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Coordinating the Corridors

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The past several years have witnessed intense discussion of new transport corridors linking South Asia, Central Asia, Iran, China, Russia, and Europe. Starting back in 2010 when the government of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan specified three major transport corridors and adopted the international standard gauge for railroads (1,435 millimeters), the process was interrupted by the fall of the Ghani government and transition to Taliban rule but has since revived with a vengeance. A welcome inundation of projects has engulfed all Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus. The goal of all these initiatives is to link the region with Pakistan, India, and the booming economies of Southeast Asia; with Iran and the wealthy Gulf states; with China via Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan; and with Europe via Turkey.

There is something grand about this. With the rise of China's economy and after the collapse of USSR, we saw huge interest in what many called "the revival of the ancient Silk Road." Books, films, and a flood of tourism were all built on what was considered a miraculous rediscovery. But all this came at the neglect of what the Georgian-Uzbek archaeologist and historian Edvard Rtveladze called "the Great India Road." Older than the Silk Road, much more heavily travelled, and never interrupted, the Great North-South Corridor carried for millennia far more goods and culture than the Silk Road. Recall, in this context, the rise

of South Asian Buddhism all across pre-Muslim Central Asia. Further, the very name of the city of Bukhara comes from the Sanskrit word for a Buddhist monastery that once thrived there. Conversely, this road facilitated the vast spread of Sufi currents of Islam from Central Asia to the regions that are now Pakistan and India. Think also of the prototypes for the lordly Taj Mahal in Afghanistan and Central Asia. This Great North-South Corridor was broken only by the rise of Russian and British colonialism in the nineteenth century.

Nothing less than the economic development of the entirety of Central Asia and Afghanistan is at stake in the planned revival of the Great India Road and the revival of other forms of connectivity throughout this region. Economic development does not just mean trade. We wrongly think of the old Silk Road and the Great India Road in terms of trans-shipments from the major surrounding powers. This is a woefully incomplete version of reality. All those ancient routes enabled the region of Central Asia and Afghanistan to become major centers of manufacturing, facilitating the existence of large scale facilities for the production of fabrics, metal tools, and even Damascus steel (which was invented not in Syria but in Afghanistan, and first produced in factories in Central Asia).

The current revival of regional transport should therefore be considered in terms of shipping products out of the region, as well as trans-shipping the products of others.

Where does this great development stand today? If we had a map of all transport projects in Afghanistan and Central Asia—both built and projected—it would show that the entire region today is crisscrossed by a surprisingly dense web of new railroads and roads. Gas pipelines and electrical transmission lines could also be included in this map. Some of these many projects have already been built, some of them are under construction, and many more of them are still in the planning stage or, if planned, seeking financing.

Such a map does not exist as the best efforts to monitor the opening of this region to the world age quickly become outdated.

How do we address this? Some organization must collect data on all transport projects involving Central Asia and Afghanistan. Such an entity would monitor routes, both existing and projected, and the status of each. It would make surveys of projects, identify needed infrastructure, report on the market potential of each initiative, their legal status, and above all, on their financing

or lack of it. Such surveys, of course, must be constantly updated and made readily available online so businessmen, financiers, and politicians could easily access them. The body that develops and constantly updates transport data on this important but still emerging region will itself become an investment generator and engine for development.

Such a clearing house and analytic center would also collect and present whatever information is available on potential transit costs per kilometer and compare these over competitive routes. At any given time, how do the cost of shipping goods by train through the heart of Asia compare with the cost of shipping them by sea or land-and-sea? Unfortunately, nowadays nearly all discussion of transport corridors in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and adjacent countries is limited to the cost of construction. There are currently no studies or even mentions of the cost of using and maintaining hypothetical transport corridors and the cost of utilizing alternative routes, limiting the understanding of the competitive status of a Central Asian transport corridor.

The best possible sponsor for such an entity would be the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which has long been committed to the advancement of this issue, leading other international funding bodies in opening Greater Central Asia to the world developing important information sources on trade routes.

Permit me now to focus on the larger map. Discussion of the routes that concern us today usually starts with a discussion of their potential benefit to the end users, whether China, Europe, South and Southeast Asia, Europe, or the Middle East. This is appropriate, for the end users command immense resources, incomparably greater than those of all the Central Asian states and Afghanistan combined. Like it or not, their governments, transport firms, and logistic teams hold the fate of Central Asia in their hands.

How are the great economic centers surrounding our region doing today? In answering this question, I want to suggest something that is largely ignored but of great significance: All the external powers that stand to benefit from the new transport corridors are in complex or even difficult situations today and are not inclined to prioritize the development and use of Central Asian and Afghan transport corridors.

