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Andrejs Vilks**PhD, Professor**Riga Stradins University**LV-1007, 16 Dzirciema Str., Riga, Latvia**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5161-0760>*

The Taliban movement as a challenge to security and political order in Central Asia

Abstract. The purpose of the study was to consider current and potential threats in the Central Asian region after the Taliban came to power in order to develop recommendations for minimising such threats. With the help of a content analysis of a number of mass media outlets, the reaction of the governments of the Central Asian region to the rise to power of the Taliban was analysed. In particular, the governments and ministries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan noted that they do not recognise the current government in Afghanistan. However, representatives of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan expressed support and desire for active cooperation with the new actor of international relations in the region. It is classified that the population of Afghanistan, in addition to the ethnically largest group of Pashtuns, also consists of Uzbeks and Tajiks. Accordingly, the governments of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan face the threat of overthrowing secular regimes in their states. This problem is particularly important for Tajikistan, as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan terrorist group is active in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. General poverty in some countries in the region and lack of prospects lead to the dependence of certain groups of the population on Islamist extremist groups, and the rise to power in Afghanistan by the Taliban only increases such risks. In addition to the problem of terrorism and extremism, the Taliban's infrastructure projects are also a problem. The most significant is the Kosh Tepa canal project, which will disrupt the water balance in the region, diverting most of the river's resources to Afghanistan. This problem becomes even more relevant in light of data from the World Resources Institute, where each of the countries in the region is among the 30 countries in the world with the largest shortage of water resources by 2040. The governments of the Central Asian region need, despite the rejection of some of them to the Taliban movement, to try to cooperate with them in a new international legal framework, since the Taliban did not comply with the agreements signed by previous governments. In addition, it may be useful to create a working group on water resources management together with the new Afghan authorities, or to involve them in the work of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea

Keywords: climate change; water balance; ethnic composition; terrorist threat; separatism

Introduction

The Central Asian region, given its geographical closeness and strong dependence on the geopolitical situation, is the object of numerous challenges and threats. The Taliban movement, as a socio-political phenomenon, emerged in the early 1990s in Afghanistan, and fundamental changes in the geopolitical situation in the region in the 21st century contributed to the strengthening of full control over the country by the Taliban. Afghanistan, by its geographical location, has long been a key territory for connecting trade routes between China, Central and South Asia, India, and the whole of Eurasia.

Moreover, with a new destabilisation of the situation in Afghanistan, the countries of the region may face a huge

influx of refugees, which will hit the social and economic component and can lead to a state of severe tension in the host countries. At the same time, however, the study of the destabilising factors with the coming to power of the Taliban can help in understanding changes in the balance of power in the region, since such major actors in international relations as the EU (European Union), the PRC (People's Republic of China) and the United States (United States of America) have significant geopolitical interests in the Central Asian region.

Afghanistan is one of the key factors of regional interconnectedness, which unites both the large macro-region of Central and South Asia, and the Middle East and

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*Corresponding author



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Eurasia as a whole. In addition, attempts to ignore the internal problems in Afghanistan will only further increase tensions in the region, as isolation and sanctions are extremely detrimental to the lives of the Afghan people.

The paper authored by A. Morenchuk & N. Kolesnychenko (2023) examined the consequences of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and concluded that after the final approval of the Taliban, neighbouring governments seek close cooperation to prevent the spread of the Afghan crisis outside the country. Investigating the influence of the government of the Republic of Turkey in the Central Asian region, E.E. Soloviova (2023) noted that the restriction of Turkish influence is associated with the intensification of cooperation between Central Asian governments and China in response to the Taliban's seizure of power.

In the context of transnational threats, V. A. Hochunska (2020) highlights the drug problem and adds that over the past 10 years, the number of drug addicts in the Central Asian region has increased 7-fold. O.B. Balatska (2020) added that the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham) Vilayat Khorasan network is active in Afghanistan and that the destructive activities of non-state actors significantly cause the crisis of statehood. Similar statements are also held by S. Asaturov & A. Martynov (2022), adding that the Taliban wants to strengthen economic ties with the Chinese government, which, in turn, does not meet the interests of the Indian government.

E. Bevzyuk & O. Kotlyar (2023) highlighted changes in security paradigms throughout Eurasia, especially in the context of the reinterpretation by the governments of the former Soviet republics of the dominant position of the Russian Federation, which will potentially lead to the consolidation of new international arrangements. K. Abuov *et al.* (2022) noted that, considering the interests of countries in the region and potential sponsors, policies aimed at developing Afghanistan without external sponsorship pose certain difficulties for the Taliban leadership. R.K. Sharma (2023) wrote that after the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the governments of the Central Asian region significantly deepened cooperation with the government of India on security and intelligence issues. However, the outlined researchers focused only on the actual steps taken by governments, but did not outline the range of potential threats.

