ACUMEN: INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH
ISSN: 3060-4745 IF(Impact Factor)10.71 / 2025 Volume 3, Issue 11

TOPIC: IMPORTANCE OF AFGHANISTAN'S GEOPOLITICS IN THE ENERGY TRANSIT FROM CENTRAL ASIA - SOUTH ASIA

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ESPECIALTY: Master's in Economic and Tourism 2026

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Academic Article

Abstract

Afghanistan's geopolitical position at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia gives it significant strategic importance in regional energy transit and connectivity. Bordering the energy-rich republics of Central Asia while providing access to the energy-deficient markets of South Asia. Thereby, Afghanistan plays a connecting role and serves as a natural land bridge for the transportation of natural gas, electricity, and other energy resources. Major regional initiatives, including the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline and the Central Asia–South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000), underscore the country's potential to facilitate regional energy integration, diversify export routes, and strengthen economic interdependence among participating states. Beyond its geographic advantage, Afghanistan's role in energy transit has broader geopolitical implications, influencing regional cooperation, economic development, and strategic competition among its neighbouring powers e.g. Russia, China, India etc. However, realizing this potential depends on sustained political stability, improved security, infrastructure development, and effective regional collaboration. This study examines Afghanistan's geopolitical significance in the Central Asia–South Asia energy corridor, evaluates the opportunities and challenges associated with regional energy transit, and explores how successful implementation of cross-border energy projects could contribute to economic growth, regional connectivity, and long-term stability across the broader region.

Key words: Energy transit, Railway, Taliban, Security and economic growth, Central Asia and China's impact.

Introduction

Afghanistan holds a pivotal position in the energy transit sector between Central Asia and South Asia due to its strategic geographic location. Serving as a natural land bridge, the country provides the shortest and most cost-effective route for transporting energy resources from the energy-rich states of Central Asia to the energy-deficient markets of South Asia. Despite the fact that the spectrum of division between countries in the North and South have been shaped in the wake of development during the midst of the 20th century, especially with reference to geographical concepts. Nevertheless, the context primarily pertained to articulate as developed or underdeveloped, and developing nations (Vesey & Hadi, 2017). A snap back to the end of Cold War and era of the open markets, the developing countries of the Global North and the emerging economies of the Global South have entered a new phase of global rivalry in the field of economic spectrum. Their competition involved pursuit of energy security as an essential dimension. The economic contest between the Global North and South seemed to have intensified by transforming into geopolitical competition. The states in the Central Asia and the South have always been after resources to achieve their economic prospect, political, military, and technological objectives where access to energy has been key part of it (Tamer, 2023).

Major regional initiatives such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project upholds Afghanistan's importance in promoting regional energy connectivity and economic integration. The TAPI joint venture is designed by six compressor stations and is being implemented by the TAPI Pipeline Company which is an international consortium containing Turkmengas, Afghan Gas, and India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) (Saira and Javed, 2022). By facilitating the flow of natural gas and electricity across borders, Afghanistan has the potential to become a key transit hub, generating revenues, enhancing regional cooperation, and contributing to long-term economic development and stability throughout Central and South Asia. The Western powers, mostly the United States, has for long been keen to asserting their regional geostrategic interests through a sustained direct engagement to make this work, where the energy transit from Central to South Asia significantly contributes to its long-term interest in the region (Hussain et al., 2021).

Additionally, the impact of the long-running conflict between Russia and Ukraine has led to another significant geopolitical shift due to the instability of traditional transport corridors, requiring a reassessment of global supply routes. Therefore, Central Asian

and South Caucasian countries, especially Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, are actively deepening cooperation in the fields of logistics and transportation. Further construction and development of alternative transit routes, including the Middle Corridor and the Azure Corridor, are under consideration. Uzbekistan, a landlocked Central Asian country, is pursuing a trans-Afghan railway initiative to connect Pakistan's seaports especially Karachi, Gwadar and Bin Qasim, are long term goals to access the Persian Gulf and European markets throughout the Eurasia.

As result, this transformation upholds the impact of Afghanistan's emerging influence (Eslami et al., 2018), which indicates a shift in its role from an ordinary intermediary into a central actor in the broader regional dynamics (Zarkani et al., 2016).

One of the factors shaping these interregional relations is the developments cantered on Afghanistan. The Trans-Afghan Transport Corridor project will provide the shortest geographical link between Uzbekistan and Pakistan via Afghanistan. However, due to its location in the cross road of an immense region, Afghanistan intrinsically marks as an interlinked entity with all of the countries, serving as a bridge that unites them (Bhatnagar & Shahab Ahmed, 2021).

