



# RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES

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# Promoting regional connectivity should be an EU priority for Afghanistan

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RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Shada Islam – Senior Commentator on Geopolitics

For many, it is a disaster foretold. As America ends the longest of its “forever wars”, foreign troops leave Afghanistan after twenty troubled years and Taliban militants seize more and more territory amid fears of rising bloodshed and destruction, the emerging international consensus is simple: another state collapse in Afghanistan at the hands of the Taliban would be a danger both to the region and the world.

Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, has warned that Afghanistan’s [challenges are massive](#)<sup>1</sup>. Hard-won gains made in educating and empowering women are under threat. Peace and stability are further complicated by rising geopolitical competition and acrimony among neighbours. As Taliban attacks increase, the arrival in Europe of another wave of Afghan refugees fleeing the country is likely - and feared.

Still, European governments have said that disengagement is not an option and promised sufficient funds for Afghanistan’s reconstruction. The country has

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<sup>1</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/malawi/99754/afghanistan-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary-debate\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/malawi/99754/afghanistan-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary-debate_en)

received almost 3.5 billion euros in EU development assistance over the last 20 years, making it the largest Asian beneficiary of EU funds. In the future, however, EU aid will be conditional on the preservation of Afghanistan's human rights and democratic achievements, tangible progress on improving governance, in particular anti-corruption, and on the access of women to education and to political and social life.

Europe's promise to continue financial support for Afghanistan and safeguard past gains is important. Clinging to past templates is not enough, however. A genuine reset of the EU's Afghanistan policy requires more ambition and imagination.

A creative, forward-looking EU strategic rethink of Afghanistan's challenges demands an honest conversation with Afghanistan's government but also its friends and neighbours on the needs of the country itself as well as the concerns and priorities of the wider region.

It also demands a closer look at how best to capitalize on Afghanistan's location in a geopolitically complex and economically fragmented region.

Located at the heart of the legendary Silk Road, Afghanistan has long stood at the crossroads of Eurasian trade and commerce, a position that faded as maritime trade replaced traditional land routes. Today, landlocked Afghanistan continues to suffer from a lack of direct access to sea routes. Across many parts of Central and South Asia, the lack of modern transport infrastructure also still impedes cross-border flows of trade, services, and people.

Working with Kabul and other regional actors, EU policymakers can help Afghanistan to retrieve its former role as a connectivity hub between Central and South Asia. To do this, the EU must switch from viewing Afghanistan solely as an intractable security challenge and focus instead on unlocking the country's still-untapped potential as a hub for regional connectivity and a catalyst for region-wide economic growth and transformation.

As South Asian countries gain access to resources and commercial opportunities in the north, landlocked Central Asian states reach markets and trade routes to the south, including the greater Indo-Pacific region. The economic rewards of such a region-wide connectivity strategy would be high.

The expected increase in inter-regional trade as well as innovation, job creation, and economic growth would, in turn, give Central and South Asian countries a strong incentive to work together to support a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. With more trade and investment opportunities, Afghanistan would also become less reliant on foreign aid.

Given its own history and success in regional integration as well as building Europe-wide transport networks, the EU is well placed to play connectivity convenor in Central and South Asia.

At least that is the hope. Unleashing Afghanistan's power as a regional connectivity hub will not be easy, however. Variations of Silk Road connectivity blueprints have existed for years but failed to gain traction because of war, violence and unrest as well as competing international geopolitical agendas.

Decoupling geopolitics from connectivity therefore remains a major challenge. Another challenge has been a lack of financing in the case of major projects even where agreements do exist.

Encouragingly, however, as illustrated by an international connectivity summit held in Tashkent on July 15-16, major players in Central and South Asia as well as their international friends and partners are throwing their weight behind initiatives to boost trade, transport, energy and digital networks that crisscross national borders and create new opportunities for travel, people-to-people exchanges and private sector investments.

China with its globe-spanning Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is clearly a major connectivity actor in the region. Russia, Iran, Turkey, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as the US are also pushing forward their own plans.

