

**Economic Isolation vs. Regional Connectivity: Afghanistan's Role in China BRI and Russia's Eurasian Strategy**

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**Abstract**

In today's global politics, Afghanistan is in a precarious position: despite its economic exclusion, political unrest, and international sanctions, it has tremendous potential to serve as a crucial center for connectivity across the region. This paper examines Afghanistan's developing position in Russia's Eurasian strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), placing its significance within the larger framework of geographic integration and major-power rivalries. The study uses a qualitative research approach and uses secondary data from regional think-tank studies, policy papers, official documents, and scholarly articles. The theoretical framework integrates theory of dependency to analyze Afghanistan's unbalanced position in these attempts, regionalism to analyze economic and institutional integration, and neorealism to evaluate the strategic competition of major powers. The results show that institutional shortcomings, safety concerns, and a lack of global acceptance hinder Afghanistan's involvement in connectivity initiatives like the CPEC extension or the Eurasian transit lanes. Yet, its geographic location and untapped resources render it a vital "swing state" for Eurasian unification. The study comes to the conclusion that Afghanistan's future will be determined by how its foreign commitment and domestic vulnerability interact, providing clues as to whether the nation will continue to be economically isolated or become a key component of regional connectedness.

**Key words:** Isolation, Regional Connectivity, BRI and Eurasian Strategy

**Introduction:**

Afghanistan has been in a constant war and turmoil. Internal instability has shattered the hopes and good will gesture of the people of Afghanistan. The war history has made the people more rigid in nature. Since early, they have been in a continuous struggle to attain independence and do what they are meant to do. Unfortunately, one after the other, they are attacked for no solid reason. This country has the potential to rise and be a mighty power due to his enormous and gigantic amount of minerals and he location it does possess. The recent withdrawal of the American led NATO troops almost annihilated the whole of country which shattered the already distrusted hopes of common people. But still due to its resistance and resilience in character, it has been a flexible country to adapt to the situation. History bears witness that the economy, politics, geography and its loyalty has always been distorted for serving other's purposes. It made Afghanistan a volatile

country in various aspects. However, the recent development made by China and Russia astonished the world by integrating Afghanistan into the regional economic development. Afghanistan has been a prominent Silk Road crossing for ages. From Kabul and Balkh to Kandahar and Herat, several of its cities are crucial transit hubs connecting the East and West. Since 2014, China has worked to strengthen commercial connections with Afghanistan because of its geostrategic significance and wealth of natural resources. Beijing is eager to include Afghanistan in the BRI initiative and offers more investment and economic assistance in an effort to satisfy growing domestic resource demand. China, Afghanistan's biggest commercial partner, also aims to stabilize the nation by tackling internal security threats brought on by the protracted war that Afghanistan has endured for decades, especially in the border province of Xinjiang (Haroon, 2023). The cooperation of the Continental giants has been the primary cause of Eurasia's growing integration. With frontiers to every Central Asian nation, including Afghanistan, Uzbekistan is located in the center of Eurasia. The country's unique status encourages it to look for avenues in international and regional markets in order to take advantage of its phenomenal growth for further development. Through Afghanistan, Pakistan offers the most cost-effective and traditional route to Uzbekistan and the Eurasian heartland. The nations of Central and South Asia are the least integrated in the modern era, despite sharing a shared history. Pakistan and Uzbekistan also understand that Afghanistan's connectivity to Central and South Asia will contribute to the establishment of a strong foundation for Afghanistan's long-term peace, stability, and development (Ahmad, 2022). Ahmad (2022) further adds that in the sense, all of the main nations have articulated their ambitions for inclusion and connectivity, especially in the Eurasian region. These are China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, and the United States' New Silk Road. Therefore, throughout the Eurasian heartland, connectivity has been the primary driver of revolutionary developments. Eurasian integration is being aided by China-Russia mutual trust and comprehension. Over the past century, the dyad did not cooperate in this way. In actuality, if a nation wants to effectively connect worldwide, it must first establish regional connections. Afghanistan benefits from the Belt and Road Initiative. The Afghan government has formally announced its involvement in the initiative and shown commitment to it. Afghans view this initiative as a very important step towards strengthening regional cooperation and regional and interregional connections, complementing Kabul's long-standing objective of promoting regional cohesiveness and economic collaboration. The project, according to the administration, will give Afghanistan the opportunity to once more act as a "Asian transit and trade roundabout" that connects East Asia to West Asia and South Asia to Central Asia, benefiting the economy of the entire area as a whole (Ahmad, 2022). China's expanding business ties with the Taliban in the framework of the Global Development Initiative (GDI), which was started soon after the Taliban took back Kabul. This implies that Beijing is more confident about investing under the Taliban than it was under the Karzai and Ghani administrations. China's practical approach is undoubtedly the driving force behind this change, which will probably allow for broader BRI integration and reciprocal economic benefits between Beijing and Kabul. Nonetheless, this relationship makes the case that China's ties to the Taliban extend well beyond their bilateral ties (Jaleel, 2025). China views the United States' exit from Afghanistan as either a danger or a chance to thrive. Beijing is adamant that economic growth is a way to achieve more security and stability, but Afghanistan continues to be especially difficult. Beijing's approach to Afghanistan has been highly practical, building ties with all political players. The Acting Foreign Minister of the Afghan Interim Government attended the third Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, which Beijing organized last spring to encourage partnership and coordination among Afghanistan's neighbors. Although there is a direct railway link between Xinjiang and northern Afghanistan, there have been little noticeable developments since the signing of an MOU between China and Afghanistan as early as 2016 under

