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Afghanistan as a Bridge between South Asia and Central Asia

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Abstract

Afghanistan's strategic location positions it as a vital bridge between South and Central Asia, historically serving as a trade and cultural exchange hub. However, persistent challenges such as political instability, ethnic divisions, and security threats have hindered its potential for regional connectivity. This paper employs a qualitative methodology, analyzing secondary data from academic sources and policy reports to explore Afghanistan's historical role, its engagement in regional initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and TAPI pipeline, and its obstacles. The findings highlight the immense potential for fostering trade, economic integration, and cooperation in Afghanistan, emphasizing the need for collaborative regional and international efforts to address security and infrastructural challenges.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Central-Asia, South Asia, Bridge, Connectivity, Regional Cooperation, Integration

1. Introduction

Afghanistan, nestled at the crossroads of major Asian regions, holds immense potential as a facilitator of regional integration and a bridge between the Far East, the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia. Its immediate neighbours – China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan – share a vested interest in Afghanistan's success in overcoming its landlocked status. Historically, Afghanistan has been more than just a transit and trade hub; it played a pivotal role in shaping Inner Asian geopolitics. However, decades of conflict and instability have paralyzed the region's capacity to be a true connector, promoter, and exchange point. This paper delves into the multifaceted significance of Afghanistan for South and Central Asia, exploring both the historical context and the contemporary challenges and opportunities for regional integration. The first part embarks on a historical journey, examining Afghanistan's geographical dimensions and their impact on regional geopolitics. It acknowledges the unique perspectives and implications that each South and Central Asian nation holds for Afghanistan, highlighting the complex dynamics that contribute to its overall significance. The second part shifts focus to the present day, scrutinizing the challenges and opportunities for regional integration through Afghanistan, particularly in light of the recent US withdrawal. While Afghanistan's central location harbours immense potential for fostering connectivity through trade and transit routes, the scars of past

interventions and conflicts continue to cast long shadows. This paper aims to highlight Afghanistan's central role in connecting regions and the potential for regional cooperation while simultaneously addressing the complexities and constraints that have historically hindered its ability to serve as a true bridge between South and Central Asia. This paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted opportunities and challenges that have emerged, culminating in recommendations prioritizing sovereignty, cooperation, and integration throughout Afghanistan.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for understanding Afghanistan's potential as a bridge between South and Central Asia is deeply rooted in the interplay of Geopolitical Theory and Regional Integration Theory, each offering distinct but interconnected lenses for analysis. Geopolitical Theory, with its origins in the classical works of thinkers like Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, has evolved significantly in contemporary scholarship to incorporate modern dynamics such as economic globalization, transnational threats, and shifting power balances. Mackinder's early emphasis on the strategic importance of the "Heartland," which includes Central Asia, positioned Afghanistan as a pivotal space within the global power structure.¹ Modern interpretations, such as those articulated by Cohen (2015), underscore the continuing relevance of Afghanistan's location, highlighting it as a corridor critical for energy transit, trade, and security linkages between the South and Central Asian regions.²

Recent contributions to Geopolitical Theory, such as those by Kaplan (2016), stress the fluid nature of global geopolitics, where non-state actors, regional partnerships, and infrastructure investments increasingly shape traditional boundaries and spheres of influence. Afghanistan, situated at the confluence of multiple civilizational, economic, and strategic interests, epitomizes these dynamics. While classical geopolitics emphasized territorial dominance, contemporary scholars like Flint (2017) integrate economic dependency and regional connectivity considerations, situating Afghanistan as a battleground of superpower rivalries and a potential linchpin for cooperative regional frameworks.³ Critics of Geopolitical Theory, such as Agnew (2019), argue that the framework often privileges state-centric views, neglecting local agency and the socio-cultural nuances that shape regional dynamics, particularly in ethnically and linguistically diverse zones like Afghanistan.⁴

On the other hand, Regional Integration Theory, traditionally associated with functionalist and neo-functionalist schools pioneered by scholars like Haas (1958), focuses on the processes and mechanisms that facilitate cooperation among states within a region. Modern iterations of this Theory, as discussed by Acharya (2018), emphasize the importance of shared interests, institutions, and norms in fostering regional unity.⁵ In the context of South and Central Asia, the Theory has been expanded to include multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), both of which have sought—albeit with limited success—to integrate Afghanistan into broader regional

¹ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–437.

² Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

³ Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 45.

⁴ John Agnew, "Globalization and Sovereignty: Beyond the Territorial Trap," *Geopolitics* 24, no. 1 (2019): 1–21.

⁵ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 45.

networks.⁶ Regional Integration Theory provides a lens to examine how Afghanistan can transcend its historical role as a buffer state to become an active conduit for trade, cultural exchange, and strategic cooperation.

Recent defenders of Regional Integration Theory, such as Börzel and Risse (2020), argue that even fragile states like Afghanistan can benefit from regional integration by leveraging multilateral institutions to attract foreign investment, foster stability, and enhance connectivity.⁷ However, sceptics like Mansfield and Milner (2020) point out that regional integration often fails in asymmetric power relations and entrenched security dilemmas, both prominent in Afghanistan's geopolitical landscape.⁸ Furthermore, regional integration efforts in Afghanistan are hindered by competing external influences, such as those of China, Russia, and the United States, which complicate the prospects for cohesive regional policies.

The convergence of these two theories in examining Afghanistan's role as a bridge highlights its strategic significance. Geopolitical Theory elucidates the importance of Afghanistan's location, which intersects major trade routes such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000). Regional Integration Theory complements this by providing a framework for understanding how Afghanistan's integration into regional economic and security mechanisms could transform it from a site of conflict to one of connectivity. This dual-theoretical approach enables a holistic analysis of Afghanistan's potential role, balancing the structural constraints imposed by its geography and political instability with the opportunities offered by regional cooperation frameworks.

Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in these theoretical applications. Geopolitical Theory often underrepresents the role of socio-political factors within Afghanistan, such as tribal dynamics and domestic governance challenges, which are crucial for understanding its regional role.⁹ Similarly, Regional Integration Theory assumes a baseline level of stability and institutional functionality, which Afghanistan lacks due to ongoing security issues and fragmented governance. Addressing these gaps requires integrating insights from conflict resolution studies and development economics to offer a more nuanced understanding of Afghanistan's potential as a regional connector.

In the context of Afghanistan, these theories are instrumental in examining both opportunities and challenges. Geopolitical Theory provides the foundation for understanding Afghanistan's enduring importance in regional and global power equations. Regional Integration Theory offers pathways for constructive engagement to harness Afghanistan's potential to foster stability and development across South and Central Asia. These theories underscore the need for sustained international and regional commitment to addressing Afghanistan's structural challenges while leveraging its strategic advantages to foster regional integration and connectivity.

Due to its strategic location at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, Afghanistan holds significant potential as a bridge for regional integration. Historically, it has

⁶ Timur Dadabaev, "Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: Interlinkages between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62, no. 1 (2021): 67-91.

⁷ Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 123.

⁸ Edward D. Mansfield and Helen V. Milner, *The Political Economy of Regionalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 45.

⁹ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 45.

facilitated trade and cultural exchanges and attracted global powers like the British Empire and the Soviet Union. However, ongoing internal conflicts, political instability, and limited infrastructure undermine its potential.¹⁰ Geopolitical interests dominate Afghanistan's role in regional dynamics. Neighbouring states and major powers like China and India view it as a corridor for trade and energy transit, epitomized by projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, and CASA-1000. These initiatives promise connectivity and economic cooperation but are constrained by persistent security threats and governance issues.¹¹

Pakistan and India's strategic competition further complicates Afghanistan's potential as a neutral facilitator of regional cooperation. Pakistan views Afghanistan as critical to achieving "strategic depth." At the same time, India invests in infrastructure to counterbalance Pakistan's influence and gain access to Central Asian markets through projects like the Chabahar Port and Lapis Lazuli Corridor.¹²

Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan rely on Afghanistan to access South Asian markets for their energy exports. These nations emphasize infrastructure development, such as railways and pipelines, to bolster connectivity. However, regional security concerns, exacerbated by Afghanistan's unstable governance under the Taliban, threaten these efforts.¹³

Despite its potential, Afghanistan's integration into regional frameworks is hindered by challenges such as a lack of international recognition, inadequate banking systems, and limited trade infrastructure. These issues impede its participation in initiatives like BRI and TAPI and deter foreign direct investment, which is critical for infrastructure development and economic growth.¹⁴ Afghanistan must address its internal challenges, including governance, infrastructure, and security, to unlock its potential as a bridge. Collaborative efforts from regional powers and international stakeholders are essential to foster stability, enhance connectivity, and realize mutual economic benefits.¹⁵ Afghanistan's success as a regional connector depends on transforming its geopolitical challenges into opportunities for cooperation and development.

¹⁰ Albert V. Beloglazov, "Central Asia Security Problems in the Context of Coalition Troops Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Journal of Sustainable Development* 4 (2015): 8; Masom Jan Masomy, "Afghanistan as a Land Bridge Between Central Asia and South Asia for Economic Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities," *EJSSS* 1, no. 2 (2021): 2.

¹¹ Ahmad Khalid Slimankhil, Mohammad Abed Anwarzai, Najib Rahman Sabory, Mir Sayed Shah Danish, Mikaeel Ahmadi, and Mohammad Hamid Ahadi, "Renewable Energy Potential for Sustainable Development in Afghanistan," *Journal of Sustainable Energy Revolution* (2020): 8-15; Mariam Tahir, "Regional Security Complex Theory and Soft Power: Mapping China's Engagement in Afghanistan," *Margalla Papers* 26, no. 2 (2022): 39-48.

¹² Thomas H. Johnson and Matthew T. Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Orbis* 51, no. 1 (2007): 71-89; Zahoor Ahmad Wani, "Geopolitical Dynamics in the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan Triangle," *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 4 (2022): 617-633.

¹³ Sabory Najib Rahman, Danish Mir Sayed Shah, Senjyu Tomonobo, and Ahmadzai Mirwais, "Afghanistan Factor in Regional Energy Security and Trade: Existing and Projected Challenges and Opportunities," *AIMS Energy* 11, no. 2 (2023): 213-238, <https://doi.org/10.3934/energy.2023012>; Adam Saud and Muaz Ullah Khan, "Geo-Politics of Afghanistan Under Taliban Regime," *Central Asia* 91 (Winter 2023): 39-63.

¹⁴ Fatima Adeeb, "Lack of International Recognition of Govt Harming Regional Economy: MoE," *Tolo News* (2022); Hameed Hakimi, "Afghanistan Under the Taliban: Regional Recalibrations, Challenges, and Ways Forward," *Atlantic Council South Asia Center* (2022).

¹⁵ Dadabaev, "Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: Interlinkages between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union," 67-91; Masomy, "Afghanistan as a Land Bridge Between Central Asia and South Asia for Economic Cooperation," 2.

