

Regional Economic Cooperation

New Silk Route Initiative and Afghanistan

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Abstract

With a population of more than 1.6 billion, South Asia's economies are growing rapidly, and its demand for inexpensive, efficient, and reliable energy is growing in turn. At the same time, Central Asia is a repository of vast energy resources, oil, gas, and hydropower. Directing some of these resources southward from Central to South Asia, through Afghanistan, would be a win-win for the region's energy suppliers and energy consumers alike. The country has more the history of conflict than construction and development, and the post-9/11 US-Taliban conflict was no exception to it. It turned to be devastating from the human security and infrastructural development perspectives. As force and reconciliation having failed to resolve the conflict, the US perceived its end through Afghanistan's regional and economic integration with South and Central Asia, and thus mooted the idea of the New Silk Route Initiative (NSRI) for the purpose. The Asian Regionalism is the most notable phenomenon that has captured the attention in the post cold war era. With multiple transitions underway in Afghanistan, the paper signifies the significance of United States and its allies who tried the NSRI to bolster peace, stability in the region and support a transition for trade and transportation over Afghanistan, Central Asia, Pakistan, and India and beyond.

In this context the study is an attempt to analyses regional economic cooperation in the South and Central Asian region in terms of logic, institutions, actors, and expectations. The study will also access the relationship NSRI and US interests in the region? Further the study will through light on how Globalisation has transformed the Eurasian context into regionalism?

Keywords

Afghanistan, Central Asia, Economic Cooperation, Eurasia, New Silk Route Initiative, South Asia, Regionalism.

Introduction

Several initiatives were taken to translate the aforesaid theoretical perspectives of regional economic cooperation into practice for South and Central Asia including Afghanistan. In essence, these were meant to transform Afghanistan into a “hub” or “roundabout” in Eurasia and

strengthen the North-South axis connecting South Asia with the rest of Eurasia.¹ One of the initiatives is the “New Silk Road Initiative” (NSRI) unfolded by the United States on the sidelines of UN General Council meeting in 2011. It was signed by 28 countries except China and Iran, and was supported by the Asian Development Bank in financial terms and the “Northern Distribution Network” (NDN), which transferred non-lethal NATO supplies to Afghanistan, in security terms.²

In fact, its idea was long back discussed in the annual meeting of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (RECCA) held in Afghanistan in 2005³ at the initiative of United Kingdom, the then G-8 chair.⁴ It was attended by the delegates from 11 countries, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, UAE and G-8, World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The meeting underscored the need of promoting specific forms of regional economic cooperation in the areas of energy, trade, investment and transportation. Special focus was laid on the hydropower generation, water sharing, energy transportation, narcotic trade control and favourable business climate in the region.⁵

The second RECCA was hosted by India in Delhi in November 2006 to further the resolutions adopted at the Kabul conference.⁶ Representatives of countries from Canada, Finland, (EU Presidency), France, Germany, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, UAE, UK, US and Uzbekistan and the organizations like Asian Development Bank (ADB), Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), European Commission (EC), European Council (EC), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations (UN) and World Bank participated in the event. It resolved to promote general trade, transportation, investment, energy exchange, per se; through the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline etc.⁷ Special focus was laid on the renewal of energy and agriculture. Follow up meetings with Afghanistan’s Investment Support Agency (AISA) resolved as under: the Creation of a centre for Regional Cooperation at Kabul; development of Public-Private Partnership as key aspect of regional development; integration of the existing regional groupings into a larger whole; Afghanistan’s

shift from a regional specific approach to capacity development; and the identification of the next theme of the RECCA conference on mining, water, health, labour, human resource development and trade and transit. The Delhi Declaration also resolved that:⁸

- Regional Countries will develop confidence building measures to remove obstacles to overland and inter-state trade and transit;
- Win-win projects, notably in the fields of energy, transport, trade, agriculture and mining, shall be collectively organized by the participant countries;
- Information shall be shared on key issues to avoid duplication of efforts;
- ADB will undertake a study on regional integration strategies and will share key findings at the next conference;
- Regional countries will work towards aviation liberalization for greater regional connectivity;
- Work on TAPI gas pipeline will be speeded up to realize a technically and commercially viable project;
- Regional linkages shall be established for human resource training and development and institutional growth.

