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## A Descriptive Look at the Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Status of the Kamal Khan Dam in Afghanistan

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## Abstract

*Afghanistan lacks access to open water sources, leading to significant challenges in its hydrography, with river flow and stagnant water in rivers, streams, and lakes creating issues with the neighbouring countries. The environmental conditions in Afghanistan are unique compared to other countries. Despite having billions of cubic meters of fresh water, Afghanistan has not fully realized the potential for regional economic growth and social development, primarily due to geopolitical factors. This article examines the socio-political realities of Nimroz province, particularly concerning the connections between Afghanistan and Iran. It analyzes the key factors influencing the geopolitical and socio-economic significance of the Kamal Khan Dam, focusing on variables such as geopolitical location, economic positioning, opportunities for economic development, and the management of water resources in the western basin. These factors significantly impact the geo-economic relevance of the Kamal Khan Dam for Afghanistan. The research findings indicate that energy production from the Kamal Khan Dam holds special importance for Afghanistan and Iran, with access to energy resources gaining strategic significance.*

**Keywords:** Kamal Khan Dam, Geo-Economics, Geopolitics, Water Control

## 1. Introduction

Water is essential for sustaining life, making it economically vital in all regions. Afghanistan, lacking access to open water sources, faces significant challenges related to its hydrography, including issues with the flow of river water and the presence of stagnant bodies, such as rivers, streams, and lakes. Additionally, Afghanistan's sensitive and strategic geographical position, surrounded by neighbouring countries, adds to its complexities.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan's geographic location significantly influences its economic relations, affecting Iran. Additionally, Afghanistan's water geography is shaped by climatic and geographical factors.

Kamal Khan Dam is a hydroelectric and irrigation dam project on the Helmand River in Southwestern Afghanistan's Chahar Burjak District of Nimruz Province. It is located

<sup>1</sup> Shadi Khan Saif, "Afghanistan Successfully Tests Water Flow at Major Dam," *Anadolu Agency*, January 4, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/afghanistan-successfully-tests-water-flow-at-major-dam/2119203> (accessed February 4, 2021).

about 95 km southeast of Zaranj.<sup>2</sup> Located on the Helmand River in the Chahar Burjak District of Nimroz Province, the construction of Kamal Khan Dam was first planned in the 1960s. Construction work on the dam officially began in 1974, but after the 1978 Saur Revolution, the Americans involved in the construction were compelled to leave Afghanistan, and the project was abandoned. The political instability and subsequent wars hindered the completion of the project until President Ashraf Ghani resumed work on it in 2017. Afghanistan successfully tested water flow at a major dam in southwestern Nimroz Province bordering Iran after nearly six decades of the inception of the mega project. According to the country's National Water Affairs Regulation Authority (NWARA), the Kamal Khan Dam would help irrigate nearly 175,000 hectares (432,434 acres) of land and generate up to nine megawatts of electricity. NWARA spokesman Nizam Khpalwak said it is hoped the dam would help irrigate vast swaths of land.<sup>3</sup>

Infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, such as dams to generate electrical energy and expand irrigation networks, have sparked debate. These projects are linked to managing the Helmand River waters in the western region of Afghanistan, which holds a sensitive and strategically important geographical position. Additionally, they have the potential to create employment opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

Afghanistan's geopolitical and geo-economic position strategically connects East and West Asia, highlighting its significant role in the politics of major powers. The geographical location of the Kamal Khan Dam, along with Nimroz province's borders with Iran, underscores the importance of this region for managing water resources in the western basin and the Helmand River. Nimroz province is one of Afghanistan's warmer and flatter regions, at approximately 21.30 degrees north latitude and 55.66 degrees east longitude. It shares borders with Iran to the west, Pakistan to the south, Farah Province to the north and Helmand Province to the east. These border areas are critical due to their geo-economic and geopolitical importance. The province's water resources have created favourable living conditions for its residents and livestock. The Helmand River, the largest river in Nimroz, originates from the central heights of the Hindu Kush mountain range and flows toward the west and southwest of the country. However, the river's passage through the winding valleys of the central mountains results in land degradation and soil erosion, leading to severe flooding during various seasons.

