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SOVEREIGN ACTORS IN AFGHANISTAN: THE STRATEGIC CALCULUS 2001-2021

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Abstract: *Afghanistan is considered the entry point for interventions and an important basis for the strategic objectives of sovereign actors. Due to the lack of national sovereignty, the inefficient political system and its fragile legal system regarding ethnic-tribal crises have created strategic depths for global and regional actors, which they can pursue and implement their objectives. While Afghanistan is a focal point in expanding political, military, and economic exchanges and transactions in its peripheral areas, it has suffered from deep ethnic divisions to the same extent. This major weakness is the basis for interventions by regional actors. This article does not deal with Afghanistan's internal weaknesses and problems but focuses on the strategic goals of sovereign actors in Afghanistan. War on terror, invasion, and creation of military bases in Afghanistan by the US and NATO to control and monitor China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian countries, have been pursued during the past 20 years. It shows the importance of Afghanistan's geo-strategic position in western policies, especially for the United States of America.*

Keywords: *Afghanistan; Geopolitics; Sovereign Actors; Strategic Depths; Implications*

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has always been at the crossroads of at least four geopolitical and security spheres: Russia and Eurasia, Iran and the Middle East, the Gulf States, South Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and finally, the great trans-regional powers such as the United States and China. This provides a fertile ground for harmful competition in Afghanistan's territory and geography by using the tools of Afghanistan's geographical and human elements and exploiting Afghanistan's social and political divisions. Sovereign actors have five perspectives and strategies in Afghanistan, and most of their goals are based on one or more of the following strategies in Afghanistan.

First, Afghanistan was a buffer zone for great powers over the decades. It was a buffer zone for the British and Russian empires in the XIX century (Rubin 2020, 3), and that caused the creation of unwanted borders in Afghanistan with its neighbors. Furthermore, Cold War tensions between Russia and the United States led to the destruction of Afghanistan's military and economic infrastructures and four decades of civil war. Finally, it was a buffer zone between the US and Russia, China, and Iran in the XXI century.

Second, when fragile states are located as a buffer zone between great powers, regional powers, most of them are more potent than the buffer state, make good use of the ongoing situation in line with their national interests, which causes the creation of proxy groups that can secure their interests or can fight with their foe in the buffer zone. Therefore, in Afghanistan, most of the sovereign actors in the region created groups that guarantee their interests over the last four decades. For instance, in 1981-1984, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, in full alignment with the United States of America, created and supported Islamic extremist groups in Afghanistan, such as the Mujahedin and Taliban (Turki 2021, 69). Although the US stopped supporting the Taliban after September 9/11, Pakistan continued and provided full financial and military support for the Taliban as its warring and proxy group until August 15, 2021. It provides shelter for the Taliban and their families in Pakistan. Pakistan's method and support to the Taliban and other extremist proxy groups have been harsh, violent, and destructive for Afghanistan. China's role has been in line with Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan. On the contrary, India still defends its interests in Afghanistan as a major regional power in very soft, civil, and humane ways. India's influence policy in Afghanistan has been mostly a soft policy, effective and in line with the interests of both states (India and Afghanistan).

In the same way, Iran mainly uses Afghanistan Shiites as its proxy group. Iran's interaction with Afghanistan's Shiites has been mostly bilateral. Afghan Shiites consider Iran to be the supporter and defender of their political and social rights in Afghanistan and the region. America looks at Afghanistan through a bigger lens, and to advance its policy in Afghanistan and the region, it invested more in Western-oriented and democratic Afghans.

Third, according to realities, Afghanistan is located at the intersection of four of the world's most populous and wealthiest regions: South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf. Afghanistan is the connecting point of these four regions. In broader terms, the region around Afghanistan can be divided into two regions: one is the internal region, which includes all six neighbors of Afghanistan (Pakistan in the south and east, Iran in the west, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in the north, and China in the northeast). Afghanistan connects these four parts of Asia, while the other is the outer region, which comprises the majority of the countries of East Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia. Beyond this, Afghanistan has a central position in the trade network of the Asia-Europe continents.

Afghanistan, located on the major East-West trade routes of the vast Europe-Asia region, is the center and axis of continental trade, extending into it from all the routes of India, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and China. Afghanistan was the crossroads of all trade routes to India, China, the Middle East, and Europe for centuries.

Fourth, Pakistan is always worried about India's military attack on its territory due to the territorial tension with India. In the case of India's military attack, Pakistan will be divided into parts due to its geographical defect. Therefore, Pakistan has always considered the southern and south-eastern parts of Afghanistan as its military geographical depth. In addition, other sovereign actors in Afghanistan have a military approach. For instance, on April 17, 2017, the United States of America, in cooperation with NATO, tested the mother of bombs in Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan. Although the purpose of using the mother bomb was

announced in the official announcement of the Afghan government to attack ISIS safe havens, it was a test of America's new weapons in Afghanistan (The New York Times 2017).

