

## The Geopolitical Location of Afghanistan: Opportunities and Challenges in Relations with South and Central Asian Countries

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### ABSTRACT

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The geopolitical location of Afghanistan is crucial for Central Asian and South Asian countries, as it provides opportunities and challenges for connectivity. Afghanistan's geopolitical location is significant in the Central Asian Era, as bordering countries exploit its natural resources, rivers, and possibilities. Afghanistan was the only mandatory corridor for empires like Genghis Khan, the Safavids, the Alexandrians, the British, the Russians, and the USA. The geopolitical location of Afghanistan has been a significant factor in regional cooperation organizations, reducing turbulences in the region. The study explores the opportunities and challenges in the area, identifying the challenges among these countries to prevent regional connectivity. The country's geographical location has been a significant factor in the development of technologies and weapons, making it a vital region for regional and international actors. The study highlights the importance of Afghanistan's geopolitical location in the connectivity of Central Asia, South Asia, and Middle Eastern countries. The study aims to identify the opportunities and challenges for Afghanistan in regional connectivity, identifying regional challenges, and identifying solutions for enhancing connectivity in relations with these countries. The study is important for political scholars, researchers, politicians, and policymakers. Afghanistan's geopolitical location in Asia is vital for Central Asian and South Asian countries. The results show that Afghanistan has an important impact on the Central Asian Era regarding geopolitics; all these countries, especially the bordering countries, are taking advantage of the natural resources, rivers, and possibilities of the North-Northeast and western parts of Afghanistan.

### INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical location is the most significant part of Afghanistan's regional & international politics. Therefore, several factors impact the geopolitical location of Afghanistan, for instance, geographical location, the shape of the country, the size of the country, topography, population, politics, ethnicity, religion, ethnic nationalism, and so on. Hence, according to these perspectives from the history till now the geopolitical location of Afghanistan has been an

enormous clash among neighboring, regional & international actors. Afghanistan is located in south Asia; Afghanistan is called the heart of Asia or land link country because six countries surround it. It borders Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan in the north, with Iran in the west, Pakistan in the southeast, and China in the remote east. In this context the essential instruments for the Afghan Government to use in Afghanistan have two aspects: one is the positive aspect that is cooperative for Afghanistan with the relations

with neighboring & regional countries, for instance, in connectivity, trade, regional security engagement, preventing the drug trafficking, terrorism, cultural exhibitions. Moreover, the negative aspect is that Afghanistan is to interrupt neighboring, regional & international superpower countries for their interests in using Afghanistan's geographical location. The historical experience shows that Afghanistan has intervened several times from international actors to safeguard its national integrity territorial independence and geopolitical location.

### Importance of the Study

This study is more effective for regional connectivity, because, Afghanistan's geopolitical location in Asia is vital for Central Asian and South Asian countries. However, the recent politics of these countries are going on the geographical perspectives, in addition to exploring regional opportunities for Afghanistan, for instance, accessing the large markets in the region, using regional resources at low prices, being situated as a crossroad in this region, and so on. and identifying the challenges among these countries to prevent regional connectivity for instance, poor relations and distrust among the regional countries, insecurity, wars, supporting militant groups... Moreover, this study is more significant for political scholars, researchers, politicians, and policymakers.

### Objectives of the Study

- 1\_ Elaborates the geopolitical location opportunities and challenges of Afghanistan with regional connectivity.
- 2\_ Identify the regional challenges across the regional connectivity in the South & Central Asian countries.
- 3\_ Identify the solutions for regional connectivity in the relations with South Asian & central Asian countries.

### Problem Statement

The geopolitical location of Afghanistan is the utmost factor in the relations with neighboring & regional and international countries, therefore, via this topic, we

explore the all opportunities and challenges that exist in the region in terms of Afghanistan's geopolitical location, and we recognize the regional cooperation organization that assists to reduce the turbulences in this region. In addition, we identify the importance of geopolitical location with the connectivity of central Asia, south Asia, and Middle Eastern countries. Moreover, identifies the cooperation of regional organizations that exist in the region.

### Research Questions

1. What are the geopolitical opportunities and challenges of Afghanistan in its relations with regional countries?
2. Why Afghanistan is vital for regional connectivity in Asia as well as in central Asia?
3. What are the regional challenges and solutions across the regional connectivity?

