

## **Central and South Asia Economic Corridor in the Evolving Central Asian Geo-Political Circumstances**

**Shabir Ahmad Khan**

Director, Area Study Center (Russia, China & Central Asia), University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan.

Email: [asc@uop.edu.pk](mailto:asc@uop.edu.pk)

**Imrana Begum**

Associate Professor, Humanities Department, NED University of Engineering & Technology, Karachi, Pakistan.

Email: [imrana@neduet.edu.pk](mailto:imrana@neduet.edu.pk)

### **ABSTRACT**

The US withdrawal from Central Asia, Russia-Ukraine conflict and diverted great-powers' competition from the region necessitate and drive the Central Asian region to revive historical links and open up in southern direction. The circumstances also induce Russia to open up trade routes to South via Central Asia. Central Asia with prudent regional approach may move from a "shatter belt" status (a region torn by internal strife and external intervention) to strengthened regionalism in the absence of direct great powers' competition. The changed geo-political and geo-economic situation presents new opportunities to Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia for developing the Central-South Asia economic corridor, though accompanied with challenges within Afghanistan. The paper argues that the recent changes in the situation of the region provide additional space to the Central Asian countries for political maneuver to address the issues of security and development by materializing Central-South Asia economic corridor.

**Key Words:** Central Asia, Afghanistan, South Asia, Economic Corridor, Development, Security.

### **Introduction**

It has been argued that "the establishment of a trade and logistic corridor is expected to bring significant economic benefits to all countries of the two regions and help build a solid basis for sustainable peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan" (Khan and Krasznai, 2021). The entire significance of Afghanistan lies in its geographical location efficiently linking Central and South Asia, the Middle East and Western China. In other words control over Afghanistan brings control over regional integration particularly between Central and South Asia. In this regard the great powers' competition for control over the region for long times had made the region prone to internal divisions. The control over Afghanistan was earlier denied to the former Soviet Union and recently denied to US/NATO by global and regional geo-politics. However there seems to be an end to the direct major power competition in the region due to the US/NATO withdrawal and Russia's protracted engagement in Ukraine. Russo-Chinese cooperation at the

global and regional level diminishes the chances of competition between the two countries in Central Asia for the foreseeable future (Khan, 2021). These developments result in a regional environment conducive to the development of an economic corridor between Central and South Asia via Afghanistan.

Economic corridor is something more comprehensive and substantial than merely a trade corridor in terms of generating economic activity, employment and revenue creation. An economic corridor connects important economic hubs or nodes while the role of an economic corridor in regional development and regional integration is specific to each corridor depending on its networks (Brunner, 2013). What are the main components and networks of the Central and South Asian economic corridor? How can an economic corridor between Central and South Asia via Afghanistan be beneficial for the regions of Central and South Asia? How are the Central Asian geo-political circumstances evolving and why are there promising prospects for developing such a corridor? These are the questions this research work attempts to answer. The methodology employed is qualitative in nature. The work is an effort to analyze the evolving regional geo-political context in Central Asia and Afghanistan and prospects of development of the Central and South Asia economic corridor. Secondary sources are used to describe, interpret and analyze the current state of affairs regarding the regional integration plans or components of the corridor in the changed regional circumstances employing hermeneutic and double hermeneutics methods by reinterpreting political developments in evolving regional context.

### **The Evolving Central Asian Regional Context**

A regional context does not exist in a vacuum rather it exists and evolves with in global context. Central Asia throughout the course of its history from the hey days of ancient Silk Route to the Great Game, from the Mackinder's heartland concept to Brzezinski's Grand Chessboard and from the post Cold War period to post 9/11 convergence of great powers on the region, Central Asia remained a zone of great powers' competition. The Central Asian regional geo-political and geo-economic situation has fundamentally changed yet again in the wake of US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the protracted Russia-Ukraine conflict since February 2022. It is most probable that the region will move from a shatter belt status to strengthened regionalism due to the developments at global level and a decline in great power competition at regional level. Shatter belt is a geographic area subject to internal divisions and major power competition (Cohen, n.d.). In fact, as a rule, it is the intense major powers' competition that makes a region prone to internal divisions. The post-American Central Asia (Cooley, 2021, August 23) acquires additional space for maneuver, allowing the regional countries to make independent foreign policy choices driven by regional interests and most conducive to their national economic development. There would be renewed efforts such as the meetings of the Foreign Minister of

