Afghanistan in the Heart of Asia: Geopolitical Fragmentation, Climate-Induced Fragility, and the Future of Eurasian Connectivity

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Abstract: *Central Asia is currently undergoing a profound transformation in regional cooperation, shifting from a passive geopolitical space to an active agent asserting itself through new connectivity initiatives and multisector diplomacy. However, the realization of a cohesive regional order is inextricably linked to Afghanistan's stability and integration. Despite its geographic centrality as the "Heart of Asia," Afghanistan remains a fragmented node, functioning more as a geopolitical barrier than a bridge within emerging regional connectivity corridors. This paper critically examines the multidimensional obstacles hindering Afghanistan's integration into the broader Central Asian regional architecture. Unlike traditional studies that focus predominantly on military security or terrorism, this research utilizes a geopolitical framework to analyze the intersection of border disputes—most notably the Durand Line conflict—and the influence of external power rivalries. Furthermore, the study investigates an under-researched dimension: how climate-induced resource scarcity exacerbates geopolitical fragility. It argues that sustainable connectivity initiatives, such as the Trans-Caspian and Middle Corridors, cannot realize their full economic potential without addressing Afghanistan's security vacuum and emerging environmental crisis. By assessing the potential of the "Heart of Asia" process, the study concludes that excluding Afghanistan from strategic planning perpetuates instability and proposes that future frameworks must adopt an inclusive approach, integrating Afghanistan's economic potential with regional security imperatives to ensure long-term stability across Eurasia.*

INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical landscape of Eurasia is undergoing a paradigmatic shift, marked by the resurgence of Central Asia as a pivotal region in global trade and diplomatic networks. Once perceived primarily as a passive buffer zone subject to the machinations of great powers, the region is increasingly asserting its agency through "multisector diplomacy" and the development of alternative transport corridors (Laruelle, 2021). The emergence of the "Middle Corridor," or the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), exemplifies this strategic evolution, positioning Central Asia not merely as a supplier of raw materials but as a critical logistical node linking Europe and Asia (Stanzel et al., 2021; Yar et al., 2022). However, the realization of this cohesive regional order and the full functionality of these connectivity corridors remain inextricably linked to Afghanistan's stability and integration. Despite its geographic centrality, metaphorically described as the "Heart of Asia," Afghanistan remains a fragmented and isolated state, functioning more as a geopolitical barrier than a bridge.

Afghanistan's paradoxical position—geographically central yet politically and economically peripheral—poses a significant challenge to the regional security architecture. The country is trapped in a complex web of internal fragility and external interference, which disrupts the spatial continuity required for seamless connectivity (Cooley, 2021). While the region has made strides in intra-regional cooperation, exemplified by the consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders (C5), Afghanistan's absence from these economic and security dialogues creates a "black hole" at the center of the continent (Kassenova, 2022; Wafa & Yar, 2024). This fragmentation is not merely a consequence of recent political upheavals. Still, it is rooted in deep-seated structural issues, including unresolved border disputes and the enduring legacy of external power rivalries that view the region through a zero-sum lens.

The central problem addressed in this study is the persistence of Afghanistan's isolation despite the urgent economic imperatives of Eurasian connectivity. While traditional security studies have extensively analyzed the conflict in Afghanistan through the prism of terrorism and insurgency, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the intersection of *geopolitical fragmentation* and *climate-induced fragility* as drivers of regional instability (Madel, 2020; Yar et al., 2024). Most existing analyses treat environmental degradation as a secondary issue or a humanitarian concern rather than a critical geopolitical variable that directly impacts border security and the viability of transit routes (International Crisis Group, 2023). This research argues that the sustainability of initiatives such as the Middle Corridor is contingent on addressing not only the security vacuum but also the escalating scarcity of natural resources, particularly water, which fuels cross-border tensions.

