

Lapis Lazuli Corridor: Meeting the Economic Aspirations of Afghanistan and Member Countries

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Abstract

Lapis Lazuli Corridor consists of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The three landlocked countries Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan have great trade potential which could lead to sustainable economic growth. However, the three countries face certain challenges that does not allow them to explore their true trade potential. Afghanistan is striving to look for alternative, easier, and economic roads to European and other international markets. Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan had their high economic growth before the international oil market shocks. Now, both the countries have prioritized to diversify their economies. Georgia on the other hand occupies a strategic location but needs to reap the gains of strategic location through more transit trade regional integration. At the same time, Turkey is working hard to ensure more political and economic influence in South Caucasus region and Central Asia. The paper discusses how the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can address the economic aspirations of the member countries.

Keywords: Lapis Lazuli, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey

JEL Classification: F02, F42, F55

Introduction

The landlocked countries have typical problems in terms of trade and transit. Research also shows that distance plays a significant role in transportation of goods (Moneta,1959).¹ The same pattern is revealed even in recent studies which shows that geographic location of a country plays an important role in determining the cost of trade (Hummels, 1998).² Despite technological development in transportation sector, the landlocked developing countries continue to face challenges to access international markets and as a result they lag behind their maritime neighbors in overall development and external trade(Faye et al, 2004).³ These countries are vulnerable to high freight cost and the unpredictability in terms of time (Marteau et al, 2007).⁴

The problems are more complicated in context of resource rich landlocked countries where lack of economic diversification makes them susceptible to international price oil market shocks. The oil exporting countries need to use the income from natural resource to diversify their economies which would enable them to fight against external shocks (Gelb and Grasmann, 2010).⁵ In this context, economic and export diversification can contribute visible benefits to the economy and resource dependent countries introduce different policies to decrease their dependence on the extractive industry (Esanove, 2012).⁶

The modern global economy is organized and strongly based on regional integration (Choi and Caporaso, 2002).⁷ The evidence from Africa shows that the countries are focusing on regional integration to overcome problems related to transportation of goods and build trade partnership with major economies including European Union, China and Central Asia (Hartzenberg, 2011).⁸

In the light of literature, the paper provides an overview of challenges and potential benefits of Lapis Lazuli Corridor to member countries. It discusses how the corridor could address the strategic priorities of landlocked members in terms of trade, and economic diversification. It also provides an analysis of how the corridor is aligned with the priorities of non-landlocked members.

2 Background of the Study

The discussion about Afghan economy usually begins with the landlocked geographic position of the country. The disadvantaged geographic position has remained a constraint for economic growth of the country because it restricts the trade prospects for the country. The neighboring countries particularly Pakistan exploit it as pressure tactic for

political gains.⁹ This is the reason why the debates about alternative trade routes gains attention. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is one of the key regional projects that has potential to diversify the trade routes of the country.

The corridor is a trade and transport route which begins in Aqina and Turghundi ports in Afghan provinces of Faryab and Hirat, reaches Turkmenbashsi port of Turkmenistan, crosses Caspian Sea, heads to Baku in Azerbaijan then via Georgian capital Tbilisi reaches its Poti and Batumi ports in Black Sea and finally via Turkey to Europe. The route involves road, rail and maritime transport means.

The route follows the traces of ancient routes through which Afghanistan used to transport goods to different countries of the world. It gets its name from the historic route through which Afghanistan's lapis lazuli and other semiprecious stones were exported to North Africa, Russia, the Balkans, Europe and Caucasus more than 2,000 years ago.¹⁰ The project was proposed by Afghanistan, it surfaced in 2012 and initially consisted of only four members countries with objective to provide the country access to Black Sea.¹¹ This is the reason the initial name was proposed as Black Sea project. However, there already existed another project in the region with similar name. Therefore, the name was changed to "Lapis Lazuli Corridor".¹² Later on, Turkey joined the corridor which extended the trade route to Kars, Istanbul and as such to Europe through Mediterranean Sea.¹³