Given the above, the purpose of the study was to identify the range of current and potential threats to develop recommendations for minimising regional security risks after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. The objectives of the study were to address political threats to secular governments in the region and assess the problem of fair water distribution in the region.

Materials and Methods

Content analysis of a number of mass media outlets, including Hasht e Subh Daily (Nezam, 2024), United News of India (Kazakhstan does not..., 2021), Eurasianet (Palyvoda, 2023), Gazeta.uz (Arziev, 2021), Azzatyk Ynalgysy (Tagaev, 2021), Asia-Plus (the President of Turkmenistan..., 2021), BBC (Rawlatt, 2018), helped to understand the reaction of regional governments to the coming to power of the Taliban movement. The reasons for the different degrees of justification of the positions of governments were analysed

by the publication Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Umarov, 2021). The classification of the ethno-linguistic composition of the population of Afghanistan was examined as part of the analysis of the "thematic report of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Government of Australia on political development and security development in Afghanistan from August 2021 to January 2022" (DFAT, 2022). Data from the World Resource Institute were used to address the problem of water distribution in the Central Asian region (Luo *et al.*, 2015). The reaction of officials and ministries of the republics of the region was studied by analysing publications on official Facebook pages (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2024), on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 2024), and on the website of the president of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Consideration has been given..., 2024).

To understand the EU's policy towards the Central Asian region, the European Parliament's publication "The EU strategy on Central Asia: Towards a new momentum?" (Shreeves *et al.*, 2024), and publications from the independent organisation The International Crisis Group (2024) were analysed. The diversity of terrorist groups in Afghanistan and the corresponding security threats to the Central Asian region were further investigated in the position of the Chinese government on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (Nandajie, 2023), and through careful consideration of two structural documents within the UN (Security Council Committee, 2022) and 2023 (Security Council Committee, 2023).

It is important to understand the internal political situation of Afghanistan to consider the publication of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index project, which cooperates with universities and think tanks (Afghanistan Country Report, 2024). The specific features of certain regions of Tajikistan in the context of potential security threats were analysed in the publication of the World Watch Research department at Open Doors International (2023). Important for consideration was the publication on Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan in the study of the Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst (Ramachandran, 2022; 2023).

In addition to the already mentioned content analysis, the study used comparative and thematic analyses. Comparative analysis has become useful for comparing the positions of different governments. It allows comparing the strategies and policy approaches of different countries in the region, and investigating what factors influenced their opinions. Thematic analysis was used to explore the main topics and concepts discussed in publications and reports. The combination of content analysis, thematic and comparative methods helped to consider how the media created a certain political narrative through language and rhetoric. This revealed how the official position of the governments of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries was reflected in the media discourse.

Results

The Taliban is a Sunni, Islamist, nationalist and pro-Pashtun movement founded in the early 1990s (Afghan Taliban..., 2017). Already in 1996, the Taliban leadership took control of Kabul and by 2001 had established its own power in Afghanistan. In 2001, the coalition forces of the

United States, NATO and other allies created a new state entity called the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on the territory of the country. However, geopolitical changes in the 21st century led to the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, after which the Taliban movement came to power again (What is the Taliban..., 2023). Unstable and dangerous Afghanistan actually continues to create geopolitical tensions, as the Central Asian region cannot fully interact with South Asia.

One of the problems in the Central Asian region since the collapse of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) has been the risk of increasing acts of terrorism and popularising extremism in society. It manifested in two forms: the first is the revival of the Islamic past, and the second is the desire to create dictatorial governments with a complete ban on any intellectual freedom. The most widespread such confrontation was in Tajikistan, where a full-scale civil war took place, and the final peace only transferred the problem of extremism to the underground. Accordingly, it was the internal problems of the countries of the Central Asian region that played along with the fact that poverty, oppression and lack of opportunities for non-violent struggle gave a significant impetus to the growth of extremism in these countries. Thousands of fighters from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and other countries in the region have immigrated to extremist movements in the Middle East and established close political and family ties with Arab countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan (Nezam, 2024).

