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Demystifying The Lapis Lazuli Corridor as A Potential Trade Pathway for Bilateral Growth of Afghanistan and Eurasian Countries

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Abstract
Afghanistan's great potential contribution to sustainable economic growth and a vital hub for Eurasian trade and transit is considerable. This research endeavor discusses the significance of the Lapis Lazuli corridor as a geostrategic transit route connecting Eurasian international macro-level trade and its potential to connect Asian trade flows. The objective is to identify opportunities and challenges for regional trade and propose solutions to address these challenges. The goal of this study is to better comprehend the economic and trade potential of the Lapiz Lazuli corridor, a ground-breaking transit route linking Afghanistan and Central Asia, both of which offer enormous potential for trade expansion and enrichment. The study uses an evidence-based approach to study the key issues at hand. We recommend how strengthening and expediting the existing bilateral regional and transit trade agreements shall be of immense economic benefit to Afghanistan. Additionally, the problems identified include political rivalries between neighboring countries, poverty, unemployment, lack of security and literacy, economic backwardness, lack of transit route management integrity, and weather issues in the Black and Caspian Seas. The lack of trade data between Afghanistan and Central Asia due to four decades of war is a limitation. The study proposes recommendations to address these challenges and harness the potential of this route for future trade.

Keywords: *Geo-strategy, Transit, South Asia, Central Asia, Lapis Lazuli Corridor, Geo-politics.*

Introduction
Lapiz Lazuli Corridor has been one of the most strategic and significant mega-projects in the global geo-political map. Lapis lazuli's priceless stones have been quarried for over 6000 years, and they have been shipped to far-off places. According to a world report by the Diplomat (2017), this initiative was aimed at furthering the geopolitical goals of the participating nations, as well as those of the US. The first millennium before Christ saw the establishment of lanes for Lapis Lazuli from Afghanistan to western nations, with caravans of up to 4,000 people travelling more than 3,000 miles from Arianna/Khurasan to Mesopotamia

and Egypt (The Lapis Lazuli Route Reopened, 2019).This trade route can be an economically, socially, and politically productive hub for international diplomatic ties for all participating countries because it offers such enormous potential for global trade. However, it faces unavoidable and significant difficulties because Afghanistan, the country where it was founded, is plagued by war-related security problems.

The goal of this study is to better comprehend the economic and trade potential of the Lapiz Lazuli corridor, a ground-breaking transit route linking Afghanistan and Central Asia, both of which offer enormous potential for trade expansion and enrichment. The long-term effects of this corridor will include the expansion of trade in the region, regional connectivity, and the addressing of transit and trade concerns.

Post withdrawal of the international troops in 2014, Afghanistan became the focus of international diplomatic politics with noteworthy initiatives aimed at creating a sustainable Afghanistan through regional trade, transit, and infrastructure projects. Out of this, the Lapiz Lazuli Corridor project has been studied widely by scholars, practitioners and analysts alike as a key to enhancing regional and international connectivity and a potentially profitable prospect for business and development. The Turkmenbashi port in Turkmenistan, Central Asia, gives landlocked Afghanistan an alternative route across the Caspian Sea to Turkey, reducing its reliance on Pakistan for trade access to the Arabian Sea. The addition of infrastructure and the diversification of trade routes can also aid the country's economic survival in the case of a US army withdrawal.

1.1 Afghanistan: The Land of rich Cultural and Historical Antiquity

Afghanistan is one of the most historic nations in terms of economic, cultural, political, and social development in Asia during the early and mediaeval ages. Based on its transit geographical location, Afghanistan has played a bridge role in connecting Chinese, Indian and Mesopotamian civilizations and Mediterranean Sea, Egypt and Greece. Afghanistan has been instrumental in combining and adapting the cultural ideals of several different civilizations. Because of this, scientists and researchers have identified this nation as a crossroads of civilizations. Scholars named Balkh (the first cultural and political base of Afghanistan), the *Ummulbelad* (mother of cities) due to its major role as international marketplace between Central Asian, South Asian, Western and Eastern Asian trade, culture and religious values for centuries.

Afghanistan (Ex-Ariana, Khurasan) having more than 50000 years of antiquity and 5000 years of cultural history, has experienced 5 civilizations: chronologically (Vedic, Avestan, Greco-Bactrian, Indo Bactrian and Islam. The Royal Road starting from Babylon and ending in Bactria (Balkh) and the ancient Silk Road starting from east and ending in west of the world is the ancient pride of this country.

During that period, the main modes of transportation were camels, horses, mules, donkeys, and yaks (Akbari, 2021). Because of their humped storage, donkeys were employed to transport things in the eastern mountains while camels were used to transport products in the sandy deserts. When the products first arrived in Mesopotamia, traders traded Lapis Lazuli for cereals and wool. Ironically, Afghanistan had no active connection to the Lapis Lazuli Corridor as a result of four decades of war. However, the interest of neighboring nations intensified when China began investing in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build the New

Silk Road so that products could be transported between Eurasia quickly (McBride, 2023). According to research, Afghanistan has become an increasingly significant market for commerce with Central Asian nations (Mogilevskii, 2012; Tadjbakhsh, 2009), with a number of vital products for imports and exports. Afghanistan's trade relations with Central Asian Republics have significantly improved over the past two decades, these nations now account for 8% of Afghanistan's total exports, which are primarily cement and agricultural products, and 12% of its total imports, which are primarily flour, electricity, and oil (Mogilevskii, 2012).As a potential advantage, Afghanistan can serve as a land bridge to connect South Asia, which has warm water but is energy-scarce, with Central Asia, which is rich in energy. (Warikoo, 2016). This aspect of comparative advantage is a key driver of Afghanistan's potential for a lucrative trade route connecting countries through the Lapiz Lazuli Trade route. Numerous scholars (Cowan et al., 2018; Torre et al., 1992; Crawford & Fiorentino, 2005) have reiterated the need for the expansion of regional trade and transit agreements in order to ensure that all nations have equal access to both domestic and foreign markets. Additionally, initiatives like Chabahar, the Five Nations Railway Corridor, and the Lapis Lazuli route can connect the markets in Afghanistan, South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe with a low-cost maritime, road, and rail network.

