



A look to Afghanistan's geopolitical and transit Location and its impact on the country's political and economic stability

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Abstract

Today, the topic of transit using modern methods is considered the economic lifeline of countries, breathing life into the body of the land and driving the vast economic cycle on the globe. This research has been conducted due to the importance of transit in the global economy and its role in ensuring political and economic stability in the country, as well as in elevating Afghanistan's geopolitical status regionally and globally. Afghanistan's transit position in Asia holds special geopolitical value and, in addition to generating economic revenue and ensuring national stability, can foster regional stability and cohesion by linking the interests of countries. The aim of the research is to study Afghanistan's transit position and its impact on the country's political and economic stability, noting that Afghanistan is a country with an important geographical and geopolitical position, connecting the north to the south and the east to the west, and is considered the gateway to Asia. The significance of the research lies in gaining an understanding of the advantages and value of the country's strategic position through such studies. The research method is qualitative, presented in an analytical and descriptive manner, with sources collected from books, scholarly articles, and internet websites. The research results indicate that Afghanistan holds great importance in terms of its transit position and has played a valuable role in the development and political and economic stability of the country.

Keywords: Afghanistan, geopolitics, political stability, transit.

Introduction

The geographical location of a country can have both positive and negative effects on its national power, political behavior, and economic stability, and understanding such a location can have a direct impact on a country's national interests (Ezzati, 2001: 19). Afghanistan, with its highly sensitive and important geographical location in the heart of Asian powers, holds special significance in the region from various geopolitical, political,

economic, cultural, and transit dimensions. This matter is so important that it can either change the path of the country's development and stability, leading Afghanistan to peaks of prosperity, economic, political, social, and security progress, and turning the country into a hub of economic and political powers, or it can drag the country into ruin. A brief look at the country's history shows that both scenarios are clearly and evidently visible. When Balkh was the center for trade of Chinese, Indian, and European goods and connected the East and West, it was called the 'Mother of Cities.' However, due to political turmoil and internal wars in recent decades, the country has become a ruin. All these factors depend on our understanding of the country's situation and management conditions (Dabiri et al, 2011: 26).

Nowadays, it has become clear that transit, as one of the pillars of a country's economy, holds an important place in the fields of economics and politics. Afghanistan, in terms of transit position, especially its geopolitical transit position, holds a high place in the region and is located among the largest production and consumer markets in Asia, which, unfortunately, has not received significant attention. This research attempts to examine the role of Afghanistan's geopolitical and transit position and study its impact. Therefore, the present study seeks to demonstrate the role of Afghanistan's geopolitical position in regional transit and how this issue can be utilized to enhance the country's geopolitical weight, political stability, and economic stability (Azimi, 2015: 12). Therefore, the main discussion of this research is the study and examination of Afghanistan's geopolitical and transit position and its impact on the country's political and economic stability. Afghanistan enjoys a very important geopolitical and transit position at the regional level and has played a significant role in the strategies of Asian countries. The question raised in this research is whether Afghanistan's geopolitical and transit position will have an effective role in Afghanistan's political and economic sphere. The resulting hypothesis states that yes, Afghanistan's geopolitical and transit position plays a very important role in the political and economic sphere of Afghanistan at the regional level. Therefore, research on such a topic is of particular importance and plays a significant role in understanding Afghanistan at the regional level, making it necessary to conduct scientific research on the subject. Afghanistan is a country with a significant geopolitical and transit position, connecting different regions of Asia, linking East to the West and North to the South, and is known as the 'Gateway to Asia' (Nami, 1388: 14). If this country's position is used properly, it can be effective in various economic and political arenas to introduce Afghanistan's advantages and situational opportunities at the regional level. It was effectively utilized in the past, but due to decades of internal wars and political instability, the country's position has not been used properly and reasonably, and has turned into a challenge. Today, transit is considered the economic lifeline of countries, driving the vast cycle of the global economy and facilitating political, economic, and cultural relations worldwide. Afghanistan's transit position in Asia has a special geopolitical value and, in

addition to generating economic revenue and ensuring national stability, it can foster regional stability and integration across Asia, especially Central Asia, by linking the interests of countries (Rashid, 2001: 34). Research has been conducted on this topic, but the difference between this study and others is that it is documented through maps and facts, focusing more on the geopolitical impact of transit and highlighting its significance. This research was carried out using a qualitative method, presented in a descriptive and analytical manner. Its sources and information were collected from books, scientific articles, and reputable websites. The research findings indicate that Afghanistan, from a geopolitical and transit perspective, holds great importance and has played a valuable role in the country's political and economic development and stability. By leveraging this position, Afghanistan can be connected to the region, which can be utilized in various dimensions.