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach, employing an interpretive analysis of geopolitical frameworks and recent policy documents to dissect the barriers to Afghanistan's integration. Specifically, it investigates two primary research questions: First, how do geopolitical disputes, particularly the Durand Line conflict and great power rivalries, obstruct regional connectivity? Second, in what ways does climate-induced resource scarcity exacerbate these geopolitical fragilities, creating new security dilemmas for Central Asian neighbors? By bridging the gap between critical geopolitics and environmental security studies, this research offers a novel perspective on the "Heart of Asia" process. It contends that without an inclusive strategy that integrates Afghanistan's economic potential with robust climate-adaptive security measures, the broader ambition of a stable and connected Eurasia will remain elusive. The paper first reviews the theoretical underpinnings of regional security and connectivity, then analyzes specific geopolitical and environmental barriers, and concludes with policy recommendations to foster a more inclusive regional architecture.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Literature Review: The Evolution of Geopolitical Thought: From Heartland to Borderlands Classical geopolitical theories have long framed Central Asia and Afghanistan through the prism of spatial determinism and great-power rivalry. Early 20th-century geostrategic thinkers, notably Halford Mackinder (1904), conceptualized this region as the pivotal "Heartland," asserting that "who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island." While this perspective underscored the region's strategic significance, contemporary scholars argue that such Eurocentric, state-centric views are increasingly obsolete in the face of globalization and non-traditional security threats (Megoran, 2022). Modern critical geopolitics suggests that viewing Afghanistan merely as a buffer state or a battleground for the "New Great Game" oversimplifies the complex internal dynamics of agency and local resistance (Ahrari, 2020). Recent literature emphasizes a shift from "territorial trap" perspectives to network-based analyses, in which connectivity corridors and borderlands are treated as dynamic spaces of interaction rather than static lines of separation (Sidaway, 2021). This shift is crucial for understanding Afghanistan not just as a void to be filled, but as a fractured node requiring integration.

Emerging Regionalism and Multivectorism in Central Asia: In the post-Soviet era, and particularly accelerated after the geopolitical shocks of 2022, Central Asia has witnessed the consolidation of a distinct regional identity. Scholars note the transition from a fragmented region prone to interstate conflict to a cohesive bloc employing "multivector diplomacy" to navigate great-power competition (Laruelle, 2022). The institutionalization of the "C5" consultative meetings and the expansion of "CA5+1" dialogues with external partners signal a move toward strategic autonomy and regional problem-solving (Cooley & Laruelle, 2020). Research indicates that Central Asian states are increasingly prioritizing functional cooperation on transport, energy, and water management over ideological alignments, a trend underscored by the resurgence of the Middle Corridor initiative as an alternative to the Northern Corridor (Stanzel et al., 2023). However, a critical gap remains in this literature. While intra-Central Asian cooperation is well documented, Afghanistan's exclusion from this emerging regional order is often treated as a necessary precaution rather than a structural impediment to regional success (Kavalski, 2022).

The Afghanistan Conundrum: Border Disputes and External Intervention. The literature on Afghanistan's crisis has predominantly focused on nation-building failures, counter-insurgency, and the role of external actors like the United States and NATO. A significant body of work addresses the Durand Line conflict—the 1893 border between Afghanistan and British India (now Pakistan)—not merely as a territorial dispute but as a primary source of geopolitical friction and identity politics for the Pashtun population (Schmeidl, 2020). Recent studies highlight how the ambiguity of this border has

facilitated transnational militancy and hindered cross-border trade, effectively severing South Asia from Central Asia (Hanifi, 2021). Furthermore, scholars of international relations argue that the security vacuum following the 2021 political transition has intensified the "penetrated" nature of the regional security complex, where external powers (China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan) compete for influence, often at the expense of Afghanistan's internal stability (Weitz, 2023). Despite this abundance of research, there is a paucity of studies that link these traditional geopolitical rivalries with the emerging non-traditional threats, specifically climate-induced resource scarcity, within a single analytical framework.

Theoretical Framework: To bridge the identified gaps in the literature and provide a robust analysis of Afghanistan's barriers to connectivity, this study employs a synthesized theoretical framework integrating Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and resource geopolitics.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) Developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), RSCT provides a structural lens for understanding security interdependence among geographically proximate states. The theory posits that security concerns are clustered regionally rather than globally, forming a "Regional Security Complex" (RSC) defined by patterns of amity and enmity. In the context of this research, RSCT is instrumental in conceptualizing Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbors not as isolated entities but as part of a distinct, insular security complex where the internal securitization of one state (Afghanistan) inevitably diffuses to its neighbors (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The theory helps explain why the stability of the "Heart of Asia" is a prerequisite for the success of the Middle Corridor; any security breakdown in Afghanistan creates immediate negative externalities for Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Moreover, RSCT enables analysis of "insulator" states and "penetration" by great powers, offering a framework for assessing how external rivalries exploit the region's internal fragmentation (Emmers, 2021).

