

Trans-Regional Connectivity in Eurasia's Heartland and the Role of Uzbekistan

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Eurasia has been increasingly integrating mainly due to the Eurasian powers' collaboration. Uzbekistan occupies the heart of Eurasia's heartland having borders with all Central Asian Republics including Afghanistan. The land locked nature of the country induces it to search for outlets towards regional and global markets to capitalize upon its tremendous growth for expanded development. Pakistan provides the most economical and historical outlet to Uzbekistan and to the Eurasian heartland via Afghanistan. Despite having a common past the countries of Central and South Asia are least integrated in the contemporary era. Pakistan and Uzbekistan also realize that Central and South Asian connectivity via Afghanistan will help build a solid basis for sustainable peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is part of important transportation corridors linking the Eurasian heartland in all directions. Pakistan has framed "Vision Central Asia Policy" and envisaging Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia Corridor to supplement CPEC in fundamentally changed regional geo-political and geo-economic circumstances. The paper mainly argues that the changed regional and global state of affairs make the regional environment conducive for enhanced connectivity between Central and South Asia via Afghanistan while Pakistan and Uzbekistan have to play leading roles necessitated by their significant geographical locations in respective regions in an altered regional scenario .

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Trans-Regional Connectivity, Eurasian Integration, Trade, Economic Corridors

Connectivity has been termed as the arms race of the Twenty First Century (Khanna, 2016). All the major powers have framed their connectivity and integration plans in this regard particularly in the Eurasian space. These are USA's New Silk Road, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Connectivity, therefore, has been the driving force behind transformational changes in the Eurasian heartland. Russia-China cooperation and understanding is facilitating the Eurasian integration. This cooperation between the dyad was absent during the last century. As a matter of fact, a country has to be first connected regionally if it has to efficiently connect globally. It is particularly true for the land locked countries like Uzbekistan. Unfortunately despite having common past the two regions of Central and South Asia are least connected in contemporary era. The important factors that contribute to better prospects for enhanced connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia are; the end of war in Afghanistan, the geographical landscape and the region's diverse resource endowment. For example Krugman finds that the characteristics of the geographic landscape and resource endowments have a profound effect on states' trade and economic behavior in a region (Krugman,1991). Eurasia's heartland is significant due to its resource base and

geography. Uzbekistan occupies heart of the heartland, borders all Central Asian Republics including Afghanistan while Pakistan provides an economic and historical outlet to the heartland i.e. Central Asia towards South Asia, Arabian Sea and beyond. The Central Asian Republics, since independence, are looking for an outlet via stable Afghanistan (Saito, 2022). The regional circumstances in post-US/NATO withdrawal period make the regional environment conducive for strengthening regional cooperation on Central and South Asia connectivity. This particular work attempts to briefly discuss the reasons behind rapidly increasing Eurasian space, the exceptional economic performance of Uzbekistan since independence and thereafter looks into the Republic's role in regional and trans-regional integration and connectivity necessitated by its economic growth, its geography and the altered regional geo-political and geo-economic state of affairs. The paper also revisits Pakistan-Uzbekistan relations and connectivity in a changed regional geo-political configuration. What are the main factors that propel the regional connectivity and inducing Uzbekistan, Pakistan and other regional states towards enhanced connectivity? How does Halfords Mackinder's heartland theory seem to be materializing in the 21st century? What are the prospects of Pakistan-Uzbekistan-Central Asia connectivity via Afghanistan? These are some of the questions this work attempts to answer. The research work is qualitative in nature based on hermeneutics and double hermeneutics research methods by utilizing the secondary sources.

