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The Geostrategic Role of Afghanistan in Connecting Central Asia with South Asia

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Abstract

Afghanistan is one of the few countries in the world that holds an exceptionally important geostrategic position for linking various geographic regions of Asia and beyond. Geostrategically located at one of the most sensitive points in the world, Afghanistan connects four major regions of Asia: Central Asia, East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia. Among these, its role in connecting Central Asia and South Asia is of particular and outstanding significance. Recognizing the importance of this issue, the present study seeks to answer the following question: What role does Afghanistan's geostrategic position play in connecting Central Asia with South Asia? The hypothesis of this research is that Afghanistan, by virtue of its central location in Asia and its substantial capacities in political, security, economic, and cultural dimensions, can play a key role in facilitating and completing the process of integration between Central and South Asia. This includes fostering convergence in these dimensions and improving the level of stability and the quality of life for the citizens of both regions. Ultimately, such integration may contribute not only to better living conditions for the people of Central and South Asia but also to broader regional stability across both regions and the Asian continent as a whole. This study is conducted through a synthesis of Mackinder's Heartland Theory and the concept of New Regionalism. Methodologically, the research is applied in terms of its objective, descriptive-analytical in nature, and relies on documentary and library-based methods for data collection.

Keywords: Geostrategic, Afghanistan, Central Asia, South Asia, Convergence

1. Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the oldest and most strategic countries in the world. Throughout its long and rich history, it has played a central role in Asia and the broader world as an essential part of a great global civilization. Due to its unique geographical location within the Asian continent, Afghanistan has consistently served as a hub for political, commercial, cultural, and even military exchanges among various civilizations and cultures. Due to its geographical location along the historic Silk Road, Afghanistan has long held a unique significance as a crossroads of major cultures and civilizations. Throughout various periods, it has served as a regional crossroads, notably both before and after the advent of Islam, and has been recognized as one of the greatest centers of civilization. In ancient times, Afghanistan was the convergence point of the Persian, Greek, and Chinese empires, and during the Islamic era, it was acknowledged as one of the foremost scientific and cultural centers of the Islamic world. In the

contemporary era, Afghanistan continues to play a crucial role as a significant and strategic country in Asia, serving as a key connector between several important Asian regions, including West Asia, East Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia.

Afghanistan, due to its connections with multiple regional systems, has consistently been at the forefront of global attention and is considered one of the most important regions in the world, especially in the twenty-first century. Afghanistan and the regional systems of which it is a member have continually experienced significant and complex political, economic, military, and cultural transformations. These developments have not only affected the member countries of these systems but have also impacted global systemic changes, with Afghanistan playing the most prominent role among them. Afghanistan, endowed with significant geostrategic capacity and due to its proximity to major regional and global powers, has consistently been regarded as a gateway connecting the regions of Asia to the rest of the world.

Recognizing the importance of Afghanistan's geostrategic position as a pivotal junction in Asia, and due to its significant geostrategic standing across various dimensions—political, economic, security, and cultural—particularly in the interactions between Central Asia and South Asia, conducting research on Afghanistan's geostrategic role in linking these two regions appears essential. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to analyze Afghanistan's geostrategic role in integrating two important Asian regions—Central Asia and South Asia—through a combined theoretical framework of the Heartland Theory and New Regionalism. The main research question is: *What is the geostrategic role of Afghanistan in connecting Central Asia with South Asia?* The hypothesis posits that Afghanistan, due to its significant capacities in political, security, economic, and cultural spheres, can play a vital role alongside the ongoing process of integration between Central and South Asia. It can foster convergence between the two regions and contribute to enhancing stability and improving the quality of life for the citizens of both areas. Such developments may ultimately lead to increased stability not only within both regions but also across the broader Asian continent.

In the literature review section, it becomes evident that no research has specifically addressed the geostrategic role of Afghanistan and the country's importance in facilitating regional connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia. Most existing studies have instead focused on Afghanistan's strategic location in terms of economic significance or have explored how this location contributes to instability within Afghanistan and the broader region. As examples, we will briefly refer to the findings of several studies conducted by different authors.

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, in her study titled "Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia", published by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in 2012, explores the importance of Afghanistan for the Central Asian countries. The findings of this research indicate that Afghanistan holds exceptional significance for these states, particularly in the context of regional connectivity and strategic interactions. The author of this study highlights that Central Asian countries approach their relations with Afghanistan with great caution and precision. The threat posed by the expansion of terrorist organizations, extremist groups, drug trafficking, and organized crime has led these countries to adopt a cautious stance toward deepening ties with Afghanistan. The study argues that these challenges have prevented the development of stronger relations between Central Asian states and Afghanistan. In addition to this observation, the research also emphasizes that Afghanistan has the potential to offer significant opportunities, particularly in serving as a corridor for the transmission of Central Asian energy to other regions. However, due to fears stemming from Afghanistan's persistent instability, these opportunities remain largely unrealized. As a result, Central Asian countries prioritize a stable Afghanistan, viewing such stability as a prerequisite for mitigating the risks associated with regional cooperation and for expanding bilateral and multilateral relations with the country. (Tadjbakhsh, 2012, p. 1_62) Therefore, based on the findings of this study, it becomes evident that the research primarily focuses on the negative impacts of Afghanistan's internal situation on the development of its relations with Central Asian countries. In contrast, the present study aims to examine the role of Afghanistan's geostrategic location in connecting the countries of Central Asia with those of South Asia. Additionally, this research seeks to analyze the prospects for regional integration by combining Mackinder's Heartland Theory with the conceptual framework of New Regionalism.

The joint study titled "The Role of Afghanistan in Central Asia: Risk and Future Prospect Overview" by Ghulam Rasool, K.S. Mukhtarova, and Bilal Naqeeb Jan, published in 2024, explores the role of Afghanistan's geographical position in relation to Central Asia. The findings of this study indicate that Afghanistan shares numerous historical, civilizational, and cultural commonalities with the Central Asian states. However, since the separation of the Central Asian territories from Afghanistan, the nature of Afghanistan's relations with its northern neighbors—particularly Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, with which it shares borders—has entered a new phase. Beyond the historical context, the study primarily focuses on the security threats emanating from Afghanistan's borders that pose risks to Central Asian countries. These threats include instability, rising insecurity, the presence of extremist groups near the borders, increased flows of Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), narcotics trafficking, and the expansion of organized criminal networks. One significant and more recent issue the study highlights as an emerging threat from within Afghanistan is the implementation of the Qosh Tepa Canal project. This irrigation canal, being constructed in northern Afghanistan and fed by the Amu Darya River, aims to support agriculture in the region. However, the study argues that the realization of this project may lead to political tensions and environmental challenges for Central Asian countries, particularly those dependent on shared water resources. (Ghulam Rasool, K.S. Mukhtarova, Bilal Naqeeb Jan, 2024, p. 66_68) An analysis of the findings of this study reveals that Afghanistan's geography is primarily examined through a security-focused lens. This security-centric perspective constitutes one of the main differences between this research and the study we are conducting. Our research seeks to explore Afghanistan's role in linking Central Asia with South Asia, emphasizing the potential opportunities that such regional connectivity could bring—not only for Central and South Asia, but also for greater Asia and the international system as a whole. The emphasis on security threats in the aforementioned study limits its scope, distinguishing it clearly from our study, which focuses on the geostrategic potential of Afghanistan as a bridge for regional integration.

Imran Khan and Safdar Ali Shirazi, in their study titled *"Geostrategic Importance of Afghanistan for Pakistan"*, examine the geostrategic position of Afghanistan in relation to Pakistan. The authors highlight Afghanistan's role as a connecting hub between Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and East Asia, emphasizing its importance as a key corridor within the broader Asian region. The findings of the study reveal that Pakistan faces a serious energy shortage, particularly in oil and gas, and the most accessible and viable source for meeting this demand lies in the Central Asian countries. The research underscores that Pakistan's access to these energy resources is largely dependent on transit through Afghanistan. Overall, the study's focus is primarily on linking Pakistan to Central Asia for the purpose of accessing energy resources, thereby framing Afghanistan's geostrategic value in terms of energy transit and connectivity. (IMRAN KHAN, SAFDAR Ali SHIRAZI, 2021, p. 137_149) An analysis of the findings of this study reveals that its geographical focus is limited solely to Pakistan, and it addresses only one primary dimension—economic connectivity. In contrast, the research we are conducting seeks to explore four key dimensions of regional cooperation, including political, economic, security, and cultural integration, which are among the defining characteristics of New Regionalism. This broader, multi-dimensional approach sets our study apart, as it aims to present a comprehensive framework for regional connectivity between Central and South Asia through Afghanistan's geostrategic position.

Dr. Muhammad Munir and Dr. Muhammad Shafiq, in their study titled *"Geostrategic Significance of the Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan"*, examine the strategic and economic importance of the Wakhan Corridor, located in Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan. This corridor, an economic passage connecting Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and Tajikistan, spans approximately 350 kilometers in length and 16 to 64 kilometers in width, linking the four member countries. Wakhan is a mountainous and high-altitude region in northeastern Afghanistan that borders Badakhshan Province in Tajikistan and the Xinjiang region of China. The study emphasizes that the corridor, if fully developed and operational, holds substantial economic potential for the participating countries. The research primarily focuses on the economic and security benefits that the corridor may bring to Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan, while also discussing the challenges and obstacles facing the realization of this project. (Muhammad Munir, Muhammad Shafiq, 2018, p. 203_213) An examination of the findings reveals that this study differs from our research in terms of nature, objectives, and the level of actors involved.

Mr. HD Joginder Singh Saklani and Ritesh Kumar, in their study titled *"Geopolitical Significance of Afghanistan in the Context of South Asia,"* examine the geopolitical importance of Afghanistan within the South Asian region.

The authors begin by introducing South Asia and its member countries, followed by an analysis of the relations between India and Afghanistan. The authors argue that despite the absence of a direct shared border between Afghanistan and the Republic of India, the deep cultural, civilizational, and social ties between the two countries mitigate the significance of this geographical separation. Furthermore, the study emphasizes Afghanistan's strategic importance to India, China, and Pakistan, with particular focus on India's access to energy resources from Central Asian countries through Afghanistan. (Joginder Singh Saklani, Ritesh Kumar, 2022, p. 33_44) An analysis of the findings of this study reveals significant differences compared to the research we are undertaking, particularly in terms of objectives, scope, and level of analysis. Therefore, our study has the potential to offer valuable insights, as it focuses more comprehensively on connecting the countries of Central Asia with those of South Asia across shared political, economic, security, and cultural dimensions.