The Government of Tajikistan has taken an exceptionally tough stance since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan (Umarov, 2021). This position of the President of Tajikistan was justified by the fact that the Taliban cannot be trusted, because they violate the rights of national

and religious minorities. However, this could indicate the desire of the country's leader to increase his ratings both within the country and to attract the support of the international community. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan immediately after the Taliban came to power stated (Kazakhstan does not..., 2021) that they do not recognise them and support the statement of the UN Security Council on the need to create an inclusive government, respect for the rights of women and national minorities, and international legislation. However, in 2023, the Kazakh authorities confirmed (Palyvoda, 2023) that the Taliban movement is no longer on the list of banned terrorist organisations in the country. This decision was substantiated by the desire of the Kazakh authorities to actively involve Afghanistan in interregional cooperation. The position of the Ministry of foreign affairs of Uzbekistan after the Taliban came to power was that the country's authorities have been in contact with the movement for many years and that Afghanistan is a close and dear neighbour for Uzbekistan and the authorities consider Afghanistan as part of Central Asia (Arziev, 2021). The Kyrgyz authorities have stated (Tagaev, 2021) that they do not recognise the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, but at the same time stressed the need for dialogue to avoid crisis and civil war. The President of Turkmenistan stated (The President of Turkmenistan..., 2021) that given the country's exclusively peace-loving policy and the experience of a positive neutral status, the authorities of Turkmenistan will do their best to normalise the situation in Afghanistan to strengthen traditionally fraternal Turkmen-Afghan relations. The positions of some of the governments of the Central Asian region are clearly illustrated by the ethnic groups present in Afghanistan (Fig. 1).

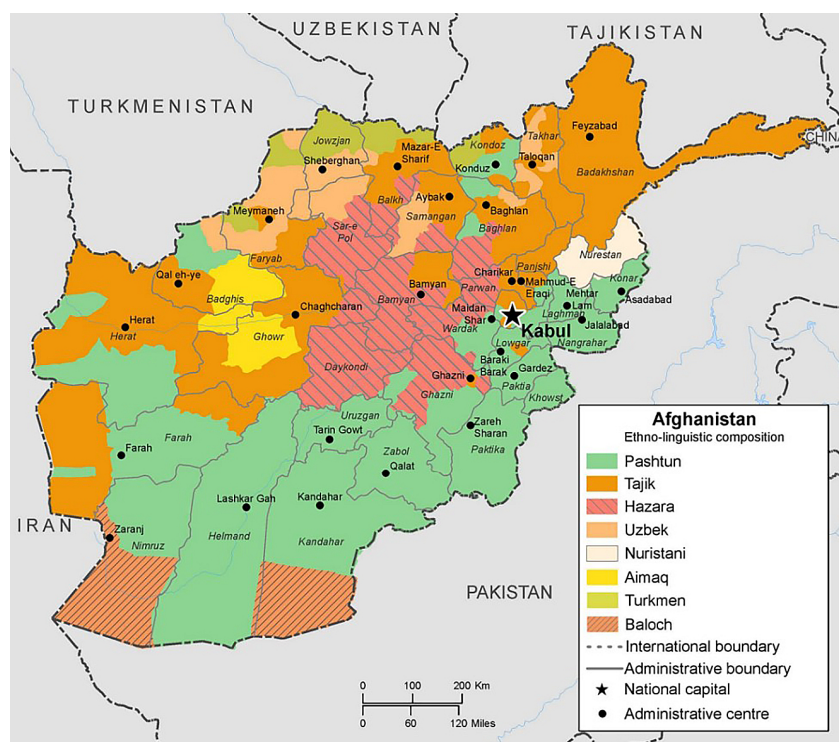


Figure 1. Ethnolinguistic composition of the population of Afghanistan

Source: DFAT (2022)

It can be concluded that the governments of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are afraid of the possible rise of the Islamist underground against the background of the Taliban coming to power, since the threat posed by regional terrorist groups is especially significant in the secular countries of Central Asia. The “rise” of certain ethnic groups in Afghanistan, which may be immigrants from Central Asian countries since the 1990s, poses a particular threat to authoritarian circles. However, the Taliban, which is also inherently a terrorist regime, has managed to maintain security and stability in Afghanistan, as demonstrated by their fight against ISIS. This has fundamentally helped the countries of the region to believe that the Taliban can contribute to building a new economy in the region, given the close geographical connection between Central Asia and the Global South. What also added confidence was the Taliban’s fight against ISIS-Khorasan, which is actively recruiting militants, including from Central Asian countries. Structural changes in the Taliban’s approach were also evident in the desire to establish trade and economic relations in the region, such as the study of the possibility of creating a Chamber of Commerce with Iran, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan (Afghanistan Country Report..., 2024).

