

Uzbekistan Seeks Dialogue With Taleban

Author: [Galima Bukharbaeva](#)

Uzbekistan attempts to build bridges with the Taleban after their recent victory over the Northern Alliance.

Uzbekistan is prepared to end its hostility towards Taleban following the movement's recent military successes against the Northern Alliance.

Regardless of its aims and policies, Uzbekistan now recognises the Taleban as a major political force in Afghanistan, Uzbek Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdulaziz Kamilov announced.

"Uzbekistan is prepared to enter into dialogue with whichever government is recognized by the people of Afghanistan," he said after a meeting between Uzbek and Taleban ambassadors in Islamabad on October 1.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov added that finding a common language and living in peace with Afghanistan was a political necessity. Policy towards the Taleban would now be one of "pragmatic constructivism", he said.

Uzbekistan's change of heart towards the Taleban is prompted by the reality on the ground. Until now the Commonwealth of Independent States have supported the Northern Alliance forces of Akhmad Shakh Massoud, but recent military success have brought territories on the Uzbek border under the control of the Taleban, who are now estimated to control over 95 per cent of Afghan territory.

Karimov simply cannot risk a hostile neighbour so close, according to Uzbek analysts.

The Taleban's recent success is the result of increased assistance from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan, according to Mukimjon Kirgizbaev of the Academy of State and Social Construction. "They want to see the situation in Afghanistan resolved, to have a state with a single leader," he said.

Kirgizbaev predicts that Uzbekistan will now use economic incentives as a bargaining chip in its relations with the Taleban. These are likely to come in the form of electrical energy, which Uzbekistan provides to northern parts of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has not paid its energy bill since 1993, running up a debt which stood at \$77 million by the beginning of 1999, when Uzbekistan cut off supplies.

The Taleban will also be offered an agreement on the construction of a gas pipeline passing through Afghan territory, from Turkmenistan to Pakistan. Such a pipeline would be very profitable for the Taleban.

However, some analysts argue that it is premature to write off the Northern Alliance. As soon as snow fall begins in about ten days, the military situation will be frozen on the ground. So if the Taleban wants to drive home its advantage, it would need to launch a final major military operation before then, according to an Afghani diplomat from exiled President Burkhoniddin Rabani's entourage.

Massoud has fought his way out of tighter corners before, according to the diplomat, who questioned the wisdom of Uzbekistan's overtures towards the Taleban.

However, political analyst Shukhrat Khurramov argues that Uzbekistan has no alternative. The country shares a border with Afghanistan, where the Taleban are now clearly in the ascendancy.

Having urged the world community to focus its attention on Afghanistan since 1993, it seems that Uzbekistan now wishes to see a quick end to the conflict there. This necessitates engaging one camp in constructive dialogue - even if that camp is the Taleban.

Galima Bukharbaeva is IWPR Project Editor in Tashkent

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