Material and Method

In the present study, a qualitative method has been used, and the presentation of the content is expressed in a descriptive and analytical manner. The required information was collected using library resources, by consulting books, articles, and reputable websites. This research relates to the study and evaluation of Afghanistan's geopolitical and transit position and its impact on the political and economic stability of the country.

Theoretical Foundations

After the collapse of the bipolar geopolitical order, geopolitical theorists, through various theories, have sought to explain the political system of the world, representing a geopolitical transitional period. This period, that is after 1989 and known as postmodern geopolitics, has given rise to geopolitical ideas indicating that Edward Luttwak's concept of 'gloeconomics and the primacy of economic power over militarism' is closer to reality than other theories (Goodarzi et al, 2022: 22).

Luttwak believes that the decline of the Cold War actually indicates a shift and movement of the global system from geopolitics toward gloeconomics. In his view, in the gloeconomic era, the means and causes of conflicts, disputes, and confrontations in the current century (the 21st) take on an economic nature, and economic instruments replace military objectives. Therefore, one of the features of the era of gloeconomic dominance is the importance of the economy in the global arena and the formation of regional groupings based on the economy (Goudarzi & Masoudnia, 2022). According to Luttwak, wars and global and regional groupings have taken on an economic and gloeconomic approach. However, the dear reader should understand that gloeconomics cannot be considered separately from its parent science, namely geopolitics; it can be said that gloeconomics is one of the sub-branches of geopolitics. In other words, when competition between powers is driven by economic motives, geopolitics provides an economic reading of the situation, leading to the emergence of gloeconomics (Ezzati, 2001).

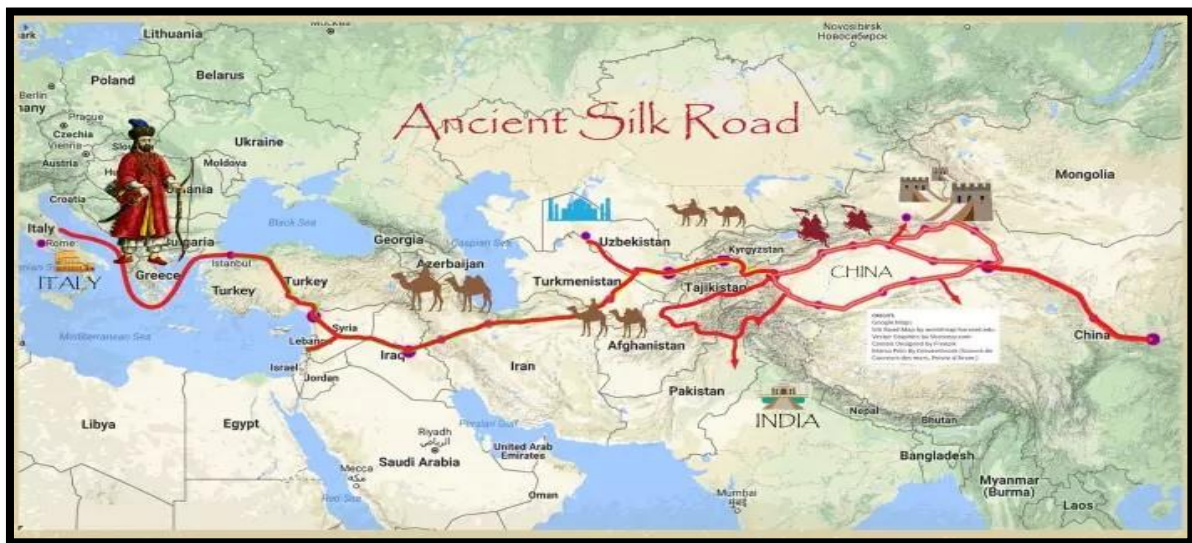
According to Luttwak, in conditions where geopolitics is economically oriented or gloeconomics comes into play, the most important factor that draws attention is energy and its transfer, or transit. In addition to the massive volume of goods that cross multiple

geographies daily, energy is the crucial component of these goods. Today, energy has become the most effective means of generating wealth, exercising power, and maintaining regional and international superiority. Therefore, the perspectives of Jeffrey Camp and Robert Harakavi, influenced by Mackinder's Heartland, focus on the 'strategic ellipse and Heartland of energy' (Goudarzi & Masoudnia, 2022: 9). Considering Luttwak's approach and the theories of Jeffrey Camp and Robert Harakavi, it can be said that in light of the above conditions, the position of this country is significantly more important than in the past 'era of classical geopolitics and militarism,' which can enhance the country's regional and global standing and turn it into a hub of regional convergence. Further details on this topic will be provided in the following pages (Valighlizadah, 2015: 32).