In fact, between two and three parts of the Afghan population are living on the verge of survival or even starvation, so this is a factor that may justify building up trade relations with the Taliban leadership. This situation was particularly pronounced in Kazakhstan-Afghanistan relations, as the former exported wheat flour and butter to Afghanistan. Another factor is that both the Western and Chinese leaders are interested in reformatting the trade vectors of Central Asian governments to Pakistan, India, and North-East Africa, because this will reduce their dependence on the Russian government. If there is less dependence on the actions of the northern neighbour, this can significantly contribute to strengthening sovereignty, but in this case, more caution should be exercised, given the ambitions of the Chinese government to become the only major power in the region (Reduce dependence on Russia..., 2023).

A positive factor in reducing the influence of the Russian Federation on the Central Asian region is also the fact that in the past the Russian government supplied weapons to the Taliban in transit through Tajikistan. The head of the US forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, stated in 2018 (Rawlatt, 2018) that the US authorities see an information agenda in which the number of ISIS militants is increasing and this agenda is used by the Russian Federation to legitimise the actions of the Taliban and to a certain extent to support it. If the Russian government wants to resume its presence in the Middle East by supplying weapons to the Taliban, Central Asian governments are likely to try to counteract this. This is conditioned by the fact that these weapons can be used by the Taliban, or by immigrants from Central Asia on the territory of Afghanistan against them.

However, in reality, governments in the Central Asian region, supporting the current government in Afghanistan at the time of 2024, may become targets of terrorist attacks by another player, namely the ISIS branch in Afghanistan, Vilayat Khorasan. This is due to numerous measures to strengthen security after Vilayat Khorasan claimed responsibility for the March 2024 terrorist attack, which killed about 140 people. In Tajikistan, security measures

in large shopping centres were significantly strengthened (Aslonova, 2024), and the Uzbek authorities decided to improve interagency interaction (Consideration has been given..., 2024), the Kazakh authorities have worked to improve coordination and action in extreme situations (The head of state held..., 2024). Governments of other states have also resorted to similar strengthening of security measures and verification of suspicious citizens (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2024; Young men with beards..., 2024). Given the above, the long-term conflict between the Taliban and Vilayat Khorasan is to some extent an advantage for Central Asian governments, and further actions to stabilise and improve relations with the Taliban may be an advantage in ensuring security in the region.

However, ISIS is not the only threat to the governments of the Central Asian region, as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan Group operates in the border provinces of Afghanistan, which aims to overthrow the ruling regime in Tajikistan. Officially, the Taliban movement has withdrawn from any ties with this network, which indicates the non-state status of the terrorist group. The growing number and influence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan may be a problem for the Government of Tajikistan, as separatist sentiments exist among the population of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan (Ramachandran, 2023). Accordingly, in the event of a certain provocation or direct conflict, Tajikistan can be drawn either into an armed confrontation with the Taliban forces, or into brutal repression against the population of the region. Tensions between the government and the population of the Gorno-Badakhshan region date back to the times after the collapse of the USSR, as the region, which differs in ethnic and linguistic characteristics, was a hotbed of anti-government rebels and even in the 2020s was subjected to violent protests and clashes, where, according to various sources, between 40 and 200 people were killed (Open Doors International, 2023).

However, of course, it is important to understand that the Taliban’s intentions are unknown. Following the differences between ISIS and the Taliban, everything becomes clearer. ISIS militants aim to establish their power in most countries of the Middle East and Central Asia, and by their ethnic composition, they are a multinational terrorist group. The Taliban, on the other hand, advocated and still stands for racial purity, that is, it consists mainly of Pashtuns, the indigenous population of Afghanistan. The Taliban’s own unwillingness to see ISIS networks on the lands of Afghanistan provoked a conflict between them (Why ISIS is fighting the Taliban..., 2023). Although without full confidence, it can be assumed that the current government of Afghanistan does not want to spread its influence outside the country.

After the Taliban seized power, Afghanistan’s neighbours feared that violence would spread across their borders to hot spots such as Indian-ruled Kashmir or the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia. These concerns were exaggerated: as the Taliban strengthened their influence in the country, belligerence did not spread.

