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Afghanistan: Regional Connectivity Hub

Abstrakt

Przekształcenie kontekstu geograficznego Afganistanu we współpracę i integrację regionalną to coraz częściej pojawiający się temat. Inwestowanie w polityki rozwojowe, skoncentrowane na inicjatywach w zakresie połączeń i komunikacji w Afganistanie, przyniesie znaczące rezultaty dla rozwoju regionu. Artykuł ten ma na celu analizę Afganistanu jako studium przypadku regionalnego centrum komunikacyjnego. Wskazuje on na wagę strategicznej lokalizacji geograficznej Afganistanu, która może odgrywać kluczową rolę w rozwoju kraju, a także szerzej, regionu, w dłuższej perspektywie czasowej. Ponadto autor wskazuje, że kwestie komunikacji i transportu poprzez Afganistan to istotny czynnik, który może pomóc Afganistanowi przezwyciężyć wyzwania w zakresie bezpieczeństwa, poprzez zwiększenie wzajemnych interesów gospodarczych w oparciu o podejście oparte na współpracy w regionie. Aby osiągnąć ten cel konieczne jest wdrożenie konstruktywnych rozwiązań opartych na strategicznej równowadze, służących wzmocnieniu połączeń w regionie. Może to pomóc w osiągnięciu pokoju i dobrobytu, zarówno samego Afganistanu, jak i całego regionu. Metodologia tego artykułu oparta jest na podejściu holistycznym, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem metod jakościowych.

Słowa kluczowe: kontekst geograficzny, współpraca regionalna, integracja, inwestycje, połączenia, Afganistan

Introduction

Throughout history, Afghanistan has been a vital corridor for traders moving goods from West to East, between the Middle East and India, and the other way around. At present, Afghanistan is more than a corridor; it's a crossroad of routes

in Asia¹. Afghanistan is strategically located at the convergence point of four of the world's most populous and resource-rich regions: South Asia, Central and North Asia, the Middle East, and the Far East. Afghanistan will play an important role in the Eurasian continental trade network as a central connecting hub between them. As a regional land-bridge, Afghanistan plays a key role in opening the prospects of trade integrity and credibility between Central Asia and South Asia that can lead toward new trade patterns in the region. Infrastructure development in Afghanistan is seen as a critical issue for regional connectivity and the successful implementation of trade complementarity between Central Asia and South Asia. In comparison to the other alternative routes, Afghanistan provides the shortest and most cost-effective routes for roads, railroads, pipelines and energy transmission lines between Central Asia and South Asia. This can be seen as a major opportunity for the countries in the region to strengthen their political and economic relations, which can have significant impacts on ensuring security in Afghanistan based on mutual economic interests². Since the 19th century, although the time before the 19th century remains as the point for discussion, Afghanistan and the surrounding area have become a war zone for global rivalries. In this territory, the engagement of the colonial powers and ideological blocs in bloody wars that became known as the Great Games has been the subject. Afghanistan and the immediate vicinity continue to be a place where the strategic geopolitical interests of a number of global and regional players converge and clash³. Afghan leaders, civil society organizations, the private sector, and foreign donors have all been working to restore Afghanistan's historical status as a regional trade and transit hub. Due to its geographical location, Afghanistan was a place of great wealth and prosperity until the 16th century. It was considered as the heart of Central Asia, at the crossroads of ancient trade routes known as the Silk Road, which connected Asia to the rest of the world⁴. „Some routes led east to China, some north to the cities of Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva and then to the nomadic steppe. Others went south-east into India, west into Iran and then flowed into the Mediterranean Sea and Europe”⁵. Any trade that wanted to navi-

¹ M.Á. Ballesteros Martín, *Analysis Document Of The Ieee 12/2011 – Geopolitical Analysis of Afghanistan*, Ministry of Defense, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), IV 2011, p. 1, http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2011/DIEEEA12-2011_Geopolitica_AFganistan_GBBallesteros_ENGLISH.pdf (9 V 2021).