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research is based on secondary source data, as there are no primary source data and official government documents. Internationally recognized journals, articles by online analysts, and newspaper reports are used instead of primary state sources, as there is regime control over published work and a markedly biased viewpoint. However, approximately half of the data incorporated comes from reports from internationally recognized newspapers. This is a library study based on a geographical approach, and data collected from secondary sources is based on an exploratory methodology. In this research, materials from relevant books, articles, newspapers, etc. are collected. The materials have been replaced in terms of continuity of the context.

### Exploration of the Geopolitical location of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is located in south Asia in the north of the Jehoun (Abasind) river; Afghanistan is called the heart of Asia or land link country because six countries

surround it. It borders Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan in the north, through the provinces of Baluchistan, Sistan, and Khorasan with Iran in the west, Pakistan in the southeast, and China in the remote east. Geographically Afghanistan is known as a landlocked country in the region. As regards geopolitically Afghanistan is located in the heart of Asia, and historically reminds the vital route among the Asian countries as well as other global power countries (Mazlumyar, 2019). According to the progress of development technologies and weapons, the importance of geography has decreased. However, it can be seen that some geographical domains are still of practical importance to the great powers, based on this aspect of geopolitics, Afghanistan's geopolitical location has been significant for the regional & international actors till now.

### **Geopolitical Areas Related to Afghanistan**

China Zone: Afghanistan, China, Mongolia and Tibet.

Zone of subcontinent of India: India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

Region of a plateau of Iran: Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Region of central Asia: Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. (Rahimi, 2018).

### **The importance of the geopolitical location of Afghanistan**

Afghanistan's geographical location is the connection between South Asia to Central Asia. Halford Johan Mackinder said: ((The one who controls the pivot Area (Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe), will have the destiny of the world)) (Amin, government and Politics in Central Asia, 2021). Historically, Afghanistan was reminding the vital route and connection region between central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East. At the time when the Indian Ocean route was not discovered, Afghanistan was the only mandatory corridor for empires, for instance, Genghis Khan, Safavids, Alexandrians, British, and Russians as well as

to the new actor of the USA, from history till now 21st-century several empires have passed through away from Afghanistan to obtain their timely interests and achieve their goals around this region and used the territory of Afghanistan as a significant instrument for their aggression and stayed on the region (Jamil). However, before 1945 how many empires have passed through Afghanistan, they only used the territory of Afghanistan for their aggressive measure and they didn't stay for a long time. Unless after 1945 on the period of the Cold War Afghanistan territory was a battlefield for the USA\_Soviet Union competition. Each of them efforts to stay in the territory of Afghanistan and maintain their existence in this region, on the soviet -Afghan War 1979-1989 USSR was required to stay here in Afghanistan to spread the Idea of Communism in this region and prevent interference from the USA in this region. However, the USA has struggled to prohibit the dissemination of Communism in this region, after the collapse of the USSR, the USA remained the unilateral dominant in the world. After the 2001 9/11 accident America made an excuse to obtain the territory of Afghanistan by the two UN Security Council resolutions (1373) on 28 September and (1368) resolution to invasion of Afghanistan territory for their purposes and existence in this region (Ben Smith and Arabella Thorp, 2010). USA as regards geopolitical theories (Heartland, Remland, Mackinder) reached to acquire the Area of Middle East and Central Asia as well as Afghanistan, as for as the borders with China, and Iran and controlling Russia in this region, Afghanistan's geopolitical location was a quite option to USA to invade based on UN security council mandate (Farmali, 2018). However, Afghanistan's geopolitical location is vital for South Asian & central Asian countries. Historically, the existence of geographical location of Afghanistan in this region (silk route 4000 miles) has a role in Chinese, Persian, and Indian civilizations throughout the past period of history, Afghanistan can provide some

opportunities for trade and serve as the energy resources and minerals as regards of vicinity to central Asia and south Asian countries. For instance, the Wakhan Corridor and Khyber Pass a great geo-economic potential for China, Pakistan, India, and Central Asian countries (Sakandari, Sajad Ali, 2020). Formerly, Afghanistan functioned as a naturally occurring passageway connecting the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. It is still referred to as the "Crossroad of Routes in Asia." 15 Afghanistan's location at the core of the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and China is the main explanation. Additionally, the nation is home to extremely profitable raw resources like copper and lithium. Furthermore, Afghanistan is situated near the intersection of nations like China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia which want to dominate their regions. These regional leaders maintain Afghanistan's geopolitical and geostrategic prominence by giving it tremendous attention. However, the US departure and the Taliban's emergence to power in Afghanistan are the key factors in terms of the regional framework (Adam Saud, Mauz ullah Khan, No. 91, Winter 2022).