The member countries took three years to discuss different aspects of the agreement. The first meeting was held in November, 2014 at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan in Ashgabat. The text of agreement was finalized in the fourth technical meeting that was held in Baku in November 2016.¹⁴ The Lapis Lazuli Route Agreement was officially signed on November 15, 2017 on the sidelines of Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA)- VII in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.¹⁵

The first and pilot shipment of goods was sent from Afghanistan via Lapis Lazuli route on December 13, 2018.¹⁶ This included cotton (83 ton), wool (23 ton), raisins (26 ton), watermelon (26 ton) and sesame seeds (2.5 ton). However, there are still major issues to be addressed to make the corridor fully operational. For this purpose, the expert group meetings which work on implementation of the agreement are held. The first working group meeting was held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan on April 2018 in which different issues including visa and transportation protocols, customs cooperation, taxation and tariffs were discussed.¹⁷ As a follow up of the issues, second meeting was held in December 2018 in Herat, Afghanistan.¹⁸ The third meeting was held in Tbilisi, Georgia in June 2019 in which all the

members showed their commitment to ensure a collective effort for effective implementation of the agreement.¹⁹

The discussions about effective implementation are still underway and it will take some time until the route is fully operational. However, it can ensure significant economic gains for the member countries. The paper provides an overview of economic importance of the project and how it meets the aspirations of three landlocked members Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, as well as Georgia and Turkey (Transit countries).

3 Economic Aspirations of the Countries

3.1 Afghanistan

Afghanistan celebrated the agreement as an important development that would heal its long standing economic plague to a great extent. As a landlocked country, Afghanistan has mainly relied on Pakistan for its international trade in the light of international conventions and bilateral agreements. However, these legal frameworks have not helped as the country's economy continues to suffer due to transit trade challenges posed by Pakistan.²⁰ The disadvantaged geographic position has been used as a pressure tool by Pakistan to dictate its political policies against Afghanistan. In this context, Lapis Lazuli corridor would diversify its trade and transit routes and has been interpreted as the shortest, cheapest and most reliable route for Afghanistan's trade with Europe.²¹

Beyond transit trade, the agreement is a strategic step towards integration of Afghanistan in the region and securing its economic future by designating it as a hub to connect markets of South Asia, Central Asia, and Middle East. As such, it complements other regional integration projects particularly Five Nations Railway Corridor Project and connect with Middle Corridor Project of Turkey.

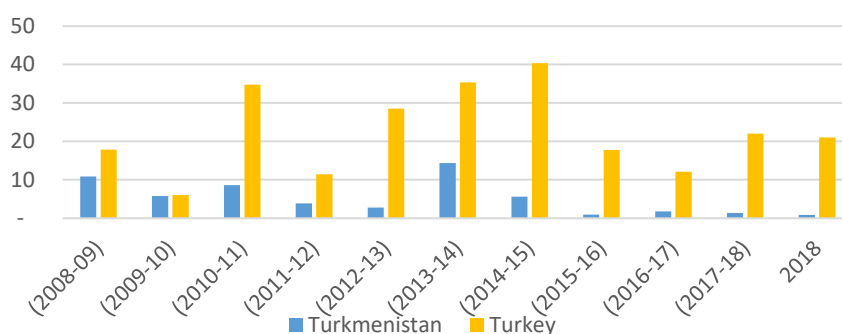
In the recent years, Afghanistan's trade has shifted Pakistan to Iran.²² At the moment, it is Bandar e Abbas of Iran being use as alternative to Karachi port. In the long term, Chabahar would serve the as trade and transit route for Afghanistan once fully operation.²³ In this context, while Chabahar provides Afghanistan access to Arabian Sea, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor gives it access to Black and Mediterranean Seas.

The strategic documents about economic future of the country states that Afghanistan cannot develop without access to regional and international markets.²⁴ The facilitation of trade and simplification of procedures along the corridor will enable Afghanistan to expand its trade with member countries as well as European Union. At the moment, both the imports and exports show a downward trend due to an overall decrease in

Afghanistan's trade as well as barriers on the current routes to access regional and international markets.

