

# Central Asia: the Problem of Water Use in the Situation of the Construction of the Afghan Kush-Tepa Canal

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**Abstract.** The scarcity of water resources, the lack of equitable access of people to clean water and sanitation services, the insufficiency of technical and financial measures to create advanced systems for the use and conservation of water resources are global problems, but they cause the greatest damage to the states of the Global South, including Central Asia. Problems associated with water shortages in this region will worsen if the Kush-Tepa canal, which is being built in Afghanistan, is uncontrolled.

The states of the region are committed to negotiations with the Taliban government in order to agree on cooperation in the field of water use, they are ready to help in the construction of the canal, associated irrigation systems and help in their technical equipment.

The Afghan side, accepting verbally the initiatives of its Central Asian partners, insists on its right to use the canal at its own discretion and to the extent that meets its interests. At the same time, the Taliban authorities, not yet recognized by the international community, are trying not to aggravate relations with their neighbors with whom they carry out trade and economic cooperation. The Central Asian countries are making it clear that interaction with the Afghans can further develop if the parties take into account mutual interests. External actors behave differently. Russia offers its services in solving problems related to the operation of the Kush-Tepa Canal. The Americans are providing financial assistance to speed up the construction of the canal.

**Keywords:** Kush-Tepa Canal, water scarcity, Taliban government, national selfishness, joint statement, UN Conference

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## Introduction

The problem of water scarcity in Central Asia has recently acquired special importance, as evidenced by numerous publications by the authors [1, 2, 4, 5], including in the journal «Russia and the World: Scientific Dialogue»[3].

The appeal to this topic is also explained by the significance of today's difficult relations between Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia. The security of this region, the positive ties between the States located here, and their sustainable development are of undoubted importance to the entire world community. This is precisely why the world powers – Russia, China, India, and the members of the European Union – are involved in Central Asian and Afghan affairs. At the same time, Washington and Brussels are openly aimed at ousting Russia and China and taking control of the region. In this context, the task of achieving Russia's competitiveness, which depends both on its internal potential and effective interaction with friendly partners - China, India, Iran and others, as well as the Central Asian states themselves, is becoming increasingly important.

## Materials and methods of research

The source and empirical base of the study were materials of international negotiations and decisions on the Kush-Tepa canal; statistical materials from Central Asian countries, media materials. The methods of document analysis, case study, and content analysis of media materials were used.

## Research results

### The problem of water use in Central Asia

In order to correctly understand the extent of possible damage from the uncontrolled operation of the Kush-Tepa canal under construction in Afghanistan, we consider it advisable to focus on the situation with water use in Central Asia. The shortage of water here is associated with the expenditure of most of it on irrigation of two abundantly water-absorbing crops – cotton and rice; excessive increase in air temperature, occurring faster than the average on the planet, which leads to a reduction in the area and volume of glaciers; a rapid increase in the population (at the end of the 80s of the last century, 49 million people lived in Central Asia, now more than 75 million, by 2050 it is projected to overcome the bar of 100 million); deterioration of irrigation infrastructure, the average age of which exceeds 50 years, which

causes significant losses of water resources (up to 25%)<sup>1</sup>. The complexity of the situation is also explained by the lack of established interaction between the countries of the region, showing national selfishness, striving to achieve maximum benefits for themselves. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which own the sources of the main rivers of the region – the Amu Darya and Syr Darya («upper countries»), are interested in developing their own hydropower, necessary for domestic consumption. For Tajikistan, hydropower is also an export commodity. The «lower countries», located, respectively, in the lower reaches of the rivers, need maximum amounts of water for growing cotton and rice. The clash of interests of the States of the region has sometimes had serious consequences. More than 230 armed border incidents, including over access to water, have occurred on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border over the course of 12 years. The peace agreement was signed on September 20, 2022. Nevertheless, tensions remain in bilateral relations. However, efforts have recently been made by Central Asian partners to reach mutually acceptable and equal agreements. An important step in this context was the adoption by the Central Asian states at the UN Conference on Water Resources (March 22-24, 2023) of a Joint Statement. In particular, it notes that water resources play a key role in ensuring the sustainable development of Central Asia, and transboundary water cooperation is an important component of the stability and prosperity of the region. This statement indicates the commitment of the Central Asian states to mutual understanding and comprehensive mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of water use and expresses their willingness to work together to implement the commitments made within the framework of the UN conference at all levels<sup>2</sup>. It is noteworthy that the co-chairs of the conference were King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands and President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon<sup>3</sup>.