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the neighbors of Afghanistan and the Tashkent Conference (Imamova, 2022, 27 July) to develop regionalism as well as diversify their foreign political and economic relations in ways that address regional issues of security and development from a regional perspective (Khan, 2022, June 15). Other important factors that contribute to better prospects of the subject corridor are; the end of war in Afghanistan, the geographical landscape and the region's diverse resource endowment. For example Krugman finds that the characteristics of the geographic landscape and resource endowments have a profound effect on states' trade and economic behavior in a region (Krugman, 1991).

In addition, the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2022 occurred in a regional geo-political and geo-economic situation which is fundamentally different from the 1990s for the Central Asian countries. In contrast to the 1990s, when these countries were preoccupied by the tremendous challenges of political, social and economic transition, they have by now consolidated their independence, made significant progress in nation-building and achieved considerable successes in the development of their economies. Now they are more capable of contributing to regional stability and are looking beyond their borders for enhancing regional connectivity to create conditions for further trade and economic development. China has become an economic powerhouse with determined plans for regional integration backed by financial capacity. China's economic relevance is set to further expand in Central Asia. Russia, too, has emerged from the shocks of transitions of the 1990s. It remains an important provider of "hard security guarantees" for Central Asia, however it is yet to be seen how much this role will be affected by its protracted engagement in the conflict with Ukraine. Iran and Pakistan have developed synergies and understanding particularly on peace and development in Afghanistan. It is not less important that Afghanistan at the moment is enjoying relative peace since decades; thought is facing severe humanitarian crises exacerbated by economic sanctions and frozen assets.

The emerging regional geo-political situation necessitates joint efforts to consolidate regional security through establishing connectivity between Central and South Asia via Afghanistan. The Central Asian countries are looking for an outlet via a stable Afghanistan towards South Asia and beyond (Saito, 2022, January 11). However, besides opportunities, there are formidable challenges to tackle. Currently the "imbroglio" emerging after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan complicates the implementation of plans for a Central-South Asian trade and energy corridor despite the overall improvement in regional circumstances.

## **Major Components of the Central-South Asia Economic Corridor**

This section looks into the various networks and regional integration arrangements as part of the Central-South Asian economic corridor via Afghanistan and discusses their current status and future prospects. These include Trans-Afghan Railway Line, Trans-Afghan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline (TAPI), Central and South Asia Electricity Transmission (CASA 1000), Highways under CAREC, ECO and the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor.

The Project of the Century i.e. Termiz-Kabul-Peshawar Railway Line (bullet train) has been agreed upon and signed by Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tanzila Narbaeva, Chairperson of Uzbekistan's Senate has termed the railway line as Project of the Century (Shira, 2021, March 05). On February 02, 2022 in Tashkent, the three countries agreed to a strategic plan for the construction of a 600 km long railway line (Khan, 2022, March 27). Uzbekistan has already operationalised a railway line from Termiz to Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan which will be extended to Peshawar under the Project. It will reduce the transportation time of goods between Pakistan and Uzbekistan from 35 days to just 3 to 5 days and will reduce transportation cost of a container by 3 times. The transportation cost per container from Tashkent to Karachi will be around \$1400 to \$1600 in comparison to the Tashkent-Bandar Abbas route of \$2600 to \$3000. That is the reason why Uzbekistan has been prioritizing Pakistan for its access to seaports. This project will also play an important role in the revenue generation and employment generation in Afghanistan due to the agglomeration effects. The rail project will run alongside regional power projects – the 1,000-megawatt Surkhan-Puli-Khumri high-voltage power line and the 1,300-megawatt CASA-1000 energy project - that will supply power to Afghanistan and Pakistan, reducing costs for all other projects. The rail route survey will also examine the large deposits of minerals in Afghanistan that are located near the proposed route. If these can be explored, these mineral riches will attract third-party financing to the Project. The World Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Asian Development Bank have already shown interest in financing the project (Rogers, 2022, March 30). This railway project will be one of the main components of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia trade and logistic corridor under the focus on geo-economics ultimately linking Termiz with Karachi and Gwadar Ports through Main Line 1 (Peshawar-Karachi Railway Line) of the Trans-Pakistan railways system.