The Lapis Lazuli agreement was signed in 2017 at the side of seventh (RECCA-VII) by representatives from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkmenistan, and Turkey to ensure a connectivity between Afghanistan and Europe. Afghanistan and China are connected by the Hairatan port in the Balkh province, which is crucial to the development of the country's international transportation network and will cut the distance travelled by up to five hours. Furthermore, a connection between China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran is provided by the Five Nations Railway (Alizada, 2018; Routray& Haldar, 2018), which enhances connectivity and Chinese dominance in Afghanistan. *The ability of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, which was once a part of the old Silk Road, to connect current South Asian markets with markets in Central Asia and Europe via Afghanistan is examined in this research study.*

1. Literature review

A stream of researches (Rahim, 2019; Samay, 2020; Kamal, 2019; Rauf, 2021) have been conducted on the various dimensions, challenges, potential possibilities and other facets of this project. A literature review of the USAID study on transport infrastructure improvement reveals that significant cost savings of up to 60% can be achieved. In the Washington Quarterly, Kuchins (2011) emphasizes Afghanistan's potential to function as a regional trade and transport hub, recommending the implementation of the Silk Road. Criticizing the US administration's inadequate funding and lack of support for Afghanistan's nation-building efforts, this paper highlights the Afghan people's awareness of their critical role in connecting the Eurasian trading network. The importance of this trade route connection for the region and all of Eurasia is discussed, with Kuchins calling for US presidential leadership in promoting transit and trade in the area (Kuchins, 2011).

In a landmark study by Gould (2018) on critical trade connections for economic growth, strategic regional integration with Central Asian nations was stated to be crucial for future development in Afghanistan. The book highlights significant advancements made in Afghan society, including the rise in per capita income from $198 in 2003 to $678 in 2013. The author discusses the impact of the departure of foreign troops and the reduction in donor aid on Afghanistan's social and economic status. Additionally, Afghanistan's potential to use its unique geographical location as a land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia, and to leverage its natural resources for regional cooperation in areas such as trade, supply chain, regulatory frameworks, infrastructures, and natural resources management was described in detail.

A recent innovative study by Sultonov (2022) highlights that by creating connections between the region and external markets, greater regional integration not only promotes trade and connectivity within the region but also more effectively enables integration with major regional markets and the global economy. These theoretical insights pave way for much needed practical policy and its implementation and Afghanistan should concentrate on removing export and import barriers, enlarging and deepening regional agreements, improving the effectiveness of border processes, investing in infrastructure and connectivity, creating a favorable business environment internationally, supporting women-owned businesses, and fostering regional economic cooperation, according to this study. Corroborating the need for reforms in inter-country trade systems, Heal et al. (2015) identified a number of implementation goals for the targeted themes.

Ministry of Commerce and Industries (MoCI) of Afghanistan mentions in its Afghanistan and Regional Trade Arrangements report (2020), “Bilateral regional trade and transit agreements are important to Afghan producers as they provide preferential access to new markets”. It has been highlighted across various policy documents and the Government think-tanks further elucidate how strengthening and expediting the existing bilateral regional and transit trade agreements shall be of immense economic benefit to Afghanistan. In the near future, Afghanistan must focus on establishing regional trade and investment ties so that it can profit from accessing global markets to sell its natural resources and derived goods as well as provide services. Because it promotes commerce and investment in Afghanistan in the mutually exclusive self-interest of its neighbors, Afghanistan benefits from tighter integration with its neighbors (Kuchins et al., 2010; Kuchins, 2011; Farahmand&Ethem, 2020). Regional commerce makes it easier to integrate Afghanistan deeper into *the multilateral trading system*; therefore, *if* Afghanistan is to have long-term economic growth, there will need to be a greater degree of regional cooperation.

Afghanistan must be a part of Central Asia, according to Caspian Policy Center's policy brief (2020), which urges the five Central Asian Republics to include Afghanistan in the Central Asian integration in order to facilitate Afghanistan's development as well as improved regional connectivity and security. This is just one of many research-driven initiatives on the topic. Afghanistan was a part of Central Asia when the Five Central Asian Republics were included in the Soviet Union, but once Central Asia gained its independence, a sub-region known as the Soviet Socialist Republics was founded, and the Russian language became the common tongue. This separated Afghanistan by erecting cultural barriers. This study discusses the fall of the Soviet Union and the US's involvement in Central Asia, the benefits of BRI for both Afghanistan and Central Asia, US relations with the Afghan government and Taliban, the US desire to redefine a Central Asian nation, and the obstacles to regional integration, such as security and power imbalance in Afghanistan. As the Ambassador for the Security and Politics Program (2020), Richard Hoagland suggests that Afghanistan be admitted to the (ASEAN) or Nordic Council, igniting a worldwide movement to provide the nation its rightful place.