Amaia Sanchez Cacicedo, in her study titled *"Unlocking Afghanistan's Connectivity Potential,"* examines the importance of Afghanistan's geographical position in linking the countries of the region and its neighbors. The findings indicate that Afghanistan, due to its strategic location, is situated close to major regional and global powers such as China, the Russian Federation, India, Pakistan, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which enhances its significance. Moreover, Afghanistan occupies a pivotal position as a connection point between East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Its proximity to the Eurasian region and the Middle East—neighbors to European countries—further elevates Afghanistan's importance for European nations as well. This study primarily focuses on Afghanistan's economic potential and examines its importance in the context of various regional economic projects. For instance, it highlights Afghanistan's critical role in the implementation of energy transmission projects such as CASA-1000, which involves Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; the CASREM energy project connecting Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan; the rail connectivity project linking China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan; as well as the TAPI gas pipeline project and other initiatives where Afghanistan plays a central role. (Cacicedo, 2022, p. 1_8) An analysis of this study reveals that the author primarily focuses on Afghanistan's economic potential within the Asian region, without addressing other capacities of Afghanistan in connecting Central Asia and South Asia.

Sujit Kumar Datta, in his study titled *"Afghanistan, the New Hotspot of South Asian Geostrategic Competition,"* examines the significance of Afghanistan's location and its impact on the country's instability. The findings indicate that Afghanistan's position as a neighbor to major regional and global powers—including the Russian Federation, China, Pakistan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and its proximity to Turkey—has negatively affected the situation within Afghanistan. (Datta, 2021, p. 197_212) An analysis of the findings of this study reveals that it views Afghanistan's geostrategic position primarily as a negative factor contributing to insecurity and instability within the country. In contrast, our research focuses on Afghanistan's geostrategic location as a potential catalyst for regional stability and integration.

Dr. Faramarz Tamanna, in collaboration with several other Afghan authors, has published a book titled *"Afghanistan Foreign Policy on Regional Cooperation."* This work, published as a collection of articles, is regarded as a valuable contribution to the field of Afghanistan's foreign policy. It examines Afghanistan's diplomatic relations with 14 countries and analyzes the opportunities and challenges present in these bilateral relations. A particularly important section for our research is Part Three, which focuses on economic cooperation and regional organizations. This section discusses Afghanistan's geoeconomic significance in fostering integration between Central Asia and South Asia, highlighting the country's potential role in regional convergence. (tamanna, 2014, p. 467_508) An analysis of the findings of this book shows that it primarily focuses on Afghanistan's foreign policy and its bilateral relations with fourteen key regional and extra-regional countries. In its third section, the book also addresses Afghanistan's economic potential in linking Central Asia and South Asia. However, in contrast, our research takes a broader approach by examining political, economic, security, and cultural dimensions, as well as Afghanistan's overall capacity to connect the countries of Central Asia with South Asia.

A review of the existing literature reveals that our study, titled *"The Geostrategic Role of Afghanistan in Connecting Central Asia and South Asia,"* not only addresses a significant research gap, but also contributes to the theoretical development of regional integration between South Asia and Central Asia. Moreover, it highlights Afghanistan's potential role in promoting stability across the region, including within Afghanistan itself as well

as among its Central and South Asian neighbors. This, in turn, could foster regional development and long-term stability throughout Central and South Asia, and more broadly, across the Asian continent.

The methodology of this study is applied in terms of its objective. For data collection, the library (documentary) method has been used, while for data analysis, a descriptive-analytical approach has been employed.

2. Theoretical Framework

In analyzing the geostrategic role of Afghanistan in connecting Central Asia and South Asia, this study adopts a combined theoretical approach that integrates Mackinder's Heartland Theory and the concept of New Regionalism. This integrated framework offers a comprehensive lens through which to understand regional and geopolitical developments. According to Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory, the Eurasian region—referred to as the "Heartland"—holds vital importance in global politics. Control over the Heartland is considered a key to accessing global power. Given its location at the crossroads of Eurasia—particularly at the junction between Central and South Asia—Afghanistan occupies a strategically significant position within this critical region. Complementing this classical perspective, New Regionalism emphasizes multilateral cooperation, the participation of diverse actors, and the voluntary engagement of states. Unlike classical regionalism, which often stemmed from top-down political or security arrangements, New Regionalism is grounded in spontaneous, interest-based cooperation across political, economic, and cultural dimensions. By synthesizing the Heartland theory with New Regionalism, Afghanistan is conceptualized not only as a geostrategic pivot in line with classical geopolitical thinking, but also as a potential agent of regional integration. In particular, its role in linking the Central Asian and South Asian regions could serve as a foundation for promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development, both at the regional and transregional levels.

2.1. *The Heartland*

The heartland Theory was introduced on January 20, 1904, by Halford J. Mackinder, then Director of the London School of Economics, during an academic lecture at the Royal Geographical Society, entitled "The Geographical Pivot of History." In this lecture, Mackinder sought to highlight the significant impact of geographical factors on the course of global history. In his Heartland Theory, which is also known as Mackinder's geopolitical philosophy, he identified a central point in the heart of the Earth, referring to it as the most strategically important and advantageous geographical region—the heart of global politics. Mackinder defined the Eurasian region as the geopolitical pivot of the world and considered its role crucial for international security. He emphasized that the Heartland region possesses immense political, security, and economic potential. In addition to the geographical emphasis, Mackinder also underlined the importance of having good neighbors. In his work *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, he asserted that a good life is impossible without good neighbors. According to Mackinder's perspective, Central Asia lies at the core of global politics and holds exceptional strategic significance. (Enayatollah Yazdani , Ali Omidi , Parisa ShahMohammadi, 2017, p. 166_170) A review of Mackinder's Heartland Theory reveals that, more than a century later, it still retains significant academic credibility. The Eurasian region, located within the continent of Asia, continues to hold strategic relevance. Afghanistan, with its critical geostrategic and geopolitical position, effectively functions as the heart of Asia and a pivotal part of the Eurasian Heartland. This reinforces the idea that Afghanistan represents not only the center of the Asian region but also serves as a practical embodiment of Mackinder's Heartland. If the countries of regions such as Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and East Asia utilize Afghanistan's strategic location wisely, it could undoubtedly create substantial opportunities for regional and transregional development—not only across Asia but also at the broader international level.

2.2. *New Regionalism*

In political geography, various definitions have been proposed for the concept of regionalism. In a general sense, regionalism refers to a special focus on a specific geographical space that possesses common characteristics and serves as the most suitable platform for realizing the goals, interests, and aspirations of multiple nations. According to John M. Collins, political geography refers to a broad region characterized by significant cultural and physical

homogeneity and shared traits. From another perspective, regionalism refers to a grouping of countries within a specific geopolitical space that maintain organic interrelations, such that a transformation in one country inevitably impacts the others, preventing them from remaining indifferent to regional developments. (Bahador Zarei , Jalil Delshad , Seyed Mehdi Musavi Shahidi , Seyyed Mahmoud Alavi, 2016, p. 744_745) Regionalism is also among the paradigms that have emerged as a result of changes and transformations in the international system. Given the dynamic nature of international politics and the evolving structure of the global order, regional systems have also undergone significant transformations. Regionalism initially emerged during the bipolar structure of the Cold War era—first in European countries, and subsequently in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa—each with differences in objectives, nature, and scope. However, the end of the Cold War marked a turning point in the evolution of regionalism. It gave rise to a new form of intra-regional cooperation across political, economic, trade, and cultural dimensions, which came to be known as New Regionalism. This post-Cold War regionalism differs significantly from the earlier form of regionalism that emerged around 1979, particularly across four dimensions: agency, motivation, orientation, and expansion. In terms of agency and actors, unlike classical (old) regionalism, which focused primarily on the role of states, New Regionalism seeks to include a broader spectrum of actors—including state, individual, and societal actors, both within and beyond the region. From the perspective of motivation and objectives, New Regionalism is not unidimensional or based on a single variable. Rather, it represents a form of multilateral and multidimensional integration, encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions. Its goals extend well beyond merely establishing free trade regimes or military-security alliances. The direction and trajectory of New Regionalism also differ from that of traditional regionalism. Unlike the old model, which was often top-down and imposed by states or superpowers, New Regionalism is not driven by structural determinism or immutable necessities. Instead, it is formed organically through human agency, practices, and interactions, under conditions where interests and processes are redefined. The scope and territorial extent of New Regionalism have also expanded significantly. Regionalism and regional integration now go far beyond the European experience and have evolved into a universal and global phenomenon. (Firouzabadi, 2010, p. 109_110)

Classical regionalism was formulated to explain the European integration theories of the 1960s and 1970s, primarily within the frameworks of federalist, functionalist, and neo-functionalist theories. This model of regionalism was largely aimed at establishing peace in the aftermath of the two World Wars, particularly in the European context. However, due to several challenges—such as the Europe-centric nature of classical integration and the failure of other countries and regions to replicate this model successfully—the need arose for a more adaptable and inclusive approach. As a result, New Regionalism emerged, particularly influenced by the White Paper of 1985, which aimed to revitalize the concept of integration and offered a new perspective on regional cooperation. This shift gave rise to what is now referred to as New Regionalism. (Ehsan Sheikhou , Roohallah Talebi arani, 2020, p. 100_102) New regionalism, compared to old regionalism, has its own advantages, including the utilization of financial and organizational resources to achieve international objectives, the specialization of the division of labor from an organizational perspective, the efficient use of local knowledge to ensure peace, the establishment of military, economic, and cultural unions, and a high degree of autonomy among aligned actors. (Mozaffar Hasanvand , Mehdi Esfandyari, 2019, p. 40_42)

With an understanding of Afghanistan's geostrategic position at the heart of the Asian continent, particularly in its role as a connector among key Asian regions including Central Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and West Asia, and given the country's considerable political, economic, security, and cultural capacities, it can be asserted that Afghanistan possesses both potential and actual capabilities to play a significant role at the regional, transregional, and global levels. Afghanistan, as a natural linking hub between important Asian regions, not only connects transportation, energy, and trade routes, but also facilitates extensive cultural and security interactions. This strategic position can be analyzed through the lens of Halford Mackinder's geopolitical Heartland Theory—a theory introduced in the early twentieth century that posits that any power controlling the Heartland region (Eurasia) can influence the political destiny of the world. Mackinder identified Eurasia as the "geographical pivot of history" and regarded it as the center of global power. Within this framework, Afghanistan's location in the southern part of Eurasia, adjacent to key Asian regions, especially Central and South Asia, grants it a vital role in regional geopolitical dynamics and positions it as a potential hub for regional integration.

