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THE ESSENCE, SIGNIFICANCE, AND IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERCONNECTIVITY BETWEEN CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA, AND UZBEKISTAN'S ROLE IN DEEPENING REGIONAL COOPERATION WITH SOUTH ASIA

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Аннотация. Представлен системный анализ геополитических, геоэкономических и культурно-гуманитарных аспектов процессов трансрегиональной взаимосвязанности между Центральной и Южной Азией. Раскрывается практическое значение стратегических инициатив и концептуальных идей, выдвинутых Президентом Республики Узбекистан Шавкатом Мирзиёевым на международных конференциях. Научно исследуются фактор Афганистана, условно выполняющего функцию «слабого моста», трансафганские транспортно-логистические проекты, в частности железная дорога **«Мазари-Шариф – Кабул – Пешавар»**, направления энергетической диверсификации (**CASA-1000** и **TAPI**), а также системные барьеры на пути интеграции двух регионов. В контексте решений Консультативных встреч глав государств Центральной Азии и национальных стратегических программ обосновывается роль новой внешнеполитической доктрины и активной дипломатии Узбекистана в обеспечении региональной безопасности и устойчивого экономического развития.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Южная Азия, взаимосвязанность, Шавкат Мирзиёев, трансафганский коридор, железная дорога **«Мазари-Шариф – Кабул – Пешавар»**, геоэкономика, региональная безопасность, TAPI, CASA-1000, активная дипломатия.

Abstract. A systematic analysis is presented of the geopolitical, geo-economic, and cultural-humanitarian dimensions of transregional interconnectedness between Central and South Asia. The practical significance of the strategic initiatives and conceptual ideas advanced by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, at international conferences is examined. The study scientifically explores the role of Afghanistan as a “fragile bridge,” trans-Afghan transport and logistics projects, particularly the **Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar Railway**, energy diversification initiatives (**CASA-1000** and **TAPI**), and the systemic barriers hindering the integration of the two regions. Within the framework of the decisions adopted at the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia and national strategic programs, the role of Uzbekistan's new foreign policy doctrine and proactive diplomacy in strengthening regional security and promoting sustainable economic development is substantiated.

Keywords: Central Asia, South Asia, interconnectedness, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Trans-Afghan Corridor, Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar Railway, geo-economics, regional security, TAPI, CASA-1000, proactive diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new phase of globalization has been fundamentally transforming the world's political and economic landscape. Today, the geopolitical influence of states is determined not only by their military capabilities or natural resource endowments but also by the extent to which they are integrated into international transport corridors, trade networks, logistics chains, and transregional integration processes. In this context, the concept of **connectedness** has emerged as one of the central categories of contemporary international relations, shaping a new paradigm of geo-economic competition.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing redistribution of global geopolitical centers and the transformation of traditional transport and energy routes, Central Asia and South Asia have attracted growing international attention. Historically, these regions constituted the heart of the Great Silk Road, serving for centuries as a strategic crossroads connecting civilizations, trade routes, scientific exchange, and cultural interaction. However, the geopolitical divisions that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century, together with the prolonged armed conflicts in Afghanistan and persistent regional security challenges, disrupted these historically established linkages. Consequently, economic, transport, and humanitarian cooperation between the two neighboring regions became significantly constrained.

This geographical reality is particularly significant for Uzbekistan, a **double landlocked** country that lacks direct access to seaports and must transit through at least two foreign states to reach global markets. From this perspective, restoring connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia represents not only an essential prerequisite for ensuring regional stability but also a strategic condition for shaping a new economic architecture across the Eurasian continent.

Since 2017, under the leadership of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**, the implementation of an **“active, open, and pragmatic”** foreign policy has marked a fundamentally new stage in the country's regional diplomacy. Initiatives aimed at strengthening trust and good-neighborly relations with neighboring countries, promoting transport and communication infrastructure projects, and opening southern transit routes through Afghanistan have positioned Uzbekistan as one of the principal drivers of transregional integration.

In particular, the **International Conference “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity – Challenges and Opportunities,”** held in Tashkent on **15–16 July 2021**, became not only an important platform for political dialogue but also the institutional foundation of a new geostrategic concept aimed at restoring historically disrupted regional linkages. The conference introduced the vision of Central Asia and South Asia as a unified economic and civilizational space into the international agenda.