Resource Geopolitics. While RSCT addresses the structural dynamics of security, it requires augmentation to account for the specific ecological challenges of the 21st century. Therefore, this study incorporates the concept of resource geopolitics, which moves beyond traditional military capabilities to analyze how control over scarce natural resources—particularly water and arable land—shapes state behavior and conflict patterns (Klare, 2021). In the arid regions of Central and South Asia, water security is inextricably linked to national survival. Disputes over the Helmand River basin between Afghanistan and Iran, and water-sharing issues in the Amu Darya basin among Central Asian states, exemplify how resource scarcity acts as a threat multiplier (Madel, 2020). This theoretical lens argues that climate change is not merely an environmental issue but a geopolitical variable that redefines borders and sovereign interests, turning shared rivers into potential flashpoints that threaten economic connectivity.

Synthesis of the Framework: The synergy between RSCT and resource geopolitics constitutes the analytical core of this paper. While RSCT maps the "where" and "who" of regional security dynamics—

the complex web of state actors and their security interdependencies—resource geopolitics explains the "what" and "why" of emerging conflicts. This integrated approach posits that the geopolitical barriers to connectivity in Afghanistan are dual-layered: the first layer comprises traditional hard security issues (border disputes, terrorism, great-power rivalry) as described by RSCT; the second, often overlooked layer, comprises ecological fragility and resource competition. By applying this combined framework, the research demonstrates that sustainable connectivity initiatives cannot be designed solely through engineering or economic paradigms; they require the "securitization" of environmental issues and the restructuring of the regional security order to include ecological cooperation as a pillar of stability.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the complex interplay between geopolitical fragmentation, environmental security, and regional connectivity in Central Asia. A qualitative approach is most appropriate for this inquiry, given the nature of the research problem, which involves interpreting the nuanced meanings of political discourse, historical treaties, and strategic documents that cannot be adequately captured by quantitative metrics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, the research utilizes an interpretive content analysis strategy. Unlike conventional content analysis, which may focus solely on term frequency, interpretive analysis enables a systematic examination of the underlying contexts, ideological frameworks, and latent meanings embedded in policy documents and geopolitical reports (Krippendorff, 2018). This methodological choice facilitates a deep exploration of how regional actors construct the "problem" of Afghanistan and how environmental factors are securitized within diplomatic dialogues.

Data generation for this study is based on a rigorous review of secondary sources, categorized into three distinct clusters to ensure triangulation and validity. The primary dataset comprises official documents from regional and international organizations. This includes the declarations and outcome documents from the "Heart of Asia—Istanbul Process" conferences (2011–2024), strategic frameworks of the Central Asian C5 consultations, and agreements related to the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). Additionally, bilateral treaties and communiqués on border management, particularly those concerning the Durand Line and neighboring states (Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), are analyzed to trace the evolution of cross-border cooperation (or its absence).

To assess the scope of climate-induced fragility, the study draws on reports from international bodies, including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These documents provide critical data on water scarcity, drought indices, and resource management in the

Amu Darya and Helmand River basins, serving as empirical evidence for the "Resource Geopolitics" dimension of the theoretical framework.

To supplement the primary documents, the study incorporates recent peer-reviewed articles and policy briefs from leading think tanks (e.g., the Carnegie Endowment and the Brookings Institution) published between 2021 and 2024. These sources provide expert analytical perspectives on the shifting dynamics of the "New Great Game" and the operational realities of connectivity projects in the post-2021 geopolitical landscape. The analysis of the collected data follows a two-stage coding and interpretation process aligned with the theoretical framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Resource Geopolitics.

First, a thematic analysis is conducted to identify recurring patterns and key concepts within the texts. Using a deductive approach, data is coded based on predefined themes derived from the research questions: (1) Geopolitical Barriers (e.g., "sovereignty," "intervention," "border security"), (2) Connectivity Narratives (e.g., "transit economy," "infrastructure development," "Middle Corridor"), and (3) Environmental Security (e.g., "water scarcity," "climate change," "resource conflict").

