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THE WAKHAN CORRIDOR AND THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF ASIA: STRATEGIC, ECONOMIC, AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN AND REGIONAL COUNTRIES UNDER THE U.S. POLICY TOWARD ASIA

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Abstract

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of north-eastern Afghanistan bordering China; currently, it is emerging as an important geo-strategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic center for the new-structuring the future economic structure of Asian countries. Historically, this area has played its role as a buffer zone during the nineteenth-century British-Russian enmity. Recently, the area has regained its strategic status by becoming the center of regional connectivity and the main focus area of major powers. This article examines the strategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor, its economic implications for Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, South Asia, the Gulf countries, and the influence of U.S. strategic economic, political, and security priorities in the broader region of Asia and connectivity projects. The study argues that the corridor represents both an opportunity for regional integration and the potential to become an area of geopolitical, security, and economic competition among major and regional powers of the world, i.e, the USA, China, Russia, Pakistan, and India.

1. Introduction

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip located in northern Afghanistan with a length of approximately 350 kilometers and a width of about 13 to 65 kilometers. It connects Afghanistan by land with China and separates Pakistan from Tajikistan and Central Asia (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). Historically, it has played the role of a buffer zone between two major empires, “Russia and British”, during the "Great Game". Recently, the corridor has gained strategic significance in the region due to its potential for connecting China with Iran and the middle-east, and South Asia with Central Asia and maritime routes through the connectivity and trade networks of the region.

The initiatives of regional connectivity, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, have renewed the interest in the revival of Wakhan Corridor. After withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan in 2021, the De Facto Afghan Regime authorities have emphasized economic engagement and regional connectivity as the fundamental elements of its foreign policy, which increase the strategic relevance of the corridor (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The recent public statements by U.S. President Donald Trump expressing interest in regaining access to Bagram Air Base

have revived debate over the future of the U.S. strategic role in Afghanistan, and these statements have also raised questions regarding their potential implications for regional geopolitical dynamics and the future of major economic corridors across Asia (Reuters, 2025).

2. Historical and Geo-Strategic Significance for Afghanistan

Historically, the Wakhan Corridor was part of the ancient Silk Road, which facilitated trade for centuries between East Asia, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. During the late nineteenth century, the corridor was deliberately established to serve as a buffer between British India and the Russian Empire during the Great Game. In contemporary geopolitics, the corridor possesses several strategic advantages for Afghanistan. It provides Afghanistan with direct access to China and opportunities for bilateral trade (Asian Development Bank, 2021). It also facilitates potential connectivity between Central and South Asia, creates opportunities for linking Iran more directly with China through regional transport networks, and supports broader connectivity between the Gulf of Oman, Gulf countries, and China (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The corridor can enhance China's access to Afghanistan and potentially to wider regional markets and can become as a strategic link to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), connecting Central Asian states with CPEC (Ali, 2020). The corridor's relevance and attachment with the China's Xinjiang provinces also gives the area security importance for regional stability and counterterrorism (International Crisis Group, 2021).

3. Economic Importance of Wakhan Corridor

3.1 Regional Trade and Connectivity

One of the most significant economic benefits of the Wakhan Corridor is its potential to enhance regional trade, economic integration and connectivity of the region. The corridor can facilitate the movement of goods, imports, and exports by providing a fast land route between China and Afghanistan and strengthening the trade routes and links between Central Asia and South Asia (World Bank, 2020). It also has the potential to improve economic cooperation between Central Asian republics and Pakistan by creating alternative transit routes which will expand regional trade opportunities.

Wakhan Corridor can facilitate the implementation of major regional infrastructure and energy initiatives, including (CASA-1000) Central Asia–South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project, and (TAPI) Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Gas Pipeline, by improving regional connectivity and transport infrastructure (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The corridor can strengthen transportation links between the Gulf of Oman, Iran, Afghanistan, and China, thereby reducing transportation costs, increasing trade and transit, and contributing to regional economic growth and stability.