Pakistan, for example, though keenly interested in trans-Afghan transport, suffers from crippling political and economic

problems and is engaged in cross -border conflicts with Afghanistan itself. Meanwhile, its Baluchi rebels threaten the viability of the Chinese and Pakistan-built Gwadar port. A skilled team of Pakistani officials and businessmen recently travelled to Kabul to discuss transport, but it is by no means clear they can deliver what is needed.

China's interest in transport in our region, for the time being, remains strong, underpinned by its keen interest in gaining access to Afghan minerals. Active though it is, its first concerns lie elsewhere, and its economy is under severe strains that are likely only to be exacerbated in the near future.

Russia has long held aspirations of linking its economy to that of South Asia through the North-South Corridor, connecting Russia to Azerbaijan to Iran and its Chabahar port. But even though Azerbaijan supports north-south transit through its territory, Russia's attention and energies have been focused on the pursuit of Mr. Putin's disastrous war against Ukraine, which has left Russia's civilian economy in increasingly desperate condition, and Iran, whose Chabahar port is the terminus of this project, is preoccupied with issues involving the Arab world and Israel and is therefore unlikely to devote the attention to Chabahar that the port requires.

This is not to deny that Iran has emerged as a major activist on transport issues in Afghanistan and is bound to remain so in the coming years, but its economy faces such complex challenges that it can only pursue such strategic projects with diminished attention and resources.

India, by contrast, may be booming economically, but it is focused on new sea corridors to Europe via Suez and the Italian port of Trieste and not on Afghanistan and Central Asia. It professes interest in Central Asian transport routes, but its major businesses show far less interest in using them (even if they existed) than they professed a decade ago.

Likewise, Europe has long dreamed of two-way trade with China via an east-west corridor crossing the Caspian. Moscow's pursuit of its war against Ukraine has led to the closure of its rail line that traverses Russia to northern Europe. This has greatly increased Europeans' interest in the projected route across Central Asia, but the European economy is in a deep slump and Europe's attention and resources are focused more on the Ukraine war and the defense of its eastern borderlands than on new corridors.

Finally, Turkey today is presenting itself as a major champion of east-west transport

through Central Asia to China, but its focus on Afghanistan is peripheral. Moreover, its attention, too, has been diverted to the maintenance of its interests in the Black Sea region in the face of Russia's frontal challenge there.

Even if these concerns are exaggerated, they cannot be ignored. Together, they constrain the attention and resources needed for opening the windows of Afghanistan and Central Asia to the world. And in the end, every one of these end-user countries can readily turn to alternate routes if transport through the region at the heart of Eurasia is undeveloped or closed.

For Central Asians and Afghans, on the other hand, the development of continental transport is an existential issue. If they are unable to open the corridors of transport that imperialism closed, their further development as sovereign states and viable economies will be severely restricted. Anyone interested in the development of Central Asia and Afghanistan as viable modern economies and societies must start by evaluating all routes in terms of their likely benefit to the regional states themselves, not just to the outside powers.

The one world region that has demonstrated a steadily increasing and deepening interest in the corridors under discussion here is Greater Central Asia, specifically the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan. For these peoples, and for them alone, the development of corridors is a strategic issue of the highest urgency. If the corridors to the world are reopened in this region, which was once a world center of commerce, industry, culture, and intellectual life, these countries stand to reclaim and build upon their distinguished heritage. The Central Asians not only embrace this strategic goal but are all working hard to attain it.

Our appreciation of this reality is constrained by the insistence on defining "Central Asia" only in terms of the five former Soviet republics. Today, the Central Asians themselves have expanded their region to include Azerbaijan. For example, when the Central Asian presidents convene today, they always include Azerbaijan's president. They are in effect bridging the Caspian, even if major international powers and international funding bodies have been slow to acknowledge it. There is historical precedent for the inclusion of Azerbaijan in Greater Central Asia: Near the Azerbaijani capital of Baku are the remains of an international trading center that dates back half a millennium, once a bustling entrepot built and dominated by traders from what are now Pakistan and India.

The Central Asians are taking the lead in opening transport corridors across Afghanistan. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan both expect three billion dollars in trade with Afghanistan in 2025, and such activity depends on transport. For all Afghanistan's unresolved problems, both domestic and international, Afghanistan's northern neighbors have managed to work more successfully with the Taliban government than have any other foreign powers.

Is it possible to build on this solid foundation of relations and thereby hasten the process of opening Central Asia's and Afghanistan's windows to the world? Yes, but the Central Asians themselves have much to do if they, or we, are to succeed at the epochal task of reopening the region's windows and corridors of trade. Many doubt that this is possible, pointing to instances of tensions and even conflicts within the region itself. Yet for all that, their intra-regional joint collaborations can claim many successes. Scarcely had the USSR collapsed than the Central Asians began the process of having the world community declare their region a nuclear free zone. Then, at the end of the 1990s they created a "Central Asia Economic Union" that was so successful that Vladimir Putin demanded to join, first as an observer and then as a full member. The Central Asians were unable to resist. Once in, Putin closed the Union down and then merged it with his Eurasian Economic Union, which itself is now flagging. However, Russia is not currently in a position to thwart further initiatives by their southern neighbors and Afghanistan.