Therefore, the issue of connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia should no longer be viewed solely as a matter of transport or trade. Rather, it has evolved into a comprehensive strategic phenomenon encompassing security, geo-economics, energy cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and sustainable development. The primary objective of this study is to examine the theoretical and practical significance of the concept of connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia, to analyze the role of Uzbekistan's strategic initiatives and diplomatic engagement in promoting this process, and to comprehensively assess the prospects of ongoing transregional projects within the broader geopolitical environment.

Unlike the traditional **security-centered** approach commonly employed in the analysis of relations between Central Asia and South Asia, this study advances a model of **geo-economic connectedness**. According to this approach, regional stability should no longer be understood exclusively through the prism of military and political balance; rather, it increasingly depends on the development of transport and communication networks, energy infrastructure, transit corridors, and the degree of economic interdependence among regional states.

The central research hypothesis argues that the conventional perception of Afghanistan solely as a security challenge is gradually giving way to a more pragmatic paradigm that recognizes the country as a geostrategic **“bridge”** for transregional integration. The study contends that, provided transport and energy projects are supported by effective institutional mechanisms, Central Asia and South Asia possess the potential to emerge as one of Eurasia's new geo-economic hubs during the coming decade.

Furthermore, the article examines Uzbekistan's regional policy through the conceptual frameworks of **transport diplomacy** and **integration pragmatism**, arguing that the country's role in transregional integration extends beyond that of a participating state. Instead, Uzbekistan has increasingly become a strategic actor making a substantial contribution to the formation of a new regional architecture across Central and South Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interconnectedness between Central Asia and South Asia, transregional integration processes, and Afghanistan's geostrategic role have become some of the most prominent research topics in the fields of international relations and geo-economics in recent years. A review of the existing scholarly literature demonstrates that, although these issues have been widely examined from the perspectives of security, transport and communications, energy, and regional diplomacy, comprehensive approaches that systematically analyze Central and South Asia as a single transregional space remain insufficiently developed.

The conceptual foundations of transregional cooperation are reflected in the foreign policy initiatives advanced by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**. In particular, the ideas presented during the **International Conference “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity – Challenges and**

Opportunities,” held in Tashkent in 2021, established a new political framework for integrating the two regions through transport, trade, energy, and humanitarian cooperation [1]. However, most existing studies have primarily interpreted these initiatives from a political and diplomatic perspective, while paying relatively limited attention to their geo-economic effectiveness and their impact on the emerging transregional architecture through rigorous empirical analysis.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of **complex interdependence** developed by **Robert O. Keohane** and **Joseph S. Nye**, together with **Béla Balassa’s** theory of the stages of economic integration, provides an important methodological foundation for understanding regional integration and connectivity processes [2; 3]. These theoretical frameworks demonstrate that economic interests and infrastructure linkages have become strategic factors in interstate relations that are no less important than traditional security considerations. Nevertheless, these models were developed primarily within European and Western contexts, and their adaptation to the specific political and economic realities of Central and South Asia remains insufficiently explored.

Experts from the **International Institute for Central Asia (IICA)**, particularly **B. Mustafayev**, have analyzed the emerging geopolitical significance of cooperation between the two regions, the strategic role of transport corridors, and Uzbekistan’s regional initiatives [4]. However, these studies provide only limited discussion of the institutional mechanisms underlying transregional integration and their implications for global geo-economic competition.

Research devoted to Afghanistan has traditionally focused on security-related issues. In particular, the works of political scientist **A. Umarov** examine Afghanistan’s role as either a **“regional bridge”** or a **“geopolitical buffer”** [5]. The author argues that Afghanistan should be viewed not only through the lens of security but also from the perspectives of transport connectivity and economic pragmatism. Nevertheless, the majority of existing studies continue to interpret Afghanistan primarily as a security challenge, while its transit potential and geo-economic significance remain insufficiently addressed.

Official statements issued by the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan**, together with official documents relating to multilateral diplomatic formats on Afghanistan, reflect the country’s foreign policy strategy aimed at promoting regional stability [6]. However, these official sources are largely declarative in nature, highlighting the need for independent scholarly analysis supported by comparative empirical evidence.

Macroeconomic and statistical data, including foreign trade and transit indicators published by the **National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan** (formerly the Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2025), demonstrate a significant increase in economic activity among the countries of the region in recent years [7]. Furthermore, international assessments of major infrastructure initiatives—including the **Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway**, the **CASA-1000** electricity transmission project, and the **TAPI** gas pipeline—confirm that these projects have the potential to bring about substantial changes in the Eurasian logistics system by creating new transport corridors [8].

