**What are the conditions on which the Republic of Kazakhstan should cooperate with Afghanistan under Taliban rule, and why?**

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**Introduction**

The latest developments in Afghanistan  – the US withdrawal and the end of the protracted 20-year war, the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan – have inevitably been the primary focus of scholarly and media discussion. Experts have paid attention to various regions surrounding Afghanistan and how these developments affect them. One of these significant regions is Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. Like many other governments, the Kazakhstani government has been bewildered by the speed of Taliban triumph. The rapid change in Kazakhstan’s position towards Afghanistan from a need to reboot the military-industrial complex to the adoption of business as a usual model of relationship can reflect this bewilderment (Pannier, 2021). It is also worth emphasizing the complexity of the issue given that it involves the discussion of conditions on which Kazakhstan should cooperate with the terrorist organization. Based on the practical and strategic calculus, the Republic of Kazakhstan should cooperate with Afghanistan under Taliban rule on the conditions that the latter will not pose a security threat, will resume economic cooperation, and will not act against the interests of Russia, China, and other Central Asian countries.

**Definitions and Assumptions**

The essay should clarify three main premises of the question to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the answer.

1. Evident though, the crucial point is that this essay looks into the issue from a non-normative perspective, that is, analyzing empirical evidence and logical arguments. Hence, by “should,” this essay does not mean “should” from a normative, moral standpoint but rather considering empirical political factors.
2. The Republic of Kazakhstan refers to the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, that is, not a population or other groups within the Republic of Kazakhstan. The reason for this is twofold: first, diplomatic relationships are implemented by the government of Kazakhstan, and second, in the vast majority of cases, the preferences and decisions of the Republic of Kazakhstan do not reflect the interests of the ordinary citizens. Although the latter is not to say that the Kazakhstani government does not care about public opinion at all, it is to say that given the less democratic nature of Kazakhstan, these decisions are frequently adopted without direct public participation.
3. “Conditions on which” in this question refers to the terms of cooperation that the Kazakhstani government should be setting for Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Hence, in contrast to “conditions in which,” which refers to the circumstances, this formulation requires the analysis of official conditions or terms that the Taliban government would need to accept to lead to cooperation.

**Conditions of Cooperation**

**Commitment Not to Pose a Security Threat**

The condition not to pose a threat requires Afghanistan under Taliban rule two things.  First, a commitment not to attack and attempt to overthrow the Kazakhstani government to establish Taliban rule. Second, a promise not to directly or indirectly support other Taliban affiliates or Islamic movements across Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. Although this condition at first glance seems self-explanatory, it is essential to stress the twofold basis for such a term: first, practical, and second, strategic reason. The following paragraph will emphasize each justification in detail.

***Practical Justification***

Setting one of the conditions a commitment not to attack or support movements against the Kazakhstani government has a practical benefit for the Kazakhstani government, and hence, in its interest. Several articles have de-emphasized the probability or the extent of the Afghan Taliban threat to Kazakhstan. Some have stressed Kazakhstan’s physical distance from Afghanistan and Kazakhstan’s substantial economic and security resources (Weitz, 2021). Others have emphasized the presence of few Kazakh citizens in the Afghan territory and the absence of significant radical Islam movements across Kazakhstan, unlike in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, to topple down the government (Pannier, 2021). More importantly, the Russian protection of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has been repeatedly referred to as a significant reason for the low probability of the Afghan Taliban attack on Kazakhstan (Voloshin, 2021). Hence, the existing literature overwhelmingly emphasizes the low likelihood of the Afghan Taliban’s threat to Kazakhstan.

However, Russia’s historical record as a savior of Central Asian states alludes not to overestimate the Russian incentive and capacity to prevent or rescue Kazakhstan from the Taliban threat. Russia isolated itself from border conflicts in 2020 and 2021 between Azerbaijan and CSTO ally Armenia (Stronski, 2021). Neither Moscow intervened for the Kyrgyzstani government’s request to help with the ethnic riots (Stronski, 2021). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the mere presence of the country with the second-best military in the world will not deter the Afghan Taliban from attacking. Notably, the recent developments, such as Russia organizing military exercises along the Tajik-Afghan borders, supplying weapons, and revitalizing military bases, hint that the Russian presence can be considered as one of the reasons for the low probability of Afghan Taliban attack to Kazakhstan (Jardine & Lemon, 2021). Nevertheless, the risk of Russia’s inactivity or inefficiency remains. Hence, Kazakhstan is interested in setting a commitment not to attack and support other Islamic movements across Kazakhstan as one of the conditions.