The Indian ambassador to Nepal, Jayant Prasad, stated during a conference in 2014 titled 'Afghanistan in SAARC: Towards Deeper Engagement', "We are willing to work with Pakistan in Afghanistan" (Ahmed & Zahoor, 2015). "Intertwined destinies of countries in the region" was another perspective highlighted by Dr Manmohan Singh, pertaining to the immense possibilities of this strategic confluence. From the geographical perspective, Afghanistan is touted as a potential energy hub of the region for South and Central Asian energy cooperation. Leaders have emphasized on the security in Afghanistan, a new paradigm for harmonizing the interests of individuals, institutions, nations of the region and world. He said that rather than funding war, nations should invest in their infrastructure. Academicians and Policy-makers have listed how Bangladesh and Afghanistan can cooperate in an array of trade opportunities. In order to strengthen the SAARC organization, he advises South Asian leaders to implement ASEAN and the EU. A critical aspect however, which has been highlighted by many researchers and policy makers, is that the prospects of expansion of SAARC has been a challenge since the inclusion of Afghanistan due to its political instability. Further limiting SAARC processes and goals is the fact that Afghanistan's accession has greatly exacerbated the conflict-ridden relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Ahmed & Zahoor, 2015).

Indian infrastructure assistance for Afghanistan's economy is particularly effective for regional integration, according to Dr. Shanthi D' Souza, a researcher at the Institute of (ISAS), Singapore. Concerning problems include corruption in Afghanistan and the Pakistan-Indian conflict (D'Souza, 2016). This paper defines the inclusion of Afghanistan in SAARC and SAFTA for the integration of South Asia and Central Asia. In a policy brief published by the East West Institute in 2018 titled 'Afghanistan Reconnected', Annie Cowan mentions that Afghanistan has a chance thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative, which also helps Afghanistan overcome its political problems. Greater connectivity and greater growth are the two key concepts of BRI as defined in this research. The author further advises Afghanistan to construct infrastructure near the Pakistani border in order to take advantage of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Multilateral trade agreements will benefit the entire area collectively. The Afghan government should reduce the burden of obtaining business visas, liberalize the rules governing the acquisition of mining and transportation infrastructure, and fight corruption (Cowan, Amin, & Elkins, 2018).

In 2017, Creighton and Marchesoni emphasized the necessity of using Afghanistan as a land bridge to facilitate the regional integration of South and Central Asian nations. According to them, Afghanistan and the region may profit financially from regional integration in areas including public-private sector collaboration, trade and economic development, social welfare, and peace. Participating in regional accords like SAARC, CAREC, SAFTA, SATIS, TIR, and others is beneficial for Afghanistan (APTTA). The best ways to accomplish these objectives, according to this paper, are to take advantage of the opportunities for trade, economic growth, and cooperation in Greater Central Asia through enhanced partnerships between the public and private sectors of the concerned countries, and aim at promoting short- and long-term policy changes in the fields of cross-border trade and transit, transport infrastructure, and energy trade and transit (Marchesoni & Creighton, 2017).

Building alternative trade routes could lessen Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan. The argument in this paper is to find Afghanistan's constructive role in connecting South and Central Asian trade flow and motivating regional countries trade connection. Afghanistan would act as a facilitator in this connection. Other countries of the region have interests and they will help Afghanistan peace and stability and national power division.We also discuss highlights on US dual play with Afghanistan government and Taliban.

Another researcher (Pattanaik, 2013) discusses Pakistan's 1990's three-dimensional policy towards Afghanistan as: economic dimension to open way to Central Asia, anti-Indian Strategic dimension and having a pliable government influenced by Islamabad as security dimension to prevent issue of Durand Line and raise of Pashtunistan.

M. Azim Wardak, a representative of Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated at a conference in Almaty in 2018 on the significance of regional cooperation that the government of Afghanistan has made. This has fueled regional economic cooperation, Afghanistan's development plan, a crucial tenet of security strategy, and a crucial tenet of foreign policy. The first circle of this foreign strategy consists of neighboring nations. In this context, the following RECCA priorities were listed: Energy (TAPI), (CASA-1000), (TAP-500), BRI, Lapis Lazuli Corridor, Chabahar, Five Nations Railway, Afghanistan Railway Network, Trans-Hindu Kush Road, TIR, Economic Zones, Digital Silk Road, B2B &Empowerment of Women, Regional Economic Cooperation, Exchange of Labor and Remittances, Development of Regional Industry in Agro Food section) and Research & Evaluation (Wardak, 2018).
N.
Afghanistan's great potential contribution to sustainable economic growth and a vital hub for Eurasian trade and transit is considerable. Some experts argue the need for BRI examination from international strategies and interlocking geopolitical relationships as a perspective that exist between China, US, Russia and India and its impact on Afghanistan. Alizada (2018) noted that although Afghanistan is a developing consumer nation, it will be able to reap the benefits of the regional network, particularly the BRI network, as its economy develops. According to Tsereteli (2019), the Indian subcontinent will act as a significant engine for South Asian economies like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh over the next ten years, as well as the fastest-growing economy in the world due to its population size and young labor force share. Because of this, the Indian subcontinent need transportation connectivity, and one alternative is to use a continental route that passes through Turkey, the southern Caucasus, and Central Asia. The necessity for a longer transcontinental route through Eurasia is discussed in this study, along with three potential routes: the Northern Corridor of East Asia-Russia-Europe, the Middle Corridor of the Silk Road or China-Central Asia-Europe, and the Southern Corridor of the Indian Subcontinent-Europe. This study makes the case that the future of the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe depends on the movement of Lapis Lazuli through Afghanistan despite security concerns. This essay comes to the conclusion that India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh should prioritize choosing a continental mode of transportation that will link South and Central Asia to Europe.