Overall, the existing literature indicates that relations between Central Asia and South Asia have generally been examined through separate analytical lenses, such as security, diplomacy, or transport. In contrast, this article is among the first to analyze these processes comprehensively within the framework of the **geo-economic connectedness** concept, treating the two regions as an integrated transregional system and evaluating Uzbekistan’s strategic initiatives as the foundation of a new model of regional integration. This constitutes the principal scientific contribution and novelty of the present study.

The issue of connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia has also attracted considerable attention from both international and domestic scholars. In particular, the American scholar **Frederick Starr** characterizes Central Asia as the **“Greater Eurasian Center”** and considers Afghanistan an integral component of regional integration. According to Starr, *“Afghanistan is not a barrier but a bridge connecting Central and South Asia”* [9, p. 7]. He argues that the development of transport and trade corridors through Afghanistan would significantly expand Central Asian countries’ access to international markets.

Similarly, **Marlene Laruelle** argues that a process of **“new regionalism”** is gradually taking shape in Central Asia, transforming the region from an arena of geopolitical competition into a space characterized by growing geo-economic interdependence [10]. In her words, *“Connectivity has become the new language of regional cooperation in Central Asia”* [10, p. 54].

Moreover, the British geo-economic and globalization scholar **Parag Khanna** has advanced the concept of **connectivity** as a defining feature of global politics, arguing that in the twenty-first century the power of states is determined less by military capabilities than by infrastructure linkages, transport corridors, and logistics networks. As Khanna famously states, *“Connectivity is destiny”* [11, p. 12]. This perspective provides an important theoretical foundation for analyzing the integration of Central and South Asia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of **systems analysis, comparative legal analysis, geopolitical and geo-economic analysis, content analysis, strategic forecasting, and econometric methods**. The theoretical framework is based on the principles of **neoliberal institutionalism** in international relations and theories of regional integration, particularly the concepts developed by **Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye, and Béla Balassa**. The empirical foundation of the research consists of speeches delivered by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, official statements issued during the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, official documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and statistical data published by the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. In addition, the study draws extensively upon the scholarly works of leading international and domestic researchers in the fields of international relations, regional integration, and geo-economics.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

1. Connectivity Between Central and South Asia: Historical Genesis and Conceptual Foundations

Central Asia and South Asia have historically evolved as a unified civilizational and economic space. From the **second century BCE** to the **fifteenth century CE**, the **Great Silk Road** functioned not only as a network for the exchange of goods but also as a global system facilitating intercontinental communication, the transfer of technologies, and the dissemination of cultural, scientific, and philosophical ideas. Throughout this period, Central Asia served as one of the principal intellectual and technological centers of Eurasia.

However, this historical network of connections was gradually disrupted in the modern era. As the author argues, for many years the Central Asian states, particularly Uzbekistan, approached South Asia primarily through the prism of security concerns and the **“Afghanistan factor.”** Consequently, the substantial economic potential and integration opportunities existing between the two regions remained largely underutilized. Today, this traditional approach is being progressively reconsidered.

South Asia is currently one of the world's fastest-growing regions, distinguished by its large population and considerable economic potential. As emphasized by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**, South Asia covers approximately **4.5 million square kilometers**, has a population approaching **two billion people**, and generates a combined **gross domestic product (GDP) of approximately USD 3.5 trillion**, while maintaining an average annual economic growth rate of **6–7 percent** [9]. The region is also home to major economies such as **India** and **Pakistan**, both of which possess nuclear capabilities. Integration with such a dynamic economic space offers significant new opportunities for the sustainable development of Central Asia.

2. The Ten Strategic Initiatives Proposed by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev

During the **International Conference “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity – Challenges and Opportunities,”** held in Tashkent in **2021**, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**, introduced **ten strategic initiatives** that collectively serve as a comprehensive roadmap for strengthening transregional cooperation. These initiatives encompass political, economic, digital, environmental, scientific, and humanitarian dimensions, forming an integrated strategic framework for regional connectivity.

