

# The OSCE and Central Asia

## Options for engagement in the context of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine

Stefan Wolff & Anastasiya Bayok, Rahimullah Kakar, and Niva Yau





OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions

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# Executive Summary

1. Since the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban, the challenge for the OSCE and its participating States has been two-fold: **how to manage the current crisis and prevent a spill-over of insecurity and instability into the OSCE area and how to engage with the Taliban**. Both of these dimensions are closely related to one another in that crisis management necessitates at least some degree of engagement. Further, these dimensions need to be addressed within a complex dynamic of the bilateral relationships that individual participating States have with Afghanistan and the states of Central Asia, on the one hand, and the multilateral relationships within the OSCE and between the OSCE and its regional and global partner organisations, and third states, on the other.
2. This initial challenge has not disappeared since 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, and this is now being played out in a far more complex context in which the pre-existing institutional crisis of the OSCE has been further exacerbated. **The war in Ukraine has become the predominant regional and global security issue, consuming vast human and financial resources**. In comparison, the crisis in Afghanistan has become far less important on most relevant actors' agendas, especially since the country itself has become relatively more stable over the past twelve months.
3. Governing in the face of complex domestic challenges—violence, displacement, and drug-related organised crime—would be difficult for any regime. In the case of Afghanistan, the situation is further complicated by internal rifts within the Taliban leadership, which acts as an additional exacerbating factor for the country's **humanitarian crisis of conflict-induced economic destitution**.
4. The relationship between the Taliban and the Central Asian participating States of the OSCE is predominantly driven by economic interests on all sides. From the Taliban perspective, engagement is key to achieving recognition, but Kabul is equally not unwilling to leverage perceived risks against their neighbours, be it in the form of potentially providing safe havens for terrorist groups or tolerating, if not facilitating, opium cultivation and drug trafficking. Thus, **economic diplomacy has so far provided an entry point to engagement with the Taliban, but it does not necessarily offer any reliable mechanism for dealing with many of the underlying security concerns** that the OSCE and its participating States in the region and beyond justifiably have concerning the Taliban.
5. The situation in Afghanistan, and the opportunities and constraints that the OSCE and its participating States have faced in dealing with it, is embedded in the **complex geopolitical and geo-economic context of Central Asia**, a region that is contested between, and penetrated by, various regional and great powers. The general approach of the Central Asian states to Afghanistan is one that prioritises stability based on the assumption that Afghanistan is a critical bridge for Central Asia's better integration into the global economy and thus, over time, decreasing dependence on Russia and China.
6. In light of the overall fragility of Central Asian states, a stable Afghanistan that could enable the kind of **infrastructural, trade, and energy cooperation** that the region needs would represent one of the key factors in creating opportunities for economic development across Central and South Asia and, thus, lessen the risks of destabilising the OSCE participating States in Central Asia.
7. The key dynamic of the Central Asian geopolitical and geo-economic context is the evolving relationship between Russia and China, and their respective approaches to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Three trends characterise this dynamic: **Russia's declining influence on the region, China's reluctance to step decisively into this void, and the slowly but unevenly increasing ability of the Central Asian countries to provide an alternative framework for managing regional stability**. These trends are not necessarily new, but they have been accelerated by the Russian war in Ukraine.
8. The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has further exposed **the OSCE's already limited capacity for responding to the crisis** during the first six months after the Taliban takeover. This period was constrained by the Organisation's own rules and procedures, by its limited unified budget and unpredictable additional extra-budgetary commitments, and by stretched human resources. While Afghanistan has remained on the agenda of the Secretary General ever since the Russian aggression against Ukraine, it remains, at best, on the radar of many staff within the OSCE's structures, institutions, and field missions. The same applies to participating States' delegations in Vienna.
9. There are six sets of **constraints that delimit the parameters of OSCE engagement** with its Central Asian participating States in the context of the crisis in Afghanistan:
  - a. The inability of key players among the participating States to overcome their entrenched differences and enable the OSCE to make full use of its potential.
  - b. The resulting dysfunctionality of the OSCE as a cooperative security organisation is further exacerbated by the drain on human and financial resources.
  - c. While participating States may generally agree on the need to prevent a destabilisation of the OSCE region, and particularly of Central Asia, from Afghanistan, there has never been a consensus on how to achieve this.



- d. Another, long-standing feature of the OSCE's structural-institutional crisis, and one that has particular relevance in the context of Central Asia, is the difficulty in balancing the different dimensions of the OSCE's comprehensive security mandate.
  - e. OSCE agency in Central Asia is further constrained by a perception that Western participating States are pushing a comprehensive security agenda, which, because it includes human rights, threatens the regime security of incumbent governments, making the option of engagement with, among others, China and the SCO potentially more attractive.
  - f. As a result of this multi-vector foreign policy of the OSCE's Central Asian participating States, OSCE agency becomes further dependent on the willingness and ability of the OSCE's actual and potential partners to give the organisation the space and time to engage on and with Afghanistan, of which there are few indications.
10. While the parameters for OSCE engagement on the crisis in Afghanistan are highly constraining, the OSCE needs to understand and embrace its significance for its Central Asian participating States. The OSCE remains a **key reference point for multilateral engagement** in relation to the crisis in Afghanistan but also as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, both of which have put Central Asia in the spotlight of geopolitical rivalries again.
11. This creates **options for the OSCE for future engagement**:
- a. **Within institutions and among participating States:** maintain a strategic narrative for the OSCE, as a whole, that defines the added value of the role that the organisation plays in contributing to managing the situation in Afghanistan; work with the incoming CiO to ensure that Afghanistan-related issues remain on the agenda in relevant OSCE fora; and conduct a strategic review and needs assessment of OSCE engagement in and on Central Asia, involving Central Asian participating States, field operations, OSCE structures and institutions, and key participating States.
  - b. **With the Central Asian participating States:** contribute to the gradually increasing intra-Central Asian dialogue between the governments of the participating States in the region; shape and contribute to the growing importance of the connectivity agenda in the region, including Afghanistan; help the region manage climate-related impacts on Central Asia, such as the cooperative management of regional water resources; support border security and management as well as programmes and projects that contribute to the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation that leads to terrorism, while maintaining a balance between the three dimensions of the comprehensive security concept and continuing efforts to strengthen the human dimension in all programming activities in Central Asia.
  - c. **With regional partners:** proactively seek out opportunities to understand the agendas of potential partner organisations and third states and develop further cooperation with them, based on developing a 'big-picture' understanding of the dynamics and implications of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine within the OSCE (e.g., connectivity implications for the South Caucasus and Turkey) and beyond, including how it affects partner organisations (e.g., EU, SCO) and third states (e.g., China, India, Iran, Pakistan); consider, in particular, the development of a more strategic approach to relations with China, through bilateral engagement at the level of the Secretary General, CiO, and/or the parliamentary assembly, inter-organisational dialogue between OSCE and SCO or OSCE and CICA, and Track-2 initiatives.
  - d. **With Afghanistan:** explore ways in which past cooperation could be reinvigorated, including the continued provision and facilitation of scholarships and visas to Afghan students to enrol in degree programmes in Central Asian Higher Education Institutions, including the OSCE Academy in Bishkek; providing training and exchange opportunities for Afghan citizens (at least initially, in a purely private capacity) in the context of programmes and projects in the OSCE's second dimension; engaging the Afghan diaspora with the aim of identifying and building relationships with suitable partners in Afghanistan and giving a meaningful perspective to regionally displaced professionals; and continuing to contribute to the international humanitarian relief effort for Afghanistan.

# Introduction

Since the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 and the takeover by the Taliban, the challenge for the OSCE and its participating States was initially two-fold: how to manage the current crisis and prevent a spill-over of insecurity and instability into the OSCE area and how to engage with the Taliban (Bayok, Evers, and Wolff 2021). Both of these dimensions are closely related to one another in that crisis management necessitates at least some degree of engagement. Further, these dimensions need to be addressed within a complex dynamic of the bilateral relationships that individual participating States have with Afghanistan and the states of Central Asia, on the one hand, and the multilateral relationships within the OSCE and between the OSCE and its regional and global partner organisations, and third states, on the other.

This initial challenge has not disappeared since 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine but is now playing out in a far more complex context in which the pre-existing institutional crisis of the OSCE has been further exacerbated. The war in Ukraine has become the predominant regional and global security issue, consuming vast human and financial resources. In comparison, the crisis in Afghanistan has become far less important on most relevant actors' agendas, especially since the country itself has become relatively more stable over the past twelve months.

Afghanistan has been one of the OSCE's Asian Partners for Cooperation since 2003 (Permanent Council of the OSCE 2003). Cooperation was initially relatively limited and focused on election support through ODIHR from 2004 onwards. After 2007, OSCE engagement with Afghanistan increased. Following a request by Afghanistan for OSCE assistance, the Madrid Ministerial Council decided to "task the Secretary General with providing support for intensifying the involvement of Afghan counterparts in OSCE activities, such as those related to the fields of border security and management, policing and the fight against drug trafficking" (Ministerial Council of the OSCE 2007, 2), reflecting the areas in which participating States had particular security concerns. Because of the reluctance to authorise activities on the territory of non-participating States, much of the OSCE's cooperation with Afghanistan involved training, especially on border security and border management, provided by the Vienna-based Strategic Police Matters Unit, the Action against Terrorism Unit, the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, the OSCE Centres in Ashgabat, Astana and Bishkek, the OSCE Office in Tajikistan, and the OSCE Staff Border Management College in Dushanbe (Ministerial Council of the OSCE 2010, also Interviews 1-3, 7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 24, 26).

The 2007 Ministerial Council Decision was reaffirmed at the Athens Ministerial Council two years later with the Ministerial Council calling for its "intensified implementation" (Ministerial Council of the OSCE 2009, 2). Two years after that, the 2011 Vilnius Ministerial Council, on the back of the launch of the Istanbul Process in November 2011 (Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable

Afghanistan 2011) and the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn in December 2011 (Conference on Afghanistan and the International Community 2011), reiterated the importance for the OSCE of "recognising the threat posed by illicit production, trade, trafficking and consumption of drugs originating in Afghanistan to international peace and stability in the region and beyond, and emphasizing the importance of co-operation with Afghanistan to counter this threat and to enhance border management co-operation between Afghanistan and its neighbours in ensuring comprehensive measures for drug control" (Ministerial Council of the OSCE 2011, 2). The focus on combating illicit drug trafficking and drug-related crimes and building domestic Afghan capacity in this context has been at the centre of OSCE support to Afghanistan ever since the 2007 Ministerial Council Decision, which reflects the broad consensus among OSCE participating States on the importance of this issue.<sup>1</sup> These concerns, and OSCE training and capacity building for Afghan national security forces as part of mitigating the resultant threats, were also shared by the organisation's international partners, such as NATO, the EU, the UN, SCO, and CSTO (e.g., Forum for Security Co-operation 2008; 2009; also Expert Communications 5, 7, 9; Interviews 5, 7, 17, 18).

While there has, thus, been an awareness of some of the actual and potential risks for the OSCE region emanating from Afghanistan, the context in which these play out and the parameters within which an OSCE response can be shaped have been fundamentally different since August 2021, with further changes at the end of February 2022.

Against this background, this report offers an assessment of this changing context and the impact that both the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine have had regarding the OSCE's engagement with, and in, its Central Asian participating States. This focus on Central Asia as is deliberate because the region has been deeply impacted, albeit in different ways, by the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine.

Across the entire OSCE region, nowhere else is the OSCE's comprehensive security concept simultaneously more challenged and the opportunities for reinvigorating it more pronounced. Naturally, the extent to which such a summary assessment applies generally differs across the three dimensions of comprehensive security and the five participating States. Yet, the key insight that we have gained from our research still stands: Central Asia is a key region for the OSCE, and the OSCE has significant potential in contributing to Central Asian efforts to mitigate the consequences of both the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine. This potential rests on its ability to overcome its own limitations which have existed long before the Taliban takeover in August 2021 but were thrown into sharp relief and further exacerbated by the war in Ukraine.

1 See, for example, OSCE Secretariat (2018; 2019); also Interviews 2, 3, 7, 12, 16, 26.

We develop this argument in three steps, beginning with an assessment of the evolving situation in Afghanistan itself, including of the Taliban's regional foreign policy strategy. On this basis, we then consider how Afghanistan-related risks have been perceived and mitigated since August 2021. Initially, we focus this part of our analysis on Central Asia and the five OSCE participating States there, before turning to a consideration of three key trends in the broader regional environment: Russia's declining influence, China's reluctance to assume the role of a full-fledged regional hegemon, and the continuing shortcomings of regional (self-) organisation.