The construction of water diversion dams and energy production is essential for the country's prosperity and the irrigation of agricultural land along the rivers. Two significant projects, the Kajaki Dam and the Kamal Khan Dam, have been implemented on the same route. According to officials, the Kamal Khan Dam can produce 9 megawatts of electricity and irrigate approximately 80,000 hectares of farmland. With a water storage capacity exceeding one billion cubic meters, the Kamal Khan Dam is one of the most important projects in the field.

The dam is located on mostly flat plains in Nimroz province, where the land has a gentle slope. Information indicates that the dam stands 16 meters tall and has a high capacity for controlling water and managing monsoon flooding. Once completed, this dam will

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<sup>2</sup> Monica Whitlock, "Helmand's Golden Age," *BBC News*, archived from the original on August 7, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-28693892> (accessed February 4, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Saif, "Afghanistan Successfully Tests Water Flow."

<sup>4</sup> Jagfar Rasouli, "Afghanistan's Hydro Politics: Impact on Cooperation or Confrontation with Neighbors," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan 6, no. 7 (2005): 154.

not only positively impact the region's environment but will also lead to the irrigation of more than 80,000 hectares of land, creating additional business opportunities in the surrounding areas.<sup>5</sup>

The environmental situation in Afghanistan varies from that of other regions. Although the country is predominantly mountainous and consists mainly of high plateaus, the southwestern part presents a different scenario. This region experiences extremely hot and dry conditions, with negligible average annual rainfall. Furthermore, the rate of evaporation exceeds the amount of precipitation received. Despite these challenges, large bodies of water can contribute to climate diversity on both local and regional levels, potentially alleviating drought and water scarcity issues that affect this area in consecutive years. These water sources recharge underground aquifers, which are crucial for meeting the water needs of the local population.

Additionally, water availability can transform the surrounding plains and deserts into greener landscapes, significantly changing the region's appearance. The presence of water not only fosters the growth of pastures for livestock but also helps to prevent flooding in southwestern Afghanistan. Concerning land slope, Nimroz Province has a gradient ranging from 0 to 210 degrees, which is lower than the national average slope of 0.865 degrees. This gentle slope is important for urban-rural development and for establishing gardens and agricultural lands.

The establishment of residential settlements, industrial companies, construction, transportation, etc., is influenced by its location. Kamal Khan Dam is located between areas with land slope degrees (0-16), which shows the absence of height contrasts. The dam was planned under former president Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan's leadership to irrigate large swaths of land and generate nine megawatts of electricity.<sup>6</sup>

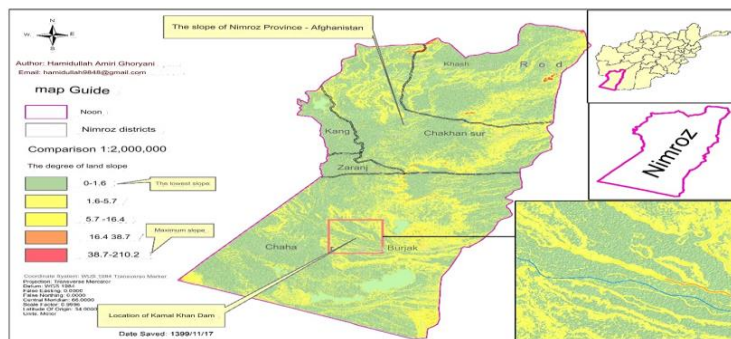


Figure 1. The map shows the elevation of Nimroz Province, drawn from DEM images of Afghanistan<sup>7</sup>