A Look at the Historical Past of Transit

Afghanistan is a historic and ancient country that has been considered a trade route between the East and the West since ancient times. The country's history of transit and trade dates back to the time when the Silk Road was active, through which merchants exchanged their commercial goods. The Silk Road reached its peak during the Kushan period (Faizi, 2019: 18).

Figure 1: The transit route of the Silk Road



Source: [https:// www.kojaro.com/history-art-culture194841-silk-road](https://www.kojaro.com/history-art-culture194841-silk-road).

Along the Silk Road, there were many caravanserais where travelers would spend the nights with their belongings for lodging and rest. On the other hand, these caravanserais ensured the security of trade caravans. In addition, official correspondence between the governments of the time was sent through these routes, which facilitated the exchange of administrative experiences and cultural exchange (ibid., 2019).

Figure number (2) is a view of the old caravans.



Source: <https://www.kojaro.com/history-art-culture194841-silk-road>

In today's Afghanistan, it was considered one of the key routes of the Silk Road and served as a connecting link between the production markets of China and India and the markets of Europe, and vice versa. The cities of modern Afghanistan played a prominent role in ensuring the security of the Silk Road. Among them was Balkh, which was the meeting point of all branches of the Silk Road and was recognized as the largest international market in the region, enjoying a high and flourishing status (Ibid., 2019).

Balkh was the largest international market of its time, where all Eastern (China and India) and Western (Europe) goods were traded. It was through this route that in the early second millennium BCE, the Hindu Vedas, the first group of Aryans in India, reached the valleys of the Indus River from the heights of the Hindu Kush. Alexander the Great traveled to India via this route. Chandragupta, the founder of the Maurya dynasty in India, shortly after Alexander, seized parts of eastern and southern present-day Afghanistan along the opposite direction, and Ashoka also brought Buddhism into this land through this route (Naeimi, 2019).

Figure (3) View of one of the caravanserais in Herat



Source: <https://www.kojaro.com/history-art-culture/194841-silk-road-1399>.

Even at a time when water transportation had also expanded, Afghanistan was recognized as one of the two major hubs or communication bridges across three continents: Asia, Europe, and Africa. Arnold Toynbee refers to these two hubs as portages. Toynbee believes that 'in the era of water transportation, the land vehicles of the oikumene were those that transported commercial goods or cargo from one sea to another and from one river to another.' One of these portages was located in present-day Afghanistan (Ibid, 118). Whenever one looks at the contemporary history of the country, especially the events of the last half-century, the significance of the country's transit position is well understood. This importance is such that part of the country's adversities and external conspiracies over the last fifty years are rooted in the geopolitical issue of the country's transit. In this context, Pakistan has always tried to find a safer and cheaper transit route to transport its manufactured goods through Afghanistan to Central Asia, and it also aims to compensate for Pakistan's energy shortages with the cheap energy from these countries. In this regard, we have occasionally witnessed Pakistan's interventions in various matters. What the country needs today is to revive the Silk Road by taking advantage of this geographical and geopolitical position and become a connecting link between the region and the world. Undoubtedly, with such an achievement, we will gain access to large energy and financial resources, as well as stability, authority, and geopolitical influence (Arya, 2017:12).

Transit

Transit refers to an industry whose mission is to transport cargo from the origin to the destination. This movement occurs through intermediary regions that possess transit advantages. According to international agreements, intermediary areas may consist of one or more countries, and no import or export customs duties are charged for this movement. However, other charges are imposed under the title of transit fees, which can amount to very large sums annually. It is clear that the income from transit fees for intermediary countries entirely depends on their geographical location and, in addition to boosting gross domestic product, also impacts the regional economy and market (Mohammadi, 2009).

The major countries of the world not only earn a significant portion of their revenues through transit, but they also ensure their dominance over global markets and control by utilizing goods transit. Our country, Afghanistan, due to decades of instability, has not only failed to take advantage of its geopolitical and transit position but has also, as a landlocked country, continually been influenced by the biased policies of its neighbors. Afghanistan's neighbors also regard this as a geographical factor and a weakness, using it as a political tool to achieve their own political objectives. Due to its sensitive geopolitical position at the heart of Asia's production and consumption markets, Afghanistan can become a transit hub in Asia. On one hand, it is located near the world's largest energy resources, the Caspian and the Persian Gulf, and on the other, it borders two of the world's most populous regions, China, India, and Pakistan. Therefore, Afghanistan can link the four corners of Asia by developing railways, roads, pipelines, high-voltage power cables, and fiber optic cables along the following routes (Rahimi, 2012: 27).