Against this background, we then consider the implications for the OSCE. We briefly summarise the OSCE's evolving role in the region and establish the parameters by which this engagement has been constrained. This, finally, provides the basis upon which we offer a series of recommendations to the OSCE for future engagement with and in Central Asia.

# A fluid baseline: the situation in Afghanistan

An understanding of the complexity of the situation faced by the OSCE since August 2021 requires an assessment not only of the implications of the situation in Afghanistan for the organisation's participating States but also of the dynamics in Afghanistan itself. Given the fluidity of the situation, we can only capture the main trends and trajectories here.

Terrorism, drugs, and displacement were the principal risks identified across the majority of expert communications, interviews and focus groups conducted in the autumn of 2021 (e.g., Expert Communications 5-7, 9, 10; Focus Groups 1-3; Interviews 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 15, 17, 23, 28, 32, 34, 35). However, there was also a widespread reluctance among experts to assess the current reality of these threats and a general acknowledgement that there is a level of uncertainty about their future trajectory (Interviews 1, 4-6, 10, 11, 13-15, 17-23, 25-29, 32).

That said, there was consensus that governing in the face of these complex challenges—violence, displacement, and drugs—would be difficult for any regime. In the case of Afghanistan, the situation is further complicated by internal rifts within the Taliban leadership. The relatively moderate faction is led by Abdul Ghani Baradar, currently the Taliban's deputy Prime Minister and the co-founding leader of the Taliban movement.<sup>2</sup> The more hard-line faction is associated with the Haqqani Network, led by the current interior minister of the Taliban regime, Serajuddin Haqqani. While the extent to which disagreements between these two factions go beyond details of policy implementation is contested (Abdullah and Qazi 2021; Siddique 2022e), there was general agreement among our interlocutors that “economic crisis in the country is putting a lot of pressure on the group's internal politics” (Expert Communication 20) and that, overall, the “Taliban leadership remains very homogenous” (Expert Communication 19), certainly when compared to the previous period of Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001.

The current Taliban movement is comprised of a wide range of groups with different ethnic, regional, and tribal affiliations. These groups were primarily united by their opposition to the former Western-backed government and a common ideological platform, but with little agreement on, or even discussion of, policies beyond this (Expert Communication 33). While this potentially bears the seeds of intensifying tensions (Expert Communication 32), especially if the economic crisis further worsens (Expert Communication 20), the internal rifts within the movement should not be overestimated, and neither should expectations of Taliban moderation (Mukhopadhyay 2022).

Given the multiple crises that the Taliban have faced since coming to power in August 2021, they made significant efforts

to build consensus on key policies within the movement and with sympathisers beyond it (Interviews 42, 47-49, 53; see also Scollon 2022b). As a result, their governance performance overall has increased, evidenced, for example, by their ability to collect taxes and customs duties, clamp down on corruption, and distribute humanitarian aid (Expert Communications 19-21, 23; Interviews 42, 48). As one of our interlocutors put it, “the Taliban ... at this moment offer the best hope of all the groups present in Afghanistan to bring a semblance of stability to the country” (Expert Communication 15)—however at significant cost to the people of Afghanistan and the immediate and wider neighbourhood.

Our analysis in this section proceeds in two steps. We first consider the relevant domestic developments in Afghanistan before turning to an assessment of the Taliban's (regional) foreign policy. Both of these dimensions are important, and they are closely related to each other. The extent to which the Taliban are able to govern and manage the combined security, political, and economic challenges that the country faces are a key indicator that influences the perceptions of the country's neighbours on potential spill-over risks. These risk perceptions are likely to be heightened (or not), depending on what foreign policy goals the Taliban articulate. Relevant external actors—be they near or far neighbouring countries or the regional and international organisations in which they participate—will formulate their responses to these perceived risks accordingly.

## Domestic politics under the Taliban regime

### *Endemic violence*

When the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, they inherited a divided country with weak institutions and an economy mostly propped up by foreign aid. The collapse of the former Western-backed government and the subsequent hasty withdrawal of most of the remaining international presence went hand in hand with the suspension of most foreign aid and a freezing of the country's overseas assets.

According to one of our interlocutors, “the domestic security situation in Afghanistan has generally improved. The widely expected collapse of the Taliban regime, serious domestic riots, and the rekindling of a brutal civil war have not materialized” (Expert Communication 32; also Interview 45). This assessment is generally shared across the community of Afghanistan analysts. This was noted during the first round of data gathering in the autumn of 2021, as there was consensus that while terrorism was

<sup>2</sup> This faction is ‘moderate’ only in the sense that it is more open to engagement with the outside world and, at least rhetorically, committed to a less harsh interpretation of Islam.



a significant transnational threat in general (Interviews 1, 4-6, 10, 11, 13-15, 17-23, 25-29, 32), the risk to the OSCE's Central Asian participating States was only limited (Expert Communications 2, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12; Interviews 5, 7, 11, 17, 18, 21, 23, 24, 34, 35).

Yet, although violence has generally declined since the Taliban takeover, it remains a problem, nonetheless.<sup>3</sup> Armed clashes between different factions declined from almost 2,500 in the second quarter of 2021 to just 50 in the third quarter, before gradually rising again to around 400 in the second quarter of 2022 and then dropping to 100 for the period July-August 2022. Violence against civilians has remained at around 200 attacks per quarter since the beginning of 2021.

While the Taliban have, thus, been gradually able to impose their authority across most of Afghanistan, significant security challenges remain in relation to both the 'traditional' opposition and the growing and increasingly active presence of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K).

The former comprises dozens of groups, among them the National Resistance Front (NRF) led by Ahmad Masoud, son of the former anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban Afghan commander, Ahmad Shah Masoud. This group is a quasi-reconstituted Northern Alliance concentrated in the Panjshir Valley in north-eastern Afghanistan (Kohzad 2021; RFE/RL's Radio Azadi 2022e; Siddique 2022a). In addition, the emergence of other anti-Taliban forces has been reported, some of which have associated with the NRF (Karaçaltı et al. 2022).

ISIS-K traces its roots in Afghanistan to around 2014/15 and has fought multiple protracted armed conflicts against the Western-backed Afghan government, the Taliban, and other armed groups ever since (Doxsee, Thompson, and Hwang 2021; Sarkar 2021). The group had already been identified as a highly potent threat in the autumn of 2021 (Expert Communications 1, 5, 7, 11, 12; Interviews 5, 11, 17, 21). It has now risen to further prominence as one of the key perpetrators of violence, targeting a range of different targets—from Taliban-affiliated clerics (Siddique 2022g) to the Russian embassy in Kabul (Afghan Witness 2022). ISIS-K does not pose a threat to Taliban rule itself but exposes clear gaps in the Taliban's ability (and willingness) to protect the country's citizens from such attacks (Human Rights Watch 2022; Mackenzie 2021; Marty 2022).

The victimisation of civilians, including of members of Afghanistan's minority communities, is not only a hallmark of ISIS-K (RFE/RL's Radio Azadi 2022f), but also of the Taliban (Kohzad 2022; Siddique 2022f). In addition, the Taliban regime has also imposed very strict new social codes in line with its very conservative interpretation of Islam. There is clear evidence that the rights of women and girls have been severely curtailed following the Taliban's ascent to power, affecting their access to employment and education, as well as a range of other public services (RFE/RL's Radio Azadi 2022a; RFE/RL's Radio Azadi 2022b; Secretary General of the United Nations 2022; Siddique

2022; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction 2021). This, in turn, has been one factor around which opposition forces have mobilised.

The consensus among the experts we consulted remains that anti-Taliban forces present mostly localised challenges to Taliban rule, but that there is no indication of a return to the widespread and largescale violence that Afghanistan experienced prior to the takeover by the Taliban or the significant levels of external support that they received during the first period of Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001.<sup>4</sup>

## *Drug-related organised crime*

Another risk, and one that reaches far beyond Afghanistan and its immediate neighbourhood (Arsala and Siddique 2022; RFE/RL 2022d), derives from the fact that Afghanistan is one of the world's largest opium producers. According to the World Drug Report 2022 (UNODC 2022, 66), the Taliban had been involved in poppy cultivation, opium production, and drug trafficking prior to their takeover of power in August 2021. Yet, in an apparent attempt to assuage neighbouring countries' concerns, the new authorities in Kabul announced a ban on the cultivation of drugs in Afghanistan in April 2022 (Greenfield and Ahmad 2022). When the Taliban, in 2000, banned opium cultivation in a similar effort to gain greater international recognition, there was a dramatic fall in the cultivation area to only 8,000 hectares, from approximately 82,000 hectares in the year before (UNODC 2021).

According to our interlocutors, it is highly unlikely that a similarly drastic reduction in the cultivation area is possible this time. The reasons for this are manifold. One of our interlocutors noted that because of "the massive Taliban involvement in opium trade, it does not seem realistic that the Taliban ban on opium cultivation will succeed" (Expert Communication 18; also Expert Communications 20, 21, 23, 33; Interviews 56, 57). In addition, there is a shared view that because of the generally desperate economic situation in the country and yet another drought, poppies remain one of the few dependable crops available to farmers, and banning them would have a devastating impact on rural livelihoods in Afghanistan (Expert Communications 19, 33; Interviews 55-57). There was also scepticism about the sincerity of the announcement because its timing, in early April 2022, suggests that it was at least partially meant to compensate for the backtracking on girls' education which prompted severe international criticism (Interview 40).

Moreover, the decree banning poppy cultivation "remains unsupported by any plan or program for implementation" (Expert Communication 21), suggesting, again, that the Taliban's capacity to govern continues to lack behind its erstwhile capacity to overthrow the former government. The available evidence so far indicates that this remains to be the case, with the Taliban unable and unwilling to enforce their ban and, consequently, opium production is on the rise (Arsala and Siddique 2022; RFE/RL 2022d).

3 Figures are author calculations based on data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (<https://acleddata.com/>). For additional Afghanistan-specific analysis, see, for example, Karaçaltı (2022).

4 For example, Expert Communications 1-4, 6, 18-20, 23, 26, 28, 33; Interviews 40, 42, 44, 47-49, 52, 53, 56. See also Sarwar (2022) and RFE/RL's Radio Azadi (2022c).

In addition, there is also some suspicion that curtailing poppy cultivation could be a strategy to drive up prices and thus increase the profitability of the remaining Taliban-controlled opium trade, alongside a much larger production of methamphetamine and cannabis (Interview 57; also George and Warrick 2022; Stone 2022).

## Displacement

Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis is increasingly one of conflict-induced economic destitution. Thus, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2022a, 7) in its January 2022 humanitarian response plan estimated that, out of a population of just under 42 million, approximately 24 million Afghans were “in need of life-saving humanitarian support due to the consequences of decades of conflict, recurrent natural disasters, lack of recovery from past disasters and the added shock from the takeover of the government, subsequent sudden pause in international assistance and resulting economic shocks.”

Particularly affected are Afghanistan's estimated 3.5 million IDPs. Approximately three-quarters of these have been displaced for more than a decade. 2021 saw a dramatic increase in IDPs with approximately 800,000 newly displaced individuals (UNHCR 2022b), while during the twelve months since the takeover by the Taliban, an additional approximately 160,000 have been recorded (OCHA 2022a). Given the dire economic situation in Afghanistan, IDPs “have had to engage in harmful coping strategies, which include changing food consumption habits, accruing debt, selling assets, requiring additional family members—including children—to work, and having to delay expenditure for medical treatment ... [as well as] more pernicious forms of harmful coping mechanisms, which include forced or early marriage—including of girl children—child selling and the selling of vital organs” (UNHCR 2022a, 9).

In 2022, the situation of IDPs became even more precarious because of natural disasters (ongoing drought, flash floods, and an earthquake) that put additional strains on cash-starved international donors and on already severely stressed local delivery mechanisms (for example, OCHA 2022c; 2022b).