3. Afghanistan's Importance for South and Central Asia

3.1 Historical and Geopolitical Importance

Afghanistan's strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Far East, and the Middle East has historically rendered it a focal point of international geopolitics.¹⁶ Its role as a connector dates back to the ancient Silk Road, where it served as a vital trade route linking the East and West. This strategic importance has made Afghanistan a nexus for migration, conquest, and conflict throughout history, attracting the influence of empires such as the Persians under Darius I, Alexander the Great, and later the British, Soviet, and American interventions.¹⁷

Historically, Afghanistan's geopolitical significance was further solidified during the Great Game, the 19th-century rivalry between the British Empire and Czarist Russia, which established Afghanistan as a buffer zone to prevent direct conflict. This legacy of external interference has persisted, with Afghanistan often becoming a battleground for the geopolitical ambitions of global and regional powers, including during the Cold War when it served as a proxy conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States.¹⁸

Afghanistan remains a site of rivalries among regional powers such as India, Pakistan, and China in contemporary geopolitics. Pakistan has historically pursued strategic depth in Afghanistan to secure its northern border against India. At the same time, India seeks to counter Pakistan's influence by investing in Afghan infrastructure and economic projects, such as the Chabahar Port and the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.¹⁹ China, leveraging its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), views Afghanistan as a critical link to connect Central and South Asia, particularly through energy and trade corridors.²⁰

Geopolitically, Afghanistan's position as a land bridge offers immense potential for fostering regional connectivity and integration. Projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and CASA-1000 electricity corridor underscore its regional trade and energy cooperation facilitator role. However, persistent security challenges, including terrorism, transnational drug trafficking, and political instability, continue to hinder its potential as a regional hub.²¹

The absence of a unified and inclusive government further complicates Afghanistan's geopolitical ambitions. Without international recognition, the current governance under the Taliban faces challenges in leveraging Afghanistan's geopolitical significance to foster stability and economic development. Regional cooperation remains fragmented, as rivalries among key players such as India and Pakistan impede collective efforts toward integration.²² Despite these challenges, Afghanistan's geographical position remains a

¹⁶ Zabiullah Dashti, "Afghan External Migration Movements in the Historical Process," *Asya Studies: Academic Social Studies* 20 (2022): 301-314.

¹⁷ Masomy, "Afghanistan as a Land Bridge Between Central Asia and South Asia for Economic Cooperation," 2; Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, 45.

¹⁸ Johnson and Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," 71-89; Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 45.

¹⁹ Muneeb Yousuf, "India-Afghanistan Relations in Changing Regional Geopolitics," *South Asia Research* 43, no. 3 (2023): 343-361, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02627280231190790>; Wani, "Geopolitical Dynamics in the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan Triangle," 617-633.

²⁰ Tahir, "Regional Security Complex Theory," 39-48; Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2016).

²¹ Sajid Iqbal and Sarwat Rauf, "Afghanistan Imbroglia: Impact on the Central Asian States," *Central Asia* 83 (Winter 2019): 59-77, <https://doi.org/10.54418/ca-83.29>; Slimankhil et al., "Renewable Energy Potential," 8-15.

²² Saud and Khan, "Geo-Politics of Afghanistan Under Taliban Regime," 39-63.

linchpin for regional and global geopolitics. Its future as a stabilizing bridge between South and Central Asia depends on addressing internal governance issues, fostering regional cooperation, and securing international support. By redefining its role, Afghanistan could transition from being a conflict zone to becoming a conduit for trade, energy, and cultural exchange, promoting regional stability and prosperity.²³

3.2 Afghanistan's Geographical and Geo-economic Importance

Afghanistan is pivotal at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Far East, and the Middle East, underscoring its strategic and economic significance. Historically, its position along the ancient Silk Road facilitated trade, cultural exchange, and migration, cementing its role as a natural connector between diverse regions.²⁴ Modern interpretations emphasize Afghanistan's geographical importance through geostrategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic dimensions. Its central location makes it a potential transit, trade, and energy connectivity bridge, linking South Asian states with the resource-rich Central Asian republics.²⁵ This dual role as a connector and a competitive site of influence has also made Afghanistan a focal point for international rivalries and conflicts, exemplified by decades of proxy wars among global powers.²⁶

From a geo-economic standpoint, Afghanistan's landlocked status amplifies its potential as an economic bridge rather than diminishing it. Situated along major corridors such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Corridor, Afghanistan offers an indispensable link between China and the Western Asian or Middle Eastern markets.²⁷ Regional infrastructure projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, CASA-1000 electricity project, and the Lapis Lazuli corridor aim to harness Afghanistan's geographical advantage to foster regional connectivity and energy cooperation (Obaidullah, 2017). Additionally, its abundant natural resources—from lithium to copper—enhance its role as a critical player in global supply chains for technological and industrial materials.²⁸

However, Afghanistan faces significant challenges in actualizing its geo-economic potential. Persistent insecurity, political instability, and the lack of an inclusive and internationally recognized government have hindered investment and infrastructure development.²⁹ The withdrawal of US forces in 2021 left a vacuum that has exacerbated uncertainties regarding governance and regional integration. Nonetheless, regional stakeholders recognize the necessity of stability in Afghanistan for the broader region's peace and economic integration. Collaborative efforts from neighbouring states and the international community are critical to addressing these challenges. This cooperation must prioritize infrastructure development, governance reforms, and constructive engagement with Afghanistan's current administration to achieve its potential as a regional connectivity hub.³⁰ In summary, Afghanistan's geographical and geo-economic

²³ Dadabaev, "Regional Cooperation in Central Asia," 67-91; Masomy, "Afghanistan as a Land Bridge," 2; Börzel and Risse, *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, 123.

²⁴ Masomy, "Afghanistan as a Land Bridge Between Central Asia and South Asia for Economic Cooperation," 2.

²⁵ Mohammad Yonus Noorzi, "Afghanistan: Regional Connectivity Hub," *Wschodnioznawstwo* 15 (2021): 287-299.