Fifth, most countries of the world, especially the European countries, consider Afghanistan a burden on the shoulders of the international community and a source of instability at the international level. This view has two roots. First, most Afghan immigrants go to Europe through Turkey and Greece, and in most cases, it has been a problem for European states (UN A/76/12 2021, 10). Second, most of the narcotics grown in Afghanistan are brought to the European markets by international smugglers, which are a potential threat and have caused an increase in organized crimes against the national security of most European countries.

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What is clear from the above is that all the sovereign actors in Afghanistan have not followed the same and similar strategies and objectives, but individually or as a group in a defined or undefined consensus in pursuit of specific goals. For example, in Afghanistan, NATO and the United States of America had the same strategy and goals, or at least they were in harmony. It was the fight against terrorism and state-building in Afghanistan. Furthermore, as part of an undefined tripartite agreement, China, Russia, and Iran sought to immobilize the United States and NATO in Afghanistan. Pakistan has always wanted a weak government or at least one aligned with its regional goals in Afghanistan, and China has indirectly supported Pakistan's policies concerning Afghanistan. Unfortunately, limited countries view Afghanistan as a credible and stable partner and ally because of the developments of the last 20 years and the lack of a strong central government. It is, therefore, necessary to examine in depth and detail the strategic calculations made by sovereign actors in Afghanistan.

The United States of America

The United States, as the world's leading economic and military power, played a crucial role in the aftermath of 9/11 in Afghanistan. After 9/11, then-President George W. Bush Jr. declared war on terror and later gained the support of NATO and the international community in the war on terror (US Dept. of State Archive 2001-2009). The main goal and strategy of the United States in Afghanistan was to fight against terrorism and destroy the safe havens of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. In addition, the United States of America added state-building and stabilizing democracy in Afghanistan among its targets.

From 2001 to 2021, four Presidents, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden, entered the White House, and each pursued relatively different diplomacy and strategy in Afghanistan. For example, Bush Jr.'s strategy in Afghanistan was in line with the US's long-term strategy in Asia to limit and control China and Russia's spheres of influence in South Asia and Central Asia. By the coming Obama administration, the US strategy changed, and he announced the gradually withdrawing the US troops from Afghanistan. But with Trump in the White House, he questioned the long-term presence of the US in Afghanistan, citing pressure from the American people.

So, Trump wanted to end the US's most protracted war in Afghanistan. Therefore, speed up the peace talks with the Taliban. The United States, as an independent and sovereign state,

had the right to redefine its interests and foreign policy but to give prestige to a terrorist group such as the Taliban at the international level and to create a regional consensus for them. The irresponsible withdrawal from Afghanistan was a strategic mistake of the United States.

To know what was behind this quick and irresponsible back drawn (August 15, 2021), time is needed to prove it. However, some analysts believe that the US was aware of Russia's military action and invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022). Additionally, the United States apparently withdrew from Afghanistan after making a strategic decision and realizing it could not fight on two fronts at once (Afghanistan and Ukraine).

It should be noted that the United States pursued its goals and strategy in Afghanistan (2001-2021) at two levels. One at the domestic level or Afghanistan, the second at the regional level. At the domestic level, the USA's goals and strategy are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The US Strategic Goals in Afghanistan after 9/11 (Source: Author own depiction 2022)

No.	Objectives	Result
1	Destroying safe havens of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups on Afghanistan's soil	Failed
2	State-building and institutionalization	Failed
3	Consolidation of democracy	Failed
4	Long-term presence in Afghanistan as a regional hegemony	Failed

South Asia

1. Resolving the threatening conflicts between Afghanistan and Pakistan to align with the region's fight against terrorism and fundamentalism.
2. Continuation of the Pakistan-India conflict in a controlled manner to control India.
3. Long-term presence in the region (Afghanistan) due to its proximity to the geopolitical region of China and India and want to have domination of Central Asia to the subcontinent and East Asia through the South Asian Canal.

Central Asia

1. Established security trust for Central Asian countries to safely connect the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor to open waters and navigate to South and East Asia.
2. Had a close look at China and Russia's interaction concerning US strategic actions and goals in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region.
3. Resolving Afghanistan's ethnic conflicts has a high potential for Central Asian involvement in Afghanistan.

The Persian Gulf and Iran

1. Controlled the Persian Gulf energy by the US from the land due to the location of Afghanistan and the appropriate extensive logistics and operational facilities.
2. The fact that Iran is located between Iraq and Afghanistan and the US sometimes considers it a threat to transfer energy from the Persian Gulf.

3. The possibility of Afghanistan being an alternative in transferring energy from Central Asia to the high seas through Afghanistan.
4. Utilizing the religious potential of the Arab and Persian Gulf countries in Afghanistan concerning Iran's efforts to raise the level of regional power
5. The interdependence of security between the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan and the impact of security on establishing a Central Asian trade route with the Persian Gulf through Afghanistan and good relations with the Arab countries of the Gulf.