Afghanistan's geopolitical position

In the traditional view, geopolitical position is the same as geographical location. By considering the value and political identity of a geographical place, in the new view,

geopolitical position means the place of a geographical location within the relevant system, such as Iran's position in the Middle Eastern regional system. This concept is considered dynamic in both views, and its main function is in the field of international relations (Valigholizadeh, 2015). With this in mind, Afghanistan is situated among four security systems: Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, West Asia, and China. Afghanistan's geopolitical position as a weak country has always led its statesmen to consider the views and perspectives of its powerful neighbors in its policies. Often, Afghanistan's location between major powers and the instability in the Afghan government's policies have prompted interventions by neighboring powers, making it a point of confrontation between two geostrategic zones. Over the past three centuries, Afghanistan has repeatedly changed hands between the powers of the maritime geostrategic zone 'Britain and the United States' and the land-based geostrategic zone 'the former Soviet Union and present-day Russia' and has sometimes been used as a buffer region. One of the reasons for America's hegemonic presence was Afghanistan's geopolitical position among the old and emerging powers of Asia. (Bidar, 2005: 8).

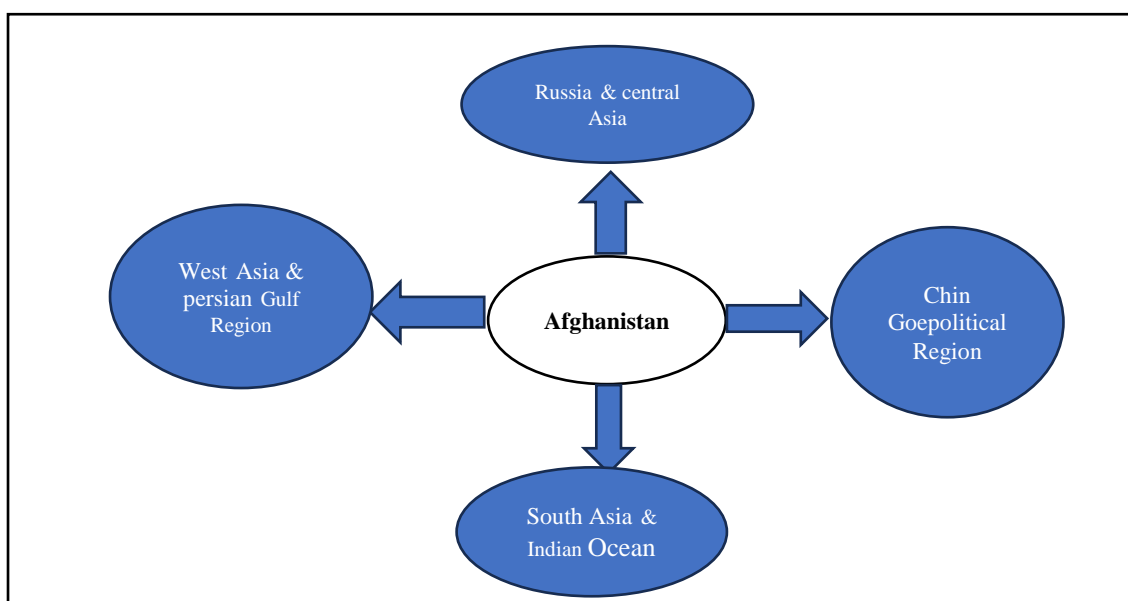


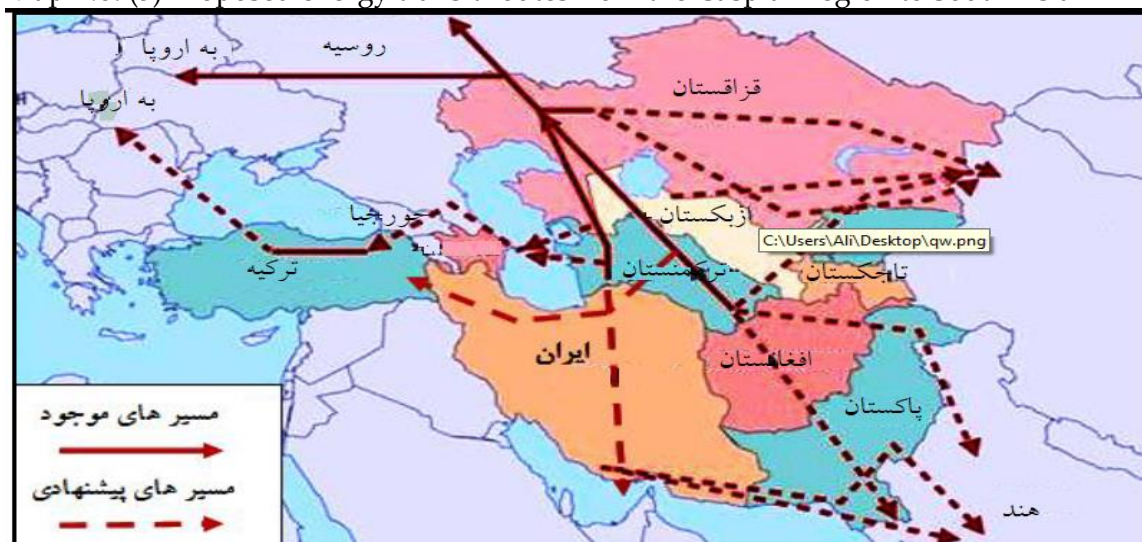
Figure No. (4): Geopolitical position of Afghanistan among the regional systems of Asia
 Source: (Rahmani, 1404).

Afghanistan's Transit Location

Afghanistan is the connecting link between the countries of South Asia, Central Asia, and China with the countries of West Asia. Such a position, as a geopolitical advantage for Afghanistan, makes the role of this country more prominent in the region and gives it greater influence in regional decision-making. South Asian countries need to pass through Afghanistan to access the markets of Central Asia; while Central Asian countries, including Turkmenistan, need Afghanistan to transfer energy to the highly consumptive and densely populated South Asian markets (India and Pakistan) as well as to access India's open waters. Therefore, it can be said that Afghanistan serves as a connecting link between production resources and Asian consumer markets. Afghanistan's transit position

increases the geopolitical weight of this country and, by linking the interests of competing Asian countries, helps unify their interests, thereby ensuring domestic and regional peace and stability (Mosallanejad, 2009: 34).