Later, at the summit held on September 14, 2023 in Dushanbe (the official name is the Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States), the positions on water problems of the Central Asian countries looked less optimistic and confident. President of Kyrgyzstan S. N. Zhaparov said that water shortage is becoming widespread and requires a change in attitude to water use. The Kyrgyz leader proposed to return to the format of cooperation that existed under the USSR, which provided for the exchange of water for energy, and create a regional center for the introduction of energy-efficient and resource-saving technologies.

The President of Uzbekistan, Sh.M.Merziyoyev, was more categorical in his assessments. According to him, the problem of water scarcity in the region has become «irreversible». Due to the lack of sufficient water reserves and inefficient use of them, the states of the region lose \$2 billion annually, and in the foreseeable future, economic damage may reach 11% of the regional gross product.

<sup>1</sup> Kamorzin I. Squeezed out drop by drop: what will the water shortage in Central Asia lead to. Available from: <https://iz.ru/1537493/igor-karmazin/vydavliaiut-po-kaple-k-chemu-privedet-defitsit-vody-v-tsentralnoi-azii>.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Statement of the Central Asian States at the UN Water Resources Conference 2023. Available from: <https://sreda.uz/rubriki/voda/sovместное-заявление-государств-центральной-азии-на-конференции-о-водных-ресурсах-2023-года/>.

<sup>3</sup> A conference on water resources has opened at the UN headquarters. Available from: <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2023/03/23/v-shtab-kvartire-on-otkrylas-konferentsiya-po-vodnym-resursam>.

The President of Kazakhstan K.J.Tokayev stressed that the interaction of the Central Asian countries should be based on the equal use of water resources and taking into account the interests of the parties. He expressed agreement with his Kyrgyz counterpart on the joint management of transboundary river resources.

President of Tajikistan E. Rahmon noted the importance of developing national, regional and international programs for the conservation of water reserves in the region, the implementation of projects of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, which is dying due to the lack of sufficient inflow of waters of regional rivers.

The Central Asian leaders agreed on the need to prepare, with the participation of international consultants, plans for the development of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya basins, taking into account the emergence of a new Afghan factor – the construction of the Kush-Tepa canal in Afghanistan.

The Uzbek president proposed to his colleagues to form a joint working group to study the influence of the canal on the fullness of the Amu Darya and the inclusion of Afghanistan in the regional dialogue on the joint use of hydro resources. However, the Afghan side has not shown willingness to participate in the negotiation process of this format<sup>4</sup>.

### The Kush-Tepa project: main characteristics and interests

The feasibility study of the Kush-Tepa project was prepared back in 2021 by international experts for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the pro-American government of A. Ghani. Implementation began shortly after the Taliban came to power, and in May 2023, the construction of the first section of the 108 km long canal was completed. It is planned to put the 285 km long canal into operation in 2028. The width of the structure is 100 meters, the depth is 8 meters<sup>5</sup>. 6.5 thousand workers and technical personnel are involved in the construction. In the future, a quarter of a million people will be provided with jobs<sup>6</sup>.

The channel's capacity will be 650 cubic meters per second, which will allow irrigation of land in three northern Afghan provinces – Balkh, Jowzjan and Faryab<sup>7</sup>. The Taliban<sup>8</sup> have repeatedly stated the special importance of the canal and intend to start operating it as soon as possible, despite the obvious concern of the Central Asian

<sup>4</sup> Water scarcity is becoming a major problem in Central Asian countries. Available from: <https://news.rambler.ru/politics/51527556-nehvatka-vody-stanovitsya-glavnoy-problemy-stranah-tsentralnoy-azii/>.