Uzbekistan's Exceptional Economic Performance

Since 1991, Uzbekistan has remained an exception with in Central Asian region for its economic transformation, growth and development. During the economic, political and social transitions of the 1990s, Uzbekistan's economic performance was best amongst the dozens of post-Soviet transitional economies. The economic contraction was least in comparison to all other former Soviet states including Central Asian Republics(CARs). Uzbekistan was the first Central Asian Republic to turn the economic growth positive in 1995 and achieve the pre-independence (1989) growth level by the year 2000 while Kazakhstan achieved it a year later by 2001 (Khan, 2008, Winter). Uzbekistan adopted a gradual reform policy termed as "Uzbek Model" by prioritizing economy over politics with a prudent guiding role of the state. The revenue earned by the strategic sub-sectors of the economy such as cotton and gold was invested in other important sectors i.e. oil and gas were financed with. The country ceased importing oil and gas by as early as 1996 to save precious foreign exchange. Similarly land under grain cultivation particular wheat was increased to make the country self-sufficient in grain production which was yet another huge import. Since then Uzbekistan has never looked back and today inter-city bullet trains are operational. "The Afrasiyab bullet-train" has effectively diminished the distance of 5 hours between Tashkent and Samarkand which the author traveled in a car during 1995 to just two hours experienced in September, 2021. Another line has been developed and added to Metro – the underground train network - providing swift and comfortable transportation to the capital city. The Metro has been a great service to the residents of Tashkent while at the same a source of revenue to the government. The economy of Uzbekistan has grown at an average rate of 7.2 percent during the last fifteen years (2005-2020) (Macrotrends, 2021) which is quite impressive. Despite the Pandemic, Uzbek economy has achieved tremendous economic growth i.e. 16.4% during 2017-2020 (Macrotrends, 2021). This tremendous growth has been translated into infrastructural development across the country generating further economic activity and productivity. Kirshi (Shakhr e Sabz) in Kashkadarya has been newly built and ancient Islamic architecture of Amir Temur era has been renovated and preserved as Uzbek National Heritage. This the author personally observed while visiting ShakhreSabz for participating in international conference on Amir Temur in September, 2021.

Navoi airport at Termiz, railway line from Termiz to Mazare Sharif in Afghanistan and development of Hilton city along with dozens of five stars hotel in Tashkent are glaring example of transforming growth into infrastructural development for increased economic activity. Uzbekistan has also increased the share of industrial sector in national GDP recently which few other transitional economies could do. In addition the Republic has upgraded the structure of industrial output as the share of machinery, equipment and chemicals has increased in the total industrial production (Popov, 2013, July 30). "Obod Kishlak", "prosperous village" like programs and enhanced spending on social protection are possible due to the increased economic activities and job creation in the economy. The three important milestones achieved by Uzbekistan:

- i. To become self-sufficient in food
- ii. To become net energy exporter and
- iii. To increase share of industry in GDP and share of machinery and equipment in the total industrial production and exports (Popov, 2013 July 30).

Uzbekistan has been executing mega projects such as airports, highways, railways and infrastructure for free economic zones and transport and logistics centers to better fit in the international transportation system (Islamov, 2013).

This tremendous economic growth compels Uzbekistan to search for outlets for expanded development to maximally benefit from the country's resource base and trade potential. Uzbekistan realizes that stable Afghanistan in the neighborhood is a pre-requisite for sustainable development and connectivity in the southern direction towards sea lanes of communication. Connectivity between Central and South Asia via Afghanistan will also serve an important purpose in regional security interests i.e. to bring sustainable peace and development to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has assumed a leading role in this regard under the government of Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

The Eurasian Integration in 21st Century

The 21st century can be termed as Eurasian Century as the Eurasian landmass has been rapidly integrating. Eurasia in terms of landmass includes multiple regions of Europe, Central and South Asia and West and East Asia. For this reason Eurasian integration is viewed as a trans-regional integration. The Eurasian landmass for instance has been defined in terms of its heartland, islands and rim-land. Two factors are instrumental in realizing Halfords Mackinder's Heartland Theory in the 21st Century as opposed to the last century. First the technological developments and secondly the synergies, understanding and cooperation developed between the Eurasian states particularly between the two main Eurasian Powers i.e. Russia and China surrounding almost entire Eurasian Heartland (khan, 2021). Importantly the two neighboring powers have developed synergies in Central Asia which is not the case with other powers engaged in the region or trying to engage meaningfully. Both the countries seem unanimous on keeping their backyard i.e. Central Asia stable and developed. Importantly Russia and China are playing in Central Asia according to local rules by supporting governments in Central Asian Republics in contrast to USA's condemnations and political interferences on human rights and democracy issues (Cooley, 2012). Indeed the color revolutions in former Soviet space and in Kyrgyzstan cautioned the CARs vis-à-vis the West. USA currently engaged in the region through C5+1 format has to productively play its role in connectivity infrastructure and need not