The Trans-Afghan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline was envisioned in early 1990s however the intergovernmental agreement was signed by the Heads of Four States in December 2010 only for the construction of a 1680 km long pipeline from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan up to India's border (Bhutta, 2019, March 13). The total capacity of the 56-inch diameter pipeline is 33 bcm (billion cubic meters). Afghanistan in addition to receiving \$500 million in transit fee will receive 500 mcf (million cubic feet per day) while Pakistan and

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India will receive 1325 mcf/d gas each (Bhutta, 2019, March 13). Total cost of the Project has been estimated as \$10 billion. Turkmenistan as the consortium leader of the TAPI Pipeline Company Limited (TPCL) has to provide 85 percent of the total expenses while Afghanistan, Pakistan and India have to provide 5 percent each. Transit fee agreements and host government agreements have already been signed between the participating states.

The project has great economic significance in this century of gas. Turkmenistan one of the largest gas reserve holders in the world, will be able to diversify its export markets by tapping the huge South Asian market. On the other hand, the energy deficit countries, Pakistan and India will have cheap energy resource for domestic household consumption as well as industrial use. Importantly the project will develop strong interdependence among the regional states with vital interests in each others' stability. The Taliban government has shown commitment to pursue the project during the visit of Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister to Afghanistan in October 2021 (Anadolu Agency, 2021, October 31).

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan possess one of largest hydroelectricity generation potential in the world: eighty five percent of water resources in Central Asia are concentrated in the two countries. The Central Asia South Asia electricity transmission line (CASA 1000) was initially planned to transmit 1000 MW electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Later on the capacity estimates increased to 1300 MW, 300 MW for Afghanistan and 1000 MW for Pakistan. Pakistan has invoked an open access clause to the Master Agreement of CASA 1000 for importing electricity in summer while exporting it in winter to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan when they face energy shortages. Pakistan during the winter season enjoys surplus due to the reduced demand and often is forced to decrease production. Construction of CASA-1000 had been on-going in Afghanistan in 2021 but was suspended recently because of the current political situation in Afghanistan. The main project activity is the construction of 570 km of transmission lines, with about 15% of transmission line work completed as of October 2021 (CASA-1000). Similarly, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan TAP-500 kv power project will be interconnected with the transmission lines of CASA 1000. The framework agreement for TAP 500 was signed between the three countries i.e. Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan in February 2018 for the supply of 4000 megawatts power to Afghanistan and Pakistan with the facilitation of Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2018, February 28). All CASA-1000 parties are closely assessing and carefully monitoring developments in Afghanistan. The project will go a long way in meeting the growing demands of power in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Pakistan as the agglomeration effects of the economic corridor will grow.