China

Before 15 August 2021, China had a most complex strategy (in coordination with Pakistan) dealing with political and security issues. China, like Russia, was ashamed of the US presence in Afghanistan and its geopolitical sphere. So China established secret ties with the Taliban in collusion with Pakistan to land the US in Afghanistan and indirectly provided financial support to the Taliban through ISI channels. It was done in 1971 during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by the US against the Soviets, and China succeeded in estimating this goal (Chene 2015, 11-12). However, during the US presence, China used most of the economic system in Afghanistan and the region where the US provided free security (Hong 2013, 3). So, China in South and Central Asia has pursued three general strategies through Afghanistan.

A. Prioritize China's direct and well-defined interests and guarantee them.
B. Efforts to facilitate the resolution of conflicts in the region to implement their economic strategies better.
C. Strive to achieve its long-term strategic goals.

However, we can briefly mention China's strategic goals in Afghanistan as follow:

1. Use of Afghanistan's natural resources (copper and lithium).
2. Joint maneuver area of China and Pakistan in South Asia.
3. Restricting India's policies in Afghanistan due to the border dispute between the two countries.
4. Navigate and dominate Central Asian markets.
5. Control of the Muslim and separatist Uyghurs of China.
6. Securing China's economic facilities in Pakistan (Gwadar Port).
7. Filling the security vacuum in Afghanistan and the region after the United States and NATO withdrawal.

Iran

Iran is located in the western neighborhood of Afghanistan with a long common border and has many cultural commonalities with Afghanistan. Every development in Afghanistan has a direct role in Iran's national security. The history of political, social, and economic relations between Afghanistan and Iran goes back to the distant past (Akbarzadeh 2014, 66). Iran's strategy toward Afghanistan has always fluctuated, and double standards have caused Iran never to have a uniform strategy toward Afghanistan (Balkhi 2011, 142). Many factors have

caused fluctuations in the multi-layered nature of Iran's foreign policy in Afghanistan. For example, during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Iran, which had just passed the Islamic Revolution and the government, was entirely in the hands of the Islamists, despite considerable differences with the United States and Saudi Arabia, supported the Afghan Mujahideen individually. In 1996, when the Taliban took control of large parts of Afghanistan and Iran saw an extremist Sunni Islamic state in its neighborhood as a threat to its national security, it opened the door to negotiations with the Taliban and, at the same time, provided political, and militarily supports for Afghanistan national front which was led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was fighting against the Taliban (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2019, 4). Also, after the events of 9/11, Iran participated in the state-building and reconstruction of Afghanistan (Akbarzadeh 2014, 67), supported the Afghan government in the international community, and at the same time, paved the way and put the red carpet for the Taliban as a terrorist group in Tehran (Khugelman 2016). This clearly shows that Iran's policy toward Afghanistan is multi-layered and shows a clear contradiction in Iran's foreign policy towards Afghanistan.

Despite the contradictions in Iran's foreign policy towards Afghanistan, Iran has long-term interests in Afghanistan and favors relative political stability in Afghanistan in contrast to Pakistan's policies (Akbarzadeh 2014, 68). As a regional player in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, Iran's interaction with Russia and China and its efforts to reduce US pressure and sanctions were directly influenced by Iran's success and failure in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the presence of Afghan refugees in Iran and the smuggling of weapons and drugs from Afghanistan to Iran seriously threaten Iran's national security. Therefore, Iran's strategy in Afghanistan can be summarized as follows:

1. Resolving the issue of Iran's water supply from the Helmand River, which is the primary prohibition of water supply in the Sistan province of Iran, has become a political challenge between the two countries (Kutty 2014, 42).
2. Control of common borders and prevention of drug and arms trafficking to Iran and through Iran to European countries.
3. Securing the Iranian goods market in Afghanistan, where Iran is under severe Western pressure, Afghan markets are a priority of Iran's strategy in Afghanistan (Kutty 2014, 41).
4. Iran and Saudi Arabia are both trying to take the lead in the Islamic world, and both countries have different interpretations of Islam, Shiite and Sunni extremists. Therefore, Iran wants to prevent Saudi Arabia from infiltrating Afghanistan.

India

India is one of the growing and influential countries in the South Asian region. The country has made South Asia one of its top priorities in its strategic plans. India considers Afghanistan a part of South Asia. Therefore, Afghanistan has particular importance in Indian foreign policy. India's foreign policy doctrine divides countries into three concentric circles, the first of which includes its immediate neighbors, including Afghanistan (Raja 2006, 1-2). In the environment of this circle, India seeks to gain hegemony through which it can confront the presence of other regional powers. In addition, Afghanistan is a platform for Indian influence in Central Asia. After 9/11, India, realizing the position of Afghanistan, sought to expand its

cooperation with Afghanistan, which enabled India to gain a foothold in Afghanistan through a strategic alliance with Afghanistan. India used Afghanistan's communicative stance toward the countries of Central Asia as a result (Roy 2013, 306). Access to Central Asia, India's multibillion-dollar assistance in Afghanistan reconstruction, training of Afghan security forces, the establishment of four consulates in four different parts of Afghanistan (MoEA 2011), and finally, Pakistan's political siege in Afghanistan show the strategic depth of India in Afghanistan. Understanding Afghanistan's geopolitical position, India seeks to expand its influence and exploit its central position to access Central Asia. In the past, India and Central Asia relations were more in the context of cultural commonalities. Still, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of the Central Asian republics, in addition to cultural issues, necessities such as combating arms and drug trafficking and curbing Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, gaining economic benefits, securing energy resources, etc. made Central Asia more and more important in India's foreign policy. India does not have direct access to Central Asia. To achieve its long-term and medium-term goals in Central Asia, it is necessary to achieve its goals through Afghanistan in cooperation mode (MoEA 2019).

