

Global Geopolitical Dynamics and Prospects for Afghanistan's Regional Connectivity

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Abstract

This article focuses on postulating Afghanistan in the context of geopolitics and its role as a regional ‘connector’ in the emerging global scenario. With the shift in geopolitics, the indicators of the New Great Game also suggest the emerging role of Afghanistan in the context of regional connectivity. However, the discordant society of Afghanistan, the paradoxical nature of domestic politics, and the deteriorating security situation in the country remain vital challenges in this regard. Nevertheless, this article argues that the ‘resetting’ of the international and regional politics provides a broader scope for Afghanistan, in becoming a regional transit and connectivity hub for South and Central Asia to Europe and Middle East. Through intra-regional trade and transit, this connectivity will not only ensure political and economic stability of Afghanistan but will also contribute to establishing sustainable peace in the country. In doing so, the article examines various regional developmental projects to explore the potential role of Afghanistan, following the U.S. withdrawal, towards regional peace and stability. Furthermore, it contributes to signifying the political and economic integration of Afghanistan within the region. It concludes that peace and stability are necessary milestones to be achieved for Afghanistan to serve as a ‘regional connectivity hub’.

Keywords

Regional connectivity, New Great Game, geoeconomics, Afghanistan, Central Asia

Introduction

The new debates of contemporary international relations constitute the changing dynamics of state relations based on an integrated global structure. The existing world order of economic interdependence and the rise of new alliances, particularly the economic and energy interdependence among various regions, indicate that a major geopolitical shift is taking place. Economic potential, resource sufficiency, market-friendliness, trading feasibility, and most significantly, the maritime connectivity of the countries and regions have become important to geopolitical studies. The notions of geopolitics — the ‘New Great Game’ and the ‘rise of Asia’ — are also prominent

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in academia. The new regional agreements have taken place, forging new alliances with shared common interests. China's emerging role in the world economy is also repeatedly being discussed in the context of challenging the U.S. hegemony and its unilateral character.

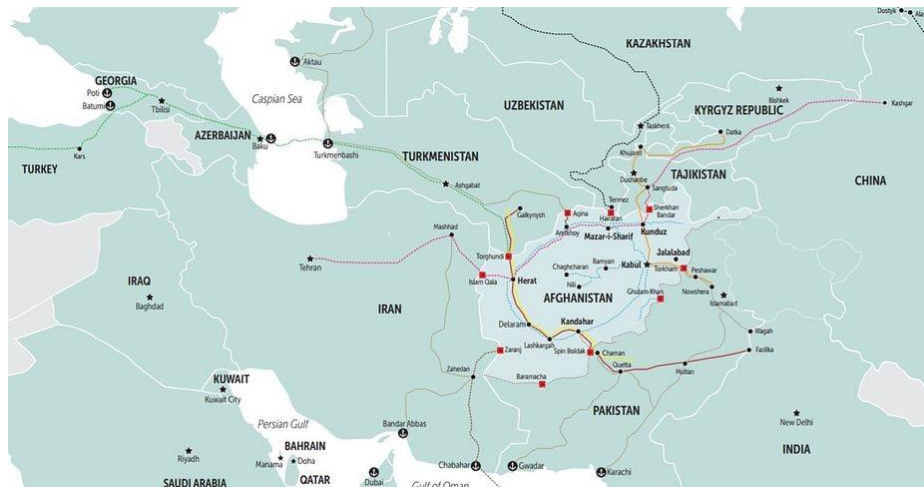
On the other hand, the reemergence of Russia has contributed to the surfacing of a new concern for the existing powers to rethink their global political and economic strategies. The central Asian region, with its extensive fuel and energy resources and hydroelectric power, has become fundamental for the great powers to realize their interests (Cornell & Starr, 2018). Its access to the major regions (such as Southeast Asia, Middle East, South Asia, and Europe) provides a great transit opportunity — spotlighting its distinct regional character. Apart from Central Asia, with rich mineral and natural resources, human potential, accessible sea routes, and being a gateway to other major regions globally, South Asia also has its unique significance. Being the hub of the world oldest civilizations and the home of healthy global cultures, South Asia has secured a prominent place in international affairs. Afghanistan — the country that connects South Asia to Central Asia — is, therefore, of significant importance.

Afghanistan, a landlocked 'rogue' state that possesses a history of volatile conflicts and violence, has remained a hub of the clashing interests of the major powers throughout the centuries. Geopolitically, Afghanistan holds a significant position in South Asia. Being an energy bridge between Central and South Asia, it has all the prospects to become a valuable junction point for energy and trade flow. It is situated at the crossroads of major trade routes with the potential of being a transit economic zone between Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Unfortunately, the security complications and its belligerent character remain an obstruction for its active regional role.

Since Cold War and especially after 9/11, Afghanistan has become the nucleus of global strategic and security concerns. The United States — after fighting for almost two decades of indecisive war against terrorism, Al-Qaeda network and Taliban, and with resultant inconclusive peace talks — is now eager to leave Afghanistan to its own fate. Since the U.S. withdrawal process from Afghanistan has begun, the country's future and the region are broadly being discussed in academia. The post-withdrawal Afghanistan is a major conundrum not only for the regional countries but also for the connecting regions. There have been efforts by scholars to situate the strategic role of Afghanistan in the context of regional connectivity.

The problem under consideration here is that the post-U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is a haunting scenario where the relapse of country into an anarchic and violent setting apprehends regional and international peace. Moreover, the shattered security and political environment in Afghanistan will potentially affect the regional integration projects of the neighboring states and regions. There is a consensus in academia and policymakers that to avoid a post-Cold War-like situation in Afghanistan, the country should redefine its role with structural changes required by the current integrated international order. Hence, only a politically stable and united Afghanistan can ensure the smooth transaction of trade and integration under the contemporary global agenda. In this context, the international relations scholarship argues that the current geopolitical order presents a broader opportunity for interconnectedness & regional integration for regional/continental states.