3.2 Integration into the Belt and Road Initiative

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can enhance regional and intercontinental connectivity through investments in transportation infrastructure, trade corridors, energy networks, and economic cooperation (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2015). Within this wider framework, the Wakhan Corridor has the potential to serve as a complementary corridor - or as an alternative route linking China with Afghanistan and the Middle East, and Central Asia with South Asia, thereby strengthening regional connectivity and economic integration (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

The integration of the Wakhan Corridor into the BRI can create several economic benefits, which include the expansion of cross-border trade, improvement of transit facilities, increase of FDI in Afghanistan, proper development of transportation hubs and networks in the region, and huge investment in the overall projects' regional infrastructure (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The corridor can develop market access for the landlocked countries of Central Asia through shorter and diversified routes to Pakistani and Iran Ports, including Gwadar and Chabahar, which will reduce the costs of the transportation process.

For Afghanistan, the Corridor will provide different opportunities, from generating of

employment to the improvement of transport infrastructure to long-term economic stability and development. Currently, the speedy process of construction of the road infrastructure toward the border of China shows the intention of Afghanistan to take an active part in the improvement and facilitation of connectivity and future trade and investment through the corridor (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

3.3 Access to Energy and Resources

Central Asia possesses vast reserves of natural gas, oil, and other important energy and mineral resources, which makes the region a key supplier of energy for the neighboring economies (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2023). Improved connectivity through the Wakhan Corridor can facilitate future regional energy transportation initiatives, including the Central Asia–South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000) and the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline, while strengthening economic linkages between Central Asia, Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan (World Bank, 2020).

The establishment of the corridor will contribute to the diversification of regional trade and energy corridors and the security of regional energy by providing low-cost transport and transit for the economies of South Asian countries and will make the Asian states interdependent. It will encourage investment, facilitate energy cooperation, and support long-term economic integration across Central and South Asia. (International Energy Agency, 2023).

4. Strategic Implications for Asia

4.1 China

China views the Wakhan Corridor from both economic and security perspectives. The corridor will enhance western connectivity of China, support the objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative, increase economic cooperation with Afghanistan, and contribute to border security and stability along the Xinjiang Uyghur Region (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

China's interest in the Corridor is to expand overland trade and transportation networks throughout Eurasia and lessen its dependence on maritime trade and have direct, short access to Eurasian countries to reduce future vulnerabilities of maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. Policymakers of China have long been working on increasing and diversifying supply chains and trade corridors (Rolland, 2017).

China has demonstrated interest in promoting stability in Afghanistan because its security is linked to the security and success of BRI-related investments. For this purpose, China has facilitated dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan on security, counterterrorism, and regional cooperation issues. Finally, the Wakhan Corridor can play a role in strengthening China's role as a regional power, diplomatic facilitator, and economic partner in South and Central Asia (International Crisis Group, 2021).

4.2 Afghanistan

Wakhan Corridor represents a fundamental pathway for economic diversification of Afghanistan, converting the country to be future exporter of raw materials, such as copper, iron, lithium, and magnificent resources, to international markets. The corridor will provide Afghanistan with wider access for exporting its goods to regional and global markets and create opportunities for infrastructure development. It will contribute to the development of the economic condition of local communities living along the corridor (World Bank, 2020).

It will transform Afghanistan from a landlocked state into a regional transit hub and exporter of natural resources. It will gradually help Afghanistan to increase its industrial and manufacturing activities (World Bank, 2020). And recently, the representatives of Afghanistan's current de facto government in China have described the Wakhan Corridor as a potential "regional connectivity hub of the region."