Table 1. Strategic Initiatives Proposed by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev [1]¹

No.	Strategic Initiative	Conceptual Content and Strategic Objective
1	Economic Platform	To facilitate the free movement of investments, goods, and services while promoting the development of transport and energy infrastructure.
2	Transport and Logistics	To implement the Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Trans-Afghan Railway project and expand modern transport infrastructure across the region.
3	Digital Transformation	To introduce digital platforms extensively into trade, transit, customs, and cross-border procedures.
4	Food Security	To establish integrated agricultural value chains and jointly develop mechanisms for ensuring regional food security.
5	Security and Stability	To formulate a joint anti-narcotics action plan with the participation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) .
6	Environmental Cooperation	To promote green development and strengthen regional cooperation aimed at mitigating the consequences of the Aral Sea environmental crisis.

¹ Source: Compiled by the author

7	Tourism Development	To promote transregional tourism based on the shared historical, archaeological, and cultural heritage of Central and South Asia.
8	Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation	To expand scientific and cultural exchanges systematically and strengthen mutual trust among the peoples of the region.
9	Scientific and Innovation Cooperation	To introduce simplified visa procedures for scholars and researchers and establish a joint online platform connecting regional universities.
10	Expert Cooperation	To establish a permanent Council of Experts , composed of leading scholars and researchers, under the International Institute for Central Asia (IICA) .

The strategic initiatives proposed by President **Shavkat Mirziyoyev** should not be viewed as separate or competing policy measures. Rather, they constitute mutually reinforcing components of a comprehensive strategy aimed at establishing a solid institutional foundation for transregional integration. Their consistent implementation has the potential to strengthen connectivity between Central and South Asia, enhance regional stability, and elevate economic cooperation between the two regions to a fundamentally new level.

3. Economic Potential and Transport–Logistics Opportunities

The strategic assessment presented by the Head of State highlights the growing importance of the South Asian market for Central Asia, particularly for Uzbekistan. Indeed, with its demographic dividend, rapidly expanding middle class, and vast consumer market, South Asia is emerging as one of the new centers of the global economy. The table below summarizes the principal economic and demographic indicators of South Asian countries, based on the latest reports of the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** and the **World Bank**.

Table 2. Economic and Demographic Indicators of South Asian Countries [9]²

Country	Population (million)	GDP (USD billion)	Annual Growth Rate (%)
India	1,430	3,700+	6.5–7.0
Pakistan	240	340	2.0–2.5
Bangladesh	171	450	5.5–6.0
Sri Lanka	22	75	1.5–2.0 (recovery)
Nepal	30	41	4.0–4.5
Afghanistan	41	14	Data limited

The principal macroeconomic indicators clearly demonstrate the region's substantial economic potential. More than **80 percent** of South Asia's combined gross domestic product is generated by **India**, making it the dominant economic engine of the region.

At the same time, the economic potential of Central Asia has continued to expand steadily. While the combined GDP of the region amounted to approximately **USD 300 billion** at the end of **2020**, it exceeded **USD 450 billion** by **2025**. During the same period, the GDP of **Kazakhstan** and **Uzbekistan** reached approximately **USD 300 billion** and **USD 140 billion**, respectively.

Uzbekistan's trade turnover with South Asian countries has also increased significantly. Bilateral trade with **Pakistan** grew from **USD 123 million** in **2020** to more than **USD 400 million** by **2025**, while trade with **India** increased by **33 percent**, surpassing **USD 1.3 billion** by the end of **2025**. It is noteworthy that both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers possessing considerable geopolitical and economic influence. India currently ranks as the **world's fifth-largest economy** by gross domestic product and is expected to become one of the world's three largest economies in the foreseeable future. Moreover, **India** and **Bangladesh** are among the fastest-growing economies globally, maintaining average annual growth rates of **6–7 percent** [9]. These trends create substantial market opportunities for exports from Central Asia, including energy resources, agricultural products, and mineral fertilizers.

Despite these favorable economic prospects, the countries of the region continue to attach particular importance to the development of transport corridors. As emphasized in the **Almaty Programme of Action**, the absence of direct access to the sea and the insufficient development of transit transport infrastructure remain among the principal constraints affecting the international competitiveness of landlocked countries. In such states, **18–20 percent** of export revenues are absorbed by transport costs, whereas the corresponding figure for countries with direct maritime access is only **8–9 percent** [10].