Crucially, the security aspect is critical in Kazakhstan, given that here, peace and stability are the utmost concern of citizens, and hence, the government. Broader in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, people are ready to sacrifice their freedom and rights to preserve peace (Umarov, 2021). Moreover, the expectations of the overwhelming number of Kazakhstani citizens that the Taliban takeover will highly destabilize the region (34% versus 23%) can spread panic across the country and pave the way for instability (Central Asian Barometer, 2021). Therefore, the absence of a security threat should be the primary condition on which Kazakhstan should cooperate with the Taliban regime.

***Strategic Justification***

Another reason for setting this commitment would be that it is strategically vital for Kazakhstan to do so. Namely, conditions should be easy to extract and commit Afghanistan under the Taliban rule to bring them to the negotiation table and further establish cooperation. Afghanistan under the Taliban is both capable and incentivized to implement this commitment to not pose a threat for several reasons. First, the new Afghan government has a more urgent concern to deal with Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), the Taliban’s bitter ideological rival. IS-K aspires to build a global caliphate, while the Taliban aspires for the Islamic government within national boundaries (Jadoon, Mines & Sayed, 2021). Moreover, the Taliban becoming a state actor is likely to exacerbate the tensions with IS-K (Jadoon, Mines & Sayed, 2021). Second, the new Afghan authorities urgently need to rebuild Afghanistan’s war-torn economy, which demands stability and cooperation with the international community, mainly neighboring countries such as Central Asia, as a prerequisite. Lastly, attacking other states does not align with the Taliban’s ultimate ideological goal, which, as mentioned before, is establishing an Islamic government within the national boundaries of Afghanistan. Although it is possible that the Taliban will change its goals to aspire for a broader geographical dominance, at the moment of writing, there are no signs that might indicate such evolution of the Taliban. Thus, the commitment not to pose a threat is plausible to extract from the current Afghan government under the Taliban.

One might argue that several factors might entail the Afghan Taliban’s succession to power, which might not be directly in the control of the Taliban, but still might pose a security threat to Kazakhstan. Namely, factors such as a) potential fracturing within the Afghan Taliban, b) other Islamic movements across Kazakhstan and larger Central Asia inspired and reinvigorated by the Taliban’s success, c) the Taliban’s close connection with al-Qaeda might contribute to the instability and terrorist insurgency across Kazakhstan (Shah, 2021; Goldstein & Shah, 2015). However, some sources have stipulated the unlikelihood of a fracture within the Taliban given the simultaneously hierarchical and consensual organizational nature of the Taliban, which allows smooth and stable politics (The Economist, 2021). Moreover, the significantly weakened state of al-Qaeda is unlikely to pose a substantial security threat (Shah, 2021). Regarding the other Islamic movements that might be inspired by the Taliban, as mentioned above, their presence is limited to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Therefore, this discussion concludes that not posing a security threat to Kazakhstan is the condition that the Kazakhstani government will most likely be able to extract from the new Afghan authorities.

**Economic Cooperation**

This condition requires the Afghan government under the Taliban to cooperate with Kazakhstan systematically economically. As in the previous term, this commitment also has two justifications, practical and strategic. It is in the practical interest of Kazakhstan to resume trade with Afghanistan since the latter imports 60% of flour from Kazakhstan, apart from sending it as part of humanitarian aid  (Voloshin, 2021). Economic non-cooperation with Afghanistan would require Kazakhstan to find new importers for its three million tons of wheat (Tazhutov, 2021). It is also a strategically advantageous condition to set for the same reasons since the new Afghan government needs these products to feed its population at the brink of hunger. In addition, Afghanistan is Kazakhstan’s closest way to international shipping waters as a land-locked country, and hence, it is a direct route to a vast market (Kassen, 2018). Moreover, economic interdependence added with trade expectations – which exists due to past and present tight trade connections – is likely to prevent the aggression between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan under the Taliban (Coopeland, 1996). Therefore, imposing economic cooperation as one of the conditions is advantageous to the Republic of Kazakhstan both in practical and strategic terms.

**Drug and Weapons Trafficking**

The third condition on which the Republic of Kazakhstan should cooperate with Afghanistan under the Taliban government is the latter's commitment not to transfer weapons and sell drugs through Kazakhstan. Crucially, this condition does not mean that the Kazakhstani government should require the Afghan government to stop drugs and weapons trafficking at all. This condition is strategically inexpedient for the Kazakhstani government since the Afghan government is unwilling and unable to commit to it as they derive the critical sum of revenue from such criminal activities. For instance, the Taliban earned approximately $460 million from opium poppy cultivation in 2020 alone (Maizland, 2021). A more practical approach would ensure that Kazakhstan will not interfere with the Taliban's money-making processes, but these processes should not go through Kazakhstani territory. It is worth admitting that the empirical plausibility of such a condition is limited given that much of narco-trafficking goes to Russia through Kazakhstan. However, cooperation with Russia, which also has an interest in cracking down on the drug trade, might address the mechanistic difficulties of such a question (Ramani, 2017). Nevertheless, this condition is vital for Kazakhstan since weapons trafficking might enable or exacerbate radical terrorist movements, while drugs transfer might also potentially entail the emergence, or escalation, of dangerous gangs and cartels.