India's ongoing rivalry with Pakistan over Kashmir is another factor that has boosted Afghanistan's position in India's foreign policy. India and Afghanistan have had good political and cultural relations due to a common enemy, Pakistan. Following its clashes with India, Pakistan strongly supported terrorist groups inside Afghanistan and India, to the extent that Pakistani foreign ministers lobbied to support the Afghan Taliban. Fearing siege by India, the Pakistani military has sought to implement its strategic depth in Afghanistan through the Taliban.

After 9/11, the US-led and international community presence in Afghanistan was welcomed by India and brought about pleasant changes in India's foreign policy. After September 2001, India implemented its policies to reduce Pakistan's influence and increase its strategic depth in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, the Government of India has many interests in Afghanistan, the strategic interests of which can be summarized as follows:

1. Limiting Pakistan's influence as a rival in South Asia and Afghanistan.
2. Fighting against Islamic extremism and terrorism.
3. Functioning of Afghanistan bridge and access to Central Asia.
4. Expanding the regional influence.
5. Limiting China's influence in Afghanistan and the region (Ahmad 2019, 1521)
6. Strengthen the India-based security system in South Asia by including Afghanistan in this system.

India needs to work with Afghanistan in a normal situation[1] to achieve its goals. By involving Kabul in the South Asian security complex, Delhi would strengthen the India-based security model in South Asia and expand its strategic depth within Afghanistan's borders, providing the basis for Delhi's direct presence in Central Asia.

[1]The normal situation is that Afghanistan must have an independent central government based on the votes of the Afghan people. But at the time of writing, which is after 15 August 2021, the Taliban group, which is fighting on behalf of Pakistan and several other countries and is ruling in Afghanistan, and until 29 May 2022, no country in the world has recognized the Taliban government. Now, Afghanistan lacks a central and popular government.

States' foreign policy is subject to their national goals and interests; in other words, national interests are the beacon of governments' foreign policy. States pursue their foreign policy doctrine based on the definition of national interests, national goals, or the definition of their friend and foe. In other words, states are constantly destabilizing their rivals to be stable. Pakistan's government pursues its foreign policy within the framework of the same theory against Afghanistan. For the last four decades, the Pakistani government has played a crucial role in destabilizing Afghanistan and supporting terrorist groups in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government has many interests in Afghanistan; because it pursues its strategic depth in Afghanistan. Pakistan's strategic depth in Afghanistan is divided into three parts: military, political, and economical.

Military Strategic Depth of Pakistan in Afghanistan

Although Pakistan has an excellent geographical position in South Asia, in terms of form, it is narrow. This bad physical shape has left Pakistan without a military and supporting geographical ties. Because India and Pakistan are in constant conflict over Kashmir and have even fought for sovereignty over this area three times, and to this day, they have strained and hostile relations. Pakistani military believes that in the event of a new war between India and Pakistan, the Indian army will launch a rapid attack using the Cold Start Doctrine, developed by the Indian army after the Kargil War in 1999, to counter Pakistan and by strike will divide Pakistan into northern and southern parts (Khan and Khalid 2018, 325). This will cause cutting off the Pakistani army's lines of communication with all its military units. This frustration among the Pakistani military and politicians has prompted the Pakistan military to seek strategic depth in Afghanistan. From a military point of view, "strategic depth is an area where it is a good place for a retreating army to regroup and at the same time not be threatened by the enemy advancing, and this retreat can provide enough time for military cohesion and plan for the army" (Hakimi, 2010). Therefore, Pakistani strategists believe that if the tactic of the Indian army is to divide the country, having a strategic depth in Afghanistan is a must for Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan has always considered the south and southeast of Afghanistan (Kandahar, Nangarhar, Khost, and Ghazni) as the geography of its strategic depth inside Afghanistan.