<sup>5</sup> The Koshtepa Canal has just begun to be built, and is it already being destroyed? Available from: <https://asiaplus.tj.info/ru/news/centralasia/20231218/kanal-kosh-tepa-tolko-nachali-stroit-a-on-uzhe-razrushaetsya>.

<sup>6</sup> Karmazin I. Frenzied drying: the Taliban are finishing off the main river of Central Asia. Available from: <https://iz.ru/1489813/igor-karmazin/beshenaia-sushka-taliby-dobivaiut-glavnuiu-reku-tsentralnoi-azii>.

<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan is building a huge canal to draw water from the Amu Darya River. This may affect the water availability situation in Central Asia. Available from: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/02/20/afghanistan-stroit-ogromnyy-kanal-dlya-zabora-vody-iz-reki-amudarya-eto-mozhet-povliyat-na-situatsiyu-s-dostupnostyu-vody-v-tsentralnoy-azii/>.

<sup>8</sup> \* Recognized as a terrorist organization and banned in the Russian Federation.

neighbors. The Taliban authorities expect that the canal with its irrigation facilities will provide a significant shift in the development of agriculture, including the production of imported grain crops, which Afghanistan urgently needs. Domestic political goals are being pursued at the same time. The emergence of new vast irrigated areas in the north of the country will improve the economic situation of the oppositional local Tajik-Uzbek population, move Pashtuns from arid areas there, as well as those arriving from Pakistan in connection with Islamabad's decision to gradually deport illegal Afghan refugees<sup>9</sup>. The importance of this task in the calculations of the Taliban is also explained by their desire to block the replenishment of the Afghan National Resistance Front, which continues the armed struggle.

The cost of the project is 684 million dollars. The Taliban Government has stated that it has its own funds, which seems unlikely. According to some reliable sources, the United States provides financial assistance through Qatar. The Americans are certainly interested in introducing into the development of a very complex problem in the region, affecting the Central Asian states. Anyway, in 2021, USAID<sup>10\*</sup> implemented the Smart Waters program, which provides for the installation of meters on all the main rivers of Central Asia to collect information via satellite about the water level in key arteries of the region<sup>11</sup>.

On January 12, 2023, the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives held hearings with the participation of U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan T.West, as well as a representative of USAID<sup>12</sup>. The topic of the construction of the Kush-Tepa canal was also touched upon. T.West's statement about Washington's lack of intentions to compete with Moscow and Beijing in Afghanistan, in our opinion, does not correspond to reality<sup>13</sup>.

Contacts are being made with the Taliban at various levels and in different formats. In particular, on July 30-31, 2023, the Taliban-American talks were held in Doha, which were declared official by the Taliban government. The Afghan side expressed satisfaction with the results of the dialogue, during which confidence- and security-building measures, the lifting of sanctions and the unfreezing of assets of the Afghan Central Bank, and the provision of humanitarian and other assistance to Kabul were discussed<sup>14</sup>. According to information received from Afghan diplomats from some representatives of the Afghan diaspora in Moscow, the topic of financing the Kush Tepa project was raised in the discussions. Summing up the talks, the Americans advised the Taliban representatives to

<sup>9</sup> Bekniyazov R. Pakistan expels Afghan migrants: security measures or leverage on Kabul? Available from: <https://tass.ru/opinions/19170103>.

<sup>10</sup> \* The organization's activities are prohibited in the Russian Federation.

<sup>11</sup> Krusenstern. USAID\*. Whoever controls the water controls Central Asia. Available from: <https://dzen.ru/a/YDDYGL1ynHHRiW9h>.

\* The organization's activities are prohibited in the Russian Federation.