### **The impact of the Geopolitical location of Afghanistan on the relations with South Asian countries**

Eight countries exist in South Asia: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Maldives. These countries have boundaries with each other's. As regards these countries India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are more vital for the South Asian region, the Afghanistan- Pakistan borderline (2640km, 1640 miles) and the Pakistan-India border (2912km). In addition, there are mutual barriers among these countries, which have created grounds for interference by the superpower countries of the world (Rahimi, 2018). Moreover, in the relations of Afghanistan to Pakistan major barriers are as follows: the issue of the Durand line, the matter of Pashtunistan, the issue of interfering in each other's internal Affairs, problems

with India and blaming Afghanistan by existing in this Area, the matter of immigrants, and supporting belligerent groups and so on (Amin, Government and politics in South Asia, 2020). However, according to geopolitical perspectives accessing directly the Central Asian region, the policy of strategic depth in Afghanistan vis-à-vis India, and also from the geo-economic point of view, the opening transit route between Pakistan and central Asia, the possibility of accessing oil and gas natural sources of central Asian countries and turning Afghanistan into a consumer goods market, expansion of ideological influence in Afghanistan and so on (Sardar Mohammad Rahimi, Abbas Arify, 2020). Moreover, after the separation of Pakistan from India in 1947, vigorous wars took place between these two countries in 1947, 1965, 1971 years, this situation forced both countries to join the East and West bloc, and the event of September 2001 created an opportunity for Pakistan to receive financial and military aid from united states and cooperate with the united states in the part of terrorism, Pakistan supported extremist groups to prevent India's power in the region, as well as Kashmir issue was aimed in balance of power in the area, competition of nuclear weapons, influence on Afghanistan geographical location, and reaching central Asia. The geographical location of Afghanistan has been significant for Pakistan from three aspects:

1. Using the geographical location of Afghanistan to defend and counter India.
2. Preventing India's influence in the region and Afghanistan and fearing the proximity of India and Afghanistan.
3. Afghanistan's strategic location is a connection bridge between South Asia and Central Asia, and both countries need the energy of Central Asia for their economic growth (Stephen, 2011).

Pakistan's most important goal in Afghanistan is to achieve financial goals, Pakistan wants to establish suitable routes for the export and import of its

commercial goods with the countries of Central Asia from Peshawar to Kabul through Salang, Quetta Kandahar, and Herat and through Karakoram. Roads have several advantages, and the Afghan government would gain as much from a solid leadership. For these factors, Pakistan opposes the establishment of a strong Afghan government. In addition, Pakistan is in urgent require of Afghanistan to expand its nuclear program because Afghanistan has a wealth of uranium. To obtain this material without using it, must encourage hostility to the local administration in these places, and they have also supported the local government's opponents' organizations (Amin, Government and politics in South Asia, 2020). In addition, Pakistan wants to strengthen and support the anti-establishment groups in Afghanistan to recognize the Durand line officially, so that a stable government is not established in Afghanistan, because there is no confusion about this line, and put indirect pressure on the Afghan government to recognize this line officially. In addition to this, their other goal is to use the water of Afghanistan's rivers at a cheap price or free. For this purpose, they do not want to establish political stability in Afghanistan and establish a strong government in Afghanistan to control its water. Afghanistan and India, despite religious and cultural otherness, have built a long-lasting friendly relationship, amid Pakistan's opposition to India's presence in Afghanistan, the country could establish a good image both within the Afghan government as well as the Afghan Nation. The collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, has provided a new opportunity for India to reconsider and harden its foothold in 2001. India maintained cordial ties with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and offered support in the areas of development, politics, the economy, culture, and the military. However, after the Taliban took dominance, it broke off political relations with Afghanistan. It is currently working to strengthen ties. However, they still have not been able to strengthen their political relations

with the Taliban.