Countries in the region are also concerned about many other transnational jihadist groups operating from Afghanistan. Central Asian states are understandably focused on militants in the north of the country near their borders, who have long-standing ambitions to incite up-

risings in their home countries (Security Council Committee, 2023). Many of these small groups number no more than a few dozen fighters, but however tiny they may be, they remain a key priority for China, Russia, and Central Asian states, as the fighters in question often belong to Uyghur, Uzbek, Tajik, and other ethnic groups that have ties to the electorate in their respective countries (Security Council Committee, 2022). Partly for this reason, Afghanistan's neighbours have pushed the Taliban to form a government reflecting the country's ethnic diversity: they fear that a lack of inclusivity could provoke unrest among these ethnic armed groups that could theoretically go beyond borders (Nandajie, 2023).

For the Central Asian region, there is a problem of access to drinking water, which threatens both economic development and the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Proper use of water resources implies a rational distribution of the main waterways of the region, including the Amu Darya River. Due to the lack of drinking water in 2023, protests broke out in Kazakhstan (Mukhitkizy & Aitmukhanbet, 2023), local authorities in Kyrgyzstan called for moderate use of drinking water (Akhmatova, 2023), and residents of Uzbekistan were forced to use only drinking water for irrigation of agricultural land (Ergashev, 2024). This indicates the existing crisis of water resources in the region (Table 1).

Table 1. Projected level of water scarcity by 2040 on a scale of 0 to 5

Kyrgyzstan	4.93
Kazakhstan	4.66
Turkmenistan	4.30
Uzbekistan	4.19
Afghanistan	4.12
Tajikistan	3.44

Source: study by World Resources Institute (Luo et al., 2015)

Therefore, excluding the more or less moderate results of Tajikistan's water deficit and Afghanistan, which was considered due to the specifics of the study topic, four out of five countries in the Central Asian region are among the top thirty of more than 150 countries studied in terms of projected water shortages by 2040. The methodological basis of the rating consists in the fact that higher indicators, i.e. 5, indicate greater competition in water use relative to the available surface water resources.

In the context of the Taliban's involvement in an even greater water crisis in the Central Asian region, the rapid implementation of the Kosh Tepa canal project is evident. Jennifer Brick, the founding director of the University of Pittsburgh's Centre for Governance and Markets, noted (Rickleton, 2023) that in the past, certain projects related to both Afghanistan and Central Asia have contained elements of "win-win" for both sides, but the Kosh Tepa project does not contain any benefits for Central Asian governments. The Taliban's desire to change the water balance of the Amu Darya River is understandable, because the vast majority of farmers in the country rely only on rainwater, despite the fact that Afghan soils are very saline. However, such activities clearly show the direction of the internal political course of the Taliban, which is more focused on the problems of its internal voters, ignoring possible problems from the outside.

In early 2023, a delegation from Uzbekistan visited Afghanistan, where trade, economic, and infrastructure issues were discussed (Uzbek delegation visits Afghanistan, 2023). However, regarding the issues of water-energy cooperation, as indicated in the press release on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, only special attention was paid to this issue. The importance for the Uzbek authorities to have access to water was clearly outlined in the address of the president of Uzbekistan at the end of 2022 (Message from the President..., 2022), where soil degradation, desertification, water scarcity, and problems in providing the population

with drinking water were also outlined among a number of urgent problems for the state.

In addition, the President of Uzbekistan in 2023 noted that a new player in the water use process has appeared in the region, which is in no way connected with the countries of the region by certain obligations, which can significantly affect the water balance in Central Asia. That is why Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed (Mirziyoyev stated that CA..., 2023) to create a working expert group, which would include research institutes of Central Asian countries, but this proposal remained only "on paper", because as of mid-2024, no additional information was put forward on this issue. In response to these statements, one of the Taliban's senior political officials responded at the same time in 2023 (We do what we think is right..., 2023) that the concern of the Uzbek government would be understandable if the Taliban assumed any obligations under the treaties, but the Taliban did not accept any obligations. Such statements once again highlight the Taliban's disregard for any risks outside the country and the difficulty in resolving the crisis for the Central Asian government.

The problem of water distribution in the region was the main topic even at business forums dedicated to the development of trade and economic relations. An Afghan delegation visited Turkmenistan in March 2024 to participate in an exhibition of Afghan goods. However, during this visit, the Afghan delegation and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan touched upon the topic of water management, in particular, the importance of a scientifically based approach to the use of water resources of transboundary rivers, ensuring the availability of the most qualified personnel at facilities, and considering the needs and interests of all countries along transboundary rivers based on international law, the principles of good neighbourliness, mutual respect, equality, and transparency (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 2024). Last but not least, the focus on the availability of qualified personnel was associated with a

large-scale accident on the Kosh Tepa canal at the end of 2023, when due to design errors on the construction of the canal, its walls were destroyed and an artificial lake with a length of 9 km was formed (Qosh Tepa canal era, 2023).