The advancement of transport and trade across Afghanistan would be greatly enhanced if the Central Asians themselves had permanent and effective institutions of collaboration. Indeed, Central Asia is the only world region without its own institutions akin to those of ASEAN or the Nordic Council. If such an institution existed, they would have a more effective platform for discussing lingering differences in opinion over transport corridors involving Afghanistan, as well as routes to Europe and China.

An easy step in this direction would be for the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC) and the (ADB) to facilitate the creation of a Greater Central Asia Transport and Trade Council. Such a body should have a permanent headquarters within the region, preferably (to foster a spirit of cooperation) in one of the countries with a smaller economy. The funders of such an initiative—whether ADB or other international financial institutions—should play the role of midwife and, initially, of funder, but

without any intention to join or control it. They should not even seek membership, nor should any countries other than those of Greater Central Asia. In fact, all non-participating countries and institutions should support and encourage a new Greater Central Asia Transport and Trade Council without seeking or gaining membership.

A primary purpose of such a Council would be to evaluate and foster Afghanistan's progress in the transport and trade sector. To that end it could take over many of the monitoring tasks enumerated above. At some point in the future and depending on Afghanistan's progress in such areas as trade and finance, this entity should aspire to invite Afghanistan to join as a seventh member. I intentionally separate membership in such a consultative body from the larger issue of diplomatic recognition of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which, by international consensus, will depend on other matters such as the status women and citizens' rights in general.

I have intentionally not sought to review the progress or lack of progress on each of the many trans-Afghan corridors now under active discussion. It goes without saying that each of these projects warrants careful analysis so that future decisions on funding can be made in a rigorous manner. However, such an ad hoc approach, while necessary, is by no means sufficient. What it lacks is a grasp of the rapidly evolving situation as a whole, an understanding of how each part relates to the others. To be sure, a number of competent analysts and scholars worldwide are studying the individual elements and at times even opening on how they relate to each other. What is missing is a single switchboard where all these analyses come together, and in such a way that the conclusions are shared by all the member countries themselves.

I am speaking here of ownership. Throughout the age of empires, the people of Greater Central Asia, including the Afghans, grew accustomed to being acted upon by others rather than exercising genuine agency themselves. Until such a regionally-based body exists, this will continue in spite of the good intentions of ADB or of other worthy international financial institutions and governments.

Why is this imperative? Without such intra-regional consultations and an institutional entity devoted to carrying them out on an on-going basis, external powers will continue the "divide and conquer" tactics that led to the region's loss of autonomy and agency in the first place. I

should acknowledge that many international institutions and governments do this quite unconsciously and without the slightest intention of playing one regional state against another. But it happens anyway and, in a fundamental way, thwarts the development of regional transport, trade, and prosperity.

Many, if not most, of the projects that are currently underway or in discussion are bound to benefit the region. I have in mind TAPI, CASA-1000, the Hairaton-Peshawar railroad, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, the Kandahar-Spin Boldak line, the ambitious Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat-Kandahar railroad, and the Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan link, among others. We should support them all.

And to be sure, there is a place for frontal competition. Take, for example, the competition between Greater Central Asia's two potential "windows" to the southern seas, Gwadar and Chabahar, which pits Pakistan, backed by China, against Iran, backed by Russia. To the extent the two ports compete, as is inevitable, they will drive down transport costs for all countries of Greater Central Asia, including Afghanistan.

At the same time, several of the proposed projects are competitive with others in a manner that is quite unproductive. As such, they are being advanced in the spirit of a "zero sum" game. This is but the latest version of the great game that defined the entire region throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Let us not continue this while claiming to promote good works. The only and best way to minimize this is not to endow individuals or institutions with dictatorial powers but for the regional actors themselves to gain a coordinated voice in the process of deliberation. Only in this way can the countries of Greater Central Asia become the subjects, and not the objects, of international efforts.

In closing, let me applaud the many initiatives that have brought us together today. Their very diversity attests to the dynamism of the grand process that is taking place to open the region to the world and the world to the region. What is missing is only the coordinated voice of the region itself. Compared with the awesome cost of many of these projects and the sheer immensity of implanting them on the ground, building an exclusive joint coordinating body by and for the region itself is relatively simple and the price tag small to the point of insignificant. The main ingredient for achieving it is leadership, both by the region itself but also by the world community.

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