the BRI framework (Amaia, 2022). Haroon (2023) further adds that Afghanistan's integration in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has piqued China's attention, despite its initial reluctance owing to the violence. China has the chance to invest in essential buildings in Afghanistan because of its advantageous location at the intersection of central and south Asia. China wants to make Afghanistan a major connectivity center within the larger framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), acknowledging that Afghanistan has the potential to be the quickest trade route connecting China to the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and the Arabian Sea. Thankfully, Afghanistan has already completed the preliminary steps required for BRI incorporation and inclusiveness. According to an IMF report, Beijing has allegedly provided Afghanistan with some funding from the BRI fund in compliance with the "Memorandum of Understanding" on the BRI that Beijing and Kabul signed.

Further in compliance with this, it is important to note that the recent hue and cry across region is that Afghanistan will be ceded to BRI's CPEC project will make it CPAEC (China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Economic Corridor). The ideal BRI partnership may also be made possible by expanding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project or projects to Afghanistan, according to analysts. China and Pakistan urged Afghanistan to become part of the CPEC, arguing that it would benefit the entire region, but especially Afghanistan. Afghanistan's potential participation in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was confirmed at a trilateral summit held in 2018. It was characterized as a bridge between Central and South Asia. China is drawn to Afghanistan's untapped mineral resources. Pakistan could profit monetarily from entering the CARs through Afghanistan. With the help of Chinese foreign investors, the war-torn, landlocked, and militancy-prone state of Afghanistan might improve its economy and build more infrastructure, which would benefit the region, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (Haroon, 2023). Thus, the claim made by Hans J. Morgenthau that "global politics, like all politics, is a battle for dominance" is adopted in this work. Power is always the immediate objective of international politics, regardless of its ultimate goals. In the end, statesmen and peoples may pursue absolute power, liberty, safety, or development. Since Beijing's ultimate goal is to increase its power both within and outside of Afghanistan by taking advantage of the enormous investment and infrastructure opportunities that Afghanistan's rebuilding could provide for the continuation and even survival of the BRI, this realist theory of power does, in fact, apply to China's case study in Afghanistan (Jalel, 2025). Amaia (2022) further elaborates that a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" is seen by Russia as "an alternative to the Western-centric approach." In actuality, Russia finds similarities in the BRI and its own vision. Moscow warned of the risk of increasing estrangement from the West during the last SCO Summit in Samarkand, where it criticized Washington for imposing restrictions on regional states, specifically Russia and Iran. An increasingly unified Pakistan-China-Russia-Iran axis could be perceived as a result of such anti-Western rhetoric, with India balancing between the so-called "similar-minded" and radical nations.

### **Questions**

- 1) What role does Afghanistan play in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China?
- 2) What part does it play in the Eurasian policy of Russia?
- 3) Can these projects help Afghanistan surpass its isolation?

### **Objectives**

- 1) To find the role of Afghanistan in BRI.
- 2) To dig out the role of Afghanistan in Eurasian strategy.
- 3) To investigate that Afghanistan can take itself out of isolation.