Rahim (2019) adds that the region's landlocked nations of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan have significant trading potential to develop sustainable economies. Afghanistan which seeks easy, cheap and alternative routes to global markets; Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan which seek ways to prioritize the diversification of their economies; Georgia which seeks to play a transit hub role due to its transit location and Turkey which is working towards economic and political influence on South Caucasus and Central Asia. The lapis lazuli route is intended to satiate the commercial goals of the local business community. The goals of all member countries will be met when the project is fully operational, according to this study, which also provides some historical background on the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, analyses the strategic primary concerns of member countries, and discusses the aspirations of the regional countries (HUANG, 2018; Ashrafi &Kalaiah, 2021; Kakar, 2020).

In his article ‘Missing Links’, S. Frederick Starr in the 2018 documentary Eurasia's Southern Corridor emphasizes on the importance of trade connectivity between Eurasia and the Indian subcontinent to Europe. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor and Silk Road are briefly discussed historically in this essay. It mentions the significance of the Eurasian connection and faults the fact that only a passing mention of it is made. He emphasizes the Southern route's potential for long-term expansion. He contends that the rail and road link between South Asia and Europe must be constructed. It claims that each country has already constructed the main infrastructure along this path. According to this study, the main challenge in front of operation of this route is the political issues along its entire length. "Identifying the Southern corridor as a potential advantage source to member countries can help balance consciousness of the risk and opportunities on offer and inaction economic costs of this route” the author writes (p.63). This study demonstrates that while there are difficulties, there are also more chances, solutions, and support for such a beneficial endeavor from member nations, particularly global development banks. By aligning the nations' economic, logical, and professional objectives, all problems might be resolved (Starr, 2018).

According to a report from Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry from 2015 (Towards Regional Economic Growth & Stability), the Lapis Lazuli Corridor appears to have significantly more attractive middle- and long-term prospects as a multimodal commerce and transit route. The so-called Chabahar projects and Lapis Lazuli might significantly increase trade and transit. Better economic and transit connectivity between the nations of the region will be possible because to the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor will promote more trade and transit, lower transaction costs, and increase market access. It will also lower trade barriers and develop customs operations.

3 Objectives and Methodology

The fact that Afghanistan is a landlocked country in the heart of Asia gives it the potential to be a crucial link between Europe, central Asia, and south Asia. Or, to put it another way, it acts as the commerce route's linking hub. Asia's energy source is headed by Central Asia, while the continent's body is composed of South Asia and Afghanistan. Afghanistan is the focal point of Asian trade, while Central Asia is the continent's energy source and is searching for lucrative markets; South Asia has a pressing need for energy and is hunting for suppliers. Afghanistan's collaboration is essential for Asian societies' economic and commercial development as well as their stability, security, and prosperity. The fact that thousands of tonnes of goods being traded among nations along the Lapiz Lazuli Corridor, which stretches from Afghanistan to Europe, underscores its enormous significance and has strategic ramifications that international diplomacy cannot afford to ignore.

The key objectives of this research have been to analyze the Lapiz Lazuli Corridor and its implications for regional integration and to study the Lapiz Lazuli Corridor and its trade prospects, issues and challenges from Afghanistan to Eurasian Countries. An evidence-based approach has been utilized to descriptively study the issues and concepts.

3.1 Key Contemporary Challenges

The challenges Afghanistan faces in serving as the crossroads for trade between Central and South Asia are as follows:

• Rivalry on the political front between certain neighboring nations.
• Denied Afghanistan's essential access to south Asian markets via Pakistan.
• Problems relating to the India-Pakistan conflict.
•Economic backwardness in south Asian countries as a result of transit route management integrity, poverty, unemployment, and good fortune with literacy.
•Prosperous security over the land bridge connecting Central and South Asia (Afghanistan).
•The route through Pakistan offers considerable flexibility due to the continued security situation in Afghanistan. Given the security situation in Afghanistan, there may be some early difficulties with this route.
•Compared to the Arabian Sea's temperate climate, a commerce route via the Black Sea and Caspian Sea may experience more weather problems in the winter.
•Afghanistan only has a nascent system of international high voltage electrical transmission lines, a deficient but improving road infrastructure, a nearly nonexistent railway network, no pipeline infrastructure for delivering Central Asian gas or oil south, and a neglected commercial aviation system. Afghanistan has been off the Eurasian transportation grid for centuries and still is, despite its strategic location.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, an overview of the study is provided in the context of the existing literature, along with new perspectives offering potential areas of research in the times to come. The theoretic and practical significance of the insights are also enumerated.

Given its geostrategic, geo-economics, and geopolitical location, Afghanistan has the strategic benefits of being the shortest and easiest square route of the regional transit to connect the economic, political, trade, and sociocultural relations of the Asian regions for free cost or at the lowest possible cost. It might improve the economic, social, and cultural, security, welfare, and productivity of regional societies, particularly Asian countries, and it could draw foreign investment for the construction of regional infrastructures.

According to strategic plans, Afghanistan cannot advance if it does not have access to regional and international markets. In addition to fostering better cooperation, Afghanistan's role as a landlocked bridge will provide its neighbors more reasons to be concerned about its stability. Giving neighboring countries economic stakes in Afghanistan would compel them to safeguard its regional and national security. This might reposition Afghanistan as a mediator instead of the existing zero-sum approach, changing the current policies to one that is mutually beneficial. Despite their rivalry, Pakistan and India might work together in Afghanistan. By facilitating India's and Pakistan's wider intentions to deepen their connections with Central Asia, Kabul may give both countries a deeper stake in a stable Afghanistan. The interaction between the three (South Asia, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf) may be facilitated further by regional organizations. (Pattanaik, 2013).