Continuing violence, repression, and economic decline have also been major contributing factors to steadily increasing numbers of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan over the past year. Both countries host approximately 2 million registered refugees. Of those, slightly over 60% are in Pakistan and just under 40% in Iran. These are long-established refugee populations, with fewer than 10% being new arrivals since 2021.<sup>5</sup>

However, the often-feared refugee crisis in the neighbouring Central Asian states—Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—has not materialised, partly due to these countries historically not having been major destinations for Afghan refugees and partly because neither of the three neighbours had a particularly welcoming refugee policy in place that would have

attracted more refugees. Adding to this, the Central Asian states made significant, donor-funded investments into strengthening their border security.<sup>6</sup> One of our interlocutors specifically noted that “China, Iran, the United States, Russia, the EU, and countries in Central Asia all have a common interest in containing the spill-over of the problems in Afghanistan in terms of ... refugees and migrants.” (Interview 57)

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the humanitarian situation in northern and north-eastern Afghanistan is particularly critical, including in regions bordering Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2022b). This will continue to create migratory pressures on neighbouring states, including the trans-border ethnic networks into Central Asia.<sup>7</sup>

## The Taliban's Regional Foreign Policy Strategy

The preceding discussion of the domestic situation in Afghanistan is one important factor for assessing risks emanating from Afghanistan for the Central Asian participating States of the OSCE and the OSCE region more broadly. It identifies potential areas for risk mitigation and tells us something about Taliban capacity to manage these risks, or, potentially, to leverage them against their neighbours in Central Asia and elsewhere. Bearing this latter point in mind, it is also important to better understand Taliban intentions towards its neighbours.

To the extent that a regional foreign policy strategy of the Taliban can be identified, its key driver is recognition, i.e., the recognition of the Taliban regime as the government of Afghanistan (Expert Communications 1, 2, 3, 21, 23, 32; Interviews 46-48, 56). While such a conferral of legitimacy is symbolically important to the new rulers in Kabul, it is also of significant instrumental value, for example, by facilitating access to Afghanistan's foreign assets, enabling formal diplomatic relations, including with bilateral and multilateral donors, and encouraging foreign investment in the country.

Consequently, the Taliban have repeatedly emphasised their willingness to engage constructively with their neighbours, and, although falling short of recognition, had some success in their economic diplomacy. For example, the delivery of electricity from Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan has continued despite concerns over the Taliban's ability to pay for it (Expert Communications 13-15, 22, 24, 32; Interviews 40, 45, 52), and the flow of humanitarian aid via the Uzbek border hub of Termez has significantly increased over the past twelve months (Expert Communication 15; Interviews 45, 52). At the same time, more ambitious connectivity projects have been revived,

<sup>6</sup> For example, Expert Communications 17, 21. On the context of Central Asian states' anti-refugee policies, see Eurasianet (2022d), Hashimova (2021b), Putz (2022b), and Бааъ (2021).

<sup>7</sup> The networks are highly complex with communities themselves deeply divided over which sides they take. In the Afghan-Tajik case, for example, Tajiks in Afghanistan are simultaneously affiliated with the Taliban, have been recruited by ISIS-K, and form the core of the re-constituted Northern Alliance. See, for example, Siddique (2022c).

<sup>5</sup> Figures are author calculations based on data from UNHCR (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>).

including plans for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline (Expert Communications 1, 6, 13, 14, 20; Interviews 40, 53, 55), and for a trans-Afghan railway connection from Uzbekistan via Mazar-e Sharif and Kabul to Peshawar, where it would connect to the China-Pakistan economic corridor, thus connecting Central Asia and Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea and beyond (Expert Communications 3, 15-17, 22, 27, 33, 35, Interviews 40, 52, 55).

Thus, there is a significant overlap in economic interests between the Taliban and their Central Asian neighbours which facilitates this economic engagement. As one of our interlocutors put it, while “the Taliban are probably not the neighbour any of the Central Asian countries would want if they had a choice, unlike the late 1990s, nearly all the Central Asian governments are practicing realpolitik, seeing the potential advantages of finally being able to connect to South Asia” (Expert Communication 15).

However, as important as economic considerations are, relations between the Taliban regime and its neighbours have not been free of problems and violence.<sup>8</sup> This includes unresolved border disputes with Pakistan along the Durand line; hostilities and exchanges of fire across the borders with Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan; and the inability of the regime in Kabul to reign in the activities some of its own allies. Further, the activities of ISIS-K have created a situation where official recognition by Afghanistan's neighbours still appears some way off for the time being.

Moreover, the Taliban also appear willing to leverage perceived risks against their neighbours, be it in the form of potentially providing safe havens for terrorist groups (Expert Communications 2, 18; Interviews 42, 46, 56) or tolerating, if not facilitating, opium cultivation and drug trafficking (Expert Communications 18, 24, 33; Interviews 40, 47, 50, 55).

For the past two decades, Afghanistan has remained a relatively safe haven for regional terrorist organisations, including the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Jihad Group, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee 2010; 2011a; 2011b). While the former has been a long-standing concern for China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021a; also Expert Communications 5, 7, 11; Focus Group 2; Interviews 11, 17), the latter in particular was notorious for cross-border violence, including during the pre-2001 Taliban regime, (International Crisis Group 2000; 2002) and it has remained active in the region ever since (Pannier 2021a; 2014). However, the ETIM, too, has been linked to attacks in Central Asia, including the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in August 2016 (Botobekov 2016; O'Grady 2016). The ETIM has also been considered an active player in the Syrian civil war and linked to a terrorist plot in the United Arab Emirates (Pantucci 2010; Zenn 2018). In the past, the ETIM has been targeted by US airstrikes, including in 2018, when the US

Airforce destroyed “Taliban training camps [which] support terrorist operations inside Afghanistan as well as operations conducted by ETIM in the border region with China and Tajikistan” (U.S. Central Command 2018; see also Lamothe 2018; RFE/RL 2018).

One of our interlocutors succinctly summarised the state of affairs regarding formal recognition, “the Taliban's actions in the past year show that economic interest remains at the centre of their talks [with neighbouring countries] and relentlessly focuses on differentiating between ideological and economic narratives, yet such efforts have not fully achieved the intended objective” (Expert Communication 19). This was further evident at the 2022 summit of the SCO in Samarkand, which took place without any diplomatic presence of Afghanistan. In their final declaration, the SCO member states made no mention of recognition but reiterated that they “consider it essential to establish an inclusive government in Afghanistan that comprises representatives from all ethnic, religious and political groups in Afghan society” (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2022, 7).

This is an important observation also inasmuch as it indicates that economic diplomacy may provide an entry point to engagement with the Taliban, but that it does not necessarily offer any reliable mechanism for dealing with many of the underlying security concerns that the OSCE and its participating States in the region and beyond justifiably have concerning the Taliban.

<sup>8</sup> Media coverage of these developments has been extensive over the past twelve months (Jamal 2022; Kamat 2022; Siddique 2022c; RFE/RL's Uzbek Service 2022; RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal 2022; RFE/RL's Radio Azadi 2022b; 2022a; Farangis Najibullah and Mustafa Sarwar 2022; Pannier 2022c; 2022a).

# Afghanistan-related risk perceptions and risk mitigation in and around Central Asia since August 2021

# 2

Having outlined the situation in Afghanistan itself, we can now turn to the regional responses to date among both the Central Asian participating States of the OSCE. These responses did not emerge in a vacuum, but have been shaped by, and played out in, a larger regional and global geopolitical environment of which the Central Asian states are an integral part. In August 2021, this environment was profoundly impacted by the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan and the takeover of power by the Taliban. Six months later, Russia's invasion of Ukraine constituted another shock to this environment. The consequences of both events are still evolving.

We begin with a discussion of risk perception and mitigating actions taken by the five Central Asian participating States and then turn to the regional constellation of what we consider established and emerging regional actors. In this broader regional analysis, we identify three important trends that we elaborate in greater detail: Russia's declining influence, China's reluctance to assume the role of a full-fledged regional hegemon, and the continuing shortcomings of regional (self-) organisation.

## Central Asia: seeking stability, exploring economic opportunities

The situation in Afghanistan, and the opportunities and constraints that the OSCE and its participating States have faced in dealing with it, is embedded in the complex geopolitical and geo-economic context of Central Asia, a region that is contested between, and penetrated by, various regional and great powers. The interests of most of these actors, including the OSCE's Central Asian participating States, are driven by their security concerns and economic interests. With the partial exception of Tajikistan, the general approach of the Central Asian states to Afghanistan is one that has no choice but to prioritise stability "regardless of who provides it and at what cost" (Expert Communication 15). This, in turn, is primarily driven by their economic interests in enhanced integration into the global economy that becomes, over time, less dependent on Russia and China (Expert Communication 2).

These economic interests, however, are also closely intertwined with the survival of the respective regimes in Central Asia, all of which are classified as 'not free' in the 2022 Freedom House report (Freedom House 2022). The capacity of three of the five

Central Asian regimes to survive has been severely tested in 2022. Unrest in Kazakhstan, in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan, and in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan could only be suppressed by force. In Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had to rely on CSTO-provided Russian paratroopers to quell the worst nationwide protests in the country's independent history, but then also proceeded with cautious constitutional reforms and called a snap presidential election for the autumn of 2022 (Najibullah 2022; RFE/RL Kazakh Service 2022; Tahir and Pannier 2022). While the protests in Kazakhstan were the result of generally worsening living conditions and triggered by a sudden increase in the price of fuel, those in Tajikistan (Eurasianet 2021d; OHCHR 2022; RFE/RL 2022a) and Uzbekistan (Putz 2022a; Solod 2022) were the result of misjudged attempts by the centre to curb regional autonomy. Regardless of the precise causes of each of these crises, they all indicate a degree of fragility that can exacerbate the impact of external shocks to the region.

This is part of the reason why the Taliban's capacity to preserve security and stability in Afghanistan will, therefore, be critical to the future of the region as a whole. In particular, it could enable the kind of infrastructural, trade, and energy cooperation that the region needs and could represent one of the key factors in creating opportunities for economic development across Central and South Asia and thus lessen the risks of destabilising the OSCE participating States in Central Asia.

### *Kazakhstan*

Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan, so any spill-over risks are partially mitigated by the fortunes of geography, although a residual risk of secondary spill-over from other Central Asian states remains (Каалмырар 2021). For Kazakhstan, the Turkmen-Afghan border is the most vulnerable in the region because of relatively poorly trained and poorly equipped border guards and weak border infrastructure. By contrast, the Afghan-Uzbek and Afghan-Tajik borders appear better protected, and Kazakhstan has no border of its own with Tajikistan. The length of its border with Uzbekistan, and in turn that of the Uzbek-Turkmen border, also heighten the need for enhanced security cooperation with Uzbekistan, which was further strengthened in the December 2021 presidential declaration between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (ORDA 2021).

Kazakhstan has, however, taken a number of precautions to limit and mitigate the risks of potential spill-overs from Afghanistan's current crisis, including a higher alert level for the Kazakh Armed Forces (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Kazakhstan



2021), as well as establishing political contacts with the Taliban (Pannier 2021f) while withholding formal recognition (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2021b).

Although Kazakhstan is not an important player in Afghanistan itself, it is important at the regional level and has used this position to facilitate further regional coordination on the management of risks associated with the situation in Afghanistan. As early as September 2021, Kazakhstan's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, proclaimed that "the states of Central Asia, especially those that are members of the CSTO, need to stick together because the development of events [in Afghanistan] is unpredictable." In the immediate context of the Taliban takeover in August 2021, this has included, among others, bilateral discussions with Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, as well as multilateral efforts in the context of the 5+1 format with the United States, as well as with Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2021a-d; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021).

In the context of Kazakhstan's ongoing concerns about the security of Central Asia's regional borders with Afghanistan, Tokayev emphasised the need for countering international terrorism and extremism, drug and arms trafficking, and illegal migration by continuing collaboration on the strengthening of the region's southern borders within the framework of the CSTO (ОАКБ 2022). Kazakhstan's general inclination to pursue the management of risks from Afghanistan in a multilateral framework is also evident from its broader engagement with the international community on this issue, including the EU (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022) and the UN (Президент Республики Казахстан 2022). This embrace of multilateralism is also obvious at the regional level with Kazakhstan's engagement in the Fourth Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in Dushanbe in May 2022 (Хабар 24 2022; also Expert Communications 22, 28) and, since 2018, through the format of the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia (News Central Asia 2022).

Notwithstanding its security concerns, Kazakhstan was among the early supporters of restoring regional trade, economic, transport, logistics, and energy ties with Afghanistan (Капитал 2021) and of providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan (Ekberova 2021; Хабар 24 2022). Since then, the country has continued on this course of regional engagement, including by offering its backing of, and participation in, the construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif—Kabul—Peshawar railway from Afghanistan to Pakistan that would connect Central Asia via Uzbekistan to ports on the Arabian Sea (Бааль 2022).

## Kyrgyzstan

Like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan does not share a border with Afghanistan but is similarly concerned by secondary spill-over effects, especially the risk of radicalisation among the country's large unemployed young male population. This relates both to people being lured to Afghanistan as foreign fighters, similar to what happened in previous years with Syria and Iraq, and those returning from there indoctrinated with radical jihadist ideology

and having acquired combat skills (Expert Communication 33; Interviews 44, 51, 54, 55). Thus, Afghanistan as a source of regional instability has been the key theme of official Kyrgyz discourse, including at various regional summits and bilateral meetings (e.g., Ekberova 2022; Министерство иностранных дел Кыргызской Республики 2021; Моисеева 2021).