Methodology

This academic article examines the consequences of factors e.g. economic, energy, geopolitical, and geo-economic potentials concerning Afghanistan and neighbouring countries in the regions. An analytical and descriptive approach has been put forward to dig into the research by assessing the sources in a qualitative method. This academic paper applied numerous secondary data emerging results of multiple studies conducted in this field, to explain the importance of Afghanistan’s geopolitics and economics in the framework of geostrategic goals of the global powers.

Importance of security transit and Afghanistan's strategic interest

How essential is the Trans-Afghan Transport Corridor for Central Asian countries?

How could each one of the countries benefit along the corridor?

What is the specific oversight of regional and super-regional actors on Afghanistan's corridors?

Afghanistan is a strategic country that acts as a land geographical hub for South Asia, Central Asia, China and the Middle East. It is no longer a landlocked country, but a strategic and key land link for the entire region. Transit energy from Central Asia to

South Asia. However, regional transactions are important issues to be shared between the countries. The realisation of the TAPI gas pipeline project could considerably reduce Turkmenistan's dependence on China, the country's largest gas importer, given China due to its monopolistic position, often dictates prices below international market levels (Singh, 2023).

Afghanistan's position situated at the crossroads of East and West, the Central and South Asia marks a significance in the transaction with the region. Many global powers have for long been attempting to capitalise on Afghanistan's strategic location for transforming it into a regional commercial and transport hub. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasise the continuation of regional partnership founded on mutual interests. Despite the continuous years of instability, the regional partnership has been essential for Afghanistan especially to mitigate the adverse ramifications of the geo-economic crisis (Zarkani et al., 2016).

From north to south, diplomatic and economic resources have been poured into developing, negotiating, and implementing connectivity initiatives such as the United States' New Silk Road initiative. The CASA-100 electricity project connecting Central Asia to Pakistan; the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project; and a Trans-Afghanistan railway stretching from Uzbekistan to Pakistan's seaports. These transit endeavours uphold significance for Afghanistan economic prospect within the broader Central Asia region as well as the global arena. The energy infrastructure and investment stand as the central pillars and indispensable elements supporting the economies of these regions. Thus, through leveraging the New Silk Road, Afghanistan will be able to extend its exports to Far Eastern and European destinations. Concurrently, these initiatives could turn up the avenues for mutual investment between Afghanistan and region (Kazemi, 2021).

Although there are existing sea and land routes to transmit energy to major consumers, the shortest routes have never been used in Afghanistan due to security obstacles. Afghanistan is the most economical and unique land corridor for regional energy trade and transit that all stakeholders can agree upon. The corridor could also save billions of dollars a year in data transfers between Europe and Asia compared to current routes. In addition to regional benefits, it opens the doors to international markets to billions of dollars of Afghanistan's intact mineral resources. These partnerships also integrate the regional interests that could extend impact across multifaceted dominions, including counterterrorism efforts, where the European Union

and the west have been having concern about (Malik, 2016; Omidi & Noolkar-Oak, 2022).

As is clear, instability in Afghanistan poses a significant threat to large-scale transit projects in Central Asia, South Asia and across Eurasia, and economic and humanitarian crises contribute to radicalization. Therefore, ensuring Afghanistan in regional cooperation to resolve these crises and reduce security threats is considered very important. The US withdrawal and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan have led to significant changes and restrictions inside the country, resulting in a lack of diplomatic relations with other countries and increasing economic problems. As a result, Kabul's participation in regional projects such as the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and Trans-Afghan may help improve the country's domestic situation and regional position. The collapse of the internationally recognised government, followed with the quick withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces 2021 have led to a significant regional policy shift concerning security, economic ties, and diplomatic relations (International Crisis Group, 2023; Barfield, 2023). As soon as TAPI is in operation, the $10 billion natural gas pipeline is designed to transport around 33 billion cubic meters of gas annually from Turkmenistan's Galkynysh field. The Turkmen segment and a 25-kilometer cross-border section into Herat have been built, with ongoing construction along the Afghan segment.

The Afghan transit corridors

Given Afghanistan's friendly relations with Central Asian countries, the growing railway and energy initiatives are of particular importance. One of the most important of these projects is the Five Nations Railway, which connects China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran. The corridor is a key transit route from China to Europe. The middle corridor runs from China to Europe and consists of two main lines. The geopolitical intentions and regional connectivity of any kind serves as an instrument for linking Central Asia with South Asia by creating new corridors of economic collaboration, it theoretically leads to reshaping of regional balance of power. Such assessments have widely been raised in the literature on regional energy corridors, which highlight the role of cross-border infrastructure initiatives, especially in reconfiguring patterns of economic interdependence through geopolitical influence (ADB, 2023; IEA, 2023).