² M. Azim Wardak, *Acting Deputy Director General Economic Cooperation Department*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, *Infrastructure Connectivity in Afghanistan*, Issyk Kul Kyrgyzstan, 6-7 V 2017, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Afghanistan_10.pdf (9 V 2021).

³ M. Safi and B. Alizada, *Integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative Review*, Analysis and Prospects, August 2018, p. 10, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/15587.pdf> (9 V 2021).

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

gate through one of these routes had to pass through Afghanistan. Its cities were strategically positioned along these vital trade routes and reaped enormous benefits as mercantile exchange centers⁶. For most of the modern epoch, Afghanistan has been viewed by its neighbors as a rough, rocky, and rugged mountainous land into which they could export their quarrels and conflicts. Nearly over the past two decades, as a result of the international community's engagement and the re-establishment of state institutions in Afghanistan, the foundation for regional cooperation in the political, security, and economic areas began to take shape once again. After the year 2001, changing region's political circumstances provided the chance for Afghanistan to strengthen regional ties by expanding legitimate trade and introducing other forms of constructive bilateral and multilateral cooperation⁷. „But it was not until 2003 that regional cooperation started to become an integral part of the country's foreign policy"⁸. Taking into consideration the security, infrastructure and political challenges in the region, it can be claimed that the present context is different in many aspects from that of history. This statement can be claimed basically for the energy-rich Central Asia and energy-poor South Asia, particularly, due to the compelling need for trade and transit in these two emerging economic hot spots. Central Asia has a gas and energy surplus for which it needs a market. South Asia is a desirable market for Central Asia's energy surplus because of the increasing demand for gas and electricity in Pakistan and India, as well as its population and proximity. Therefore, Afghanistan provides a unique terrestrial corridor for energy trade and transit from Central Asia to South Asia, that no other country can offer – a value that has been recognized and emphasized by the Afghan government, countries in the region and international organizations, such as the World Bank over the past decade⁹. Though Afghanistan's geographic position is critical for regional integration and connectivity, it is inadequate on its own. Obstacles must be addressed in order for Afghanistan to achieve its ambition of becoming a land-bridge and trade and transit hub connecting Central Asia, South Asia, China, and the Middle East. Additionally, the creation of an environment that allows states in the region to cooperate in overcoming major impediments in this case is seen as critical. Major issues such as the security situation, the infrastructure deficit and the lack of bilateral and multilateral agreements to facilitate cross-border trade and transit have diminished the chance for Afghanistan's ambitious goals for regional connectivity¹⁰.

Overall, for many centuries, Afghanistan has been a transit point for international trade, military operations and political games. The development of

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*

⁸ *Ibidem*

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

vast oil fields in the Central Asian region dramatically accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century, which can be seen as a major subject that sparked increased international attention in Afghanistan. However, certain issues such as the terrorist threat and drug trafficking have caused major obstacles to political stability and security in Afghanistan, moreover, threatening regional connectivity and commercial activities through Afghanistan as a transit economic zone and as a source of natural resources. It can be claimed that developing a successful policy based on cooperative approach at the regional and international level with the goal of overcoming these negative interconnected trends is a significant step toward securing Afghanistan, and maintaining political, economic, and social integrity in the region¹¹.

Afghanistan A Transit Route For Asia: Can It Fly?

Afghanistan benefits from a favorable strategic geographical location at the cross-roads of Central Asia, with the former Chinese and Persian empires to its east and west, respectively. As a result, commodities traded between Western and Eastern Asia would certainly pass through Afghanistan. Balkh, Bamiyan, Herat, Badakhshan and Kabul were among the cities located along the Silk Roads. During the height of the Silk Roads, Afghanistan, and the ruling empires gained substantial benefits from free trade and maintained trade networks during periods of political stability. Lapis lazuli was one of the main goods native to Afghanistan that was extensively traded along the routes¹². „Afghanistan is home to over 1500 archaeological sites, with excavations revealing evidence of both eastern and western influences in architecture and material goods”¹³. Chinese silk, Persian silver and gold from Rome were traded in Afghan cities. Over time, Buddhism spread to Afghanistan before reaching China, as evidenced by the Bamiyan Buddhas, which stand as testament to Buddhism’s presence in the region. The Kushan Dynasty, who were patrons of the religion within their territory, supported and encouraged the spread of Buddhism to China. A result of constant cultural exchange, Chinese traditions influenced Islamic architecture in the 14th century, and Mongol ideas were incorporated into Afghanistan’s laws. Aspects of intangible culture that evolved during the Silk Roads era, such as hospitality and the number and diversity of languages spoken, are still part of Afghan culture today. Since Afghanistan is landlocked, as maritime technologies advanced in the 15th century,