<sup>12</sup> \* The organization's activities are prohibited in the Russian Federation.

<sup>13</sup> The United States does not consider it necessary to compete with Russia and China in Afghanistan. Available from: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/19712319>.

<sup>14</sup> Putz K. A very quiet meeting in Doha: US officials meet with representatives of the Taliban\*. Available from: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/a-very-quiet-meeting-in-doha-us-officials-meet-with-taliban-representatives/>.

\* Recognized as a terrorist organization and banned in the Russian Federation.

exercise caution while promoting cooperation with Russia, which is «engaged» in a special military operation in Ukraine.

Meetings of special envoys and representatives for Afghanistan of the Central Asian states and the European Union are regularly held. The last one took place on May 25-26, 2023 in Ashgabat without the participation of Russia and China, the main regional powers, even as observers. The position of the European Union has undoubtedly been agreed with the United States. Most of the adopted joint statement relates to human rights issues in Afghanistan, while the key socio-economic issue of the return of assets of the Central Bank of Afghanistan blocked by Washington was not touched upon. But new difficulties with water use in the region, which arose in connection with the construction of the Kush-Tepa canal, were discussed<sup>15</sup>.

According to experts, upon completion of construction, the canal will take from 15 to 20% of the total flow of the Amu Darya<sup>16</sup>. For Uzbekistan, this would mean a shortage of water resources for irrigation of cotton, which generates about 17% of GDP. It is also important to keep in mind that about 40% of the population of this republic is employed in agriculture. According to the Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, the annual water consumption in the country averages 51 billion cubic meters, 91% of which is spent on agriculture, mainly for irrigation of cotton fields<sup>17</sup>. In this regard, «water diplomacy» is a priority task for Uzbekistan, which is confirmed by the materials of the Ministry of Water Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan<sup>18</sup>.

Turkmenistan faces an equally acute problem, as evidenced by the activities of the State Committee for Water Management of Turkmenistan<sup>19</sup>. The Amu Darya River feeds the Karakum Canal, which provides irrigation to 580 thousand hectares of cotton. The change in the river level has also created social difficulties. In particular, in June 2023. Farmers in Lebap province have complained about the lack of water for cotton irrigation, while the government has pledged to supply them with water, fertilizers, seeds and agricultural machinery in exchange for selling a certain amount of the crop at pre-set prices<sup>20</sup>.

15 The EU–Central Asia meeting on Afghanistan has ended in Ashgabat. Available from: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/05/26/v-ashgabade-zavershilas-vstrecha-eu-tsentrlnaya-aziya-po-afganistanu/>.

16 The Koshtepa Canal has just begun to be built, and is it already being destroyed? Available from: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/centralasia/20231218/kanal-kosh-tepa-tolko-nachali-stroit-a-on-uzhe-razrushaetsya>.

17 The Agency of Statistics under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Available from: <https://stat.uz/ru/>; Mamadshoev M. Water conflicts loom over Central Asia. Available from: <https://cabar.asia/ru/nad-tsentrlnoj-aziej-navisayut-vodnye-konflikty>.

18 “Water diplomacy” in Central Asia. Available from: <https://suvchi.gov.uz/ru/posts/1545735855/2768>; Speech by the Minister of Water Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh.Khamraeva at the special session “Cooperation of Central Asian countries to ensure water security in the context of climate change” within the framework of the 9th World Water Forum (March 24, 2022, 10:45 a.m., Dakar, Senegal). Available from: <https://suvchi.gov.uz/ru/page/2/26>.

19 The State Committee of Water Management of Turkmenistan. Available from: <https://www.turkmenwater.gov.tm>.

20 Mamadshoev M. Water conflicts loom over Central Asia. Available from: <https://cabar.asia/ru/nad-tsentrlnoj-aziej-navisayut-vodnye-konflikty>.