Afghanistan is a part of regional organizations including ECO, CAREC, and SAARC that pro mote better commerce, transit, and transportation cooperation (Afghanistan and Regional Trade Agreements, 2020).

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Afghans are aware that their nation's future development depends on its dominant position in a revived Eurasian trading network. The following four conditions must be met for an economic strategy to be effective for Afghanistan:

- Prior to anything else, it must improve the lives of the vital populations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Investors from both inside and outside the company will help the project as it develops.
- Both the economic and military strategies must be able to be pursued concurrently and in a way that strengthens one another.
- An economic policy must move swiftly and integrate with aim of handing power to Afghanistan.
- It ought to provide Afghanistan's government with a reliable source of money. The only plan that meets these criteria takes into account reestablishing Afghanistan's historical role as a commercial and transportation hub that links the Indian subcontinent with the Middle East, Europe and all of Southeast Asia.

This transportation-based strategy intends to remove existing obstacles to long-distance road and railroad freight as well as intra-Afghanistan hydrocarbon and hydroelectric energy transmission.

Evidence suggests that the tremendous mineral wealth of Afghanistan will be worthless because it lacks access to a regional rail network to carry these goods to bazaars. A lack of establishing Afghanistan as a transit hub will make agricultural products difficult to transport. The Afghan government's top priority should be to serve as a transit hub for the surrounding nations (Kuchins, 2011).

Distance is a crucial component in trade and travel. Afghanistan can offer the quickest route between China, the Middle East, and Africa. In recent years, China has shown interest in reaching the Middle East. China decided to invest in the Five Nations Railway to access Iran and the Middle East via Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan, as a route shorter than through Central Asia. In spite of the obstacles such as insecurity and infrastructure insufficiencies, China wants to invest in connectivity projects. Afghanistan can connect South Asia to Central Asia and Europe which is important for Europe and South Asia, because the Red Sea–Mediterranean–Europe route is too long and too costly based on expense and time. The achievement of this goal and the failure to break through to rapid development were hampered by a few misunderstandings.
However, it is generally agreed by international organisations that institutional, bureaucratic, and political barriers are the major ones (Kuchins, 2011; Rahim, 2019; Ashrafi &Kalaiah, 2021).

Figure 1: Lapis Lazuli Corridor

Source: Ministry of Finance policy document, Government of Afghanistan

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is a key potential project for diversifying Afghanistan's trade routes. It begins from Aqina in Faryab and Turghundiin Herat, crosses through Turkmenistan, Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and ports of Poti and Batomi in Black Sea and finally via Turkey to Europe by road, rail and maritime (Rahim, 2019) .Lessening trade obstacles, lowering transaction costs, improving border governance, expanding trade, and fostering regional cooperation are all advantages of the Lapis Lazuli transit corridor. The corridor is regarded as a global transit route and might operate under the Transports International Routiers (TIR) framework carnet to simplify the customs procedures. Afghanistan first became a TIR member in 1975, but due to unreliable security, it was in a dormant state and only renewed its membership in 2013 (Shanti, 2018). It will connect Afghanistan through Central Asia to Europe and free Afghanistan from dependence on ports of Pakistan, Iran, and Russia.

Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan possess potential to lead to sustainable economic growth, but face some challenges in front of exploring their true trade potential. Afghanistan needs easier and economic routes to Europe and global bazaars. Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan experienced great economic progress prior to global shocks of oil market and now prioritize their economic diversification. Georgia's has strategic location to gain from regional transit. Turkey wants to influence on Central Asia and South Caucasus (Rahim, 2019) .The Lapis Lazuli Corridor has allowed Afghanistan to export products like cotton, dried fruit, and sesame products to and through Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and Turkmenistan. This has boosted Afghanistan's economy and demonstrated that it can benefit the countries in the Greater Caspian Region. More broadly, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor promotes interregional highway, railroad, and maritime connectivity throughout the region (Hoagland, 2020).

Greater connectivity is the core concept of BRI is which leads to greater growth. Because Lapis Lazuli is a part of Silk Road, then Afghanistan and China must consider the political climate of the region to solve deficiencies in soft infrastructure as well as hard infrastructure and focus to enrich human capital of Afghanistan and develop Asian regional transportation hub. This sentiment has been further discussed by prominent researchers as well (Cowan, Amin, & Elkins, 2018) . The key advantage that this route could offer the countries of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey is a highly advantageous route to expand economic, cultural connectivity for the efficient integration of the transit between Europe and Asia *(Towards Regional Economic Growth & Stability*, 2015) .The corridor will integrate Eurasian transit corridor, Five Nations Railway and the International transport corridor from North to South (Qadri & Siddiqui, 2020).

4.1 Economic Ambitions of Members

China's pledge to invest $40 billion in the industry is a strong opportunity for the functioning of the Lapis Lazuli route despite the absence of security, stability, assurance of regional cooperation, and infrastructure for the transfer of commodities. The likelihood of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia reducing their reliance on Russia and forming beneficial relationships with Europe is very high (Khalil, 2017). Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey will benefit from energy rich Central Asia and also from a Gas Pipeline crossing Trans-Caspian making them energy transit hub (Qadri & Siddiqui, 2020).

4.2 Afghanistan

For its international trade, Afghanistan historically has depended on Pakistan based on universal conventions and mutual agreements. These legal frameworks could not help Afghanistan and this country suffered transit challenges posed by Pakistan. Pakistan used this position as a pressure as a part of political policies against Afghanistan.