²⁶ Saud and Khan, "Geo-Politics of Afghanistan Under Taliban Regime," 39-63.

²⁷ F. Ramezani Bonesh, "The Future of the Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan: Obstacles, Opportunities, and the Taliban's Perspective," *Silk Road Briefing* (2023).

²⁸ Slimankhil et al., "Renewable Energy Potential," 8-15.

²⁹ Fatima, "Lack of International Recognition of Govt Harming Regional Economy."

³⁰ Imran Khan and Safdar Ali Shirazi, "Geostrategic Importance of Afghanistan for Pakistan," *Pakistan Geographical Review* 76, no. 1 (2021): 137-153.

importance lies in its capacity to facilitate regional cooperation, trade, and energy integration. Overcoming its internal and external challenges is vital for enabling Afghanistan to fulfil its role as a connector between South and Central Asia and beyond, promoting stability and economic growth.

4. Role of the South Asian States and Central Asia: Impact on Afghanistan

India and Pakistan are key players in South Asian Politics; therefore, their roles are vital in contributing to regional connectivity and integration throughout Afghanistan. Despite security challenges, political instability, illiteracy, and environmental degradation in this region, poverty is a major problem that causes these challenges to grow. Thus, collective regional dialogue is necessary to address these challenges and identify the shared gains and benefits vital for regional connectivity. Regional connectivity cannot be achieved without a collective regional outlook.

4.1 India

Since 2001, India has been regarded as Afghanistan's key regional partner, assisting Afghanistan with over \$2 billion in reconstruction projects in the health, education, and humanitarian sectors. Afghanistan has also been integrated into several regional connectivity initiatives with India for assistance to enhance trade, transit, and energy cooperation.³¹ Chabahar Port, a major initiative in connectivity projects, was jointly inaugurated by the leaders of Afghanistan, India, and Iran in 2017. This port is considered a strategic point for India as it reduces Afghanistan's dependence on the Karachi port and facilitates India's connectivity to Central Asia. Despite investing in the Chabahar port, India also assisted in building a 218 km highway between Delaram and Zaranj in Afghanistan to boost the connectivity of Chabahar to the border of Iran with Afghanistan. This port helped India facilitate humanitarian assistance, and India wanted to reach Central Asia without Pakistan being involved.³²

International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is another major connectivity initiative proposed collectively by Russia, Iran, and India to connect Russia to the Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean to Europe via road, rail, and sea routes. Afghanistan can also take a stake in this initiative using the Lapis Lazuli corridor, a trade and transit agreement between Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. The Lapis Lazuli corridor aims to connect Afghanistan using the Caspian and Black Sea routes to Europe, reducing the time and money costs. Through this corridor, India has guaranteed its stake-over connectivity projects to connect it with the rest of the world.³³

Post-2021, with Afghanistan under new governance, India faces challenges in maintaining its influence and advancing bilateral trade and political relations. India must adopt a pragmatic approach to enhance these relations, engaging diplomatically with Afghanistan's de facto administration while emphasizing trade, infrastructure development, and people-to-people connections. India can ensure its continued role as a key contributor to Afghanistan's regional connectivity by supporting economic initiatives and fostering mutual trust. Overall, India, as a major player in South Asian

³¹ Muzammil A. Dar, "Afghanistan Factor in Indo-Central Asian Relations," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 21, no. 1 (2014).

³² Shawn Amirthan, "What Are India, Iran, and Afghanistan's Benefits from the Chabahar Port Agreement?" *Strategic Analysis* 41, no. 1 (2017): 87-93.

³³ Sanchita Chatterjee, "International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) Connecting India and Central Asia," *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 8, no. 4 (2018).

states, plays a constructive role in contributing to regional connectivity, which is not only determined by economic interests but also by political and strategic considerations. India viewed the past as an important partner in countering terrorism and issues related to its security and interests in Afghanistan.

4.2 Pakistan

Pakistan is another important player in South Asia, and its role is vital for regional connectivity. The country shares a long British-drawn Durand line with Afghanistan and religious and cultural ties. Afghanistan offers Pakistan a gateway to connect with Central Asia and beyond to benefit from links that facilitate trade and transit. Pakistan also tries to land its strategic interests in Afghanistan, known as the strategic depth linked to its survival against its main rival, India. Overall, despite political and strategic interests, Pakistan also wants to secure its economic interests by advancing towards central Asian markets and importing fossil and clean energy through the route of Afghanistan.³⁴

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a major project initiated jointly by China and Pakistan. It is considered a flagship of the Belt Road initiative aimed at connecting Xinjiang, China, with the Gawadar port through major transport infrastructure. Afghanistan also can participate in this megaproject and connect with the Chinese markets and further opportunities. Central Asian states can also participate in this initiative to reach the South Asian, Indian Ocean, and Chinese markets through Afghanistan.³⁵

Pakistan is also involved in many regional megaprojects, such as TAPI, aimed at supplying gas from Turkmenistan to India; CASA 1000, aimed to transmit 1000 megawatts of electricity to Pakistan through Afghanistan; and TUTAP also aimed to supply energy from Central Asia to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan has a lot to offer and contribute to regional connectivity and integration. However, due to security challenges, the disputed Durand line and tensions with India have hampered a collective regional perspective.³⁶ Pakistan's ambitions for regional integration face substantial challenges, including persistent security threats, strained relations with India, and unresolved issues related to the Durand Line. These factors significantly hinder efforts to cultivate a cohesive regional perspective. To navigate these obstacles, Pakistan must adopt a cooperative strategy emphasizing support for Afghanistan's infrastructure development and fostering constructive dialogue with India. The ongoing tensions over Kashmir and cross-border terrorism continue to complicate this dialogue, as India's assertive policies under Prime Minister Modi have further strained bilateral relations, leading to a breakdown in communication and trust between the two nations.³⁷

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, Pakistan's relationship with its neighbour has evolved, necessitating a reassessment of its strategic approach. By prioritizing stability in Afghanistan and addressing shared concerns such as terrorism and drug trafficking, Pakistan can enhance its role in regional connectivity initiatives. Collaborative projects that promote economic interdependence will be vital for

³⁴ Faisal Javaid and Uzma Siraj, "Pakistan and Central Asia: A Comprehensive Analysis of Regional Connectivity Drive, Challenges and Policy Options" (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 2021).