¹¹ D. Korkodinov, *Afghanistan’s geopolitical importance*, World Geostrategic Insights, 28 XII 2019, <https://wgi.world/afghanistan-s-geopolitical-importance/> (9 V 2021).

¹² UNESCO, *Silk Roads Programme. Afghanistan*, <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/countries-alongside-silk-road-routes/afghanistan> (9 V 2021).

¹³ *Ibidem*.

it saw a decrease in trade as maritime routes became more common due to lower cost and shorter lead time¹⁴.

After 2001, due to the changing political, economic and security developments, Afghanistan has become the center of attraction in the region and the world, but unfortunately, the resources have not been fully used as the Afghan government and people had hoped. However, in recent years, Afghanistan's evolving political mindset has been focused on policies that can strengthen regional cooperation, and the country has attempted to address problems and build opportunities by implementing national, regional, and trans-regional initiatives, which, given the regional competition and Afghanistan's young government, the result of the regional cooperation can yield promising results, although the existence of obstacles are undeniable¹⁵. The Afghan government has focused and stepped up much of its efforts to strengthen, expand, and intensify regional connectivity, especially, in the economic sphere. The transformation of Afghanistan's political and security conflict zone into an area of economic cooperation and interaction, as well as the demonstration of its geo-economic security and capability role toward the region and the world, which forms the core of the government's regional policy, has resulted in significant achievements for the country and the region. Afghanistan would soon become the source of bilateral and multilateral ties between the major part of the countries in the region, given the regional support and welcoming of this approach. It will not only help large number of people economically, but it will also revive and reinforce the historical and cultural relations of the people of the region more than ever before, as well as play a key role in promoting and speeding up the emergence of a strong Asia in terms of economic prospects. The RECCA¹⁶ (Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan), as a leading regional cooperation platform, seeks to regain Afghanistan's historical role along the ancient Silk Road, turn the country into a trading and transit hub and share the benefits of Afghanistan's centrality with the rest of the region¹⁷. Moreover, Istanbul conferences and other diplomatic efforts that have been undertaken by the Afghan government, including bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements, can be seen as crucial mechanisms toward achieving significant gains in this regard¹⁸.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*

¹⁵ A. Amini, *Aia Afghanistan Mitawanad Shahera Transit Asiai Shawad* (ترانزیت آسیای میانه شادود؟) (آیا افغانستان میتواند شادود شادود؟), BBC Persian, 19 XII 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-46619542> (9 V 2021).

¹⁶ Z. Danish, *Afghanistan: Connectivity Chapter in the Region*, Office of Chief of Staff to the President, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 28 I 2017, https://ocs.gov.af/en/article_details/139 (9 V 2021).

¹⁷ M. Azim Wardak, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ Z. Danish, *op.cit.*

On the one hand, since Afghanistan is a landlocked country, the establishment of the transit ports carries vital importance for the country in order to have access to regional and international trade markets, but practical issues and geopolitical challenges have so far prevented Afghanistan from achieving its crucial goals in this regard to a large extent. On the other hand, economic convergence is an important issue for Afghanistan, and Central Asia and South Asia. As the efforts for expanding economic cooperation intensify in Central Asia and South Asia, Afghanistan's role as the shortest and least costly connecting point between the two regions has become more prominent. As a result, one of the most fundamental cases for widening regional economic integration is taking into account the country's traditional role as a bridge between the two regions. Given the differences in resources and performance of countries in the two regions, the need for a complementary trade strategy can be stated. Although South Asian countries are more technologically advanced than Central Asian countries, they suffer from energy shortages. This problem can be clearly addressed by the energy surplus in Central Asia. The TAPI project is a good example of economic integration, which, if successfully completed, will transport gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India¹⁹. Moreover, TAPI:

The 1,814-kilometer gas pipeline will pass through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. At least 816 kilometers of the pipeline will pass through the territory of Afghanistan. The pipeline passes through Herat, Farah, Nimroz, Helmand and Kandahar provinces of Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the TAPI pipeline will be constructed alongside the Kandahar–Herat Highway in western Afghanistan, and then via Quetta and Multan in Pakistan. The final destination of the pipeline will be the Indian town of Fazilka, near its border with Pakistan. Afghanistan is expected to earn more than \$400 million USD in transit duties annually from the project. According to President Ghani's Office, the project will create thousands of job opportunities for Afghans²⁰.

Officials in TAPI member states, including Afghanistan, see it as more than a project and believe that, as a comprehensive partnership, it will lead Afghanistan and the region to prosperity, greater cooperation and socio-economic development in Central Asia and South Asia. The TAPI gas pipeline will bring great economic, security, social and cultural benefits to the region and its four member states, especially Afghanistan. From a different angle, this project contributes to economic growth, increasing the buying ability of the people, reducing unemployment and poverty, reducing gas prices throughout the country, and

¹⁹ A. Amini, *op.cit.*

²⁰ S. Sirat, *All You Need to Know About TAPI Project*, TOLO News, 24 II 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/all-you-need-know-about-tapi-project> (9 V 2021).

stabilizing Afghanistan's economic and strategic position in Central Asia and South Asia, and the region, these significant achievements will be effective for Afghanistan's security²¹.

The expansion of economic collaboration between Central Asia and South Asia is heavily reliant on land connections. Afghanistan, as the shortest route between the two regions, is considered as one of the main actors in shaping integration in the region. Road corridors between Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan can significantly reduce transportation in terms of time and cost, moreover, it would lead to an increasing trade rate between the two regions. According to studies conducted by the Asian Development Bank on the economic impact of road corridors between Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan, while 13,586 km²² of road corridors are required for regional trade between Central Asia and South Asia, including 3657 km²³ in Afghanistan if completed, regional trade would increase by 160%²⁴ and transit trade in the region by 111%²⁵. If the economic effect of the potential railway routes connecting Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan is factored in, the advantages of a land connection between the two regions will be far greater. Although such predictions may not have been practically achievable in the short term due to the non-completion of some of these corridors and also due to security challenges, in any case, such predictions will affect transport cost and trade growth in terms of cross-border transport infrastructure. Afghanistan is a member of most regional cooperation frameworks in the two regions of Central Asia and South Asia, and its goal, like other members, is to expand and enhance cooperation in the region. Efforts that have been made in this field can be mentioned as the: TAPI which is mentioned above, and CASA-1000 projects in the field of energy²⁶. Central Asia South Asia (CASA-1000): CASA-1000 is one of Central Asia's largest electricity transmission projects from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan at 1,250-kilometer long²⁷. The project will build tens of kilometers of new electricity lines in those countries²⁸. The Lapis Lazuli as a project in the area of transportation

²¹ Z. Danish, *Proja TAPI: Gami Brai Rownaq Iktisadi, Ishtighal va Sulh dr Afghanistan* (پروژه «تاپی»؛ گامی برای رونق اقتصادی، اشتغال و صلح در افغانستان), BBC Persian, 10 II 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-43014915> (9 V 2021).

²² A. Amini, *op.cit.*

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Kar Proja Intiqal Barq CASA-1000 dr Afghanistan* (کار پروژه انتقال برق کاسا یک هزار در افغانستان آغاز شد), BBC Persian, 6 II 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-51397758> (9 V 2021).