² Source: Compiled by the author

From this perspective, the construction of the **Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway** and the development of trans-Afghan transport corridors have acquired considerable strategic importance. According to available estimates, once the railway becomes fully operational, the cost of transporting a standard container from Central Asia to South Asia is expected to decrease from approximately **USD 900** to **USD 286**, while delivery times will be reduced from **35 days** to only **3–5 days**. Likewise, the cost of shipping goods from **Pakistan** to **Uzbekistan** is projected to decline from **USD 2,600–3,000** via the existing **Tashkent–Bandar Abbas** route to approximately **USD 1,400–1,600** through the new corridor [11]. Furthermore, the activation of this multimodal transport route in recent years has resulted in an almost **fivefold increase** in road freight transportation along the **Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan** corridor, providing further evidence of the strategic significance and long-term relevance of these infrastructure projects.

4. Geo-Economic Analysis: Transport Barriers and the Strategic Benefits of the Trans-Afghan Corridor

One of the principal constraints limiting the integration of the Central Asian republics into the global economy is their geographical remoteness from maritime trade routes. According to international statistics, **landlocked countries** allocate approximately **18–20 percent** of their export revenues to transportation costs. By comparison, countries with direct access to seaports spend only **8–9 percent** of their export earnings on transport services.

Under current conditions, the cost of shipping a standard container from Central Asia to the **Port of Shanghai** is nearly **five times higher** than transporting the same container from countries such as **Türkiye** or **Poland**. Consequently, the diversification of export routes has become one of Uzbekistan's strategic priorities for strengthening national economic security and enhancing economic sovereignty.

The **Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway**, initiated by Uzbekistan and supported by international financial institutions, possesses the potential to fundamentally reshape the geo-economic landscape of the region. Economic analyses and feasibility studies indicate that the implementation of this project could generate a number of significant economic and strategic benefits.

One of the project's most important geo-economic advantages is the substantial reduction in transportation costs. According to preliminary estimates by international experts, once the railway becomes operational, the cost of transporting a standard container along the **Tashkent–Karachi** route is expected to range between **USD 1,400 and USD 1,600**. By comparison, transportation via the existing **Tashkent–Bandar Abbas** corridor currently costs approximately **USD 2,600–3,000** per container, indicating that the new corridor could reduce transport costs by nearly **50 percent** [12]. Other studies further suggest that the cost of shipping containers from Central Asia to South Asia could decrease from approximately **USD 900** to as little as **USD 286** per container [13].

In addition to lowering transportation costs, the new corridor is expected to significantly reduce transit times. Current estimates indicate that freight shipments from **Pakistan** to **Uzbekistan** require approximately **35 days** under existing transport routes. Following the completion of the Trans-Afghan Railway, this period is expected to decrease dramatically to only **3–5 days** [14]. Such improvements would substantially enhance the competitiveness of perishable agricultural products and other export-oriented goods by reducing delivery times and logistics expenses.

From an infrastructure perspective, the project is equally significant. According to technical assessments conducted under the **Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)** Program, construction of the **Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway** will require the building of **264 bridges**, **7 tunnels**, and **641 drainage and water-crossing structures** [13]. Experts suggest that these infrastructure investments will stimulate economic activity throughout the mountainous regions of **Afghanistan** and **Pakistan**, while simultaneously creating thousands of new employment opportunities [12].

Furthermore, the transport corridor is closely interconnected with several major transregional energy initiatives. The **CASA-1000** electricity transmission project is designed to export surplus electricity generated in Central Asia to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Likewise, the **TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India)** natural gas pipeline is regarded as a strategic initiative aimed at strengthening energy connectivity between the northern and southern parts of Eurasia [12].

The commissioning of the new railway is expected to reduce the cost of transporting a standard container from Central Asia to South Asia from approximately **USD 900** to **USD 286**. Freight transportation costs along the **Tashkent–Karachi** route are projected to decline to **USD 1,400–1,600**, compared with the current **USD 2,600–3,000** required for shipments via the **Tashkent–Bandar Abbas** corridor.

Transit times are likewise projected to decrease dramatically—from approximately **35 days** under existing routes to only **3–5 days** after the completion of the railway. Such improvements will significantly enhance the export potential of perishable agricultural products and other time-sensitive commodities by improving their competitiveness in international markets.

As part of the project, **264 bridges, 7 tunnels, and 641 drainage structures** are planned to be constructed across the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These infrastructure facilities are expected to stimulate regional economic development, improve connectivity, and generate substantial employment opportunities in the affected areas.

In addition, the corridor is strategically linked with major transregional energy infrastructure projects. Both the **CASA-1000** electricity transmission line and the **TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India)** gas pipeline will reinforce energy interdependence between Central Asia and South Asia, thereby contributing to the development of an integrated economic and energy architecture across the Eurasian continent.