## Research methodology

In this chapter, the whole umbrella is to be set. This umbrella to be set up for to know and find the answers of the questions asked in the paper. The methodology shows and led to the attainment of the purpose for which the research aims to achieve. Therefore, certain ways and methods are adopted to get the aims.

**Research methodology:** qualitative research design is adopted for this paper. As there is no numerical and mathematical data representation or facts and figure to prove it. Therefore, it was essential to follow qualitative one.

**Data collection tools:** data for this paper would be taken from various research papers, articles, reports and articles in newspaper to get the relevant and updated data for the topic concern. In addition to this, secondary data would be consulted.

**Analysis technique:** in this paper, content analysis is used because the researcher opted for the secondary data and extraction of the data and contents which would be analysed and extract the meaning in it.

**Theoretical framework:** the researcher has opted to apply three best suited theories i.e. Neo-Realism, regionalism and dependency theory to find out the answers and the context of Afghanistan in relations to the BRI and Eurasia.

## Literature review

Following the U.S. pullout in 2021, the ties between China and Afghanistan has changed dramatically. China kept its diplomatic mission open while Western governments departed, making it one of the first states to interact with the new Kabul government. China was in a better position than Western countries that abandoned their diplomatic representation because of its early involvement. According to Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, the two countries' bilateral trade has increased significantly, reaching "\$1 billion" a year by 2025. China has been the "key trade partner" of Afghanistan in this time frame. The diplomatic strategy has been practical and has prioritized economic concerns over ideological ones. As a result, China has been able to "expand its influence and tap Afghanistan's vast mineral resources" without getting directly involved in the country's internal governance problems (Zadeh, 2025). Mariam (2018) explains that Afghanistan must establish communication and integration with this area. The solution must be regional interconnectedness. It is the cornerstone of our foreign policy, and in order for Afghanistan to grow, open up, and even become politically stable, we must establish interconnectedness—that is, connect Afghanistan to the region and the region to Afghanistan. However, she acknowledged that there had been criticism of these policies. Afghanistan's aspirations for international economic integration are strongly linked to its advantageous geographic location, fertile agricultural areas, and mineral riches, all of which will help the nation realize its full potential for fostering economic collaboration within the region, integration, and reciprocal development. Afghanistan must, however, create the required economic conditions to reduce its need on foreign assistance in the near future if it hopes to become self-sustaining. The Afghan government has prioritized participation in the BRI, portraying it as a framework for regional cooperation<sup>132</sup> where China and Afghanistan can gain from each other in the fields of energy development, financial services, and the acquisition of natural resources. The largest possible benefactor of the CPEC enlargement is Afghanistan. Long periods of violence, shaky government, economic underdevelopment, and humanitarian disasters are only a few of the nation's many problems. Roads, power grids, and industrial zones are among the vital infrastructure projects that inclusion into CPEC promises to produce. These projects might boost the economy and generate jobs that are desperately needed. Afghanistan may now access new trade routes thanks to improved connectivity with China and Pakistan, which lessens its reliance

on donor and Western aid and its landlocked status. The basis for Afghanistan's economic recovery might be laid by this connectedness, which could also increase exports, draw in foreign direct investment, and make it easier for people and products to move around. The opportunity for CPEC to access Afghanistan's enormous undiscovered mineral riches, estimated at over a trillion US dollars, is a critical component of the project's extension into the country. Afghanistan's reserves of copper, lithium, rare earths, and other vital minerals are mainly untapped due to ages of conflict and inadequate infrastructure. These natural assets might be effectively produced and shipped abroad, possibly becoming Afghanistan a major supplier of commodities essential for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Amit, 2025). China has established rail linkages with Afghanistan and Central Asian nations in an effort to resurrect the ancient Silk Road under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative. Two cargo trains traveled from two Chinese cities to Afghanistan in order to incorporate Afghanistan into the BRI. The first China-Afghan cargo train left Nantong in August 2016 and reached Hairatan, while the second cargo train left Yiwu and reached Mazar-i-Sharif, which was 75 kilometers away from Hairatan. Over USD 4 million worth of products, including fabric, construction materials, and textiles, were transported by the second cargo train. Both nations thought that the cargo train route would speed up their trade cooperation (Zhenhong, 2022). The Afghan government previously made involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) a top priority. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been presented as a model of regional cooperation where China and Afghanistan will participate in the energy sector, mine natural resources, and provide commercial services, all of which will be beneficial to both countries. A stable Taliban regime would be able to link its Silk Road aspirations with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) thanks to this massive infrastructure project. In addition to providing China with an advantage, it will boost the economies of South and Central Asia. Additionally, the BRI might significantly help Afghanistan establish a sustainable economy and position itself as a key center for transportation and trade (Salman, 2021).