be viewed solely as countering Russia and China in the region through a transitory and transactional approach (Tolipov, 2015).

The Eurasian integration may transfer huge portion of world trade to trans-continental trade corridors making Central Asia a transit bridge between Asian, African and European continents. This will thus result in power shift from Sea Powers to Land Powers (Diesen, 2018). The Eurasian heartland i.e. Central Asia as a result is being connected in all directions becoming land linked region instead of land locked. The major powers like Russia, China, USA and European Union all have framed their own integration plans i.e. Eurasian Union, BRI, New Silk Road and the relatively older TRACECA (Transport Corridor-Europe-Caucasia-Asia) respectively. Similarly there are bilateral and multilateral trans-regional integration arrangements along with connectivity plans of regional, sub-regional and international organizations such as ECO, SCO and CAREC. In this context the Eurasian heartland i.e. Central Asia has gained added significance to effectively and efficiently connect the Eurasian landmass. The regional and sub-regional organizations need to coordinate their policies for physical infrastructure development to effectively develop cross-border infrastructure, hard and soft.

Uzbekistan's Role in Trans-Regional Connectivity

Uzbekistan after consolidating its nation and state hood with strong, diversified and dynamic economy looking beyond the borders to capitalize on its geographical location in the heart of Central Asia in order to enhance regional and trans-regional connectivity in this era of Eurasian Integration. The Republic has assumed leadership role in Central Asia to enhance regional cooperation and connectivity (Imamova, 2021). The Government of Uzbekistan since 2017 has made regional cooperation and connectivity main focus of its foreign policy. Uzbekistan is currently participating and implementing the policy of (TRACECA) Inter-Governmental Commission 2026 Strategy through Master and Action Plan 2018-2020 (Islamov, 2020, February). Uzbekistan welcomes the proposals of other partner countries to enhance trans-regional transportation corridors under the TRACECA. Uzbekistan occupies the Centre of Eurasian Heartland having borders with all CARs including Afghanistan. The Government of Uzbekistan has embarked on a fundamentally changed foreign policy with a focus on inter and intra-regional cooperation within Central Asia and with South Asia by the promotion of peace and development in Afghanistan. It is important that CARs develop regionalism on the basis of trade and economic relations which will pave the way for regional cooperation on the foreign policy and security related issues. Uzbekistan has been maintaining balance in its relations with major powers like Russia, China, USA and Europe to benefit from their investment, trade and transfer of technologies. The new initiatives undertaken by President Mirziyoyev have been focusing on augmenting foreign trade and economic relations, amicably resolving border and water issues in Central Asia and facilitating smooth border crossings for enhanced trans-regional trade and economic connectivity (GCRF, 2020, February). The Consultative Forum has been revived with the efforts of Shavkat Mirziyoyev amongst the leaders of CARs which is instrumental in resolving water and border issues in consultation and mutual understanding (Nematov & Umarova, 2021).

The enhanced cooperation in Central Asia serves two pragmatic interests and objectives for the region. First Central Asia will be viewed as a single large market with smooth border crossing by the investors and traders and secondly CARs will maximally benefit from the integration plans of the major powers. It is through regional cooperation that the natural wealth of the region can be translated into inclusive growth and development. Uzbekistan also aims to address the region-wide security issues in jointly coordinated manner to pave the way for

sustainable peace and development as both are imperative and neither can be achieved without the other. Afghanistan is the regional corner stone. The countries of Central and South Asia have strong incentive to support peace and stability in Afghanistan as peaceful Afghanistan would unlock vast opportunities for itself and for the two regions in terms of regional connectivity, market access, job and trade creation and economic growth.