Map 1: Regional Connectivity in South and Central Asia



Source: Haidari (2018).

Unfortunately, despite its geopolitical significance, Afghanistan is a landlocked country with a fragmented nation, feudal society, ethnic divides, uncertain future, and astigmatic felonious character. The challenging political and security environment has never been friendly to major economic activities/projects. The tribal cleavages, the Taliban rule, and frequent wars largely prohibited the investors from taking stakes in the country. This study is significant as it provides an insightful analysis of problems engraved in Afghanistan that have hampered development and international economic input. It elucidates the challenges Afghanistan has faced throughout, which have also damaged its reputation in the world community. This article argues that to execute regional connectivity and in-place projects of cooperation and transaction through Afghanistan, it needs to contrive rationally with its grass root problems of nationhood, extremism, violence, and wars as only a stable, secure, and politically legitimate Afghanistan can become a responsible actor entertaining regional connectivity. These question that arises here is how Afghanistan can redefine its role from a war-torn country into a regional connectivity transit hub and what the challenges and prospects of regional integration are for Afghanistan. Gauging the role of Afghanistan in regional and international affairs after reviewing vast literature on the topic, this research contributes to signifying the use of the geographic location of Afghanistan with a broader scope of trade and transit connectivity policy options for post-withdrawal Afghanistan.

Significant scholarship has been devoted to understanding the strategic location of Afghanistan and its potential role in regional connectivity. Similarly, a wide range of scholarship is available that examines the challenging features of Afghanistan. This research seeks a pragmatic approach for Afghanistan to legitimize its political character by establishing workable government machinery. There are many apprehensions about an unstable and violent Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal. The inconclusive peace talks and the resurrection of the Taliban in Afghanistan are alarming, and its neighboring countries are concerned about peace in the country for their globally integrated economic and political interests. In the post-

withdrawal Afghanistan, the current geopolitical order will have a far-reaching impact not only on Afghanistan but also on the region.

This article also postulates various economic and energy projects that can provide Afghanistan with a chance to align with these developmental projects for its economic development and address and resolve its longstanding problems. In light of the integration agenda, this will also help create a space for its political stability and economic growth, and transform its role from a terrorist-ridden state into a productive and friendly transit route connecting the world's most vibrant regions.

Conceptual Framework

The Post-Cold War world order transformed the patterns of inter-state relations and altered the power dynamics of various regions. Among the multiple channels of connectivity and interdependence, 'regionalism' has remained a vibrant and debated thought. The conventional concept of regionalism focuses on sharing sovereignty and territory through political collaboration for common economic, political, and strategic interests (Soderbaum, 2013). The essence of this concept of regionalism was based on liberal assumptions of cooperation and harmony among the state and non-state actors for common trading interests and commercial gains. The contemporary idea of regionalism is much broader, enhancing its coterie through cultural, environmental, and security regionalism as 'neo-functionalism' explains. The neo-functionalist approach views 'regional integration' through the lenses of regional *institutions* and *integration* that accelerate cooperation among states and drive them towards positive spillover outcomes (Niemann, Lefkofridi & Schmitter, 2019). The contemporary integrated complex world order prefers regional and global interdependence to minimize antagonism and aggression, and accelerate harmony among states through economic and political diplomacy.

The process of regional integration and connectivity, described by neo-functionalism, advocates that in a contemporary world system, the interdependence of multiple actors prefers to secure welfarist objectives through political and economic cooperation of the regional actors (Haas, 2004). Haas advocates that the process of regional integration results from three interactive factors that include: (i) growing economic interdependence; (ii) effective role on an international organization in conflict resolution; and (iii) supranational market rules. He further argues that regional integration postulates spillover effects of these three interactive factors, which also establish the feasibility of integrating economically with other sectors. Under the neo-functionalist agenda, it has been argued that the most attractive contribution of this integration is the creation of various platforms other than economic bargains. These platforms or organizations positively resolve many disputed problems that may otherwise harm integration (Haas, 1961). In the framework of regional integration and its interactive characteristics, as illustrated by Haas (2004), Afghanistan finds sufficient room to ameliorate its character from a vicious state into a strategic chokepoint. If it succeeds in overcoming its internal security issues, political cleavages, and violence, Afghanistan can join the international settings.

The Geopolitics and Afghanistan

The relevance of the regional role of Afghanistan as a bridging actor can also be examined from the geopolitical theory of international relations. The geopolitical framework believes that the industrial revolution and the advanced means of

communication and transportation (such as railroads, maritime extensions, and sea routes) would determine the geographic features of the land and the regions. Such an emerging geographical setting is expected to influence the character and function of the states and shape the emerging international order (Deudney, 1983). The geopolitical theorists value the military and economic factors as important contributors to modern geography-based international relations settings.

As a regional connecting actor, the role of Afghanistan can best be examined through Nicholas Spykman's 'Rimland theory' of geopolitics introduced, in 1942, as a counter geopolitical description to Mackinder's 'Heartland Theory' (Deudney, 1983). Mackinder's heartland theory postulates that world politics is ruled by the strong maritime states that can control interior Eurasia (Eastern Europe; also known as the core of Eurasia). Spykman's 'Rimland theory' (or inner crescent), on the other hand, focuses on the coastal and peripheral states with vital geographical position and a large share of world resources which have a more influential role in world politics. These peripheral states and regions are Iran, China, Afghanistan, Asia Minor, Arab countries, Southeast Asia, and Korea; which are mostly the buffer states that can connect with both the sea and land 'power' (Cahnman, 1943).