³⁵ Mercy A. Kuo, "China, Pakistan, and the Taliban: CPEC in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat* (2023).

³⁶ World Bank, *Pakistan at 100: Regional Connectivity* (2019): 23-26.

³⁷ Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "Don't Expect Any Breakthroughs in India-Pakistan Relations," *Stimson Center*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/dont-expect-any-breakthroughs-in-india-pakistan-relations/>.

strengthening Pakistan's contributions to regional integration. However, achieving this will require overcoming the legacy of mistrust stemming from historical grievances, particularly regarding Kashmir, which remains a core issue in India-Pakistan relations.³⁸

4.3 Role of Central Asian States

Central Asia, considered a hub of energy for South Asia, is located to the north and bordered by Afghanistan. These republics were once part of the former Soviet Union and achieved independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. Central Asia is also considered an opportunity region because of its agricultural and energy production industries. However, this region must find a market for cheap product transport. They view South Asia as one of the largest markets for product consumption. South Asia, on the other hand, suffers from an energy deficit and is dependent on oil, gas, and electricity for Central Asia and, ultimately, Russia. This highlights the role of Afghanistan in regional energy cooperation, which makes it possible for these regions to exchange industrial products through land corridors.

4.3.1 Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is a landlocked country that has an important influence on Central Asian politics and has long been pursuing connectivity with South Asia to facilitate the transmission of energy and trading of agricultural goods. Since 1991, it has been improving its relations with its neighbours to address commerce, cooperation, and integration. Several factors determine the relationship between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, but most importantly, geographical factors also play a vital role. Therefore, peace and stability in Afghanistan are Uzbekistan's core interests when implementing projects.³⁹ Uzbekistan has much to offer in promoting regional connectivity, and Afghanistan's role is vital in enabling it to reach the southern markets. Despite accessing South Asian markets to trade products, Uzbekistan also wants to benefit from India and Pakistan's investment, expertise, and technology. Overall, Uzbekistan wants to play a constructive role in regional integration through Afghanistan, aimed at promoting the security and stability significant for regional cooperation.⁴⁰

Afghanistan and Uzbekistan share a tiny border connected with the Hairatan Port, a strategic port facilitating trade and transport between the two countries. Uzbekistan and Afghanistan want to jointly extend this route from Hairatan to Mazari-Sharif to Herat and link themselves to either the Chabahar port or Pakistan. Another project decided upon was the extension of the railway from Hairatan to Mazari-Sharif, Kabul, and Peshawar, which provides access to Uzbekistan and reaches Pakistan at a lower cost.⁴¹ However, one of the main challenges for Uzbekistan in achieving connectivity is the rendered situation in Afghanistan, which is located between Central and South Asia.⁴²

³⁸ Wei Wang, "South Asia's Security Dilemma: How India and Pakistan Lost Policy Flexibility in the Kashmir Conflict," *SHS Web of Conferences* 148 (2022): 03018.

³⁹ Abdusamat A. Khaydarov and Surat M. Mirkasymov, "Uzbek Perspectives on Eurasia," *India Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2019).

⁴⁰ Shabir Ahmad Khan, "Trans-Regional Connectivity in Eurasia's Heartland and the Role of Uzbekistan," *University of Peshawar* 16, no. 4 (2022).

⁴¹ *Diplomat Magazine*, "Uzbekistan's Strategy for Building Greater Trans-Regional Connectivity," June 30, 2021, <https://diplomatmagazine.eu/2021/06/30/uzbekistans-strategy-for-building-greater-trans-regional-connectivity/>.

⁴² Navbahor Imamova, "Uzbekistan Promotes Connectivity to Enhance Its Regional Leadership," *Voice of America*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia-uzbekistan-promotes-connectivity-enhance-its-regional-leadership/6208215.html>.

Uzbekistan has long supported the peace process and invested in connectivity infrastructure such as rail and road and the extension of power lines from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Following the US withdrawal, Afghanistan was uncertain about the future, and the lack of global recognition of the government delayed or slowed down the regional connectivity process. However, Uzbekistan realizes that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has started a new era, and all neighbouring countries should be encouraged to help Afghanistan improve its military-political situation, which would benefit the entire region in the long run. The Afghan government can address Afghanistan's problems, and neighbouring countries' assistance is sought to overcome these odds collectively. Overall, this shows that Uzbekistan's perspective on regional connectivity holds greater significance as it contributes to the macroeconomic status of the region. Afghanistan plays an important role as a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia.