Afghanistan's Ministry of Energy and Water Resources reported that the reconstruction of the Kamal Khan Dam, along with the hydroelectric power station and reservoir, is 99% complete, and the hydraulic structure will soon be implemented. According to Matiullah Abed, spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Energy and Water Resources, the dam's reservoir can hold 52 million cubic meters of water, the hydroelectric power plant can

<sup>5</sup> Gharjestani Tavasli, "The Importance of Kamal Khan Dam," *Afghanistan - Shia News Agency*, 4 (2017), accessed March 4, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Naheed Askari, "Inauguration of Kamal Khan Dam Soon," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, January 4, 2021, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://pajhwok.com/2021/02/04/>.

<sup>7</sup> Hamidullah Amiri Ghoriani, "Economic, Agricultural, and Environmental Benefits of Kamal Khan Dam for Afghanistan," *Sam.media*, February 21, 2021, <https://sam.media/fa> (accessed February 21, 2021).

generate six megawatts of electricity, and the dam irrigates more than 174,000 hectares of agricultural land.<sup>8</sup> The press secretary told TOLONews: "The Kamal Khan Dam Project, located in Nimroz Province, is one of the significant projects of the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources, the work of which is 99% completed. This project generates six megawatts of electricity." Meanwhile, the Afghanistan Chamber of Agriculture and Livestock recognizes that dams are important in irrigating agricultural lands, increasing agricultural production and preventing drought. It emphasizes that with proper management of water resources, Afghanistan can transform from an importing country to an exporting country.<sup>9</sup>

However, the opening of the Kamal Khan Dam in March 2021 reignited an old dispute between Iran and Afghanistan over water allocation in the Helmand River. The river is considered one of Afghanistan's natural lifelines. The Helmand River is the longest and runs into Hamoun Lake, which lies on the border between the two neighbours. At the inauguration of the Kamal Khan Dam, then-President Ashraf Ghani said, "Afghanistan would no longer give free water to anyone, so Iran should provide fuel to Afghans in exchange for water."<sup>10</sup> In late July 2022, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian warned his counterpart, Afghanistan's Amir Khan Muttaqi, that prohibiting Tehran from its rightful access to the Helmand River would only cause further strain on an already splintered relationship. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, too, urged serious action.<sup>11</sup> Iran is concerned that the completion of the Kamal Khan Dam will deepen its water woes. The Hamouns, wetlands in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province that the River Helmand feeds would be badly hit.<sup>12</sup> For instance, it was reported that in 2021, the availability of fish dropped, undermining the local water-related economy – sandstorms buried around 124 villages, triggering a mass outmigration.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, the Islamic Emirate's spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's remarks regarding the Helmand water treaty will affect the political relations between Kabul and Tehran. "The Iranian officials should first gather facts about the water of Helmand and then mention their demands with the appropriate words. If reality is not considered, and such statements are made, the political status between the people of the two Muslim countries could be harmed," Mujahid said in an earlier statement in reaction to Raisi's remarks. In addition, he further emphasized that the Islamic Emirate is committed to the Water Treaty of Helmand, signed in 1973 between Afghanistan and Iran.<sup>14</sup>

The Kamal Khan Dam's geo-economic characteristics and the geographical and geopolitical relationships between Afghanistan and Iran contribute to the challenges and threats regarding water resource management in the western basin. This complex geopolitical and geostrategic landscape creates economic and political instability for Afghanistan and Iran. Therefore, there is a pressing need for effective solutions based on

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<sup>8</sup> CAREC, "Kamal Khan Dam in Afghanistan is 99% Complete," *CAREC Information Portal*, April 26, 2024, <https://centralasiacclimateportal.org/> (accessed April 26, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ikramuddin Kamil, "Afghanistan's Kamal Khan Dam and the Helmand River Treaty," *The Diplomat*, January 27, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Pascal Louvre and Ranceva Tual, *Geopolitical Keys*, translated by Hasan Sadouq and Nini (Tehran: Shahid Beheshti University, 2002), 123.