Contemporary geopolitical theorists describe the very multipolar interaction of states that are well interspersed with economic interdependence, cultural diversity, and international socialization; relating all countries for their greater common well-being (Jianqun, 2018). Their assumption relies on a coordinated role of regions and states that can grow together and resolve their interdependent issues with mutual cooperation. The cooperation, they believe, facilitates many other global issues to be resolved with effective diplomacy. This perspective creates a margin for Afghanistan to become a regional actor; for which peace and stability are desired, followed by the developmental projects. Being an important Eurasian land corridor and a potential trading hub, the geopolitical and geostrategic location of Afghanistan can play its role in blooming its domestic market and the inflow of foreign investments that can subsequently decrease the dependency of its economy on foreign aid and loans. As a regional connecting point, Afghanistan has the margin to bridge a network among the surrounding regions that can facilitate acceleration on the trade routes. It can also minimize the antagonistic attitudes of rival states in the regions, as interconnectedness or linkages can divert rival agendas to commercial interests. In this conceptual framework, under the agenda of regional integration and geopolitics, the regional connectivity through Afghanistan has a broader scope to enhance the importance of Afghanistan in South Asia and beyond. Through the connectivity network of states, the economic interdependence and the trade stakes would yield avenues for the economic growth and development of Afghanistan. It is likely to generate new opportunities for investment and trade from other countries and give the landlocked Afghanistan access to the seas and warm waters (Sweet et al., 2001).

The Regional Role of Afghanistan during the Cold War and Post-Cold War Afghanistan

As a regional connectivity hub, Afghanistan holds a historical role in trading since ancient times. The old Silk Road provided Afghanistan with a standout position, connecting the South and Central Asia regions to Europe and the Middle East. During the Cold War (the 1950s-1990s), the power politics between the USA & USSR affected the political and economic position of Afghanistan through their assistance schemes, pursuing their respective ideological goals. It benefited Afghanistan — the

country with low social indicators and a poor stagnant economy — less and the Cold War rivals more (Byrd, 2012). The Afghan economy was, for the very first time, regulated under the communist agenda by Daud Khan. Although the average growth rate remained low during the latter part of the Cold War (followed by the Soviet invasion in 1979), foreign aid made the Afghan economy functional from the private economic sector to the socialist economic sector. During that time, Afghanistan and USSR signed a series of projects that included physical infrastructure development, including roads, airport (Bagram airport), and Salang Tunnel in the Hindu Kush mountains (Siddiqui & Butt, 2014). Soon, this Soviet-Afghan economic partnership turned into a Soviet military adventure with the penetration of Soviet military forces in Afghanistan (Matinuddin, 1991). The Soviet-Afghan military cooperation proved to be short-lived, as the United States perceived it as an invitation to confront communist expansion in South Asia at priority. With the help of Pakistan and its military alliance, the United States poured extensive economic and military aid to train and equip ‘Mujahedeen’ — an Afghan youth militia to fight Soviet military forces (Siddiqui & Butt, 2014). The Cold War was a complex political manifestation for Afghanistan. The enmity of the two Cold War powers (USA & USSR) set the stage for war in Afghanistan, squandering the country politically, economically, socially, and broadly at the human level. The war ended with the collapse of the Soviet communist block, leaving Afghanistan a shattered rocky state.

The Soviet disintegration changed the political, social, and economic dynamics of Afghanistan. The United States became indifferent after the Soviet withdrawal, and with no proper exit-plan, pushed the desolated Afghanistan into a more disastrous situation than ever (Siddiqui & Butt, 2014). The internal tribal cleavages, the Taliban, and various ethnic factions in Afghanistan twitched the country for their vested interests; leading to chaos and violence. Furthermore, the 9/11 events laid down a causal impact on world affairs in general and on Afghanistan in particular, suspecting the country as a hub of terrorism. Following the 9/11 incidents, the U.S. President George Bush launched a military strike against Al-Qaeda in 2001. The U.S.-led war against terrorism and the Al-Qaeda network wrecked the *normal* living environment in Afghanistan.

Since 9/11, the subsequent U.S.-led war, and the implementation of the Bush doctrine for Afghan peace and reconstruction, the United States and the world community took measures to transform the Afghan society with increasing economic development and a stable social and economic environment. Post-9/11, Afghanistan adopted free-market economy, assisted by the United States and its allies. The U.S. efforts to building Afghanistan into a stable working economy and a peaceful political entity in the Asian region made it pertinent to benefit from its geostrategic location, from a regional connectivity perspective. Unfortunately, in almost two decades, the United States could not bring the desired results, and neither a legitimate government nor peace could be established in Afghanistan.

‘New Great Game’: Afghanistan as a Regional Connectivity Hub

The world order is in transformation, and there is an exclusive debate about the fading away of power from the U.S.-led North to the rising Asian powers. This brought to the surface the new actors, such as India, China, Russia, Turkey, Japan, Iran, and Central Asia, as powerful actors with their influential role in world politics (often termed as the ‘New Great Game’; see e.g., Edwards, 2003). Geographically circumscribed but salient to the point of connectivity of major regions of the world,

Afghanistan has remained central to international politics throughout the centuries. If stabilized, Afghanistan (being an important actor of the New Great Game) holds the prospects to become a trade-crossroad and a notable supplier of resources for the global economy. The proximity of Afghanistan has already contributed to the country being an ancient focal point for trade routes and travelling for major powers. It borders Iran (in the west), Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan- Tajikistan (in the north), Pakistan (in the south and east), and China (in the far northeast); enhancing its strategic significance as the 'Heart of Asia' (Ghiasy & Saedi, 2014).