In terms of member countries, Turkmenistan and Turkey are the key destinations for Afghanistan's exports. The exports to both countries has mainly included dry fruits, animal skin, wool, high value and medical herbs. Georgia and Azerbaijan make random appearance as export destinations. However, the Afghan Government sees it as potential market for mineral products. In this regard, the first shipment of 115 tons of marble reached Azerbaijan in June 2019.²⁵ While this was not the first time in the last decade that Afghanistan has exported marbles in the last decade, this indicates the potential for future exports.

Figure 1: Afghanistan's Exports with Turkmenistan and Turkey (2008-2018)

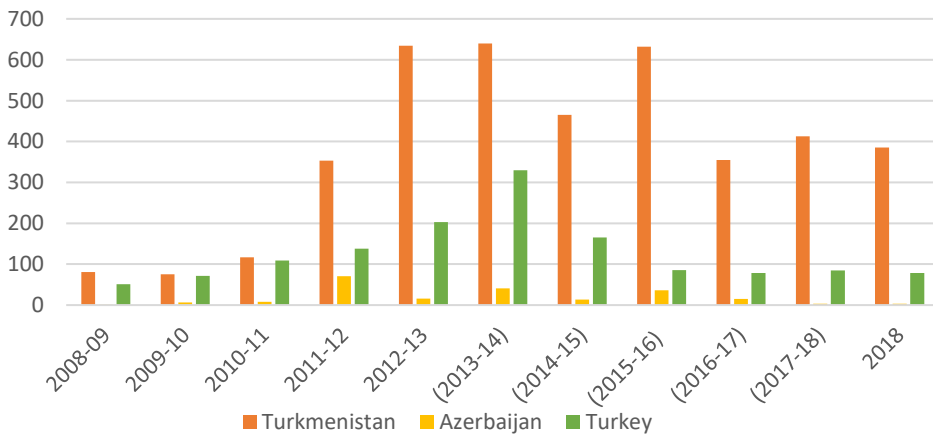


Source: National Statistics and Information Authority (Afghanistan)

Afghanistan is a highly resource rich country blessed with mineral wealth. But, the current gains from the mining sector are way below its potential.²⁶ One of the major reasons is the export remains a challenge due to its landlocked geographic position. The case of talc mineral can further explain the situation and potential for Afghanistan's mining sector. A recent study reveals that Afghanistan's talc is imported by Pakistan at a very low price and then re-export to international markets. It is important to mention that Pakistan is an important name in the global talc market. It is a producer, consumer as well as exporter of the mineral to major importing countries. The data from 2016 shows that Pakistan produced 125,330 MT (metric ton) of talc. However, it exported 305,970 MT valued around \$56.7 million. In the meantime, data reveals that the country consumed 120,000 MT of talc in the same year.²⁷ Given the fact that in the same year, Pakistan's domestic production was almost at par with its consumption, it did not have significant import from another country and that almost all of Afghanistan's talc was exported to Pakistan, it can be implied that the remaining gap is filled by talc from Afghanistan. In this context, the Lapis Lazuli would serve as an alternative route which Afghanistan could use to export its minerals to Europe and other international markets.

In terms of imports, Turkmenistan has remained at the top followed by and Azerbaijan. The imports from both Turkey and Turkmenistan include food and non- food items in different categories. However, the significant part of imports from Turkmenistan includes electricity, diesel, liquid gas and petrol. This is one of the key reasons why the imports from the country have remained very high.

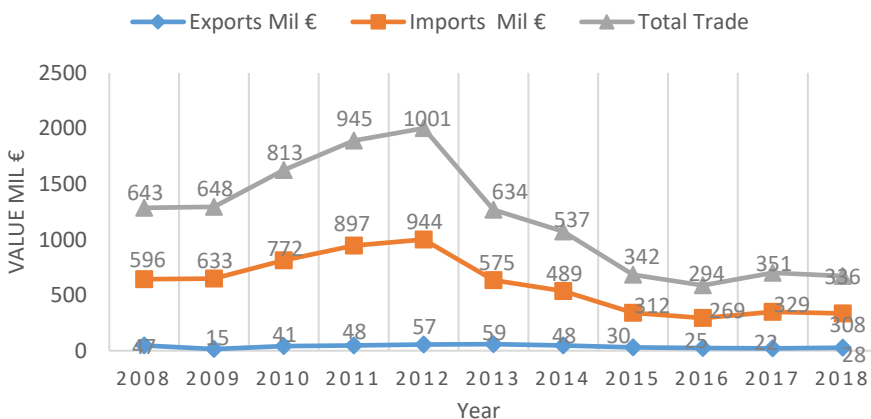
Figure 2: Afghanistan's Imports from Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey (2008-2018)