Second, a geopolitical analysis is applied to the coded themes. This involves interpreting the data through the lens of spatial and power relations. For instance, the study analyzes how policy narratives frame Afghanistan's physical space—as either a "bridge" for economic integration or a "buffer" against terrorism—and how these framings influence the foreign policy decisions of neighboring states (Agnew, 2023). This stage critically examines the discourse to uncover how external powers and regional neighbors utilize the rhetoric of "stability" to advance specific geopolitical interests, often at the expense of addressing environmental crises.

The study has a contemporary temporal scope, covering the period from August 2021 to the present (2024-2025). This timeframe is critical as it marks the geopolitical rupture caused by the withdrawal of US-led forces and the subsequent shift in the regional balance of power. Focusing on this period enables the research to capture the immediate and evolving responses of Central Asian states, China, Russia, and Iran to the new reality in Kabul, as well as the acceleration of alternative connectivity strategies, such as the Middle Corridor, that bypass Afghanistan or seek to engage it on new terms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings and Analysis

Applying the theoretical lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Resource Geopolitics, this section presents a detailed analysis of the data derived from policy documents, treaties, and strategic reports. The analysis reveals three primary structural barriers that prevent Afghanistan from functioning as a cohesive node in the Eurasian connectivity network: border fragmentation driven

by the Durand Line dispute, the destabilizing impact of external power rivalries, and the exacerbation of insecurity through climate-induced resource scarcity.

Border Fragmentation and the Durand Line: From Administrative Line to Economic Dead-End. An analysis of border management documents and historical treaties indicates that the Durand Line, established in 1893, has evolved from a colonial administrative demarcation into a hard geopolitical barrier that actively disrupts regional connectivity. While traditional cartography depicts it as the international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the interpretive analysis of diplomatic discourse reveals a persistent "ontological insecurity" regarding this boundary (Schmeidl, 2020). The findings suggest that the lack of mutual recognition of the border by successive Afghan governments has rendered the frontier region an anomaly rather than a gateway.

This fragmentation has a direct and debilitating impact on major transit corridors intended to integrate South and Central Asia. For instance, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project, conceived as a flagship energy connectivity initiative, remains functionally stalled. The analysis shows that security concerns in the border provinces—exacerbated by the lack of effective border sovereignty—render the pipeline route vulnerable to insurgency, thereby deterring long-term foreign investment (Ghazanfar, 2022). Similarly, the Khaf-Herat railway link, which connects Iran to Afghanistan and potentially onward to Central Asia, illustrates the limits of connectivity in a fragmented borderland. Despite the physical completion of the rail line, operational efficiency is hampered by divergent customs protocols, security clearances, and the political mistrust associated with the porous border. Consequently, the Durand Line functions not as a bridge between the energy-rich Central Asia and the energy-hungry South Asia, but as an "economic wall" that increases transaction costs and disrupts the spatial continuity required for the Middle Corridor to function effectively (Hanifi, 2021).

External Rivalries and the Security Vacuum: A Penetrated Security Complex. Consistent with the predictions of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the findings demonstrate that Afghanistan functions as a "penetrated" security complex, in which the competing agendas of external powers fill the internal security vacuum. The review of strategic documents from Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan reveals a pattern of "coopetition"—cooperation in rhetoric but competition in practice. Each neighbor seeks to prevent the use of Afghan territory against itself by hostile powers while simultaneously limiting the influence of rival neighbors in Kabul.

The analysis indicates that this external rivalry prevents the emergence of a unified regional security architecture. For example, Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine prioritizes a pliable government in Kabul, often at the expense of broader regional economic integration that might empower Indian or Iranian influence (Ahmed, 2021). Conversely, Russia and the Central Asian states prioritize strict border

controls to prevent the spillover of militancy and narcotics, leading to a "fortress" mentality that restricts the free flow of goods and people necessary for connectivity corridors (Cooley & Laruelle, 2020). China's approach, driven by the security of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Xinjiang, focuses heavily on counter-terrorism cooperation with the Taliban but remains cautious about large-scale infrastructure investments until a stable, multilateral security guarantee is established (Jiang, 2023).