Asia is the largest continent with the longest coastal line, is the most populated among the seven continents, and also is the birthplace of various civilizations. Its connectivity with Europe makes it relevant for discussion. The geostrategic and geopolitical significance of Afghanistan made it salient to the world-renowned 'Khyber Pass' trade route, the Silk Road, and most suitable strategic military access to the U.S.-NATO allies. Though landlocked, Afghanistan can build a 'regional hub/hegemon' alongside Iran, Russia, China, and Pakistan. This can be achieved through multiple agreements pertaining to the power sector, energy resources, and cargo facility for Asia, particularly for Central and South Asia to other vital regions. Furthermore, the unique geographic location enhances its importance to become a natural hub for access through roads, energy pipelines, electric supply connections, and railroads. These linkages will strengthen the scope of Afghanistan as a regional *connecting* actor benefiting Central and South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the future emerging course of world order through rising economic powers such as China, Russia, India, Iran, and Turkey (Starr, Kuchins & Sanderson, 2010).

Challenges

The regional context of Afghanistan is quite advantageous not only for the country itself but can also be the most viable bridging and accessible route to other relevant regions. However, this is linked with many challenges and opportunities at the same time (Akhtar, 2019). There is a series of internal and external challenges for Afghanistan to become self-reliant. The internal cleavages have played a negative role in splintering Afghan society; the external obstructions have ravaged the social fabric in Afghanistan. Lamentably, Afghanistan remains in turmoil due to strategic rivalries of various powers and regional states. The wars caused disorder in the Afghan society, making it a dubious environment for the Afghans. In these circumstances, some ground-rooted factors need to be addressed to make Afghanistan a robust and stable state that is convenient for smooth trade and transaction activity.

Social Deprivation and Fragmentation

Afghanistan is a mountainous country with the majority of the rural population living in remote areas, with minimal access to everyday resourceful life and markets. They are largely deprived of developmental postures that the contemporary globalized international order has introduced. A bulk of Afghan nationals also fled to the neighboring countries to save their academic and professional careers and make their living possible. The series of local and foreign wars have damaged the economic stability of the country. It has also been well explored that the foreign aid-dependent economy of Afghanistan has failed to deliver to the socially deprived citizens. Moreover, the poor economic conditions has harnessed illicit trade, drug trafficking,

smuggling, narcotics business, and militant groups in Afghanistan. Hence, the mentioned aspects remain lethal to Afghan national integration and unified society.

Afghanistan faces a crisis of 'national unity'. The fragility of various factions (ethnic, religious, and cultural) and tribal rivalry has contributed to keeping the country fragmented. This has impacted 'nationhood' in Afghanistan. Such a vulnerable atmosphere of any country can facilitate the extraneous sectors to manipulate the fragmented segments of the society for their vested interests. Unfortunately, the internal skirmishes in Afghanistan have made its soil conducive for conspiracies to many external powers to date. Many neighboring countries of Afghanistan have the potential to influence its development both positively and negatively (see e.g., Weinbaum, 2006). Consequently, the fractionate atmosphere has hindered political development and economic growth in the country.

Conflicts, Violence, and Illicit Economy

The major hurdle for Afghanistan in becoming a regional connectivity junction is the internal conflicts among its various factions. The lack of unity among the major tribal groups and their clashing interests has always dragged Afghanistan into a hotspot of conflicts and violence. It is an established fact that only a stable and peaceful country attracts economic activity and growth. And therefore, the volatility of political authority in Afghanistan has, unfortunately, impacted its economic sector. The lack of a legitimate governing authority further complicated the internal conflicts into longstanding animosities that hampered economic activity. The power tussle among these groups caused disaster for political stability in the country. The economy of Afghanistan has remained stagnant and aid-dependent throughout, in addition to being unattractive for the local and foreign investment due to the non-conducive environment. A primary factor contributing to this is the fluctuating security condition which has restricted investors to risk their resources. The lack of infrastructure has also remained an impetus to low investment and slow growth in Afghanistan.

Among many other relevant challenges to Afghan growth and development, illicit activities need to be concentrated and worked on as a priority. Limited economic opportunities, scarce resources, and poverty have caused many Afghans to find means for their living and earning through indulging in illicit activities. Moreover, the mountainous geographical location of the country has harnessed illicit shelters for drug trafficking, smuggling, human trafficking, narcotics-related business, arms smuggling, and other illegal activities; ultimately hampering any economic activity through foreign investment, exports, and marketing that further worsened the domestic economy.

'Lost' Nation-building

The United States has been committed to Afghan nation-building for the last two decades. It poured heavy financial aid and extensive military troops to gear Afghanistan towards the right track. Unfortunately, the U.S. nation-building and reconstruction largely focused on building infrastructure in Afghanistan, but the grass root fault lines remained unaddressed. Resultantly, the internal cleavages remained intact and reemerged as the United States began to withdraw its forces. The United States has remained unsuccessful in introducing democracy and establishing a 'legitimate' government in Afghanistan and was compelled to negotiate for peace with the same Taliban that it intended to overthrow. It is yet a major challenge for peace and stability and any plan of cooperation in Afghanistan until the future course

is decided. The Taliban hold a particular ideology of 'rule and law', and the contemporary liberal principles of economic interdependence, cooperation, and growth are contrary to their traditional mindset. In view, the prospects of Afghanistan as a regional connectivity hub can be ruled out under the Taliban rule. In order to benefit from regional integration and redefine its role, it is now important to take on board all the stakeholders in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, to work on the agenda of connectivity, economic development, and sustainable peace.

Economic Instability & Infrastructure Scarcity

The economy of Afghanistan remains shambling and irregular, dominated mainly by the private sector. In post-WW II, Daud Khan brought the Afghan economic system under the Communist structure and introduced a socialist economic policy with rules and regulations sponsored by USSR (Jamal, 2013). But the subsequent Civil War destroyed the economic fabrication, and Afghanistan fell into the Cold War power politics (i.e., between the USA & USSR). After the Afghan Civil War, the country entered another global war against the Al-Qaeda network and terrorist organizations. Since post-9/11, the US and the world community have prioritized building Afghanistan a free market-oriented economy with liberal policies and developmental agendas.