Map No. (5) Proposed energy transit routes from the Caspian region to South Asia



Source: (Dabiri & Zarghani, 2011).

TAPI Gas Pipeline

The TAPI gas pipeline, known as Trans-Afghanistan, is one of the largest gas transmission projects in the region. With its implementation, Afghanistan will become an economic corridor between Central and South Asian countries. Moreover, this project is considered the most profitable for Afghanistan. The plan for initial talks on the transportation of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, known as TAPI, first began in the 1990s; however, in 2003, with financial support from the Asian Development Bank, it entered serious negotiations. Eventually, in 2008, India officially joined the project, which is one of the reasons for its realization. The main objective of the aforementioned project is to transport 33 billion cubic meters of gas per year from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The parties involved in this project established the TAPURITY Joint Stock Company (TPCL) in late 2014, which is responsible for the construction and management of the project. It is noteworthy that the company's shares belong to Turkmenengaz, the Afghan Gas Corporation, the private Pakistani Gas Systems Company, and the private Indian GAIL Company. The TAPURITY project has significant positive effects on the expansion of regional cooperation between Central and South Asian countries, one aspect of which is the creation of a cooperation corridor in the energy, communications, and transport sectors among the countries in the region, and it holds special importance for Afghanistan in terms of economy, politics, and diplomacy (Naeemi, 2019: 7). With the operation of the TAPI project, Afghanistan will annually earn over four hundred million dollars in gas transit fees, in addition to receiving sufficient gas from this project (Arya, 2017:13).

By implementing this project, job opportunities will be created for more than four thousand people. According to statistics, Afghanistan will obtain up to five hundred

million cubic meters of gas annually from this project in the first ten years. Afghanistan's share of gas from this project will reach one billion cubic meters in the second ten years and 1.5 billion cubic meters in the third ten years after the project is completed. Initial statistics indicate that with the operation of this project, 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmenistan gas will reach Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India annually (Adel, 1400).