The result, as evidenced by the stalled "Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process" declarations, is a fragmented diplomatic landscape. The study finds that the absence of a consensus among these external actors regarding the modality of engagement with Afghanistan creates a "paralysis of multilateralism." Without a unified external security umbrella, the internal sovereignty required to protect transnational infrastructure remains elusive, rendering ambitious connectivity projects like the Middle Corridor vulnerable to the whims of non-state actors and proxy warfare.

Geopolitics of the Environment: Climate-Induced Resource Scarcity: The most critical and novel finding of this research, analyzed through the lens of resource geopolitics, is that water scarcity has emerged as a silent, non-traditional threat multiplier that destabilizes borders and threatens connectivity. The analysis of environmental reports and water treaties reveals a direct correlation between climate-induced droughts and the intensification of cross-border tensions, particularly in the Helmand and Amu Darya basins.

In the southwest, the analysis of the Helmand River dynamics highlights a hydro-political crisis. Afghanistan's construction of the Kamal Khan Dam on the Helmand River is viewed not merely as a development project but as a strategic weapon by downstream Iran. The review of diplomatic exchanges following the dam's inauguration in 2021 shows that water has become securitized, with Iranian officials explicitly linking water flow to regional security (Madel, 2020). As water tables drop, the resulting agricultural collapse fuels population displacement toward urban centers or across borders, creating humanitarian crises that destabilize adjacent transit routes for Chabahar port connectivity.

Similarly, in the north, the Amu Darya River basin poses a significant threat to potential railway links connecting Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to Afghanistan. The findings suggest that retreating glaciers in the Pamir Mountains and the overuse of river water by upstream Central Asian states for cotton cultivation reduce flow into Afghanistan. This scarcity creates potential friction points, particularly as Afghanistan seeks to harness its own water resources for agricultural revival. The study argues that future conflicts over water rights in the Amu Darya basin could physically endanger cross-border infrastructure, such as the proposed Trans-Afghan railway, turning critical economic assets into targets in a resource war (UNDP, 2022). Thus, climate change acts as a force multiplier for geopolitical fragmentation, drying up the literal and metaphorical rivers of trade that connect the region.

Figure 1. Strategic Energy and Transit Corridors in the Heart of Asia

Figure 1 illustrates the major energy and transport connectivity corridors linking Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, highlighting Afghanistan's pivotal geostrategic position as the "Heart of Asia." The map depicts the proposed Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline (green dashed line), originating from the Galkynysh gas field in Turkmenistan, traversing Herat and Kandahar in Afghanistan, passing through Quetta and Multan in Pakistan, and terminating at Fazilka on the India–Pakistan border. In parallel, the Khaf–Herat railway corridor (solid red line) is shown as a critical infrastructure project connecting eastern Iran to western Afghanistan, thereby integrating Afghanistan into Iran's national railway network and extending access toward the North–South Transport Corridor and Turkish transit routes. Strategic connectivity nodes, including Herat, Chabahar Port, and Bandar Abbas Port, are emphasized as regional logistics hubs that facilitate multimodal trade flows among Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, and global markets. Grey directional arrows indicate Afghanistan's potential linkage to the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor) via Kazakhstan, underscoring the country's role as a critical bridge between Eurasian land corridors and maritime trade routes. Collectively, the figure conceptualizes Afghanistan not merely as a geopolitical buffer but as a central transit hub whose stabilization and integration are essential for sustainable regional connectivity and economic interdependence across Eurasia.

Discussion: Afghanistan as a Barrier or a Bridge?

The preceding analysis has illuminated the multidimensional nature of Afghanistan's isolation, characterized by border disputes, external interference, and environmental degradation. In this section, these findings are situated within the broader theoretical discourse of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and contemporary geoeconomic strategies. The discussion moves beyond describing the *symptoms* of instability to critically evaluating the *structural failures* of existing regional mechanisms and the geopolitical costs of excluding Afghanistan from emerging Eurasian networks.