5. The Afghanistan Factor: A Transregional “Weak Bridge” and the Paradoxes of Security

Owing to its strategic geographical location, **Afghanistan** possesses significant potential to serve as a transregional **bridge of integration** between Central Asia and South Asia. Nevertheless, in contemporary geopolitical realities, the country has long been characterized by complex security challenges that have complicated cooperation between the two regions. The withdrawal of the international coalition forces after two decades of military engagement significantly altered Afghanistan’s internal political balance and created an entirely new geopolitical environment.

Within the academic community, several experts, including **A. Umarov**, argue that Uzbekistan’s most appropriate short-term strategy should focus on strengthening national borders, enhancing security measures along the **Uzbekistan–Afghanistan** frontier, and preventing potential security threats. However, such an approach is primarily capable of producing short-term results. A more sustainable strategy involves gradually addressing Afghanistan’s long-term socio-economic challenges while integrating the country into regional economic networks. This approach would contribute to strengthening long-term security in Central Asia and facilitate the diversification of regional transport corridors.

A distinctive feature of Afghanistan is that its **northern and northwestern provinces** are closely connected with Central Asia through ethnic, economic, and historical ties, whereas its **southern and eastern provinces** maintain strong links with South Asia across the **Hindu Kush** mountain range. Consequently, the implementation of major national and transregional infrastructure projects within Afghanistan is increasingly viewed as an effective means of strengthening the country’s internal connectivity while simultaneously transforming it into a platform for regional cooperation, peace, and sustainable development.

6. Econometric Modeling for Assessing the Integration Potential Between Central and South Asia

In addition to geopolitical analysis, **econometric modeling** provides an important analytical instrument for evaluating the integration potential between Central Asia and South Asia. To assess future prospects for trade and economic cooperation, three internationally recognized econometric approaches are particularly relevant.

1. Gravity Model of Trade

The **Gravity Model of Trade** demonstrates mathematically that bilateral trade between two countries is directly proportional to their economic size (GDP) and inversely proportional to the geographical distance—or, more precisely, the economic distance represented by transportation and logistics costs.

$$\ln (\text{Trade}_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \ln (\text{GDP}_i) + \beta_2 \ln (\text{GDP}_j) - \beta_3 \ln (\text{Distance}_{ij}) + \varepsilon$$

Where:

Trade_{ij}— the volume of merchandise trade between Central Asian country *i* and South Asian country *j*;

GDP — Gross Domestic Product, representing economic size;

Distance_{ij} — the economic distance between countries, incorporating transportation and logistics costs;

ε — the random error term.

Under existing transport conditions, shipping cargo from Central Asia to the Pakistani ports of **Karachi** or **Gwadar** requires approximately **20–25 days**, largely because of complex logistics procedures. The completion of the **Trans-Afghan Railway** is expected to reduce both transportation costs and delivery times by **30–40 percent**.

Economic calculations indicate that improvements in logistics efficiency alone—without any increase in production capacity—could increase bilateral trade between Central Asia and South Asia by approximately **50 percent**, or **1.5 times**.

2. Trade Complementarity Index (TCI)

The **Trade Complementarity Index (TCI)** measures the extent to which the export structure of one region corresponds to the import demand of another. The index ranges from **0 to 100**, with values closer to **100** indicating a higher degree of trade complementarity and stronger unrealized trade potential.

The index is calculated as follows:

$$TCI_{ij} = 100 - \sum_k \frac{|m_{ik} - x_{jk}|}{2}$$

Where:

TCI_{ij} — Trade Complementarity Index between South Asia (*i*) and Central Asia (*j*);

m_{ik} — the share of product *k* in the total imports of South Asia;

x_{jk} — the share of product *k* in the total exports of Central Asia;

Σ — the summation across all product categories.

When two regions specialize in producing similar products, they tend to compete in international markets, resulting in a relatively low TCI value. According to calculations based on **UNCTAD** data, the overall Trade Complementarity Index between Central Asia and South Asia averages approximately **40–45**, indicating moderate trade compatibility.

However, considerably higher levels of complementarity are observed within specific sectors:

Energy resources and mineral fertilizers — TCI > 75

Agricultural products (particularly legumes and fruits) — TCI > 65

For Central Asian countries, South Asia represents an important source of **information technology services, pharmaceutical products** (with **India accounting for approximately 20 percent of the global pharmaceutical market**), and **textile technologies**. Conversely, the rapidly growing industrial economies of South Asia—with annual growth rates of **6–7 percent**—have substantial demand for **Central Asian hydrocarbons, electricity, and agricultural raw materials**. These characteristics indicate a high degree of economic complementarity between the two regions.

