पूर्वी एशियाई अध्ययन केंद्र
Centre For East Asian Studies
अंतर्राष्ट्रीय अध्ययन संस्थान / School of International Studies
जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
नई दिल्ली / New Delhi -110067

Phone : 91-11-2670 4346

PhD. Thesis Review of "Unlocking Afghanistan's Role in Regional Connectivity: Key Challenges and Prospects" submitted by Bilal Naqeeb Jan, Educational Program "8D03105 – International Relations"

The PhD thesis **"Unlocking Afghanistan's Role in Regional Connectivity: Key Challenges and Prospects"** submitted by Bilal Naqeeb Jan [Educational Program **"8D03105 – International Relations"**] is original, and prepared after collecting primary sources, interviews and extensive consultations with me and co-supervised by Dr. Leila Delovarova of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. Bilal Naqeeb Jan followed all the PhD requirements of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University.

This PhD thesis is devoted to one of the most strategically significant and analytically challenging topics in contemporary International Relations and Regional Studies. It addresses the persistent gap between Afghanistan's geographic centrality in Eurasian connectivity visions and its functional disconnect from regional infrastructure networks and seeks to explain this paradox through a rigorous original theoretical framework. The work is aimed at identifying the structural, geopolitical, and gatekeeper-level mechanisms that sustain a lock on Afghanistan's role as a transit and resource corridor in the post-2021 period. The thesis is analyzed in four main chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion.

The relevance of this study lies in the growing importance of regional connectivity initiatives in Eurasia and the strategic position of Afghanistan as a potential transit hub linking Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. From an international relations perspective, Afghanistan's integration into regional transport, trade, and energy networks can contribute to economic interdependence, regional stability, and enhanced cooperation among neighboring states. At the same time, persistent security challenges, political uncertainty, and geopolitical rivalries continue to hinder the country's connectivity potential. Therefore, examining the key challenges and prospects of Afghanistan's role in regional connectivity is essential for understanding broader regional integration processes and their implications for international cooperation and security.

In his PhD thesis, Bilal Naqeeb Jan develops an original geopolitical "lock-and-key" analytical model that conceptualizes Afghanistan's connectivity impasse as the product of mutually incompatible political and security "keys" demanded by rival external actors and by the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) as a sovereign. This model synthesizes realist insights on relative gains and competitive statecraft, geoeconomic analyses of infrastructure as an instrument of power, and research on de facto sovereignty and gatekeeper agency under sanctions. The result is a theoretically precise, empirically operational, and genuinely original contribution to International Relations scholarship.

The PhD thesis of Bilal Naqeeb Jan has both theoretical and practical significance.

In the theoretical part of the dissertation, Bilal Naqeeb Jan critically engages with liberal functionalist approaches to connectivity, demonstrating systematically why shared economic interests and technical feasibility have repeatedly failed to produce integrated corridors through Afghanistan. He situates this critique within broader debates on structural realism, weaponized interdependence, and critical infrastructure studies, and then advances the geopolitical lock-and-key model as a theoretically grounded and empirically testable alternative. The model's three core components the structural lock generated by great-power and regional rivalries, actor-specific political and security keys, and the sovereign gatekeeper's bounded agency are precisely specified and operationalized through observable indicators and a Geopolitical Rivalry Matrix that codes the goals, tools, red lines, and unlocking conditions of all major actors.

In the empirical part of the study, Bilal Naqeeb Jan applies the model to two carefully selected cases: the Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan (UAP) Railway and the Mes Aynak copper project. The UAP Railway is used as a most-likely case for liberal-functionalist expectations, demonstrating that

even a technically viable and repeatedly endorsed corridor remains stalled because competing great-power corridor visions and sanctions-based financial constraints override economic rationality.

This part of the study plays a key role in testing the theoretical model using specific empirical examples, demonstrating the limitations of both economic functionalism and the agency of individual actors in complex international political structures. An analysis of the UAP Railway and Mes Aynak projects demonstrates that the implementation of regional initiatives in Afghanistan is determined not only by economic feasibility and the interests of the participants, but also by the impact of sanctions, international non-recognition, and competition among major powers.

The thesis also makes a significant contribution through its concept of managed dissociation, a theoretically precise category between integration and isolation that captures the stable, intended equilibrium in which Afghanistan finds itself: selectively connected through narrow, ring-fenced, and sector-specific arrangements that generate limited benefits for actors without coalescing into an integrated regional corridor. This concept has direct relevance for other contested connectivity spaces globally and represents an important addition to the theoretical vocabulary of international political economy and critical infrastructure studies.

The synthesis and policy chapter demonstrates a mature ability to translate analytical findings into differentiated, actor-specific policy recommendations. The recommendations for Central Asian states, Pakistan, India, Iran, the IEA, the United States, China, and international financial institutions are each grounded in the dissertation's empirical evidence and structured around the specific key-holding position of each actor in the lock. This approach avoids the generic character that weakens many policy-oriented chapters in PhD dissertations and instead produces recommendations that are logically derived from the theoretical model and directly applicable to current policy debates.

In the process of the study preparation, the research goal was fully achieved, and all tasks were completed at a high scholarly standard. The thesis is characterized by clarity of theoretical argument, depth of empirical analysis, methodological transparency, and analytical consistency across all chapters. Along with this, the study acknowledges certain limitations, including its temporal boundary to 2021–2026 and the bounded sample size of the expert survey — limitations that are honestly stated and do not detract from the quality and significance of the work.

I should note that during his doctoral studies, Bilal Naqeeb Jan was in constant contact with me and received all the necessary consultations throughout the research process.

It's worth noting that he completed his doctoral fellowship in Afghanistan, where he collected data and conducted interviews, which formed an important core for his dissertation.

Bilal's dissertation was co-supervised by Dr. Leila Delovarova of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, and Bilal Naqib Jan followed all of our advice, recommendations, and rules of al-Farabi Kazakh National University demonstrating scholarly integrity, intellectual independence, and exceptional dedication to primary source research, including under challenging field conditions and environment in Afghanistan during his internship.

Considering all of the above, the doctoral dissertation of Bilal Naqeeb Jan entitled "Unlocking Afghanistan's Role in Regional Connectivity: Key Challenges and Prospects" is recommended by me for defense to obtain a PhD degree.

Dr Srikanth Kondapalli, Professor
in Chinese Studies School of
International Studies Jawaharlal
Nehru University New Delhi

Professor
Centre for East Asian Studies
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067