4.3.2 Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan followed the politics of neutrality and established relations with the Afghanistan government, regardless of which regime was in charge. Northeastern Afghanistan borders it and is vital to regional connectivity through land corridors, trade, and transit projects. Turkmenistan contributes to regional connectivity and integration via Afghanistan's trade in energy sectors, such as gas and electricity. Turkmenistan is rich in gas production and sees it as a core interest in supplying gas to Europe and its neighbours in South and East Asia through its megaprojects as part of Turkmenistan's energy policy. However, there are challenges and opportunities to determine exports and enhance connectivity, integration, and energy security. Turkmenistan deems the role of regional and international countries efficient in addressing challenges and contributing to regional connectivity, highlighting the role of Turkmenistan in supporting regional energy security. Regional countries ought to resolve their political disputes, build trust, improve their infrastructure, create a collective regional perspective, and promote investments in energy sectors.⁴³

TAPI is one of the many megaprojects aimed at supplying gas from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India through Afghanistan. Despite economic gains, this project also aims to enhance regional cooperation and integration.⁴⁴ However, many challenges, such as security threats, inadequate infrastructure, and political instability, have made implementing this project challenging. Projects require strong diplomatic dialogue, a collective political outlook, engagement, and follow-up by regional countries.⁴⁵ Overall, it is evident that Turkmenistan's role in the region is significant in supplying energy for Southeast Asia and Europe and providing a gateway for Afghanistan and South Asia to connect to Europe through the Lapis Lazuli corridor. Afghanistan is an important geography for Turkmenistan to reach South Asian markets that face an energy deficit.

⁴³ Martha Brill Olcott, "International Gas Trade in Central Asia: Turkmenistan, Iran, Russia, and Afghanistan," *Institute for Public Policy*, 2004.

⁴⁴ Eldaniz Gusseinov, "Turkmenistan's Afghanistan Policy: Balancing Risks and Untapped Opportunities," *The Diplomat*, April 23, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/turkmenistans-afghanistan-policy-balancing-risks-and-untapped-opportunities/>.

⁴⁵ Adil Rana Rajpoot and Sharyl Naeem, "Geopolitics of Energy Pipelines: Case Study of TAPI and IP Gas Pipelines," *International Journal on Integrated Education* 3, no. 8 (2020).

4.3.3 Tajikistan

Tajikistan is also a central Asian country bordered by Afghanistan to the northeast and plays an important role in enhancing connectivity and integration through Afghanistan. Tajikistan offers Afghanistan an electricity supply; on the other hand, Afghanistan offers a gateway for Tajikistan to benefit from trade and transport in South Asian markets. Tajikistan plays a role in contributing to peace and security in Afghanistan by providing diplomatic and political support and encouraging regional cooperation. Tajikistan is involved in many regional initiatives that aim to be implemented nationwide. The Five Nations Railway Corridor, which connects Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China by railway, aims to enhance trade, transit, and regional connectivity and reduce the demand for sea routes.⁴⁶

CASA-1000 is another regional project that supplies electricity from Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan through Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The project aimed to enhance participation, cooperation, and integration by providing clean energy and achieving economic development for stakeholders. The Afghanistan-Tajikistan gas pipeline is one of many other regional projects aimed at supplying natural gas from Amu Darya to Tajikistan to diversify Tajikistan's energy resources and boost mutual economic development. The Lapis Lazuli corridor between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, which aims to connect Afghanistan to Europe and facilitate the transportation, trade, and movement of people, can link Tajikistan to Europe through the route of Afghanistan.⁴⁷ Despite Tajikistan's energy supply to Afghanistan and South Asia, Afghanistan also needs to connect to South Asian and European markets through railway infrastructure. However, before that, Afghanistan needed to improve its trade infrastructure to enable regional countries to conduct connectivity and transit activities.

5. Opportunities and Challenges for Regional Integration through Afghanistan

5.1 Opportunities

5.1.1 Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI)

Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), launched by China in 2013, aims to build extensive connectivity infrastructure linking Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond through land and sea-based networks.⁴⁸ Afghanistan's geographical location places it as a key stakeholder in this initiative. Its vast reserves of natural resources, such as lithium, copper, and iron, further strengthen its strategic importance for the BRI, particularly for industries like technology and renewable energy.⁴⁹ BRI's infrastructure projects, including railways, highways, and pipelines, are critical for Afghanistan to access regional and global markets. These projects also enhance trade and energy cooperation among major players like China, Russia, Pakistan, and Central Asia, fostering regional stability through mutual economic dependence.⁵⁰ However, Afghanistan's ability to fully integrate into BRI is

⁴⁶ Bibhu Prasad Routray and Sayantan Haldar, "Analysis: Five Nations Railway Corridor Project: Increasing Connectivity and Chinese Dominance in Afghanistan," *Mantraya.org*, 24 (2018).

⁴⁷ Mehmet Levent Yilmaz and Faridullah Talash, "Afghanistan's Integration to the New Silk Route," *Journal of Security Studies* 19, no. 3 (2017): 61-71.

⁴⁸ Bonesh, "The Future of the Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan."

⁴⁹ Slimankhil et al., "Renewable Energy Potential," 8-15.

⁵⁰ Tahir, "Regional Security Complex Theory," 39-48.

contingent on addressing challenges such as political instability, insecurity, and lack of inclusive governance.⁵¹

5.1.2 Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI)

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project, originally envisioned in 1995, was delayed by years of conflict and instability. Recently, renewed efforts to implement the project, including groundwork by Afghanistan's current administration, have brought it closer to realization.⁵² TAPI aims to transfer 33 billion cubic meters of gas annually across 1,800 kilometres, generating significant revenues for Afghanistan through transit fees and taxes. Additionally, it promises thousands of jobs during construction and operation, which could alleviate Afghanistan's severe energy shortages and humanitarian crises.⁵³ TAPI also promotes regional stability by fostering cooperation among participating countries. However, its implementation faces hurdles such as regional tensions between India and Pakistan, insufficient technical expertise in Afghanistan, and differing visions regarding the project's strategic goals.⁵⁴

5.1.3 Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)