Alongside Afghanistan's important position as the heart of Asia based on the Heartland Theory, the New Regionalism Theory also provides a suitable analytical framework for better understanding Afghanistan's role in regional and international interactions. Unlike classical models, this theory emphasizes multilateral integration and the participation of a diverse range of state and non-state actors. New Regionalism is founded on the belief that local and transnational actors, motivated by multidimensional interests and operating in a voluntary space, are capable of advancing regional cooperation processes. From this perspective, Afghanistan, relying on its geopolitical position, particularly as a strategic link between Central Asia and South Asia, can smartly leverage its internal and regional capacities to create the necessary foundation for sustainable political, economic, and security cooperation. This role not only contributes to strengthening stability and development within the country but also transforms Afghanistan into an influential hub in the new regional and global order, aiding in the formation of coherent structures connecting peripheral regions.

3. Overview of Afghanistan

Geographically, Afghanistan is a mountainous country located in the heart of Asia. It is renowned regionally and globally for its high-altitude position, towering mountains, and deep valleys. Afghanistan has an irregular oval-shaped structure, covering an area of approximately 652,225 square kilometers. Its highest point rises above 6,000 meters in elevation. Climatically, Afghanistan resembles countries in the Middle East and lacks the monsoon rainfall typical of the Indian subcontinent. As a result, its climate is generally classified as semi-arid. (Mossalanejad, *The Evolution of Social Structure and Geopolitics of Power in Afghanistan*, 2009, p. 170_172) Afghanistan shares its borders with the Turkmenistan Republic to the northwest, the Uzbekistan Republic to the north, the Tajikistan Republic to the northeast, the People's Republic of China to the east, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to the south and southeast, and the Islamic Republic of Iran to the west. Major cities in Afghanistan include Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, Herat, and Jalalabad. Accurate population statistics are not readily available. The main languages spoken in the country are Persian (Dari), Pashto, Uzbeki, and Turkmeni. The official religions are Sunni and Shia Islam. Historically, Afghanistan has an ancient and rich history spanning several thousand years. Due to its strategic position, it has frequently undergone changes and invasions by foreign powers, including Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Timur, the British, Tsarist Russia, and the Soviet Union. (Afghanistan Heartland of Asia, 2004, p. 97_101) Afghanistan holds exceptional importance in terms of geostrategy and political geography for the region. According to political geography theorists, Afghanistan has been described as the "crossroads of Asia" or the "heart of Asia." As Mackinder noted, every continent has a pivotal point that countries strive to control, and dominance over this point is tantamount to control over the entire continent and its center. Due to its significance, Afghanistan has been a region over which many empires have sought to exert control from the perspective of political geography. With its geostrategic position, Afghanistan connects several important Asian regions: Central Asia to the north, East Asia to the east, South Asia to the south, and West Asia to the west. For this reason, Afghanistan is often referred to as the "four-way crossroads of Asia." (Farhad Atai, Mohammad Musa Jafar, 2019, p. 161_162) An examination of Afghanistan's geostrategic position reveals that the country holds special significance for both the region and the world, particularly due to its substantial capacity to connect key Asian regions, notably Central Asia and South Asia. These two regions are complementary, and if effectively linked through Afghanistan, they could generate significant opportunities for the region, Asia as a whole, and at the global level.

4. Afghanistan's Diplomatic and Geostrategic Role in Connecting Foreign Relations of Central Asian and South Asian Countries

4.1. *The Diplomatic and Geostrategic Role of Afghanistan in Foreign Relations with Central Asian Countries*

4.1.1. Afghanistan's Diplomatic Position in Foreign Relations with Central Asian Countries

Due to its strategic position, Afghanistan is influenced by several geopolitical systems, including the Central Asian regional system, the South Asian regional system, an independent geopolitical system, and the West Asian regional system. It is evident that Afghanistan occupies a special and prominent place among these systems. (Dr. Zahra Pishgahifard, Sardar Mohammad Rahimi, 2008, p. 108_109). Among these regions, it is evident that Afghanistan

shares ancient and longstanding relations with Central Asia. Afghanistan has historically served as one of the strategic and geographical axes in strengthening this civilizational connection, playing a fundamental role in its expansion. Due to the importance of the relationship between Central Asia and Afghanistan, we now turn to an examination of the nature of these relations.

4.1.1.1. Republic of Uzbekistan

Afghanistan's relationship with the Republic of Uzbekistan is rooted in deep historical ties. As one of the major centers of civilization, culture, and ancient literature in the Central Asian region, Afghanistan has historically maintained a shared identity with the countries of Central Asia, particularly through its economic and connective role with neighboring states. Uzbekistan, one of Afghanistan's northern neighbors, also possesses a rich historical and cultural heritage. Like other Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1917, remaining under Soviet rule until 1991, when it gained independence. Afghanistan was among the first countries to officially recognize Uzbekistan's independence in the same year. Since then, relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have been among the most positive and cooperative bilateral relations, encompassing various political, economic, and cultural dimensions. (tamana, 2014, p. 62_66) As previously mentioned, the relationship between Afghanistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan is considered one of the oldest foreign relations in the history of both countries. Due to their significant civilizational and historical commonalities, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan have always maintained strong ties as brotherly nations sharing a common geographical and cultural landscape. This can be clearly observed in the interactions between citizens living on both sides of the Afghanistan–Uzbekistan border. At present, the level of diplomatic and bilateral relations between the two countries remains positive and constructive. With greater attention and investment in various sectors, both nations have the potential to further enhance these relations—particularly in connection with South Asian countries, which could generate numerous opportunities and benefits for both Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

4.1.1.2. Republic of Tajikistan

The history of the Republic of Tajikistan shares many similarities with other Central Asian countries. Historically, like its regional neighbors, Tajikistan has been under the influence of various dynasties such as the Achaemenids, Samanids, Seljuks, Khwarazmians, and the Gurkanians. (Habibullah Abolhassan Shirazi , Mohammad Reza Majidi, 2003, p. 217) A study of the history of the Central Asian region reveals that Afghanistan, like Tajikistan, shares a civilizational history and common values, underscoring the importance of relations between the two countries. Due to the expansionist policies of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, Tajikistan, like other Central Asian republics, remained under Soviet domination until the late twentieth century. The Republic of Tajikistan gained its independence on September 9, 1991, joined the United Nations in 1992, and experienced a period of civil war from independence until 1997, when peace was finally achieved. Afghanistan was among the first countries to recognize Tajikistan's independence on December 12, 1991, establish diplomatic relations, and play a significant role in ending the civil war. Since then, Afghanistan's foreign policy toward Tajikistan has been based on neighborliness, brotherhood, and multilateral cooperation. (Arzoo, 2015, p. 110_112) Relations between Afghanistan and the Republic of Tajikistan have always been based on the principles of neighborliness and brotherhood. A clear example of this close relationship can be observed during the Tajikistani civil wars, when a significant number of Tajikistani refugees sought shelter in Afghanistan. Following the end of the conflict and the establishment of peace, with the support of Afghanistan, these refugees returned to Tajikistan. (Habibullah Abolhassan Shirazi , Mohammad Reza Majidi, 2003, p. 219_235) In addition to these considerations, due to the historical, civilizational, and cultural commonalities between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the bilateral relations between the two countries have remained at a good level. Relations between Afghanistan and the Republic of Tajikistan have consistently been based on the principles of brotherhood and neighborliness, standing together even in difficult and adverse circumstances. This reflects the strength and resilience of their relationship under all conditions. Furthermore, if Tajikistan invests in its significant political, economic, social, security, and cultural capacities, it can further enhance the level of bilateral relations, which in turn could bring about greater opportunities in the Central Asian region.

4.1.1.3. Republic of Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is one of the Central Asian countries that, like other members of the region, gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The country shares borders with several neighboring states that have common

civilizational ties, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Afghanistan. The Amu Darya River, along with other shared attributes, constitutes one of the important commonalities between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan is home to various ethnic minorities, including Turkmens, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Russians, Azerbaijanis, Tatars, Germans, and Ukrainians, making it one of the more ethnically diverse countries in the region. (Siddiqi, 2016, p. 142_146) Afghanistan's relations with the Republic of Turkmenistan have a long-standing history, with their most notable interactions traceable back to the era of Greater Khorasan. However, these relations have been more formally studied and developed since 1991. Turkmenistan gained its independence in 1991 and joined the United Nations as a sovereign state. Afghanistan was among the first countries to recognize Turkmenistan's independence and also one of the earliest to acknowledge Turkmenistan's neutral foreign policy. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, both countries have consistently sought to expand their bilateral ties. This effort has led to the signing of several bilateral and multilateral strategic agreements, which have created numerous political, security, economic, and cultural opportunities between the two nations. (tamana, 2014, p. 188_207) Due to the longstanding historical and civilizational ties between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, as well as their mutual interdependence, the two countries hold a special position in each other's foreign relations. Recognizing this, Afghanistan can serve as a key point of connection, linking Turkmenistan—with its considerable economic and cultural capacities to South Asian countries that have essential needs. This dynamic, alongside the strengthening of Turkmenistan's relations with South Asian states, can further contribute to the expansion of ties between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan.