Solving the problem of water scarcity requires the governments of Central Asia to consolidate the issue of including the Taliban in the process of international discussions on the future fate of the region's water resources. This is important, because the problem of water scarcity has existed before, and the construction of the Kosh Tepa canal is just another step towards increasing the region's dependence on cross-border rivers. Even within the framework of the forum (Regional initiatives try..., 2024) "Water, energy and food in Central Asia: partnerships and projects for sustainable development" in Kazakhstan in June 2024, the topic of at least minimal efforts to draw the attention of the Taliban to the problem of water distribution in the region was ignored, but experts from regional security structures repeatedly noted that it is the five governments of the Central Asian region that play a crucial role in solving the problem of water scarcity. In any case, the construction of the Kosh Tepa canal may take about six years, and given this, the governments of the Central Asian region still have time to build a constructive dialogue in a 5+1 format, where 5 are the governments of the region and 1 is the Taliban.

At the level of statements that could draw the attention of the Taliban to the rational distribution of water resources, the actions of the government of Uzbekistan should be noted. For example, at the summit of the Organisation of Turkic States in July 2024, Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated (CentralasianLIGHT.org, 2024) that the return of Afghanistan's gold and foreign exchange assets, which amount to approximately USD 9.4 billion, can significantly improve the country's social situation. He also added that the Uzbek authorities will continue to provide humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, which in April 2024 amounted to more than 150 tonnes of food, and in May – almost 100 water storage tanks. In addition, Central Asian governments could try to integrate Afghanistan, at least at the observer country level or with a different status, into the work of the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, which from its creation until mid-2024 operates based on the Agreement "On Co-operation in the Field of Joint Management of Use and Protection of Water Resources of Inter-State Sources" (1992).

The improvement of the security situation is closely linked to trade and economic ties in the region. In particular, the fact that oil supplies are extremely important for South Asia, and for the Central Asian region, it has been important for years to find new markets for buying and selling goods and services. Regional stability is possible only if there is a strategy for long-term economic integration. Moreover, integrating the Taliban into regional economic flows could strengthen the overall security architecture and make the behaviour of Afghanistan's political elite more predictable. However, this is hindered by economic sanctions that limit the amount of foreign investment in the country and an imperfect regulatory framework, which makes it almost impossible for the private sector to develop efficiently (The International Crisis Group, 2024).

The range of threats to the region can be traced most clearly in the briefing published by the European Parliament "The EU strategy on Central Asia: Towards a new momentum?" (Shreeves *et al.*, 2024). In particular, it notes that although the region is considered quite peaceful, it is increasingly facing threats to its stability. In the internal political discourse of countries, tension and discontent are increasingly growing due to inequality and quality of life, which are destabilising factors that led, for example, to the events of "Bloody January" in Kazakhstan and to the growth of popularisation in Kyrgyzstan. This is where the problems of poverty and the general lack of prospects for future life begin, which lead to the growing dependence of some groups of the population on extremist Islamist groups, which increases the risks of terrorism in the Central Asian region. Therefore, the return of the Taliban regime to power is a source of instability throughout the region, and especially for the authorities of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where the existing tension has led to repression in the regions of Karakalpakstan and Gorno-Badakhsha region. The climate change situation also has a very strong impact on regional stability, as according to the European Parliament, temperatures in Central Asia will rise on average more than in the world. This will lead to sustained and more frequent droughts, degradation of agricultural land, greater competition for water resources, and deterioration in the living standards of poor and marginalised communities. A positive factor is that the leaders of the Central Asian region meet every year for consultative meetings, but given the emergence of a new regional player in the face of the Taliban, its position should be considered, or involved in similar meetings at the highest level.

Summarising all of the above, the governments of the Central Asian region need, although without objective desire, to establish cooperation with the Taliban movement. The discussion of fair water distribution cannot take place without the participation of the real authorities in Afghanistan. In other words, the format may be similar to the 5+1 meetings that were initiated by the Chinese authorities in 2020 to better focus on cooperation with Central Asian governments. Accordingly, the regional authorities already have some experience in conducting negotiations in this format. The problem is that the Taliban authorities do not recognise the legal and international documents that were adopted by their predecessors. This indicates the urgent need to develop new treaties and agreements that will consider both the interests of the authorities in Afghanistan and the interests of the governments bordering them. Apart from diplomatic recognition, official government structures may note the importance of deepening cooperation with the Afghan authorities in international forums, as the Uzbek authorities do (CentralasianLIGHT.org, 2024). The decision of the Kazakh authorities to exclude the Taliban from the list of terrorist organisations is also indicative in this matter (Palyvoda, 2024). A representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan then said (Taliban welcomes Kazakhstan's..., 2024) that this step is significant progress in removing barriers and strengthening bilateral relations. Therefore, the governments of Central Asian states have both the experience and time to normalise relations with the new actor in international relations in the region.