The northern line (China-Kazakhstan-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan) and the southern line (China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-CaspianSea-Azerbaijan) with

continued development, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor (Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Afghanistan) could become the third line with the potential to connect Afghanistan to the world. be taken. Likewise, the Lapis Lazuli Route has expansion opportunities towards Pakistan and India. The expansion of the rising powers of India and Pakistan offers significant economic and security benefits to countries using the corridor another project is the Trans-Afghanistan Transport Corridor. Nonetheless, by the operationalisation of the Central to South Asian Transport Corridor, could also impact the length of time in terms of business transactions. Thereby the estimates indicate that any such business transaction will enhance the facility to transport 20-30 million tons of products and goods every year (Chatterjee & Singh, 2020).

The corridor in question provides the shortest geographical link between Uzbekistan and Pakistan through Afghanistan. In addition, the Termiz-Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar route, both Uzbekistan, Central Asia and Afghanistan can reach the oceans from the shortest route. Uzbekistan and Pakistan have shown strong will to implement the project. The policy of the parties towards Afghanistan is also strongly influenced by the idea of implementing the Trans-Afghanistan Transport Corridor. Because the strong ties that will be established between Uzbekistan and Pakistan will not only increase the achievements of the two countries and Afghanistan, but also Central and South Asia. In the long run, this route will also contribute to India's transport access to export its goods and products at a meagre cost to European countries. Additionally, to the central Asian nations, it will also create the opportunity for India's products to find reasonable market due to their lower price and short conveyance time (Ghiasi & Muniraju, 2019).

Afghanistan receives about half of its imports on one route from Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan and Afghanistan signed an agreement on the Uzbekistan railway. The agreement will resolve the dispute over the railway, which Afghanistan uses to receive about half of its imports and much of its humanitarian aid. Afghanistan into the global equation and attract world attention for regional peace and integration will be a major achievement in this country, which defines the successful policy of Afghanistan in the foreign diplomacy (Sazmand, 2011). The project will also help strengthen political and economic ties between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It creates opportunities for closer cooperation, exchange of experiences and resources between countries in the region.

The Trans-Afghan Railway Project is an ambitious initiative that has been under construction for six years to create a vital rail link between the three regions. The

trilateral agreement has received enthusiastic support from key stakeholders, including Pakistan's finance and railway ministers. The project plans to complete the railway by 2027 with a capacity of 15 million tons of freight per year by 2030.

The geographical position of Afghanistan, according to historians has the advantage of pride more than any other factor because it has a mountain road at the crossroads of the Asian highway that can be described as the harbour of the ancient world. According to Tron Be: Afghanistan has played the most important role in the geopolitical and geostrategic developments of the region. The powerful Roman emperor, the Indian Empire, the powerful Kushan government, and other dynasties in China have used the Silk Road as a communication corridor for centuries.

The proposed trade route is of profound geopolitical importance, but its realisation appears to be mired in a web of financial and security challenges. One of the most significant obstacles is the unlikely prospect of Western financial institutions funding such an ambitious project in Afghanistan's volatile regions. Also, Pakistan's past record of ambivalent foreign policy in managing similar projects has created uncertainties that have complicated the project's prospects. According to French archaeologist Alfred Fossa: the Silk Road had an extraordinary importance in the transmission of culture, religion and world politics in addition to commercial importance. (Panjshiri, 2008).

Key challenges in regional energy transit and trade

The root of all major security and political problems in the region is the rivalry of the four great powers, the United States, China, Russia and India. But political issues between neighbouring countries have added to its complexity. At least three main political coalitions are actively involved in regional politics, which are directly related to many security and economic activities and issues in the region, including energy trade. The United States, China and Russia lead these factors. The stability and security of Afghanistan can be the solution to many regional and international problems and challenges. Given multiple decades had proven that instability in Afghanistan can harm the region security or economic-wise.

On the other hand, Afghanistan is the transport corridor of Central Asia that leads to Pakistan and India. Despite a population of around 35 million, its energy consumption remains relatively low, contributing to a smaller ecological footprint (Irena, 2020). Most Asian countries are somehow dependent on their neighbours or countries in the region. If one needs energy, the other may pass the other to transit their goods, access

the sea, or go to energy-fertile land. In the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the former needs to connect to China, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the sea through Pakistan.