4.1.1.4. Republic of Kazakhstan

The Republic of Kazakhstan is located in the central part of the Eurasian continent and northern Central Asia. It shares borders with the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Republic of Turkmenistan. Covering an area of 2,717,300 square kilometers, Kazakhstan is the eighth largest country in the world and the second largest among the former Soviet republics in terms of land area. Despite its vast size, Kazakhstan is considered one of the least densely populated countries in the world. Its geographical location and vast territory significantly contribute to Kazakhstan's geostrategic importance. (Dero, 2019, p. 55_57) Although the Republic of Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan, it possesses significant commonalities with Afghanistan similar to other Central Asian republics. The geographical separation has never diminished Kazakhstan's importance as a country with profound civilizational and historical ties to Afghanistan. The history of relations between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan should be examined primarily from the time of Kazakhstan's independence. Afghanistan was among the first countries to recognize Kazakhstan's independence, and since then, bilateral relations have remained strong and positive. Examples of this cooperation include both countries' membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with Kazakhstan as a full member and Afghanistan as an observer member, as well as their collaboration within the framework of the Istanbul Process. (tamana, 2014, p. 402_408)

Moreover, due to the shared history and cultural heritage, the relationship between the two countries has always maintained a special status. In this context, Kazakhstan's vast mineral resources and its strong agricultural potential, combined with Afghanistan's supply of inexpensive labor, create opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. Afghanistan, acting as the gateway for Kazakhstan and Central Asia to South Asia, holds a strategic position that enables it to function as a corridor for Central-South Asian collaboration. This situation highlights Afghanistan's geopolitical importance and underlines its strategic role in political, security, economic, and cultural dimensions in relation to Kazakhstan. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the current relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and Afghanistan are already at a positive level. With effective utilization of the extensive political, economic, security, social, and cultural capacities of both nations, these relations have the potential to expand significantly.

4.1.1.5. Republic of Kyrgyzstan

The Republic of Kyrgyzstan, like other Central Asian republics, shares a similar historical background. It experienced a period of control under Tsarist Russia and later under the Soviet Union. Kyrgyzstan came under the rule of the Russian Empire in 1876, and following the 1917 revolution, it became one of the republics of the Soviet Union. This status continued until the dissolution of the USSR. In 1991, with the approval of the Supreme Council of Kyrgyzstan, the country declared its independence from the Soviet Union. (Habibullah Abolhassan Shirazi ,

Mohammad Reza Majidi, 2003, p. 193_197) Afghanistan's official and diplomatic relations with Kyrgyzstan date back to the period following Kyrgyzstan's independence. However, due to prolonged internal conflicts in Afghanistan, these relations did not develop to a significant level. It was not until 2002 that a major transformation occurred in bilateral ties, marked by the appointment of Abdul Qadir Dostum as Afghanistan's first ambassador to Kyrgyzstan. Key aspects of the bilateral relationship since 2001 can be analyzed at various levels. These include the presence of the Kyrgyz minority in Afghanistan, Afghanistan's status as an observer member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Kyrgyzstan's permanent membership in the same organization, and regional commonalities. Such factors have contributed to making the Afghanistan–Kyrgyzstan relationship increasingly noteworthy. (tamana, 2014, p. 440_451) Although Afghanistan does not share a geographical border with Kyrgyzstan, the two countries are connected through civilizational ties and shared cultural and ethnic elements most notably, the presence of Kyrgyz minorities in Afghanistan. Despite facing internal challenges, including economic difficulties, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan maintains cultural and historical connections with Afghanistan. Given the significance of Central Asian countries particularly Kyrgyzstan for regional cooperation, Afghanistan holds the potential to create substantial opportunities by linking these states to South Asia. In this context, Afghanistan's strategic geographical position enables it to serve as a vital bridge between Central Asia and other regions, especially South Asia.

4.1.2. The Geostrategic Role of Afghanistan in Foreign Relations with Central Asian Countries

Afghanistan's unique geostrategic position plays a significant role in shaping the geostrategic definition of the region. Frequently referred to as the "crossroads of Asia," the "Heartland," or the "Heart of Asia," Afghanistan has long been recognized for its strategic importance. According to Halford Mackinder, Afghanistan is among the strategic regions whose control could lead to the control of Asia—and potentially the world. In this context, Afghanistan's geopolitical relations with the Central Asian countries have been of extraordinary significance and continuity. One of the key factors strengthening this enduring connection is Afghanistan's geographical borders with three major and influential Central Asian countries through its northern frontier, rendering these ties both vital and unbreakable. (Farhad Atai , Mohammad Musa Jafar, 2019, p. 161) In addition to geographical proximity, the peoples of Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries share deep-rooted civilizational, historical, and cultural commonalities. These shared features were disrupted primarily due to political compulsions—particularly the rivalries among colonial powers during the 17th and 18th centuries—which led to their separation. Nevertheless, despite these divisions, strong relations between Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia have consistently existed across various sectors. (saeed vosoughi , Ehsan Fallahi , Qurban Ali Haidari, 2014, p. 155_158) An analysis of Afghanistan's position and its connection to the Central Asian region highlights one key element above all: Afghanistan's strategic role as a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. Geographically, Afghanistan shares borders with three Central Asian countries—Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan—positioning it as the gateway from Central Asia to South Asia. Conversely, it also serves as South Asia's entry point to Central Asia. From both historical and civilizational perspectives, Afghanistan shares significant commonalities with Central Asian countries, which further reinforces its vital geopolitical role. If the nations of Central Asia can effectively utilize Afghanistan's existing potential as a connector to South Asia, this could create major opportunities for political, economic, security, cultural, and social cooperation across the two key regions of Asia. Moreover, the mutual interdependence of Central Asian and South Asian countries on Afghanistan not only accelerates regional connectivity, but also paves the way for broader opportunities. Ultimately, such cooperation could contribute not only to regional stability, but also to enhanced collaboration, integration, and balanced development across the wider Asian continent.

4.2. The Diplomatic and Geostrategic Role of Afghanistan in Foreign Relations with South Asian Countries

4.2.1. The Diplomatic Role of Afghanistan in Foreign Relations with South Asian Countries (India and Pakistan)

The concept of "region," first introduced by Barry Buzan in his book *People, States, and Fear*, posits that national and international levels of analysis are insufficient for adequately examining regional issues. Therefore, an intermediate level of analysis is necessary. To address this gap, Buzan proposes the "regional level" of analysis as a middle ground that bridges the divide between the state level and the international system level. (Mohammad

Musa Jafari , Ali Ahmad Tawhedi, 2018, p. 13) Based on existing theories proposed by various scholars, Afghanistan has been examined as part of different regional groupings. Among these, four main approaches stand out: First, an approach that considers Afghanistan within the Middle East region; Second, an approach that places Afghanistan within Central Asia; Third, an approach that includes Afghanistan in South Asia; And fourth, an approach that does not categorize Afghanistan within any of these regions, instead viewing it as a distinct border area—an intersection between Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. (Seyed Ahmad Fatemi Nejad , Alireza Mohammadzadeh, 2018, p. 400_401) However, in the geopolitical spatial framework proposed by Goldstein, Afghanistan is considered part of the South Asian region. According to this theory, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are regarded as the most important countries within South Asia, with India occupying a central position, while Pakistan and Afghanistan hold peripheral positions. (Rahimi, 2017, p. 286) However, the author of this research believes that, given Afghanistan's significant geographical position and its various commonalities with countries across multiple regions—including Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and East Asia—Afghanistan functions as a complementary link among these regions. Afghanistan's strategic importance is far greater and more valuable than limiting it to a single geographic region. Simultaneously, Afghanistan can be considered a member of all these regions due to its dependencies and shared characteristics. Furthermore, countries in these regions can utilize Afghanistan as a connecting point to foster political, economic, security, cultural, and social development. Considering the importance of Afghanistan's policy and the South Asian region, this study proceeds to examine Afghanistan's policy towards two major South Asian countries, India and Pakistan, following Goldstein's perspective.

4.2.1.1. Republic of India

The Republic of India and Afghanistan have shared friendly and historic relations throughout various periods of history. Before the emergence of Pakistan as an independent country, India was Afghanistan's neighbor, and the destinies of the two nations were closely interconnected. However, with the establishment of Pakistan, India lost its direct border with Afghanistan. The onset of the Cold War between the two major South Asian countries, India and Pakistan, had significant repercussions on Afghanistan's political and security situation. (Abdullah Alizadeh , Khan Ali Azimi, 2024, p. 166) From its independence in 1919 until India's independence in 1947, Afghanistan, as an independent country, engaged in political interactions primarily with Britain. However, following India's independence, Afghanistan was among the first countries to recognize India's sovereignty and establish diplomatic relations with it.. (tamana, 2014, p. 260) In reviewing India's approach towards Afghanistan, it is important to note that India has consistently maintained cordial and friendly relations with Afghanistan regardless of the type of political regime in power. Since Afghanistan's independence, diplomatic relations between the Republic of India and Afghanistan have been established and further strengthened through friendship and strategic agreements. Over the past two decades, India has been one of the largest investors in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts. (Nowzar Shafiee , Shahriar Faraji Nasiri , Afshin Mottaghi, 2012, p. 134_139) India's foreign policy has consistently been based on respect and support towards Afghanistan. This approach is evident in India's assistance to Afghanistan's educational institutions, particularly through programs such as ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) and ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation). Through these initiatives, thousands of Afghan youth have received education and training in India. Additionally, India has played a significant role in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts. Notable contributions include the construction of the Shahtoot Dam, Salma Dam, and Kamal Khan Dam, the development of the Zaranj Highway, and support for Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). (Abdullah Alizadeh , Khan Ali Azimi, 2024, p. 178_184) Alongside India's positive and fraternal policies, if we examine the foundations of India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan, two major issues emerge: security concerns—particularly preventing the encirclement of the region by China and Pakistan—and India's economic interests in Central Asia. However, due to the interdependence between South Asian and Central Asian countries, economic interests appear to be significantly more important for India. As a major neighbor of Central Asia, India holds vital economic and geostrategic interests in the region. One of the most important aspects of this vision is cooperation in the fields of energy and security. With a population exceeding one billion and a large commercial market alongside a serious energy demand, India views Central Asia—with its vast energy reserves and promising market for Indian products—as key to achieving its goal of fostering integration between South Asia and Central Asia. (Nowzar Shafiee , Shahriar Faraji Nasiri , Afshin Mottaghi, 2012, p. 132_133) As previously mentioned, due to its significant strategic position in the heart of Asia and as a connecting point of four major regional systems, Afghanistan can serve as a bridge

linking India—the core of the South Asian region—with the countries of Central Asia. In this regard, Afghanistan, as the gateway from South Asia to Central Asia, can play a valuable role in connecting South Asia, especially the Republic of India, to Central Asia. Afghanistan's shared borders with three key Central Asian countries further enhance its strategic value. Additionally, the Caucasus region and the Russian Federation could potentially access the warm waters of the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan. Over recent years, India has maintained deep cultural relations with the people of Afghanistan. The presence of Indian diplomatic and consular missions in Kabul and other provinces underscores Afghanistan's strategic importance to India. Recognizing this importance and the mutual interdependence between South Asia and Central Asia, fostering integration can help reduce tensions among regional actors—including Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan—while simultaneously increasing cooperation and coordination between the countries of Central and South Asia.