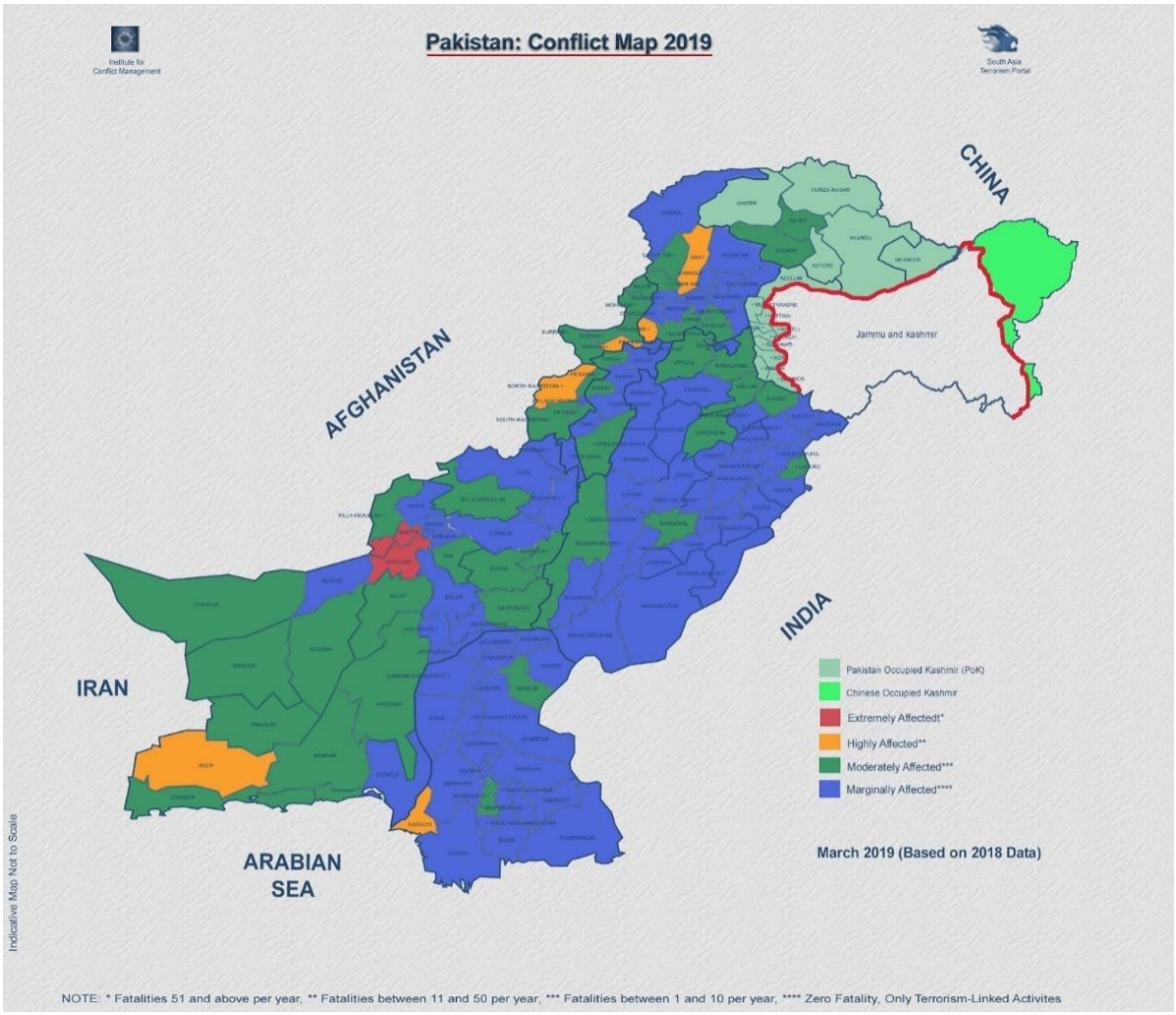


Figure 1: Pakistan Conflict Map 2019 (Source: Institute of Conflict Management 2019)

Pakistan's Political Strategy

The political differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan are rooted in the Durand Line. Pakistan has recognized it as a solved issue and uses it as an official and international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, Afghanistan does not recognize the Durand Line as a border. Afghanistan's argument is this: the border was between British India in 1893 and was signed while no government called Pakistan (Linschoten and Kuehn 2012, 81).

Therefore, the Durand Line issue has not been resolved by Afghanistan. In addition, because the border is a disputed issue between the two sides, it has led to the separation of Pashtuns on both sides of the border, leading to Pakistani Pashtuns claiming separatism, which is a major political dilemma for the government of Pakistan. To manage both (Durand Line and Pashtunistan separatists), Pakistan has prioritized its policy of supporting Afghanistan's Pashtuns. Most of the latter are predominantly Islamic extremists Taliban and Salafists, over its

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foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the past four decades. In 1995, Pakistan provided tremendous political, military, and economic support to the Taliban in gaining control of Afghanistan. After 2001, despite the presence of the United States and the international community in Afghanistan, Pakistan never stopped supporting regional Taliban and international terrorists al-Qaeda, ISIS, etc. Ideology has been a tool of Pakistan's foreign policy in the region, as opposed to Afghanistan and India and even the international community, with evidence showing that from 2001 to 2018, the United States paid $1.3 billion a year in ransom to Pakistan for controlling terrorism (D'Souza 2006, 529-530). Donald Trump, the President of the United States, tweeted in 2018: "The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given as nothing but lies and deceit, thinking our leaders as fools. They give a haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan with little help. No more!" (The Guardian 2018). Therefore, Pakistan believes it does not see a sovereign, stable and self-sufficient government in Afghanistan as in its interest in the region. Therefore, twice (1995-2021) gave extraordinary support to the Taliban, its proxy group in Afghanistan, to gain political power in Afghanistan. Pakistan considers the weak government in Afghanistan to be in its favor.