The construction of the hydrogiant is carried out without compliance with technological requirements. As a result, the walls and the bottom of the canal are not reinforced properly, which led to their partial destruction and a 9 km long water spill. Moreover, observations from space show that the disaster zone is increasing, indicating the inability or unwillingness of the Taliban to remedy the situation. This is the opinion of most Russian experts. Uzbeks believe that in this case we are talking about the rise of groundwater. One way or another, the formation of new lakes poses a danger to Tajikistan<sup>21</sup>. Tajikistan is particularly concerned about the growing water problem. According to the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources of the Republic of Tajikistan, since 2000, at the initiative of the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, the UN General Assembly has adopted 7 resolutions aimed at solving water issues<sup>22</sup>.

If Uzbekistan, having lost the resources of the Amu Darya, starts bailing out water from the Syr Darya, which feeds Kazakhstan, then Kazakh farmers will be forced to reduce cotton and rice crops, which will lead not only to a shortage of these crops, but also to an increase in unemployment. The Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation of the Republic of Kazakhstan is responsible for solving the problems<sup>23</sup>.

The situation in Central Asia will become even more complicated if the Taliban government implements plans to build the Dashtijum hydroelectric complex, which accumulates most of the summer runoff of one of the tributaries of the Amu Darya – the Panj River<sup>24</sup>.

### International experience in negotiations on the division of transboundary water resources

Historical and modern, including international, experience in finding ways to reach agreements on the division of transboundary water resources indicates the complexity of the negotiation process, which led to directly opposite results. An example of Chinese-Kazakh contacts on this topic is indicative. Let's explain: two deep rivers flow from the Chinese province of Xinjiang to Kazakhstan – Ili, which feeds the country's largest lake Balkhash, and Irtysh, which flows through the main industrial region in the north of the Republic of Kazakhstan and further to Siberia. China consumes up to half of the water of each of them, which causes discontent among Kazakhstanis who fear that Balkhash may suffer the fate of the disappearing Aral Sea. Beijing, however, does not respond to numerous requests from Astana to limit the intake of water in the upper reaches. Moreover, he refuses

21 The Koshtepa Canal has just begun to be built, and is it already being destroyed? Available from: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/centralasia/20231218/kanal-kosh-tepa-tolko-nachali-stroit-a-on-uzhe-razrushaetsya>.

22 Global Water Initiatives of the President of the Republic of Tatarstan. Available from: <https://www.mewr.tj/?p=192>.

23 Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Available from: <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/water/activities/directions?lang=ru>.

24 Central Asian watershed: will the canal being built by the Taliban become a threat to Kazakhstan? Available from: <https://www.caravan.kz/news/centralnoaziatskij-vodorazdel-stanet-li-kanal-kotoryj-stroyat-taliby-ugrozit-dlya-kazakhstana-966799/>.



to sign the UN Convention on Transboundary Waters. The leadership of Kazakhstan has essentially resigned itself to this situation, trying not to irritate China, which is carrying out investment injections in the amount of billions of dollars in Kazakhstan, including within the framework of the «One Belt, One Road» project. Interestingly, Astana has included «One Belt, one Road» in its own state program of infrastructure development «Nurly Zhol» («Bright Path»)<sup>25</sup>.

The equitable water arrangements between India and Pakistan served as a powerful deterrent in the permanently very tense relations between these countries.

The problem with the distribution of water resources between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt is well known. More than 80% of the waters of the Nile are formed on the territory of Ethiopia, located in the upper reaches of the river, but this country uses no more than 2% of its water reserves. The downstream Sudan and, to a greater extent, Egypt are the main consumers of the waters of the Nile.

In 1959, an agreement was concluded between Egypt and Sudan, which did not take into account the interests of Ethiopia. In response to the statements of this country about the need to revise the agreement, Egypt and Sudan have always refused<sup>26</sup>.