<sup>12</sup> Mohammad Azim Azimi, *An Entry on the Political Geography of Afghanistan* (Kabul: Khorasan, 2012), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "Afghanistan Clashes with Iran over Dam Construction," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item> (accessed May 2, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Mohammad Farshad Daryosh, "Islamic Emirate Reacts to Remarks of Iranian President," *TOLONews*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.tolonews.com> (accessed May 19, 2023).

research findings to address this issue. Within this context, it is possible to utilize water resources for energy production in Afghanistan while considering Iran's rights to water for electricity generation and agricultural irrigation.

This article analyzes the economic potential of the Kamal Khan Dam as part of water resource management in the country's western region. It draws on the latest domestic and international sources and studies for its theoretical framework. The research employs a descriptive-analytical method, utilizing library and document studies to gather information. The findings from this method are presented in Table 1. Additionally, the results of this study regarding the economic impact on the western basin – particularly concerning the Kamal Khan Dam in the Chaharbarjak district – can greatly assist officials and stakeholders in the financial sector of Nimroz province. These insights can help develop managerial and financial strategies to ensure the province's stability and development. This article contributes to the literature on Afghanistan's economic and hydro-political geography, and the National Water Regulatory Authority can utilize its findings for future initiatives.

## **2. Geopolitical and Geo-economic status of the Kamal Khan Dam in Afghanistan**

Dam building is one of the engineering activities in which the region's specific historical and geographical conditions play a significant role in its origin, formation, and expansion. In the past, the residents of each specific geographical area took action to build dams or reservoirs to meet their needs in the field of irrigation and water supply. In some areas, due to the low water level of the rivers or the need to change the river's course, dams were built to raise the water level and use it for agricultural and construction needs.<sup>15</sup>

One of the important issues in Afghanistan's region is water. Unlike oil, water has no substitute; therefore, as an irreplaceable element, it is important in the region's political and economic equations. The noteworthy point in this context is Afghanistan's superior position compared to Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which can increase Afghanistan's bargaining power at international levels.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, investigating the upcoming crises caused by the lack of water resources is one of the geopolitical topics in political geography. By analyzing the geopolitical and geo-economic position of the Kamal Khan Dam in Afghanistan and Iran, its position and importance in bilateral relations can be understood.

Views on sharing the waters of the Helmand River have exacerbated the differences. At the same time, Afghanistan's damming of the river has angered Iran, as it is expected to reduce the water flow to Iran. That is why some civil activists in the province stated that the water dam is more of a political issue for some other countries. They say that neighbouring countries are trying to prevent the construction of this dam.<sup>17</sup>

### *2.1 Geopolitical Status of the Kamal Khan Dam*

Geopolitics is the political interpretation of geography. Therefore, it is important to consider that the behavioural patterns of human groups toward each other are formed

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<sup>15</sup> Mohammad Azim Azimi, *Economic Geography of Afghanistan* (Kabul: Khorasan, 2011), 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "Afghanistan Clashes with Iran over Dam Construction," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item> (accessed May 2, 2017).

by combining three factors: geography, power, and politics.<sup>18</sup> Geopolitics speaks of political-environmental roles within the framework of the concept of power.<sup>19</sup> Geopolitics is considered the art and technique of government management, organization and administration. In its dynamic nature, every geographical place reflects man's direct or indirect relationship with the environment. This relationship is manifested in the influence of human ideas, thoughts, approaches, politics, culture, customs, and other characteristics of life, which collectively shape the geographical environment. Geopolitical crises refer to conflicts that have a geographical origin. These crises emerge when different groups compete for control over a specific geographical area for various reasons. Geo-economics examines the relationship between geography and the economic power of nations. The events following September 11 and the situation in Afghanistan have highlighted the political sensitivities surrounding the region.<sup>20</sup> Afghanistan's geopolitical landscape has transformed considerably in the 21st century, driven by the increasing importance of the country's geo-economics. The Kamal Khan Dam plays a crucial role in this shift, significantly impacting Afghanistan's management of water resources and energy production. Its construction is a key geopolitical opportunity for Nimroz Province and the nation.