Lapis Lazuli corridor has been interpreted as a transit diversifier for Afghanistan and the short, cheap and reliable route for trade with Europe. This project will complement other international projects in the region such as Five Nations Rail route and Middle Corridor of Turkey. Afghanistan’s business has recently shifted from Pakistan towards Iran. In future, Chabahar port could serve as transit route for Afghanistan import and exports to South Asia. Afghanistan will access to South Asia Especially India and Arabian Sea via Chabahar and access to Black Mediterranean Seas will be easy (Rahim, 2019).

Figure 2: Chabahar Port connecting Afghanistan to South Asia

Source: United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer

4.3 Lapiz Lazuli: Key Aspects

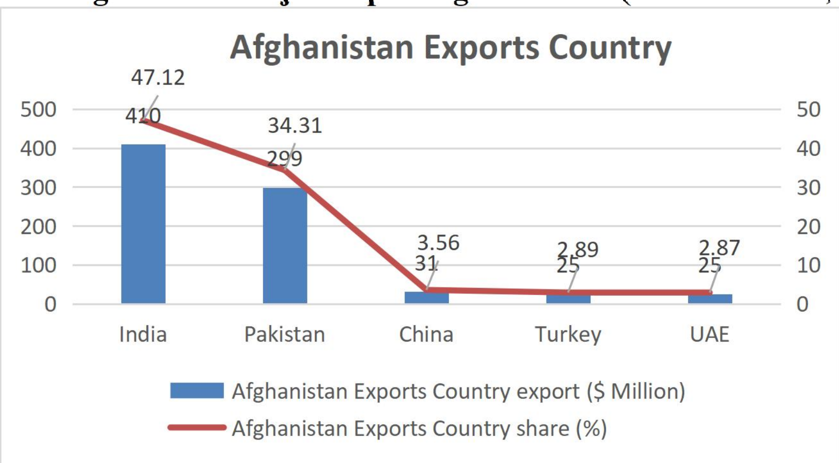
- The shortest, cheapest, and most reliable route between the markets in Afghanistan and Europe is Lapis Lazuli.
- Afghanistan is landlocked and needs routes to waters for its international transit. Political and security challenges alongside the Indian Sea caused Afghanistan seeking alternatives for connecting to the globe. The Lapis Lazuli corridor is a good alternative in this connection.
- These nations in the region do not impose tariffs or other restrictions on items made in Afghanistan. Due to the lack of customs checks, Afghan vehicles can load and unload goods in each of these nations.
- Lapis Lazuli Road would free Afghanistan from dependence of Pakistan and Iran.
- Lapis Lazuli route, a significant regional project, can help boost Afghanistan's economy and facilitate its share in global trade and commerce.

4.4 International Trade Landscape in Afghanistan

Turkmenistan and Turkey receive Afghanistan's primary exports of dry fruits, animal skin, wool, and herbs (Rahim, 2019). In Afghanistan, minerals are abundant. The talc mineral case provides additional information about the condition and potential of Afghanistan's mining sector. A recent study claims that Pakistan is the destination of Afghan talc exports (Byrd & Noorani, 2017). This talc is exported from Pakistan to other countries. In today's talc and mineral markets, Pakistan is well-known as a producer, consumer, and exporter. According to statistics from 2016, Pakistan produced 125,330 MT (metric tons) of talc, but only 305,970 MT, worth around $56.7 million, were exported. The data shows that this nation used 120,000 MT of talc in the same year. This year, Pakistan's domestic output was almost equal to its domestic consumption, while imports from other nations were minimal. The fact that all of Afghanistan's talc was sold to Pakistan demonstrates how Afghan talc fills in the remaining gap. Afghanistan can sell its minerals to Europe and international bazaars by using the other route of Lapis Lazuli. Afghanistan's exports to the EU remained over €50 million during its peak years, but its imports increased to almost €900 million. In the previous decades, 2012 was the only year in which bilateral commerce exceeded $1 billion (Rahim, 2019).

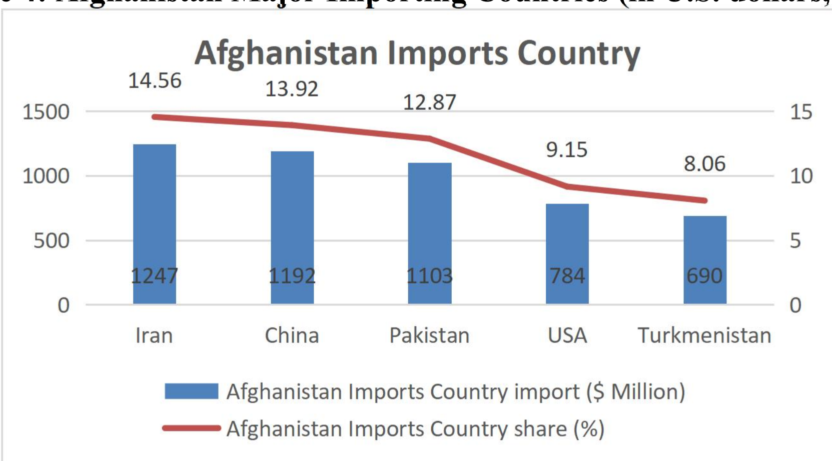
Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI) counts the Lapis Lazuli route as the shortest and the most inexpensive corridor for transit between Afghanistan, Asia and Europe. 80 percent of exports to Europe can be done by rail across black and Caspian Seaby ship (Agenda, 2017). Based on statistics from the United Nations COMTRADE database (2019), the following illustration shows Afghanistan's exports to various countries in USD.