Evaluating Existing Schemes: The Paralysis of the "Heart of Asia" Process: The "Heart of Asia—Istanbul Process" (HoA), established in 2011, was predicated on the liberal institutionalist assumption that enhanced dialogue and confidence-building measures (CBMs) could mitigate security threats and foster economic cooperation. However, the findings of this study reveal a significant divergence between the HoA's normative framework and its operational efficacy. Applying the lens of RSCT, the failure of the HoA can be attributed to the persistence of deep-seated "amity-enmity" patterns that regional dialogues alone have failed to overcome (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The interpretive analysis of HOA declarations suggests that the process was hampered by institutional inertia and a lack of enforcement mechanisms. While numerous CBMs were identified in domains such as disaster management, counter-narcotics, and trade, the implementation was consistently obstructed by the geopolitical rivalry between Pakistan and India, two key actors in the process (Kumar, 2021). The mechanism was unable to decouple regional economic cooperation from bilateral conflicts. Furthermore, the HoA largely functioned as a top-down, donor-driven initiative rather than a regionally owned enterprise. It often neglected the "sub-national" economic realities—specifically, cross-border trade networks among Pashtun tribes or Northern Afghan alliances—that sustain local economies. By prioritizing high-level state diplomacy over local economic imperatives, the HoA failed to generate the "peace dividend" necessary to stabilize the periphery. Consequently, the process succumbed to the security dilemma, where measures taken by one state to secure its border (e.g., Pakistan's fencing of the Durand Line) were perceived as aggressive by others, leading to further fragmentation rather than cohesion.

Sustainable Connectivity: The Middle Corridor and the Missing Link: The concept of sustainable connectivity has moved to the forefront of Eurasian geopolitics, particularly with the operationalization of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), commonly known as the Middle Corridor. This corridor aims to connect China to Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus, providing an alternative to the volatile Northern Corridor through Russia. However, a critical

geoeconomic assessment suggests that, without the integration of Afghanistan, the Middle Corridor will remain an "incomplete artery," unable to achieve its full capacity or strategic diversification.

The findings indicate that the current trajectory of the Middle Corridor treats the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus as bottlenecks, while largely overlooking the potential southern gateway through Afghanistan. From a network theory perspective, a robust transport network requires redundancy and multiple nodes to ensure resilience against disruptions (Stanzel et al., 2023). Excluding Afghanistan confines the Middle Corridor to a strictly northern latitude, thereby forgoing the most direct geographical route to the populous markets of South Asia (Pakistan and India) and to the Indian Ocean via Iranian ports such as Chabahar. The argument here is that "sustainability" in connectivity is not merely about infrastructure durability but about political stability. As long as Afghanistan remains a security black hole, the regional spillover effects—instability in the border provinces of Tajikistan or Uzbekistan—will continue to deter investors and increase insurance premiums for freight along the entire Central Asian segment of the corridor. Therefore, true connectivity necessitates a "Southern Loop" that integrates Afghanistan, transforming the country from a barrier into a bridge that unlocks the full economic potential of the Eurasian landmass.

The Cost of Exclusion: Security Externalities for Europe and Central Asia: The final dimension of this discussion addresses the counterfactual: what are the costs of maintaining the status quo of isolation? The evidence gathered indicates a high probability that excluding Afghanistan from strategic planning will have severe negative externalities for neighboring Central Asian states and distant partners such as the European Union.

Firstly, the narcotics trade serves as a primary funding source for instability in the region. The analysis suggests that, in the absence of legal and economic alternatives provided by transit corridors, the illicit economy remains the dominant livelihood in border regions. This destabilizes not only Afghanistan but also the "Stans" to the north, where drug trafficking routes fuel corruption and undermine state institutions—a phenomenon documented extensively in the security sector reform literature (UNODC, 2022).

Secondly, climate-induced migration represents an impending security crisis. As discussed in the findings, water scarcity in the Helmand and Amu Darya basins is displacing rural populations. If Afghanistan lacks the economic resilience to absorb these internally displaced persons (IDPs), the spill over into neighboring Iran and Pakistan—and subsequently into Turkey and the EU—will become inevitable. Europe's current strategy of "externalizing" migration control to third countries is likely to fail if the root causes—environmental collapse and economic destitution in Afghanistan—are not addressed (Gleick, 2021).

"Ultimately, Afghanistan's role in the 'Heart of Asia' cannot be assessed in isolation from Kazakhstan's strategy of 'Multi-vector Diplomacy' and the development of the 'Middle Corridor' (TITR). The geopolitical instability in Kabul poses not merely a border security challenge but also constitutes a significant impediment to Astana's regionalist aspirations to connect Central Asia to South Asian markets. In this context, integrating Afghanistan into initiatives such as the 'Trans-Afghan Railway' serves not only as an economic imperative but also as a mechanism for managing 'ontological insecurity' within the region. Consequently, the success of Kazakhstan's connectivity initiatives is contingent upon transforming Afghanistan from a 'security impasse' into an 'active transit bridge'—a transition that necessitates shifting from a purely military perspective to the paradigm of 'resource and infrastructure geopolitics' elucidated in this study."