**Russia, Central Asia, and China**

The Republic of Kazakhstan also has several geopolitical considerations to take into account. First, as mentioned before, despite Kazakhstan's considerable military and economic resources, it still highly relies on Russia's more sophisticated and more robust military experience and resources to protect itself from a potential threat. Hence, the Kazakhstani government needs to ensure that the Taliban rule will not engage in any activities that might cause Russia's discontent. The same idea applies in the case of the People's Republic of China, that is, to ensure that the Afghan government will not undertake any actions against the interest of the PRC. Good relations with China are advantageous and even critical for Kazakhstan.

Similarly, Kazakhstan should emphasize the importance of broader Central Asian (CA) security and stability. Instability in neighboring CA countries is likely to cause instability in Kazakhstan too. Moreover, considering Kazakhstan's unique multi-vectored foreign policy, which takes a proactive role in the regional integration process, Kazakhstan should actively consider the geopolitical context (Kassen, 2018). Hence, Kazakhstan needs to maintain solidarity with regional hegemonies and other CA countries in terms of its relationship with the Afghan government under the Taliban regime.

This geopolitical solidary factor is also strategically advantageous since the Kazakhstani government is most likely to be able to extract it from the Afghan Taliban government. Namely, China has already emphasized its sympathetic attitude towards new Afghan authorities (Johnson, 2021). Hence, there is no incentive for the Taliban regime to be antagonistic towards China. The only potential problem is Tajikistan’s aggressive stance towards the Taliban regime. Tajikistan is a member of CSTO, meaning that Kazakhstan also would have to take a hostile position if the Taliban posed a threat to Tajikistan. This situation complicates the condition of geopolitical solidarity. Nevertheless, at the time of the writing, the Taliban government ensures that it does not pose any threat to any neighboring countries, including Tajikistan (Pannier, 2021). Thus, this condition can also be considered strategically expedient for Kazakhstan to ask Afghanistan under the Taliban rule.

**Not a Good Condition - Women’s Rights and Inclusive Government**

A condition that the Republic of Kazakhstan should not request the Afghan government is establishing proper women’s rights and inclusive government. Although these aspects are undoubtedly desirable from a normative standpoint, from a strategic viewpoint, the Kazakhstani government should not set this aspect as one of the conditions. This condition is likely to antagonize the Taliban regime and is least likely to be extracted for two reasons. Firstly, it is deeply rooted in the ideology and teachings of the Taliban regime for women to wear burqa and follow all other restrictions. Secondly, it is practically hardly possible for the Taliban government to commit to the inclusive government condition. The government currently consists of irreplaceable global terrorists and blacklisted individuals and is primarily based on the Sunni Islamism identity rather than ethnic ties (Shah, 2021). Thus, the prospects of creating an inclusive and nondiscriminatory government are limited. Hence, requiring it as one of the conditions of cooperation is likely to alienate the Taliban regime from the negotiation table.

One might argue that proposing women’s rights and an inclusive government as one of the conditions of cooperation will show Kazakhstan on a positive side in the eyes of Europe and the United States of America. However, it is hardly important even if this benefit is possible since the US and Europe have limited interest in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. Despite speculations that the Taliban’s return to power will reinvigorate EU’s and the US attention to the Central Asian region, a more probable scenario is that their attention will further diminish. Empirical evidence suggests that the US security assistance to Tajikistan has dropped from $450 million in 1990 to $11 million in 2020 and a significant decrease in the number of military exercises (Jardine & Lemon, 2021). Therefore, there are low chances of attracting the west’s protection and a high probability of antagonizing the Afghan authorities. Hence, it is in the strategic interest of Kazakhstan not to include women’s rights and inclusive governments as a condition of cooperation with Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

**Conclusion**

The Republic of Kazakhstan should cooperate with Afghanistan under Taliban rule on the conditions that the latter will not pose a security threat to Kazakhstan and broader Central Asia, and will economically cooperate with Kazakhstan, and will not act against the interests of Russia, China, and other Central Asian countries. Such a foreign policy should be built based on both practical and strategic considerations and analyze both capacities and incentives of interest groups. A significant concern of the Kazakhstani government is the potential security threat from the Taliban regime; hence, policymakers should emphasize this condition as part of the cooperation. Secondary but necessary conditions are economic cooperation and geopolitical solidarity due to the *sui generis* nature of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy that is land-locked and transcontinental. Although future geopolitical developments might change the nature of these conditions, and detailed consideration of each policy decision is needed, these conditions appear to be the most expedient ones given the current domestic and international politics.

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