The economic growth of any country depends on its stable political structure, steady economic activity, conducive safe environment for foreign investment, harmonious civil society, and smooth outflow of import and export. However, Afghanistan does not achieve any of the mentioned requirements. The prospects of the regional role of Afghanistan can only be materialized if the country focuses on its political environment with a legitimate government to meet the demands of international cooperation. As mentioned earlier, the economy of Afghanistan largely remains aid-dependent, deficient of its resources and appropriate policy. The rented and consumer-oriented economic nature of Afghanistan never appealed to the local or foreign investors, and the local production of the country remained oblivious.

There are many regional arrangements and agreements such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), and One Belt One Road (OBOR) that can facilitate Afghanistan to erode its internal cleavages by building confidence in civil society to bring stability in the country. The rich mineral and natural resources in Afghanistan can best be utilized if a conducive security environment is ensured for investors (Ahmadzai, 2015). Despite being landlocked, Afghanistan holds a natural bridge between the most vital regions of the world. Therefore, improving the security conditions are mandatory to ensure a smooth economic activity in Afghanistan. There are other significant projects, such as Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project, Central Asia-South Asia-1000 (CASA 1000) electricity supply power project, and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative, that are underway but progressing slowly due to multiple local and regional impediments. The absence of a reliable banking system is also a major hurdle in foreign investment, and Afghanistan — for its economic prosperity — needs to foster it with much urgency.

In addition, Afghanistan is significantly infrastructure deficient. The ongoing violence, bombings, military attacks, and sustained conflicts have not allowed the infrastructure in the country to develop. In addition, the poor transportation infrastructure and bureaucratic obstacles in Afghanistan never allowed it to avail transnational shipments and cargo (e.g., Starr et al., 2010). Therefore, for making Afghanistan a regional 'connectivity' hub, the standard road development in its

surrounding is needed to link Afghanistan to the regions beyond and including Central and South Asia. The road infrastructure also needs security assurance, for which patrolling highway police is vital to ensure 'secure' transport and trade.

Afghanistan and Neighboring Countries

Afghanistan has inherited many cross-border conflicts since its inception. Its foreign policy remains weak towards its neighbors and other regional countries. Its relations with Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian countries were never harmonious. Apart from the Durand line issue, Afghanistan has failed to establish and sustain a cordial bilateral relationship with Pakistan. Iran, the western neighbor of Afghanistan, also has a contentious relationship with the latter (on issues such as religious minorities, drug trafficking, and cross-border terrorism). In addition, it is important to establish stable trilateral relations among India-Pakistan-Afghanistan to ensure regional growth and development. Any plan for instituting Afghanistan as a 'regional connectivity hub' is necessarily dependent upon a good relationship between Pakistan and India. However, it has been unfortunate that India tends to dominate and influence the Afghan policy that resists any bilateral relations with Pakistan. Therefore, with regards to Pakistan, Afghanistan needs to re-orient its strategic and security interests. For instance, the conflicting interests of India and Pakistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have severe economic implications for Afghanistan.

Also, the role of the Central Asian states in the ethnic cleavages in Afghanistan has been quite critical. Some of the Central Asian states are involved with their respective ethnic groups (such as Turkmens, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Kyrgyz) that have further sharpened the dividing lines in Afghanistan; posing a significant challenge to the Afghan national unity (Price & Hakimi, 2019). The same is the case with the Afghanistan-Pakistan Pushtoon community and the Iran-Afghanistan Shia population. All these cross-border elements have played a role in exacerbating the civil conflicts in Afghanistan. Therefore, Afghanistan needs a viable and robust foreign policy towards its neighbors, to ensure sustainable peace in the region.

Prospects of Regional Connectivity for Afghanistan

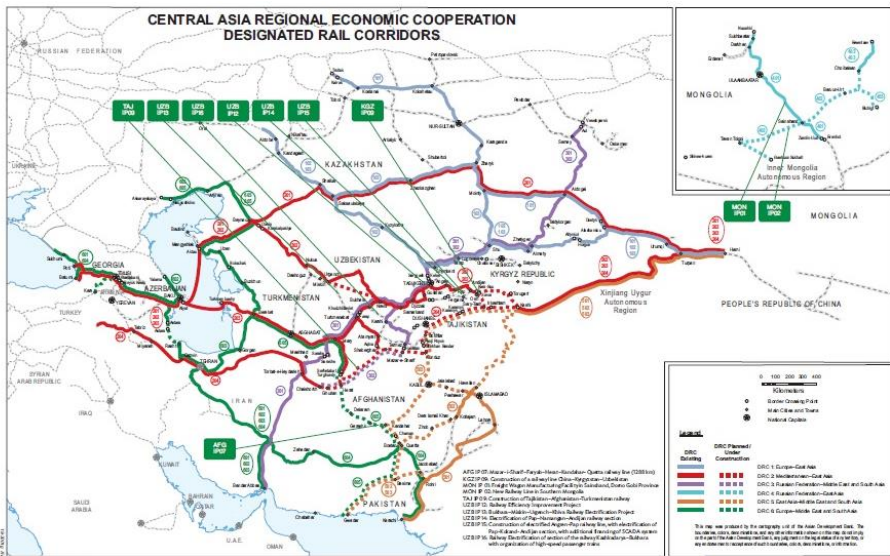
The political, economic, and regional synchronization of Afghanistan with other states/regions will create connectivity between the economic nodes and hubs. It can boost the prospects for commercial opportunities vital to gear up the Afghan economy and its stability (Azhar & Muhammad, 2015; Brunner, 2013; Rizvi, 2014). Following are the dominant projects based on regional integration (comprising regional energy supply and economic collaboration):

Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)