The other main networks of the Central-South Asia economic corridor are the road corridors of Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), the

Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Khyber-Pass Economic Corridor (KPEC) complementing each other via Afghanistan. The Khyber Pass Economic Corridor has been developed with \$406 million approved financial assistance of the World Bank.<sup>1</sup> A highway (4 Lane) will be constructed from Peshawar to Torkham along with Special Economic Zones under the Project. Similarly the Peshawar-Torkham expressway extends the Karachi-Peshawar Trans-Pakistan Expressway system and forms an integral part of the Peshawar-Kabul-Termiz Highway. The expressway between Peshawar and Kabul through the Khyber Pass also represents a section of corridors 5 and 6 of CAREC. CAREC Corridor 5 starts from China, runs through Xinjiang and via Dushanbe reaches Kabul where it is linked to Peshawar via Jalalabad and also with Quetta, Balochistan via Kandahar (Asian Development Bank, n.d.). Through Pakistan Corridor 5 provides the shortest link to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea. Corridor 6 provides access to Europe, the Middle East and Russia via Tashkent.

In addition to this, the Asian Highway 7 (AH7) starts from Yekaterinburg in Russia crosses Tashkent, Kabul and reaches Gwadar via Chaman and Kandahar, however Torkham is also linked through the highway with Kabul via Jalalabad as mentioned. AH7 can be a major transport corridor connecting Pakistan, Central Asia and Russia and can also play the role of the North-South Corridor. The ECO Road Routes 1 to 7 links all 10 member states up to the borders of Russia and China (ECO, 2012 December). The strategy should be to coordinate policies for maximum utilization of this infrastructure by all the regional countries. The trade and logistic corridor between Pakistan and Central Asia via Afghanistan through railways and highways will naturally transform the trade and transport corridor into an economic corridor due to agglomeration effects and will play a crucial role in economic revival of Afghanistan.

### **Afghanistan's Internal Situation**

The Central-South Asia economic corridor requires political stability and functioning economy in Afghanistan. The Afghan government together with the economy collapsed immediately when the US/NATO troops withdrew. External financing amounted to 75 percent of total government budget spending before the Taliban takeover (Qaiyum, 2021, November 25). The World Bank-administered trust fund, worth \$1.5bn, was frozen along with other international funding when the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021. Given that roughly 75% of the Afghan government's spending was financed by foreign aid, the country's economy faced instant devastation while a rapidly growing proportion of the

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Economic Affairs Division. Minister for economic affairs, Mr. Muhammad Hammad Azhar, witnessed the signing ceremony of financing and project agreements of khyber pass economic corridor project (kpec) worth us\$ 406.6 million with the world bank, 13 December 2021, available at: <https://ead.gov.pk/NewsDetail/MzZmZTg4OGItNWE5My00NjkxLTlhODQtYmUwZGQxMDc1ZjRl> accessed 30/06/2022

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Afghan society now faces hunger and malnourishment (The Economist, 2021, December 10). Another problem created by the takeover of the Taliban is the temporary disappearance of affordable demand in Afghanistan. Due to the near collapse of the Afghan economy, the country is unable to pay for electricity imports from Central Asia. A vicious circle is in the making: unmet energy demand in Afghanistan exacerbated by sanctions hinders the normal functioning of the economy which in turn further reduces the ability to pay for electricity imports (Putz, 2022, January 13).

The leadership of the Taliban has been facing severe challenges to effectively run the Afghan economy due to the lack of recognition, finances, dysfunctional institutions and lack of expertise and as a result of an exodus of trained professionals. Afghanistan right now is on the brink of economic collapse and famine. Keeping control through military force is very different from governing the country. Due to the outflow of highly trained experts, technocrats are in short supply. The sanctions have exacerbated the situation as Afghanistan's commercial banks face difficulties in transactions with correspondent banks and interbank placements. The Taliban have to realize that without International support they cannot run the country. For having international support, the Taliban will have to make an inclusive setup representing all ethnic, political and religious groups of the country and to respect basic human rights including right to education for women. The Taliban have to review their repressive style of governance and to eliminate the transnational terrorist groups present in Afghanistan.