The long-standing water dispute between Iran and Afghanistan over the use of the resources of the transboundary Helmand River has escalated again. The border skirmishes that took place on May 27, 2023, resulted in casualties on both sides. The reason for the conflict was that, according to Tehran, the Taliban authorities did not comply with the 1973 agreement, under which Afghanistan pledged to supply 320 million cubic meters of water per year to Iran. Kabul rejected the Iranians' claims, attributing the water supply disruptions to drought and technical difficulties. As a result of the consultations, the Iranian leadership formally agreed with the arguments of the Afghans. However, reconciliation does not mean peace<sup>27</sup>.

The work with Afghanistan of the Soviet Union, and later Russia, brought different results at different stages. In 1946, the USSR and Afghanistan signed an agreement on the Amu Darya, according to which the Afghan side had the right to use 9 of the 19 cubic kilometers of water of the Panj River. In 1977, negotiations were held on the conclusion of a new agreement, during which the Soviet side insisted on reducing the quota of Afghanistan to 6 cubic kilometers. The Afghans rejected the new scheme. In the future, Moscow sought to maintain Afghanistan's water consumption at the lowest possible level, contributing to the development of irrigated agriculture in the south of the country. In 2002 and 2014, the Afghan authorities, under the patronage of the United States, offered their neighbors to sign a new treaty instead of the 1946 agreement. The initiative then did not meet with support from Central Asian partners<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Trilling D. China defeated Kazakhstan in the water dispute. Available from: <https://inosmi.ru/20221213/kazakhstan-258814414.html>.

<sup>26</sup> New water agreements in Central Asia: what Kyrgyzstan should do. Available from: <https://rivers.help/n/1369>.

<sup>27</sup> Water Wars: What is happening on the Iran-Afghanistan border? Available from: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20230529/vodnie-voini-cto-proishodit-na-iransko-afganskoi-granitse?ysclid=ItjIvppnm2585862057>.

<sup>28</sup> Panfilova V. Tashkent will share technologies with Kabul. Available from: [https://www.ng.ru/cis/2023-03-26/5\\_8689\\_asia.html](https://www.ng.ru/cis/2023-03-26/5_8689_asia.html).

Starting discussions with the Taliban government on the use of the Amu Darya's water resources, the Central Asian neighbors invited him to join the interstate coordinating water Management commission, which determines water use quotas. The appeal, however, remained unanswered.

## Discussion

So, to date, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan does not participate in either international or regional agreements in the field of water resources use and acts at its discretion, guided by the law equal to the rights of neighboring countries. It is not possible to reach an agreement with the Taliban on rational water use, taking into account the interests of neighboring States on an international legal basis, since their Government is still not recognized by the international community. At the same time, agreements with Kabul can be reached on a bi-, trilateral or regional basis, subject to the voluntary informal agreement of the parties.

When considering general approaches, it should be borne in mind that in the context of the allocation of water resources, there are three doctrines:

- the doctrine of territorial sovereignty, according to which States control water sources located on their territory. This doctrine, of course, is addressed by the «upper» countries;
- the doctrine of territorial integration. It says that the countries downstream of the rivers have the right to receive the necessary volume and quality of water and can interfere with the vital activity of the «upper» countries if they ignore the needs of the «lower» ones;
- The doctrine of fair use of water resources is designed to reconcile the contradictions of the parties on the basis of mutual interests. It has the largest number of adherents among experts and the international community and is embodied in a number of legal documents, including the 1997 UN Convention on the Law on the Non-Navigational Use of International Rivers.

Obviously, it is advisable to use the third doctrine in working with Afghanistan.

Based on this message, Uzbekistan is discussing with the Taliban the problem of water resource allocation, coupled with multidimensional trade and economic cooperation. In March 2023, the Uzbek side initiated a visit to Kabul by a delegation headed by the Special Representative of the President of the country on foreign policy issues A.Kamilov. During the talks with Deputy Prime Minister of Afghanistan A.Ghani Baradar, Minister of Foreign Affairs A.Muttaki, Minister of Defense Ya.Mujahid, other members of the government and representatives of economic structures had a detailed exchange of views on the topics of transport, logistics, and energy cooperation, in particular the construction of the Termez–Mazar-I-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar railway; laying power lines along the Surkhan-Puli-Khumri route; increasing the volume of transportation of various goods, including transit, through the territory of Afghanistan; training of Afghan personnel at the educational center in Termez.

