

CONNECT CENTRAL ASIA: ROLE OF AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

The economic potential of the Central Asian countries can be considered as the basis for a new model of cooperation and economic integration. The region of Central Asia can be the bridge between the European, Asian and Middle Eastern countries. In this article are considered the role and the place of Afghanistan in transit opportunities of Central Asian countries. The armed opposition in Afghanistan is a major obstacle for the development of regional economic cooperation and realization of wide transit potential of the Central Asia.

Nowadays, Afghanistan is actively involved in the integration processes of Central Asia within the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other organizations. This fact will certainly help to promote fast reconstruction of Afghanistan in partnership with the Afghan authorities and other members of the international community.

However, there is not a common point of view among specialists, analysts, representatives of the expert community and the intelligence services as far as the future development of situation.

Keywords: New Silk Road; Northern Distribution Network; Central Asia; Afghanistan

1. Introduction

After the collapse of Soviet Union, Central Asian republics started focusing on developing their own transport and communication systems at the expense of neglecting regional transport infrastructure that was built earlier to connect neighbouring countries. That stemmed from the fact that,

once independent, Central Asian countries discovered that they had more differences than commonalities and headed towards the alienation from each other (Connecting Central Asia with Economic Centers: Interim report, ADBI).

Today Central Asian region presents a complicated set of multilateral and bilateral arrangements within region's countries and between other external actors. With the drawdown of NATO ISAF forces fast approaching, the region is about to face even more serious threats and challenges. Yet to say that CA countries stand unified and solid is an under assessment. If nothing else, the region is deeply divided across various fields of cooperation: there are border, energy and water disputes along with the deep sense of mistrust towards the neighbours.

2. New Silk Road initiative

By declaring the revival of the New Silk Road by attempting to link Central Asia with South Asia via Afghanistan, both United States and Western policy-making community expect to boost the economic development of Afghanistan by extending the trade ties, creating new transportation networks and new routes.

The initiative has so far been seen as partly controversial since Central Asian government does not perceive Afghanistan as part of the region and there are ongoing security concerns due to increasing drug trafficking and terrorist attacks. However, for the West in general and for the US in particular, New Silk Road may serve as "politically expedient" exit away from Afghanistan and its permanent security troubles (The Diplomat, Following the New Silk Road 2014). There is strong possibility that in the absence of any other viable geopolitical solution, Unites States will keep pursuing the New Silk Road as "lux et veritas". As US Deputy Secretary of State, William Burns, in late September 2014 stated that: "We see clearly that Afghanistan's fortunes remain tied to its neighborhood, just as the neighborhood's fortunes remain tied to Afghanistan," encouraging further development of New Silk Road strategy (The United States Silk Road to Nowhere 2014).

Despite the countless efforts to construct reliable land transit routes as well as the pipelines connecting CA to the rest of the world, 90% of cargo exchange between Asia and Europe takes place via the sea ports to which none of CA countries has direct access. The existing land corridors, such as Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), Trans-Kazakhstan and Trans-Siberian routes proved to be both inefficient and expensive comparing to the maritime options (Azerbaijan as a Regional Hub in Central Eurasia, Taleh Ziyadov, June 2011).

However, before developing and further investing into serious transport projects, it is important to study the region and its countries better, to determine whether they have sufficient political and economic will to get engaged. Presently Central Asian countries do not have an integrated economic or trade system similar to the EU.

Prior to elaborating plans of boosting Afghan economy by creating closer ties with its northern neighbours, it is important to understand whether Central Asia itself as a region is capable and willing to do that or not. For example, among five countries it is only Tajikistan that has an air connection with Afghanistan today. Uzbekistan has the only functioning railroad.

Today Afghanistan's 93% of products are being imported; the country is almost completely dependent upon its neighbours to supply basic goods, much as the flour, sunflower oil, grain, pasta varieties and other. In this regard the U.S Agency for International Development (USAID) Regional Economic Cooperation Project is actually funding interested Central Asian businesses to explore the export opportunities to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Part of that exploring includes the discussions on how to improve the transportation and logistical issues. For example, some of Kazakhstan's export products to Afghanistan, after transiting Uzbekistan, reach their destination via freight ferry along Amu-Darya to Hairatan to be picked up by rail link to Mazar-i-Sharif; the process takes considerable amount of time. It is obvious that regional countries involved in the process need to find the ways of reducing the timing of the deliveries, so vital for perishable products (Kursiv, Afganistan i Pakistan 2014).