Domestically, the Kyrgyz government has responded to these perceived threats with a wave of arrests of alleged extremists (e.g., KABAR 2021; 2022b) and with an intensified programme of training for the country's security forces, including in cooperation with the US Department of State's Counter-Terrorism Assistance Program (e.g., KABAR 2022c); the EU (e.g., Министерство внутренних дел 2021a); and the OSCE (e.g., Министерство внутренних дел 2021b). In addition, Kyrgyz security agencies conducted a campaign of public outreach trainings across the country, targeting religious leaders, media, civil society, as well as women's and youth groups to mitigate the harmful effects of the dissemination of radical Islamist ideologies (e.g., Министерство внутренних дел 2021c; Голос СНГ 2021; KABAR 2022h).

Regionally, Kyrgyzstan has become a strong advocate of engagement with Afghanistan, although stopping short of official recognition for the time being. For example, Taalatbek Masadykov, the Deputy Chairman of the Kyrgyz National Security Council and the country's leading expert on Afghanistan, visited Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Afghanistan, to discuss development of the situation in the country and how existing risks can best be mediated through regional and bilateral cooperation (KABAR 2022g). Beyond the region, Kyrgyzstan has also engaged with other international partners, including the UN, India, and Turkey (KABAR 2022a; 2022e; 2022f; 2022d).

Kyrgyz engagement with, and on, Afghanistan is also driven by the country's economic interests related to the implementation of the CASA-1000 regional electricity project, as well as the development of Afghanistan as a regional transit country and, thus, a route for Kyrgyz trade which would decrease its dependency on existing routes via China and Russia (Expert Communications 1, 15, 34, 35; Interviews 55, 61).

## Tajikistan

Of all the Central Asian participating States of the OSCE, Tajikistan is the most concerned about the security risks of the situation in Afghanistan and their implications for its own domestic security, in remarkable contrast to its post-Soviet neighbours (e.g., Hashimova 2021a; Imanaliyeva and Ibragimova 2021; Mikovic 2021; Pannier 2021c). As one of our interlocutors aptly summarised the 'outlier status' of Tajikistan even among the Central Asian states which border Afghanistan, "Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have promoted a dialogue with Taliban, while Tajikistan remains profoundly suspicious and reluctant to consider Taliban as a reliable political partner." (Expert Communication 14, similarly Expert Communications 20, 24-26, 29; Interviews 48, 52, 54-57, 59, 65). This reflects the many spoken and unspoken concerns of Tajikistan's neighbours and other OSCE participating States, including EU and NATO

members, as well as, initially, Russia (Expert Communications 1, 5, 6, 9; Interviews 1, 5, 6, 9, 17, 18, 27).

There has long been a concern about ethnic Tajiks and Tajik citizens joining terrorist organisations and receiving training in Afghanistan, including linking these activities to the Tajik civil war in the 1990s (Бадалов 2021; Радио Озоди 2022b). Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon, has continually highlighted the spill-over risks from Afghanistan in his engagements with other regional and global leaders (Anghelescu 2021; Putz 2021b; RFE/RL's Tajik Service 2021) and stressed, in his address to the nation at the end of 2021, that Tajikistan faces several security challenges arising from, among others, terrorism, drugs and weapon trafficking, illegal migration "which have been aggravated by the situation in Afghanistan" (Rahmon 2022).

Where the other Central Asian participating States of the OSCE have favoured an approach of greater engagement with the Taliban regime, Tajikistan has focused on a security response. This has included a range of military exercises of its own, in cooperation with Russia, and within the frameworks of the CSTO and SCO (Kiselyova and Marrow 2021; Putz 2021a; RFE/RL 2021c; RFE/RL Tajik Service 2021), as well as resuming the annual Regional Cooperation exercise with the United States after a two-year, pandemic-related hiatus (RFE/RL 2022b). Reflecting Dushanbe's primary security concerns, most of these exercises focused on scenarios in which militants illegally cross from Afghanistan into Tajikistan (Шарифов 2021; Ма мадализода 2021).

The fear of infiltration by Afghanistan-based militants also shapes other domestic security responses. On the one hand, and similar to responses in Kyrgyzstan, there has been a greater emphasis on youth engagement and cooperation between authorities and religious leaders in an attempt to counter radicalisation efforts by alleged Islamic extremists (Министерство внутренних дел Республики Таджикистан 2021a; 2021b; 2022a; 2022b).

On the other hand, the Tajik government has used significant amounts of force when cracking down on unrest in the Gorno-Badakhshan region in southeastern Tajikistan, bordering Kyrgyzstan, China, and Afghanistan (RFE/RL Tajik Service 2022a). In a sign of support from Moscow for the Tajik government, numerous activists from the region have also been detained in Russia (RFE/RL Tajik Service 2022d) and prosecutors have sought high prison sentences for those already on trial in Tajikistan (RFE/RL Tajik Service 2022b; 2022c). While there is no direct evidence that the latest instability in the restive Gorno-Badakhshan region was supported, let alone fomented, by the Taliban, there have been suggestions that this could be one of the levers that the new regime in Kabul could use to pressure Tajikistan into dropping its support for the National Resistance Front in Afghanistan (Interview 53; also Expert Communication 33; Interviews 44, 51, 55, 59, 60).

The Tajik narrative of being a frontline state in the fight against security risks associated with the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan also dominates Tajik engagements with a variety of international partners (Expert Communications 20, 24, 25, 31; Interviews 43, 44, 50, 51, 53, 56, 61). This applies above all to Russia and the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation 2021c;

Министерство внутренних дел Республики Таджикистан 2021c; 2021d; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan 2022b; Радио Озоди 2022a; Siddique 2022c). There is also a growing Chinese security presence in the country (Eurasianet 2020; Putz 2021c; Standish 2021b; Tahir and Pannier 2021). Moreover, security cooperation with Iran has increased, including the opening of an Iranian drone-manufacturing site (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan 2022c; Scollon 2022a).

Other international organisations, including the UN, EU, and OSCE, cooperate closely with Tajikistan on the Afghanistan issue, especially in relation to border security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan 2022a). In these engagements, too, Tajikistan is strongly pushing its security narrative and thereby obtains significant backing from international development partners (Expert Communications 20, 24, 25, 31; Interview 43).

Tajikistan's predominant mode of risk mitigation, thus, is focused on security. While Tajikistan has been outspoken in its criticism of the Taliban, its backing of anti-Taliban opposition is well below the level of that of the 1990s. According to our interlocutors, this is partly due to Russian pressure (Interviews 53, 56). It also partly reflects economic self-interest and, much like its Central Asian neighbours, Dushanbe has pursued some economic engagement with Kabul, albeit less publicly. This is most obvious in relation to the renewal of electricity contracts between the two countries (Ibragimova 2021; WION 2021). As one of our interlocutors noted, despite the often-hostile rhetoric, the Tajik government is quietly engaging with the Taliban: "the trade across the border, it hasn't stopped, ... [it] is still going and actually increasing" (Interview 52; similarly Expert Communications 15, 24, 29).

## Turkmenistan

As one of our interlocutors put it, "Turkmenistan is one of the most closed-off countries in the world, we have not had access to the country in the past 20 years" (Interview 4). Thus, data we could obtain on Turkmenistan was relatively limited and mostly reliant upon secondary sources. Nonetheless, there is a largely consistent picture of relatively low risk for Turkmenistan in general, despite an expectation of an increasing problem with drug trafficking (Expert Communication 6) and a track record of managing residual risk through engagement with the Taliban going back to the 1990s (Expert Communications 1, 2, 8, 9; Interviews 5, 6, 11, 17, 19, 27, 32).

Thus, despite having the second-longest border with Afghanistan among the Central Asian participating States and despite actual border skirmishes with Taliban forces (Pannier 2022a), Turkmenistan's responses to the Taliban takeover in August 2021 has been predominantly shaped by the country's economic interests (Expert Communications 1-3, 13-15, 20, 28; Interviews 1, 5, 11, 14, 24, 27, 53).

The fact that "Turkmenistan has promoted bilateral dialogue with the Taliban mainly focused on stability issues as well as on the feasibility of interconnectivity projects which involve both

countries” (Expert Communication 15) is a clear indication that the need for stability in Afghanistan is on the Turkmen radar screen (Putz 2021d). This has meant that otherwise neutral Turkmenistan has engaged more with the SCO and attended the 2021 and 2022 summits of the organisation despite being neither a member, partner, nor observer country (Eurasianet 2021b; State news agency of Turkmenistan 2022). In addition, Turkmenistan has been one of the key providers of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover (Хроника Туркменистана 2021; Новости Центральной Азии 2021).

Economic engagement with Afghanistan is the continuation of Ashgabad’s long-standing strategy, which predates the current Taliban regime and is predominantly focused on the realisation of the TAPI project—the pipeline that would secure new export markets for Turkmenistan’s natural gas reserves in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (Expert Communication 15) and end the country’s over-dependence on the Chinese market (Eurasianet 2022c) without rekindling its dependence on Russia (Штольц 2022). Other connectivity projects that both countries are keen to pursue include the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) high-voltage power transmission line and new railway connections between the countries (Хроника Туркменистана 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan 2021; Eurasianet 2022a; Афганистан.Ру 2022a; 2022b; Turkmenportal 2022).

The feasibility of the TAPI and other connectivity projects also depends on sufficient investment which has been a key problem in the past, partly because of the lack of stability in Afghanistan (Eurasianet 2018a). The project, however, has remained important for Turkmenistan and created opportunities for other players as well. For example, the State Bank for Foreign Economic Affairs of Turkmenistan and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development created a joint venture in October 2021—the Turkmen Investment Company—which has the potential to become a key vehicle for financing at least part of the TAPI (Nebit-Gaz 2021b; Eurasianet 2021e).

## Uzbekistan

Of the three Central Asian OSCE participating States that share a border with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan’s border is the shortest and generally regarded to be the best-protected while still being the most open to trade and the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan (Expert Communications 13–15, 20, 28; Interviews 49, 52; also Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2021; Mirziyoyev 2021). As seen with Turkmenistan, this is reflective of an approach to Afghanistan that is primarily driven by economic interests: sales of Uzbek electricity to Afghanistan and boosting road and rail connections through Afghanistan to Iran, Pakistan, and India (Expert Communications 1, 3, 5, 8; Interviews 1, 14; also Hamidzada and Ponzio 2019; Kamilov 2021; Pannier 2021d).

Thus, Uzbekistan built on long-established contacts into Afghanistan to minimise security risks as the Taliban conquered Kabul and ensured the continuing flow of humanitarian aid and

electricity across the border (Interview 17; also Kalmurat 2021; Pannier 2021e; RFE/RL Uzbek Service and RFE/RL Radio Azadi 2021). Subsequently, the town of Termez, on the Uzbek side of the border with Afghanistan, developed into a major trade and humanitarian hub (Expert Communication 15; Interviews 45, 52; also Eurasianet 2021c).

Strategically among the most important projects, not only for Uzbekistan, but also for Central Asia more generally, is the construction of the trans-Afghan railway corridor from Termez in Uzbekistan via Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul in Afghanistan to Peshawar in Pakistan, where it would connect to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative (Expert Communications 15, 27, 33, 34; Interviews 40, 52, 55). The completion of this project, which depends on both security and stability in Afghanistan and the availability of financing, is also important for Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. The former has had a sustainable rail cargo connection with Uzbekistan since 2017 (Expert Communication 22; also Silk Road Briefing 2022a), while the latter is likely to benefit significantly once the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway project is completed (Expert Communications 17, 27, 35; Interviews 51, 54, 55; also Rafiq 2022). Tajikistan, too, would benefit from this: the Galaba-Amuzang railway, which connects to Uzbekistan, has resumed operations (Expert Communication 22; also Caravanserai 2018; Eurasianet 2018b) after being destroyed by explosions in 2011 (Kucera 2011).

In a sign of the growing importance of following through on these regional connectivity projects, a three-month trial period for a China-Afghan rail corridor via Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was announced on the eve of the SCO Samarkand summit in September 2022 (Afghanistan Times 2022; Burna-Asefi 2022). If proving viable, this corridor would increase Uzbekistan’s role as a key transit country for both China and Afghanistan and its neighbouring Central Asian countries.