Uzbekistan's role in organizing crucial international forums for promoting inter and intra-regional connectivity has become the voice of all Central Asian states. The Republic's efforts for enhanced regional and trans-regional connectivity have earned world-wide support. The grand international conference for Central and South Asia connectivity in Tashkent in July, 2021 has ushered a new era of reviving the centuries old trade and cultural links between the two regions. Uzbekistan has concrete plans to link Peshawar and Termiz through the development of trans-Afghan railways and highways. It will naturally transform into trade and economic corridor between Central and South Asia as Peshawar can serve as a gateway to South Asia while Termiz can serve as gateway to Central Asia. The fact is that railways, because of its advantages for bulk, containerized and long distance transport, play key role in freight movement. The Trans-Afghan Railway Project has been warmly supported and pursued by Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan as the three countries have already requested the international financial organizations to help in financing. Central and South Asia can capitalize on their comparative advantages in terms of human and natural resources by enhancing connectivity via Afghanistan. The post US-Afghanistan has become a regional responsibility in terms of security and connectivity however regional efforts regarding Afghanistan shall be supported by international community. If Afghanistan moves towards instability again it will become a global problem as turned out to be during the 1990s. The neighbors of Afghanistan do not enjoy the luxury of distance in contrast to extra regional states. The drug trafficking, cross border terrorism and refugee influx from instable Afghanistan are immediate concerns of the neighbors of Afghanistan. The development of trade and transport corridor between Central and South Asia shall be devised and frame by the local traders, regional commerce ministries, local companies and banks, farmers and local entrepreneurs instead of military and strategic planners sitting thousands miles away.

Uzbekistan as a member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and as observer in Eurasian Union and important partner in BRI playing critical role in materializing the connectivity plans in the form of trans-regional highways, railways and pipelines. One of the key success factors of CAREC is its focus on development of multi modal transport infrastructure which meets the objectives of regional connectivity and Uzbekistan is important partner in CAREC Corridors. Uzbekistan has been vigorously pursuing policy of developing transport corridors in all directions. In this context Tashkent has been advocating and pursuing policy of transport infrastructure development such as Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman corridor and trans-Afghan corridors including the development of Termiz-Mazare Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar rail and road corridor plus the Termiz-Marare Sharif-Herat rail and road corridor. This will help to develop North-South Corridor complementing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, Central Eurasian Corridor and other road projects of ECO passing through Uzbekistan contributing to the overall strengthening of the transit potential of the Central Asian region (Kurbanov, 2020). The ECO Road Route 2 starts from Bulgaria and

Greece via Tehran, Ashgabat, Tashkent, Bishkek and Almaty reaches to Chinese border (Khan, 2021).

Uzbekistan actively participating in regional forums including the forum for development of International Transport Corridor (ITC) and focusing on the development of mega projects of railway, highways, airports and free economic zones constructions. In this regard an international conference “Central Asia in the system of International Transport Corridors: strategic prospects and unrealized opportunities” was held in Tashkent in 2018. Uzbekistan has thus prioritized the development of ITC. The Republic is also an important partner in BRI and links Central Eurasian Corridor with the ports of Pakistan and Iran. The development of Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway line under the BRI is mutually beneficial in creating trans-regional connectivity (Islamov, 2020). Construction of new highways, including the development of the Andijan-Osh-Irkeshtam-Kashgar corridor and setting up a railway line along this route will open new prospective transportation corridor under the BRI framework. Tashkent links the Asian Highway 7 (AH 7) from Yekaterinburg in Russia via Afghanistan to the ports on Arabian Sea. AH7 starts from Yekaterinburg in Russia crosses Tashkent, Kabul and reaches Gwadar via Chaman and Kandahar; however Torkham is also linked through highway with Kabul via Jalalabad. AH7 can be a backbone connecting Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Russia and can also take a shape of North-South Corridor to South Asia, Arabian Sea and beyond. The China-Central Asia Pipeline system is yet another example of regional cooperation that starts from Turkmenistan passes through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan reaches China. All the three CARs feeding gas to this pipeline system for exporting to China which has established an energy corridor intra-regionally.

