

KABUL AND TEHRAN SYNCHRONIZE TRANSPORT DIPLOMACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR CENTRAL ASIA

Nargiza Umarova

The Islamic Republic of Iran is strengthening the Afghan dimension of its transport diplomacy, while also developing partnerships with Central Asian states. Several notable events have recently occurred in this area, and a collective analysis of these developments demonstrates Afghanistan's active involvement in the expanding network of Eurasian overland routes. China is providing practical support for this within the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing's strategy involves diversifying east-west logistics routes via Central Asia to minimize the growing risks of uncertainty in maritime shipping. Uzbekistan is expected to benefit particularly from this progress, as it prioritizes southern transit corridors and maintains pragmatic policies towards both Afghanistan and Iran.

BACKGROUND: In June 2026, an Afghan delegation led by Deputy Minister for Railways, Mawlawi Mohammad Ishaq Sahibzada, [visited](#) Iran to discuss transport logistics infrastructure projects, including the construction of the Herat–Mazar-i-Sharif railway. The parties discussed technical specifications, standards, financing mechanisms and the stages of project implementation. Prior to the meeting in Tehran, media reports had indicated that Afghan commercial banks were [willing](#) to invest in the new railway line connecting the provinces of Balkh and Herat, estimated to cost US\$ 780 million. It was later revealed that Iranian companies would [undertake](#) the construction of the infrastructure facility in exchange for participating in the development of Afghanistan's mineral resources.

The Herat–Mazar-i-Sharif transport line will serve as an extension of the cross-border trade route that originates in the Iranian city of Khaf, and will be a key component of the Afghan section of the Five Nations Railway Corridor (FNRC), which is approximately 2,100 km long. The FNRC extends to Kashgar in China and utilizes a uniform 1,435 mm standard gauge, crossing the borders of two Central Asian states: Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In a global context, this will create a more competitive continental East-West Corridor, in which Afghanistan and its northern neighbors will play a pivotal connecting role. The strategic importance of the Herat-Mazar-i-Sharif railway project is determined by its potential to connect Iran and Türkiye with the Central Asian republics and China via Afghanistan. It is worth noting that Ankara is a third party to the agreement on the joint construction of a railway to Mazar-i-Sharif, which was [signed](#) in Istanbul during the 36th regional meeting of the International Union of Railways in October 2025.

In light of the Strait of Hormuz crisis triggered by the military standoff with the U.S., it has become critical necessity for Tehran to establish additional transport routes to China, one of its largest trading partners. Beijing is interested in both the Iranian market and the Islamic Republic's extensive transit capabilities. On

May 25, 2025, the first freight train [departed](#) from Xi'an, China, bound for the Iranian dry port of Aprin, marking the official launch of direct land transport between the two countries. The Xi'an-Aprin railway route passes through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, making use of the Uzen (Kazakhstan)-Bereket (Turkmenistan)-Gorgan (Iran) railway line. This line was opened in 2014 and forms part of the eastern route of the International North-South Transport Corridor.

Within the framework of the six-party meeting mechanism for heads of railway administrations, a China-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Türkiye/EU railway corridor is being [developed](#). This involves Uzbekistan in container transport along the southern branch of the East-West Corridor. This development forms part of the wider initiative to establish the China-Europe Railway Express Economic Corridor under the Belt and Road Initiative. The expansion of the network of freight routes connecting Chinese and Central Asian cities should also be viewed in this context. Since early 2026, several regular and test block trains have been launched from industrial and economic centers in China, such as [Chongqing](#), [Sichuan](#), [Jiangsu](#), [Hubei](#) and [Xining](#), bound for Central Asian countries, with the potential to extend into Iran and beyond.

IMPLICATIONS: The practical progress being made on constructing the Herat-Mazar-i-Sharif railway line, alongside the already operational Khaf-Herat railway, reflects Iran's desire to diversify its freight transport corridors, particularly in view of the ongoing risks of disruption to maritime shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran is therefore prioritizing the expansion of rail connections with Afghanistan and its Central Asian partners. Implementing the Herat-Mazar-i-Sharif infrastructure project is central to achieving this objective, as [announced](#) by the Iranian government in August 2026.