Interestingly, thanks to the EU strategy for '[Connecting Europe and Asia](#)'<sup>2</sup> first adopted in 2018 and updated by [EU foreign ministers in July](#)<sup>3</sup> this year, countries in

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/10/15/connecting-europe-and-asia-council-adopts-conclusions/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/07/12/a-globally-connected-europe-council-approves-conclusions/>

Central and South Asia have also become interested in working with Europe to ensure more sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity projects.

With the five nations of Central Asia building up momentum in their push to work together more closely, there is now a “true opportunity to build a joint vision of connected networks” linking the region to South Asia and further afield, including Europe, [Borrell told the Tashkent meeting](#)<sup>4</sup>.

While the EU is ready to work with the private sector to roll out high quality investments in physical infrastructure and regulatory frameworks, connectivity to build bridges – literally and figuratively – cannot be separated from negotiations on a political settlement in Afghanistan, he warned.

In fact, there is no dearth of connectivity projects under consideration in the region. Energy infrastructure projects – considered a priority - include the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission Project ([CASA-1000](#))<sup>5</sup> which will send surplus hydropower in Central Asia to South Asia, the [Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Power Interconnection Project](#) and the [Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline \(TAPI\)](#)<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, the [Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Programme](#), brings together eleven countries across Central, South, and East Asia. There is also excitement about the opening of the Herat-Khaf railway connecting Afghanistan with its western neighbor and second largest trade partner, Iran, both because of its implication for increased regional connectivity and the project’s role as a valuable catalyst to improve Afghanistan’s internal transport infrastructure. Once operational, the [Chahbahar Port](#) in Iran is expected to provide Afghanistan with the potential to connect to the International North-South Transport Corridor, led by Iran, India, and Russia. Additionally, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China have in principle agreed to link two of the most important BRI corridors – namely, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor – with each other through Afghanistan.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/101814/european-union-reliable-partner-sustainable-connectivity-central-and-south-asia\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/101814/european-union-reliable-partner-sustainable-connectivity-central-and-south-asia_en)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.casa-1000.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://momp.gov.af/index.php/tapi-project>

Still, [challenges abound](#)<sup>7</sup>. Despite ongoing negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, there is no guarantee of sustainable peace in the country. Lack of infrastructure including a railway network inside the country remains another obstacle. Any private sector actor interested in investing in the region will also worry about competing geopolitical agendas and rivalries, including strategic competition between the US and China, difficult EU-Russia relations and continuing US sanctions against Iran. Continuing acrimony in bilateral ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as between India and Pakistan is another headache for business leaders.

These will have to be tackled in direct national conversations both with the Afghan government and the Taliban but also in region-wide discussions which focus on the advantages of working together rather than at cross purposes.

It will also be important to reach an agreement on some key principles and standards for connectivity projects which are currently marred by conflicting goals and ambitions

Regional governments and private sector actors will have to be encouraged to take an inclusive approach on connectivity by listening to the concerns and priorities of women, young people and civil society organisations which are too often sidelined in the search for short-term profit.

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the recent meeting in Tashkent, connectivity is essential to trade, growth, and sustainable development. It is not just about economics but also drives regional cooperation and encourages friendly relations among neighbors.

The meeting in Tashkent is an important indication of the regions' interest in working with the EU and a reassuring sign that many governments in Central and South Asia are recognising that peace and security in Afghanistan will also bring benefits to the entire region – and that geopolitical rivals will have to set aside their adversarial approaches in favour of collective engagement and cooperation.

Together, the EU and member states can also help fill the financing void that has delayed implementation of all the major connectivity projects even those where

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<sup>7</sup> [https://heartofasiasociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/001-HAS\\_Policy-Alternative-1\\_English.pdf](https://heartofasiasociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/001-HAS_Policy-Alternative-1_English.pdf)

agreement exists. One important EU contribution would be to put financing on the table for one or more game-changer regional projects such as TAPI. This would act as a catalyst for other partners and potential investors to step up their own engagement with Afghanistan and the wider region, while also showcasing the geostrategic clout and relevance of the EU as a global connectivity actor.

As foreign troops leave Afghanistan amid fears of more nation-wide violence, the EU's continued high-level and sustained support and engagement will be critically important. However, the EU can and should play an even more ambitious role by helping the international community to re-imagine Afghanistan as a country in the heart of Asia which is part and parcel of a bigger, connected, and dynamic Eurasian region.

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

## Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

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