While the Central Asian states share periphery in terms of cultural, linguistic, and historical ties with Afghan people, have responded differently when it comes to strategies to address the uncertainties proceeding from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is among lead countries that has established close ties with the Taliban by adopting a pragmatic approach to maintain a limited diplomatic channels with the Taliban administration to safeguard its trade and security interests in the region (Kassenova, 2022).

The political, security and economic dynamics of the South and Central Asian regions are fast-paced, unpredictable and complex. The energy-rich countries of Central Asia need a market for their energy. China is one of their main markets. India is Central Asia's second largest gas and oil market, but has been blocked due to security problems in Afghanistan and tensions between India and Pakistan. Issues such as cross-border terrorism, the drug trade, refugee influxes, and economic disruption are increasingly viewed through the lens of regional security complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Though Afghanistan's role in the wider context is not screened as effective. however it tends to play an important role in terms of energy connectivity and cooperation between Central and South Asia.

Beijing's expanding trade volume with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan makes it a key player in the region. China's bilateral trade with Central Asia reflects its significant economic interests in the region. The establishment of a reliable railway corridor will certainly serve China's interests by facilitating the affordable and efficient transportation of transit goods. The initiative promises a more efficient and affordable trade route that will reduce travel time by nearly 70 percent and logistics costs by up to 30 percent.

Unlike other countries in the region, India’s involvement has been another factor with the current regime in Kabul. The country plays an active role in the region, providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Given the volatile situation in the country, such a careful approach reflects India's soft power strategy without full approval or recognition of the Taliban regime. The use of Chabahar port to transport wheat from India to Afghanistan is a positive step for both countries. The port is of special strategic importance, with India investing $85 million to connect Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Conclusion

With reference to the geopolitical spillover theory, this paper articulates on how the crises in a volatile or failing state can "spill over" into neighbouring countries. The findings show that causing of disruptions, ranging from arms smuggling and terrorist infiltration to economic and later the infrastructural instability, could be the consequence (Brown, 2006). The form of partnerships yet discussed in the framework of energy transit and railway, directly influences regional economic and security policies. TAPI Natural Gas Pipeline joint venture, which was designed to transport gas from Turkmenistan to South Asia via Afghanistan, was formed and discussed in line with the economic and security prospects of the regional states.

The preservation of the TAPI project tends to be conditional on the stability of the economy and security in the region. Given Afghanistan's security issues especially in the post-Taliban era 2021, to some extent affect the economic interests of the parties, while it is not just Afghanistan's issue. This article, applies to a broader scope of understanding over the concept of energy diplomacy, energy and security infrastructure, such as the TAPI project and the partnering member states of interdependence, that could be used to in discussing on how the engaging stakeholders comply with the needs especially the security arrangement for the energy transit through Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, after the NATO withdrawal 2021 followed by the Taliban takeover, is a classic case of geopolitical spillover in terms of governance for the country. Anyhow, the economic and its transit toute has always been a pretext to its neighbours to invest for their economy. Given the security concerns that existed amongst the Central Asian countries, they have responded by militarising their border zones, enhancing surveillance, and drawing new security measures by seeking greater alignment with international security frameworks like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Although there is no clear information about the exact cost of the pipeline could be, based on the update estimate, total length of is around 2000 kilometres, will cost, the daily transport capacity of hydrocarbon will be about 1 million cubic meters (Sadat, 2015).

In the meantime, the spillover theory articulates on why Tajikistan amongst the Central Asian countries, have taken a more security based and cautious approach toward engaging with the Taliban, while other countries like Turkmenistan have chosen for

neutrality, attempting to insulate themselves from spillover through diplomatic hedging (Lemon, 2022).

Based on the challenges and opportunities of the region, three scenarios have been predicted and analysed by taking into account the factors of Afghanistan. The best scenario is where a safe and politically stable Afghanistan and the region. Given the major South Asian states such as India and Pakistan have been looking for an affordable and reliable energy source to meet their needs and economic growth. At the moment, where Afghanistan is optimistic about the energy transit along with the railway, leaders of both Central Asian and South Asian states are also inclined on securing energy trade agreements (Sadat, 2015 Raofi, 2022).