The third RECCA conference scheduled in Pakistan in 2007⁹ was actually held in Islamabad in May 2009. Following resolutions were adopted for Eurasian economic integration with Afghanistan as its roundabout: signing of trade and transit agreements between Afghanistan and Pakistan before the end of 2009; conducting of a pre-feasibility study of railways by the European Commission for and across Afghanistan; establishment of a Customs Academy in Kabul; conducting feasibility studies for the development of economic zones over Afghanistan borders; and establishing an Afghan Centre by the European Commission within the Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The fourth RECCA was held in Istanbul 2010, November 2-3. RECCA participants recommended to improve the a) Infrastructure (Regional Roads, Railways, Extractive Mine Industry, Public-private partnerships and investment to enable commercially viable), b) Trade, Transit and border management (Regional Transit and Trade Agreements, Trade Facilitation, Customs and Transport Infrastructure Harmonization and Upgrade, Enhancement of Border Cooperation), c) Education and vocational training, d) Agriculture, f) Small and medium enterprises and others.¹⁰

The Fifth RECCA conference held in Dushanbe Tajikistan¹¹ terminated with resolutions about five crucial areas of cooperation among the participant countries: infrastructural development (transport and energy); human resource development (including vocational training and labour market facilitation); investment and trade (including transit and border management); regional disaster management and regional fibre optic connectivity besides establishment of regional institutions for vocational training (in Tajikistan) and disaster management (in Kazakhstan).¹² These resolutions included the one that sort to take stock of the situation after every conference.

The 6th Regional Economic Cooperation on Afghanistan (RECCA) was held in Kabul with delegates from 30 countries and almost 40 organizations.¹³ It was devoted to a discussion on and around Afghanistan's economic projects, transit and trade cooperation, customs, structures, systems, Afghan workers in Gulf countries etc. On the occasion, Afghan government acknowledged the RECCA's role in strengthening regional economic cooperation; attracting foreign investment to the country; exploring country's alternate transit routes to South Asia; building her image in the world at large and establishing a permanent monitoring office for regional economic cooperation.¹⁴ Qurban Haqjo, the Afghanistan Investment Security Agency (AISA) chief said on the occasion that "along with the government, it is quite significant to have the role of the private sector contributing in different economic projects on a regional level; this could lead to the enhancement of investment in various countries."¹⁵ Inclusive economic strategies are supposed to ensure sustainable growth in Afghanistan and the region," said Afghan Minister of Economy, Abduk Sattar Murad¹⁶ The 6th RECCA conference terminated with the resolution emphasizing on the establishment of five rail corridors between Afghanistan and its five regional countries; launch of gas pipeline projects between Central Asian and South Asia over Afghanistan; implementation of the TAPI project¹⁷; boost to the private sector investment in Afghanistan in future and, above all, the relocation or revival of the ancient Silk Road.

Old Silk Route and its Revival: Background

Further to the aforesaid RECCA resolutions, the US took the initiative of a New Silk Route vision to revive Ancient Silk Route, and re-establish the hassle-free movement of goods and people across Afghanistan as its main hub. To recall, South and Central Asian region was characteristic

of a transcontinental highway, antedating 3rd - 2nd century BC and connecting China with Rome across the great civilizations of India, Central Asia, Middle East and Europe.¹⁸ The highway named as the Grand Silk Route by a German geographer in the 19th century,¹⁹ did not signify a single route but rather a cluster of routes criss-crossing the region in different directions and one of them crossed over Afghanistan and reached out to Iran and Central Asia on the one hand and Pakistan, India and South Asia on the other.²⁰

The said highway was famous for both inter and intra-state trade in farm and craft products besides horses, camels and other cattle products. No doubt, silk was the principle commodity, but other regional varieties formed a part of its variegated trade structure, besides the exchange of men, material, ideas and ideologies, the said highway was known for cross-cultural and inter-faith dialogue between and among the people of the South and Central Asian region, to which Afghanistan was the key constituent.²¹

However, the said highway fractured and became non functional with the discovery of the Sea Route and the genesis of the nation states and their periodic conflict and wars for jingoistic nationalism and imperial and other designs.²² Its spill over, *inter alia*, was geographical and historical disconnect between Afghanistan and South Asia owing to India-Pakistan conflict on Kashmir,²³ their intermittent wars and the emergence of a highly militarized borderline as a deterrent to Central and South Asia integration over Afghanistan.