The general Uzbek approach of focusing on economic engagement with Afghanistan, however, does not mean that the relations between the two countries are free from security concerns. Uzbekistan is indirectly exposed to threats from Afghanistan through the Ferghana Valley, where it borders Tajikistan, which is a key transit area for drug traffickers from Afghanistan into Uzbekistan. In addition, ISIS-K has allegedly launched attacks against Uzbekistan from Afghan territory and the group also has a sizeable number of ethnic Uzbek members, some of whom have prior combat experience with the group in Iraq and Syria, as well as with the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Expert Communication 33; Interviews 42, 44; also RFE/RL Uzbek Service 2022; Siddique 2022b). This undermines Taliban claims to the movement’s ability to provide security and stability in Afghanistan.

From an Uzbek perspective it is also concerning that the Taliban’s relations with their northern neighbours are not free from strain in general. Thus, while both sides emphasise the importance of pursuing their mutual economic interests, the Taliban continue to be seen as a potential threat to domestic stability in Uzbekistan (Interviews 47, 52, 55; also Pannier 2022b; 2022d).



This continued perception, of at least some level of threat, has meant that Uzbekistan has also engaged with its Central Asian neighbours, Russia (Kolodyazhnyy, Marrow, and Liffey 2021; Putz 2021a; RFE/RL 2021a), and regional organisations like the SCO and CSTO (Baratov 2021; Collective Security Treaty Organisation 2021a; Eurasianet 2021a; Indeo 2021), as well as the US (RFE/RL 2021b; 2022b; RFE/RL Uzbek Service 2021), in signalling its military preparedness to deal with any spill-over of violence from Afghanistan.

## Established and emerging regional actors: balancing national interests and regional and global aspirations in the context of the war in Ukraine

The economic and security interests of actors like Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and India drive them to seek influence in and over not just Afghanistan but also the OSCE's Central Asian participating States. In fact, according to one of our interlocutors, "China, Iran, the United States, Russia, countries in the EU, Central Asia ... all have common interests in containing the spill-over of the problem in Afghanistan in terms of illicit economy, extremism, but also refugees and migrants" (Interview 57).

The key dynamic, however, is the evolving relationship between Russia and China, and their respective approaches to Afghanistan and Central Asia. As was repeatedly emphasised by most of our interlocutors (Expert Communications 13-15, 17, 22, 25, 32, 33, 35, 40; Focus Group 1; Interviews 40, 42, 43, 51, 52, 54, 56, 61), following the withdrawal of the US and its allies from Afghanistan and in light of the unfolding consequences of the Russian war against Ukraine, the shifting balance of power between Russia and China will be among the key determinants for the future of the region as a whole.

Three trends are particularly noteworthy in this context: Russia's declining influence on the region, China's reluctance to step decisively into this void, and the slowly but unevenly increasing ability of the Central Asian countries themselves to provide an alternative framework for managing regional stability. These trends are not necessarily new, but they have been accelerated by the Russian war in Ukraine.

### *Russia's declining influence*

For decades, Russia was seen as the pre-eminent guarantor of security in Central Asia. This position was maintained through Russia's dominance in the CSTO which, in turn, played a leading role in the initial response to the crisis in Afghanistan. This was

particularly evident in a series of large-scale trainings of the CSTO Collective Forces held near the Tajik-Afghan border in October 2021: 'Search-2021', 'Echelon-2021', 'Interaction-2021' and 'Cobalt-2021' (Collective Security Treaty Organisation 2021c). The CSTO Crisis Response Centre additionally carried out a multi-stage online simulation game at the end of September 2021 which involved practising "decisions to provide military and military-technical assistance, including the involvement of the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Forces and its special forces units" (Collective Security Treaty Organisation 2021b).

Since then, Russia and the CSTO have mostly engaged at a rhetorical level and to little effect. The persistence of a spill-over of risks from Afghanistan continues to be emphasised by Russian and CSTO sources, but very little emerges by way of concrete actions (e.g., Collective Security Treaty Organisation 2022; Вятчани 2022; Zas 2022). Direct engagement with the Taliban has also continued, for example in the context of the "Central Asia + Russia" regional format (Lavrov 2022; Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2022) and at the St Petersburg Economic Forum (Аргументы и Факты 2022; ТАСС 2022), yet again without clear results and with no official Russian recognition of the Taliban regime.

Tellingly, in a video conference with permanent members of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Putin acknowledged that "from the point of view of national security, we are focusing on the events related to providing assistance to our people in Donbass, on the special military operation in Ukraine" relegating "other issues that are of great interest from the point of view of national security, including in the southern sector...in respect to the events in Afghanistan" to secondary concerns (President of Russia 2022; see also Павленко 2022).

Putin's visit to Central Asia in June 2022 simultaneously signalled Russia's continuing interest in the region and also its declining influence there (Expert Communication 25). Meetings with the presidents of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, and of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, interestingly produced no agreements or joint statements. In a press conference after his visit to Turkmenistan where he also attended the Sixth Caspian Summit, Putin was merely able to point out that "there were a lot of ideas and proposals that have arisen, and I will not discuss all this now, because all this should be reflected in the relevant multilateral and bilateral documents" (Президент России 2022). Yet, such agreements remain elusive despite the repeatedly stated Russian interests in supporting the TAPI project and the construction of the trans-Afghan railway line (Александров 2022; Nebit-Gaz 2021a).

Thus, the impression generated of Russian-Central Asian relations is one of "imaginary friends" (Штольц 2022). Russia's efforts to mobilise its erstwhile reliable partners in the region to undercut Western sanctions repeatedly failed (Eurasianet 2022b), and political support for Russia's war in Ukraine has been even less forthcoming. This was further confirmed by a significant set-back for Russia at the St Petersburg Economic Forum when Kazakh president Tokayev, sharing a stage with Putin, publicly rejected the idea of recognising the Luhansk and Donetsk regions as independent states (Askar 2022b; Waller and



Geropoulos 2022), further adding to already strained relations between the two countries (Askar 2022a). Putin also had to endure an apparently unscripted, live-streamed seven-minute challenge from Tajik president Emomali Rahmon at the CSTO summit in Astana in October 2022 (Eurasianet 2022e; RFE/RL Tajik Service 2020), which is further evidence of the fact that Russia's dominance in the region has become more perilous over the past eight months since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and has to be careful to avoid further antagonising the OSCE's Central Asian participating States.

There can, thus, be no doubt that Russia's role in the post-Soviet periphery is declining. Despite the presence of Russian "peacekeepers", deployed under a 2020 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan that was mediated by Turkey and Russia, Azerbaijan had no qualms escalating violence again in September 2022 (Badalian and Aslanian 2022), while at the same time the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan escalated anew, ironically coinciding with the annual summit of the SCO (RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service and RFE/RL Tajik Service 2022).

The 2022 SCO summit is significant for another reason. For the first time, Putin had to publicly acknowledge Chinese concerns over the war in Ukraine—nothing short of a humiliating climb-down and further evidence that the balance of power in the relationship between Russia and China is shifting further and further towards Beijing (Standish 2022b; Toleukhanova and Lillis 2022; Wolff 2022). Less than a week later, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, met with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, in the margins of the UN General Assembly and expressed both China's concerns about worsening spill-over effects from the war in Ukraine and support for "the EU and major European countries in continuing their active mediation and making every effort to strive for peace" (Wang 2022; also Malyarenko and Wolff 2022).

## *China's reluctance*

Russia's decline creates opportunities for China. Yet, the rapid nature of the decline also poses problems for Beijing (Expert Communications 16, 32, 40) and, so far, there is no clear evidence that China is actively pushing Russia out of Central Asia, but rather that Beijing is keen to continue "to work with Russia to maintain Central Asian regional security and stability" (Expert Communication 32). Above all, China has pursued a policy of economic engagement with Central Asia, most evident in its Belt and Road Initiative (Expert Communications 14, 33, 35, 40; also van der Kley 2020; Wolff 2021), and continuing this approach requires shielding the region from spill-over threats from Afghanistan and from potential Russian expansionism.

Starting in the early to mid-2000s, China has gradually established itself as the key economic player in Central Asia but has done so on the basis of mostly bilateral relationships with the individual countries there, in contrast to the more multilateral structures favoured by Russia and its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). While the SCO's Samarkand Declaration continued to pay some lip service to "efforts to align the progress of the

Eurasian Economic Union and the BRI" (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2022, 10), the main thrust of the Declaration and of the deals agreed, for example between China and Uzbekistan (Silk Road Briefing 2022b), point to both Chinese economic predominance in the region and a focus on developing trade and transport routes that enhance existing intra-regional connectivity and further the region's economic integration with China.

This underscores that, for China, engagement with Central Asia remains primarily driven by its own economic interests (Expert Communications 13, 14, 23; Interview 46). Until recently, this also manifested itself in a relatively clear, and mutually accepted division of labour between China and Russia, with the latter being accepted as the pre-eminent security guarantor for the region. While this arrangement continued to be in effect in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban take-over in August 2021 and in the context of the unrest in Kazakhstan in January 2022—evident in the coordinated response by the Russia-led CSTO in both cases—Moscow's invasion of Ukraine has cast doubt over the ability of the Kremlin to continue in this role, given diminished capacities and increasing distrust of Russian intentions.

In the past, China has used the SCO as one of its vehicles to manage its security concerns in Central Asia which are primarily related to the restive Xinjiang region (Yau 2022), and only very tentatively increased its own security footprint in the region, such as in Tajikistan (Expert Communications 13, 14, 16, 25, 31; Interview 45; also Putz 2021c; Standish 2021a; Tahir and Pannier 2021). In an indication of growing military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing in general, China has also participated in Russia's annual Vostok military exercises in the Far East since their inauguration in 2018 (Ferris and Nouwens 2022; Standish 2022a), and both sides appear to have agreed at the SCO Samarkand summit on increasing their military cooperation (RFE/RL 2022c). In his speech at the summit, Xi Jinping, reflecting the domestic security concerns of China, noted the "need to expand security cooperation" among SCO members and partners and linked this to the organisation's established focus on the so-called three evils of "terrorism, separatism, and extremism", as well as on "drug trafficking as well as cyber and transnational organized crimes" (Xi Jinping 2022).

Yet, the SCO is unlikely an answer to China's security concerns in relation to Central Asia. The organisation itself appears weak when border tensions between two of its members escalate into serious violence just as the organisation's annual summit takes place (Doolotkeldieva and Reeves 2022; Toleukhanova and Lillis 2022). Its growing membership and the increase in the number of observers and dialogue partners, including among countries in the Middle East, speaks to a certain attractiveness of the organisation. However, this diversity also exposes the limitations of the organisation—for example, there were no bilateral meetings between India and China or India and Pakistan, despite the many unresolved issues between the countries.

While that makes it less likely that the SCO will become an effective tool for China to manage its security concerns (Aydıntaşbaş et al. 2022; Nadin, Nijhar, and Mami 2022), the organisation may remain useful to Beijing to push its own

(national) security narrative and assemble a loose coalition of ideologically like-minded autocratic states—especially if the SCO were to consolidate an alliance between Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey. However, this cannot distract from the fact that China is still far from able, or indeed willing, to take over from Russia as the main security guarantor in Central Asia.

This is also evident from the level of regional engagement on Afghanistan that China seeks to promote outside the SCO, although their effectiveness is limited, and perhaps intentionally so, when compared to Chinese investment in bilateral relationships, especially with the Central Asian participating States of the OSCE (Interviews 40, 51, 52, 56, 61). This includes regular meetings of the foreign ministers of neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, the first of which was held online with representatives from China, Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on 8 September 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021b). Since the second such meeting on 27 October 2021, the group also includes Tajikistan and Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021c). A third meeting took place on 31 March 2022 and inaugurated an additional mechanism for regular meetings of special envoys on Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022a). Statements from these meetings reflect the common security concerns of the neighbouring countries, as well as increasingly their economic interests and readiness for practical engagement: at the third, and so far last, of these regional meetings in Tunxi, the seven participating countries launched an initiative on supporting Afghanistan's economic reconstruction, which focuses, among other things, on humanitarian assistance, trade, and various infrastructure development projects aimed at enhanced transport connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022c).

In parallel, China has also been keen to facilitate engagement on Afghanistan at the global level, especially through the so-called “U.S.-China-Russia+ Consultative Mechanism on Afghanistan” which also includes Pakistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021d; 2022b). China has also engaged directly with the EU, Germany, and the UK (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022d), who, in turn have their own consultative mechanism of special representatives and special envoys involving the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, the UK, and the US (EEAS 2022).