4.3 Central Asia

Central Asian states could benefit from the corridor through expansion of export routes,

increased regional trade, reduction of transportation costs, and easy access to South Asian markets, and fast connectivity with maritime trade routes through Pakistan and Iran (World Bank, 2020). It can reduce their dependence on traditional transit corridors that are connected with geopolitical and logistical challenges. In addition to economic opportunities, Central Asian countries have security concerns regarding developments in Afghanistan. Its instability, extremism, cross-border militancy, and any possible terrorist networks from Afghanistan remain a major security concern for neighboring states. Therefore, the success of the corridor depends heavily on regional security, effective border management, counterterrorism cooperation, and political stability in Afghanistan (United Nations Security Council, 2023).

The Corridor therefore represents an economic opportunity and a security challenge to the Central Asian States. Its development can contribute to regional integration and economic growth, but its success will only be possible if it is accompanied by promoting different types of cooperation among Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Central Asian countries.

4.4 Pakistan

Pakistan considers the Wakhan Corridor as a complementary route to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The development of transport infrastructure can strengthen Pakistan's role as a main regional transit state connecting landlocked Central Asian countries with Pakistani seaports and maritime trade routes through the Arabian Sea (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

The integration of the Wakhan Corridor with existing infrastructure of Pakistan like the Karakoram Highway and CPEC-related transport infrastructure, can create more opportunities for trade expansion and revenues, and regional economic cooperation (CPEC Secretariat, 2023). For Pakistan, direct transit and trade connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia is a fundamental need, because only Afghanistan can connect Pakistan directly with Central Asian markets. It will help to increase export and, reduce transport costs, and increase demand for Pakistani goods in those markets. The corridor has importance for bordering economically isolated communities and can support them economically, such as Gilgit-Baltistan, northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), and Balochistan (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

Pakistan also considers connectivity projects through Afghanistan from the perspective of security and also considers that it can be used for cross-border militancy and security incidents affecting Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Baluchistan. Therefore, the corridor's success will have positive impacts on the economic development of Pakistan and security cooperation between regional countries.

4.5 Russia and Central Asia

The Wakhan Corridor is of importance to Russia in the Perspective of the broader framework of Eurasian connectivity Projects and regional trade integration. Russia has had economic, political, and security interests in Central Asia for a long time and has supported Projects for improving transport, trade networks, and transit infrastructure across the region. More developed connectivity through Afghanistan can strengthen economic activities between Russia, Central Asia, and South Asia through trade routes through Afghanistan.

Russia's interest in regional transportation networks is connected through railway and multi-modal transport projects, and it seeks to improve the infrastructure of connectivity routes between Central Asia, Afghanistan, and neighboring regions, which will increase intraregional trade and economic activities. (Eurasian Development Bank, 2023)

Central Asian countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan have the same interests in the expansion of transport networks and routes for increasing access to regional and international markets and improving their role in Eurasian economic networks (Asian Development Bank, 2021). But all of these interests and opportunities depend on the security situation, political stability, and reliable transport infrastructure of Afghanistan.

4.6 India

India has not yet shown a formal policy or direct involvement for future involvement in the future development of the Wakhan Corridor, but the corridor is of economic and geopolitical significance for India. Connectivity by land through Afghanistan and Pakistan can provide India with direct easy access to the Central Asian markets and Afghanistan and Eurasian trade networks (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Due to India's separation from the region there can be alternative routes for India through Iran like Chahbahar which instantly use it for connectivity with the region, but due to the current or future security situation those ways are facing challenges, and the only easiest way will remain a true choice for India through Pakistan and Afghanistan's corridors.

India may consider the corridor as an opportunity to strengthen its influence in Central Asia and support Afghanistan's economic development. Its investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure projects have shown its broader objective of engagement with Afghanistan and expanding regional influence. Apart from that, Afghanistan's instability and regional rival competition have created concerns for all countries, including India, such as cross-border militancy and security threats from Afghanistan and Pakistan. But on the other side, Pakistan has concerns about the presence and influence of India in Afghanistan. Therefore, Wakhan Corridor will be viewed through both security and economic lenses, but Pakistan may view the corridor may be used by India to support armed opposition against Pakistan and simultaneously escalate the Kashmir issue.