While Afghanistan was hardly bearing the brunt of her disconnect from South Asia, it was overtaken by great power rivalry for territorial gains, material pursuits and regional influence. The Anglo-Afghan Wars of the 19th century and Soviet-Afghan War of 20th century offer the illustrious examples of the periodic sufferings of the Afghans. Of late, they were eclipsed by more than 15 years US-Taliban fighting over power and ideological supremacy. However, neither of the two irreconcilable actors had an absolute victory despite heavy human toll and infrastructural damage worth trillions of US Dollars.²⁴

No doubt, amid the conflict, the US strived for dialogue with the insurgents, provided relief to the war-stricken Afghans and funds for country's mining and agricultural development to "wean away peasants from poppy cultivation" for [it] being the financial source of Taliban insurgency. However, all such measures went waste either due to the ongoing conflict or else the corruption battered ruling elite of President

Karzai.²⁵ The predicament was compounded by the absence of in-state and out-states' free border corridors for marketing of Afghan imports and exports. The rigid borders had emanated from the genesis of the nation states of India and Pakistan and their historical conflict on Kashmir.²⁶

No wonder, for perpetual conflicts and wars, Afghanistan offers a poor economic profile, which is presently complicated by drowning export potential and donor support and soaring security expenditure. In addition, the landlocked country has rough and rugged terrain and only 12% area is arable in a total space of 250, 000 square kilometres. Her export potential is quite limited: US\$ 119 million in 2005 and US\$ 492 million or US\$ 1612 million in 2010. Despite having rich energy deposits, the production of oil and gas is minimal which does not rhyme with the actual demand of the population. As a result, she imports bulk of energy from neighbouring Central Asian states. Her crunched economy is the natural concomitant of above predicament, which the President Karzai vainly tried to balance through short-cut means: increasing domestic taxes and curtailing public expenditure. Not surprising, therefore, to see the country trailing behind other South Asian countries in terms of health, education, infrastructure, security and other indicators of human resource development. The poverty and corruption are rampant and whole scenario explains the underlying reason of Afghan insurgency and country's overall poor profile.²⁷

New Silk Route Initiative (NSRI)

Thus on the failure of its military mission and reconciliation process, the US attempted for conflict resolution through the medium of regionalization or regionalism or rather country's regional and economic integration with Central Asia and South Asia. For this purpose, it conceived the New Silk Route Initiative (NSRI). Estimated at ADB funded 20 billion US Dollars, the project was estimated to commence in 2014 and end by 2020. It was thought of with following considerations in mind: to neutralize the restive Afghans through economic integration with its neighbourhood; supplement Afghanistan's appalling economy with additional transit and taxes to be realized from intra-regional and trans-border trade with South and central Asia; empower Afghanistan to negotiate security and other expenses by herself than by the US; enable the US to sustain her influence in Afghanistan after her proposed withdrawal in 2014; empower new Afghan Government to channelize

the socio-economic and security gains of the past one decade and reduce her dependence on the foreign aid and assistance; boost her bilateral, trilateral and multilateral trade with neighbours; integrate her into a larger Eurasian whole for successful transition after 2014 and re-ensure free movements of goods, services, capital and people across South and Central Asian region.²⁸

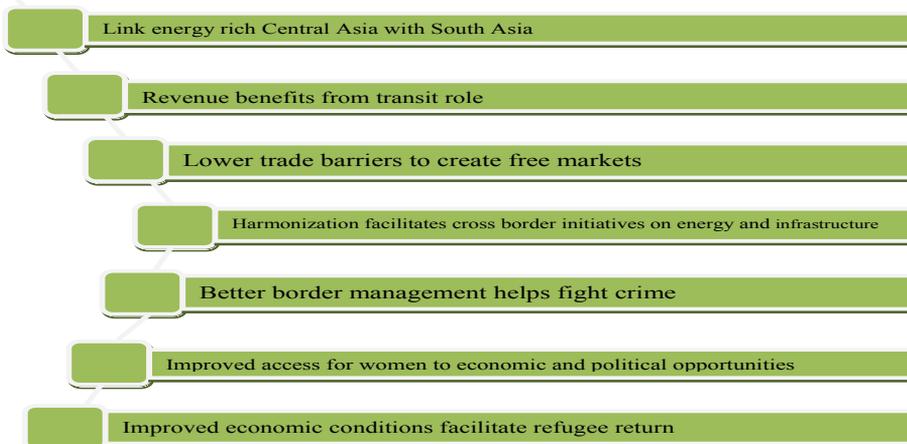
In precise terms, the NSRI seeks to cultivate benefits of economies of scale or other efficiencies for Afghanistan, which is a catalyst to restoring her physical connectivity with South Asia; increasing her local supply capacity and access to South Asian markets; and harmonizing her neighbourly trans-boundary issues related to the trade regulatory mechanisms, transport, transit and regional infrastructure, shared natural resources and worth trillion dollar natural wealth exploration, and thereby generate jobs, revenues, systems, and other structures in Afghanistan through regional and economic amalgamation with South and Central Asia. As a matter of fact, NSRI and its allied intra-state economic tie up offers ample opportunities of growth and development to the peoples of Afghanistan in particular, and India, Pakistan, Central Asia, etc. in general.²⁹