### **The impact of geopolitical location of Afghanistan on the relations with Central Asian countries:**

Afghanistan has an important impact on geopolitics during the Central Asian Era. There are five countries in the Central Asian region, and three of them share borders with Afghanistan, for instance: Afghanistan has a common border with Tajikistan in the Northeastern (Badakhshan, Takhar, and Kunduz province), Afghanistan border with Turkmenistan in the Northwestern and Western side (Jowzjan, Faryab, Badghis and Herat provinces), Afghanistan connected border with Uzbekistan in the Northern (Balkh province) (Safranchuk, 2017). All the Central Asian countries and especially the bordering countries are using the geopolitics of Afghanistan to gain their interests in Afghanistan, all these countries are taking advantage of the natural resources, rivers, and possibilities of the North-Northeast and western parts of Afghanistan, and they support the existing minorities in Afghanistan and against the existing government to protect their interests and create instability in Afghanistan (Shirzad, 2019). However, Central Asian countries have jointly horror from transnational crime and Islamic extremism and the presence of various extremist groups that exist in this area, for instance, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union, Jamat Ansarullah and also from Central Asian ISIS militant, concerns about the worsening of the security environment and operations of Non-state actors in Northern Area of Afghanistan and transmission of border and attacks, passing drug trafficking from the territory of Afghanistan, as well as the humanitarian tragedy of numerous populations of refugees and immigrants who go to these countries and cause the crisis in this region (Shahi, 2022). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these countries took geopolitics into account in their relations with Afghanistan, and each of them cooperated to maintain this region safely. In



addition, every country has concerns and efforts to gain their interests. Like, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan Uzbekistan, etc. However, when the Islamic Emirate came to power, although the relations between the countries of Central Asia slowed down a little, 2022/1/16 the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi visited Turkmenistan and in addition to the start of the TAPI project, Trade, Security and the construction of the railway line should be discussed with this country, however, the Turkmenistan Foreign Minister Rashid Muradov met with the high-rank official of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in Kabul to discuss issues regarding bilateral ties, for instance: TAPI project initiation, security dilemma's economic opportunities, cultural exhibition and so on. At the same time, at the end of 2021, a commercial contract was signed between Kazakhstan and the Islamic Emirate, Maulana Zaheer, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Industry and Trade, told the Voice of America: The head of this Ministry Nouruddin Azizi asked his Kazakh counterpart to supply 100,000 tons of wheat, 50,000 tons of gasoline, 50,000 tons of diesel and 30,000 tons of liquid gas to Afghanistan at a cheap price, which was also accepted by Kazakhstan. In October 2021, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Abdul Aziz Kamlov, came to Kabul to discuss cooperation with the Taliban government, they also talked about the plan to extend the railway from Tarmez to Mazar Sharif and from Mazar to Kabul and extend the electricity agreement to the end of 2022 (Amin, government and politics in central Asia, 2021).

### **The importance of the geopolitical location of Afghanistan with the connectivity in Central Asia to South Asia**

Afghanistan's geographic location in south-central Asia has certain benefits and drawbacks in terms of politics and strategy. Afghanistan, a landlocked country with mountains, is situated along the 4000-mile ancient Silk

Road, which has historically been recognized as a crossroads for the civilizations of China, Persia, and India. Furthermore, the nation's proximity to South and Central Asian nations has made it possible for it to act as a gateway to trade and energy resources in Central Asia. Additionally, Afghanistan has benefited from the Wakhan Corridor and Khyber Pass in terms of trade, and ultimately, the country contains several mineral mines, according to some surveys (Sakandari, Sajad Ali, 2020). As a bridge connecting South West Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia, Afghanistan is geographically more vital than other Asian states. Iran and the Central Asian republics have abundant energy resources, but Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, and India are energy-hungry countries that require access to Iran and the Central Asian states. Afghanistan provides a direct land link via Pakistan to Central Asia, and Pakistan provides a similar route via Afghanistan and Iran to the energy-hungry world. Afghanistan, at 652000 square kilometers, is the 41st largest country in the world. This landlocked nation is largely mountainous, with countryside located in the north and southwest. The country's strategic location at a crossroads connecting Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and China makes it stand out on the global map. The borders with Pakistan are 2430 km long, Tajikistan is 1206 km long, Iran is 936 km long, Turkmenistan is 744 km long, Uzbekistan is 137 km long, and China is 75 km long. The vast Hindu Kush Mountain ranges divide Afghanistan into its northern and southern regions. Marco Polo referred to the northeastern Pamir Mountain as the "Roof of the World," as it serves as a bridge connecting China, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. The Subcontinent can be accessed from the east by mountains such as the well-known Khyber Pass in the Suleiman Mountains. Afghanistan's location at the meeting point of major atomic states to gain regional leadership became apparent while examining the country's map (Imran and Shirazi, 2021). There are some benefits and privileges