3. Northern Distribution Network

One of the greatest achievements in connecting Central Asia and Afghanistan has become the construction of Hairatan - Mazar-i-Sharif railroad opened in August 2011 funded by the Asian Development Bank.

The railway track gauge is 1524 mm that makes it compatible with Uzbekistan and the rest of Central Asian countries (Railway Technology Uzbekistan 2014). Currently Uzbek government is looking at extending 75 km Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif towards Sher Khan Bandar (Tajik-Afghan border) and on the other side with Herat. The project is supposed to be funded by Central Asia Regional Economic Co-operation (CAREC) and might also connect Kunduz, Kholm and Naibabad (Central Asia online 2014).

However, if Uzbekistan or any other CA country plans to extend the rail network, they must ensure it will remain as 1524 mm track gauge, otherwise additional funding will be required for constructing separate gauge switching stations.

Today both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan play significant role of transit countries for NATO shipments to and from Afghanistan via two vital routes: one is TRACECA (Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan) and the other is called Northern Distribution Network (Latvia-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan).

Over the years around 100 000 containers belonging to the US and NATO forces were shipped via NDN to bypass the territory of Pakistan (Eurasia Net 2014). Another example In 2010, Kazakhstan had processed over 1 million ton of transit cargo to Afghanistan (Azerbaijan as a Regional Hub in Central Eurasia, Taleh Ziyadov, June 2011).

However, things do not look well for the newly elected leadership of Afghanistan: President Ashraf Ghani and his counterpart, Abdulla Abdulla, just recently signed the Power Sharing Agreement and are yet to prove their ability to jointly work and find the coordinated solutions. Taliban attacks continue to destabilise the country, and so far there are no indications that they might subside. If nothing else, it is on the opposite: the nearer the drawdown time approaches, the deadlier the attacks on Afghan National Army and Afghan National Forces are. Many recruits quit their ranks and in some cases switch sides. Both western and local experts are

unable to predict how the situation might evolve once most of NATO contingent withdraws (South Asia Foreign Policy 2014).

It is important to note that Central Asia has not been immune to Taliban attacks either. There are serious concerns among the Central Asian expert community that Taliban might present a tangible threat for the region (Central Asia Online Articles 2014).

On the other hand, there are also indications that CA governments wish to pursue the idea of building the transport bridge infrastructure to Afghanistan in order to connect to the wider world and assist Afghanistan to get reconnected too. Afghanistan had long had border disputes with Pakistan and it is well assumed that both countries do not trust each other. Central Asia might serve as a perfect bridge to reconnect Afghanistan to a wider world. Such re-connection is already happening.

4. Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan railway

The construction of Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan railway is planned to commence at the end of 2014. The railway will link two Central Asian countries with Afghanistan and can also be extended further in the direction of Iran in the west and towards Kyrgyzstan and China in the east. The new railway will link Atamyrat (Turkmenistan) - Imamnazar (Turkmenistan) - Aqina (Afghanistan) - Andkhoy (Afghanistan) - Panj (Tajikistan). It is scheduled to be completed by June 2015 (Turkmenistan - Afghanistan rail link 2014)

The railway thus bypasses the territory of Uzbekistan which has been blocking import/export of Tajik goods. If the project is indeed launched and the flow of goods flourishes, then Uzbekistan will be missing out a great share of profit which might trigger further tensions within the region.

Today Uzbekistan perceives itself as a regional hegemon and prevents Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan from transiting their goods as well as competing with Dushanbe on supplying energy to Afghanistan (Turkmenistan-tajikistan-best-friends 2014).

Uzbekistan can rightfully be called the key to the transport infrastructure of Central Asia. 74 % of CA and Russian transit freight passes through Uzbekistan. Tajikistan for one thing relies heavily on

Tashkent in terms of connecting to Uzbekistan's railway network since the country has disjoint rail lines (Kulipanova 2012).

Yet Uzbekistan's road transit to Afghanistan stands at 4 percent opposing 69 percent that includes Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and 21 percent going through Tajikistan (Rastogi and Arvis 2014).

Turkmenistan may assume the role of the most active player in the transport field due to its self-funding, determination to diversify the access to world markets and its geopolitical neutrality. Tajikistan's interests lie in the fact of breaking the current isolation due to Uzbekistan's disruptive actions and get the country to re-connect with the wider world.