5. U.S. Policy Towards Asia and the Wakhan Corridor

5.1 U.S. Policies Towards Asia

U.S. policy toward Asia is shaped by its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, which supports regional stability, allies and partners, protecting freedom of navigation, and managing strategic competition with China (White House, 2022). U.S strategic priorities in Central and South Asia have included maintaining and supporting a regional balance of power and economic connectivity, countering any security threats, and holding influence in strategic regions. Even though the United States ended its direct military presence in Afghanistan in 2021, it has continued to engage with regional countries and maintained influence through diplomatic engagement, sanctions policy, counterterrorism efforts, regional partnerships, and support for international economic initiatives (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Economically, the U.S supports alternative connectivity initiatives in Asia like the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) to enhance trade and infrastructure links between India, the Middle East, and Europe (White House, 2023). This can be viewed within the wider context of strategic competition with relevant projects of China including CPEC and the Belt and Road Initiative.

5.2 U.S. Perspective on Chinese Connectivity Projects

The future geopolitical position of the Wakhan Corridor will be influenced by broader competition among major powers of the world. There is no declared U.S. policy towards the Wakhan Corridor to control or manage it directly, but its relationships with countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, India, and Central Asian states, can have an impact on the future development of the corridor. Because the in such broader competition major powers seek diplomatic, economic, or strategic influence over any future emerging connectivity routes thus the Wakhan Corridor will be involved in broader regional competition of China, Russia, the United States, and neighboring states.

The United States views China's Belt and Road Initiative and its other connectivity projects with strategic caution because these initiatives may expand China's geopolitical influence, economic presence, and strategic position across Asia and beyond, which may conflict with U.S strategic interests in the region (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The assessment focuses on concerns regarding Chinese investment of infrastructure projects and dependency of countries on Chinese finance, commercial influence, and wider political leverage (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

The U.S assessment of Chinese projects may have security implications, as American analysts and policymakers are concerned that such projects grant China access, dual-use capabilities, greater regional influence, and a wide presence in strategic areas like maritime access areas and states, and these concerns are relevant to U.S competition with China in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific region (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023). Hence, the mentioned Corridor and all other connectivity corridors in the region are not only considered as economic infrastructure projects from a U.S perspective but are also considered as part of broader geopolitical competition.

5.3 Impact on Asian Geopolitics

The Wakhan Corridor has the potential to influence the geopolitical competition between major regional and international powers due to its capability of strengthening regional connectivity, land-trade networks, and China's economic and strategic engagement with Central and South Asia, as it will assist China to reduce dependence on maritime trade routes for commerce, energy transportation, and infrastructure cooperation among Asian states (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

The development of inland connectivity routes supports strengthening integration and connectivity through the Belt and Road Initiative, but these developments also intersect with wider strategic competition between China and the United States as the expansion of any infrastructure supported by China challenges U.S. strategies of maintaining partnerships, influence, and strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific and Central Asian regions (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022), so all such Corridors will become the areas of competition, diplomatic engagement, and strategic rivalry, thus the corridor should not be viewed as an economic route but also as a geopolitical space of economic interests, security objectives, and influence on all over Asia.

6. Current Challenges to the Wakhan Corridor

Despite its strategic and economic significance, the Wakhan Corridor faces several major challenges that may delay its construction and limit its potential as a regional connectivity route. These challenges include environmental risks, infrastructure issues, security concerns, political uncertainty in Afghanistan, and geopolitical competition, but the most significant challenge is the security environment in Afghanistan.

The uncertain political status and historically fast-changing situation of Afghanistan, concerns about legal governance, rule of law, and the concerns regarding the presence of extremist organizations create risks for foreign investment in any large-scale infrastructure projects. China has shared concerns regarding terrorism with Afghanistan, especially those posing security threats to Xinjiang of Chinese (United Nations Security Council, 2023).

