ANNOTATION

of the dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
in the educational program «8D03105 - International Relations»

Bilal Naqeeb Jan

Unlocking Afghanistan's Role in Regional Connectivity: Key Challenges and Prospects

Relevance of the research topic

In the evolving international system, regional connectivity has become an increasingly important dimension of international relations, shaping patterns of economic cooperation, regional security, and geopolitical interaction. The political changes in Afghanistan since 2021 have significantly influenced the regional geopolitical landscape and prompted neighboring states and international actors to reconsider existing approaches to regional engagement, security cooperation, and diplomatic interaction. Afghanistan has emerged as an important case for examining how states balance security, economic, and connectivity interests while adapting their foreign policies to evolving regional realities. Against this background, analyzing Afghanistan's role in regional connectivity contributes to a deeper understanding of pragmatic diplomacy, regional governance, and the transformation of international relations in Eurasia.

Afghanistan occupies a unique geostrategic position linking Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean, making its stability a key determinant of regional connectivity initiatives. Major transport, energy, and trade projects, including the Trans-Afghan Corridor, CASA-1000, TAPI, and railway initiatives, depend on Afghanistan's ability to function as a reliable transit hub despite ongoing political and security challenges.

Investigating the opportunities and constraints of Afghanistan's participation in regional connectivity is therefore essential for understanding the future of Eurasian economic integration and cross-regional cooperation.

For Kazakhstan, strengthening regional connectivity through Afghanistan aligns with its long-term foreign policy objectives of diversifying trade routes, enhancing transit potential, and expanding economic ties with South Asia and the Middle East. Kazakhstan has consistently pursued a policy of pragmatic engagement with Afghanistan by supporting humanitarian assistance, educational initiatives, and regional dialogue while avoiding formal diplomatic recognition of the current authorities. Consequently, assessing Afghanistan's connectivity potential is directly relevant to Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, regional leadership ambitions, and efforts to promote sustainable development and economic resilience across Central Asia.

The object of the research is Afghanistan's role in contemporary regional connectivity between Central Asia and the South Asia.

The subject of the research Competing interests of great powers in their regional interactions and the role of the Taliban government, which hinders the implementation of projects to develop transport infrastructure in and through Afghanistan.

Goal of research. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine Afghanistan's role in regional connectivity by identifying the key political, security, economic, and institutional factors

that shape its integration into regional transport, trade, and energy networks, and to assess the conditions and prospects for enhancing connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia under the evolving regional geopolitical environment.

The hypothesis is that Afghanistan's connectivity along the Central Asia-South Asia axis remains "locked" not by technical or economic deficits, but because integrated corridors would disproportionately advantage one rival actor, prompting other great powers and regional competitors to block or delay such projects through statecraft tools, preferring frozen fragmentation to competitor gains.

To achieve the goal of the dissertation, answer the research question, and test the hypothesis, the following **research tasks** were defined:

- To examine the theoretical approaches to regional connectivity in International Relations and to assess the explanatory limitations of liberal functionalism in accounting for Afghanistan's connectivity challenges under conditions of geopolitical competition.

- To develop an analytical framework that explains how the interaction of great-power rivalry, regional competition, external constraints, and domestic governance shapes Afghanistan's role in regional connectivity.

- To analyze the interests, strategies of global and regional actors influencing Afghanistan's connectivity.

- To identify the mechanisms through which geopolitical rivalry affects regional cooperation initiatives.

- To evaluate the implementation prospects of major connectivity initiatives, including the Uzbekistan – Afghanistan - Pakistan (UAP) Railway and the Mes Aynak project, through comparative empirical analysis of political, economic, and security constraints.

- To identify the key conditions under which Afghanistan can strengthen its role as a regional connectivity hub linking Central Asia and South Asia, and to assess alternative trajectories of regional cooperation under different geopolitical scenarios.