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

networks that transports Afghanistan's exports to Central Asia and then to Europe²⁹. In detail, Lapis Lazuli Corridor:

The name „Lapis Lazuli” is derived from the historic route that Afghanistan's lapis lazuli and other semiprecious stones were exported along, over 2,000 years ago to the Caucasus, Russia, the Balkans, Europe, and North Africa. The project will serve to reinforce the Afghan Government's National Infrastructure Plan and the Private Sector Development National Priority Program. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is also geared toward expanding the economic opportunities of citizens in the wide range of countries who will benefit from this new transport corridor. The provision of facilities for transit and simplification of customs procedures constitute two important pillars of cooperation under the agreement. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor encompasses part of CAREC Transport Corridor #2, stretching from Aqina in northern Faryab province and Torghundi in western Herat (both in Afghanistan), and continuing to the port of Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan (on the Caspian Sea); the route then continues on to Baku and further onward to Tblisi, as well as the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi; finally, the corridor connects to the cities of Kars and Istanbul, Turkey, at the entrance of Europe³⁰.

Despite significant efforts by the Afghan government to achieve its goal of regional connectivity, Central Asia and South Asia continue to have the lowest rate of regional integration. One of the main reasons that create major obstacles toward the successful implementation of a strategy that can enhance regional cooperation and integration is the lack of trust of neighboring countries in Afghanistan as the key to success in regional programs because war and insecurity always project a negative picture of Afghanistan in the public mind. Given that Afghanistan can potentially provide the most cost-effective road routes, railways and gas and power transmission lines between Central Asia and South Asia, it could be the key to opening up potential for complementary trade in the region. However, regional rivalry and alternative ways to form a connecting point can be considered as a crucial issue that impedes Afghanistan's progress in this area. On the other hand, war and insecurity in Afghanistan give the chance to its rivals to reduce Afghanistan's importance as a regional connectivity hub³¹.

As a result, chronologically, Afghanistan's position as a connecting hub in the region can be traced back to the Silk Road's origins and many centuries after it. However, after 2001, Afghanistan's geopolitical position has become a key subject in major regional and global developments and challenges, implying that the

²⁹ A. Amini, *op.cit.*

³⁰ RECCA (*Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, https://recca.af/?page_id=1468 (9 V 2021).

³¹ A. Amini, *op.cit.*

nation is now pursuing a policy that will enable Afghanistan to act as a connecting point for the region's countries in the heart of Asia³².

Barriers toward Regional Connectivity through Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a country that has suffered more than three decades of war and the destructive consequences of war have caused major problems for the country. The ongoing war has created major obstacles for Afghanistan's progressive policies in terms of political and economic stability in general. Furthermore, a number of negative indicators such as poor governance, widespread corruption, and foreign interference can be seen among the major impediments toward the successful implementation of regional connectivity through Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Afghan government has not been able to create a strategy that ensures the nation to economic self-sufficiency over the past decades. The reason for this economic dependency can be seen in Afghanistan's lack of economic stability, which has been hampered by continuing wars, which has hindered the country from achieving its plans of economic stability. Afghanistan is heavily dependent on foreign aid, which can be seen as a major vulnerability for the country. These negative interconnected trends in terms of political and economic instability have prevented Afghanistan from maintaining its position in the region for the purpose of regional connectivity. This is in a situation where achieving economic integration in the region would be impossible without considering the current situation in Afghanistan. The development of a scenario in which regional economic cooperation will be difficult to undertake without considering the current situation in Afghanistan can be stated as a crucial case in this regard. Afghanistan needs to develop an economic strategy that is aligned with its demands, needs and capabilities in order to make the best use of existing regional opportunities with the goal of improving and strengthening regional cooperation strategies focused on constructive politics. A plan that lays out the country's relations with its immediate neighbors and regional bodies over three time periods: short-, medium-, and long-term goals³³.