Discussion

The Taliban movement, which gained power in Afghanistan, has become a challenge to security and order in the Central Asian region. In the light of these developments, the governments of the region are forced to reconsider their development strategies and transform their diplomatic relations, taking into consideration the range of threats in the field of terrorism, extremism, and watershed. Stability and security require coordination of efforts and work at the highest levels to prevent the negative impact of the Taliban's activities.

The paper under the authorship of C.J. Sullivan (2022) reported that the governments of the Central Asian republics reacted differently to the Taliban coming to power. This was also confirmed by the results of the study, since some governments actually immediately designated Afghanistan as a close and friendly people, while others did not recognise the Taliban and agreed to act exclusively within the framework of the UN. The study also highlighted the Taliban movement as a threat to the retention of power for the secular governments of the republics of the region. In this context, A. Schmitz (2022) added that on social media, the political model of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is portrayed as a kind of counter-model, revealing a trend towards the development of an Islamic identity that will be extremely difficult to stop through censorship and repression.

The problem of terrorism and extremism is considered one of the most serious in the region. Although there are not many cases of terrorist attacks, the Central Asian region is a potential target for ISIS, especially its regional unit Vilayat Khorasan. E. Lemon (2023) noted that some governments, through the prism of combating extremism, are trying to create a community of loyal citizens who will monitor each other and are unlikely to ever challenge the regime in the state. N. Tucker (2022) notes that at the time of the withdrawal of the military contingent from Afghanistan, there were no serious security threats to any of the states in the region, but over time, a wide range of unresolved internal problems made some citizens more sensitive to the calls of terrorist groups. A similar statement was contained in the message of the European Parliament on the strategy of interaction with the republics of the region. At the same time, the problem is that the population of Afghanistan is not only Pashtuns, but also a large number of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmens who immigrated to the Middle East in the 1990s and can lead an uprising against the secular governments of the Central Asian region. I.A. Shah (2020), although he did not investigate the threat of overthrow of secular regimes in the Central Asian region, confirmed in his study that about 90% of the population of Afghanistan is Pashtuns, Tajiks, Khazars, and Uzbeks.

In the context of ensuring both regional and national security, cooperation between the governments of the People's Republic of China and Pakistan was aimed at developing diplomatic and economic ties with the Taliban, and extending the Belt and Road initiative to the territory of Afghanistan, as noted by G. Ali (2022). In this case, A.K. Shams & N.S. Muhammad (2023) added that there is still no water distribution cooperation mechanism between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which creates regional tensions. The results of the study

highlighted the importance of involving the Taliban in international discussions, including on the issue of fair distribution of water resources.

Although the Taliban movement is inherently terrorist, there are also certain advantages for the governments of the Central Asian region. This is because there is some hostility between the Taliban movement and ISIS, as ISIS' plans to create a unified Islamic State in the region cannot be implemented due to Taliban policies. The Taliban movement itself is almost monoethnic, that is, it consists mainly of Pashtuns, the indigenous population of the country, and the composition of ISIS, on the contrary, is multiethnic. However, despite the fact that the Taliban fought ISIS, it continued to cooperate with international terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda or Jaish-e-Mohammed (Jones, 2020). Despite this, there are still concerns in the region that Afghanistan will become a haven for terrorist organisations, as noted by A. Vellante (2022). However, the existing struggle, as the results of the study showed, between the Taliban and Vilayat Khorasan, and therefore with ISIS in general, suggests that in order to strengthen its own influence in the Taliban region, it will be necessary to build both economic and political relations with the Central Asian region.

In addition, the threat to the secular regime in Tajikistan may be the terrorist group Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan, whose goal is to overthrow the regime of Emomali Rahmon. E. Marat (2022) also notes that the Tajik government strongly does not recognise the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and, in addition, indirectly supports the resistance movement in Panjshir, one of the 34 regions of Afghanistan.