4.2.1.4. Islamic republic of Pakistan

Afghanistan has long been referred to as the "Heart of Asia" due to its highly strategic geographical location. This position grants Afghanistan significant importance across various fields, including politics, economics, and transportation, for all countries in the region. In particular, Afghanistan holds exceptional significance for neighboring Pakistan. (Mahmood Ketabi, Yadolah Dehghan, Sara Dehghan Nasiri 2, 2016, p. 26) After the emergence of Pakistan from the partition of India in 1947, Afghanistan established diplomatic relations with Pakistan at the ambassadorial level. (tamana, 2014, p. 135) Pakistan shares deep religious, cultural, linguistic, and geographical ties with Afghanistan. As a landlocked country, Afghanistan shares approximately 2,200 kilometers of border with Pakistan and serves as Pakistan's gateway to Central Asia. Pakistan's primary objectives in its engagement with Afghanistan include pursuing geostrategic, security, and economic interests, as well as balancing India's influence in the region. (Alireza Khodagholipour, Farideh Mohammad Alipour, Mohammad Vali Modarres, 2020, p. 270_290) The interconnected geographical positioning of Afghanistan and Pakistan, situated in a strategically important region, has long been observed to function in a complementary manner. Pakistan maintains deep interdependencies with Afghanistan in political, security, cultural, and economic spheres. (Seyed Ahmad Fatemi Nejad, Alireza Mohammadzadeh, 2018, p. 409_412) There is a need to shift from Hobbesian policies toward more peaceful and cooperative Lockean approaches. Such a transition can play a significant role not only in stabilizing the South Asian region but also in promoting the development and progress of both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan, which shares eastern and southern borders with Afghanistan, has a strong need to connect with the Central Asian countries. In this context, Afghanistan can serve as a strategic corridor for Pakistan. Recognizing Afghanistan's importance as the gateway to South Asia, strategic investment and the adoption of aligned policies—particularly by Pakistan—could enable Afghanistan to create significant political, economic, security, and cultural opportunities for both South Asian and Central Asian countries.

4.2.2. Afghanistan's Geostrategic Role in Foreign Relations with South Asian Countries

According to the geopolitical framework presented by Goldstein, Afghanistan is considered part of the South Asian regional subsystem. Within this structure, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are identified as key countries in the system. (Rahimi, 2017, p. 286) South Asia, which includes Afghanistan, consists of eight countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This region is considered one of the most important in the world due to its significant energy needs, population dynamics, and geopolitical, economic, and geographical factors. With a total area of approximately 5,134,664 square kilometers and a population of over 1.952 billion people (according to the United Nations estimate in 2021), South Asia stands out as a critical region. Furthermore, based on the International Monetary Fund's 2020 report, the region's gross domestic product exceeds \$3.336 trillion, and its rapid population growth further enhances its global significance. (Marjan Badiie Azandehie, Bahador Zarei, Moein Barzegarzadeh zarandi, 2022, p. 1456) South Asia has a serious and growing need for energy. For nearly six decades, the region has been plagued by various internal and cross-border conflicts, including the wars between India and Pakistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Afghanistan's civil wars, and, most recently, the U.S.-led war in the region. These conflicts have significantly affected South Asia, leading to the destruction of development infrastructure, the rise of poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and other major challenges. As a result, South Asia has remained an underdeveloped region in the global system, despite its abundant human and material resources, which otherwise make it capable of becoming a developed and prosperous region on the international stage. (Abdolreza Farajirad, Mohammad Darkhor, Seyyed

Hadi Sadati, 2012, p. 34) Afghanistan, which is connected to the South Asian region through Pakistan, is considered one of the key actors within the regional system of South Asia. In addition to sharing approximately 2,200 kilometers of border with Pakistan, Afghanistan has deep religious, cultural, linguistic, and geographical ties with its neighbor. In fact, Afghanistan serves as the gateway for South Asian countries to access Central Asia. (Alireza Khodagholipour, Farideh Mohammad Alipour, Mohammad Vali Modarres, 2020, p. 271_272) Pakistan shares borders with the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Afghanistan, as the gateway from South Asia to Central Asia—and to countries such as the Russian Federation and the Caucasus region—holds a strategic position of particular importance. For the countries of South Asia, Afghanistan's geostrategic role is highly significant across political, economic, cultural, and security dimensions. The presence of consular missions from the two major South Asian actors—India and Pakistan—in Kabul and various Afghan provinces reflects the country's strategic relevance. In this context, Afghanistan serves as a principal corridor linking South Asia to Central Asia and the Caucasus region.

5. The Security Role of Afghanistan in Connecting Central Asia with South Asia

From a geopolitical perspective, Afghanistan is encompassed within the security frameworks of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Although Afghanistan is not geographically fully part of South Asia, it has become integrated into the dynamics of the South Asian region and is often considered a component of it. This integration has effectively removed Afghanistan from isolation and incorporated it into South Asia. The strategic importance and potential of Afghanistan have often been neglected by neighboring countries and regional actors. This neglect has contributed to cycles of instability and internal crises in Afghanistan spilling over into other regions, particularly Central and South Asia. South Asia is one of the most fragile and conflict-prone regions in the world. Multiple factors have contributed to this instability, with the core issue being the ongoing conflicts between the two major regional powers, India and Pakistan. These tensions have affected neighboring countries, including Afghanistan, further exacerbating instability across the region. Key factors driving insecurity include the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan, the arms race between the two countries, and disputes involving Pakistan and Afghanistan. Afghanistan's connection to Central Asia is established through its northern borders with neighboring countries. Geographically, Afghanistan's northern borders link it to Central Asia, and the region shares common characteristics with Afghanistan. However, the historical geopolitical rivalry between Russia and Britain in the 18th century separated these areas. Despite shared commonalities, Afghanistan and Central Asian countries face limitations that hinder closer cooperation. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan each pursue their own interests in collaboration with Afghanistan. Challenges such as drug trafficking, weak economies, terrorism, the spread of fundamentalism, and ethnic-religious conflicts have made these countries cautious in expanding their relations with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as Afghanistan's influential northern neighbors and landlocked countries, hold significant strategic importance. Overall, Afghanistan is strategically positioned as a crucial corridor for energy trade and providing Central Asian countries access to open seas. However, insecurity within Afghanistan and South Asia has impeded this potential. Moreover, the shared borders have become conduits for drug trafficking by armed groups, posing national security threats to these countries. Russia, in particular, has noted that it is one of the first countries to suffer the most from Afghanistan's instability and the associated narcotics trafficking. (Mohammad Musa Jafari, Ali Ahmad Tawhedi, 2018, p. 10_28) Recognizing the crucial importance of security in Afghanistan, it is clear that ensuring stability there can create significant security opportunities for both Central and South Asia. Therefore, it is essential for countries in these regions—particularly those in Central and South Asia—to adopt coordinated policies aimed at establishing stability and security in Afghanistan. Such collaboration, alongside maintaining peace and security, can lead to comprehensive stability across both Central and South Asia. The outcome of this effort would promote progress and development not only within these two regions but also across Asia and the world.

6. The Economic Role of Afghanistan in Connecting Central Asia with South Asia

Given its significant geostrategic and geoeconomic position in the heart of Asia, and its considerable potential, Afghanistan can serve as an economic crossroads of Asia. Alongside this, the substantial economic capacities of the surrounding regions—particularly Central Asia and South Asia—could facilitate Asia's transformation into the world's largest economic hub, with Afghanistan playing a vital role in this process. Recognizing Afghanistan's

important position, this section briefly introduces three examples of transit and trade projects between Afghanistan and the Central and South Asian regions that contribute to the stability and integration of these two areas.

6.1. *Lapis Lazuli (lajward) Corridor Project*

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is one of the most important and newest transit routes connecting Afghanistan to Central Asian countries, European nations, and the rest of the world. This corridor has a historical background and was once part of the ancient Silk Road. Over 2,000 years ago, Afghan lapis lazuli (from Badakhshan) was exported via this route to the Caucasus, Russia, the Balkans, Europe, North Africa, and especially to Eastern civilizations along the ancient Silk Road. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor connects Afghanistan and South Asian countries to Europe by road through Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, making it one of the shortest transit routes for Afghanistan and South Asian countries. This corridor offers significant trade opportunities for Afghanistan, Central Asia, and South Asia. Moreover, due to shared cultural, historical, and civilizational ties among the countries along this corridor, the project can further strengthen regional relations. In addition, this international corridor can provide multiple benefits for Afghanistan and the neighboring countries, with the primary objectives of this transit project aimed at contributing to regional and global development and progress.

1. Regional integration and internationalism.
2. Expansion of large-scale economic interactions.
3. Access to open seas.
4. Promotion of domestic products and their export to global markets.
5. Enhancement of domestic competitiveness and promotion of a balanced internal economy.
6. Encouragement of domestic investment.
7. Establishment of trade relations and attraction of foreign commercial assets to Afghanistan.
8. Membership in international treaties and agreements.
9. Efforts toward regional security and peace.
10. Existence of multiple transit and trade partners in Afghanistan. (Tariq, 2023, p. 276_279)

A brief review of this project shows that, alongside enhancing cooperation among Central Asian and South Asian countries—including Afghanistan—it can foster economic integration between the two regions and contribute to the economic prosperity of the countries within Central and South Asia.

6.2. *TAPI Project*

The TAPI project is an energy transit initiative that transports natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to South Asian countries. The name "TAPI" is an acronym derived from the member countries of this major energy transmission project: Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The TAPI pipeline is a historic project aimed at transporting Turkmen gas to South Asia (Pakistan and India) via Afghanistan. The initial plan for this project was formulated in the 1990s, but the practical agreement was signed in 2010 by the presidents of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Prime Minister of India. The construction began in 2015, led by the leaders of these four countries. The TAPI pipeline stretches approximately 1,735 kilometers, entering Pakistan through the Herat-Kandahar route in Afghanistan. Of this length, about 200 kilometers are within Turkmenistan, 735 kilometers within Afghanistan, and 800 kilometers within Pakistan before reaching India. This project is designed to transport approximately 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas annually through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India.. (Qasem Turabi , Razieh Sanei, 2017) The TAPI project is among the few initiatives that have utilized the potential for cooperation between Central and South Asia through Afghanistan. Upon its completion, it will meet the high energy demands of South Asian countries, particularly India and Pakistan. Therefore, if the full potential of collaboration between the two regions can be realized, there is no doubt that cooperation in other sectors can also be accelerated. This, in turn, could contribute to improving the level of welfare in both Central and South Asian countries.