Source: National Statistics and Information Authority (Afghanistan)

An important aspect of Lapis Lazuli corridor is that it provides Afghanistan alternative access route to European marks. The exports to European Union (EU) have remained slightly above €50 million in peak years while the imports reached well above €900 million. The best year in the last one decade has been 2012, when the bilateral trade crossed one billion Euro mark. The facilitation and ease of barriers will enable Afghanistan to expand trade with EU.

Figure 3: Afghanistan's Trade with European Union



Source: Directorate General for Trade, European Commission

3.2 Turkmenistan

The next destination of Lapis Lazuli route is Turkmenistan. The competition for influence in resource- rich, landlocked and strategically important Central Asia among USA and the regional players China and Russia is not new.²⁸ This has forced the Central Asian republics to decide their foreign policies in accordance with geopolitical position. Among these republics, Turkmenistan had adopted Permanent Neutrality in 1995 under a unique UN resolution which manifests strong commitment of the country towards international peace and security in its foreign policy.²⁹

The economy of Turkmenistan depends on its natural resources. The country is fourth largest producer of natural gas in the world with exports to Russia, China and Iran.³⁰ However, the revenue from hydrocarbons industry is shrinking following major back-to-back blows. For instance, Russian giant Gazprom stopped purchase of Turkmen gas apparently due to price dispute.³¹ On the other hand, the supply to Iran was stopped due to contract issues.³² Both these incidents took place in early 2017. This left China as the only destination for Turkmen gas. However, that too is turned into an uneven road for the country. The supply to China is made through three lines A, B, and C passing through Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan before reaching western China. In order to boost the supply, an additional 30 billion cubic meter of gas was planned to be supplied through a fourth pipeline “Line D” which was supposed to pass through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to reach China.³³ However, the construction work has remained suspended since December 2015 due to disagreements over route, and other technical issues among the three transit countries.

Turkmenistan is aware of the risks associated with its heavy reliance on the hydrocarbon industry and has been planning to diversify the economy. The economic diversification agenda is highlighted as strategic national priority and outlined in the National Program for Socioeconomic Development (NPSD) 2011-2030.³⁴ The country has embarked on an ambitious objective to become a transnational transit corridor, including Black Sea and Caspian Sea connections. As such, Turkmenistan has heavily invested in transport infrastructure. According to NPSD, the investments in transport infrastructure need to be complemented by the development of services to facilitate trade. In this context, the Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade & Transport Route Agreement is in line with country’s strategic priorities. It will integrate the country more strongly with the South Caucasus, Turkey and Europe.

3.3 Azerbaijan

Across the Caspian Sea, the Lapis Lazuli trade and transport route reaches the string of Azerbaijan. The economy of Azerbaijan collapsed following independence from Soviet Union in 1991. The country made remarkable progress in economic realm on the back of its hydrocarbon resources. In 1995, the economy was less than 40% as compared to what it was back in 1989.³⁵ However, it made remarkable progress starting in the mid-2000s and reaching a GDP per capita of \$7886 in 2014 and poverty rate as low as 6% in 2012.³⁶ However, the economy was hit by nose dive in global oil prices in 2014 like many other countries dependent on the sector.³⁷

The situation revealed that too much dependence and concentration on the hydrocarbon industry had made the country susceptible to external shocks. The data from National Statistics Committee for structure of economy between 2007 and 2015 reveals that the share of manufacturing sector was less than 5% in the GDP while that of mining industry ranged between 26-42% during the same period.³⁸ Therefore, as a typical case of resource rich country, Azerbaijan needs to diversify its economy to address the underlying challenge. In this context, trade can play an important part in diversifying economy of the country as suggested by studies.³⁹

The fact is understood and duly addressed in strategic document “Strategic Roadmap for development of logistics and trade in the Republic of Azerbaijan” which sets the overall direction for economic development of the country for 2020, 2025 and beyond.⁴⁰ The strategic document aims to turn Azerbaijan into logistic and trade hub of regional significance through increased traffic in medium to long term.