The next best scenario is a peaceful and stable Afghanistan with little or no change in regional politics and security. Ultimately, the worst-case scenario is when everything in Afghanistan and the region remains unchanged. The series of joint projects also faces numerous challenges and uncertainties that may influence the decision-makers in allocating vital resources, especially China as a global actor in the region. The Trans-Afghanistan Railway or TAPI have for long been threatened by ISIS. As a result, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan must allocate huge funds to provide armoured vehicles and hire security personnel to protect the technical team. Following the regime change in Kabul 2021, the central Asian states initially orchestrated a moderate stance against the Taliban rule, where Tajikistan, by contrast, has expressed sharp criticism, while the Taliban's political exclusionism and remains wary of the ideological and security threats posed by potential spillovers across its southern border (Koehler & Zürcher, 2023).

Notwithstanding the existence of renewable energy potential, Afghanistan is tremendously dependent on unreliable and insecure imported power, which puts strain on economic development. Besides, the Afghan transmission grid is very weak due to insufficient technology, capacity, and links to facilitate the utilisation of grid-scale renewable energy. In this paper, the associated major issues, challenges, and constraints of transmission networks and power imports are comprehensively described. In addition, opportunities and proposals are highlighted that could overcome these challenges (Haider, 2023). Finally, recommendations have been provided that can enhance the transmission network capacity, improve the existing weak grid, and pave the way for reliable, stable, and techno-economic integration of renewable and non-renewable energy with high security. The proposals and recommendations may help

the Afghanistan and its power sector make decisions about large-scale transmission projects and long-term power trade with neighbouring countries.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's geopolitical position places the country at the heart of the emerging energy connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia. As a natural transit and land corridor linking the energy-rich countries of the north with the energy-deficient markets of the south. It seems that the regional trade deals puts Afghanistan towards a trend of stability, where the regional players are dependent upon its pivotal role in the transit and trade. Afghanistan has the potential to transform from a landlocked state into a land-linked hub for the regional energy trade. Projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline and the Central Asia–South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000) demonstrates on how the country's geography or geopolitics can facilitate the cross-border energy flows, by strengthening economic interdependence, and promoting a regional integration.

Given the needs of the regional stakeholder in the energy and transit sector, Afghanistan's strategic importance extends beyond economics, where security of the country becomes more prevalent topic. Additionally its role in energy transit influences the geopolitical interests of regional and global powers, making cooperation on infrastructure, security, and governance essential for the success of transnational energy projects. From a risk assessment view point, the persistent challenges could come across that includes political instability, security concerns, inadequate infrastructure, and financing constraints continue to hinder the realisation of Afghanistan's full transit potential. Therefore, addressing these challenges require a sustained regional dialogue over joint investment, confidence-building measures, and adherence to international standards for boosting infrastructure development and trade in the region.

Bearing in mind that the transmission network aims to fuction as the backbone of the power sector of the country, that will enhance different power generation and transmission to the main load centres. Thus, upgrading the current transmission links by designing and installing a new and robust transmission links with sophisticated and efficient technology, such

as High-Voltage Direct Current (HVDC), are genuine tools both the domestic and regional power integration and sustainable development of Afghanistan and the region. As a result, Central Asian countries prioritise to a stable Afghanistan, viewing such stability as a prerequisite for mitigating the risks associated with regional collaboration and for enlarging bilateral and multilateral ties with the country.

Finally, Afghanistan's future as a regional energy transit hub depends on its ability to provide a stable and predictable environment for long-term investment and cross-border cooperation. If these conditions are met, Afghanistan in the long run could play a pivotal role in enhancement of energy security, expanding regional connectivity, generating transit revenues, and fostering shared economic prosperity across Central and South Asia. Thus, Afghanistan's geopolitical significance should be viewed not only through the lens of security but also as a strategic opportunity for regional development, economic integration, and lasting cooperation. And lastly, the research recommends an optimal strategic planning to be associated as part of the infrastructure investment in the transmission sector of the Afghanistan, where both the regional and international support could play role for the future of a prosperous Afghanistan.

Suggestions

By considering Afghanistan and the Central Asia as major industrial hubs that preserve one of the largest oil and gas source in the world. The importance of a fortified economic structure to integrate the regional trade and transit from Central to South Asia has for long been a geostrategic goal for the global powers, especially the United States. Thereby, the Near-East sources as a strategic region rich with hydrocarbon reservoirs, has drawn a significant attention by the global powers to influence critical sources, hubs, and operational centres to achieve their long term political-military, economic and commercial goals. Therefore, it is suggested that Afghanistan should integrate within a regional economic framework like Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to sustain its effective role in the context of regional or global trade. Afghanistan’s geographical position and proximity to major powers like Russia and China as well as neighbouring with regional players such as Pakistan, Iran, and India makes is critically important to incline its operational role with the region.

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