Among many other regional cooperation settings, CAREC (founded in 1997) is an economic corridor of multiple projects; strategic in nature to foster energy transfer, transport, trade liberalization, and cooperation for peace and economic prosperity of various regions, including Central Asia, South Asia, Caucasian countries, and Afghanistan. It aims to provide economic opportunities and access to all necessary resources to the respective regions and their people for sustainable development. CAREC provides Afghanistan with an array of options to benefit from it, especially by becoming a connecting place between South and Central Asia that is pivotal for the New Great Game (Center for Development Research, 2014). After completing the railway line between Mazar-i-Sharif (Afghanistan) and Hairatan (Uzbekistan), there

are many other projects in line with the upcoming plan (2020-24), with the support and financial assistance of the Asian Development Bank, in the energy sector, transport, and connectivity that can broaden the scope for the significance of Afghanistan in this connectivity. Afghanistan is an important member of the cooperation and holds a significant role between Central and South Asian regions as a supply corridor. Hence, if utilized appropriately, this \$165 million project can open up the horizons for the stagnant economy of Afghanistan to stabilize itself and rejuvenate through resourceful Central Asian economies and their energy resources (Procak, 2010).

Map 2: CAREC Designated Rail Corridors



Source: CAREC Program (n.d.).

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a Chinese initiative of establishing confidence-building measures to ensure peace and stability within and between the member countries (Haas, 2017). Due to cross-border terrorism and deteriorating internal security, Afghanistan remains the most significant concern at the platform of SCO. In this view, Katzman and Thomas (2017) have described the central focus of SCO. According to them, peace and stability in Afghanistan is in the interests of Central Asia, and SCO can serve as a platform to promote structural conditions for sustainable peace. Therefore, Afghanistan has a great opportunity to align with the SCO member countries in the post-U.S. withdrawal.

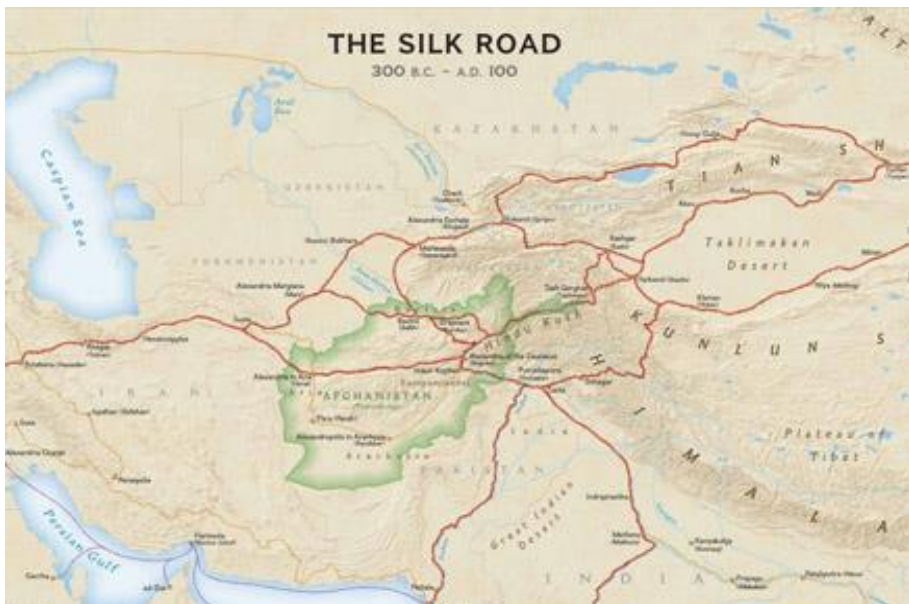
Afghanistan acquired an Observer status in SCO in 2012. However, the member states are concerned about the worsening security situation in Afghanistan and, in 2020, the SCO member countries held a round table discussion on Afghanistan. Several issues were discussed, including the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan, Intra-Afghan dialogue, illicit and/or illegal trade and the overall issue of terrorism. With regards, the participants necessitated the role of SCO in establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan. It was also emphasized that the SCO-Afghanistan

contact group (2005) should focus on enhancing diplomatic efforts to promote cooperation, trade, and economic facilitation as a part of their primary agenda. The discussion also added in its agenda the acceleration of humanitarian and cultural interactions (through youth engagement) to enhance harmonious relations between the SCO countries and Afghanistan (Reis & Simionato, 2013). Indeed, these efforts by the SCO member states are promising for Afghanistan and the region as a whole. This can help Afghanistan to play its role as a regional connecting platform through developmental projects designed by the SCO countries.

The ‘New Silk Road’ Project

For any cooperation, investment, or regional connectivity, Afghanistan needs to be stable, and the international community has been trying in this regard — to bring peace to the country. Afghanistan, being a geopolitical and geostrategic corridor at the major connecting regions, holds a vital position. In the post-9/11 era, the U.S. nation-building assistance was expected to integrate Afghanistan into the regional cooperation and developmental plans.

Map 3: At the Crossroads of Eurasia: The Silk Road through Afghanistan



Source: Wassi (2014).

Afghanistan holds a central trading hub for China’s ‘New Silk Road’ project or ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ that provides Afghanistan with an opportunity to transport Central Asian hydrocarbon resources to the European markets. More importantly, Afghanistan can also access these resources; hence, ensuring its energy security and overall economic development (through export and private sector investment).

The ‘Heart of Asia’: Istanbul Process (IP)

The ‘Heart of Asia’, also known as the Istanbul Process (IP), aims to promote common objectives of the member states: i.e., peace and stability, regional economic development, and cooperation. It also seeks to combat the shared threats, most particularly concerned with the security and stability of Afghanistan. It brings together the countries in the heart of the Asian region to meet the challenges that hinder their growth and development. Since the ‘Heart of Asia’ focuses on Afghanistan as the most significant actor to work upon, this platform can become a strong ally for the country to highlight its deep-rooted issues (Asian Development Bank, 2011). Comprising three main mechanisms of collaboration (i.e., political consultations, Confidence Building Measures, and the role of regional organizations), the IP can serve Afghanistan in achieving (economic) stability (Quie, 2014). Besides, the member countries can also be helpful for Afghanistan through indulging in the mentioned mechanisms to accelerate the peace process and reconstruction and to improve the probability of foreign investment and aid. A peaceful Afghanistan is a key to regional peace and stability, and the ‘Heart of Asia’ — being a consultative policy and multilateral diplomacy — can revitalize this ‘regional hub’ for trade and transit.