Another major issue is the lack of infrastructure, as the Wakhan Corridor is located in the most remote and mountainous regions of Afghanistan, with very irregular climatic conditions and limited transportation networks; the absence of logistics facilities and relevant infrastructure on the Afghan side and also on the Chinese side increases costs of construction and creates technical difficulties for connectivity projects (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

Another significant challenge is geopolitical competition, as the corridor is in an area where the interests of China, the United States, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Central Asian states. There might be U.S concern regarding connectivity initiatives of China's Belt and Road Initiative, as the U.S struggles with the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) project, and this represents strategic competition over trade routes and regional partnership; so these geopolitical dynamics may affect the financing and political acceptance of the Wakhan Corridor due to U.S political power and influence in the region.

Another issue is environmental and sustainability challenges, because the rigorous mountainous area of Wakhan creates risks related to natural disasters, maintenance costs,

climate change, and long-term sustainability of infrastructure, as the development of transport infrastructure in such a rugged mountainous area requires technical expertise, huge investment, and environmental management strategies (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The Wakhan Corridor provides opportunities for connectivity and regional economic integration, and its development will absolutely depend on political, infrastructural, geopolitical, and environmental challenges and the security conditions of Afghanistan. The mentioned factors will influence China's engagement and future regional connectivity initiatives in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

7. Suggestions

1. **Afghanistan should focus on security and political stability**

Afghanistan can take benefits and advantages from the Wakhan corridor only if there are improved security conditions, stable political conditions, and a stable environment for investment and regional cooperation. The Afghan authorities must not allow extremism to arise from the territory of Afghanistan; they must improve border management, strengthen all institutions, and create conditions required to encourage international economic engagement.

2. **Pakistan should adopt an economic-centered Afghanistan policy**

Pakistan should reassess its policies, which are now solely based on security concerns, and should also focus on economic cooperation and make economic- focused policies. It should expand border trade, develop all types of connectivity routes from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, establish special economic zones, and encourage Pakistani private and public sector investment in Afghanistan, which could provide long-term economic benefits for both countries.

3. **China should promote inclusive regional cooperation**

China should continue the development of infrastructure and connectivity initiatives and play its role in solving regional security issues through cooperation with Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asian states, and other regional stakeholders, because stable and sustainable economic integration and connectivity require not only physical infrastructure but also political stability and active participation with local economies.

4. **Regional and International powers should avoid geopolitical conflicts**

The Wakhan Corridor should not become a place for historical rivalry between major powers like the USA, the British, China, and Russia. China, the United States, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries should establish different mechanisms for cooperation, transparency, and shared economic benefits through investments in different kinds of economic projects and infrastructure and connectivity projects.

5. **The United States should consider economic engagement and not geopolitical competition**

Within the context of strategic competition, the U.S. has deep concerns regarding Chinese influence in the area. Full-fledged U.S opposition to the Chinese connectivity projects will decrease the opportunities for regional economic stability. U.S must adopt balanced policies and strategies based on economic cooperation, development assistance, and regional partnerships, which can better serve long-term economic and security interests in the region.

6. **Environmental sustainability should be considered for Infrastructure development**

All types of environmental assessments, climate adaptation measures, and sustainable construction project measures should be included and considered in the fragile environment of Wakhan and its mountainous geography.

7. **All Regional organizations should play a wider role**

All regional organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and other regional institutions should finance the infrastructure, provide technical support, facilitate trade, and create confidence-building among participating countries.