for Afghanistan in terms of regional connectivity: pave the way for productive activities in part of economic, however, the Taliban can use it for coordination to obtain and fulfill some projects and energy resources, for instance: TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India) project, CASA 1000(Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project), TAP500(Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan) project, TUTAP (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan , Tajikistan, Afghanistan , Pakistan electricity transfer project), and also railways project like TAT(Turkmenistan, Afghanistan ,Tajikistan ) railway, Trans-Afghan railway(Afghanistan, Uzbekistan ,and Pakistan) starting from Balkh's Mazar-e-Sharif the 760km line will pass through Samangan ,Baghlan , Bamiyam, Maidan Wardak, Logar and Paktia provinces and on to Pakistan , and so on , provide facilities in part of trade and transit, for instance: turning Afghanistan into an economic region, prepare the path for various models of transport and logistic materials, moreover, pave the way for regional customs and border management coordination, like , cross border transport agreement (CBTA), Afghanistan has been access to India large markets, in addition, prepare environment for the China investment, and so on, these conditions provide an environment for assistance with Afghanistan in terms of economic growth and humanitarian crisis (Adam saud, Mauz ullah khan, No. 91, Winter 2022). In addition, there are various challenges exist across regional connectivity, for instance: war and insecurity, rivalry and competition of regional power countries, border clashes as well as the division of water, weak role of regional organizations, economic and financial challenges, and constraints, weak social relations among the nations in this region, priority political and security dilemma across economic benefit, drug trafficking and organizational crime, weak information about the regional cooperation and exist the government low professional capacity people, and disco ordination among intergovernmental organization and so

on (Ahmadzai, 2020).

### CONCLUSION

Afghanistan's geopolitical location plays a crucial role in its relations with South Asian and Central Asian countries, offering both opportunities and challenges. The country's position as a crossroads between these regions has historically made it a key player in regional cooperation and connectivity efforts. Despite challenges such as insecurity, wars, and competition among regional powers, Afghanistan's geographical location remains vital for trade, energy resources, and regional stability. Solutions for enhancing regional connectivity include addressing security concerns, strengthening regional organizations, and promoting economic cooperation. As such, the geopolitical location of Afghanistan continues to shape its relations with neighboring countries and influence regional dynamics. Regional cooperation is a helpful factor for Afghanistan and regional countries to enhance their economic and industrial growth, and extend their trade relations in this region. However, Afghanistan must decrease has dependence on international aid and American assistance, find alternatives for their national need, and provide opportunities for regional cooperation, for instance, regional power countries are compelled to invest in Afghanistan, prepare the environment for mutual and multilateral coordination, regional power countries encourage to assist with economic growth and getting regional organizations assistance and support. However, Afghanistan will get benefit from the resources of these countries Central Asian, and South Asian countries, for instance, electricity, food resources, mineral resources, and access to the market of these countries.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Afghanistan should increase its capacities and capabilities, information, and training about regional cooperation and development.
- Clarifying and sharing common goals with South

Asian and Central Asian countries and jointly working for them.

- The government of Afghanistan should attempt to concentrate on the construction of railways between the countries of the region, based on which Afghanistan can be connected with Central and South Asia.
- More research should be done on the importance, opportunities, and challenges of regional cooperation, and this research should be shared with the relevant agencies of the Afghan government to use it as an effective strategy for the development of regional cooperation.

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#### Conflict of Interest

I declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research conducted for this study on Afghanistan's politico-geographical location and its impact on relations with South Asian and Central Asian countries. This work has been completed impartially and without any external influence or financial interest that could have affected the integrity of the analysis.

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