In addition to the Afghan nation, the US departure marks a significant strategic transition in the larger Eurasian area, as rebalanced power dynamics and changing alliances have come into sharper view. Strategic interests have shifted, especially among regional powers like China, Russia, and Iran, as a result of the void left by the abrupt withdrawal of the US military and diplomatic presence. These nations have aimed to increase their power in Afghanistan while also taking advantage of this change to broaden their influence throughout the larger geopolitical region of Eurasia. After serving as a stabilizing force in the area for 20 years, the US's withdrawal has led to new kinds of collaboration, rivalry, and strategic rebalancing between various Eurasian countries, particularly China (Toghrul, 2025). Recognizing a fait accompli is the goal of Russia's formal relations with Kabul; the Taliban are an inevitable danger element that would be foolish to overlook. In actuality, Moscow wants to work more closely with Afghanistan on matters like mining for raw materials, security (particularly with regard to any spillover into Central Asia), and—above all—the expansion of connectivity. This strategy is a component of Russia's Asian pivot. The Taliban also wants possible Russian investment in agriculture and the extractive sector. Afghanistan's efforts to establish effective connections with the neighboring regions have been particularly notable as part of the country's expanding involvement in the region. Building new trade routes and extending those that already exist via Central Asia to Afghanistan are of special interest to Moscow (Avdaliani, 2025). Avdaliani (2025) further adds that the Afghanistan has become a focal point of the broader Central Asian area since the Taliban's return, particularly as it seeks to forge closer ties with its neighbors. One significant step in the integration of the Eurasian and South Asian railway networks through Afghanistan is the plan to construct the Termez-Naybabad-Logar-Kharlachi railway link, which offers an instant link to the Pakistani maritime ports of Karachi and Qasem. By cutting the time and expense of cargo transit by about 30–40%,

this project will put the area on what was once known as the Great Silk Road and provide the quickest land route across multiple parts of Eurasia. Eurasia, which includes the intertwined continents of Asia and Europe, is characterized by historically shifting borders that reveal intricate geopolitical, cultural, and strategic relationships. The US and NATO army pullout from Afghanistan in 2021 was a turning point in international geopolitics amid the escalating struggle for dominance in Eurasia, leading to significant changes in regional alliances and the overall global power structure. China also saw the US pullout as a sign of changing global power relations. Beijing was inspired to pursue the BRI with increased energy in an effort to gain geopolitical and economic footholds throughout Central Asia and the Middle East as a result of the perceived American retreat from Eurasian affairs.

### **Discussion on the data**

One may argue that Afghanistan's participation in the BRI and Eurasian initiatives is a logical reaction to its seclusion and diplomatic fragility. Neorealism places a strong emphasis on the importance of survivability and the chaotic foundation of the international system. Afghanistan would benefit greatly from infrastructure investment, regional economic connections, and crucial security guarantees if it participated in these programs. Afghanistan might increase its strategic importance and acquire influence in the balance of power in the area by establishing itself as a transit hub between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Neorealism cautions, however, that Afghanistan's inclusion in these frameworks would further ensnare it in great-power conflicts. Afghanistan's status as a disputed buffer state rather than a sovereign actor with autonomous agency might be strengthened by strongly aligning with China and Russia at the expense of the West and India. On the other hand, dependency theory draws attention to the structural dangers associated with Afghanistan's possible membership. Dependency theorists contend that although the Belt and Road Initiative and Eurasian connectivity offer economic progress, they frequently reinforce unbalanced ties. Afghanistan has the risk of being restricted to a supporting role, providing transportation options and natural assets while continuing to be dependent on other powers for investment and security due to its lack of financial capital, institutional stability, and technological capability. This relationship may perpetuate patterns of dependency, restricting Afghanistan's independence and leaving it vulnerable to abuse by more powerful nations. In this way, integration might only move the axis of dependence from Western donors to Eurasian countries, rather than ending Afghanistan's isolation. A parallel reality emerges when these viewpoints are balanced: Afghanistan can move out of isolation by joining the BRI and Eurasian projects, but this engagement could also strengthen dependency and external control in the absence of robust governance, inclusive economic planning, and regional negotiating power. Afghanistan faces more than just the question of whether or not to join; it also has to figure out how to negotiate terms of membership that protect its sovereignty, share benefits at home, and keep it from becoming a pawn in the grand powers' geopolitical plans.