As governing a country is entirely different from fighting and maintaining insurgency, the new government must find answers to pressing questions. One of the main factors in the overall progress, developments and prosperity of developed nations is their successful connectivity in their respective regions. Taliban have to understand and realize this phenomenon. There is no growth and development in isolation. If Afghanistan is not put on a path to economic recovery, it may become a constant factor of instability in the broader region and may become a global problem as it turned out to be during the 1990. Therefore peace, stability and development of Afghanistan are not only in the interests of the region rather it is in the interests of the whole world. The regional efforts therefore must have global support to integrate Afghanistan in regional economic processes.

Peace and development of Afghanistan must be considered as a shared responsibility by the immediate neighbors of Afghanistan. The neighbors of Afghanistan and all the Central Asian countries need to develop a strategy to capitalize upon the opportunities brought about by the new situation. A regional strategic alignment on Afghanistan to chalk out coordinated approaches is much needed. The economy will surely become a decisive factor in the long run, but if neighboring countries and other partners would manage to rapidly kick-start economic cooperation, it would shorten the period of suffering of the Afghan people from hunger and deprivation. According to the former senior advisor to the

US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan “it is important for the Taliban, the regional countries and international powers to engage in greater diplomacy, take risks and make difficult compromises to stave off further instability and protect the Afghan population from greater suffering (Amiri, 2021, November 09). The materialization of regional integration plans via Afghanistan will be instrumental in reducing its dependence on foreign aid which is a difficult but inevitable task.

### **Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Considerations**

Another large-scale military intervention in Afghanistan as a tool of “stabilization” is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. The failure to “promote democracy” through military interventions at the costs of hundreds of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars has become obvious after the wars in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. As Yascha Mounk stated that “it’s time for the USA’s administration to limit the scope of its ambitions” (Mounk, 2021, December 07). Robin Raphel former US Ambassador and former Under-Secretary of State said in Islamabad during a Conference on December 13, 2021 that “the US withdrawal has put much of the onus on the countries of the region to take responsibility for assisting Afghanistan and promoting regional connectivity” (Nawaz, 2021, December 13-14). Though Afghanistan has become a regional responsibility in terms of security and economic stabilization through regional connectivity in an altered regional geo-political situation however the international sanctions impede any effort to economically stabilize Afghanistan. The stakes are high for the immediate neighbors of Afghanistan in particular as they do not enjoy the luxury of distance, as opposed to the West. The cross border terrorism, refugee inflows and drug trafficking are real concerns of the immediate neighbors which may be less urgent for extra-regional states. However, it should be avoided that the security of Afghanistan becomes a global problem again. If Afghanistan slides towards instability again, it will not remain solely a regional problem.

Pakistan has particularly strong interests in facilitating an economic recovery of its neighbor. A stable Afghanistan not only guarantees Pakistan’s access to the Eurasian Heartland and vice versa, stable Afghanistan is also vital for Pakistan’s own stability. Connectivity has been termed as the arms race of the twenty first century (Khanna, 2016). Pakistan has declared a shift of focus from geo-politics to geo-economics which means connectivity within the region particularly with Central Asia via Afghanistan. “Pakistan has proactively adopted a regional approach for long-term regional stability and prosperity for post-conflict Afghanistan and greater Central Asian region” (Sadiq, 2021). Pakistan envisages the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia economic corridor to maximally benefit from CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) too. Therefore the Government of Pakistan declared its principled stance to be a partner in peace, stability and regional connectivity (Khan, 2021, June 06).



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**Economic Dividends Overshadow Political Differences**