Since the population of Afghanistan includes not only Pashtuns, but also a large number of Tajiks and Uzbeks, the secular governments of these countries may be threatened by their own ethnic population, which in the 1990s immigrated to the Middle East and joined terrorist groups. In this context, S. Ramachandran (2022) adds that if earlier Vilayat Khorasan relied on propaganda rhetoric, translating their works into Uzbek and Tajik, then in the 2020s their method developed into open violent aggression. At the official level, the Taliban's failure to comply with the agreement that Afghanistan will not become a haven for terrorist groups was noted in a UN report in June 2023, according to S. Shay (2024).

What also adds to the particular concern about security in the region is the problem of fair water distribution. This issue is particularly important given the rapid climate change and the fact that on average in the Central Asian region, temperatures will rise higher than in the rest of the world. L. Hao *et al.* (2022) noted that all five countries in the region are facing an energy and food crisis, which creates problems in achieving sustainable development goals. In this case, E.B. Hessami (2023) rightly noted that the population of Afghanistan is facing poor public water management, and the authorities are unable to respond to climate change and population growth in Central Asia, which is why about 20 million Afghans do not have sufficient resources to survive, and about 6 million are on the verge of starvation. The results of the study showed that to solve this problem, the Taliban began construction of the Kosh Tepa canal, which significantly worsens water

distribution for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. An additional threat is the fact that the canal is being built on the Amu Darya River, which accounts for more than 50% of the river flow in Afghanistan, according to M. Hanifi (2024).

M.N. Haidari (2024) examined the relationship between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan and stated that they were shaped both by geographical proximity and shared ethnic and cultural ties. In this context, given the results of the study, governments in the Central Asian region could take a more thorough approach to regional cooperation with the Taliban. In particular, it could involve the Afghan authorities in the work of the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, which sets the percentage of water intake for each of the countries in the Central Asian region. However, the difficulty is that the Taliban leadership does not adhere to the international treaties and conventions signed by the previous government, as also noted by M.Y.A. Kadir & S. Nurhaliza (2023).

Thus, the analysis of the results of the study and their comparison with the papers by other researchers drew attention not only to the security situation between Afghanistan and the Central Asian region, but also to Afghan-Pakistani relations. In addition, it was important to understand the critical significance of the Amu Darya river basin for the population of Afghanistan, and to confirm that the Taliban movement does not recognise the international legal treaties signed by the predecessors of the current government.

Conclusions

It has been investigated that governments in the Central Asian region have had different reactions to the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan. The Tajik authorities have stated that the Taliban cannot be trusted in any case, because they violate the rights of national minorities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan noted the need to create an inclusive government and respect for the norms of international law, but in 2024, by the decision of the Kazakh authorities, the Taliban was excluded from the list of terrorist organisations. Non-recognition of the Taliban was also the position of the government in Kyrgyzstan. The situation with the governments of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan is somewhat different. In general, their position was that Afghanistan is a full part of Central Asia and governments will help them to strengthen bilateral relations.

The results of the study showed that the Central Asian region, in accordance with the secular state regimes established in it, can be an object of influence of international terrorist groups. However, it is in Afghanistan that among the dominant ethno-linguistic groups there are Uzbeks and Tajiks who can take action to overthrow the regimes of the region. The example of the activation of Tehrik-i-Taliban Tajikistan as a threat to the government of Tajikistan is illustrative.

It is stated that in the Central Asian region, along with a sharp climate change, temperatures will rise on average more than in the rest of the world. This can trigger severe and frequent droughts, and therefore a partial decline in the agricultural sector. In this context, the construction of the Kosh Tapa canal by the Afghan authorities on the Amu Darya River, one of the main sources of water distribution in the region, is a threat. General recommendations for reducing the risks of coming to power by the Taliban are attempts by the governments of the region to draw the attention of the Taliban to cooperation in the field of fair distribution of water resources, since construction, which began in 2022, will last about 6 years. Thus, the regional authorities still have time to develop mechanisms for involving the Taliban in the work of the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea.

The limitations of the study were the partial secrecy of Turkmenistan's information sources. In addition, the position of governments regarding the active construction of the Kosh-Tepa canal was not fully understood, because all statements were only declarative in nature, and negotiations with the Taliban during the business forum in Turkmenistan did not lead to positive developments. Further research on this topic may take a closer look at the future activities of regional governments in relation to infrastructure projects implemented by the Taliban. In addition, it may be useful to review the experience of Afghanistan's cooperation with other countries in the region, such as Pakistan or India, and highlight the best practices of bilateral cooperation. The Taliban movement as a challenge to the political order in Central Asia could have a significant impact on world and European security policy.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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