## *2.2 Geo-Economics Status of the Kamal Khan Dam*

The economy has always been a key factor in shaping governments' internal and external policies. Recently, it has become a powerful tool for influencing politics. Economic logic was overshadowed by the regular competition between East and West for a long time. Additionally, the balance of power is crucial in analyzing human relations, the global environment, and the geopolitical landscape. A new world has emerged where personal conflict is less significant, prompting a reexamination of the relationship between economics and geopolitics.

The term "geo-economics" emerged in the relationship between individuals as economic actors and their environment, which is being studied and analyzed. As a result, some policymakers in the country interpret this concept as indicative of an economic war. They emphasize the importance of economics in evaluating government policy.<sup>21</sup> After transitioning from focusing on global geopolitical ideologies, the changing world system has entered the postmodern era. This era is characterized by the significant role of economic infrastructure in shaping global geopolitics, particularly through the globalization of the free market economy. When the economic capabilities of nation-states are influenced by their geographic resources, a geographic economy, or geo-economy, takes shape.<sup>22</sup> Geo-economy examines how economic factors and infrastructures affect political decisions and power competition in national, regional, and global contexts, as well as how these elements influence the geopolitical structure at regional and global levels.<sup>23</sup> In this context, the primary objective of geo-economics is not to control territory and gain physical power but to achieve technological and commercial dominance.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mohammadreza Hafez Nia, *Principles and Concepts of Geopolitics*, 2nd ed. (Mashhad: Papli, 2011), 62.

<sup>19</sup> Pirouz Mojtahedzadeh, *Democracy and Iranian Identity* (Tehran: Kavir, 2002), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Ghoriani, "Economic, Agricultural and Environmental Benefits,".

<sup>22</sup> Yadallah Karimi Pour, *Iran and Its Neighbors (Sources of Tension and Threat)* (Tehran: Academic Jihad Publications, Tarbiat Moalem, 2000), 87.

<sup>23</sup> Pirouz Mojtahedzadeh, *Democracy and Iranian Identity* (Tehran: Kavir, 2002), 54.

<sup>24</sup> Ezzatullah Ezzati, *Geopolitics in the 21st Century* (Tehran: Samit Publications, 2001), 35.

Water is essential for life, making its importance and economic role extremely high, fundamental, and indispensable, regardless of how it exists on Earth. In Afghanistan, hydrographic issues arise from the flow of river water and stagnant water found in rivers, streams, and small lakes. The country's land structure, topography, the movement and flow of moist air masses, and various climatic conditions significantly influence its hydrographic situation, which is crucial for economic activities.<sup>25</sup> One of the key debates influencing political-economic relations and Kamal Khan Dam's geopolitical and geo-economic stance about Iran is the competition between regional and extra-regional powers for access to Afghanistan's water resources, particularly the Helmand River. Iran effectively leverages this geo-economic position to its advantage in the region.

## Conclusion and Findings

The research findings indicate that proper management and utilization of the Kamal Khan Dam can significantly improve conditions in Nimroz Province. The irrigation system can be regulated by effectively managing and using the dam, promoting modern agriculture's development. This approach can transform Nimroz Province, with its fertile soil and vast plains, into a granary for Asia. The dam's capacity to manage water and control monsoon floods is also important.<sup>26</sup> The findings indicate that in addition to positively impacting the region's environment, over 80,000 hectares of land will be irrigated, and approximately 9 megawatts of electricity will be generated. This development will also enhance the business landscape in the area. Constructing dams is essential for reaching fair agreements with neighbouring countries regarding Afghanistan's transboundary watersheds. Until Afghanistan gains the ability to control and manage these waters, no other country will acknowledge its right to equitable use.