6.3. *CASA-1000*

CASA-1000 is an energy transmission project that aims to transfer electricity from Central Asia to South Asia through Afghanistan. Launched in 2006, the project is designed to deliver 1,300 megawatts of electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, along a 1,200-kilometer transmission line. (Daisuke Sasaki, Mikiyasu Nakayama, 2015, p. 90) The CASA-1000 project, which facilitates the transmission of electricity from Central Asia to South Asia, is seen as having a high energy transfer capacity. Central Asia, being landlocked and without direct access to the sea, can be connected to South Asia and open waters through Afghanistan, due to its strategic geographical position. Afghanistan, which—like the countries of South Asia—faces challenges related to energy shortages, can benefit from projects such as CASA-1000. These projects can help meet the energy needs of both Afghanistan and South Asia. Additionally, they can enhance regional cooperation between the countries of Central and South Asia, which in turn can contribute not only to the stability of these two regions but also to broader peace and security in the area. (Zaheer Abbas, Inayat Kalim, Muhammad Shoaib Malik, 2019, p. 42) An examination of the CASA-1000 project and other similar initiatives reveals that there exists substantial economic potential for cooperation between the countries of Central and South Asia through Afghanistan. Joint investments by the countries of both regions—particularly in sectors such as the transmission of energy from Central Asia to South Asia, the export of raw materials from Central Asia to the South, and South Asian investments (especially from India) in technology and environmental industries—could create significant opportunities for investment and employment in Central Asia. This would enhance the economic capacity of both Central and South Asian countries and contribute to greater stability and prosperity across the region.

7. The Economic Role of Afghanistan in Regional Connectivity Between Central and South Asia

Afghanistan holds a significant geoeconomic position in one of the most important regions of the world. The importance of this position is well reflected in Afghanistan's regional cooperation strategy. Afghanistan is located at the crossroads of four densely populated and resource-rich regions: South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East. It serves as the hub connecting these four regions. Broadly speaking, Afghanistan can be divided into two zones: the internal zone, which includes all six neighboring countries sharing borders with Afghanistan, and the external zone, which encompasses most countries in Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia. Furthermore, Afghanistan holds a pivotal position in the Asia-Europe continental trade network. Situated along major East-West trade routes across the vast Eurasian region, Afghanistan is a natural center and axis of continental trade extending through various corridors from India, Southeast Asia, Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and China. For over two thousand years, Afghanistan has been the intersection point for all trade routes linking India, China, the Middle East, and Europe. While Afghanistan's geoeconomic position provides significant economic opportunities not only for its neighboring regions but also for the entire Asia-Europe continental zone, this study focuses on Afghanistan's potential role as a land bridge between its two key neighboring regions: Central Asia and South Asia. These two regions are increasingly seeking land connectivity to promote sustainable economic growth and enhance bilateral trade. (tamana, 2014, p. 473) The countries of South Asia and Central Asia, through cooperation with Afghanistan and investment, can not only enhance their trade exchanges but also meet their critical needs, particularly in the sectors of energy and raw materials.

7.1. Afghanistan as the Corridor Between Central and South Asia

Afghanistan, as the shortest and most cost-effective transit route between Central and South Asia, plays a key role in unlocking the complementary trade potential between the two regions. Compared to alternative routes, Afghanistan can offer the shortest and most economical paths for road networks, railways, and energy transmission lines—such as gas and electricity—linking Central and South Asia. A road corridor passing through Afghanistan could significantly reduce transportation time and costs, thereby increasing the volume of trade between the two regions. According to a 2005 study conducted by the Asian Development Bank on the economic impacts of road corridors between Central and South Asia via Afghanistan, if the required 13,586 kilometers of road corridors for regional trade—including 3,657 kilometers within Afghan territory—were completed, regional trade would increase by 160%, and overall transit trade in the region would rise by 111%. If we further account for the projected benefits of planned railway corridors connecting Central and South Asia through Afghanistan, the economic gains from overland connectivity between the two regions would be significantly greater. (tamana, 2014, p. 482-483) An examination of this matter reveals that Afghanistan, due to its important strategic location between Central and

South Asia, can serve as a short and cost-effective corridor connecting the two regions. If countries invest in Afghanistan and in the broader region, Afghanistan could function as a key transit hub, opening a gateway to prosperity and development not only for the countries of Central and South Asia but also for the wider Asian continent and the world at large.

7.2. Energy Transmission from Central Asia to South Asia via Afghanistan

Today, energy security is one of the greatest concerns of governments in the international system. As such, the supply of various forms of energy—including oil, gas, coal, and others—has become a key strategic priority for states. South Asian countries, which are experiencing a rapid increase in energy demand, are facing energy shortages, making the provision of sufficient energy one of their top governmental priorities. To secure energy resources and improve supply, these countries are actively seeking national and international investments within their territories. South Asia holds approximately 5.7 billion barrels of oil reserves, which accounts for only 0.5% of global reserves. Due to limited domestic resources, oil imports in the region are expected to multiply in the coming years. Industrialization, urbanization, and population growth have significantly raised energy demand across South Asia. A large portion of oil consumption in the region is driven by the growing needs of the transportation sector, electricity generation, and household use. Many South Asian countries remain heavily dependent on a single energy source—fossil fuels. (Marjan Badiie Azandehie , Bahador Zarei , Moein Barzegarzadeh zarandi , 2022, p. 1551_1552) Due to South Asia's critical dependence on fossil fuels, energy supply in the region has become a major security concern. Considering the growth in fossil fuel consumption between 2010 and 2020, projections indicate that energy demand in the region will increase by approximately 33% by the year 2040. (Marjan Badiie Azandehie , Bahador Zarei , Moein Barzegarzadeh zarandi , 2022, p. 1551_1552) On the other side, while South Asia faces an urgent need for energy supply, Central Asia—which includes the five republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan—possesses some of the world's largest fossil fuel reserves. According to research by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London and the International Energy Agency (IEA), the total recoverable oil resources in Central Asia are estimated to range between 17 and 37 billion barrels. Furthermore, these institutions report that the region holds between 6.6 and 9 trillion cubic meters of proven natural gas reserves, with an additional 60 trillion cubic meters of unproven reserves—representing approximately 37% of the world's natural gas potential. In addition, data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) provide country-specific figures. Uzbekistan ranks 47th globally in proven oil reserves with 94 million barrels and holds 1.841 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, placing it 19th in the world. Tajikistan, with limited energy resources, was estimated in 2013 to have 12 million barrels of proven oil reserves (ranking 84th globally) and 5.663 billion cubic meters of natural gas (ranked 90th globally). According to the same source, Turkmenistan possesses 600 million barrels of proven oil reserves (45th globally) and an estimated 24.3 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, ranking it 4th in the world in terms of gas reserves. Kazakhstan holds approximately 30 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, placing it 11th globally, and with 2.407 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, it ranks 14th in the world. (Ansari, 2018, p. 107_108) Meanwhile, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has reported the fossil fuel reserves of Central Asian countries as follows:

Kazakhstan:

- 6.350 billion tonnes of coal equivalent (tce) of crude oil
- 3.455 billion tce of natural gas
- 25.102 billion tce of coal

Kyrgyzstan:

- 0.008 billion tce of crude oil
- 0.007 billion tce of natural gas
- 0.553 billion tce of coal

Tajikistan:

- 0.003 billion tce of crude oil

- 0.007 billion tce of natural gas
- 0.304 billion tce of coal

Uzbekistan:

- 0.126 billion tce of crude oil
- 2.353 billion tce of natural gas
- 0.768 billion tce of coal

Turkmenistan:

- 0.127 billion tce of crude oil
- 13.044 billion tce of natural gas (EUROPE, 2023, p. 1_4)

Recognizing the global importance of energy, along with the significant energy needs in South Asia and the abundant energy reserves in Central Asia, the transmission of energy from Central Asia to South Asian countries can play a vital role in meeting the region's energy demands. Such cooperation has the potential to substantially enhance regional collaboration between the two regions. In this context, Afghanistan—serving as the transit route for Central Asian energy toward South Asia—acts as a facilitator of economic interaction. This not only strengthens Afghanistan's strategic position but can also have a meaningful impact on boosting international trade at both the regional and broader Asian levels.

7.3. The Densely Populated Economic Markets of South Asia

South Asia is one of the most dynamic regions in the world. High population growth, rapid urbanization, fast-paced economic development, and industrialization have led to a sharp rise in demand for essential resources such as food, water, and energy, significantly intensifying their consumption. Although South Asian countries have made notable social and economic progress in recent years, they still face serious challenges such as hunger, poverty, food and nutrition insecurity, low living standards, lack of access to modern energy, and poor health conditions. Despite remarkable economic growth in the past decade, South Asia continues to be home to over 40% of the world's poor and 35% of those suffering from malnutrition. About 51% of the poor population in the region faces food energy deficiency, and over 56% of the world's underweight infants are born here. Roughly 20% of the population lacks access to safe drinking water. With less than 5% of the world's land area, South Asia must feed one-fourth of the global population. While land, water, and vital ecosystem resources are diminishing, the population is steadily growing. If the current growth rate continues, the population is expected to reach 2.3 billion by 2050. This population growth—coupled with declining agricultural land—has led to increasing pressure on water and energy resources. Climate variability, along with food insecurity, is pushing South Asia toward a future in which more food must be produced with less land, less water, and rising energy prices. Most South Asian countries suffer from food shortages because their domestic production cannot meet internal demand. (meysam hadipour , mohamadreza hafezneia , s .mahamad kazem sajadpoor ,mohammadreza khorashdizadeh, 2020, p. 38)

In contrast to the countries of South Asia, the nations of Central Asia possess vast arable and cultivable lands along with abundant raw material and food resources. Undoubtedly, Central Asian countries have the capacity to meet the food shortages and needs of South Asian countries. In this regard, Afghanistan can serve as the shortest route for transferring these essential goods from Central Asia to South Asia. Beyond addressing food shortages in South Asia, this transit role can also expand trade between the two regions and strengthen commercial ties between these two important parts of Asia. In the long term, such developments can elevate the levels of welfare and stability in both regions, contributing to broader peace and security in Asia and globally.