Figure 3: Afghanistan Major Exporting Countries (in U.S. dollars, 2019)



Source: UNComtrade

Figure 4: Afghanistan Major Importing Countries (in U.S. dollars, 2019)



Source: UNComtrade

The figures presented above demonstrate that Afghanistan engages in trade, both exporting and importing, primarily with Asian countries that have a strong interest in the Lapis Lazuli corridor. These statistics pertain to the year 2019 and highlight the significant importance of the corridor for the economic and social well-being of Asian nations.

4.5 Turkmenistan

The countries of Central Asia have been obliged to establish foreign policies based on geopolitics due to the competition for influence in resource-rich Central Asia amongst global power states. Turkmenistan, one of these nations, adopted permanent neutrality in 1995, demonstrating in its foreign policy a strong commitment to world peace and security (Rahim, 2019) . Each participant has opportunities along the Lapis Lazuli route, a fact highlighted strongly by Qadri &Siddiqui (2020). Turkmenistan is the fourth-largest producer and exporter of natural gas in the world, sending its natural gas to Iran, China, and Russia (Rahim, 2019). For its economy to thrive, Turkmenistan needs different export avenues. The lapis lazuli corridor will enable the export of Turkmen goods to the European market. Turkmenistan intends to diversify its economy and is aware of the risks associated with its reliance on the heavy hydrocarbon sector. To develop into an important global transit hub, Turkmenistan has made considerable investments in trade and transit. The Lapis Lazuli Route Agreement is in line with this nation's intended aims, which include a strong integration of Turkmenistan through the South Caucasus, Turkey, and ultimately Europe (Rahim, 2019). Through the Lapis Lazuli Route, trade between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, and forward links to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, is expected to grow in the future, especially by finalizing TAPI natural gas pipeline (Growth, 2015).

4.6 Azerbaijan

Formerly a colony of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan is situated along the Lapis Lazuli corridor. Azerbaijan's economy deteriorated following its 1991 liberation from the Soviet Union. It made significant economic progress with its hydrocarbon resources. By 1995, Azerbaijan's economy had grown by more than 40% since 1989, but since the mid-2000s, it has made substantial progress, with poverty dropping to 6% in 2012 and per capita GDP reaching $7886 in 2014. The country was found to be particularly vulnerable to external shocks as a result of its significant dependence and concentration on the production of hydrocarbons. According to data on economic structure from 2007 to 2015, the manufacturing sector contributed less than 5% of the GDP, although mining accounted for between 26-42% of the GDP throughout this time. As a result, studies show that trade can play a crucial part in Azerbaijan's need to diversify its economy (Yılmaz & Talash, 2017; Huang, 2018; Sultonov, 2022).

Lapis Lazuli Corridor is a regional priority; the port traffic may rise with the facilitation and simplification of customs procedures. Additionally, there is a chance for increased trade between Afghanistan and Azerbaijan, which would profit from these nations' strategic location (Starr et. al, 2015; Rahim, 2019).

4.7 Georgia

Georgia, which shares borders with Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, and the Black Sea, had to enlist the assistance of western nations to counteract Persia's and Russia's influence (Rahim, 2019) .A good transit route for moving gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey is through Georgia, which is connected to Russia, Azerbaijan, and via the Black Sea to Turkey. In order to create economic prospects, Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan formed a cooperative venture that built the South Caucuses Pipeline (gas pipeline), the Baku-Tbilisi Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway. The Lapis Lazuli route is crucial for this nation to strengthen these ties. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor offers further opportunities for regional countries' integration and pursues its goals to counteract Russian influence and enhance trade among members in order to open up new markets (Daly, 2017; Ashrafi & Kalaiah, 2021; Sultanov, 2022).

4.8 Turkey

Turkey is the fifth and last country in the Lapis Lazuli route, which aims to become an energy transfer point to European nations. The Lapis Lazuli corridor is one of the most pivotal catalysts to achieve this goal. For this reason, Turkey is attempting to use this corridor to transport Lapis Lazuli items to Europe. Currently, Russia is the EU's top oil and gas supplier. In an effort to minimize their reliance on Russia, the US and EU support projects like the Nabucco gas pipeline to transfer gas from the Caspian and Middle East to Europe and help Turkey become an energy cross-route. The Caspian spur of the Nabucco pipeline would be a danger in comparison to Russia's monopoly and Iran's attempts to sell gas to Europe via the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, whose construction agreements were presented and approved by the US in 1999. Additionally, Turkmen exports will be less reliant on China. Additionally, a subsea pipeline from Kazakhstan can transport gas to the EU. The pipeline will go to Turkey via the countries of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, specifically Azerbaijan and Georgia. Rahim (2019) reiterates in his study how Turkey wants to serve as a hub for European Union energy transit. The Lapis Lazuli corridor stretches via Georgia and networks Turkey through land and a number of European nations such as Bulgaria, Romania and the Ukraine, passing the Black Sea and through Kars and Bosphorusto Istanbul.

By confirming the decision of Pakistan to connect to the Lapis Lazuli route, former PM Sharif at the Conference on Sustainable Global Transport in 2016 said, “I would like to take this historic opportunity to announce our agreement in principle to join the Ashgabat Agreement as well as the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.” Pakistan will then gain from its geostrategic advantage in being the gateway to Central Asia in both the regional and global contexts thanks to the Lapis Lazuli corridor (Qadri &Siddiqui, 2020; Kakar, 2020). The CPEC, Lapis Lazuli route and the Ashgabat Agreement by synchronizing between each other at some point will open land-locked countries to the rest of the region.