- To formulate evidence-based policy recommendations for regional states and international stakeholders aimed at promoting sustainable regional connectivity while balancing geopolitical competition, economic cooperation, and regional security.

Chronological framework. Chronological framework. The research covers the period from the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 through 2025, a timeframe defined by the qualitatively new configuration of sanctions, non-recognition, and regional corridor competition that shapes Afghanistan's connectivity environment. To explain the structural origins of this problem, the study also draws on earlier and later developments, particularly the period of international engagement in Afghanistan after 2001, since the corridor initiatives, financing arrangements, and rivalries of that period created the conditions that the post-2021 configuration inherited.

Theoretical basis of the research. The theoretical foundation of the dissertation is formed by structural realism and its relative-gains logic (K. Waltz, J. Mearsheimer, J. Grieco), which explains why states refuse cooperation that disproportionately benefits rivals; the literature on

geoeconomics and infrastructure as statecraft, which treats corridors, pipelines, and ports as instruments of power rather than neutral development goods; the concept of weaponized interdependence (H. Farrell, A. Newman), which shows how control over financial and logistical networks is converted into coercive leverage; and the scholarship on gatekeeper states and contested sovereignty (A. Cooley and others), which informs the analysis of the Afghanistan's position. Liberal functionalism and the theory of complex interdependence (R. Keohane, J. Nye) serve as the theoretical counterpoint: the dissertation engages them critically as the dominant but, in the Afghan case, empirically inadequate explanation of connectivity. On this basis the author develops the original geopolitical lock-and-key analytical framework, which integrates these strands into a single explanatory framework operating at the systemic, regional, and unit levels.

Research methods. The dissertation employs a systematic approach and a qualitative, multi-method research design anchored in structured, focused comparative case study analysis, enhanced by the within-case technique of process tracing, and grounded in systematic primary document analysis.

Provisions submitted for defense. The following scientific propositions constitute the core of the dissertation and will be presented and defended:

- Afghanistan's persistent connectivity deadlock is best explained by a geopolitical lock rather than by technical or institutional weakness alone. A structural lock operates in which great-power rivalry, regional corridor and port competition, and sanctions regimes interact to suppress Afghanistan's connectivity potential despite its geographic centrality and repeated initiatives to use the country as a land bridge.
- Connectivity in Afghanistan fails to follow liberal functionalist expectations because relative-gains and regime-survival logics dominate over absolute economic benefits: actors systematically prioritize denying rivals strategic advantage and defending regime survival over maximizing joint economic gains.
- The geopolitical lock-and-key analytical framework constitutes a new theoretical framework for analyzing connectivity in contested sovereignties. It explains connectivity outcomes through the incompatibility of "keys", specific, often non-negotiable political and security conditions demanded by systemic powers, regional states, and the territorial authority, showing that corridors remain blocked when these keys are mutually exclusive, even where projects are technically feasible and economically rational.
- The Afghanistan's functions as a sovereign gatekeeper whose bounding agency is central to connectivity outcomes: it exercises effective territorial control, collects revenues, and issues transit permissions, but its bargaining power is constrained by sanctions, non-recognition, and external vetoes. Gatekeeper agency is real, but insufficient on its own to unlock connectivity while the structural lock remains in place.
- The UAP Railway and the Mes Aynak copper project are two faces of the same geopolitical lock: UAP reveals how great-power rivalry and competing port strategies harden the lock at the corridor level, whereas Mes Aynak illustrates how sanctions and financial restrictions

limit gatekeeper bargaining at the project level, confirming that the lock operates across both transport and extractive domains.

- The concept of managed dissociation captures the most likely equilibrium in Afghanistan's connectivity under ongoing rivalry and sanctions: an intermediate outcome between full regional integration and complete isolation, in which external powers and the Taliban construct narrow, sector-specific, and bilateral arrangements while comprehensive, multi-purpose corridors remain blocked.

Main results of the research. In accordance with the research tasks, the dissertation obtained the following results.