8. Afghanistan's Role in Connecting Central Asia and South Asia through Regional Organizations (SAARC, SCO, and ECO)

Due to the significant role of non-state actors in fostering cooperation and integration between Central and South Asian countries, this section examines the collaboration between these regions. Regional organizations, grounded in the theory of new regionalism, play a crucial role in promoting regional cooperation. The countries of Central

and South Asia can enhance their cooperation and regional integration through expanded collaboration within the frameworks of these organizations. In the following, we analyze the cooperation between Central and South Asian countries within the structures of three key regional organizations.

8.1. SAARC

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is composed of countries from South Asia. South Asia is the southern part of the Asian continent, encompassing the countries south of the Himalayan mountains, and is bordered by West Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. Currently, the members of SAARC typically include Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Essentially, the primary rationale behind the establishment of SAARC has been economic, with political objectives being secondary priorities. The main founding goals of SAARC, according to its charter, can be listed as follows:

- Enhancing the social welfare of the peoples of the South Asian region and improving their quality of life.
- Accelerating economic growth and utilizing the region's full potential to expedite social and agricultural programs, thereby ensuring suitable living opportunities for all people.
- Promoting and strengthening cooperation among member countries within South Asia.
- Reinforcing multilateral treaties and fostering mutual understanding of problems and other issues.
- Enhancing effective collaboration and multilateral coordination in economic, social, cultural, scientific, and technological fields.
- Strengthening cooperation with developing countries.
- Consolidating cooperation among member states regarding international affairs.
- Collaborating with international and regional organizations that share similar goals and objectives.

Despite the establishment of SAARC in 1985 by the South Asian member countries, the region has remained one of the most complex and volatile areas in international politics over the past seventy years. This is largely due to the presence of two nuclear powers and the unique social, economic, and geographical characteristics of the area, which have facilitated the establishment of militant and terrorist groups. As a result, South Asia has been a focal point of international politics and one of the most conflict-prone and insecure regions in the world. Considering Afghanistan's position in South Asia and the complexities of the region, Afghanistan's participation in South Asia, and particularly in SAARC, can have significant implications for the country. (Sadeqi, 2024, p. 6) (SAARC, 2025) In conclusion, an examination of the members of this organization reveals that they share significant historical, civilizational, and cultural commonalities. Undoubtedly, cooperation among the member countries can contribute to security and the achievement of stability. Alongside this, Afghanistan's strategic position can play a vital role in the development of the region—particularly in the energy sector and key markets of Central Asia and the Caucasus—and in linking South Asia with Central Asia. This, in turn, can foster greater integration and cohesion among the countries of South Asia and Central Asia.

8.2. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established on June 15, 2001, by six countries: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, in the city of Shanghai, China. This is why the organization bears the name Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The SCO covers a geographic area of over 30 million square kilometers and has a population exceeding 1.5 billion people. When observer countries are included, this population roughly doubles. The SCO was founded with the aim of fostering long-term cooperation in economic, trade, commercial, and security fields. (Dero, 2019, p. 108_113) The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) currently has nine member states: the Republic of India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan. Additionally, there are three observer states: Afghanistan, the Republic of Belarus, and Mongolia. In 2022, during the SCO Summit in Samarkand, the process of elevating the status of the Republic of Belarus to full membership within the organization began. Currently, the SCO has 14 Dialogue Partners, including the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Armenia, the Kingdom of

Bahrain, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the State of Qatar, the State of Kuwait, the Republic of Maldives, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of Turkey, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Socialist Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (sco, 2025)

This organization was established with the following objectives:

- To strengthen mutual trust, friendship, and good neighborliness among member countries;
- To encourage effective cooperation among member states in various fields including politics, trade, economy, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transportation, tourism, environmental protection, and more;
- To jointly ensure and maintain peace, security, and stability in the region; and
- To promote a new democratic, just, and rational international political and economic order .(sco, 2025)

By examining the significance and substantial capacity of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its members, it is evident that most countries from Central and South Asia are members of this organization. Undoubtedly, comprehensive cooperation among these members can enhance the level of collaboration and accelerate the processes of stability and development in both Central and South Asia.

8.3. Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)

The Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) was established by the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Republic of Turkey, and was renamed the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in 1985. The ECO region, with a population of approximately 550 million and spanning over 8 million square kilometers, connects the north to the south, the south to the east and west, Asia to Europe, and Eurasia to the Arab world. The ECO, composed of countries from the Caucasus, Southwest Asia, and Central Asia, is one of the oldest intergovernmental organizations. Its primary goal is to create favorable conditions for continuous and sustainable economic development aimed at the welfare and prosperity of its member states. Currently, the organization comprises ten member countries: Afghanistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. (ECO, 2025) The members of this organization vary in terms of their economic size and gross domestic product, and their economic systems also differ. However, by utilizing a complementary economic strategy, they can achieve a significant level of integration, especially in the sectors of fossil energy resources and raw materials, which constitute some of the largest fossil fuel reserves in the world. Moreover, the ECO member states, most of which are located in strategically important regions of the world, have long attracted the attention of both regional and extra-regional countries. The history of this area also reflects shared cultural and historical ties spanning several millennia, covering a vast territory from western Turkey in Europe to eastern Kazakhstan, and from the borders of Mongolia and China to the coasts of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, extending to northern parts of Central Asia. The ECO region lies on the east-west transit route, connecting Europe and Africa on one side with East and Southeast Asia on the other. Through its waterways, the ECO region can engage in trade via the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea with Europe and Africa, and via the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean with East Asia. In brief, it serves as a junction point for three continents: Asia, Europe, and Africa. Additionally, this region possesses key maritime areas such as the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean and controls strategic straits including Hormuz, Bosphorus, and Dardanelles, giving it significant global influence. These factors collectively enhance the strategic importance of the ECO region. (Rasoul Afzali , Adel Ansari, 2017, p. 350_353) An important point regarding this organization relates to its membership. Upon reviewing its members, it is evident that most are from Central and South Asia, including Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, comprehensive cooperation among the members of this organization can play a significant role in expanding collaborative relations across various political, security, economic, and cultural fields between Central and South Asian countries. Afghanistan, in particular, can play a pivotal role as a bridge connecting these two regions, which could accelerate economic development in both areas.

9. Afghanistan's Cultural Role in Connecting Central Asia and South Asia

The countries of the Eastern world hold a prestigious position in terms of civilizational and cultural identity. A significant part of this honor is attributed to the countries of Central and South Asia. The modern-day countries of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan are considered members of a unified civilizational sphere. Cultural, historical, religious, and spiritual commonalities among Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries have fostered closer ties between the nations in this region. (tamana, 2014, p. 71) On the other hand, Afghanistan shares deep-rooted historical ties and significant commonalities with the countries of South Asia. It holds substantial interests in historical, religious, linguistic, and cultural spheres that render Afghanistan's relationship with the South Asian region inseparable. (Seyed Ahmad Fatemi Nejad , Alireza Mohammadzadeh, 2018, p. 410) Understanding the regional commonalities between the countries of Central and South Asia and recognizing Afghanistan's pivotal role in connecting these two regions, cooperation among these areas can undoubtedly enhance relations among member countries. Numerous opportunities exist for cultural collaboration, particularly in the fields of language, Islamic art, and education. Expanding cooperation in these sectors fosters a broader approach toward collaboration and integration among the countries of these two regions. Acknowledging the significance of these aspects, we examine several key cultural domains that link Central and South Asia, highlighting Afghanistan's role in this connection.

9.1. Existence of Shared Islamic Art

The spread and influence of Islam in the Indian subcontinent coincided with the political life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This process initially occurred through Arab trade networks established during the Prophet's era, which maintained commercial relations with the southwestern region of India (Malabar). Subsequently, Arab merchants and investors traveled throughout the Indian subcontinent, disseminating Islam and constructing mosques to facilitate religious practices. According to historical perspectives, Islam first entered the Indian subcontinent via the regions of Merv, Kabul, and Zabul. (Hamid Hajipoorian , Elham Taheri, 2013, p. 3_4) Following the Arabs, one of the most influential factors in the spread of Islam in the Indian subcontinent were dynasties originating from present-day Afghanistan, including the Ghurids, Ghaznavids, and the Mughals, descendants of Babur. An important point to note regarding the dissemination of Islam is that these dynasties simultaneously ruled over vast parts of Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, which contributed to the expansion of a cohesive Islamic culture across both South Asia and Central Asia. This cultural unity is vividly reflected in various art forms such as literature, architecture, calligraphy, painting, ceramics, music, and more. Furthermore, the monumental historical sites in the Indian subcontinent, including the Humayun's Tomb, Sher Shah Suri's Tomb, Akbar's Tomb, and the Taj Mahal, stand as testament to the profound influence of Islamic art in the region. (Shirazi, 2021, p. 1_15) In Central Asia, Islam was first introduced during the Arab conquest led by Qutayba ibn Muslim in the early eighth century CE. The Arab armies conquered major cities in Central Asia, particularly Bukhara and Samarkand, which became the most important Islamic centers in the region. Throughout the ninth century CE, Central Asia was regarded as an integral and vital part of the Islamic world. (Abdolreza Faraji Rad , Javad Khansari, 2011, p. 49_50) The spread of Islam in Khorasan, Central Asia, and present-day Afghanistan, alongside political and religious transformations, brought profound impacts on the field of art. Especially during the medieval period, scholars such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Al-Biruni, Al-Farabi, and others gained prominence. Alongside this, significant literary and artistic works emerged in these countries. An important aspect related to Central Asia is the rise of dynasties that played a vital role in promoting and spreading science and art, including the Timurids, Safavids, Shaybanids, Mughals, and others. During the rule of these dynasties, numerous Islamic monuments were left as a legacy, particularly mosques, palaces, gardens, and mausoleums, which vividly demonstrate the influence of Islamic civilization in the region. (Moghbeli, 2017, p. 60_68) An important topic concerning Central and South Asia is Afghanistan's pivotal position in terms of civilizational and religious matters, as well as the shared civilizational, artistic, and Islamic commonalities between these two regions. Examining these aspects reveals that ruling dynasties in both regions, particularly the Mongol dynasty, played a significant role in the dissemination of Islamic art. This underscores the potential for expanding relations between these two regions, with Afghanistan playing a crucial role in strengthening and broadening these connections.