There is relatively greater support in Central Asia to involve Afghanistan in regional cooperation as the land locked region has strong incentives to support and peace and development in Afghanistan. Political stumbling blocks to regional cooperation preventing the involvement of Afghanistan in regional integration need to be overcome. It mostly depends on the attitude of Taliban in the evolving circumstances. Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries would gain much from the development of a Central-South Asia economic corridor. The corridor would offer considerable advantages to Afghanistan too: the energy projects and the transportation infrastructure complement each other in terms of security provision and economic activity generation and will have immense effects on the need for other projects. When the transportation and logistics corridor is fully developed between Central Asia and South Asia, demand for energy will arise to support economic activities and economic hubs will be developed as agglomeration effects in Afghanistan. Similarly the proposed energy projects if materialized will generate hubs of economic activities and urban amenities resulting in increased economic activities and employment generation. For instance the proposed railway line between Termez and Peshawar will go along the energy project of 1000 megawatt Surkhan-Pul-e-Khumri line and CASA 1000 energy project, reducing the cost of the other projects (Durso, 2021, August 05). Despite the obvious economic advantages, there seems no complete agreement within the current Afghan government on whether priority should be given to economic recovery and strengthening economic cooperation with neighboring countries. The Taliban have to give a roadmap on how they intend to govern the country. It is not clear whether the 2004 constitution will be adopted or a new constitution will be drafted, or changes in the current constitution will be incorporated? Similarly neighbors of Afghanistan including Central Asian countries will definitely need reliable security guarantees vis-a-vis the Taliban's world view as well as governing pattern. The regional countries have been calling on the Taliban to pursue moderate policies, however moderation comes with wellbeing. Time and economic development will undoubtedly moderate the Taliban, if provided. The Taliban, on the other hand, have to realize that benefits are always mutual and reciprocal. If the Taliban demands recognition and economic assistance from the region and the world, they have to address the legitimate concerns of the neighboring countries and the world at large.

While Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are the points of departure of some of the most important regional infrastructure projects to be developed between Central Asia and South Asia - like TAPI, TAP and the Termez-Peshawar railway line, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan will equally benefit from the projects. These projects shall be viewed in a regional context. All the Central Asia countries are interwoven through highways, railways and pipelines due to the

Soviet legacy. In addition, these projects complement the CAREC and ECO highways and railways corridors and infrastructure built under the Belt and Road Initiative providing efficient links and outlets to all countries of the region.

The biggest obstacle to the establishment of the corridor is the stubborn survival of "old thinking", the inability of the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks to share power in a balanced and stable way within Afghanistan. This issue in Afghanistan has internal as well as external dimensions and needs to be addressed accordingly. The Afghans need to accommodate and respect ethnic, political and sectarian diversity while the neighbors of Afghanistan need to assist the process and encourage harmonious coexistence of Afghans within Afghanistan. The Central Asia-South Asia economic corridor could play a major role in overcoming this "old thinking" and bringing all players on board. All of them have pressing economic problems that the corridor would help alleviate.

The regional countries including Afghanistan should accept the fact that their countries can more effectively overcome the tremendous challenges facing their trade, logistic and energy sectors through cooperation and the development of a comprehensive, long-term regional strategy on transportation. Afghanistan's participation - in appropriate form - in a dialogue on strengthening regional cooperation on highways, railways and pipelines would have a catalytic effect. It would help make a strong case for increasing investment as a guarantee of long-term security and stability of the whole region and a precondition of achieving the full potential of the Central Asia -South Asia economic corridor. With a more flexible attitude of the Taliban, a comprehensive strategy on the part of Afghanistan to strengthen food security, create jobs, increase the export potential, provide electricity for the development of the economy and improve health and sanitation of the population through investment is likely to receive significant support from the neighbors, partners and other stakeholders including International Financial Institutions (IFIs). This in turn would leverage financing by the private sector - presently only a remote possibility.

## **Conclusions**

It is obvious that the Central-South Asia economic corridor does not exist in a vacuum rather it exists and evolves in a regional context. The absence of major power competition in the wake of US/NATO withdrawal, the end of war in Afghanistan, revived regionalism in Central Asia and enhanced Sino-Russian collaboration in the Eurasian Heartland all augur well for developing regional economic cooperation through the establishment of the corridor. It seems that Central Asia and South Asia are now approaching the "Schuman moment" in the emerging regional geo-political and geo-economic scenario. Robert Schuman proposed to end centuries of wars in Europe by establishing close economic cooperation based on economic complementarities. In the case of Central and South Asia, the complementarity is obvious i.e. ample energy resources in Central

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Asia and a market that desperately needs energy in South Asia. Energy could play the role of the Coal and Steel community in realization of this corridor and uniting this region. One can observe that the networks of Central-South Asia economic corridor will finally bring long term stability and prosperity to Afghanistan. This corridor links two important regions one resource rich and the other resource poor. At the same time opening up a landlocked region by reviving traditional cooperation and historical links in changed regional circumstances.

