



## Afghanistan as a Bridge Connecting Central and South Asia

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### **Abstract**

This article is devoted to the study of some scientific debates about whether Afghanistan belongs to an integral part of Central or South Asia. Despite the different approaches, the aim of the article is to determine Afghanistan's role as a bridge that connects Central and South Asian regions.

**Keywords:** *Asian Switzerland; Heart of Asia; Afghan Dualism; Afsouthasia; Af-Pak, Durand Line; SAARC; Afcentasia; Mazar-E-Sharif-Herat; Mazar-E-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar; TAPI; CASA-1000; Surkhan-Pul-E-Khumri*

### **Introduction**

Various forms of negotiations are taking place on the ground of Afghanistan to ensure peace and settle the long-lasting war. The withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and the simultaneous start of inter-Afghan negotiations, as well as internal conflicts and sustainable economic development in this country, are in particular scientific interest. Therefore, the research is focused on the geopolitical aspects of the inter-Afghan peace talks and the impact of external forces on Afghanistan's internal affairs. At the same time, the approach for recognizing Afghanistan not as a threat to global peace and security, but as a factor of strategic opportunities for the development of Central and South Asia has become a key object of research and made the implementation of effective mechanisms a priority. In this regard, the issues of restoring the historical position of modern Afghanistan in connecting Central and South Asia, including the further acceleration of these processes, play an important role in the diplomacy of Uzbekistan.

### **Methods**

In this article systematic, logical analysis and historical methods have been adequately used.

### **Results**

Afghanistan is a mysterious country in its history and today, trapped in major geopolitical games and internal conflicts. The region in which Afghanistan is located will automatically have a positive or negative impact on the geopolitical transformation processes of the entire Asian continent. French diplomat Rene Dollot once compared Afghanistan to "Asian Switzerland" (Dollot, 1937, p.15). This

allows us to confirm that in its time, this country was the most stable country on the Asian continent. As Pakistani writer Muhammad Iqbal rightly describes, "Asia is a body of water and flowers. Afghanistan is its heart. If there is instability in Afghanistan, Asia is unstable. If there is peace in Afghanistan, Asia is peaceful" (Heart of Asia, 2015). Given the competition of major powers and the conflict of geopolitical interests in Afghanistan today, it is believed that the geopolitical importance of this country can be defined as follows:

- Geographically, Afghanistan is located in the heart of Eurasia. Afghanistan is very close to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which is surrounded by the countries with nuclear weapons such as China, Pakistan and India, as well as the countries with nuclear programs such as Iran. It should be noted that Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan account for about 40% of the total state border of Afghanistan;
- From a geo-economic perspective, Afghanistan is a crossroad of regions with global reserves of oil, gas, uranium and other strategic resources. This factor, in essence, also means that Afghanistan is a crossroad of transport and trade corridors. Naturally, leading power centers such as the United States and Russia, as well as China and India, which are known around the world for their potential major economic development, have great geo-economic interests here;
- From a military-strategic point of view, Afghanistan is an important link in regional and international security. Security and military-strategic issues in this country are among the main goals and objectives set by such influential structures as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the CIS.

The geopolitical feature of the Afghan problem is that, in parallel, it involves a wide range of domestic, regional and international forces. Because of this, the problem can incorporate all the factors to play the main role in the reflection of geopolitical theories and concepts. It is important to note that the geopolitical views on the Afghan problem and approaches to its solution still have not been meeting the expected results. Many of these approaches and perspectives present complex challenges while portraying the negative aspects of the Afghan problem. This in itself, demonstrates the need to interpret the Afghan problem through constructive theories and optimistic scientific views based on modern approaches as one of the urgent tasks. Observing the theoretical views and approaches we present below may also provide additional scientific insights into theories about Afghanistan:

### "Afghan Dualism"

From our point of view, the theoretical approach to "Afghan dualism" (Buranov, 2020, p.31-32) should be added in the list of geopolitical views on Afghanistan. It is observed that the essence of the theory of "Afghan dualism" can be reflected in two ways.

1. *Afghan national dualism*. Controversial views on the establishment of Afghan statehood on the basis of state or tribal governance, unitary or federal, pure Islamic or democratic, Eastern or Western models reflect the Afghan national dualism. Valuable information about the dualistic aspects of the national statehood of Afghanistan can be found in the researches of well-known experts such as Barnett Rubin, Thomas Barfield, Benjamin Hopkins, Liz Vily and Afghan scholar Nabi Misdak (Rubin, 2013, Barfield, 2010, Hopkins, 2008, Vily, 2012, Misdak, 2006).

2. *Afghan regional dualism*. It can be seen that Afghan regional dualism is reflected in two different approaches to the geographical affiliation of this country.

### Af South Asia

According to the first approach, Afghanistan is part of the South Asian region, which is assessed by the theoretical views of Af-Pak. It is known that the term "Af-Pak" is used to refer to the fact that American scholars consider Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single military-political arena. The term began

to be widely used in scholarly circles in the early years of the 21st century to theoretically describe U.S. policy in Afghanistan. According to reports, the author of the concept of "Af-Pak" is an American diplomat Richard Holbrooke. In March 2008, Holbrooke stated that Afghanistan and Pakistan should be recognized as a single military-political arena for the following reasons:

1. The existence of a common theater of military operations on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border;
2. The unresolved border issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan under the "Durand Line" in 1893;
3. The use of an open border regime between Afghanistan and Pakistan (primarily a "tribal zone") by Taliban forces and other terrorist networks (Fenenko, 2013, p.24-25).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Afghanistan is a full member of SAARC, the main organization for the integration of the South Asian region.