Despite the existence of incomparable wealth among the region's countries, particularly cheap labor and rich natural resources, as well as, perhaps more importantly, rich social and historical equivalents, the existence of various issues

³² M.G. Himar, *Gaiga Jeopolitic Afghanistan dr Rawabet India ba Asia Miana* (با آسای میانه) (جایگاه جیوپولتیک افغانستان در روابط هند)، 2018, <https://8am.af/the-geopolitical-position-of-afghanistan-in-indias-relations-with-central-asia/> (9 V 2021).

³³ A. Amini, *op.cit.*

and factors create major barriers to the successful utilization of the region's wealth and enormous potential. Political and border tensions, instability, violence and poverty are the major existing impediments in these countries, among others. Afghanistan, due to its special geopolitical location, has been considered for years as a point of conflict between the interests of regional and trans-regional countries, which has had a negative impact on the situation in Afghanistan and the region. However, years of tension, political disputes in relations, hostility and conflicts in the region have proven that the origin and destiny of these countries are intertwined together; the challenges and problems of one country can have detrimental consequences for other countries in the region. From Afghanistan's point of view, Terrorism, Criminal Economics, Narcotics, and Poverty are the four major challenges that are considered as the common threat to all countries in the region from every aspect³⁴.

More specifically, it is important to state four major challenges toward regional connectivity through Afghanistan. The first challenge: corruption, poor governance, political and ethnic conflicts within the Afghan government. The lack of transparency, abusing governmental resources through widespread corruption, political divisions based on political and ethnic priorities can be considered among the major challenges facing the Afghan government. Until the government is not able to ensure an effective strategy that enables the country to overcome these problems, countries with a shared interest in building the aforementioned projects are unlikely to invest in Afghanistan. Above all, the Afghan government must reform its mechanisms and institutions, fostering transparency, unity, and integration in order to establish a viable economic and trade link with Asian countries; otherwise, the targeted plans toward regional connectivity will remain just a wish.

The second challenge is terrorism and proxy war in the region. Afghanistan is the victim of regional and global rivalry between influential powers, with a number of insurgent groups fighting for the interests of others in Afghanistan. On the one hand, the rivalry between these powers at regional and international level has posed significant barriers to Afghanistan's development. More importantly, it is one of the primary causes of Afghanistan's lack of security, which has posed significant challenges to the successful implementation of regional connectivity. They have taken advantage of the Afghan government's vulnerability, and are attempting to stop their opponents in Afghanistan and expand their sphere of power in this country due to their political, social, and economic, border and territorial tensions. In other words, they take advantage of Afghanistan's lack of a stable government; therefore, they take any action to ensure their security and interests in Afghanistan through maximization of power. This aspect of the issue

³⁴ Z. Danish, *Afghanistan: Connectivity Chapter in the Region...*

is very complicated, and difficult to overcome. Because many powerful states in the region and beyond the region want Afghanistan to be unstable in order to be able to interfere and achieve their interests. On the other hand, the Afghan government's lack of commitment, and the weakness of the country's security and defense forces, as well as the illiteracy of the people, which is a major vulnerability for Afghanistan, have provided many chances for foreign countries to interfere in Afghanistan. Perhaps the best solution for the Afghan government is to develop a clear and codified foreign strategy and policy, so that it can define Afghanistan's national interests, distinguish between friend and foe, and ensure a balance between securing the interests of rival countries in the region and beyond the region while also considering Afghanistan's national interests, to ensure others' security, and maintain a balance in its foreign policy based on cooperative approach.

The third challenge is economic and financial problems. On the one hand, completing projects toward regional connectivity through Afghanistan is very costly. On the other hand, over the past decades, Afghanistan has struggled to achieve economic growth and stability as a result of the ongoing conflict in the country. Therefore, to a large extent, the implementation of the regional connectivity projects has been dependent on the economic assistance of other countries in the region, which can be regarded as a major vulnerability for Afghanistan, particularly, in terms of its policy toward regional connectivity.