Furthermore, the Kamal Khan Dam has created significant economic opportunities for Afghanistan due to its advantageous socio-economic and geopolitical position, facilitating transit and commercial activities in the region. Economic development in Afghanistan heavily relies on water resources, highlighting the necessity of recognizing water's importance. Afghanistan contains five waterbodies, four of which are shared with neighbouring countries, with the sources of these waterbodies located upstream. Nimroz province is considered one of Afghanistan's key provinces because of its economic, geographical, and geopolitical significance. This province is a vital transit route at a communication crossroads with Iran. Nimroz Province is bordered by Farah Province on the north side and Helmand Province on the east side, which has a special position in terms of socio-economic and geopolitical situation. Small and large rivers in this province have created suitable living conditions for its residents and livestock. The Helmand River is the largest in Nimroz province, on which the Kamal Khan Dam was built.

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<sup>25</sup> Mohammad Akbar Shurmach Nuristani, *General Geography of Afghanistan* (Kabul: Zori Publications Institute, 1971), 123.

<sup>26</sup> Tavasli, "The Importance of Kamal Khan Dam".





Figure 2: The Most Important Goals of Kamal Khan Dam Construction  
 Source: Designed by the author

Effective management of water resources in the western basin, particularly at the Kamal Khan Power Dam in the Chaharbarjak district, is essential for developing managerial, economic, and political strategies. The National Administration of Water Regulation can utilize this article's findings to understand better the opportunities, challenges, and bottlenecks in water resource management within the Western region. The primary aim of geo-economics is not to exert control over land or achieve physical dominance but to attain technological and commercial superiority. Water is vital for life; thus, regardless of the current state of water availability on Earth, its significance and economic role remain extraordinary, fundamental, and critical. Adequate water resources play a crucial role in climate diversity at both local and regional levels. They can help save the southwest of Afghanistan from recurring drought and water scarcity issues.

**Table 1: Research library findings<sup>27</sup>**

No	Features of the Physical Structure of Kamal Khan Dam	Geopolitical Position	Geo-Economics Position	Water Resources Management
1	The dam's height is 16 meters; the length is 17 meters.	Neighbouring Iran and Pakistan	Economic capacities	Flood control
2	The water storage capacity is 52 million cubic meters	Geographical affiliation	Employment opportunities	Water geography Adjusting the irrigation system
3	Production capacity of 9 megawatts of electricity	Geopolitical and economic dependence	Electricity production	Meeting the needs of the catchment area

<sup>27</sup> This table is based on library research and analysis of theoretical research literature and shows the research findings. It mentions the documentary findings of the research in the sections of Features of the Physical Structure of Kamal Khan Dam, Geopolitical Position, Geo-economic Position, and Water Resources Management.

4	Irrigation of about 80,000 hectares of agricultural land	Asymmetric power	creating jobs	Ecosystem restoration
5	Ability to control water and monsoon floods	The dependence on international political negotiations	Economic growth	Irrigation of agricultural land
6	The land slope is between 0 and 210 degrees		National development strategy	Transboundary water control
7	Location: Chaharbarjak District	Helmand Water Sharing Treaty, 1972	Economic Development	Water management and planning
8	The distance from Zaranj City is 95 km	Instrumental diplomacy	water quality	Creating power lines
9	The distance to the district is 18 km	Water is a tool for achieving power	Infrastructures	Water resource management capacity-building

One of the key factors in economic development is the management of water resources. Afghanistan has significant potential in this area; relevant departments should prioritize dam construction to regulate internal and transboundary waters. The Kamal Khan Dam, recently established, is particularly important. The National Water Regulatory Authority should initiate scientific research on this dam to evaluate its economic, geopolitical, and ecological benefits. The findings from this research can be useful in regulating and managing water resources in southwestern Afghanistan, coordinated by the Ministry of Energy and Water, to empower local communities.

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