4.9 Indian Subcontinent

Recent economic developments on the Indian subcontinent indicate that it will be a land driven by the market for global economic development in the coming decades. Given that Europe is anticipated to be a trading partner for many Asian nations, the longer-term perspective of regional growth necessitates adjustments in transportation. Tens of billions of dollars in funding will be required for infrastructure expansion, but political risks seem to provide a challenge. Depending on the origin of the shipment, it takes 6-7 weeks to transport products by sea from China to Europe. It takes roughly 5–6 weeks to transport marine goods to Europe, depending on whether the port is in Mumbai or Kolkata for the Indian subcontinent. In reality, sea transportation predominates trade between Asian and European markets, but manufacturers and consumers make decisions about land transportation based on strategic calculations across continents as well. Significant advantages include strategies for current and future infrastructure expansion and supply times via land routes (Tsereteli, 2019).

Three trans-Eurasian Land Transit routes are considered for fulfill large scale transportation requirements: Southerly Corridor with the ability to link the Indian subcontinent to Europe; Middle Corridor (Silk Road between China and Europe through Central Asia); and North Northern Corridor (East Asia with Europe through the Russian transit system by Trans-Siberian railroad). Lapis lazuli from Afghanistan is discovered in very early Pharaonic tombs in Egypt and Sri Lanka, when the goods from the Indus Valley first emerge in archaeological sites in the Middle and Far East (Starr, 2018).

This alternative has rising strategic relevance for the future of the Indian subcontinent's conne ctivity with Central Asian, Caucasian, Turkish, and European bazaars despite its political and security challenges. The high economic progress in Indian subcontinent, and the larger and younger population of India than China, it is naturally expected that total trade volumes will grow exponentially with Europe in the coming decades (Tsereteli, 2019).

There are many possibilities available for the continental transit system between the Indian subcontinent and Europe. The analysis's major and principal focus is on a revival of the historic Indian Subcontinent, Afghanistan, and Central Asia in the direction of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. It can boost the unused potential to increase trade with India, Central Asia and the world. To achieve regional economic integration, transit and trade agreements must be implemented, as the same sentiment was echoed in studies by Shanti (2018). The success of these projects will depend on Afghanistan's stability.

Activation and implementation of the Lapis Lazuli route by the aforementioned nations carries expectations and optimism for the corridor's future.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor's strategic priorities analysis suggests that the landlocked nations are attempting to diversify their economies. Afghanistan aims to make sure that commercial channels to global bazaars are level, reliable, and affordable. Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan seek diversifying of their economies in pursuit of high hydrocarbon supported economic development industry. However, the shocks brought on by dropping oil prices had an impact on economic growth. Black Sea harbors of Azerbaijan will produce excellent predictions for the country's and the region's economic growth. It can serve as a transit country between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Turkey aspires to expand into Central Asia and the South Caucasus in order to strengthen its position in the region. According to the report, the Corridor satisfies important economic needs. When the corridor is fully operational, Turkey can contribute to integration in the area and benefit from it.

The strategic priorities of the landlocked nations indicate that they desire to diversify their economies. Afghanistan makes an effort to ensure smooth, affordable, and reasonable trade routes to regional and international markets. Two resource-rich nations, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, desire to diversify their economies and boost their hydrocarbon industries. Black Sea ports owned by Azerbaijan might provide endless opportunities for the nation and the region to experience economic progress. It will function as a good transit corridor between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Turkey wants its influence in Central Asia and South Caucasus. Lapis Lazuli Corridor has the ability to fulfil economic goals, contribute to member nations' strong integration for economic cooperation, and gain benefits when it is fully operational.

For Afghan producers, regional transit and bilateral trade agreements are essential because they provide preferential access to new markets. For its own economic benefit, Afghanistan aims to strengthen and quicken the implementation of such accords. The emphasis in the near future will be on regional and international trade and investment linkages that can profit from interacting with global markets to export resources, commodities, and services. It will promote trade and local and foreign investment in Afghanistan in their competitive self-interest. More integration into the multidimensional trading system is made possible by regional trade and transit. If Afghanistan does not make efforts to boost commerce, it will not be able to experience sustainable economic progress. Greater regional collaboration is essential for growth over the long run. To facilitate the smooth flow of products, it is essential to build a railway and supporting infrastructure from Afghanistan to its neighbours and other nearby nations. These agreements should also cover transit and trade. In addition, significant investment projects like the Chabhar and Five Nations Railways Corridor are scheduled to function as specialized components of the Lapis-Lazuli route Agreement. Finally, this massive international transit route would link Europe and Afghanistan.

Afghanistan may have the advantage of connecting Central Asia, which is abundant in energy, with South Asia, which has warm water but is lacking in energy (Warikoo, 2006; Ahmad &Alam, 2015). This issue of comparative advantage is a fundamental driver of Afghanistan's potential for a lucrative commerce route connecting countries through the Lapiz Lazuli commerce route.Asia will strengthen its position as the world's region with the fastest growth rate by doing research and cooperating. We can transform international issues into possibilities that will be good for the economies of all members by cooperating in a single research area.

6. Recommended Solutions to the problems in front of Asian trade success are:

❖ Establishing a joint administration system for transit routes management by related countries.
❖ Calculation of cost of non-cooperation by officials of Asian countries.
❖ Calculation of benefits of trade flow from Europe and central Asia through Afghanistan to south Asia.
❖ Insist on trade and business policies rather than political policy by Asian countries.
❖ Facilitation of visa policies for business in Asian countries must be made meaningfully less prohibitive.
❖ Feasibility research should suggest locations built on Lapis Lazuli Corridor, Five Nations Railway and Garland Highway routes.

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