In this context, Lapis Lazuli Corridor falls within its regional priorities. The simplification in customs procedures and facilitation would increase the traffic on the ports. In the meantime, there is potential for increased trade between Afghanistan and Azerbaijan. The trade with and via Azerbaijan would help the country reap benefits of its strategic location.

3.4 Georgia and Turkey

The next stop of Lapis lazuli Corridor is Georgia, a country which shares borders with Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkey, with Black Sea on its West in South Caucasus region. For more than two centuries, the country had to seek western support to fight the influence of its giant neighbors Russia and Persia.⁴¹ A brief British security ensured its short-lived independence after World War- I, before Bolshevik regime took over the country. The collapse of Soviet Union granted independence to the country in 1991, but Russia continues to assume it as its backyard, like its other small neighbors.⁴² The

most recent display of power against Georgia appeared when Russia invaded the country in August 2008 and recognized Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. The action was further interpreted as an attempt to prevent Georgia from getting close to West by joining NATO.

Georgia is a transit route for Azeri oil and gas to reach Turkey. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey are focusing on the connectivity interventions among the three countries. The connectivity interventions like South Caucasus Pipeline (gas pipeline), Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway have offered new economic opportunities to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

These developments are a clear indication of increased influence and dominant position of Turkey vis-à-vis Russia in the South Caucasus region. The country has already termed the BTK railways as the Turkish version of the New Silk Road Corridor with an ambition, that it would be utilized by North Africans and Europeans to connect with landlocked Central Asia.⁴³

In this context, the Lapis Lazuli route agreement provides it an opportunity to further integrate with the countries in the region and as such follow its agenda to tackle Russian influence. Moreover, it would enhance trade between Georgia and member countries, help it explore new markets, and reap dividends of increased connectivity.

Turkey is further aiming to turn into an energy hub for EU.⁴⁴ At the moment, Russia is the biggest supplier of oil and gas to EU. As part of diversification efforts and to decrease dependence on Russia, the US and EU are backing initiatives like Nabucco gas pipeline project which would carry gas from Caspian and Middle East to Austria in Central Europe, and turn Turkey into an energy cross roads. The Caspian spur of Nabucco pipeline can challenge Russian monopoly and Iranian efforts to supply gas to Europe through Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline which was suggested by US and the agreements about the construction were signed in 1999.⁴⁵ On the other hand, it would diversify Turkmen exports and its reliance of China. The pipeline is meant to supply gas not only from Turkmenistan but also Kazakhstan to EU through a subsea pipeline. At the moment, the dispute over territorial boundaries in Caspian and fierce opposition of Iran and Russia is holding back the project. It is important to mention that mentioned pipeline would reach Turkey via Lapis Lazuli Corridor countries i.e. Azerbaijan and Georgia.

4 Conclusion

The analysis of strategic priorities of member countries reveals that landlocked member countries are striving for economic diversification. Afghanistan aims to ensure smooth, reliable, and economical trade routes to international markets. On the other hand, two natural resource rich landlocked member countries Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan aim to diversify their economies following high economic growth on the back of hydrocarbon industry. However, the shocks from plunge in the prices of oil affected the economic growth. Therefore, these two countries aim to diversify their economies. Azerbaijan's ports in the Black Sea can offer great prospects of economic growth for the country and for the region. On the other hand, it can serve as a transit country to connect Azerbaijan with Turkey. Similarly, Turkey is trying to establish itself stronger in the regional through connectivity projects in South Caucasus region and extend it to Central Asia. The analysis shows that the Lapis Lazuli Corridor can address the economic priorities. It has the potential to contribute towards stronger regional integration and economic cooperation. However, the benefits would be reaped once the corridor is fully operational.

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