Finally, the threat of transnational terrorism remains potent. The security vacuum created by isolation provides a haven for groups like ISIS-K. While Central Asian states have bolstered their borders, a "fortress Central Asia" strategy is not sustainable in the long term. Ultimately, the exclusion of Afghanistan creates a "gray zone" in which non-state actors can thrive, thereby threatening the broader objective of a stable, connected Eurasia that serves the interests of both regional hegemons and European partners.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the geopolitical and environmental impediments that currently prevent Afghanistan from fulfilling its historic destiny as the "Heart of Asia." By synthesizing Regional Security Complex Theory and Resource Geopolitics, the analysis demonstrates that Afghanistan's status as a fragmented node is not an immutable geographical fate but a consequence of specific political and ecological failures. The findings reveal that the legacy of the Durand Line dispute functions as an economic barrier, severing the spatial continuity required for the Trans-Afghan corridors. Furthermore, the security vacuum resulting from great-power rivalries has fostered a "penetrated" system in which external competition undermines regional sovereignty. Most critically, the study highlights that climate-induced resource scarcity—manifesting in the drying of the Helmand and Amu Darya basins—acts as a potent threat multiplier, exacerbating border tensions and displacing populations. Ultimately, the paper argues that the sustainable development of Eurasian connectivity, particularly the Middle Corridor, is inextricably linked to Afghanistan's stabilization. Excluding the country from regional strategic planning does not isolate the problem; rather, it exports instability, resulting in high costs for Central Asian neighbors and European partners in the form of narcotics trafficking, uncontrolled migration, and transnational terrorism.

To transition Afghanistan from a geopolitical barrier to a functional bridge, a paradigm shift from securitization to functional integration is required. Based on the analysis presented, the following policy recommendations are proposed for regional actors and international stakeholders:

1. Pragmatic Diplomacy: A New C5+1 Framework for "Economy and Water." The current diplomatic architectures, such as the "Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process," have stalled due to an overemphasis on counter-terrorism and security assistance. It is recommended that the Central Asian states (C5) and their partners establish a specialized track within the C5+1 dialogue dedicated exclusively to "Economic Connectivity and Hydro-Cooperation." By decoupling economic engagement from the volatile politics of security recognition, regional states can engage in functional cooperation based on shared interests. This approach, rooted in the theory of neo-functionalism, suggests that cooperation in technical sectors (trade and water) can create "spill-over" effects that build trust and reduce political hostility over time (Mitrany, 1943). This framework should prioritize the normalization of trade relations and the reduction of non-tariff barriers at border crossings.

2. Joint Resource Management: International Commissions for Water Security. Given the critical role of water scarcity in driving conflict, ad hoc bilateral agreements are insufficient. The study recommends establishing legally binding River Basin Commissions for the Amu Darya and Helmand rivers, under the impartial auspices of the United Nations or a neutral third party. These commissions should be mandated to implement data-sharing mechanisms regarding river flow and glacial melt, ensuring that upstream dam construction (such as the Kamal Khan Dam) is coordinated with downstream needs (Iran and Pakistan). Institutionalizing "hydro-diplomacy" transforms water from a source of conflict into a platform for dialogue, ensuring that climate change does not derail infrastructure projects.

3. Infrastructure Integration: Small-Scale Cross-Border Projects as Confidence-Building Measures. Grand projects such as the TAPI pipeline or the Trans-Afghan railway are essential for the long term but remain vulnerable due to prevailing mistrust. It is advisable to adopt a "bottom-up" connectivity strategy. Regional stakeholders should prioritize small-scale, high-impact cross-border infrastructure projects, such as short-haul railway links connecting border markets (e.g., between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan) or joint power transmission lines. These smaller projects can serve as Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), allowing local communities to derive immediate economic benefits from connectivity. Success in these localized zones can create pockets of stability that gradually expand, thereby securing the larger corridors essential for the Middle Corridor's success.

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