Pakistan Economic Strategy

Pakistan's economic interests in Afghanistan are well-arguable. Pakistan wants Afghanistan and Central Asian countries to be consumer markets for Pakistani goods (Rashid 2010, 49). In recent years, abundant and largely untapped energy resources in Central Asia have created competition between major powers for gas and oil pipelines inside and outside the region. Afghanistan is geographically on the road to the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia region. Pakistan needs the energy to improve its economic situation, and the TAPI[2] gas pipeline (Figure 2), with all its problems, will provide an energy source that will be enough for Pakistan for the next 50 years. The pipeline was supposed to be completed in 2019 but has not made much progress due to rapid developments in the region and Afghanistan.

The Pakistan-China economic corridor is part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, a Chinese BRI that promises to connect Central Asia with South Asia beyond Pakistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, whether Afghanistan's security worsens or stabilizes directly impacts Pakistan's economic interests. Waltz, a theorist of the school of structural realism, believes that governments seek to increase their economic and military power.

[2] Turkmenistan - Afghanistan - Pakistan - India Pipeline.

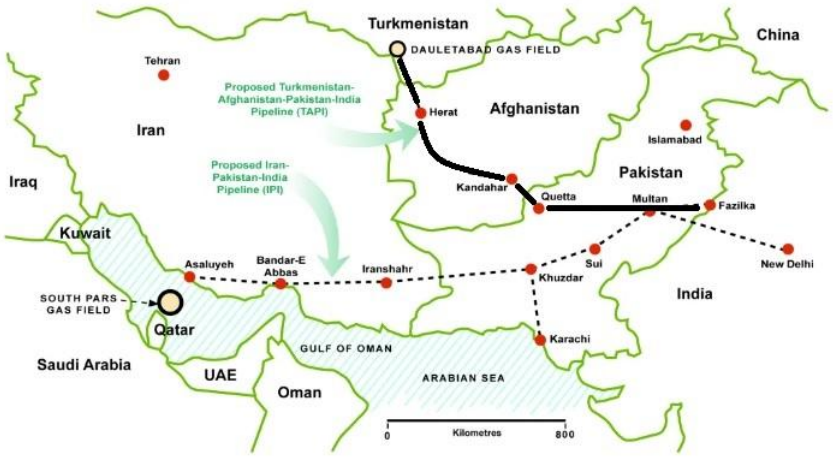


Figure 2: TAPI Route Map (Source: Silk Road Briefing 2018)

IMPLICATIONS OF THE COOPERATION OF SOVEREIGN ACTORS IN AFGHANISTAN

All the sovereign actors in Afghanistan have the same strategies in some instances. If they cooperate, they will lead to regional convergence, and the result of that cooperation will be a win-win game. Afghanistan will earn more from this game than any other actor. Security and regional economy are two decisive factors for the convergence of the sovereign states in Afghanistan. Considering its position, Afghanistan can positively create regional convergence and economic growth. The successful experience of regional economic integration in Europe in the last few decades has given rise to regional economic integration efforts among developing countries. This type of convergence is significant for Afghanistan and its neighboring regions.

The BRI and Afghanistan's Role

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a strategy initiated by the People's Republic of China that seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks to improve regional integration, increase trade, and stimulate economic growth (Chatzky and McBride 2020).

This project connects 6o countries and beyond in Asia, Africa, and Europe and covers four and a half billion people in the world and has not only economic advantages but also creates the basis for connecting different civilizations and increasing social-cultural exchanges (UN, ESCAP 2017, 3). This project will contribute a lot to Asian integration and cause the economic development of all the countries along the path of this project. It will help ensure all regions' prosperity, stability, and security. The Silk Road project is win-win cooperation between Asian, European, and African countries; it is a turning point in international convergences and the connection of significant economic interests with large international interests. The Silk Road was a route that passed through Afghanistan two thousand years ago (Tucker 2015, chapter 1, 26). Since ancient times, there has been a passageway for pilgrims, commercial caravans, and

trade between China and the so-called Afghanistan lines. As a strategic passage, Afghanistan is historically an intersection of cultural and religious interactions and relations, social and commercial, between India and China, the Far East, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Of course, this route is vital for Afghanistan. Using the Silk Road, Afghanistan could export to countries in the Far East and Europe. Using projects related to the Silk Road, Chinese and Afghan investors can invest in both countries. Also, the Wakhan[3] Badakhshan Corridor of Afghanistan is one of the critical gateways of the Silk Road, the revival of which is of vital importance for the economic and commercial growth of Afghanistan and the region (Dunning 2021).