Uzbekistan-Pakistan Connectivity

With the changes in regional geo-political configuration, Pakistan has reframed its foreign policy with a focus on geo-economics. Geo-economics is a synonym for regional connectivity particularly in the direction of Central Asia via Afghanistan. Pakistan envisages Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia Corridor complementing CPEC. One of the major components of this corridor is the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor with the financial assistance of World Bank worth \$402 million which is also part of Corridors 5 and 6 of CAREC (The World Bank, 2019). The Khyber Pass Economic Corridor envisages developing highways, trade and logistic facilities along with Special Economic Zones from Peshawar to Torkham which is linked with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan via Kabul. There is an unprecedented warmth and promotion in Pak-Uzbek overall bilateral relations during the last few years in Particular. Leaders of the two countries talked to each other four times during the year 2021, in online bilateral summit, during July 2021 Connectivity Conference in Tashkent, during the SCO Summit in Dushanbe and in October when the Prime Minister of Pakistan called the President of Uzbekistan and congratulated him on winning the presidential elections. In November 2021, the National Security Advisor of Uzbekistan visited Pakistan and along with the Pakistani counterpart and Pakistan’s Minister of Commerce visited Torkham (Pak-Afghan border) to receive the Uzbek trade convoy reached via Kabul under the TIR (International Road Transport).The bilateral trade has increased from \$36 million in 2017 to more than \$125 million in 2020 (Khan, 2020).

The most important factors that induce Pakistan and Uzbekistan to enhance connectivity are their significant geographical locations in respective regions, the changed regional scenario and the ongoing integration processes in the region. In order to capitalize their geographies and maximally benefit from the integration processes both the countries enhancing

mutual connectivity in this era of revival of Silk Roads. For Pakistan connectivity with Uzbekistan means connectivity with all other CARs. Pakistan is naturally facing towards Central Asia and considers itself part of the process of regionalism reinvigorated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Central Asia.

Improving physical connectivity infrastructure and harmonizing, coordinating policies via Afghanistan is imperative for meaning-full cooperation between Pakistan and Uzbekistan in the short term. Both the countries have signed transit trade agreement in July 2021. Pak-Uzbek connectivity via Afghanistan is a region-grown approach which will be definitely instrumental in stabilizing country by generating economic activity and revenue for the Afghans. The two countries may declare Termiz and Peshawar as sister cities for enhancing connectivity between the two cities in particular and the two countries in general via Afghanistan. Termiz will serve as a gateway to Central Asia while Peshawar as a gateway to South Asia. This status will help increasing cultural, social, educational, trade and economic relations between the two cities which in turn will serve as a friendship bridge between two countries and the regions in large. It is worth mentioning that a trade convoy reached Torkham from Termiz via Kabul on 4th December 2021 which will prove as a milestone in establishing this corridor.

Infrastructure development plays crucial role in connectivity. One of the basic aims of connectivity must be to develop the transport and logistic corridors between Pakistan and Uzbekistan via Afghanistan through Railways and Highways and these will naturally transform into economic corridors due to agglomeration effects. A production network can be developed in the fields of textile, leather, automobiles, food processing and pharmaceuticals by both the countries. The realization of the proposed railway line linking Termiz with Peshawar via Kabul will be a milestone in this regard and will fundamentally change the regional landscape in terms of connectivity. The southern route via Afghanistan and Pakistan will complement the routes in northern, eastern and western directions in Central Asia. For Uzbekistan the route via Afghanistan and Pakistan is the priority (Durso, 2021) and obvious from the current positive developments in bilateral relations. James Durso opined that though for land locked Central Asia connectivity with Pakistan and beyond via Afghanistan is a necessity, this connectivity in southern direction helps the Central Asian region to escape the gravitational pull of Russia and China and therefore USA shall not limit or impede regional integration arrangements via Afghanistan as this will be tantamount to handing over a political win to Russia and China (Durso, 2021).