5.1.3 Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), initiated in 1995 and expanded to include Afghanistan in 2005, focuses on infrastructure development for trade, transport, and energy cooperation across Central Asia.⁵⁵ The framework has supported over 100 projects worth \$15 billion, highlighting Afghanistan's importance as a landlocked country for regional connectivity.⁵⁶ Key corridors under CAREC, such as the BRI and Lapis Lazuli, further integrate Afghanistan into larger regional networks. Despite its potential, Afghanistan's security and governance challenges have delayed the implementation of several CAREC projects aimed at connecting South Asian markets. Addressing these issues is essential for Afghanistan to leverage its role in this framework fully.⁵⁷

5.1.4 Foreign Direct Investment

Afghanistan's strategic location offers significant opportunities for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), particularly in infrastructure and resource extraction. Agreements, such as the 25-year deal with China to extract oil from Amu Darya, exemplify Afghanistan's potential to attract FDI for industrial and technological development.⁵⁸ Investment in natural resources, including lithium and copper, could provide the capital needed to modernize Afghanistan's infrastructure and integrate it into regional connectivity initiatives.⁵⁹ FDI can also improve Afghanistan's business environment by introducing global standards in property protection and tax policies, fostering investor confidence. However, political instability, security concerns, and limited institutional capacity remain significant barriers.⁶⁰

⁵¹ Saud and Khan, "Geo-Politics of Afghanistan Under Taliban Regime," 39–63.

⁵² Obaidullah, "TAPI Project Benefits and Challenges for Afghanistan," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 2017.

⁵³ Slimankhil et al., "Renewable Energy Potential," 8–15.

⁵⁴ Abulkhairkhan Zhunisbek, "Prospects and Challenges in Realizing the TAPI Project," *Eurasian Research Institute*, 2018.

⁵⁵ Faisal Javaid and Uzma Siraj, "Connectivity Through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and CAREC between Central Asia and South Asia: A Case Study of Pakistan," *Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences and Technology*, 2022.

⁵⁶ Bonesh, "The Future of the Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan."

⁵⁷ Khan and Shirazi, "Geostrategic Importance of Afghanistan," 137–153.

⁵⁸ Fatima, "Lack of International Recognition of Govt Harming Regional Economy."

⁵⁹ Slimankhil et al., "Renewable Energy Potential," 8–15.

⁶⁰ Noorzi, "Afghanistan: Regional Connectivity Hub," 287–299.

5.1.5 Eradication of Poverty

Poverty eradication is not only an opportunity but also a responsibility and collective necessity for regional countries to achieve it through the above-mentioned megaprojects. These projects can create hundreds of thousands of security, maintenance, and operation jobs in multiple regional countries. Poverty eradication should be the ultimate goal of regional countries, and it requires a collective vision of regional cooperation. South Asian countries are highly populated, and joblessness and poverty rates in this region are growing. Therefore, the integration of markets between South and Central Asia is required to reduce the poverty rate, increase energy supply, and create job opportunities throughout Afghanistan.⁶¹

Poverty is one of the main causes of illiteracy, instability, conflict, and insecurity, which severely affect Afghanistan's regional bridging ability to benefit from cooperation and integration. It is vital to address this challenge by improving the region's peace, stability, and security. Regional connectivity can contribute to eradicating poverty in Afghanistan in multiple ways.⁶² First, the enhancement of transit and trade, which facilitates the flow of goods through Afghanistan, creates revenue for Afghanistan and the people across the region. Second, energy resources such as electricity, gas, and coal are important to keep industries operating, which is necessary to create more jobs and opportunities. Afghanistan's role in this regard is vital because it contributes to the movement of resources in an inexpensive manner. Finally, Afghanistan is rich in natural resources such as lithium, copper, and iron, which are used in major technological industries, attracting direct investments by foreign companies that will ultimately acquire greater revenue.⁶³

5.2 Challenges

5.2.1 Lack of Recognition

After the US withdrawal and the immediate fall of the republic, the Islamic Emirate took charge for the second time after 20 years. The formation of a new government in Afghanistan has remained unrecognized by the international community, creating challenges for Afghanistan to serve as a regional connectivity bridge.⁶⁴ Lack of recognition means Afghanistan cannot participate in regional initiatives, agreements, and organizations critical for connectivity and integration through its strategic location.⁶⁵ This situation has further isolated Afghanistan from international financial assistance, which is essential for acquiring investments to improve economic stability.⁶⁶ Furthermore, this lack of recognition prevents Afghanistan from leveraging its geographical position, which could otherwise facilitate projects aimed at linking regional countries, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) electricity project, and International

⁶¹ Oleg E. Grishin and Nasratullah Rawan, "Importance of Afghanistan for Regional Security in South and East Asia," *Peoples' Friendship University of Russia* 7, no. 1 (2020): 97–98.

⁶² Noorzi, "Afghanistan: Regional Connectivity Hub," 287–299.

⁶³ Rahman et al., "Afghanistan Factor in Regional Energy Security and Trade," 213–238.

⁶⁴ Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 45.

⁶⁵ Antonio Giustozzi and Niamatullah Ibrahim, "Afghanistan and Regional Connectivity: Challenges of Stability and Recognition," *International Affairs Journal*, 2022.

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan's Economic and Humanitarian Crisis: Impact of Taliban Takeover," 2022.