### **Potential benefits for Afghanistan from BRI and Eurasia's participation:**

Following generations of warfare that have severely damaged the country's buildings and financial sector, Afghanistan hopes to benefit greatly from official involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative. The most obvious possible advantage is the growth of infrastructure. Being involved in the BRI could enable:

- 1) Transport systems that link the nation's once remote areas.
- 2) Chronic electricity shortages that impact more than 70% of the population are being addressed via energy infrastructure.
- 3) Increasing digital connectedness through investments in telecommunications.

- 4) Industrial zones that have facilities to facilitate processing and manufacturing.
- 5) Afghanistan could gain favorable trading access to Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Armenia if it were a member or associate of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).
- 6) Afghan goods like fruits, dry fruits, carpets, and minerals may find additional markets for export as a result of lower tariffs and standardized customs regulations.
- 7) Afghanistan might become an economic hub connecting South and Central Asia with improved cross-border transit arrangements. Given that Russia and Central Asia are major participants in discussions about global acknowledgment, Afghanistan would gain more political legitimacy under the Taliban rule if it were formally integrated into Eurasian organizations.
- 8) By diversifying its economic relationships, it may also lessen Afghanistan's dependency on Western assistance.

Afghanistan faces significant development obstacles, such as some of the lowest rates of electrification in the world and sparse road networks linking key population centers, which these infrastructure upgrades could assist overcome. With the creation of new jobs, income, and potential industrial growth, this might provide Afghanistan with a route to economic recovery. It guarantees access to minerals needed for technologically advanced production, batteries, and sustainable energy for China and other partners. By connecting such assets to CPEC's transit and energy corridors, Afghanistan may be further integrated into regional supply chains, trade routes could be expanded, and Kabul's economic future might be linked to the geopolitical orbit of China and Pakistan. The Taliban are currently advancing cautiously, and the world is witnessing a changed Taliban thinking and strategy. However, some policy analysts believe that the Taliban takeover may bring back the brutal reality of the past. Chinese aid will lay the groundwork for Afghan growth, according to Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, who also said that China would be Afghanistan's "main ally." "China will be our main partner and represents a great opportunity for us because it is ready to invest in our country and support reconstruction efforts," stated spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid. He added that the Taliban value China's Belt and Road Initiative because it will bring back the historic Silk Road. "China will be our gateway to international markets," he stated. In all probability, the amount of goods traded between China and Afghanistan in 2024 was over \$1.6 billion, up around \$1 billion from 2021, when it was just about \$600 million. China and the Taliban aimed to resurrect the Wakhan Corridor in order to deepen their relationship. Under the Taliban, the Wakhan Corridor—which connects Afghanistan and China via Badakhshan Province—regained strategic significance, and by early 2024, construction was over 40% finished. The corridor, which was once a part of the Silk Road, helped China achieve its objectives of establishing a direct trade route that avoids Pakistan and Uzbekistan and growing its Belt and Road Initiative. The newly established Taliban government's favorable statements demonstrate their engagement and dedication to the neighboring nations. They understand the significance of the BRI and wish to participate completely in order to take benefit from Afghanistan's unique location at the intersection of Central and South Asia. However, in order for China and other nations to securely engage in and collaborate with Afghanistan, this commitment must be supported by an inclusive political system, wise foreign and internal policies, and determined efforts to combat terrorism. Countries of all sizes in Eurasia have been more and more inclined to acknowledge the Taliban and form transactional connections. The increased desire in establishing new transit and commercial connections between Afghanistan and its neighbors is at the core of this change in mindset. To put it briefly, increasing connectivity is allowing Afghanistan and its neighboring areas to progressively open up to one another. In fact, both in the medieval and contemporary eras, commerce and transit routes across Afghanistan have long been

essential to Eurasian integration. However, there is a distinct geopolitical trajectory for Afghanistan to become more connected and commercially linked with Central Asia and greater Eurasia.

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