As for Afghanistan, one of the latest Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reports confirms the fact of Afghan railroad system being almost non-existent. It also appears that the Western coalition has a little trust in serious investments into the area as the report suggests that "there is no direct U.S. project funding dedicated to building rail infrastructure, although indirect U.S. funding continues through contributions to the ADB and other entities" (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 30th 2013).

5. Connect South Asia

One of the US's most ambitious projects for the region is to turn it into serious intercontinental and interregional hub connecting Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia using Afghanistan's territory. However local expert communities are deeply aware of the fact that if Afghanistan is not first stabilised and reconstructed along with the provision of highly guaranteed security and safety, no investor will be willing to take the risk of "connection policy". Furthermore, there lies another destabilising hotspot of FATA areas as well as permanent volatile state of conflict between Pakistan and India.

So even if post-2014 Afghanistan with its newly elected leadership that is yet to demonstrate an efficient and coordinated work might stabilize in the mid-term future, the issue of Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal conflict must still be sorted out. Again if that happens, there lies vulnerability with India and Pakistan border conflicts. One should also mention the fact of

deep concern and suspicion with which India views China which is reinforcing its positions both militarily and strategically all along its border with India. Going North, one should mention the brewing instability in Ferghana valley: with mixed populations and convenient locations to mount Islamic extremist attacks.

India rightfully describes what was mentioned in the paragraph above as the “arc of instability” perceiving itself to be surrounded by unsafe and disturbing neighbours. As long as the situation remains, no transport connection, be it railways, roads, highways, river ferries and even air links can be considered safe and user friendly.

In 2012, India had launched its Connect Central Asia foreign policy initiative to activate its political, military and logistic ties with Central Asian republics. India wishes to boost mutual trade and energy cooperation as well as to create reliable partners and allies to combat modern day terrorism and extremism. One of the most critical components of “Connect Central Asia” strategy is to formulate common policy towards Afghanistan and its reconstruction process. India is heavily interested in seeking cooperation with CA on counter-terrorism, providing military training and development between Central Asia and South Asia regions. In this regard India relies on Iranian port Chabahar that it plans to invest into. Chabahar in turn is connected to the famous ring road in Afghanistan, the project that India spent 136 million USD (Jamestown Org single 2014).

Another important factor is the role Central Asian republics might play in terms of developing relations between India and Pakistan. Main thing to consider is that India wishes to access landlocked Central Asia and Afghanistan for various reasons, among which there are: access to natural resources of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan; construction of TAPI pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India); boosting the trade through construction of new railways and highways for transportation of goods; boosting military and security cooperation between India and CA countries to protect from the imminent threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan and others. None of these goals can be considered serious to achieve without first ensuring one significant factor: Pakistan, being geographically located as it is and having currently complicated relationship with India, serves as almost unsurmountable obstacle on India's way to Connect Central Asia.

On the 11th of December 2010 Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan and India had signed an agreement on the pipeline construction, though the plans were never implemented due to the conflict of interests about the price of the construction and other financial arrangements (Tapi still in the pipeline 2014).

Conclusion

The objective of making Central Asian territory as intercontinental hub has no doubt its own positive sides, such as boosting the trade; managing the infrastructure; facilitating regional transport cooperation and others. Extended system of railways and roads will no doubt lead to increased and sustainable cooperation between CA countries and might even perhaps contribute to reducing certain difficulties that the region faces now. It is a task worth signing up for and continuing to implement despite short and medium term problems. However, before anything, the countries of both Central Asia and South Asia need to be re-assured and convinced that Afghanistan will find a solution to its permanent civil war state and reduce the Islamic extremist and Taliban threat it currently presents for its neighbours. And another gravest challenge to overcome is to find sufficient funding for the gigantic task ahead. International donors might help but that might in turn require specific guarantees and tons of feasibility studies from the countries involved to receive any financial help.

The overall volume of interregional trade between CA countries is relatively low. Asian Development Bank estimates intra-regional trade as 6.2 percent out of global trade only, thus making Central Asia the world's least economically integrated region (Blog Foreign Policy 2014).

One of the background reasons for Central Asian republics not to develop regional transport/transit links lies in the fact that CA countries themselves are not interested and/or motivated enough in developing those ties on tactical level. There is deep mistrust between the countries and until this mistrust is overcome no serious developments, at least in transportation field should be anticipated.

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