First, an original geopolitical lock-and-key analytical model was developed and grounded in International Relations theory, and it was demonstrated that liberal functionalist and complex-interdependence accounts cannot explain Afghanistan's connectivity deadlock, whereas relative-gains and regime-survival logics can.

Second, the framework was operationalized: the concepts of the geopolitical lock, the sovereign gatekeeper, mutually exclusive "keys," and managed dissociation were translated into observable indicators, and a Geopolitical Rivalry Matrix was constructed mapping each actor's goals, tools, red lines, and keys.

Third, the qualitative multi-method design was implemented, integrating comparative case analysis, process tracing, primary document analysis, elite interviews, and an expert survey into a single replicable procedure.

Fourth, the empirical application of the model established that the UAP Railway, a technically feasible project with strong regional demand, remains unbuilt inside Afghanistan as of 2026 because competing U.S., Chinese, and Russian corridor visions, Pakistan-India port competition, and sanctions-related financing barriers have prevented any workable implementation framework from emerging, while the Mes Aynak copper project has attracted effectively no committed capital despite renewed Sino-Taliban engagement, being constrained by U.S.-led sanctions, absence of international banking access, Chinese risk aversion regarding investment protection in a non-recognized state, and the Taliban's own ideological and institutional limits; both cases thus proved to be different expressions of the same geopolitical lock.

Fifth, cross-case synthesis, reinforced by supplementary evidence from the CASA-1000 electricity project, the stalled TAPI pipeline, and the Qosh Tepa Canal, established that managed dissociation is not a transitional stage toward integration but a stable equilibrium serving the revealed preferences of all major actors: Afghanistan is neither fully isolated nor genuinely integrated, but selectively connected through narrow, ring-fenced, sector-specific arrangements.

Novelty and significance of the obtained results. Scientific novelty of the dissertation lies in developing a new explanatory framework for understanding why Afghanistan's strategic geographic position has not translated into sustained regional connectivity. Unlike existing studies, which examine corridors, sanctions, Taliban governance, or great-power rivalry separately, this research integrates these dimensions into a unified analytical model and tests it empirically. The

dissertation introduces four original contributions: the geopolitical lock-and-key model for explaining connectivity deadlocks in contested geopolitical spaces; the concept of the sovereign gatekeeper, operationalized for post-2021 Afghanistan and applicable to other de facto or sanctioned regimes; the concept of managed dissociation as an intermediate outcome between integration and isolation; and the Geopolitical Rivalry Matrix, which maps the goals, tools, red lines, and "keys" of systemic, regional, and gatekeeper actors.

Approbation of the research and publications on the dissertation topic. The dissertation was completed at the Department of International Relations and World Economy of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University under the supervision of Dr. Leila Delovarova (Al-Farabi Kazakh National University) and Professor Srikanth Kondapalli (Jawaharlal Nehru University, India). The main provisions and results of the research were discussed at meetings of the Department and presented in the author's scholarly publications. On the topic and materials of the dissertation, the author has published [5] scientific articles, including [2] articles in journals indexed in the Scopus database and [3] articles in journals recommended by the Committee for Quality Assurance in the Sphere of Science and Higher Education of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in which the main results of the research are reflected.

Structure of the dissertation. The structure of the dissertation research is determined by the logic of achieving the stated goal and objectives of the research and consists of an introduction, four sections, a conclusion, and a list of references.

Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework, critiquing liberal-functionalist expectations and developing the geopolitical lock-and-key model. Chapter 2 maps the systemic, regional, and gatekeeper actors and applies the Geopolitical Rivalry Matrix. Chapter 3 provides the core empirical test through the UAP Railway and Mes Aynak case studies. Chapter 4 integrates the findings, develops alternative future scenarios, and draws policy implications. The conclusion summarizes the main findings, restates the theoretical and empirical contributions, and reflects on future trajectories of Afghanistan's role in regional connectivity.