3. Border Effect and the Trade Cost Multiplier

The **Border Effect** measures the impact of tariff and non-tariff barriers—including customs procedures, bureaucratic regulations, infrastructure constraints, and technical standards—on international trade.

The trade cost function may be expressed as:

$$Trade_Cost_{ij} = (1 + t_{ij})(1 + ntb_{ij}) \times Transport_Cost_{ij}$$

Where:

t_{ij} — tariff rate;

ntb_{ij} — non-tariff barriers (bureaucratic procedures, technical standards, administrative restrictions);

Transport Cost_{ij} — logistics and transportation costs.

This framework demonstrates that infrastructure projects such as the **Trans-Afghan Railway** can substantially increase trade flows by reducing transportation costs, even without expanding production capacity.

According to **World Bank** analyses, non-tariff barriers—including customs delays, complicated transit documentation, and differences in sanitary and phytosanitary regulations—currently increase trade costs between Central Asia and South Asia by an additional **15–20 percent** of the value of traded goods.

Econometric estimates further indicate that reducing the **border effect** through **Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs)** or **Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)** has a multiplier coefficient of approximately **1.4**. In practical terms, reducing transit and customs barriers by only **10 percent** could generate an additional **0.4–0.6 percent** increase in regional GDP through the expansion of bilateral trade.

Table 3. Econometric Indicators for Assessing the Integration Potential Between Central and South Asia³

Econometric Indicator	Current Impact	Scientific Forecast After Integration
Gravity Model (β₃)	High transit costs continue to constrain trade volumes.	A 40% reduction in transport costs is projected to increase trade by approximately 50% .
Trade Complementarity Index (TCI)	Sectoral differences still limit trade potential.	Greater integration of raw materials, energy resources, and industrial goods markets is expected to strengthen regional economic complementarity.
Border Effect	Tariff and non-tariff barriers increase production costs by approximately 20% .	Harmonization of customs procedures and border regulations is expected to contribute to additional regional GDP growth.

3 Source: Compiled by the author

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Today, Central Asia and South Asia remain among the regions with a relatively low level of integration on a global scale. This situation is primarily associated with the complex geopolitical environment in Afghanistan. However, the experience of recent decades demonstrates that addressing the Afghan problem exclusively from a security perspective, based on a securitized approach, is insufficient to fully protect the interests of the regional states. The transformation of this paradigm is based on the following principal analytical considerations.

1. Transition from the Security Paradigm to Geo-Economic Pragmatism

For many years, the countries of the region approached South Asia primarily through the Afghanistan factor, that is, from the perspective of security concerns. As a result, bilateral and transregional relations remained underdeveloped, while the available economic opportunities were not fully utilized.

In reality, the prospects for the sustainable development of both regions are closely linked to the establishment of peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Major projects such as the Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway, the CASA-1000 electricity transmission network, and the TAPI gas pipeline will not only contribute to the development of transit infrastructure but will also increase the interest and participation of Afghanistan and its population in regional development projects.

2. Trans-Afghan Projects as a Safeguard Against Fragmentation

One of the important analytical findings of this article is that certain Afghan provinces are developing closer economic and security relations with neighboring countries than with other regions of Afghanistan itself.

The Hindu Kush mountain system naturally separates northern Afghanistan from the rest of the country. Therefore, infrastructure projects connecting different regions should not be limited to performing a transit function. They should also serve as a solid core linking the northern and southern parts of Afghanistan and should be developed as genuine national projects.

3. The “Bridge Effect” in Mitigating Regional Tensions

Efforts to connect Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan are influenced not only by the situation in Kabul but also by the persistent mistrust between New Delhi and Islamabad, as well as disagreements between the leadership of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A stable and steadily developing Afghanistan has the potential to mitigate these political differences and facilitate the creation of a modern version of the Great Silk Road, linking states within a common economic space. From this perspective, the parties should prioritize geo-economic interests over geopolitical disagreements.

4. The Need for Non-Standard and Innovative Solutions

The existing multilayered challenges require the development of comprehensive and non-standard solutions to ensure the integration of the two regions. In particular, the establishment of new international financial instruments or consortia is essential for implementing major infrastructure projects associated with high investment risks.