On the other hand, the economic and trade relations between Afghanistan and China and China's big investments in Afghanistan are currently developing. In 2008, the administration of Hamid Karzai signed a 30-year contract with a Chinese joint venture called MCC to extract high-grade copper from Mes Aynak. Studies show that the site holds up to 12 million tons of the mineral. Also, in early 2012, the Afghan government reached an agreement with the China National Oil Company to extract oil and gas reserves in the Amu Basin in northern Afghanistan.

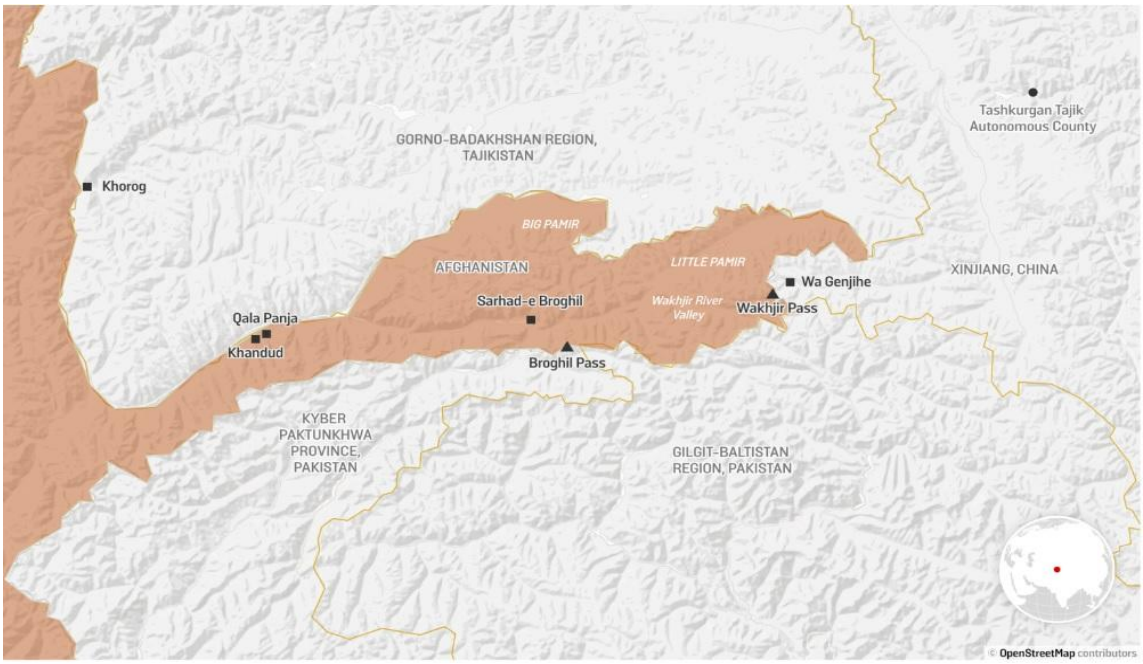


Figure 3: The Wakhan Corridor (Source: Foreign Policy 2021)

It should be remembered that the price of Afghanistan's various types of mine reserves is estimated at more than one trillion dollars (Aljazeera 2021). Afghanistan is rich in gas, minerals such as iron, copper, and decorative and precious stones. Also, Afghan saffron was recognized as the best in the world among three hundred types of saffron from different countries based on an evaluation that took place recently at the International Institute of Taste and Quality in

[3]Wakhan corridor is located in Badakhshan province in north part of Afghanistan, which was determined in the 19th century by the British and Russian empires along with other borders of Afghanistan. As a result, Afghanistan was recognized as a buffer zone between the two empires' territories.

Brussels (Jahanmal 2019). China's investment in exporting Afghan products to China and importing Chinese goods to Afghanistan are significant for both countries.