While there is, thus, a degree of multilateral activity on the part of China, the overall approach of Beijing is likely to remain one of seeking to increase its bilateral influence in Central Asia through more economic engagement, closer relationships with ruling elites, and penetration of local media, alongside a selective security presence to protect its investments and shield itself from the risk of spill-over threats (Expert Communications 15, 16, 25, 31, 32). This, in turn, creates vulnerabilities for the states of Central Asia, especially given that popular anti-Chinese sentiment is growing across the region (Focus Group 2, Expert Communication 22) and, occasionally, China continues to question the sanctity of borders in Central Asia by making territorial claims to lands in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Expert Communication 25; also Pannier 2016).

## *The shortcomings of regional (self-) organisation*

The lack of leadership by neighbouring great powers—Russia and China—and the near-complete disengagement by the EU and US is further compounded by the inability of regional organisations and the states in the region to create and maintain a stable regional order. Given Russian decline and Chinese reluctance, the insufficiency of the CSTO and SCO to step into the fray is not surprising. Yet, despite acknowledging the declining role of Russia in particular, the five Central Asian participating States of the OSCE are only slowly overcoming their own inability to cooperate (for example, Interviews 1, 2, 5, 6-9, 12, 15-17, 22, 23, 25, 32).

While “Central Asian countries have historically maintained a consensus-based stance towards countries in the region, including Afghanistan, with insignificant differences” (Expert Communication 1; similarly, Expert Communication 6; Interviews 5, 6, 17, 18, 23), at present, this consensus is only partial in that “in addition to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, also Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are oriented to promote dialogue with Taliban, to work together to preserve regional security”. At the same time, however, “efforts by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to improve Tajikistan's relations with Taliban” appear to have been underway for some time (Expert Communication 1).

Most progress has been made in the area of economic cooperation, particularly since 2016, when Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded Islam Karimov as Uzbekistan's leader and gradually ended the isolation of a country that borders all of the other Central Asian countries and Afghanistan (Expert Communication 22). This led to the gradual restoration and upgrading of the Soviet-era Central Asia Power System, including the construction of hydro-power plants in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Кабап 2022; Радио Озоди 2019), externally supported efforts to create a viable regional energy market including Afghanistan (Asian Development Bank 2018; USAID 2022), and a significant increase in regional trade (Abaturon 2022). In parallel, discussions have also progressed on the TAPI pipeline project.

Politically and militarily, progress in enhancing cooperation has been slower, but there is a growing sense among regional leaders of the need for a Central Asian voice. Joint military exercises have been conducted in the context of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation 2021c), as well as among the Central Asian countries themselves (КАЗИНФОРМ 2021). This, and increasing political cooperation and coordination, is driven by both the perception of risks related to the situation in Afghanistan and the realisation of a weakening role of Russia since the start of the war in Ukraine (Expert Communication 22; also Alimova 2022; RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service and RFE/RL Kazakh Service 2022).

The war in Ukraine and the situation in Afghanistan, however, have also become a driving force behind increasing regional cooperation in a different sense. Western sanctions have disrupted traditional trade routes from China across Central Asia and through Russia to Europe, necessitating alternative connections and finally leading to the realisation of the China—Kyrgyzstan—

Uzbekistan railway project. The need for alternative trade routes, in turn, has created opportunities for all Central Asian states to become better integrated into the global economy via the yet-to-be-completed trans-Afghan railway and the revitalisation of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor from Turkmenistan across the Caspian Sea to Baku and from there, across the Black Sea or over existing land connections through Turkey to Europe, thus connecting with Turkey's Middle Corridor project (Rahim 2017; Shahbazov 2017).

Regional cooperation will be critical here because of challenges that these alternatives face. Rather than 'reinventing' connectivity routes on a sub-regional basis, a modular extension of the existing green ports project of the OSCE would serve the purpose of enhancing connectivity and economic integration much better. This would particularly be the case if there was a concerted and coordinated effort to provide the necessary strategic investment for this extension of the green ports project, for example through the EU's Global Gateway or the Economic Resilience Initiative in Central Asia, recently launched by the US (Putz 2022c).

Even then, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor/Middle Corridor "remains a fragile construct where geography constitutes a major obstacle" requiring multi-modal transport along sea and land lines, crossing multiple international borders, and transiting through unstable, and at times unpredictable, geopolitical environments (Expert Communications 17, 28, 28). In Central Asia, these risks are illustrated, for example, by the recent episodes of unrest in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region (RFE/RL Tajik Service 2022a; RFE/RL 2022a) and Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan region (RFE/RL 2022; Solod 2022). As with the unrest in Kazakhstan in January 2022, these issues indicate the continuing fragility of the region and the multiple domestic challenges that individual countries face, limiting their capacity to engage regionally (Expert Communications 14, 20, 22, 25, 28, 29, 35; Interviews 38, 51, 52, 54, 55, 59-61).

Additional complicating factors are the disputed borders in the highly volatile Ferghana valley with its numerous ethnic exclaves and disputes over scarce water resources (Interview 15; also Pannier 2021b; RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service 2021), as illustrated by the ongoing "little war" (Interview 16) in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict (RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service and RFE/RL Tajik Service 2022). Here, according to one of our interlocutors, "a combustible mix" of problems has existed for a long time (Interview 31; de Haas 2017; Digol 2012).

While not causally related to the crisis in Afghanistan, the Tajik-Kyrgyz border disputes continue to have a negative impact on regional cooperation across Central Asia (Expert Communication 9) and indicate, "in the eyes of Taliban and in the eyes of Central Asians living in Afghanistan, ... that there is no unity between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and that's a problem" (Interview 5; also Interviews 1, 16). Moreover, inter-ethnic violence in the Ferghana valley is often linked to turf wars between rival gangs of drug traffickers (Interviews 8, 35).

Regional cooperation among the Central Asian participating States of the OSCE is also, to an extent, influenced by the growing interest of the secondary powers in the region. Turkey,

Iran, Pakistan, India, and the Gulf countries have, until recently, not been very significant partners for Central Asia. However, this has changed in the wake of the Taliban takeover in August 2021 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The role of these secondary players also needs to be seen in the context of their existing relationships not only with Afghanistan but also with each other and the traditional great powers (Russia, China, and the combined West). For example, Turkey is a member of NATO and dialogue partner of the SCO; Iran, Pakistan, and India are members of the SCO; and although the Gulf countries remained unaligned, several of them have now become SCO dialogue partners at the 2022 Samarkand summit of the organisation.

The increased relevance of these countries is a result of the opportunity that the regime change in Afghanistan has created for connecting Central Asia to South Asia and beyond. As noted earlier, connectivity through Afghanistan is high on the agenda of Central Asian countries, China, Iran, Pakistan, and India because of the potential for trade in goods and energy across this part of Asia. Further, the integration with the global economy that transit through a stable Afghanistan can facilitate through Iranian, Pakistani, and Indian ports on the shorelines of the Arabian Sea is seen as the increasingly attractive option of the Middle Corridor (Expert Communications 13, 15-17, 22; Interviews 45, 52).

Consequently, the incentives for regional cooperation and coordination among the Central Asian participating States of the OSCE are significant. In August 2021, the participation of Turkmenistan, for the first time, in the third consultative meeting of the heads of state of Central Asia and the agreement then to draft an *Agreement on Friendship, Neighbourliness, and Cooperation for Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century* appeared to signal greater pragmatism among the region's governments (Buraneli 2021). Yet the limits of regional cooperation became, yet again, apparent by the failure of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan to sign up to the agreement one year later at the leaders' fourth meeting in July 2022 (Expert Communications 22, 28, 34, 37, 39; also News Central Asia 2022; RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service 2022).

# Conclusions and policy recommendations 3

## The evolving role of the OSCE

“The biggest risk right now with regards to any OSCE action on Afghanistan is that Afghanistan has been completely out of the spotlight since February. This is a general phenomenon. It’s not only Afghanistan. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this has been the number one topic at OSCE.” This statement from one of our interlocutors (Interview 58) neatly sums up the fundamental shift within the organisation that occurred as a result of the war in Ukraine. As expressed by others, too, the fallout from Russia’s war has also meant that human and financial capacity to deal with the crisis in Afghanistan within the OSCE and its structures and institutions, as well as among participating States—both in the delegations and in national capitals—has severely diminished (Interviews 38, 39, 41, 43, 50-52, 58, 61).

While Afghanistan has remained on the agenda of the Secretary General even since the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Interviews 28, 29, 41, 43, 50), it remains, at best, on the radar screen of many other staff within the OSCE’s structures, institutions, and field missions (Interviews 38, 41, 43, 50, 51, 54, 55, 58, 61, 62). The same applies to participating States’ delegations in Vienna (Interviews 38, 39, 43, 49).

This is a significant shift from the situation before 24 February 2022, when there was a significantly greater focus on Afghanistan within the OSCE and among its participating States. This included an Afghanistan taskforce in the Secretariat and a repository fund to sponsor project activities to mitigate spill-over risks from Afghanistan, both of which still operate, albeit at diminished capacity (Interviews 2, 9, 38, 43). Yet, even before the start of the war in Ukraine, the organisation’s capacity for responding to the crisis during the first six months after the Taliban takeover was constrained by the Organisation’s own rules and procedures, by its limited unified budget and unpredictable additional extra-budgetary commitments, and by stretched human resources (Interviews 3, 7, 8, 12, 15, 24, 26).

Since August 2021, there has been no official engagement with Kabul on the part of the OSCE. The Taliban have not appointed a new representative to Vienna and the current one, while remaining accredited, does not act as an interlocutor between Kabul and Vienna. This means that Afghanistan at present is de-facto no longer one of the OSCE’s Asian partners for cooperation. The annual OSCE Asian conference, which should have been co-organised, and potentially even been hosted, by Afghanistan, was similarly dominated by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine (Interview 50; OSCE 2022c).

In a sign of at least some remaining attention to the continuing implications of the crisis in Afghanistan, the Secretary General, on the eve of a special OSCE Asian Partners meeting on Afghanistan on 3 June 2022, released an update of her November 2021 thematic report on Afghanistan to the Permanent Council (Interviews 38, 51). At the meeting itself, participants were presented with the Framework for Response to the Implications of Afghanistan for the OSCE Region (Interview 38; OSCE 2022a). The Secretary General also visited Tajikistan in June 2022. In bilateral meetings with senior Tajik officials, including President Rahmon, Foreign Minister Muhridin, the Commander of the Tajik border troops, and the deputy speaker of the Tajik Parliament, she noted that the OSCE is enhancing its “support to Tajikistan to help mitigate the range of challenges stemming from instability in Afghanistan [by] working together on border management, for example, including by providing training at the OSCE Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe” (OSCE 2022b).

Looking ahead to 2023, Bujar Osmani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia and incoming CiO, noted his country’s support for “further OSCE engagement in the region to mitigate risks and address challenges related to the crisis in Afghanistan, particularly in neighbouring participating States” (OSCE 2022c).

In terms of engagement on the ground, the focus has remained heavily on the issue of border security and border management, with large projects, funded among others by the EU, US, and Japan in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In contrast to the period before the Taliban takeover, there is no longer any official Afghan participation in any of these projects (Interviews 38, 41, 43, 51, 54, 55, 61).

To the extent that Central Asian participating States have articulated expectations of their own, they have remained in line with previous OSCE activities—this has not changed either in response to the Taliban takeover in August 2021 (Interviews 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 24, 26, 28) or in relation to the war in Ukraine since February 2022 (Interviews 38, 41, 43, 49-51, 54, 51, 55, 61).

For the time being, therefore, the OSCE continues to play a role, primarily through bilateral programmes supporting individual participating States in managing Afghanistan-related risks to security and stability, including preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism and countering terrorist financing (Interviews 3, 7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 26). In the assessment of our interlocutors, such projects provide a basis for further engagement with the Central Asian participating States, but do not reflect the full potential that the OSCE has (Interviews 2, 7, 12, 26).



## The parameters of OSCE engagement

The OSCE has had a marginal role in the global response to the crisis in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. However, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has become all but negligible, despite the fact that some of the organisation's activities in Central Asia include Afghanistan in some form.

On the one hand, this is surprising because the OSCE, the EU, NATO, the SCO, and the CSTO as well as their various participating and member states share similar concerns regarding spill-over risks from Afghanistan. On the other hand, given that the OSCE's pre-existing limitations to engage on Afghanistan were further exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, the inability of the OSCE to be proactive on managing the crisis or to assume a coordinating role among regional and international organisations is hardly astonishing. Yet, the fact that the organisation plays virtually no role in any of the existing multilateral formats speaks volumes to the utility that the OSCE has in the eyes of any potential partners in relation to Afghanistan (Expert Communications 7, 9; Interviews 5, 7, 22, 28). However, as noted by one of our interlocutors regarding OSCE-SCO cooperation, "there is a consultation process, and there is coordination, but it is very often at the level of tokenism. You can tick the box because you have invited someone and someone came and did a presentation, but that is all it amounts to" (Interview 24).