8. Conclusion

The Wakhan Corridor has been a strategic buffer zone between the two rival empires, but

its geopolitical importance is under transformation from being an isolated area for centuries, the corridor is now gaining its strategic status, connecting China, Afghanistan, Central Asia, South Asia, and the wider Eurasian region. Its sensitive location enables linking multiple economic regions and creates alternative land trade and transit routes, decreasing dependence on maritime pathways. The importance of the Wakhan Corridor goes beyond its geography, as it presents a potential change in Asian geopolitics where investment in such connectivity infrastructure, and economic networks have become instruments of political and strategic influence. The corridor has the ability to become a complement to China's Belt and Road Initiative, support its objectives of enhancing regional and continental connectivity, increase trade routes, expand trade, and increase economic integration across Eurasia. But simultaneously, such a multi-dimensional expansion of China's presence paves the way for strategic competition between China and the United States, because the U.S views all Chinese connectivity initiatives from economic, geopolitical, and security perspectives.

Economically, the corridor provides greater opportunities for all regional and neighboring countries with trade facilities, fast transit connectivity, supporting energy cooperation, and encouraging investment in natural resources and the development of all infrastructure. It will provide alternative routes to Central Asian countries with improved land and maritime connectivity routes and access to South Asian markets. It will contribute to the economic diversification of wider alternative transit and trade route networks for Afghanistan and transform it from a landlocked country into a regional transit and economic hub.

However, economic opportunities cannot be separated from political and security realities. The future success of the Wakhan Corridor will largely depend on Afghanistan's internal stability, governance capacity, international engagement, and ability to provide a secure environment for foreign investment. Concerns regarding terrorism, extremist organizations, border security, and political uncertainty remain major challenges that may delay or limit the implementation of large-scale connectivity projects (United Nations Security Council, 2023).

The future of the corridor will also depend on the policies and interests of major regional and global powers. China views the corridor as part of its broader continental connectivity strategy, while the United States considers China's expanding infrastructure presence within the wider context of strategic competition in Asia. Similarly, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian states are likely to evaluate the corridor according to their own economic, security, and geopolitical interests. Therefore, the Wakhan Corridor should be understood not only as an infrastructure project but also as a geopolitical space where economic cooperation and strategic competition occur simultaneously, and more probably the U.S may not allow the success of china-supported projects in the region and will support only U.S supported connectivity projects in the region.

For Pakistan, the corridor represents both an opportunity and a challenge. Due to its geographical location, access to Arabian Sea ports, and connection with CPEC, Pakistan can benefit significantly from regional connectivity. However, achieving these benefits requires a shift toward economic cooperation, cross-border trade facilitation, infrastructure development, and political engagement with Afghanistan. Long-term stability in Afghanistan is directly connected with Pakistan's economic and security interests, particularly in border regions.

For Afghanistan, the corridor grants a fundamental opportunity to prove its role in regional connectivity projects and not to remain dependent on external routes. It can become play a bridging role between South and Central Asia, China and Iran, and the current Afghan authorities have also emphasized economic diplomacy and insist on Afghanistan's role of becoming the hub for regional connectivity projects, but achieving such goals will require international confidence, security and political conditions, institutional development, recognition and regional cooperation.

Iran can also play an important role in future projects of connectivity but the developments related to Afghanistan, Iran, and international relations will affect the available routes for China and Central Asian states. There can be wide interaction and linkage between the China, Wakhan Corridor, and the Iranian ports and can connect China directly with Iranians ports and, through land, with Eurasian countries. In addition to this, there can be CPEC transit projects which the future Asian connectivity will likely to depend on multiple transit and trade routes rather than a single corridor.

In conclusion, the Wakhan Corridor will remain an important area for the development of the geopolitical, economic, and security future of Asia, because its significance and importance is not only based on economic purpose, transportation, and trade infrastructure. Wakhan is changing its nature and is becoming a place for strategic competition hub for major international and regional powers, despite its ability of connectivity routes and economic influence, its success will depend on solving security challenges, political stability, and geopolitical competition, and on whether the countries and actors choose cooperation or confrontation. Through cooperation, the corridor will definitely transform Afghanistan from a historical conflict zone and a landlocked country into a connecting state of major regional economies, and through competition among major powers, it will become the center of strategic competition.

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