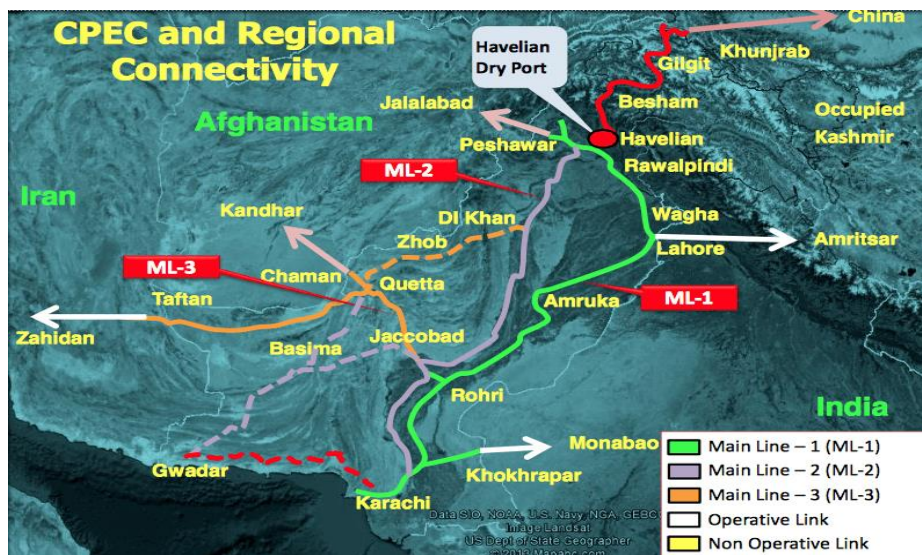
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Afghanistan

Being strategic partners in the region, Pakistan and China agreed to construct multiple economic routes, energy & infrastructural projects, and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as part of the Chinese Belt & Road Initiative (BRI).³ The primary impetus behind this is to enhance geostrategic and geoeconomic collaboration and connectivity in the region (Khan & Hyder, 2017). China has always remained willing to invest in the rich resources and energy reserves in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the political uncertainty and marred security situation in Afghanistan never allowed China to risk considerable investments. China has been focusing on combating and restricting terrorism and terrorist networks from Afghanistan into its border areas, especially in the Xinjiang province.

Recently, China has shown a keen interest to link Afghanistan with the CPEC project. The Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, held a video conference on July 27, 2020, with the foreign Ministers from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nepal to initiate a ‘green corridor’ and expressed his desire to extend CPEC to Afghanistan (Kaura, 2020). Pakistan also wishes to add Afghanistan into the CPEC connectivity project and has announced the construction of a 265-kilometre highway from Peshawar to Kabul that will provide Afghanistan access to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian sea (Tahir, 2015). Other road projects that are part of this connectivity agenda include the Torkham-Jalalabad Road and Peshawar Torkham Road (Chandran, 2017).

³ The One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative of China is aimed at building highways and the sea-routes under the auspices of the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’ (Tracy, 2013).

Map 4: CPEC and Regional Connectivity



Source: OBOR-TUNITY: <https://obortunity.org/cpec-news/cpec-research/>

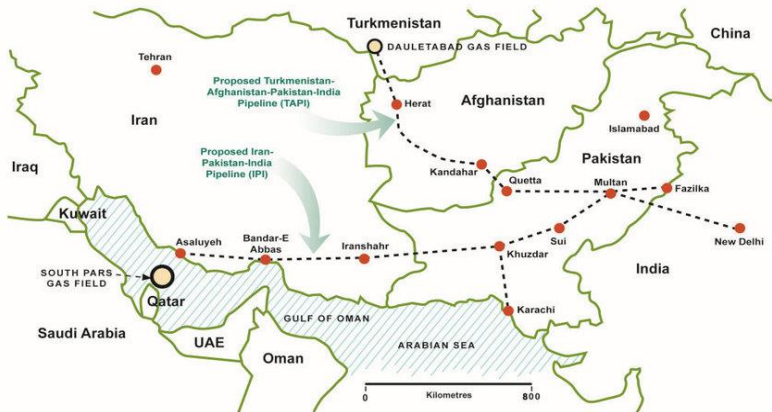
Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline Project (TAPI)

Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) is a natural gas pipeline project stretched from Central Asia to South Asia. Supported by the Asian Development Bank, TAPI hopes to provide natural gas to the deficient South Asian region through an 1814 kilometer long gas pipeline. The significance of TAPI was remarked as ‘Peace Pipeline’ as it involves the countries which have noncordial relations (the two recipient countries — India & Pakistan — are regional rivals). On the other hand, Pakistan and Afghanistan also have many conflicting issues that have not yet been resolved. With regards to the role of Afghanistan in TAPI, the pipeline is planned to pass through five provinces (including Kandahar, Nimroz, Helmand, Herat, and Farah) and will become the mega project for the Afghan Gas Enterprise. It will generate yearly revenue of up to U.S. \$300 million for Afghanistan (Rafique, 2020). With the completion of TAPI, Afghanistan will strengthen its regional connectivity and get access to the Gwadar port, which is the emerging hub of transit and trade.