Indeed, for landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia,³⁰ regional integration is imperative for trade and economic growth; marketing of energy resources; diversification of energy pipelines; and their direct physical connection with a wider region.³¹ Although the size of the markets in Afghanistan and Central Asia are very small when considered individually, pooling markets through regional economic integration can generate economies of scale and the potential for regional resource sharing. As smaller markets can be vulnerable to monopoly capture, market widening can increase competition and offer higher productivity gains.³² Further, the NSRI can facilitate legitimizing the informal and unrecorded trade following poorly designed state policies, which tend to create the impression that informal economy is unproductive. Regional trade facilitation measures can, therefore, raise the level of formality and the volume of trade. Moreover, regional provision of public goods, energy, finance, telecommunications and transport can facilitate to address development challenges. But, all this is possible once connectivity improvements are made within an agreed regional trade facilitation strategy.

The significance of regional cooperation is adequately appreciated in the following official statement of the Afghanistan National

Development Strategy (ANDS): “the central goal of the Regional Cooperation is to contribute to regional stability and prosperity, and to enhance the conditions for Afghanistan to resume its central role as a land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia, the Middle East and the Far East, as the best way of benefiting from increased trade and export opportunities.”³³ The ANDS anticipates that regional integration will yield significant strategic benefits for economic growth, border management, social well being and regional security. The following figure is quite representative:

Strategic Outcome of Regional Integration & Afghanistan’s National Development Strategy



Source: Cf. “Afghanistan and Central Asia: Strengthening Trade and Economic Ties,” *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific*, Bangkok-Thailand, 2015, p.19.

Afghanistan and Central Asian trade has further potential to grow keeping in view the desire of the Central Asians to shift from trans-surface routes of Russia over to the ports in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf,³⁴ for which are, however, essential much better and integrated infrastructures, formal institutions, harmonized regulatory frameworks like trade agreements and customs unions in Central and South Asian region.³⁵ Luckily, the Aga Khan Foundation has enormously invested on road and bridge building in the Greater Badakhshan region, whereas other international donors have invested on constructing rail connection between *Mazar-e Sharif* and the Uzbek border and roadways between Afghanistan and Central Asian states within larger Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) framework. In the mean time, several other investment projects are under way for the furtherance

of regional economic integration over Afghanistan. These include Special Program for the Economics of Central Asia (SPECA), Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), and South Asian Association for Regional Corporation (SAARC) etc. All these forums are actively engaged in fostering trade and transport throughout the Greater Central Asia region.³⁶ However, New Silk Route Initiative (NSRI) represents a vision and call to action rather than a well-articulated and organised strategy. It endorses the concept of Afghanistan's merger into the Eurasian economic hub.³⁷ It emphasizes on international partners to support the development of regional transport and energy corridors over Afghanistan. The Major projects allied to the NSRI are the TAPI pipeline and the CASA-1000 energy link.³⁸

The NSRI is, therefore, a catalyst to the concept of regionalization. It is expected that it would provide much needed support to Afghanistan in case US made complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. Its main objective is that "if Afghanistan is firmly embedded in the economic life of the region, it will be better able to attract new investments, benefit from its resource potential, provide increasing economic opportunities and hope for its people."³⁹ Besides, it would propel economic boost to Afghanistan's neighbours, including Central Asian Republics. Central Asia possesses great energy resources and economic potential though, yet it remains one of the least integrated regions in the global economy for its landlockedness. The NSRI can a long way to modernize infrastructure and effective cross-border trade in the Eurasian region.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The NSRI aims at transforming the minds of the belligerent from conflict to peace and development; unearthing worth \$billion wealth of natural resources; networking Afghan cities; facilitating diasporas to the maximum possible; exploring opportunities for ordinary Afghan men and women to strike off poverty through education and employment; and shifting Afghanistan's priorities from security human resource development. Indeed, in the current environment of global fiscal constraint, the shift from massive military expenditure to focused investments in human capital and infrastructure is badly required for overall human welfare. However, there are existence of challenges and threats ahead of it. These are allied to the continued Taliban-Afghan conflict; unending Afghan political insecurity; growing infighting amongst the Islamist insurgents (Taliban and IS); mutual enmity among

Afghanistan and its neighbourly states; foreign forces interference through proxy war in Afghanistan; appalling Afghan economy; endemic corruption; arms and narcotic smuggling; miss-governance and absence of rule of law and justice etc. Their existence may prove to be deterrent to the NSRI. However, the initiators and most people around the Silk Route are optimistic about the success of the initiative as it is relevant to Afghanistan once peace returns to the country, depends on time and the policy perception of the regional and global players. Moreover, ultimate goal of the initiative is to reunite Asian powers for enduring peace, security and prosperity of the region at large.

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