### **Af Cent Asia**

According to the second approach, Afghanistan is geographically an integral part of Central Asia. In our perspective, it is scientifically logical to call it an alternative to the term AfSouthAsia with the term AfCentAsia. This concept is a term that defines Afghanistan and Central Asia as a single region. In assessing Afghanistan as an integral part of the Central Asian region, it is necessary to pay attention to the following issues:

- Geographical aspect. According to its location, Afghanistan is called the "Heart of Asia" as it is central part of Asia, and theoretically embodies Mackinder's "Heartland" theory. Alexandr Humboldt, a German scientist who introduced the term Central Asia to science, described in detail the mountain ranges, climate and structure of the region, including Afghanistan on his map (Humboldt, 1843, p.581-582). In his doctoral dissertation, Capt. Joseph Mc Carthy, an American military expert, argues that Afghanistan should be viewed not only as a specific part of Central Asia, but as the enduring heart of the region (McCarthy, 2018).

- Historical aspect. The territories of present-day Central Asia and Afghanistan were an interconnected region during the statehood of the Greco-Bactrian, Kushan Kingdoms, Ghaznavid, Timurid, and Baburi dynasties. Uzbek professor Ravshan Alimov in his work cites as an example that a large part of modern Afghanistan was part of the Bukhara Khanate for a number of centuries, and the city of Balkh, where it became the residence of the heirs of the Bukhara Khan (khantora) (Alimov, 2005, p.22). In addition, the graves of great thinkers such as Alisher Navoi, Mavlono Lutfi, Kamoliddin Behzod, Hussein Boykaro, Abdurahmon Jami, Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur, Abu Rayhan Beruni, Boborahim Mashrab are located on the territory of modern Afghanistan. They have made an invaluable contribution to the civilization, as well as cultural and enlightened ties of the people of the whole region. The Dutch historian Martin McCauley compares Afghanistan and Central Asia to the "Siamese twins" and concludes that they are inseparable (McCauley, 2002, p.19).

- Trade and economic aspect. Afghanistan is both a road and an unopened market leading the region of Central Asia, which is closed in all respects, to the nearest seaports. In all respects, this will ensure the full integration of Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, into world trade relations, eliminating some economic dependence on external spheres.

- Ethnical aspect. Afghanistan is home to all Central Asian nations. An important fact that needs special attention is that the Uzbeks in Afghanistan are the largest ethnic group in the world outside of Uzbekistan. Another significant aspect is that the more Tajiks live in Afghanistan as the more Tajiks live in Tajikistan. This is extremely important and vital for Tajikistan. Afghan Turkmen are also one of the largest ethnic groups listed in the Afghan Constitution. In addition, more than a thousand Kazakhs and Kyrgyz from Central Asia currently live in the country.

- Linguistical aspect. The majority of the Afghan population communicates in the Turkic and Persian languages spoken by the peoples of Central Asia. According to the Constitution of Afghanistan (The Constitution of IRA, 2004), the Uzbek language has the status of an official language only in Afghanistan, except Uzbekistan.

- Cultural traditions and religious aspect. The customs and traditions of the people of Central Asia and Afghanistan are similar and very close to each other. For example, Navruz, Ramadan and Eid al-Adha are celebrated equally in all people of the region. Islam also binds our peoples together. One of the main reasons for this is that about 90% of the population of the region confesses Islam.

For this reason, as the current efforts to involve Afghanistan in the regional processes in Central Asia intensify, it is expedient to take into account the relevance of this term and its popularization in scientific circles.

### ***Discussion***

Although different views and approaches to the geographical location of Afghanistan have some scientific basis, today the factor of assessing this country not as a specific part of Central or South Asia, but as a bridge connecting these two regions, is a priority. Without restoring Afghanistan's historic role as a bridge connecting Central and South Asia, it is impossible to develop inter-regional interdependence, ancient and friendly cooperation on new fronts. Today, such an approach is becoming a prerequisite for security and sustainable development in Eurasia. After all, the peace in Afghanistan is the real basis for peace and development in both Central and South Asia. In this context, there is a growing need to coordinate the efforts of Central and South Asian countries in addressing the complicated and complex issues facing Afghanistan. In this regard, it is extremely important to carry out the following crucial tasks:

First, the Central and South Asian regions have been bound by long historical ties and common interests. Today, based on our common interests, we consider it as an urgent need and a priority to establish a dialogue format "Central Asia + South Asia" at the level of foreign ministers, aimed at expanding opportunities for mutual political dialogue and multifaceted cooperation.

Second, it is necessary to accelerate the construction and implementation of the Trans-Afghan Transport Corridor, which is one of the most important factors in expanding rapprochement and cooperation in Central and South Asia. With the aim of achieving this, we will soon need to discuss the signing of multilateral agreements between all countries of our region and the financing of transport projects. In particular, the Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway projects will not only connect Central Asia with South Asia, but will also make a practical contribution to Afghanistan's economic and social recovery. For this purpose, we consider to organize the Trans-Afghan Regional Forum in Tashkent.

Third, Afghanistan has the potential to become a major energy chain in connecting Central and South Asia with all sides. This, of course, requires the mutual coordination of Central Asian energy projects and their continued supply to South Asian markets through Afghanistan. In this regard, there is a need to jointly implement strategic projects such as the TAPI trans-Afghan gas pipeline, the CASA-1000 power transmission project and the Surkhan-Puli Khumri, which could become part of it. From this reason, we propose to jointly develop the energy program REP13 (Regional Energy Program of Central and South Asia). By following this program, Afghanistan would act as a bridge in Central and South Asian energy cooperation.

Fourth, we propose to hold an annual international conference on the topic of "Afghanistan in the connecting Central and South Asia: historical context and prospective opportunities". In all respects, this correspond to the interests and aspirations of the citizens of Afghanistan, as well as the people of Central and South Asia.

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