North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).⁶⁷ The absence of recognition by key international actors significantly impacts Afghanistan's economic and political stability. Additionally, the lack of recognition hampers Afghanistan's ability to address regional security threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and violence. This isolation restricts opportunities for collective security solutions, affecting regional stability and delaying the implementation of critical projects.⁶⁸

5.2.2 Lack of Credible Banking System

Another challenge in the context of Afghanistan's bridging potential is the lack of a reliable banking system that weakens transactions for economic activities. This situation created many challenges for regional cooperation and integration, especially after the fall of the republic, which created uncertainty within the banking system in a variety of aspects, such as limited accessibility to credit by customers, frozen reserves abroad, lack of trust by customers, lack of recognition by foreign institutions, and lack of integration with regional payment and transaction systems.⁶⁹

These challenges in the banking system have affected Afghanistan's bridging potential to acquire advantages from various regional connectivity projects, such as TAPI, BRI, and INSTC. Because these projects aim to enhance trade, transit, and infrastructure in the region, it is necessary to establish a reliable banking system that facilitates time payments and transactions that promote investments. As a result, integration and cooperation will occur not only in the private sector but also in the regional governmental sector. Therefore, Afghanistan must address the weakening trade and transit challenges through governance, security, and regional cooperation factors.⁷⁰

5.2.3 Poor and Inadequate Trade Infrastructure

Another major challenge within regional integration and connectivity is inadequate trade infrastructure that slows the flow and movement of industrial goods, public transport, and services through Afghanistan. Roads, highways, railways, and ports are physical infrastructure that help achieve connectivity. The existence of trade policies, company laws, consumer laws, and standard procedures is also deemed an important trade infrastructure that facilitates integration.⁷¹

Due to decades of war and conflict, Afghanistan has suffered the destruction of its primary infrastructure for trade and connectivity. Afghanistan possesses only 3300 km of regional highways, which is insufficient to handle the flow of regional goods to a larger extent. Moreover, the railway infrastructure is limited to 75 km and is only used for imports from Central Asia.⁷²

This situation threatens Afghanistan's domestic economic development and affects its capacity as a regional bridge and regional countries that try to integrate through Afghanistan. It will also hamper the status of Afghanistan from benefiting from megaprojects such as TAPI, TUTAP, BRI, and INSTC, which aim to improve trade and

⁶⁷ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan: Economic Collapse, the Taliban, and Prospects for Regional Connectivity," *Brookings Institution*, 2022.

⁶⁸ Samiullah Khan, "Strategic Implications of Afghanistan's Geopolitical Challenges in Regional Integration," *Journal of Contemporary South Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2023): 105-128.

⁶⁹ UNDP, *Policy Brief: The Afghan Banking and Financial System Situation Report*, 2021.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Mohibur-Rahman Mohib, "Impact of Road Transport Infrastructure on Economic Growth: Evidence from Afghanistan," *Kardan Journal of Economics and Management Sciences* 4, no. 3 (2021): 16-35.

⁷² *Ibid.*

transit infrastructure and amalgamate various projects with each other. For example, the Five Railway Nations Corridor can be linked to the Chabahar Port, and the Hairatan Port can be extended to the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. Afghanistan seems to have a lot to offer in regional connectivity, but its status has been hampered due to several challenges.⁷³

5.2.4 Security Challenges in South-Central Asia Integration

Security challenges remain one of the most significant obstacles to regional integration between South and Central Asia, with Afghanistan at the epicentre of these issues. Decades of conflict, insurgency, and the presence of extremist groups have destabilized Afghanistan, creating a ripple effect across the region. This instability has undermined trust among neighbouring countries, disrupted trade and infrastructure projects, and deterred foreign investment crucial for regional connectivity.⁷⁴

The porous borders between Afghanistan and its neighbours have facilitated transnational threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling. These activities not only destabilize Afghanistan but also pose risks to South and Central Asian nations, complicating cooperative efforts.⁷⁵ For instance, the persistence of militant groups along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and within the region has hindered the implementation of key projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) electricity project.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the lack of a unified regional approach to addressing these security threats exacerbates the problem. Distrust and rivalries, particularly between India and Pakistan, have hampered collective action and limited Afghanistan's ability to act as a neutral facilitator of integration.⁷⁷ Sustainable South-Central Asia integration will remain elusive until these security challenges are adequately addressed through robust regional cooperation.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's strategic location at the crossroads of South and Central Asia underscores its potential as a regional bridge. Historically, its geography has attracted the attention of global powers, shaping its role in regional politics and trade. Despite this potential, persistent challenges – ranging from political instability, lack of international recognition, and inadequate infrastructure to internal conflicts and ethnic divisions – have undermined Afghanistan's ability to fulfil its role as a connector between these regions. The paper highlights Afghanistan's involvement in regional projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), TAPI pipeline, and CAREC, offering immense trade opportunities, energy cooperation, and economic growth. However, these opportunities remain constrained by security threats, weak governance, and strained diplomatic relations with key players like India and Pakistan. To unlock its potential, Afghanistan must redefine its role from that of a conflict-ridden state to a stable partner capable of fostering regional integration. This requires internal reforms and collaborative support from neighbouring

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Andrew Thangasamy, "The Missing Link in Regional Integration in South Asia: The Case for Regional and Sub-Regional Political Institutions," *South Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (2019): 139–155.

⁷⁵ Mukesh Shankar Bharti, "Indo-French Defence Partnership and Regional Security Balance in South Asia," *Torun International Studies* 1 (2023): 55–68.

⁷⁶ Muhammad Al Amin, "The Role of China's Investment in Shaping the Redevelopment of Afghanistan," *RJL* 2 (2023): 9–19.

⁷⁷ Muhammad Ajmal Khan, "India-US Strategic Convergence: Implications for Strategic Balance in South Asia," *NDUJ* 37 (2023): 46–58.

countries and the international community. Addressing its challenges, Afghanistan can become a vital conduit for trade, energy, and cultural exchanges, promoting stability and prosperity across South and Central Asia.

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