In light of the escalation of the Afghan-Pakistani conflict, the rail link between Iran and Afghanistan has given Kabul a significant opportunity to access the markets of the Persian Gulf states, Türkiye and the EU, offsetting the costs resulting from the temporary lack of access to the seaports of neighboring Pakistan. This has also boosted Iranian-Afghan trade, with an annual volume [reaching](#) US\$ 3.6 billion. Similarly, bilateral freight traffic has sharply increased. From March 2025 to March 2026, over [640,000 tons](#) of cargo were transported via the Khaf-Herat railway, compared to fewer than [15,000 tons](#) during the previous period. Monthly volumes have already approached 130,000 tons, and projections indicate [growth](#) to 160,000 tons per month, or 1.5 million tons per year.

It is estimated that, once the Khaf-Herat railway line is fully operational, the annual volume of interstate freight traffic could [increase](#) to 3 million tons, and transit freight to 1.7 million tons. These figures are in line with Tehran's ambitious plan to increase the volume of cargo transported by rail to [60 million tons](#) per year. This goal will be achieved by developing North-South and

East-West international transport corridors, which will require close cooperation with neighboring countries, including those in Central Asia. Tehran has already announced plans to increase rail freight traffic with Kazakhstan to [5 million tons](#) per year, with Turkmenistan to [4 million tons](#), and with Uzbekistan to [2 million tons](#).

In order to speed up the transportation process and remove the physical barriers hindering the movement of cargo, Iran has reached agreements with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan regarding the passage of its wagons, which should ensure their free movement throughout the CIS. However, these agreements have not yet been implemented.

CONCLUSIONS: A review of Afghanistan's foreign policy activities over the past few months reveals a noticeable synchronization of efforts between Kabul and Tehran in promoting the construction of a railway line to Mazar-i-Sharif. This project would establish an additional transport link to Central Asia via the Uzbek border. In this context, the [visit](#) of an Afghan technical delegation to Tashkent on July 22, 2026, is noteworthy. During negotiations with the Chairman of the Board of Uzbekistan Temir Yullari, a joint-stock company, the parties held detailed discussions on commencing engineering surveys to prepare a feasibility study for the Trans-Afghan (Kabul) Railway Corridor, as well as the possible transfer of project documentation and a preliminary feasibility study for the construction of the Herat-Mazar-i-Sharif railway to the Afghan side. The parties also [addressed](#) the modernization of infrastructure at Hairatan station, the construction of new warehouse complexes and an additional 1,650-meter access track at Naibabad station, which is located along the Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif route. In April 2026, Uzbek specialists had already [laid](#) 1,000 meters of access tracks on this section to simplify and accelerate cargo handling.

On July 27, an official meeting [took place](#) between Afghanistan's Minister of Public Works, Mullah Mohammad Issa Sani, and Uzbekistan's Deputy Prime Minister, Jamshid Khodjayeov. According to Afghan sources, the Uzbek authorities expressed an interest in investing in the railway network between Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. However, this information has not been officially confirmed by Tashkent.

If Uzbekistan is intent on contributing to the implementation of the new project, it could encourage the country to participate in developing the Five Nations Road. Although the original route was designed to bypass Uzbekistan, the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway offers the potential to connect with the FNRC via a spur extending into Tajikistan through the Sughd section. This would enable the route to bypass the congested transport hub in Tashkent, shortening the journey to Afghanistan by several hundred kilometers.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Nargiza Umarova is a Head of the [Center for Strategic Connectivity](#) at the Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS), University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED), and an analyst at the

Non-governmental Research Institution 'Knowledge Caravan', Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Her research activities focus on developments in Central Asia, trends in regional integration, and the influence of great powers on this process. She also explores Uzbekistan's current policy on the creation and development of international transport corridors. She can be contacted at **nargiza.umarova@iais.uz**.