Afghanistan at the “heart of Asia” has a pivotal role in the development of Central-South Asia economic corridor. All the regional integration plans discussed in this paper pass and re-pass Afghanistan as a regional corner stone. Afghanistan during its many centuries of history has never been able to independently support its economy and remained dependent on foreign aid. The World Bank also acknowledges the fact that Afghanistan’s biggest economic challenge is finding sustainable sources of growth (The World Bank, n.d, p.1). The Central-South Asia corridor has the potential to drastically reduce Afghanistan’s foreign aid dependence. To benefit from a trade and energy corridor, the leaders of Afghanistan need to take concrete steps to build good-neighborly relations with bordering countries. Currently the Afghans are enjoying relative peace after decades however if Taliban remains inflexible in their attitude towards its own people, the neighbors and the world at large, Afghanistan may face prolonged isolation jeopardizing the realization of the corridor.

As the broader regional scenario has changed for the better, it is up to the regional states to capitalize upon this new environment conducive for regional integration. If the Asian countries still could not develop a mechanism of cooperation and remained divided, the dream of Asian Century could not materialize. The un-recognized government in Kabul needs regional and global support as much as the region and world need stable and secure Afghanistan. The Taliban have to go along with the region and the world by addressing the legitimate concerns of their neighbors and other countries of the world. Taliban need to address and review their repressive style of governance, restrictions on women education. The presence of transnational terrorist groups in Afghanistan pose great security risk to the countries of the region and the world at large.

While most of the countries of the world have no diplomatic relations with the government in Kabul, Pakistan, the Central Asian countries and other neighbors of Afghanistan managed to preserve trade and economic ties and channels of communication with Afghanistan. This would allow the regional countries to explore possibilities for gradually engaging Afghanistan in regional economic processes. In view of the acute lack of necessities of life, the first step should be humanitarian assistance gradually taking Afghanistan towards stability. International sanctions creating crises of liquidity and therefore need to be removed. The next step could be a joint platform for exchange of experiences and sharing best practices. Cooperation in building human capacity could pave the

way for more substantive joint projects. Importantly the regional countries and organizations need to coordinate the various connectivity plans and components of this economic corridor. The International Financial Institutions can also gain much in form of economic dividends from actively sponsoring various components of the corridor.

Joint efforts by the neighbors of Afghanistan to remove political stumbling blocks from the way of mutually advantageous economic cooperation by a policy of non-intervention in Afghanistan should be a priority. It can be done through the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the neighbors of Afghanistan. It is in the interest of all the regional countries to clear the way for the development of transport and energy infrastructure through regional cooperation. There is also a dire need to develop the soft component of cross border infrastructure i.e. harmonization and coordination of policies, rules and regulations. The potential investors must see the investment of billions of dollars as an investment in economic development and regional security to mobilize the funds. Prioritizing geo-economics over geopolitics in regional context would facilitate developing a long-term strategy for the strengthening of vitally needed regional cooperation on connectivity.

In this context, it is imperative to establish links between the research and academic institutions of the regional states to start joint research projects on regional and bilateral issues of security, connectivity and development. The principles of mutual benefit, mutual trust and pragmatism between Pakistan, Central Asian countries and other neighbors of Afghanistan i.e. China and Iran will contribute to the search for constructive approaches to solve regional issues of security and connectivity from regional perspectives. Research establishments of all the regional states need to highlight the need and develop a full-fledged economic concept for the corridor based on regional geo economic and geopolitical considerations.

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