

## **Kazakstan Builds Bridges With Taleban**

**Author:** [Adil Kojikhov](#)

Astana moves closer to establishing ties with the ascendant Taleban movement

Kazakstan has become the latest Central Asian state to try to reach an accommodation with the Taleban following the Islamic movement's recent military victories in Afghanistan.

Astana, which has in the past accused the Taleban of threatening the region, has held a series of meetings with representatives of the radical Muslim organisation - the most recent of which took place in Islamabad last week.

The Kazak authorities say they are ready for dialogue with the Taleban which now controls more than 90 per cent of Afghan territory, following its capture of the Northern Alliance stronghold Taloqan two months ago.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - who share a border with Afghanistan - appear to have already adopted a more pragmatic approach towards the Islamic movement since the Taloqan victory, which brought fighting closer to the Central Asia states.

It's taken Kazakstan longer to try to reach an accommodation with the Taleban for two reasons. Firstly, it does not share a border with Afghanistan. And secondly, recognition of the organisation's influence in the region risks upsetting Moscow, one of the main sponsors of the Northern Alliance.

Russia's opposition to the Taleban, however, appears to be softening. Moscow diplomats have met the movement's representatives unofficially on several occasions.

The first public signs of Kazak overtures towards the Islamists came earlier this month following a meeting between the military ruler of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, and President Nazarbaev in Astana.

"Kazakstan is ready to establish contact and have talks with all groups and movements in Afghanistan including the Taleban," Nazarbaev said after the talks.

Prime Minister Kasymjomart Tokaev went even further, saying that Kazakstan regards the Islamists as one of the most powerful military and political forces in Afghanistan.

"Regardless of what administration Afghanistan will have in future, the Taleban are likely to play a leading role," he said. "Therefore international community should not ignore them."

Officially, Musharraf's visit was part of his attempts to establish good relations with Pakistan's neighbours, but many analysts believe its real purpose was to persuade Kazakstan to move closer to the Taleban. A senior Saudi politician also recently visited Astana with apparently the same goal.

"These high profile visits from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan - two of only three countries who officially accepted legitimacy of Taleban's rule in Afghanistan - can not be just a coincidence," one local political

observer said.

The Kazak leadership has indicated that it sees the radical Muslim movement as a force capable of ending the chaos in Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Erlan Idrisov said he believed it would be able to "restore peace and order and pave way for the country's integration into international community".

Astana's rapprochement with its former enemy has met with some domestic criticism.

Several newspapers argued the move would damage the country's reputation.

An editorial in the newspaper Panorama accused the Kazak government of following a short-sighted policy and warned that having an authoritarian Taleban-run state would set a bad example for the young democracies of the Central Asian region.

Other analysts suggest the authorities hope improving ties with the Taleban will curb the activities of regional Islamic groups suspected of getting assistance from the movement.

Few doubt that Astana would have changed its Afghan policy without Moscow's approval. Indeed, some analysts suspect that Russia wants to use Kazakhstan as an intermediary in its efforts to establish links with the Islamists. They say the issue was raised during Putin 's recent talks with Nazarbaev in Moscow.

In any negotiations with the Taleban Moscow will demand that the Northern Alliance be allowed to retain control of the northern territories in Afghanistan which it currently occupies. This would enable the Kremlin to maintain some degree of influence in the country.

Russia clearly fears that the anti-Taleban forces are facing defeat and that a deal of some sort should be brokered before it is too late "It appears that Russia wants to bring the Northern Alliance and the Taleban to the negotiating table while the anti-Taleban Akhmad Shah Massoud's forces are still able to fight," said Vladislav Yuritsin, an analyst for newspaper Vremya Po.

Adil Kojikhov and Tolgonai Umbetalieva are political analysts in Almaty.

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