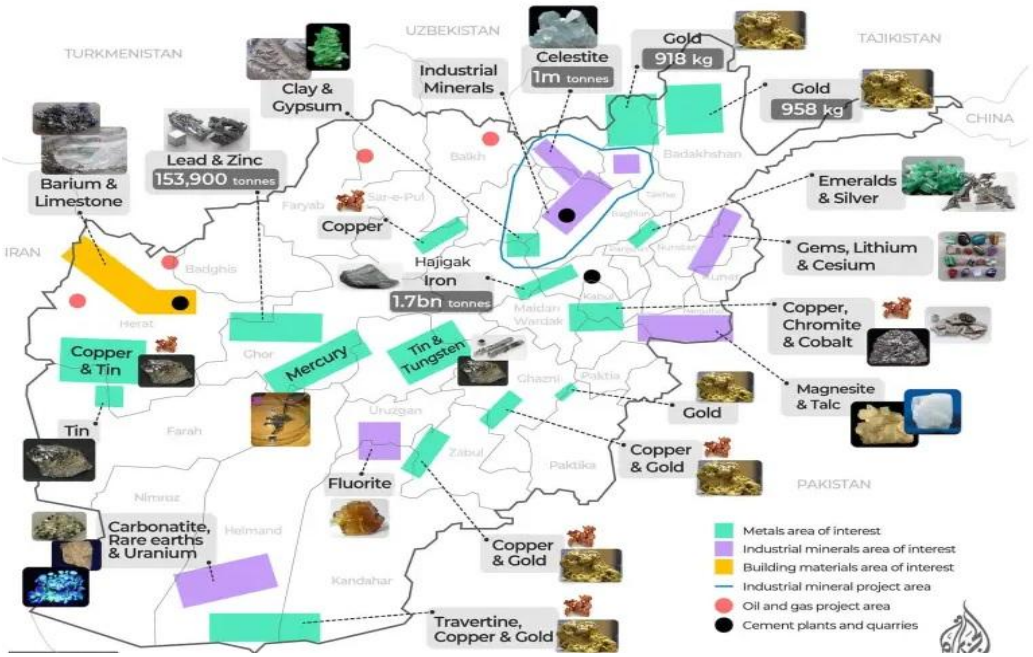


Figure 4: Afghanistan Natural Resource Map (Source: Al Jazeera 2021)

Central and South Asia's Economic Relations and Afghanistan's Strategic Role

Among all the regions of Asia, regional integration has enormous economic benefits for the two regions of Central and South Asia. Currently, the level of trade between these two regions is at a superficial level. One of the main problems in developing trade between these two regions is the distance issue, which increases transportation costs. This is while India is currently the third largest energy-consuming country in the world (Obesta 2020), and Pakistan's demand will increase several times in the coming years. However, on the other side of Central Asia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have rich gas resources. Kazakhstan is one of the major oil producers, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have high hydropower production capacities. Afghanistan can provide the shortest and most suitable energy corridors between Central and South Asia. All planned corridors between the two regions will pass through Afghanistan. In the field of natural gas transmission, the natural gas transmission project from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (TAPI) is underway to transfer natural gas up to 33 billion cubic meters per year (Huda and Ali 2017, 201). The Government of Bangladesh has recently expressed its interest in joining this project.

There is no better alternative to the TAPI route to export Turkmen gas to Pakistan and India. The only alternative route can be the Turkmenistan-Iran-Pakistan-India route, which is much longer than the TAPI route. Regarding the possible export of Uzbekistan's natural gas to Pakistan and India in the future, the only and best route will be the Afghanistan route, which is half the distance from the TAPI route. Afghanistan also provides the shortest route for power

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transmission lines between Central Asia and South Asia. The CASA 1000 project intends to transfer 1,000 MW of electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan through a 1,227-kilometer transmission line. There is no better alternative route for this project. Therefore, Afghanistan has the potential to become the center of a Central Asia-South Asia single energy market. Such a market will transform both regions and significantly contribute to the region's economic growth.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this current research clearly show three fundamental issues. First, due to its geopolitical and geo-strategic position, Afghanistan plays an important role in facilitating convergence in South Asia, West Asia, and Central Asia, as well as China's independent geopolitics. If Afghanistan could create an efficient foreign policy and follow domestic, regional, and international realities between 2001-2021, the type of game would change from a zero-sum state to a win-win game, and Afghanistan would have benefited more than anyone else. Furthermore, having the same position could use the opportunities from this process for its interests and lead the country to economic development and progress. Big projects such as TAPI, CASA 1000, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and similar projects undoubtedly play a huge role in facilitating, accelerating, and deepening regional and trans-regional integration. With the formation of convergence in the commercial and economic fields and according to the existing regional capacities, there was/is hope for the formation of convergence in other dimensions in the relations between the countries of the region and by creating grounds for understanding the common interests and that would cause reduction of regional divergence potentials and added to cooperation and convergence in the region.

Second, Afghanistan has a golden position in the region, which arouses the greed of every regional and global power. Nevertheless, due to the lack of a national government representing the collective will in Afghanistan and fragile democracy, this situation has become the root of all problems in Afghanistan. On the other hand, unfortunately, Afghanistan's foreign policy apparatus has been the most useless governmental institute in the last 20 years and failed to convince regional actors that any closeness and interaction between Afghanistan and one other actor does not mean hostility with other actors. For instance, Afghanistan has failed to convince Pakistan that any close political, security and economic interaction with India does not mean hostility to Pakistan. This could result in Pakistan ceasing to support the Taliban and other terrorist groups. The presence of the US and NATO in Afghanistan also means no hostility with Iran, China, and Russia.

Third. Along with other internal fundamental reforms, such as changing the constitution and the type of political system, Afghanistan should take decisive steps towards nation-building. As long as the claims of big and small ethnic groups exist without scientific and logical proof, Afghanistan will always be an area of competition between sovereign actors. In the first stage, Afghans must form a nation of all ethnic groups living in Afghanistan. The second stage will lead to a modern government in Afghanistan. Based on its geopolitical and geo-strategic capacities in the third stage, it can become an influential regional actor.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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