Figure (6) TAP Gas Transmission Project Route



Source: <https://momp.gov.af/dr>

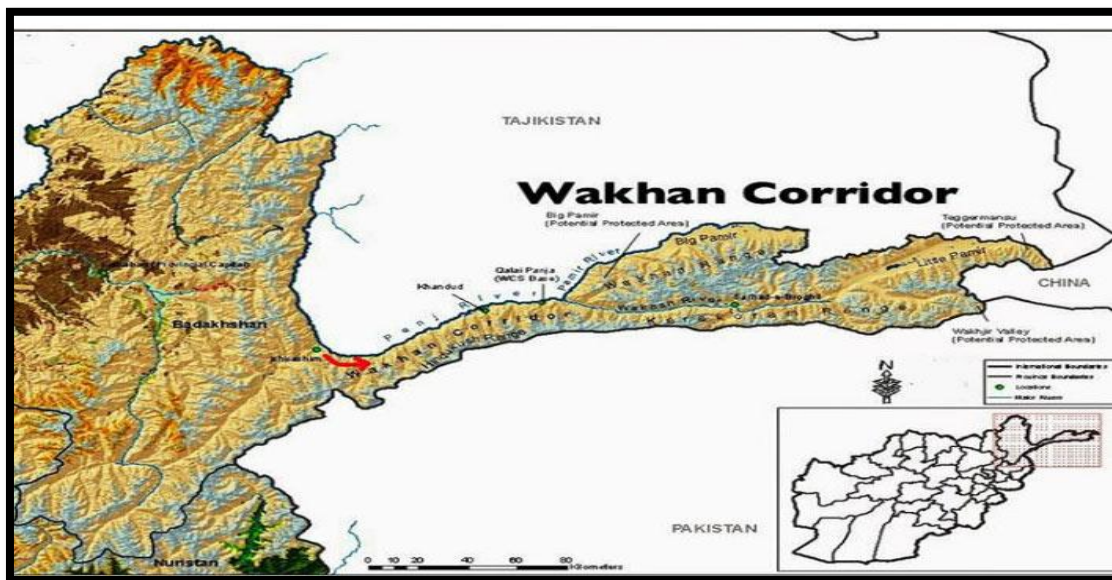
TAPI Side Projects

The TAPI project is not a single project; rather, several other projects will also be implemented along this gas pipeline. One of these projects is the 500 kV Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan electricity transmission project, which will transfer electricity from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan. According to government calculations, Afghanistan will earn up to 110 million dollars annually in transit fees from the transmission of Turkmen electricity to Pakistan, and three sub-stations will be built in the provinces of Herat, Farah, and Kandahar. In addition to electricity transmission, a fiber optic cable will also be laid in the region, connecting neighboring countries. Another project to be implemented along the TAPI gas pipeline is a railway line that will connect Pakistan and Turkmenistan through Afghanistan (Varij Kazemi, 1399: 16).

Northeast-Southwest Corridor of Wakhan

Afghanistan can rightly be seen as a land whose significance depends on its distinctive geographical position. A unique geographical location that, although not ideal for military operations, has a remarkable history and capacity for shaping trade connections between the East and the West. The Wakhan Corridor is one of the areas that can, as in ancient times, realize Afghanistan's special geographical potential (Adel, 1400).

Figure (7) Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan



Source: [https://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2023275\(1400\)](https://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2023275(1400))

Wakhan is a region in Badakhshan province that shares a 300-kilometer border with Pakistan to the south, over 260 kilometers with Tajikistan to the northeast and west, and 74 kilometers with China. The Wakhan Corridor, due to its unique topography, is located among the Hindu Kush, Himalaya, Karakoram, and Tien Shan mountain ranges. Wakhan covers an area of approximately 14,080 square kilometers. This region has a length of 220 kilometers and a width ranging from 10 to 64 kilometers. The Wakhan Corridor has extended Afghanistan's borders and connects Afghanistan to China through the "Wakhjir Pass," thereby linking it to the East Asian world. The Wakhan Corridor connects China to Afghanistan and Tajikistan to Pakistan. This area, due to its mountainous terrain and peaks over six thousand meters high, as well as lands covered with ice and natural snow, is one of the sources of the Amu Darya River. Over the years, this corridor has been designated as a national park, covering an area about 23 percent larger than Yellowstone. Tourists come to this corridor to travel through the magnificent Wakhan landscape and meet local people who have preserved their traditional way of life (Varij Kazemi, 2020: 18).