9.2. Persian Language

The role of the Persian language as a fundamental and influential element in the connection between Central and South Asia holds great significance. Although the origin of this language and its rich literature lies in the lands of Afghanistan, Iran, and present-day Central Asian countries, its influence extends not only over Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia but also widely encompasses the Indian subcontinent, including India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In some cases, the cultural and linguistic ties of Persian with this region have even surpassed political and social relations. (Abbaszaidi, 2010, p. 87) Among these, the significant presence of Persian poets and writers in the Indian subcontinent—and, most importantly, the use of Persian as the official and administrative language of Indian rulers for nearly eight hundred years—demonstrates the profound influence of the Persian language in the region. (tamana, 2014, p. 259) The regions of Central and South Asia have experienced difficult periods of occupation in their recent history, which negatively impacted the spread of the Persian language in the past. However, it is evident that Persian remains a living and important language with a special status in both Central and South Asia, particularly when viewed within its historical context, where it has held great prestige and significance. Understanding this, regional cooperation between Central and South Asia, along with the increasing role of Persian-speaking countries such as Afghanistan as a connector between these two regions, can undoubtedly contribute not only to the revitalization of the Persian language but also to the expansion of regional collaboration.

9.3. Technology and Innovation

An examination of the conditions in South and Central Asia reveals a high potential for cooperation in the fields of education and technology between the two regions. The Central Asian countries, which faced major technological and technical challenges following their independence, (koolae, politics and government in central asia, 2015, p. 68_69) Even now, Central Asian countries have not been able to turn this challenge into an opportunity. However, given their abundant human capital and natural resources, they could undoubtedly do so through international cooperation. On the other hand, South Asia—particularly the Republic of India—has, over the past two decades, emerged as one of the world's leading powers in technology and communications. India's information technology and software industry has been growing at a rapid pace. In fact, the development of software and information and communication technology (ICT) services has significantly contributed to India's rise as a global player. According to the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM), India has become a major hub for ICT product development globally. The country's technology sector generates revenues exceeding hundreds of billions of dollars. In addition to ICT, India also holds a prominent position in global biotechnology. Biotechnology—an applied science—plays a key role in modern agriculture, animal husbandry, pharmaceuticals, vaccine development, pollution control, environmental protection, and energy production. Today, more than 350 biotechnology companies operate in India, employing over 20,000 scientists, and exporting biotechnology and pharmaceutical products to more than 100 countries annually. (Abdolreza Farajirad , Masoud Abdi, 2016, p. 71_75) In light of this potential, the Republic of India, with its vast capabilities in technology and biotechnology, can undoubtedly create valuable opportunities to enhance the capacities of both South and Central Asian countries. Such cooperation could be fostered through the provision of academic scholarships for students from South and Central Asia, as well as through the signing of multilateral agreements aimed at sending scientists and experts for advisory missions to member countries in these regions, including Afghanistan. India, in particular, has made significant educational investments in Afghanistan. Each year, through programs such as ICCR and ITEC, it offers higher education opportunities to Afghan students in India. Consequently, India has become one of the primary academic destinations for Afghan students across various educational levels. This model of cooperation can undoubtedly serve as a valuable example for broader scientific, technological, and academic collaboration between the two regions. (Abdullah Alizadeh, Khanali Azimi, 2023, p. 179_180)

10. Conclusion

Afghanistan is one of the few countries that enjoys an extraordinarily significant geostrategic position at both the regional and global levels. With a history spanning over 5,000 years, it is considered one of the cradles of ancient human civilization. The land known today as Afghanistan was historically referred to as Khorasan and Ariana, encompassing a vast geography that now includes parts of Central Asia, Iran, and South Asia. Despite the reduction of this historical territory due to the geopolitical maneuvers of colonial powers, the strategic importance of

Afghanistan's location has remained undiminished. In the 21st century, Afghanistan continues to occupy a vital geostrategic position at the crossroads of four key regions of Asia: Central Asia, East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia—making it a consistent focal point of interest for global powers. However, this strategic position has not been effectively utilized. Recognizing Afghanistan's considerable potential to connect these four regions, this study has focused on the country's specific role in linking Central and South Asia—two regions with deep civilizational, geographical, and cultural ties. The findings of this research confirm that, as the “Heart of Asia,” Afghanistan holds significant capacity to serve as a bridge between Central and South Asia. This potential is analyzed through the lens of the theory of New Regionalism, particularly across four dimensions: political, security, economic, and cultural.

Political Dimension: South Asia, comprising the eight member states of SAARC, represents one of the most important regions of the world due to its vast geography and immense human resources. This region includes two key geopolitical actors—India and Pakistan. Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the subsequent emergence of India and Pakistan as independent states, South Asia has experienced persistent political tensions and instability. These strained relations, particularly between India and Pakistan, have also cast a shadow over Afghanistan's own political environment. Since 1947, Afghanistan has maintained formal diplomatic relations with key South Asian countries, especially India, Pakistan, and later Bangladesh. Historically, Afghanistan's relations with South Asian countries—except for Pakistan—have been relatively positive. Considering the region's substantial political potential, particularly with the presence of shared civilizational values and institutional frameworks such as SAARC, Afghanistan could play a significant role in facilitating diplomatic engagement within the region, especially between India and Pakistan. Turning to Central Asia, which consists of five republics, Afghanistan shares deep historical, civilizational, and geographical ties with these nations. However, diplomatic relations with the Central Asian republics formally began only after their independence in 1991–1992. Since then, Afghanistan has enjoyed generally positive and stable relations with these countries. When assessing diplomatic relations between Central and South Asia, it becomes evident that there remains a serious need for stronger diplomatic engagement between the two regions. Given its geographic position as a bridge between Central and South Asia, Afghanistan is well-placed to facilitate and expand these relations. This role would not only contribute to greater regional stability but also foster the groundwork for regional integration. Ultimately, this could lead to enhanced cooperation across broader Asia and at the international level.

Security Dimension: The two regions of South Asia and Central Asia face significant security challenges. South Asia, considered one of the most unstable regions in the world over the past few decades, has a pressing need for enhanced cooperation among the South Asian countries themselves as well as with neighboring regions, particularly Central Asia. Central Asian countries are also grappling with serious security threats, including drug cultivation and trafficking, organized crime, separatist movements, and the activities of illegal armed groups. Like South Asia, Central Asia is threatened by issues such as organized crime, drug trafficking, and unlawful militant activities. Many of these threats in Central Asia stem from developments in South Asia, underscoring the urgent need for cooperative security frameworks between the two regions. In this context, Afghanistan, as a pivotal interregional country, can play a critical role in enhancing security cooperation—particularly in combating drug trafficking, fighting against international and organized crime, countering separatist movements, and curbing the operations of illegal armed groups. Such cooperation would not only reduce crime and enhance security in both Central and South Asia, but would also lay the groundwork for strengthening ties in other areas such as politics, economy, and culture—ultimately leading to greater regional integration.

Economic Dimensions: Afghanistan plays a significant role in fostering regional cooperation and promoting both regional and international connectivity. However, the country's geographical position also provides it with substantial economic potential, particularly between two major regions of Asia—Central Asia and South Asia. South Asia, with its large human resources and vast economic market, has a serious demand for raw materials and energy in order to meet the needs of its citizens. In contrast, Central Asia—with its vast territory, small population, and abundant reserves of raw materials and energy—seeks to export these resources to larger markets. Among the most viable and closest destinations for Central Asian exports is South Asia. In this context, Afghanistan, due to its key connecting position between Central and South Asia, can serve as a suitable economic corridor to facilitate this linkage between the two regions. Therefore, there is a serious need for the member countries of both regions

to enhance their cooperation, particularly in the transfer of raw materials and energy from Central Asia to the South, and likewise in the export of South Asian goods to Central Asian countries. In this process, Afghanistan—as the most important and efficient transit route—can play a vital role in the economic development of the two regions, the expansion of economic relations among their countries, and the promotion of regional integration. This will not only contribute to resolving economic challenges and reducing poverty but also help raise the standard of living for the people of both regions. Moreover, this process would allow Afghanistan's strategic location to be further utilized in developing economic and trade relations with other parts of Asia as well. In the broader perspective, it could pave the way for the flourishing of Asian regions as a global economic center—with Afghanistan, as the Heart of Asia, having the potential to become its beating heart.

Cultural Dimensions: Afghanistan shares extensive cultural, civilizational, and historical commonalities with the countries of Central Asia and South Asia, as they are part of a unified civilization. Historically, Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries were once part of the same territorial domain. Similarly, Afghanistan and the South Asian countries also belonged to a single territorial entity until major geopolitical changes occurred, binding their destinies together. A study of the historical backgrounds of Central and South Asia reveals that these regions share a common political and cultural fate. The ruling dynasties in both regions exercised power in similar ways, indicating a parallel governance tradition. Given these shared characteristics, there are significant cultural grounds between Central and South Asia that—if supported by joint investments—could facilitate cultural integration between the two regions. This is especially true in the fields of education, arts, language, and literature. In this context, Afghanistan, due to its central geographic and cultural position, can play a crucial connecting role in expanding cultural relations between Central and South Asia.

Based on the findings of the research, it is evident that Afghanistan possesses a significant connecting capacity as a bridge between two major regions of Asia—Central Asia and South Asia. Afghanistan, known as the Heart of Asia, and in accordance with the principles of the theory of new regionalism, not only provides the basis for linking and fostering integration between these two key Asian regions but also creates conditions for the stabilization and prosperity of South Asia and Central Asia. Alongside its capacity to connect Central Asia with South Asia and promote regional integration between them, Afghanistan has the potential—if this integration is realized—to facilitate the cohesion of other Asian regions, especially East Asia and West Asia, by linking Central and South Asia with these wider regions. In such a scenario, Afghanistan would become the pivotal communication hub of Asia. An examination of these points confirms that the research supports the main hypothesis of this study.

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