Partly, this is also the result of a deliberate choice. According to one of our interlocutors, the 2022 Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC) took place without participation of any other regional or international organisation because "Poland, as CiO, decided to have the ASRC in a very closed format" (Interview 50). But this is merely a symptom of much deeper problems that have beset the organisation for some time.

Thus, we can identify six sets of constraints that delimit the parameters of OSCE engagement.

1. The inability of key players among the participating States to overcome their entrenched differences and enable the OSCE to make full use of its potential. While there is clearly a shared interest in stability in Central Asia (and by extension, in Afghanistan), the OSCE has been experiencing a quasi-existential crisis for several years now, culminating in the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
2. The resulting dysfunctionality of the OSCE as a cooperative security organisation is further exacerbated by the drain on human and financial resources: the OSCE has no proper budget for 2022 as yet, and participating States which may have previously supported extra-budgetary measures more generously are now struggling to make ends meet between support for Ukraine and a growing economic, energy, and cost-of-living crisis.
3. While participating States may generally agree on the need to prevent a destabilisation of the OSCE region, and particularly of Central Asia, from Afghanistan, there has

never been a consensus on how to achieve this. Despite a steadily improving, more permissive UN (and EU) environment, this has so far prevented direct engagement with the new rulers in Kabul, who in turn lack capacity and expertise to engage much beyond their immediate neighbourhood.

4. Another long-standing feature of the OSCE's structural-institutional crisis, and one that has particular relevance in the context of Central Asia, is the difficulty in balancing the different dimensions of the OSCE's comprehensive security mandate. When it comes to mitigating the spill-over risks from Afghanistan, the key challenges concern how not to increase the capacity of security apparatuses that might subsequently be turned against independent media, civil society, or political opposition. This is not only a question of the OSCE's already weakened norm of consensus but also one of potentially counter-productive mitigation strategies as more repression and political exclusion will inevitably feed into further radicalisation and polarisation in Central Asian societies that will, in turn, exacerbate spill-over risks.
5. This then further constrains OSCE agency in Central Asia. Pushing a comprehensive security agenda and a larger OSCE engagement in managing the security challenges perceived to emanate from Afghanistan and exacerbated by decreasing Russian clout and capacity, might be seen as potentially threatening by incumbent governments to their long-time survival. This would be especially so in light of alternatives, such as greater reliance on SCO support, on an increasing Chinese security presence, or on unconditional engagement with the Taliban.
6. The multi-vector foreign policy of the OSCE's Central Asian participating States, in turn, adds an additional set of constraints in that OSCE agency then becomes dependent on the willingness and ability of the OSCE's actual and potential partners to give the organisation the space and time to engage on and with Afghanistan. Despite generally shared interests, there is little indication that other relevant organisations like the SCO and the CSTO, as well as potentially CICA, and third-party states like China, Iran, Pakistan, and India, take the OSCE serious in this regard. Nor does the OSCE have the capacity to devise an approach on how engagement with any of these potential partners could be structured.

## Options for future OSCE engagement

The parameters for OSCE engagement on the crisis in Afghanistan are highly constraining. However, this does not mean that there are no opportunities for the organisation to take action within its broad mandate for cooperative and comprehensive security, as it applies to the Central Asian participating States.

Therefore, we finally identify options for future engagement within the OSCE's institutions and among its participating States; with, and in, Central Asia; with potential regional partners; as

well as with Afghanistan. These policy recommendations are based on suggestions we received from our interlocutors and our own analysis. There is some inevitable overlap among our recommendations as several of them cut across the distinctions we make between the different sets of options. Additionally, they should not be seen as a list of ordered priorities or preferences, although it will become clear from the following that some recommendations will need to be implemented before others.

Critically, from our perspective, the OSCE needs to understand and embrace its significance for its Central Asian participating States where it remains “the current reference point for possibilities to engage on a multilateral level and not only as Central Asian states but in cooperation with other countries as well—something that is attractive and strategically important to these participating States” (Interview 51). This is not only relevant in relation to the crisis in Afghanistan but also as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, both of which have put Central Asia in the spotlight of geopolitical rivalries again. These developments over the past twelve months may have slightly increased the situational autonomy of the Central Asian participating States, while also highlighting the precarity of their fragile political, economic, and social orders.

### *Options for engagement within institutions and among participating States*

1. Maintain a strategic narrative for the OSCE as a whole that defines the added value of the role that the organisation plays in contributing to managing the situation in Afghanistan and then turn this narrative into clear political guidance for the Secretary General and other relevant structures and institutions of the OSCE for a meaningful course of action. The narrative should focus on:
  - The value that the OSCE has for its Central Asian participating States in managing the crisis in Afghanistan.
  - The mobilisation of resources, including additional contracted or seconded personnel, for field operations in Central Asia.
  - Enhance existing analytical capabilities to increase situational awareness and early warning capacity regarding terrorism, drug trafficking, and displacement, while systematically factoring in issues linked to organised crime and corruption, including trafficking in small arms and light weapons.
2. Work with the incoming CiO to ensure that Afghanistan-related issues remain on the agenda in relevant OSCE fora. The Chair should serve in a coordinating role to enable discussions among key participating States that provide the Secretary General with credible political clout in her management of the OSCE’s approach to the crisis in Afghanistan.
3. Conduct a strategic review of OSCE engagement in and on Central Asia, involving Central Asian participating States, field operations, OSCE structures and institutions, and key participating States. This should include:
  - A regional and country-specific needs assessment conducted in relation to the impact of the situation in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine on all three dimensions of security as defined by the OSCE’s comprehensive security agenda, including the geopolitical and geo-economic position of Central Asia as a key OSCE region. On this basis, programming priorities and budgetary needs should be identified, as well as opportunities for regional cooperation and coordination (within the confines of the field operations’ mandates).
  - Further consideration of strengthening the second dimension in the mandates of field operations in Central Asia and supporting projects in this regard, including through extra-budgetary contributions. This would also reaffirm the OSCE’s overall commitment to Central Asia and the organisation’s sincerity in responding to the stated needs and interests of its Central Asian participating States.
  - A reconsideration of the renewal model of existing field operations in Central Asia, in particular the possibility of establishing open-ended mandates similar to the one that exists for the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat. This would not eliminate the need for host-government consent but would remove the uncertainty stemming from the currently annual mandate renewal cycle that requires the application of the organisation-wide consent principle. Rather, the guiding principle should be that field missions should not be discontinued without host-state consent.
  - Smaller-scale projects could also focus on the consolidation of existing expertise on Afghanistan, such as the creation of a research centre at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, which would recognise the importance of the issue for the region, for Central Asia, and for the OSCE as a whole when it comes to Afghanistan. Such an initiative could also benefit from existing networks of past and current students from Afghanistan at the Academy, as well as past and present Kyrgyz engagement on Afghanistan through the UN.

### *Options for engagement with the Central Asian participating States*

1. Contribute to the gradually increasing intra-Central Asian dialogue between the governments of the participating States in the region. This could include providing the good offices and expertise of the Secretary General and CiO, special representatives or personal envoys, and facilitating bilateral and multilateral engagements on uncontroversial issues of regional relevance, identified by the governments themselves. Given that economic interests have emerged as key drivers of engagement with Afghanistan, particular attention should be paid to assisting Central Asian participating States with the OSCE’s existing expertise in the second dimension, especially when it comes to:
  - The growing importance of the connectivity agenda in relation to alternative trade routes from China to Europe, such as the OSCE’s green ports initiative, which could be extended further east into Central Asia and further

west across the Black Sea and through Turkey into the Western Balkans and beyond. In this context, the OSCE also has significant knowledge and understanding of global standards and practices of customs regulations to facilitate connectivity. Further cooperation with the EU and multilateral donors, like the World Bank or EBRD, would add the necessary financial muscle for the effective delivery of relevant projects and provide welcome alternatives to Chinese financing in Central Asia.

- The ongoing efforts for the creation of a regionally better integrated energy market, including Afghanistan.
  - The development of trans-Afghan road and rail connections that could enable improved regional integration into the global economy, including by connecting to the existing green ports route.
  - The significance of the climate change agenda and the management of climate-related impacts on Central Asia, including Afghanistan, such as the cooperative management of regional water resources.
2. Maintain support for border security and management as a critical area of response to the crisis in Afghanistan for the country's immediate neighbours in Central Asia, as well as for OSCE participating States with secondary borders (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey) and those along routes of trafficking. This could include programmes and projects that:
    - Increase the physical security of borders.
    - Enhance the effectiveness of border-crossing procedures, including the documentation and processing of people crossing borders.
    - Raise situational awareness of developments near and across borders.
    - Establish and strengthen mechanisms of cross-border communication and dialogue to boost transparency and build confidence across borders. This could also include efforts to connect local communities on both sides of relevant borders to discuss issues of immediate relevance, such as access to water, pollution, or flood management, as well as border demarcation. Such efforts could also include incident prevention mechanisms like those that have been in place in Georgia for more than a decade.
  3. Maintain support for programmes and projects that contribute to the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation that leads to terrorism (VERLT). Further efforts could be made in relation to:
    - Strengthening local capabilities to monitor cyber activities and develop capacity to prevent online radicalisation, especially of children and young people.
    - Ensuring that efforts aimed at preventing VERLT do not unduly infringe fundamental civil and political liberties, including the freedom of expression. In this context, programmes and projects following up on the Conclusions of the Second Expert Meeting of the Central Asia Judicial Dialogue in 2020 could be considered.
  4. Maintain a balance between the three dimensions of the comprehensive security concept and continue efforts

to strengthen the human dimension in all programming activities in Central Asia, including any responses to the crisis in Afghanistan. This could involve activities aimed at:

- Securing fundamental civil and political liberties, including freedom of religion and media and equal rights for women.
- Protecting the rights of national minorities in Central Asian participating States and increasing their awareness, among others, of the Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations to inform their own approaches on addressing challenges related to kin-minorities in Afghanistan.
- Continuing and increasing training programmes for government officials and professionals in, for example, security services and prison administrations on human rights issues. This could, for example, also include joint programmes and projects with local human rights organisations on issues like community policing.

### *Options for engagement with (potential) regional partners*

1. Proactively seek out opportunities to develop further cooperation with partner organisations and third states. This will require:
  - Developing a 'big-picture' understanding of the dynamics and implications of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine within the OSCE (e.g., connectivity implications for the South Caucasus and Turkey) and beyond, including how they affect partner organisations (e.g., EU, SCO) and third states (e.g., China, India, Iran, Pakistan). This should be done in order to understand their respective agendas and to identify synergies and areas of potential disagreement and conflict.
  - Exploring different formats of engagement, from exchanges of information, to sharing of best practices, and cross-participation in events, with the aim of avoiding duplication or competition in efforts and potentially making the most of complimentary capacities and pooling resources.
5. Once more, consider the development of a more strategic approach to relations with China, in light of China's role in and on Afghanistan, and the ongoing recalibration of Chinese investments in connectivity as a result of the war in Ukraine. This could take different forms, including:
  - Bilateral engagement with China at the level of the Secretary General, CiO, and/or the parliamentary assembly.
  - Engagement in the context of existing, currently under-explored, formats such as inter-organisational dialogue between OSCE and SCO or OSCE and CICA. Such contacts can but need not be high-level but can also occur productively at the operational level, for example between SCO-RATS and the different OSCE executive structures which implement counter-terrorism activities through their mandates, including the Secretariat, ODIHR, RFoM, and various OSCE field operations.

- Engagement through Track-2 initiatives either directly by organising workshops with Chinese academics and analysts or indirectly through cooperation between organisations like the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, the CICA Institute (formerly the CICA Think Tank Forum), the OSCE Academy, ADB's CAREC institute, and the SCO University.
- Closer cooperation with China on border security and management, for example, by considering how China, given its increasing security presence and long joint borders with participating States (as well as a shorter one with Afghanistan), could be involved in training activities at the OSCE Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe.

including at a regional level, who can act as potential service providers; cooperation and coordination with IOM and UNHCR to facilitate alternatives to the deportation of Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan; and integrating any humanitarian response with border management activities in order to enable vulnerable populations to seek safety and have their rights protected.