Feasibility of Constructing a Railway in the Wakhan

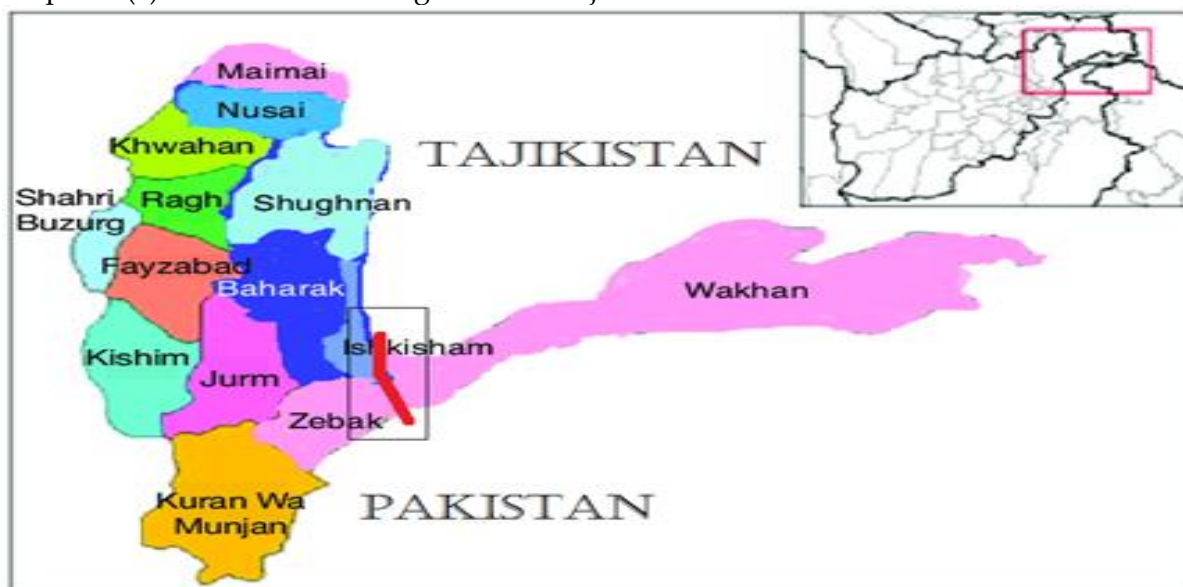
Considering the geography of the Pamir Mountains, establishing rail infrastructure in the Wakhan region can be difficult and costly. However, there are many examples of various projects that have been successfully completed in regions that are similar or even geographically more complex than the Wakhan area. For instance, the Karakoram Mountains, where the Karakoram Highway was constructed using 1960s and 1970s technologies, and the Pamir Mountains, where the Wakhan Corridor is located, are geographically and topographically similar. A brief comparison of these two regions indicates that establishing rail infrastructure in the Wakhan region is feasible, given the road and tunnel construction technologies currently available in China (Adel, 2021).

The cost of the Wakhan railway project would be reasonable compared to the \$794 million budget of the Karakoram Highway or the \$4.2 billion cost for building the 1,600-kilometer China-Tibet railway, which opened in 2006. Moreover, in recent years, projects have been

completed in similar regions, making the creation of transportation infrastructure in Wakhan more accessible. The Lowari Tunnel, the first phase of the Chitral-Tajikistan highway, was completed in 2017. Five bridges have been built over the Panj River in the Wakhan area since 2002. In 2009, a road in western Wakhan was constructed by the Chinese army, and the roads connecting Ishkashim-Baharak to Feyzabad indicate that the development of railway infrastructure in the Wakhan region would also be feasible. Overall, with the development of modern road construction technologies, geographical complexity cannot be considered a sufficient reason for the impossibility of building a route (Mohammadi, Bita: 7).

Currently, countries like Pakistan and Tajikistan are trying to use the Wakhan Corridor as a land bridge to connect Central Asia to the ports of Pakistan. The government of Tajikistan announced in 2013 that the necessary infrastructure for this project, including bridges and roads, has been established in Tajikistan, and Pakistan has ready routes that connect the cities of Islamabad and Peshawar to Chitral (Varij Kazemi, 2020: 18).