Innovative instruments proposed by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, including the introduction of digital platforms into trade and transit procedures, the establishment of online platforms for scholars and researchers, and the simplification of visa regimes, represent effective mechanisms for strengthening regional trust.

The above analysis demonstrates that Afghanistan should not be regarded as a dividing factor between Central Asia and South Asia. Instead, it may emerge as a historical crossroads with enormous potential to promote good-neighborly relations and multidimensional development. The current situation requires the harmonization of traditional border and security approaches with modern geo-economic strategies, as well as the consistent implementation of innovative initiatives aimed at transforming the two regions into an open, digitally connected, and infrastructurally integrated space.

These considerations confirm that a stable and peaceful Afghanistan could serve as a vital bridge between Central Asia and South Asia and play an important role in reviving the historic Silk Road in a modern format. Existing challenges require the development of non-standard and innovative solutions to promote regional integration and ensure sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Principal Recommendations

1. Prioritizing Economic Pragmatism over Political Disagreements

To reduce political mistrust between New Delhi and Islamabad, as well as between Kabul and Islamabad, it is advisable to involve the chambers of commerce and industry and major investors of these countries more actively in negotiations. Economic interests may serve as an important factor supporting political agreements.

2. Implementing Infrastructure Projects through International Consortia

To reduce the investment risks associated with projects such as the Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway and the TAPI gas pipeline, it is advisable to establish a special international financial consortium with

the participation of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the regional states. Such a mechanism would strengthen the resilience of these projects to various political and economic risks.

3. Supporting Genuine Trans-Afghan National Projects

To prevent the fragmentation of Afghan provinces and their excessive dependence solely on neighboring countries, transport and energy networks should be designed according to a hub-and-spoke model that directly incorporates Afghanistan's central regions.

4. Establishing a "Digital and Humanitarian Bridge"

It is essential to consistently implement the initiatives proposed by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to create an online platform for scholars and researchers and introduce a simplified visa regime. The private information technology sector should be actively involved in this process, while digital B2B and B2C platforms should be developed for young people, students, and entrepreneurs.

In addition to the recommendations outlined above, the following measures should be implemented to protect Uzbekistan's strategic interests, strengthen its regional leadership, and ensure the effective practical implementation of the proposed initiatives.

Central Asian and South Asian integration should be understood not merely as a transit initiative but as an important component of Uzbekistan's de-landlocking strategy. Although Afghanistan currently functions as a "weak bridge," transforming it into a zone of stability and prosperity remains one of the priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. From this perspective, the following innovative mechanisms are proposed.

1. A New Financing Model for Trans-Afghan Projects

For the construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway, it is advisable to establish an international consortium based on a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), supported by state guarantees and involving major investment institutions, including the Islamic Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Such a consortium would make it possible to distribute political and technical project risks among the participating parties and attract long-term concessional credit lines.

2. A "Digital Border" and Customs Harmonization

It is advisable to launch a blockchain-based Single Digital Transit Platform, operating as a Single Window system, to ensure the mutual recognition and digital exchange of transit documentation among Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

This system could reduce customs clearance times by two to three times, minimize corruption-related risks, and substantially reduce the impact of the Border Effect.

3. Prioritizing Economic Pragmatism over Politics

It is advisable to establish a permanent Interregional Business Forum uniting the business communities of New Delhi, Islamabad, Kabul, and Tashkent.

Even during periods of political tension, a distinctive economic buffer mechanism should be created to preserve business-to-business relations and maintain political dialogue through sustained commercial cooperation.

4. Human Capital and Scientific-Humanitarian Diplomacy

A unified online platform for regional researchers should be established under the International Institute for Central Asia.

Young people should be actively involved in regional integration processes by promoting exchanges of highly qualified specialists, developing regional grant programs similar to Erasmus, and establishing joint start-up accelerators in cooperation with the South Asian information technology sector.

5. Food Security and a "Green Corridor"

Food hubs, including refrigerated storage facilities and logistics centers, should be established in Termez and other border areas to supply South Asian markets.

Such infrastructure would expand Uzbekistan's capacity to deliver agricultural products to the markets of India and Pakistan at seasonally competitive prices and would contribute to the diversification of the country's export structure.

The proposed measures represent a new stage of active diplomacy aimed not only at strengthening regional security but also at ensuring Uzbekistan's geo-economic sovereignty. This process may contribute to transforming the country into one of the continent's major economic centers and a strategically important logistics hub.

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