Lapis Lazuli Corridor

Lapis Lazuli Corridor, connecting Afghanistan to the European and Balkan markets, is known to be the cheapest, most convenient, and shortest trade route. It combines the most frequent sea routes, including the Mediterranean, Black and the Caspian Sea, (through Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, and Georgia). Starting from Torghundi in Afghanistan, it connects Turkmenistan (Turkmenbashi port) and Azerbaijan (Baku) in the Caspian Sea. The corridor further continues to Georgia (Poti and Batumi Ports) and ends in Turkey at the entrance of Europe. Afghanistan can take significant economic advantages from the corridor, providing access to the most vital sea routes.

Map 5: TAPI Pipeline Project



Source: Danish and colleagues (2020).

Map 6: Lapis-Lazuli Transit, Trade & Transport Route (Lapis Lazuli Corridor)



Source: Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA).⁴

Wakhan Corridor and CASA-1000-Electricity Power Project

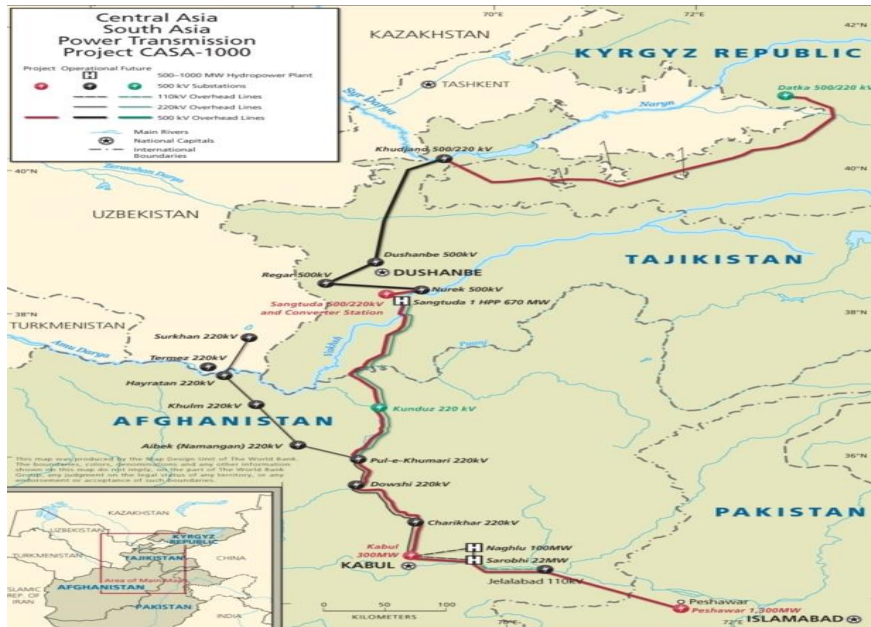
Connecting the four countries — China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip in the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. The importance of the Wakhan Corridor has further increased after the Chinese OBOR project (see above). Through the corridor, Afghanistan can benefit from the Chinese connectivity projects and economic agreements, particularly when the role of China is expected to expand following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In addition, Central Asia-South Asia Power Transmission Project-1000 (CASA-1000) is an electricity transmission project between Central and South Asia. It is an electricity trade between Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan (in Central Asia) to Pakistan-Afghanistan in South Asia. The project was initiated in 2008 under the ‘Inter-Governmental Agreement’ (IGA) between the member countries to construct a power-line from Central Asia to South Asia for the supply of hydropower surplus.

⁴ For details, please visit http://recca.af/?page_id=2080

The operationalization of CASA-1000 will also enhance the connectivity of Afghanistan, making it sufficient in energy sources; hence, facilitating indigenous industrial production.

Map 7: Central Asia South Asia Power Transmission Project CASA-1000



Source: Siddique (2016).

Conclusion

The contemporary world system has fostered interdependence and regionalism through international agreements of multiple natures, including economic cooperation, trade development, humanitarian concerns, cultural cooperation, and political facilitation, to promote trade and resolve longstanding conflicts. The notion of regional integration and geopolitics has dominated the international relations discourse, broadening the scope for regions and states with (natural, physical, and human) resources. The emerging ‘order’ also seems to expand the scope for third world countries to benefit from the interdependent economic systems and nurture their economies for sustainable growth and development.

After thoroughly elucidating the challenges and prospects for the role of Afghanistan in the regional connectivity context (benefiting from regional integration and contemporary geopolitical settings), this article argues that post-U.S. withdrawal Afghanistan is apprehended to revert to its post-Cold War anarchical scenario. The United States has remained unsuccessful in uniting the Afghan society and establishing a legitimate government in the country. The imminent vacuum is likely to be filled with another wave of violence and terrorism, leading to economic and political instability. The Taliban seem more potent with a victorious mindset to rule the post-U.S. withdrawal Afghanistan. Therefore, Afghanistan needs to rethink and rationalize its national character by addressing the local and foreign destabilizing factors. Since the regional and international scenario has changed, the current

interdependent system has broader options to offer Afghanistan through engaging in diverse developmental projects. However, the prerequisite of any regional cooperation is stability and a conducive environment for economic growth and expansion.

The article also argues that Afghanistan, being geographically placed in the peripheral area of Central Asia and the middle of Asia, has the contiguity of culture, language, religion, ethnicity, and race with many of its neighboring states (such as Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia). This multifocality can be used to develop cooperative relationships through socio-economic and cultural transactions. The untapped rich mineral and natural resources of Afghanistan and energy resources of Central Asia (mainly oil and gas) can be transported to the targeted economies via the Afghan transit route. Many international economic and energy projects, including CPEC, TAPI, CASA-1000 energy power project, and the Istanbul Process, can facilitate Afghanistan economically and politically. These (developmental) projects can generate substantial annual revenue for Afghanistan and foster regional trade and cooperation. Furthermore, by becoming a regional connectivity hub, Afghanistan will have access to the global market to boost its domestic economy. These arrangements can also benefit the country diplomatically, facilitating resolution to multifaceted internal and external conflicts. However, only a stable and peaceful post-US Afghanistan can serve as a 'regional connectivity hub'.

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