According to the Statistics Agency of Uzbekistan, this republic supplies wheat flour, electricity to the Afghan market, and provides transport for freight rail transportation. Humanitarian aid in the amount of 1.3 thousand tons, consisting of food, medicines, and clothing, has been transferred to the Afghan government. Projects to create trading houses of Uzbekistan in Kabul and Mazar-I-Sharif for the supply of agricultural and industrial products, the organization of growth points for processing Afghan products, including marble, lapis lazuli, other semi-precious and precious stones, are considered promising. An agreement on Uzbek assistance in the restoration of textile factories and fat-and-oil plants is very important<sup>29</sup>.

In water and energy cooperation, an agreement was reached on some kind of custody of the Kush-Tepa canal, assistance in the technical equipment of construction works, as well as irrigation facilities<sup>30</sup>.

The Turkmen delegation headed by Foreign Minister R.Meredov paid a working visit to Afghanistan (Herat province, bordering Turkmenistan) in December 2023. Following the example of the Uzbeks, the Turkmen discussed the problem of Kush-Tepe in the background format, focusing on key areas of trade and economic cooperation. During negotiations with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate A.Muttaki, Minister of Mining Industry Sh.Delavar, Minister of Industry and Trade N.Azizi discussed the construction of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline on Afghan territory, the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan (TAP) power transmission line, and the expansion of Afghanistan's railway infrastructure<sup>31</sup>. Turkmenistan exports electricity, oil, and gas to Afghanistan, and imports marble, dried fruits, and potatoes from that country<sup>32</sup>.

Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, which also carry out extensive trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan, have not yet joined the conversation with the Taliban, apparently waiting for the results of contacts between Uzbeks and Turkmen with them.

## Conclusions

In general, Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors hope that Kabul, when planning its further actions regarding the operation of the Kush Tepa canal, will take into account the importance of partnership with them. In addition, the Taliban authorities, who are already in international legal isolation, will not want to provoke friction in relations with Central Asia.

<sup>29</sup> Jumhuriyat. Details of the visit of the Uzbek delegation to Afghanistan. Available from: <https://dzen.ru/b/ZBv8CoLbPRp3xLRM>.

<sup>30</sup> Tension is growing in Central Asia over the Kush Tepe canal. Available from: <https://rivers.help/n/1208>.

<sup>31</sup> The Foreign Ministers of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan discussed the start of TAPI construction in Herat. Available from: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/12/meredov-afghanistan-visit-3/>.

<sup>32</sup> The trade turnover between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan reached 481 million dollars in 2023. Available from: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2024/01/15/tovarooborot-mezhdu-afganistanom-i-turkmenistanom-dostig-481-milliona-dollarov-v-2023-godu/>.

At the same time, the Americans, as a result of contacts with Taliban leaders, spread information that the main topics at the talks are allegedly human rights, primarily women, the formation of an inclusive government, the fight against terrorism, inside Afghanistan and beyond. In fact, according to behind-the-scenes information from the staff of the Afghan Embassy and representatives of the Afghan community associated with Kabul, American diplomats pay considerable attention to the so-called problems of regional and international security, emphasizing the undesirability of close trusting relations between Afghanistan and Russia and its Central Asian friends. This kind of pressure on the Afghans intensified after Russian expert circles started talking about the possible recognition of the Taliban government. Attempts to persuade the Central Asian states to more mundane relations with Russia and expand ties with the West are also being made in the course of communication with the Central Asian leadership, including at the highest level.

Russia's offer of assistance in overcoming disputes over water use went unnoticed. Nevertheless, it is necessary to continuously monitor the development of the situation, especially the actions of the United States and its European allies.

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## Contribution of the author

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