an agreement on military assistance. This document stipulates the strengthening of cooperation between the two countries in this domain. From the Azerbaijani side, the implementation of the agreement was entrusted to the State Border Service.

Another challenge that afflicts Afghan society is drugs trafficking. According to the 2023 World Drug Report released in June by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the bulk of global illicit opium production still takes place in a limited number of countries, especially in Afghanistan. In 2022, Afghanistan’s production reached 6,200 tons, equivalent to 80 percent of the projected global production of 7,800 tons.

Afghanistan’s 2023 opium crop could fall sharply, following the Taliban’s drug ban in 2022, with possible global repercussions. Early reports indicate a decline in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan.

As of June 2023, the Taliban have successfully reduced poppy cultivation by more than 99 percent in Helmand province, where more than 50 percent of the country’s opium was previously produced.

In October 2021, Masum Rasulov, Chief of the Main Directorate of Operative-Investigative Activities of the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan (SCC), warned that “there are efforts to deliver drugs to the EU along the Afghanistan-Iran-Azerbaijan route.” He made clear that Baku was interested in cooperation with Afghanistan and other states in order to prevent completely drug trafficking in the region. It stands to reason that this still remains the case today.

Shared Social and Humanitarian Issues

Another subject of Baku's interest and attention to Afghanistan should be the ethnic minorities very close to Azerbaijani Turks, which are known by various names including Marvi, Bayat, Qizilbash, Shahsevan, Turkman, Afshar, Qajar, and so on. There are approximately 3 million Turkic peoples in Afghanistan who live mainly in Herat, Kabul, Ghazna, Mazar-i-Sharif, Beglan, Badakhshan, and other areas of the country.

At present, they have no relations with their ethnic-Azerbaijani kin. Almost none of the Afghan Turkic peoples under the age of 35 know their native language, according to local human rights activists. From time to time, local organizations representing these people in Afghanistan, such as Qizilbash Unity, appeal to Azerbaijan's authorities to assist in building special schools for their children or to grant at least quotas or scholarships for their students.

In a conversation with me, representatives of Qizilbash Unity and Qizilbash Global Heritage Organisation expressed the wish that Baku pay as much attention as possible to them, since in today's conditions the Azerbaijani state is perhaps their only potential supporter.

In turn, the Azerbaijani authorities may in the future use the factor of the presence of their ethnic kin in the region to advance the country's interests.

Relatedly is the fact that a number of Afghan citizens have come to Azerbaijan as refugees in the wake of the return of the Taliban to power, and more will likely make the attempt. No exact numbers have been released since 2019, however. But we do know that then, over 60 percent of all the refugees in Azerbaijan were citizens of Afghanistan (at least according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Azerbaijan). It seems likely that this figure has not been reduced in the intervening timeframe.

Moreover, the Azerbaijani experience of ASAN Xidmet—a one-stop shop, single-space concept for the delivery of public and bureaucratic services—began to be successfully implemented in Afghanistan starting in 2016. For several years, Afghanistan's Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Affairs (MoMDA), with the assistance of Azerbaijani specialists, worked on creating easy access for citizens and businesses to efficient and transparent public services and establishing trust to the government.

In particular, an Afghan "Asan Khedmat" aspired to "enhance service delivery to the private sector and thus improve business environment" and "become an e-Government platform providing e-services to citizen and businesses," as noted on the official website of Afghanistan's Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Affairs. Before 2021, more than 100

representatives from various institutions of Afghanistan had been given roughly 20 trainings.

However, due to the renewed rule of the Taliban, the full implementation of the service remains incomplete. Representatives of the local Afghan “Asan Khedmat” informed me that work still needs to be done on it. One obvious and quite useful way forward for the people of Afghanistan would be for Azerbaijan to continue where it left off in the provision of advice to improve and implement the “Asan Khedmat” service in Afghanistan.

In addition, it seems that Kabul is expressing an interest in Azerbaijan helping to implement likeminded projects of the Azerbaijani Agency for Sustainable and Operational Social Security (DOST).

Also, Azerbaijan could play a constructive role in the educational sphere. The brightest example of that is the fact that the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (the forerunner of ADA University) began conducting specialized training courses for Afghan civil servants and diplomats in 2010, which continued until summer 2021. Students from Afghanistan also participated in several university-level exchange programs and were the beneficiaries of various scholarship schemes. The renewal of such programs for Afghan students could also become a fruitful way forward.

Can Baku Rebuild a Relationship with Afghanistan Under the Taliban?

All in all, Baku possesses a wide range of areas to cooperate with the new Afghan authorities. Regardless of all the difficulties, this relationship could be mutually beneficial, especially for Kabul, which needs more international attention in order to address its most urgent challenges such as poverty and drug trafficking, to say nothing of terrorist threat.

During my meeting with Zabihullah Mujahid, he indicated that the interim Taliban government is ready to undertake any format of cooperation with Azerbaijan, especially in the field of trade. Moreover, the “Islamic Emirate” would welcome the reopening of an Azerbaijani embassy in Kabul.

The latter would almost certainly represent a step too far, too fast, for it would require Azerbaijan to officially recognize the Taliban government. However, building informal contacts—following the example of the countries of Central Asia, the Arab states, or Türkiye—could be acceptable for Azerbaijan.

Contacts could be facilitated by one or more of the aforementioned states: they and some other countries that are strategic partners of Azerbaijan also have a significant record of interaction with the “Islamic Emirate.”

In the future, Baku could even provide accreditation to a representative of the “Islamic Emirate” to work in the Afghan embassy in Azerbaijan. This is exactly what Moscow and Ankara, for example, have already done. And it would not require any sort of formal recognition, either.

In any case, taking into account the potential benefits for the Afghan people of renewing Azerbaijani-Afghan relations in the manner suggested in this brief, the beneficial legacy of trade relations developed over the years, and also the importance of advancing the rights and interests of the Qizilbash (Afshars) minority in Afghanistan, there is a strong case to be made for tentatively unfreezing contacts between Baku and Kabul.