Map No. (8) Corridor connecting Pakistan-Tajikistan via the Wakhan route



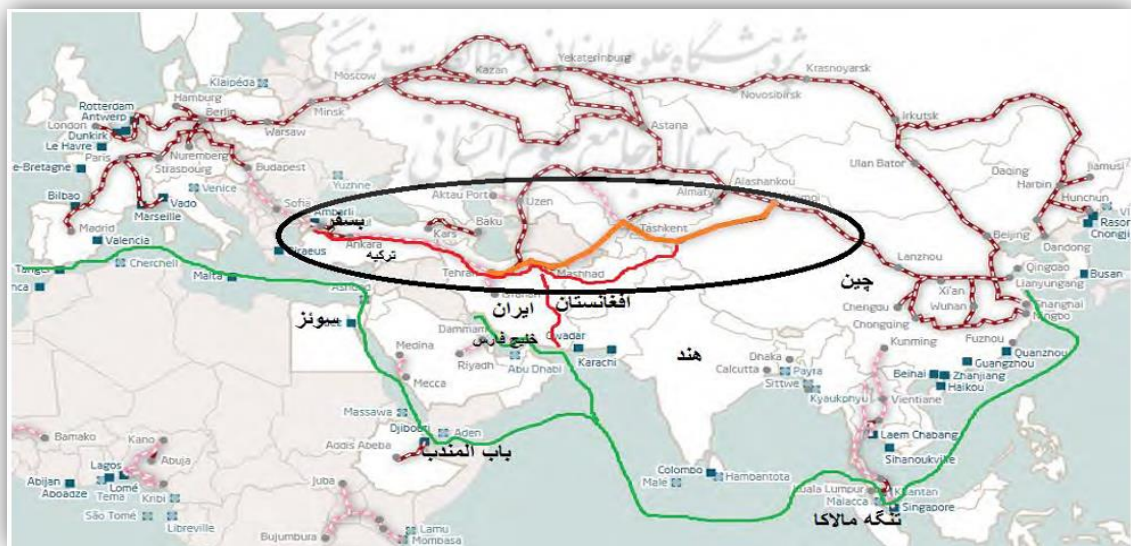
Source: [http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2023275\(1400\)](http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2023275(1400)).

It is estimated that the cost of constructing this route will be 24 million \$, and if completed, it would enable Central Asia and Afghanistan to connect to Pakistan's southern ports. On the other hand, China's Belt and Road project, in which Afghanistan is also interested, as the largest economic project of the 21st century, requires passing through the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (the orange line in image number 7). These four Central Asian countries face an insecure environment due to ethnic and tribal conflicts over water, as well as the presence of radical groups and anti-government networks, which, in the event of border clashes, could threaten China's economic security. Additionally, the issue of Xinjiang, or East Turkestan, which is linked to Central Asia in terms of identity, also increases pressure and violence. Therefore, China can directly and solely pass through one country, namely Afghanistan, while laying the groundwork for creating a new security order, and guarantee its economic interests (red line in Figure 7). In

this context, the connection of the Wakhan Corridor with the energy-rich Caspian Basin region and the establishment of energy transfer links with China in the form of oil and gas pipelines also increases the geopolitical and geo-economic value of Wakhan (Arya, 2017).

During the inauguration of the Tajikistan-Pakistan-China Corridor, China is negotiating the possibility of establishing pipelines, rail connections, and even an oil pipeline through the Wakhan Corridor. This region is of great importance for Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan. The opening of the Wakhan Corridor will have serious implications for regional and global actors in Afghanistan, especially India, as Afghanistan is the final key for China to completely encircle India (Varij Kazemi, 2020: 19).

Map No. (9) Current transit routes of China and the Wakhan Corridor



Source: <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2023275>

Therefore, Afghanistan's geopolitical position for transit is very important, and not only can it help Afghanistan escape political isolation and persistent instability, but it can also ensure stability across Asia by intertwining the interests of regional powers. In addition, the geopolitical weight and regional and global influence of the country have increased, and hundreds of millions of dollars are generated annually from the transit of goods and energy (Rahimi, 2012: 43).

Conclusion

The fact that Afghanistan's transit position is considered one of the very good opportunities for the country's growth, development, and political and economic stability, and has played a significant role in the country's sustainable development, and that in the past this position has been used correctly, playing a constructive role in the country's stability and recognition. Therefore, Afghanistan has had a very important role in the geopolitical position, especially in transit geopolitics. If this opportunity is used correctly, it can bring the country out of isolation and turn it into a transit hub of Asia. This issue arises from the fact that Afghanistan has the potential to connect Central Asian countries,

which have cheap energy sources such as electricity, oil, and gas, to the high-consumption and densely populated markets of South Asia, namely India and Pakistan. On the other hand, India's long-cherished wish, especially Pakistan's, to reach the markets of Central Asia would also be fulfilled. On the other hand, China, as the economic giant of Asia, today challenges the economic hegemony of the United States and is also striving to reach the energy centers, oil, and gas of the Caspian Basin and the Persian Gulf through a shorter route via Afghanistan, which is only possible through the Wakhan Corridor. By establishing the Wakhan Corridor, not only does China connect to West Asia, but it also gains access to Europe through Turkey via the shortest land route. Therefore, Afghanistan becomes the connecting link between East, West, North, and South Asian countries. Being at the center of such a link can provide Afghanistan with political and security credibility and elevate the country's geopolitical weight in relation to regional and global powers. It is clear that if the above corridors are established, the regional countries will not only refrain from interfering but will also work toward ensuring stability in Afghanistan. Hence, proper and constructive management of the country's transit position can lead it to political and economic stability.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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