The fourth challenge is the issue of the continued political, military and financial support of Western countries, especially the United States. The determined and sustained support of NATO, especially the United States, is crucial for overcoming Afghanistan's many economic, political, and security challenges. The financial support of the US can be considered an important subject for Afghanistan in case of achieving its goals toward overcoming the impediments with regard to regional connectivity. However, at the moment, there are many doubts that NATO and the United States may not continue their long-term financial and military support to Afghanistan. The peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban have generated much hope toward a prosperous future in Afghanistan. If the peace process successfully proceeds, that could result in a permanent peace in the country, So Afghanistan may achieve lasting political stability and turn into a regional connectivity hub³⁵.

³⁵ S.A. Piam, *Taghir Afghanistan ba Chaar Rah Iktisad va Ticaret Mantaqa; Chalesha va Imkana* (تغییر افغانستان به چهارراه اقتصاد و تجارت منطقه؛ چالش ها و امکان ها), 2014, http://www.dailyafghanistan.com/opinion_detail.php?post_id=132125 (9 V 2021).

Conclusion

Afghanistan is a country with enormous potential in terms of strategic geographical location, resources, young demographic and many other necessary measures for the development of the country from political, economic and social perspectives. Over the past two decades, the Afghan government has sought the development of Afghanistan in peaceful global cooperation with the help of the international community in order to move the country out of its history of war; and to establish a state in which law can protect people and their rights and eventually, achieve peace and prosperity. The Afghan government's and people's efforts have primarily focused on supporting and encouraging regional integration through political, economic, and social means in order to ensure stability and development in Afghanistan and the region. The development of a viable political attitude by the Afghan government in case of its regional policies for the purpose of maintaining economic stability can be seen as a vital step toward ending conflicts, and focusing on mutual economic interests in the region. For the purpose of ensuing economic growth and integration in the region, the successful implementation of regional connectivity projects through Afghanistan can play a key role in the political and economic stability of Afghanistan, and the region. The commitment of the Afghan government and other countries in the region for the purpose of establishing transit routes through Afghanistan in terms of increasing trade and energy transmission can be seen as an important step toward regional cooperation and integration. This means that Afghanistan's strategic geographic location as a crossroads in Asia brings tremendous advantages to the country, and the region, which can lead to increased stability in Afghanistan and the region. However, major challenges such as terrorism, insecurity, poverty and drug trafficking have caused major obstacles toward regional connectivity through Afghanistan. Moreover, on the one hand, the lack of an effective strategy for leading the country in the Afghan government has caused major problems in terms of political and economic instability, insecurity, corruption and poverty. On the other hand, the shaping of political discourse in Afghanistan is significantly affected by the intervention of foreign countries, particularly neighbors of Afghanistan. These negative interconnected trends have hampered Afghanistan's and the region's efforts to achieve economic growth goals focused on regional connectivity. It can be claimed that the goal of a regional connectivity hub for Afghanistan, above all, requires a transparent strategy by the Afghan government and people based on building trust between the government and people to overcome domestic challenges. Furthermore, it requires an effort and the support of countries at regional and international level based on a pragmatic approach.

Abstract

Mohammad Yonus Noorzi

Afghanistan: Regional Connectivity Hub

The transformation of Afghanistan's geographical context into regional cooperation and integration is an emerging subject, and investing in progressive policies focused on Afghanistan's connectivity initiatives will yield substantial outcomes in the region's development. This paper is to analyze Afghanistan: Regional Connectivity Hub as a case study in order to state the importance of the strategic geographical location of Afghanistan that can play a key role in the progress of the country, and the region in the long-term. Furthermore, it considers regional connectivity through Afghanistan to be an important subject that can help Afghanistan overcome security challenges to a large extent by increasing mutual economic interests based on a cooperative approach in the region. In order to achieve this goal, constructive politics is seen as the strategic balance for empowering regional connectivity that can lead to peace and prosperity in Afghanistan and the region. The methodology of this paper is based on a holistic approach, and therefore the method will be qualitative.

Keywords: Geographical Context, Regional Cooperation, Integration, Investing, Connectivity, Afghanistan

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