Institutions are dead bodies and it is human being that brings life to institutions. There is a need to further enhance people to people contacts between Pakistan and Uzbekistan through cultural, educational and media exchanges. Despite having common a common past, the people in both the countries know least about each other. There is a dire need to enhance people to people connectivity on priority basis through faculty/scholar exchanges, cultural exhibitions, book fairs, movies, plays and sports. Direct flights between the two countries will have positive impact on overall relations by developing air corridor. Visa regimes need to be simplified as without getting visas easily neither land nor air corridor will work. There is also a dire need to establish and coordinate banking system for smooth transactions. Establishment of joint ventures and enhancing cooperation in agriculture particularly cotton sector need to be prioritized. A cotton cartel can be developed between Uzbekistan, Pakistan and China under the CPEC industrialization phase. Ali Sher Navoi Research Centre has also been established at the Area Study Centre (Russia, China and Central Asia) University of Peshawar with the financial

assistance of the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Islamabad. It will benefit the scholars in Peshawar to learn and conduct research on Uzbek language and literature.

Conclusions

One can observe that after the US/NATO withdrawal from Central Asia and the diverted Russian attention and competition from the region, Central Asia most probably will move from a shatter belt (a region torn by internal strife and external intervention) status to strengthened regionalism. The developments drive Central Asian region to revive the historical links and open up in southern direction though accompanied with challenges. In this context Pakistan and Uzbekistan have to play decisive roles. Both the countries have realized that Afghanistan besides posing challenges also present opportunities. Uzbekistan has achieved outstanding economic growth and development during the last three decades and assuming a leading role in the region of Central Asia for enhanced connectivity. In the changed regional circumstances Pakistan and Uzbekistan are making efforts to enhance connectivity via Afghanistan and ultimately help the war torn country in stabilization. Uzbekistan played an important role in the conflict of Afghanistan even during the 1990s by initiating the 6+1 format for talks on resolving the Afghan issue. Similarly Uzbekistan has been facilitating and hosting talks on Afghanistan for bringing sustainable peace to the country in post US withdrawal period and has been advocating Afghanistan's inclusion in the regional economic processes. Uzbekistan has been driving the international community to engage with the Taliban. Tashkent convened an important conference on Afghanistan on July 26, 2022 in which delegations from nearly 30 countries interacted with the Taliban (Imamova, 2022). The purpose seems to facilitate and help Afghanistan in achieving sustainable peace for enhanced regional connectivity as a corner stone of the region.

Uzbekistan after consolidating its nation and statehood is looking beyond its national borders to play active role in regional connectivity particularly in the southern direction via Afghanistan which historically remained a trade conduit between Central and South Asia. The Eurasian landmass is increasingly integrating due to the major powers' connectivity plans and cooperation particularly between China and Russia which was absent during the last century. There is also a growing realization in the Eurasian heartland for regional cooperation to maximally benefit from the integration plans of major powers that have the capital and technology to develop cross border connectivity infrastructure. Many factors induce Uzbekistan to focus on regional and trans-regional connectivity such as the integration plans of major powers for Eurasian connectivity, the geographical location of Uzbekistan in the heartland of Eurasia, the prospects of Central and South Asia connectivity via Afghanistan and to capitalize on its tremendous growth and development by having access and providing access to markets in all directions. The bilateral relations between Pakistan and Uzbekistan have grown tremendously in all spheres of life. Both the countries making coordinated efforts necessitated by changed regional circumstances to capitalize on their geographical locations through enhanced connectivity. The Pak-Uzbek transit agreement will include Uzbekistan in the WeBoC (Web based one custom) custom system of Pakistan for enhanced trade via Afghanistan. The two countries also facilitate the development of links between the research and academic institutions to undertake joint research projects on regional and bilateral issues of security, connectivity and development. The post Pandemic era will be characterized by regionalism as there are already trends of de-globalization.

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