### *Options for engagement with Afghanistan*

Apart from election support, the OSCE has never fully operated in Afghanistan, even before the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Yet, until then, one particularly valuable aspect of the various programmes and projects run, especially by the field operations in Central Asia, has been the inclusion of Afghan participants. Regardless of the exact nature of the OSCE's future relationship with Afghanistan, it would be worthwhile exploring ways in which such efforts could be reinvigorated. This could include:

- The continued provision and facilitation of scholarships and visas to Afghan students to enrol in degree programmes in Central Asian Higher Education Institutions, including, the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.
- Providing training and exchange opportunities for Afghan citizens (at least initially in a purely private capacity) in the context of programmes and projects in the OSCE's second dimension. This could also include consideration of future opportunities for Central Asian participating States to enhance regional economic connectivity and could also involve citizens of further third states, such as China, India, Iran, and Pakistan.
- Contemplating a role for the Afghan diaspora, including more recently displaced persons, in such efforts with the aim of identifying and building relationships with suitable partners in Afghanistan and giving a meaningful perspective to regionally displaced professionals and thus avoiding a damaging permanent skills and brain drain from Afghanistan.
- Finding ways to continue to contribute to the international humanitarian relief effort for Afghanistan. While the OSCE is not a humanitarian organisation, humanitarian crises have clear security and stability implications that are core to the OSCE's mandate. Hence, efforts in this regard could include: preparatory fund-raising and the setting up of necessary logistics to provide support at or near the border, including acquisition of necessary resources for humanitarian relief (medicines, food, shelter, fuel, etc.) and transport capacity; further coordination with key partners, especially UNHCR, but also local governmental and non-governmental actors,



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# Appendix

## A note on methodology

We used standard ethnographic methods, based on desk research drawing on academic literature, OSCE, UN and government sources, and international and local online media; semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted online in October and November 2021 and in June, July, and August 2022 (unless otherwise stated, see Tables 1 and 2) in English or local languages, as appropriate, with officials from the OSCE and from participating States, academic experts, analysts, journalists, and representatives from civil society and non-governmental organisations; and specifically commissioned Expert Communications from regional and subject matter experts on particular questions (see Table 3).

Across the two rounds of interviews, we took the opportunity to speak with 20 of our interlocutors twice to get their perspectives of change over this period of time, but also interviewed an additional five new experts during the summer of 2022. Each of these interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour.

In the course of 2022, we commissioned a larger number of Expert Communications, as we found this form of data gathering particularly useful in our initial analysis in the autumn of 2021. We asked 18 individuals during the spring and summer of 2022 to provide such analyses on specific questions, in some cases, in contrast to the initial exercise in the autumn of 2021, commissioning two or three expert papers of between 1,000 and 1,500 words each. Only five experts provided inputs in 2021 and we added ten additional experts in the 2022 round.

Interlocutors were predominantly based in Central Asia and OSCE participating States. They were identified through existing networks, based on initial desk research, and through recommendations from interlocutors (snowballing).

Interviews and focus groups were, for the most part, professionally transcribed, except in a few cases in which summaries were produced based on notes taken during the interview. All interview and focus group transcripts and Expert Communications were coded in NVivo 2020 by the lead author, Stefan Wolff, to facilitate systematic qualitative analysis and interpretation of the original data generated in the course of our research.

In order to maintain confidentiality, all sources were pseudo-anonymised by using an ID code instead of the participants' names. Participants are described in general, non-identifiable terms, in Tables 1-3 below, in order to contextualise the sources of information in the report without compromising their anonymity.

The authors all have a background in social sciences and extensive research experience on the OSCE, Central Asia, and the substantive issues covered in this report. As a research team, they are thus well equipped to collect original first-hand data, situate it in an existing body of knowledge, and analyse and interpret it in the context of the specific questions investigated, while effectively mitigating residual risks for the team and its interlocutors, in line with the full ethical approval granted for this research by the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee of the University of Birmingham (Ethical Review ERN\_21-1348A).

The paper was drafted by the lead author, Stefan Wolff, and reviewed by all three co-authors before submission. An initial draft was submitted to the German Federal Foreign Ministry and discussed during an online workshop. Additional comments were provided from colleagues at the Centre for OSCE Research at IFSH. The final draft incorporates all these comments to the fullest extent possible.

Table 1: Interviews

Code	Reference	Date	Place
Interview 1	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	21 October 2021	Online
Interview 2	OSCE Official, Executive Structures and Institutions	22 October 2021	Online
Interview 3	OSCE Official, Central Asia	22 October 2021	Online
Interview 4	NGO Analyst, Central Asia	21 October 2021	Online
Interview 5	Journalist, Prague	22 October 2021	Online
Interview 6	Academic Researcher, UK	25 October 2021	Online
Interview 7	OSCE Official, Central Asia	26 October 2021	Online
Interview 8	OSCE Official, Central Asia	26 October 2021	Online
Interview 9	Government Official, London	26 October 2021	Online
Interview 10	Academic Researcher, Germany	26 October 2021	Online
Interview 11	Academic Researcher, Australia	27 October 2021	Online
Interview 12	OSCE Official, Central Asia	27 October 2021	Online
Interview 13	Academic Researcher, US	22 October 2021	Online
Interview 14	Policy Analyst	25 October 2021	Online
Interview 15	OSCE Official, Executive Structures and Institutions	28 October 2021	Online
Interview 16	OSCE Official, Central Asia	29 October 2021	Online
Interview 17	Academic Researcher, Italy	29 October 2021	Online
Interview 18	Journalist, Washington, D.C.	25 October 2021	Online
Interview 19	NGO Analyst, Central Asia	29 October 2021	Bishkek
Interview 20	NGO Analyst, Central Asia	29 October 2021	Bishkek
Interview 21	Academic Researcher, UK	2 November 2021	Online
Interview 22	Academic Researcher, UK	3 November 2021	Online
Interview 23	Academic Researcher, US	3 November 2021	Online
Interview 24	EU Official, Vienna	3 November 2021	Online
Interview 25	Academic Researcher, US	3 November 2021	Online
Interview 26	OSCE Official, Executive Structures and Institutions	4 November 2021	Online
Interview 27	Academic Researcher, Germany	5 November 2021	Online
Interview 28	OSCE Official, Executive Structures and Institutions	5 November 2021	Online
Interview 29	Government Official, Kabul	6 November 2021	Online
Interview 30	Government Official, Vienna	8 November 2021	Online
Interview 31	Government Official, Vienna	8 November 2021	Online
Interview 32	Academic Researcher, US	8 November 2021	Online
Interview 33	OSCE Official, Executive Structures and Institutions	9 November 2021	Online
Interview 34	Former Afghan government official, Kabul	9 November 2021	Online
Interview 35	NGO Analyst, Vienna	10 November 2021	Online
Interview 36	Academic Researcher, Germany	22 November 2021	Online
Interview 37	Academic Researcher, US	24 November 2021	Online
Interview 38	OSCE Official, Vienna	24 June 2022	Online
Interview 39	UK Government Official, London	24 June 2022	Online
Interview 40	Academic Researcher, Germany	24 June 2022	Online
Interview 41	OSCE Official, Central Asia	27 June 2022	Online
Interview 42	Academic Researcher, Australia	29 June 2022	Online
Interview 43	EU Official, Vienna	29 June 2022	Online
Interview 44	Academic Researcher, UK	30 June 2022	Online
Interview 45	Academic Researcher, US	1 July 2022	Online
Interview 46	Former Afghan Government Official, Kabul	3 July 2022	Online

Interview 47	Former Afghan government official, Kabul	3 July 2022	Online
Interview 48	Former Afghan government official, Kabul	4 July 2022	Online
Interview 49	UK Government Official, Vienna	6 July 2022	Online
Interview 50	OSCE Official, Vienna	8 July 2022	Online
Interview 51	OSCE Official, Central Asia	8 July 2022	Online
Interview 52	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	8 July 2022	Online
Interview 53	Afghan Analyst, London	8 July 2022	Online
Interview 54	OSCE Official, Central Asia	12 July 2022	Online
Interview 55	OSCE Official, Central Asia	12 July 2022	Online
Interview 56	Academic Researcher, Prague	12 July 2022	Online
Interview 57	NGO Analyst, Vienna	20 July 2022	Online
Interview 58	OSCE Official, Warsaw	21 July 2022	Online
Interview 59	NGO Analyst, Central Asia	28 July 2022	Bishkek
Interview 60	Journalist, Central Asia	28 July 2022	Bishkek
Interview 61	OSCE Official, Vienna	11 August 2022	Online
Interview 62	OSCE Official, Vienna	23 August 2022	Online
Interview 38	OSCE Official, Vienna	24 June 2022	Online
Interview 39	UK Government Official, London	24 June 2022	Online
Interview 40	Academic Researcher, Germany	24 June 2022	Online
Interview 41	OSCE Official, Central Asia	27 June 2022	Online
Interview 42	Academic Researcher, Australia	29 June 2022	Online
Interview 43	EU Official, Vienna	29 June 2022	Online
Interview 44	Academic Researcher, UK	30 June 2022	Online
Interview 45	Academic Researcher, US	1 July 2022	Online
Interview 46	Former Afghan Government Official, Kabul	3 July 2022	Online
Interview 47	Former Afghan government official, Kabul	3 July 2022	Online
Interview 48	Former Afghan government official, Kabul	4 July 2022	Online
Interview 49	UK Government Official, Vienna	6 July 2022	Online
Interview 50	OSCE Official, Vienna	8 July 2022	Online
Interview 51	OSCE Official, Central Asia	8 July 2022	Online
Interview 52	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	8 July 2022	Online
Interview 53	Afghan Analyst, London	8 July 2022	Online
Interview 54	OSCE Official, Central Asia	12 July 2022	Online
Interview 55	OSCE Official, Central Asia	12 July 2022	Online
Interview 56	Academic Researcher, Prague	12 July 2022	Online
Interview 57	NGO Analyst, Vienna	20 July 2022	Online
Interview 58	OSCE Official, Warsaw	21 July 2022	Online
Interview 59	NGO Analyst, Central Asia	28 July 2022	Bishkek
Interview 60	Journalist, Central Asia	28 July 2022	Bishkek
Interview 61	OSCE Official, Vienna	11 August 2022	Online
Interview 62	OSCE Official, Vienna	23 August 2022	Online

Table 2: Focus groups

Focus Group 1	Russia-based academics and analysts	22 October 2021	Online
Focus Group 2	Academic and Think Tank-based Experts on the Politico-Military Dimension of the OSCE	5 November 2021	Online
Focus Group 3	Academic and Think Tank-based Experts on the Economic and Environmental Dimension of the OSCE	18 November 2021	Online

Table 3: Written expert communications

Expert Communication 1	NGO Analyst, Afghanistan	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 2	Academic Researcher, Afghanistan	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 3	Former Afghan Government Official, US	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 4	Afghan Author and Journalist, UK	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 5	Academic Researcher, Kyrgyzstan	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 6	Academic Researcher, Tajikistan	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 7	Academic Researcher, China	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 8	Academic Researcher, China	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 9	NGO Analyst, Russia	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 10	Academic Researcher, Italy	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 11	OSCE Official, Central Asia	Autumn 2021
Expert Communication 12	Academic Researcher, Afghanistan	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 13	Academic Researcher, Italy	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 14	Academic Researcher, Italy	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 15	Journalist, Czech Republic	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 16	Journalist, Czech Republic	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 17	Analyst, Georgia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 18	Afghan Analyst, US	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 19	Former Afghan Government Official, US	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 20	Afghan Academic Expert, Italy	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 21	NGO Analyst, Afghanistan	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 22	Journalist, Czech Republic	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 23	Former Afghan Government Official, Kabul	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 24	Journalist, US	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 25	Journalist, US	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 26	Analyst, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 27	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 28	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 29	Analyst, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 30	Analyst, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 31	Journalist, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 32	Academic Researcher, China	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 33	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 34	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 35	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 36	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 37	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 38	Academic Researcher, Central Asia	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 39	NGO Analyst, Afghanistan	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 40	Academic Researcher, China	Spring/Summer 2022
Expert Communication 41	Academic Researcher, China	Spring/Summer 2022



The OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions (<https://osce-network.net/>) is a Track II initiative. Its members are research institutions from across the OSCE area engaged in academic and policy research on OSCE-relevant issues. Network members exchange information, provide expertise, stimulate debate, and raise awareness of the OSCE, thereby contributing to comprehensive and cooperative security. The Network is based on a proposal made by OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier in July 2011. It was created by 16 research institutions on 18 June 2013 at Vienna Hofburg. Neither the Network nor its members represent the OSCE, and the views expressed by Network members are their personal opinions.